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Book review: Soccer, culture and society in Spain. An ethnography of Basque Fandom

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Soccer, Culture and Society in Spain. An ethnography of Basque fandom

By Mariann Váczi. Routledge, 2015, New York, NY.

Reviewed by: Alan Bairner, Loughborough University, Loughborough, United Kingdom.

Mariann Váczi's *Soccer, Culture and Society in Spain* is one of the latest titles to be published in the Routledge Critical Studies in Sport series edited by Jennifer Hargreaves and Ian McDonald and it must surely be one of the most impressive. Váczi tells the story in considerable detail of expressions of fandom associated with the unique association football club, Athletic Club of Bilbao, situated in the Basque country and, in so doing, relates how she, a Hungarian anthropologist with little previous interest in football, became a Bilbaino.

The book is divided into four parts, the first of which “explores the affective dimensions of soccer culture, the projection of communal identifications and desires on the club, and the resulting impasses and double binds of identification” (p. 9). The chapters here deal with the development of the game in both the Basque Country and in Spain, the Basque-only philosophy of Athletic Club which lies at the heart of its unique place in world football, and the seasons when the club was almost relegated from the top tier of Spanish football. Part II “examines Basque and Spanish football as a gender regime” (p. 9). Chapter 4 looks at masculinities and the melodramas of good and evil – disloyal players as villains, the club and the city as victims. Chapter Five is a fairly conventional feminist reading of the role of women in the culture of Athletic Club as fans, reporters, leaders and players. Chapter Six, on the other hand, offers a far less widely-held account of the public perceptions of soccer-wives-and-girlfriends which is intended to give added weight to claims that the Basque Country is different. Part III “investigates the regional, political and ideological divisions of the Basque Country and Spain through the lenses of soccer” (p 10). Individual chapters

address Athletic Club's intra-Basque rivalry with Real Sociedad (from Donostia-San Sebastián) and the Spanish 'national' team as an ideological terrain contested by Basque, Catalan and Spanish nationalisms. The final part of the book consists of a single chapter which examines life-cycle rituals at Athletic Club's 'Cathedral', the San Mamés stadium, where the team played its last game on 5 May 2013, and its successor, San Barria ('New'). A short epilogue follows with Váczi concluding that "For a city thoroughly transformed by industrial capitalism, known for its maritime ventures and financial exploits, and divided by its Basque and Spanish politics, Athletic both embodies and resolves contradictory impulses by making Bilbainos believe that what binds the city together is neither business nor ideology, but the enjoyment of local play" (p. 192).

Bilbao is arguably best known today for its Guggenheim Museum, founded in 1997 and built to a design by the Canadian-American architect, Frank Gehry, which was pivotal in its transformation from an industrial to a post-industrial city and stands close to the site where football was first played in the city by British sailors and dockworkers. For those who are interested in association football, the city is also recognised as home to a football club with its own unique philosophy concerning the recruitment of players – a philosophy which seems wholly at odds with the requirements of the modern, highly commercialised game. Put simply, Athletic Club's players are Basques although as Váczi explains, this is not as straightforward as it might at first appear.

In many respects, Athletic's selection policy, according to Váczi, reflects the twin strands of Basque nationalism, one primordial and essentialist, the other action-based and performative. Who is and who is not Basque in this context proves at times to be a complex issue. What is

certain, however, is that the club has turned its back on the model of player recruitment which is otherwise universally applied. *La filosofía* is a major source of pride as is Athletic Club's uninterrupted presence in the top tier of Spanish football. Yet, these two sources of pride are always potentially in conflict. For how much longer can purism of this sort withstand the pressures on the modern game? Real Sociedad, the other major club in the Basque Country, has no such handicap, but nor is it the club that is most closely identified with Basque national identity even though, as Váczi reports, "below and beyond rivalry and competition, a Basque derby should always be a fiesta of Basque unity" (p. 146). The Madrid clubs remain the true enemies.

Váczi notes that "Peripheral nationalist ideologies in Spain emerged at the same time that the first soccer clubs were institutionalized: at the end of the 19th century" (p. 153). They were suppressed during the Franco years, when the Hispanicization policy temporarily forced Athletic Club, its English name being a tribute to the early pioneers, to be known as Atlético de Bilbao and when the club acted as "a site of secret transgression" (p. 28). However, they have re-emerged, arguably with a greater sense of political direction in subsequent years, especially in the Basque Country and Catalonia. Although the recent achievements of Spain's 'national' team – 'The Spanish Fury' - have given sustenance to the idea of Spanish national unity, all the while, "Through Athletic Bilbao, Basques produced an ideal of purity that Spanish nationalists dreamt for The Spanish Fury" (p. 158). Meanwhile, Barcelona Football Club were carrying the flag of Catalan nationalism on the global football stage and contributing a sizeable contingent of players to the successful Spanish side.

The vast amount of research that has gone into this book is astonishing and the story that is told particularly comes alive through the excerpts from interviews and conversations that the author had during the period of her immersion in the life of Bilbao and its football club.

There is evidence throughout the book of Véczi's innate curiosity about people and places and her willingness to embrace these and be embraced by them in return. Her erudition is also evident on every page of this work as is her ethnographer's capacity to make us think that we, the readers, are there too. For example, of Bilbao itself, she refers to "the tangibility of production, communal togetherness, and the synaesthesia of industrial smells, colours and textures" (p. 33). And 'being there' is central to this study not only methodologically but also in relation to its subject matter. As Véczi herself describes it, "Bilbao's soccer culture retains the carnival mandate of 'being there', of universal participation as it consumes the entire community" (p. 3).

I have only one slight concern about Véczi's analysis and it relates in particular to the third of her three chapters on gender. She is at pains throughout the book to highlight what makes Basques and, above all, Athletic Club different and she presents a strong case for this in the second gender-related chapter where she discusses the emergence of the club's women's team. She claims that when the women's team arrived at San Mamés in 2003, "Bilbao turned women's soccer into an event" (p. 94). Women had not even been allowed to join the club until 1979. Indeed, in the Basque context, they had traditionally been regarded as non-competitive. Yet Véczi envisages a new era in women's football at San Mamés Barria because of her faith in the 'Athletic effect'. This, she argues, could be the greatest *bilbainada* yet – "turning women's soccer into a mass spectator sport in a country where men monopolise it" (p. 109). "If anywhere in Spain", she goes on, "it could happen in Bilbao" (p. 109) and who, having read her book, would discount the possibility? Her representation in the

next chapter of Basque attitudes towards soccer wives and girlfriends is, however, more difficult to believe.

According to Véczi, “Basques do not show any interest in WAGs and the private life of players” (p. 123). I, for one, am obliged to take her word for this. It is explained, in part, by reference to the Basques as respectful people, resulting in a rejection of “the conflated media presence of soccer players in any capacity other than that of athlete” (p. 125). At this point, further stereotypical and essentialist Basque traits are laid out – “a Basque man should be simple, silent and serious” (p. 125); humility is “desirable male behaviour” (p. 126); self-promotion undermines “personal credibility” (p. 126). Whilst accepting that this is what Véczi found to be true, I am well aware, as a Scot, of the ability of certain peoples, not least submerged nationalities, to tell stories about themselves that are in keeping with how they want the world to view them. Thus, the Scots are mythologized as being more democratic and egalitarian than their nearest neighbours. Whilst myths and stereotypes often contain within them some kernel of the truth, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that Basques are just as capable as the Scots of misleading even the most assiduous of ethnographers and that is certainly what Véczi is.

The book concludes with an examination of football grounds as places to spread the ashes of deceased fans or to place the ashes in urns in separate purpose-built rooms such as is incorporated in Athletic’s new stadium. As Véczi remarks, “Soccer clubs are increasingly aware of their fans’ desire to follow their club *a muerte*, ‘to the death’ – unconditionally, until the last day and beyond” (p. 184). Overall, she concludes, “Without Athletic and its world of fantasy and desire, Bilbao would be incomplete, inconsistent, barren” (p. 191). This is a

remarkable piece of scholarship combined with passion. If you only read one book about the social significance of association football, this is surely the book that you should read. For those of us who have written about football to varying degrees, this is the book that we should wish we had written.