

BOOK REVIEW

Srđan Vrcan: "SOCCER - POLITICS – VIOLENCE: essays on sociology of soccer"

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Zagreb, 2003, 270 pp.*



In Croatian sociological literature new books on sport sociology are quite a rarity. Therefore, the book "Soccer – Politics – Violence" is a great contribution to the works of sport sociology, particularly to the sociology of soccer.

The book by Srđan Vrcan is an interesting and rewarding piece of reading material for sport sociologists and kinesiologists alike, in general, for all people interested in the phenomenon of sport, soccer or association football in particular. It is a result of many years of research and critical deliberation upon the phenomenon of soccer and its social environment, and a kind of sequel to Vrcan's previous study "Sports and violence here and today" (*Sport i nasilje danas u nas*), which was published in 1990. The thematic framework is built out of concepts *soccer*, *politics* and *violence*. It should be underlined here that soccer is investigated as a phenomenon *per se*. Soccer is established nowadays in the centre of social life, therefore, it has become much more than a game and entertainment – it has become a kind of a global game which has inundated the world.

In the introductory chapter of the book the origins and development of soccer are analysed –

from the rough and natural game in ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, through the beginnings of "real" soccer played in the Florentine square Santa Croce in the XV. and XVI. century, to the professional and top-quality sport that originated in England in the XIX. century. It seems as if "soccer does not depend on any geographical or cultural circumstances, but that it is rather, like a kind of human inclination, inherent to people of all races, cultures, social structures, social systems and other" (p. 8) – it assumes a form of wide dispersion and inclusion in social and cultural life.

The second study is entitled *Soccer support in the territory of former Yugoslavia in the 90s of the XX. century*. It deals with the process of the transformation of supporters gangs (from the stadium stands) during the Croatian War for Independence into warrior gangs (to trenches and bunkers) and with their return to stadiums in the time of peace, as well as with the politicization of soccer supporters. The supporters gangs are nowadays hierarchically organised institutions which have become an inseparable component of soccer as a game.

The scenes of the supporters and soccer itself were the very indicators of how serious the social crisis was – the atmosphere in the stadiums could (and should) have been read as an announcement of future political disputes and war. By paraphrasing Roger Caillois, who claimed in his book "Games and people" in the 60s of the XX. century that an analysis of a game that prevails in a certain society can give an accurate prediction about its destiny (e.g. from the gladiatorial games one could have predicted the ruin of the Roman Empire), Vrcan stated that "In fact, in the attitudes, behaviour and actions, as well as in the contents of mass chants and symbols used in Zagreb, Split and Belgrade (...) one could see the unambiguous signals of a breakdown of the ruling socialist system and of the appearance and strengthening of political strategies in parallel that led to the unavoidable conflicts and frontal clashes, consequently to a war conflict, which at the same time

was being prepared behind the curtains of the then politics and in the core of society's essence." (p. 85). The concept of soccer being a copy of the social-political climate of a particular community was corroborated again in this case - severe conflicts between adverse supporters' gangs (of the clubs Dinamo and Crvena zvezda) were an overture to the bloody warfare. Again, Garry Harrison's statement about soccer as a metaphor of a society was proven to be true, as well as Vrcan's statement that a society was, in fact, a metaphor of soccer.

The author writes *about violence now and here* in the third chapter of the book. Observing the territory Croats are living in, the author claims that violence has become a normal component of everyday life and social conformity. The violence of the supporters is part of the gang folklore – it always has its symbolic and deeper meaning. The author seeks a way out of the vicious circle of violence in an attempt to “lower the level of general social conflicts and consequently legalize any form of violence which is used as a means of social, particularly political goal achievement” (p. 196).

In the fourth study entitled *Odd conflict: President of the Republic against the supporters gangs*, the author applied sociological imagination to interpret the conflict that lasted several years between the then state authority, which led to active politics even in the stadiums, and the members of one group of supporters – Bad Blue Boys. Using political instrumental conditioning of soccer it was easy to create a critical mass which was easy to mobilise and “exploitable” for any concept. The nineties in Croatia were a period in which politics and soccer developed side by side. Sports achievements were a kind of remedy for failures in

politics. The entire depoliticization of sport is impossible, but imposing political ideas onto supporters gangs may be counterproductive – it may turn them into rebels and ruffians.

Nowadays, soccer is a kind of surrogate for politics – it is “like contemporary democracy: twenty-two play and billions watch” (p. 16).

The last study *Sociological analysis of soccer in the gap between normality and pathology* suggests that there is a socially positive soccer, on the one hand, and a soccer that has a negative impact on society, on the other.

Stadiums are “places of deceptive egalitarianism” in which a supporter transforms himself into “somebody” and “something”. That makes stadiums places of deceptive unity and soccer becomes a game in which a person builds not only his individual identity, but a national identity as well. Despite the fact that the essential anthropological determinant of a human is, according to J. Huizinga, that he/she is *homo ludens* – a being of play, meaning that the need for play is inherent to him/her, it still does not explain the fact that in a contemporary society soccer is more than a game – a satisfaction (a compensation) for all the setbacks and misfortunes in life.

By observing soccer within a broader context as a phenomenon that can be described successfully, but hardly explained from the aspect of sociology, and by observing its relationships to politics and violence, Vrcan has contributed a lot to solving the problems connected to the game that has conquered the world (R. Giulianotti). Therefore, it is my opinion that the book is dedicated to a broad reading audience – from those who are meeting the sociology of soccer for the first time to students, lecturers and researchers.

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