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## THE FOOTBALLISATION OF THE POLISH SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

**Abstract.** The article addresses the issue of the unique position of football among sports, which supports Bromberger's thesis on the footballisation of society. As an overview of publications shows, football has occupied a special place in the international sociology of sport over the last 30 years; studies of football have been among the twenty most popular topics within the sub-discipline. However, it would be unjustified to speak of the footballisation of the international sociology of sport, understood as the overrepresentation of football in this sub-discipline. The situation is different when it comes to the Polish sociology of sport, where up to 50% of publications in the first fifteen years of the 21st century tackled various football-related issues. In conclusion, theses concerning possible consequences of the footballisation of the Polish sociology of sport are presented, including the type I and type II errors.

**Keywords:** footballisation, sociology of sport, football, sports.

*Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.*

William "Bill" Shankly

*No history of the modern world is complete without an account of football.*

David Goldblatt

### Footballisation of society

Athletics is said to be the queen of sports while chess is called the game of kings. However, as Pierre Bourdieu argued, representatives of the dominant social class usually indulge in such leisure activities as golf, tennis, polo, horse riding, hunting, downhill skiing and yachting (Tomlinson 2004; Lenartowicz 2012). One can say that these are elite sports. Team sports, on the other hand, are usually associated with the lower class (Tomlinson 2004; Lenartowicz 2012). Still, all

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the above statements should be treated with caution, as football is considered by many to be “the salt of the earth” among sports.

Football is unique in that its social role cannot be reduced to entertainment. Scott Waalkes (2017) poses a provocative question: *Does soccer explain the world or does the world explain soccer?* and points out that, in a political sense, football fulfils a peace-making function (creates a supra-national community of football supporters, and international understanding based on shared passion for football). Waalkes admits (2017: 169–170) that football can also be a seedbed of – or pretext for – a political conflict and cites, among other things, the example of the 1969 football war between El Salvador and Honduras.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, football matches are important in domestic politics; they can legitimise the authorities and help bolster national identity and pride. One can recall examples from the 10th FIFA World Cup in 1974, i.e. both the memorable match between East Germany and West Germany (Wojtaszyn 2018) and the success of the Polish national team (bronze medal), which were skilfully used by the then authorities to propagate success and fight for their legitimacy (Papuczys 2016).

Waalkes (2017: 171–173) also stresses the economic importance of football (its positive role in economic integration, common markets and international exchange).<sup>2</sup> However, from a sociological point of view, football’s cultural role is especially noteworthy; thanks to its popularity around the world, the organisation of international events and so on, football contributes to globalisation and cultural unification (*vide* common cheering patterns). That is why Waalkes (2017: 173) calls football and cheering a transnational cultural activity.<sup>3</sup>

All the contemporary and historical social meanings of football outlined by Waalkes invoke the term “footballisation of society”<sup>4</sup> coined by Christian Bromberger. This means that football is seen and instrumentalised as a tool for achiev-

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<sup>1</sup> Let me point out that tense relations between the two countries had already existed before the match lost by El Salvador, and it is arguable whether this sporting defeat was indeed the real cause of armed conflict. However, it can be assumed that the football match between Honduras and El Salvador was a hotspot.

<sup>2</sup> The World Cup and the UEFA European Championship are the so-called SMEs: Sports Mega-Events and are treated as special events by host countries. Their organisation is associated with years of preparatory efforts and huge investments (the construction of stadiums, investment in road infrastructure, etc.). This is accompanied by hopes for the promotion of the country, the development of tourism, co-funding of hotel industry, etc., which is supposed to translate into long-term macro-social and macroeconomic benefits (Humphreys, Prokopowicz 2007: 12; Woźniak 2013; 2015: 62–74).

<sup>3</sup> American society is an exception to the rule. In the USA, football is not only unpopular, but also perceived as alien to the American spirit (Melosik 2016).

<sup>4</sup> As Piotr Skuza (2006: 78) puts it: “Football takes a special place among other sports as far as the number of spectators is concerned. The position of this discipline is so prominent that the »footballisation« of society becomes the expression of modern spirit”.

ing social benefits and progress, not just a source of entertainment and respite from important social matters (Bromberger 2001: 18 after Watson 2018: 603).

Although Wolfram Manzenreiter and John Horne (2007) do not explicitly define the term under discussion in their article *Playing the Post-Fordist Game in/ to the Far East: The Footballisation of China, Japan and South Korea*, it can be deduced from the context that it refers to the growing popularity of football in the region, which is accompanied by the transformation of football from leisure activity to a domain subjected to market valuation and regulation.

Bromberger, Manzenreiter and Horne share the belief that the footballisation of society means that football has ceased to be what it had used to be (merely a form of entertainment). It is playing an increasingly significant role in other areas of life. Thus, in its structure, the term “footballisation of society” resembles the term “medicalisation of society” understood as

a process in which non-medical problems (behaviours, conditions, attributes) are defined in medical terms, most often as diseases or disorders that need to receive medical treatment. Certain aspects of everyday life fall under the influence and supervision of medicine. In terms of definition, this process can be viewed from the point of view of medicine itself, which implies the broadening of the jurisdiction of medical professions that claim ownership of natural life processes, forms of deviation or difficult life situations (Wieczorkowska 2012: 34).

## Football and the sociology of sport

To what extent is the sociology of sport interested in football? Is football the main subject of inquiry within this sub-discipline? Before we answer these questions, let us agree on some definitions. It is assumed here that the sociology of sport investigates social contexts, preconditions, consequences and manifestations of such phenomena as sport (*sensu stricto*), physical recreation and physical education (Stempień 2018: 177).

Undoubtedly, a number of renowned scholars representing this sub-discipline have recognised the social importance of football or referred to football-related examples. Norbert Elias’ student Eric Dunning used to write about football and Richard Giulianotti is the co-author of an important monograph on the links between football and globalisation.

Ørnulf Seippel (2018), who analysed the content of articles published from 1984–2014 in three leading sub-discipline periodicals (“Journal for Sport and Social Issues”, “Sociology of Sport Journal” and “International Review for the Sociology of Sport”), showed that football was one of the twenty key topics. Other topics included athletes, nationalism, urbanism, culture, organisations and politics, body and health, subcultures, the Olympics, media, globalisation, gender, race, and Europe. However, of the 1,923 articles studied by Seippel (2018: 299), football could be described as the main topic referred to throughout the text only

in 48 cases (2.5%). Culture proved to be the most important topic (30.4%). Interestingly, in the case of texts on culture, the second most important topic was body strength, and the topic of health and body was on a par with football.

Therefore, sports sociologists recognise the unique social importance of football. This is proven by the fact that football was the only sport on the list of the most frequently discussed topics in publications on the sociology of sport. The other topics were more typical of “general sociology” rather than “sports sociology”; the authors were more interested in how certain general social issues manifested themselves in the field of sport (e.g. nationalism). At the same time, it has to be assumed that items discussing football constitute more than the mentioned 2.5% of all articles published over the last 30 years under the label of the sociology of sport. Indeed, to this number must also be added some socio-sports studies on culture, nationalism, the relationship between sport and politics, sports organizations, etc., where the examples or research base were related to football.

The Polish sociology of sport stands out against this backdrop, which is documented by the analysis of the content of five leading Polish sociological periodicals from 2001–2015. The analysis showed that the articles on the sociology of sport published in these periodicals (29 pieces in total) are relatively homogeneous:

one can conclude that there is a certain over-representation of the studies that focus on the analysis of the popularity of football (supporting, big football events, the “football world”). Almost half of all of the pieces of writing on the sociology of sport belong to this category (Stempień 2018: 186–187).

Thus, it can be stated that during the first fifteen years of the 21st century, about 50% of the articles in the field of the Polish sociology of sport were devoted to football.

One can formulate a tentative thesis that many publications by sports sociologists dealing with football actually focus on the narrower issue of supporting, considering the activities and communities of football fans. Therefore, the subject of reflection would focus on supporting football clubs as well as some transformation of this activity and football supporter communities, rather than on football itself. Such a thesis can be supported by numerous monographic items.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it must be admitted that thematic issues of Polish sociological journals which announce broader discussions about football often offer, in fact, mainly studies of the supporting<sup>6</sup> phenomenon in football, which is obviously an inter-

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of the books include: R. Kossakowski (2017), *Od chuliganów do aktywistów? Polscy kibice i zmiana społeczna*, Universitas, Kraków; D. Antonowicz, R. Kossakowski, T. Szlendak (2015), *Aborygeni i konsumenci*, Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warszawa; T. Sahaj (2007), *Fani futbolowi: historyczno-społeczne studium zjawiska kibicowania*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Wychowania Fizycznego w Poznaniu, Poznań.

<sup>6</sup> The following examples can be listed: R. Kossakowski (ed.) (2015), *The social phenomenon of football*, “Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica”, vol. 16(4); W. Woźniak, K. Kaźmierska

esting and important topic. Many articles published both in Polish sociological periodicals and leading international journals in the field of the sociology of sport explore the phenomenon of supporting football clubs.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, one can question the thesis that the Polish sociology of sport is dominated not so much by football but by studies dedicated to supporting. First of all, it is not difficult to find examples of influential publications on football which marginalise the issue of supporting football clubs. One of the examples is a recently published book by Konrad Burdyka (2019) *Między zagrodą a boiskiem. Studium aktywności wiejskich klubów sportowych* [Between the homestead and the football pitch: the study of the activity of rural sports clubs] (IRWiR PAN [Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences], Warsaw). In it, the author focuses on the activities of Popular [Rural] Sports Teams and amateur football in the countryside. One can cite other publications by Burdyka and other authors on football which do not focus on the issue of football supporters.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it cannot be claimed that football-related studies boil down to studying football supporters. Moreover, it is noteworthy that some of the studies which explore the world of football fans also refer to broader phenomena and show the activities of supporters from the point of view of the processes that affect football as such, or even society as a whole. Let us recall reflections on the commercialisation of sport and resistance to this on the part of traditional fans (“the last bastion of anti-consumerism”).

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(eds.) (2013), *Globalization and glocalization of football. Theoretical considerations and empirical efforts*, “Przegląd Socjologiczny”, vol. 62(3).

<sup>7</sup> Examples include: J. Burski (2013), *Euro 2012 – The End and the Beginning of Polish Football Supporters*, “Przegląd Socjologiczny”, no. 3; M. Gońda (2013), *Supporters’ Movement “Against Modern Football” and Sport Mega Events. European and Polish Contexts*, “Przegląd Socjologiczny”, no. 3; R. Kossakowski (2013), *Proud to be Tukker. A Football Club and the Building of Local Identity: The Case of FC Twente Enschede*, “Przegląd Socjologiczny”, no. 3; M. Grodecki (2017), *Building Social Capital: Polish Football Supporters through the Lens of James Coleman Conception*, “International Review for the Sociology of Sport”, vol. 54(4); R. Kossakowski (2017), *From Communist Fan Clubs to Professional Hooligans: A History of Polish Fandom as a Social Process*, “Sociology of Sport Journal”, vol. 34(3); R. Kossakowski, D. Antonowicz, T. Szlendak (2017), *Polish Ultras in the Post-socialist Transformation*, “Sport in Society”, vol. 21(6); R. Kossakowski (2015), *Where are the Hooligans? Dimensions of Football Fandom in Poland*, “International Review for the Sociology of Sport”, vol. 52(6).

<sup>8</sup> For example: K. Burdyka (2015), *Strategie działania amatorskich klubów piłkarskich a pobudzanie potencjałów społecznych polskiej wsi*, [in:] H. Podedworna, A. Pilichowski, W. Knieć (eds.), *Nowi sprawcy zmian społecznych na wsi*, Wydawnictwo Szkoły Głównej Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego, Warszawa; K. Łęcki (2009), *Śląski “Ruch” – ponowoczesne meandry regionalnej tożsamości (na przykładzie klubu piłkarskiego i jego społecznego otoczenia)*, “Studia Socjologiczne”, no. 4; W. Woźniak (2013), *Sport Mega Events and the Need for Critical Sociological Research: the Case of Euro 2012*, “Przegląd Socjologiczny”, no. 3; W. Cudny, R. Rouba (2013), *Large Sports Events in the Eyes of the Host City’s Inhabitants: the Example of Wrocław*, “Polish Sociological Review”, no. 4.

To sum up, within the Polish sociology of sport, the subject of football has been very popular in recent years. Studies on football fans are central here. Besides, the Polish sociology of sport clearly deals with football more often and more willingly than the international sociology of sport. Such close analytical attention paid by Polish researchers to football – compared to their colleagues abroad – would be understandable if we demonstrated that football was a particularly important social issue in Poland, more important than in other countries. However, such an assumption is not well-grounded. Therefore, an over-representation of football-related topics in the Polish sociology of sport can be identified. We will refer to this as the “footballisation of the sociology of sport.”<sup>9</sup> The consequences of this phenomenon are noteworthy.

### **Consequences of the footballisation of the sociology of sport**

It can be assumed that the footballisation of the sociology of sport, understood as excessive analytical and research attention paid to the topic of football, can have two consequences for this sub-discipline. It may mean that the conclusions drawn about football will be treated by their authors and recipients as binding for sport in general (type I error). Moreover, the footballisation of the sub-discipline may lead to interesting research issues being neglected, for the sole reason that they are not related to football, which is considered central here (type II error).

Treating football as sport *per se* is based on two assumptions. The first one implies that, as a rule, knowledge of one sports discipline can be extrapolated to sport in general. It seems that one should be cautious when making such presumptions. Still, it has to be admitted that one can come across publications by authors who claim to discuss or resolve important sociological sport-related issues (as indicated in the title) but subsequently add (in a subtitle) that their study is in fact of a casuistic nature and is based on research carried out, for example, among fencers or female badminton players. The second assumption implies that football can be regarded a discipline representative of all sports, and therefore football-related studies can be treated authoritatively. This assumption should be rejected due to the specific characteristics of football, such as the specific nature of a sporting career (high earnings, no need for an additional occupation). It is also quite obvious that footballers become celebrities more often than sportsmen and sportswomen in other disciplines. Football is also special due to the specific nature of sports consumption; football supporters, compared to fans in other disciplines, seem to be more numerous, better organised, more “colourful”, visible and more aggressive. The phenomenon of football hooliganism is actually purely football-related.

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps a more suitable but less grammatically graceful term (especially in Polish) would be the “over-footballisation of the sociology of sport”, similarly to the term “overmedicalisation” of certain areas of social life, and thus their excessive medicalisation (Wieczorkowska 2012: 34).

At the same time, it can be argued that – at least in Poland – football fans more often have underworld connections than supporters in other disciplines. Apart from distinctive sporting careers and sports consumption, there is also the issue of the specificity of organisation. National and international football organisations differ from other sports organisations in terms of their budgets, embezzlement scandals and their strong position in negotiations with public and political bodies (let me recall the conflict between the PZPN [the Polish Football Association] and the Polish government a dozen years ago, when FIFA and UEFA interfered). Due to these distinctive characteristics of football, generalisations from football-based observations seem unjustified.

The type II error is an error of omission. Given that the group of sports sociologists in Poland is not numerous and that this sub-discipline is one of the least represented in Polish sociology (Stempień 2020: 118), strong focus on football-related issues may mean other vital research topics are neglected. As the above-mentioned analysis of Polish sociological journals over the first 15 years of the 21st century showed,

the Polish sociology of sport *sensu lato* deals primarily with sport itself, and only then with another component of physical culture, namely physical recreation. Sociological aspects of physical education are also neglected. Thus, one can speak of a misrepresentation within the Polish sub-discipline (Stempień 2018: 190).

We can list at least two more topics or areas hitherto neglected by the Polish sociology of sport. The first one is niche sports, in which Poles are internationally successful. Examples of such sociological inquiries could be:

- how can sports consumption, sponsorship and professionalism be described in the case of niche disciplines?
- what is the socio-demographic profile of a niche sports fan?
- what is the relationship between organisational solutions and sporting successes in niche sports?
- can we speak of the social world of niche disciplines?
- what are the hurdles and benefits associated with the establishment of a common institutional representation for niche disciplines?

The second area worth exploring is the area of “borderline sports” i.e. strategy games (chess, bridge, scrabble, etc.), e-sport, and perhaps also “exotic” sports (competitions in wood cutting and chopping which are becoming increasingly popular in Poland, or the Scottish caber toss, etc.):

- are borderline disciplines socially recognised as sport? What arguments are used by “ordinary people” when defining whether a given discipline is a sport?
- do competitors in borderline sports define themselves as athletes?
- what is the level of engagement of borderline sports fans and what are the borderline sports consumption patterns?

To sum up, it should be stated that the sociology of sport is a sub-discipline developed in Poland by a small group of researchers who focus primarily on studies of the world of football (including football fans). Although we are not questioning the scientific merit of many of these publications, we must admit that the footballisation of the Polish sociology of sport leads to the neglect of other important research topics. This is primarily due to the lack of studies devoted to the other two components of physical culture apart from sport, i.e. physical recreation and physical education. Let me formulate a recommendation to consider the possibility of establishing research teams comprising health sociologists (for research into physical recreation) and sociologists of education (for research into physical education) aimed at supporting the narrow circle of sports sociologists.

As for the other two fields of study (niche sports and borderline sports), it seems that studies in these fields would not only make the discussion within the Polish sociology of sport more heterogeneous, but also more interesting and perhaps more inspiring, including for recipients from outside the sub-discipline. It is worth making an effort.

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This volume creates an opportunity to present the results of researches and analyses related to sports, physical recreation and physical education in a broader context (beyond that of football). Therefore, it is defined largely by exclusion: articles discuss studies of a number of sports disciplines, including niche sports (shooting sports, table tennis) and “borderline sports” (chess, e-sport) or general sport-related issues (sport in the era of political transformation, organisation of the Olympic Games from the perspective of the local host community). However, none of the articles is devoted to football. We believe that this volume will enrich the debate within the Polish sociology of sport. We would be honoured if, in retrospect, it could be said to have contributed in some way to the exploration of new research areas and lines of analysis within this sub-discipline.

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## FUTBOLIZACJA POLSKIEJ SOCJOLOGII SPORTU

**Abstrakt.** Rozważania w tekście dotyczą wyjątkowej pozycji piłki nożnej w gronie dyscyplin sportowych, co pozwala na przyjęcie tezy Brombergera o zjawisku futbolizacji społeczeństwa. Jak pokazują przywoływane analizy, światowa socjologia sportu na przestrzeni ostatnich 30 lat dostrzegła wyjątkowy status futbolu i należy on do dwudziestu najchętniej podejmowanych tematów w obrębie subdyscypliny. Trudno jednak mówić o futbolizacji światowej socjologii sportu, rozumianej jako nadreprezentacja tematyki futbolowej w studiach socjo-sportowych. Inaczej rzecz przedstawia się w przypadku polskiej socjologii sportu, gdzie nawet połowa prac powstałych w pierwszym piętnastoleciu XXI wieku dotyczyła różnych zagadnień związanych z futbolem. Rozważania w tekście kończy prezentacja tez dotyczących możliwych skutków futbolizacji polskiej socjologii sportu (błąd pierwszego i drugiego typu).

**Słowa kluczowe:** futbolizacja, socjologia sportu, piłka nożna, dyscypliny sportowe.