

A year of controversies on civil rights in the sport

by Tiziano Peccia



Introduction

We are living through an intense and conflictual phase in world politics. Past events have thought that the Olympic Games and the World Cup have always been a theatre for diplomatic and ideological conflicts. The Cold War was defined as “cold” by George Orwell as it was

fought not with weapons and open military conflicts, but rather in other social fields such as sports, culture, science, etc. Winning a medal at the Olympics has always been a status symbol to show the power and the superiority of a country. It is not a coincidence that China, the United States and Russia invest many economic resources to have excellent athletes. It is the same concerning football; Italy, Germany, and emerging countries the Latin American, have in football the key to spread sense of belonging and patriotism to own populations. Therefore, the last Olympic Games and the last Football World Cup have been a mirror on the social trend of the society: thanks to the Olympics it is possible to statue the tensions between Western and Eastern countries and thanks to the World Cup are clear the social problems who are dividing people of different sexuality, ethnic origin and religion.

1. Sochi and the new Cold War

The Cold War has officially been over for more than 20 years now, but people continue to hear about ideological conflicts between “Western and Eastern blocks”. For example, the singer Madonna, along with the Russian group Pussy Riot (Vania, 2014), invited democratic countries to boycott the Sochi Olympics. Both captured the attention of Western media, giving rise to a series of anti-Sochi reactions in the United States and other Western countries. Surprisingly this boycott was supported by the Russian diaspora community in [Brooklyn](#). The Italian ex-Parliamentarian Vladimir Luxuria, first European transgender in Parliament, paraded around Sochi’s streets with the Rainbow flag and was consequently arrested by the Russian police. Norway’s Health Minister, Mr. Bent Hoie, took his husband to Sochi for the opening ceremony, which echoes Obama’s decision to send a delegation partly composed of famous gay icons, such as Billie Jean King. In spite of everything, Russia seems to have handled these media attacks quite well and has avoided any conflicts. The video of Putin hugging [Ireen Wüst](#), the Dutch athlete who kissed her girlfriend during the Vancouver’s 2010 Olympics could be seen as an image of the Russian President converted

by the Western policies of “freedom of expression”, or is it just a two-faced President who does not want diplomatic problems?

2. Olympic Games and world politics, then and now

In order to better understand what is going on, it is useful to briefly look at the past. The Olympic Games of Moscow were boycotted due to the Russian invasion of Afghanistan by the United States and 65 other allied countries, the 1984 Olympic Games of Los Angeles were boycotted by the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block (Runciman, 2012), except China and the European countries Romania and Yugoslavia, more influenced by “Western democratic-economic models”. From this point of view, Olympic Games are synonymous of propaganda. Today people do not live in the era of the Moscow Olympic Games, in which Vladimir Sal'nikov - with his world record in the men's 1500 meters freestyle - symbolized a Soviet Union that wanted to be a dominating superpower, nor do people live in the era of the Los Angeles Olympic Games in which the mighty Carl Lewis won four gold medals, showcasing the stunning performance of an US citizen to the whole world. Today people live in a different world however the differences between the West and the East are still alive. Moreover, pro or anti-gay policies are just a mirror image of the social situation of two-faces of the same globe, where one “block” continues to try to influence the other.

3. World Cup: comparing French football in 1998 and 2014

1998 is a crucial and symbolic year for the French political situation. During the last century, multiculturalism and multiracialism have been among the hottest issues in France. The French football team in 1998 was composed by a new generation of French citizens, coming from different parts of the world. Media invented the expression “black-blanc-beur” to emphasize the ethnic diversity of the football team of that year. Thuram, born in Guadeloupe, Zinédine Zidane, with Algerian descendants and double citizenships, and Fabien Barthez, born in the the Midi-Pyrénées region, were three faces of contemporary French society looking for a new multicultural equilibrium. For many the French victory in the World Cup, that year, symbolized also a victory of a new national identity, based on equality and the recognition of diversity, with people linked together and engaged in order to avoid racial prejudices (Jelloun, 1999).

If in 1998 the victory of the World Cup “was considered a [blow](#) to Jean-Marie Le Pen's far-right National Front Party” ([Kuper, 2005](#)), with black and white French players singing together the Marseillaise, 2014 presents a rather different scenario. The success in the European Parliament election of Marine Le Pen, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s daughter, appears as her father’s revenge. The rise of power of the *Front national*, becoming in that election the first party in France, is the outcome of a France that lost a match in the integration policies and in the harmonization of the French multiculturalism.

For a coincidence, the French football team in the 2014 World Cup did not shine as in their glorious past. Moreover, during the match between France and Switzerland, three French supporters painted blackfaces were dressed like the women of the Afro-Brazilian religion, [Candombé](#). The reactions were protests followed by a requests to investigate started from the FIFA.

4. Racism and homophobia in 2014 World Cup

A similar scenario occurred again during the match between Ghana and Germany, with a pro-Nazi supporter who invaded the playground. The security did not stop the invasion. The image of Sulley Muntari, a Ghana's player, who intervened to ward off the jammer from the football field, was full of meaning: a black man wanted to expel a vulgar and obsolete Nazi message from the global attention.

[Piara Powar](#), executive director of the FARE ([Football Against Racism in Europe](#)), defined unacceptable the expression "puto" used by Brazilian and Mexican supporters. Mexican supporters screamed the homophobic word during the opening match against Cameroon. Despite Piara Powar's protest, and the intervention of professor Andres Aradillas-Lopez in defining this expression as discriminatory, FIFA decided to [not apply](#) the Article 67 in sanctioning the conduct of spectators.

Moreover, the World Cup has been not just the scenario of racist and homophobic reviles, but also of religious and cultural-based hate acts, such as the anti-Semitic messages showed through banners by Croatian and Russian supporters. The 2014 World Cup, spotted by vulgar and discriminatory messages, showed therefore the failure in promoting worldwide civil rights while respecting freedom of expression. The responsibilities are shared between the organizers of the competition and their managers, that did not protect the stadiums, extremely exposed to Media's attention, from those dangerous messages. A share of responsibility belongs also to the origin country governments of the racist and homophobic supporters, that did not teach effectively to their own people how to respect different ways to be.

5. The "Tavecchio case" in Italy: from racist sentences to the FIGC Presidency

On 25 July, during the presentation of his candidacy to presidency of *Federcalcio* (FIGC), the main Italian football association, [Carlo Tavecchio](#) generated a hot controversy in the media blaming the presence in Serie A's clubs of "many banana-eating non-EU players". James Pallotta, President of the Roma football association, said that Tavecchio's words were embarrassing for Italy as a whole.

Italian politics was divided in evaluating the *banana-eating* expression. On one hand, politicians of left-wing parties were really strict in asking Tavecchio's withdraw from the

election. The Prime Minister Matteo Renzi defined the sentence as an *own goal* for the candidate. [Graziano Delrio](#), Secretary to the Prime Minister with responsibility for Sports, and Debora Serracchiani, President of Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region, defined sport as a source of models to imitate for young people, models where those kind of expressions are inadequate. They argued therefore that who uses such discriminatory expressions cannot have the visibility and the influence of a FIGC President. On the other hand, members of right-wings parties, such as the former Minister Maurizio Gasparri and Matteo Salvini, rejected any accuse of racism raised against Tavecchio.

After weeks of debates, Tavecchio became president with a share of 63,18% of votes. During his first speech, he mentioned the fight for expelling racism from Italian stadiums as one of the main priorities of his presidency. This is a clear example of Italian incongruence and mismatches, as the man accused of racism is the same who is promising to fight against this same issue. Some days later the [UEFA](#) opened an investigation to statue the importance of Tavecchio's sentence, moving the debate from a national to an international environment. This investigation produced no practical results. According to a twit of the Italian Euro-parliamentarian Cécile Kyenge, in dealing with this case Italy missed the opportunity to change, and to coherently use sport as a *big gym* for fair inclusion of immigrants and new Italian citizens with migration backgrounds.

Some days later the UEFA opened an investigation to statue the importance of Tavecchio's sentence, moving the debate from a national to an international environment. The result of the investigation became published on 7th October 2014; UEFA sanctioned the racist affirmation interdicting Tavecchio to be part of the UEFA committees for six months, included the UEFA congress in March 2015. Moreover, Tavecchio "will organise a special event in Italy aimed at increasing awareness and compliance with the principles of [UEFA's Resolution](#) entitled 'European Football united against racism'". FIGC decided to do not prolonging dispute, accepting the suspension. The UEFA role is absolutely central in fight racism; decision making in football, according to the high level of attention on sport events, could generate externalities even on other social fields. Khalid Chaouki, Italian Parliamentarian for the Democratic Party (*PD*), emphasised the outcome of a petition [online](#) subscribed on Change.org: around 26.000 signatures claimed a consequence for Tavecchio's expression. Tavecchio case is not a good advertisement for the Italian image; if Italy would continue to be a regional power in Europe and in the West of the World, mismatches and mistakes of this kind should be avoided, as Khalid Chaouki highlights, especially in institutions as FIGC.

Conclusion

While Olympic Games mirror the civil right debate from a global prospective, revitalizing a Western-Eastern divide, the World Cup and the case of Tavecchio present a more complicated picture. The World Cup shows that racist episodes affects also European countries, that in the last years were particularly involved on the international scenario in promoting anti-discriminatory policies. The case of Tavecchio shows that a same country, presumed to be internal to the “Western block”, may be dramatically divided on the same topics such as the racist content and the moral implications of some controversial sentences. Italy pointed the finger against racist episodes during the World Cup and the Olympic Games is, paradoxically, the same country in which one can become president of the national football association despite being accused for discriminatory expressions.

The UEFA sanction reassumes the thinking of Alberto Burgio, professor at the University of Bologna, who affirms in his book *Nonostante Auschwitz. Il «ritorno» del razzismo in Europa* that the way to fight racism should be focused in banning every kind of discriminatory manifestation. “Banana-eaters” is one of thousands, minor discriminatory expressions apparently innocuous in micro contexts, having involuntary a dangerous and massive outcome on daily life. In order to have positive developments on the macro level, it is necessary to eradicate discrimination even at the micro one.

If a sort of new Cold War is taking place today, the *Western block* seems to be less compact in ideology compared to it-self 25 years ago. Italy, France, and Germany, are just few examples of countries that are living internal ideological reshaping today, especially on the ‘race’ and colour divide. Moreover, it is still difficult to understand which will be the outcome of those trends in the long run.

References

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