

The Pitch of Empire

ALEGI, Peter – *African Soccerscapes: How a Continent Changed the World's Game*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010. Pp. 184.

DUBOIS, Laurent – *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010. Pp. 352.

When looking back at the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, many remember Ghana's run into the quarter-finals and their loss at the hands, or rather *the* hand of Luis Suárez and Uruguay. Others remember the brilliant first goal of the tournament, off the boot of South African midfielder Siphwe Tshabalala. Still others remember the slow-motion replay of England's wrongly disallowed goal against Germany in the round of 16. All this, of course, remembered through the hazy drone of the vuvuzela.

Peter Alegi's *African Soccerscapes* and Laurent Dubois' *Soccer Empire* were both published in advance of the tournament and they join a growing field connecting soccer with world politics and history. Books such as Franklin Foer's *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization* (2004), Simon Kuper's *Soccer against the Enemy: How the World's Most Popular Sport Starts and Fuels Revolutions and Keeps Dictators in Power* (1994), and most recently, Brenda Elsey's *Citizens and Sportsmen: Fútbol and Politics in Twentieth-Century Chile* (2011), all fall into this category. Why all of this scholarship on soccer? Dubois sums it up best in his preface, saying that after "fifteen years studying the history of the French Empire in the Caribbean and beyond . . . I had seen only passing references to the place of football . . . But once I started looking I discovered that football . . . was everywhere (xix)."

These two books certainly prove that. Alegi covers more than one hundred years of history across an entire continent, and Dubois moves around the French empire over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but both still manage to find soccer just about "everywhere." The two books share more than just this general similarity, however. They are also both driven by many of the same conceptual questions, namely, what are the links between soccer and empire? Between soccer and national movements? And what is the role of soccer in post-independence societies, both in the metropole and in the former colonies? Importantly, both historians also examine the larger question: what do these links tell us?

Alegi frames his concise and accessible book by asking, "how did an African country come to host the 2010 World Cup (xi)?" His answer is a broad, chronological

overview of soccer in Africa that analyzes the influence Africans have had on “the world’s game.” He argues that this influence must be acknowledged and understood. He also uses the lens of soccer to examine the many forms of and responses to European colonialism in Africa. Dubois likewise uses soccer as a frame for understanding colonialism, but he focuses more narrowly on the French empire and on the French national soccer team. His main argument is that the history of French soccer “condenses and illuminates the complexities and ironies of French colonialism (p. 11)” and thus can be used to understand the history of the French empire as well as current debates on multiculturalism in France.

Using soccer as a main reference point may be an unorthodox methodology for writing history, but it allows Alegi and Dubois to coherently discuss a range of topics. Alegi touches on the civilizing mission, magic, apartheid, pan-Africanism, and globalization, while Dubois slides easily between colonialism, multiculturalism, the *banlieues* and the 2005 riots in France, and even a detailed analysis of Zinedine Zidane’s infamous *coup de boule* in the 2006 World Cup Final. The soccer approach also allows Alegi to write Africa into world history – one of the goals of the series his book is a part of, David Robinson and Joseph Miller’s “Africa in World History” – and it allows Dubois to write the history of empire into the history of the metropole. These are aims that are often suggested and talked about by historians but not always done, or done well.

Both books begin with the spread of soccer. It was first introduced to Africa in the 1860s when British civil servants began playing the game in South Africa for their own amusement. Later, the British used the game as part of their “civilizing” mission, a practice also adopted by the French, Italians, Belgians, and Portuguese. Soccer, they believed, represented the “metaphoric essence of a cultured civilization” that would help turn young people into “disciplined, healthy, and moral citizens . . . virtues which no books [could] give them (Alegi, p. 12, p. 8).” However, when people in Africa began playing soccer, they were not always moulded into ideal colonial subjects. Instead, Alegi suggests, they subverted European intentions and made the game their own through their styles of play and spectatorship, including the hiring of diviners and sorcerers.

Dubois describes a similar process of expansion and explains that because of soccer’s growing popularity in the colonies after World War I, the early French national teams were often made up of players from around the world. For example, the 1938 World Cup team was made up of players from Algeria, Senegal, and Uruguay. The Senegalese player was Raoul Diagne, son of notorious Senegalese politician Blaise Diagne. Dubois mentions some other surprising names: Albert Camus, Aimé Césaire, and Léon-Gontran Damas all played as young men.

Like any popular activity, soccer has the power to exclude, but it can also foster intense unity. Alegi and Dubois both explain the powerful link between soccer and national movements. Alegi argues that feelings of solidarity generated by soccer were used by leaders in Africa to promote nationalism and anti-colonialism, a point he claims has been overlooked by scholars. He gives several examples: Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first president of Nigeria, established athletic clubs during World War II and then travelled throughout Nigeria, making

anti-colonial speeches after matches. Similarly, Alegi shows that when the South Africa Soccer Federation pushed for anti-apartheid and anti-racist legislation, it “helped propel and legitimize the activities of anti-colonial movements (p. 53).”

A further example, one also taken up by Dubois, is the Algerian FLN team. In April 1958, ten Algerians playing professionally in France left their teams – some of them giving up the opportunity to play for France in the 1958 World Cup – and formed their own team under the FLN. They toured around the world raising awareness for four years, disbanding in June 1962, one month before Algerian independence. Ferhat Abbas, a major political leader in Algeria, saw the team as an opportunity to make a statement: “On a man to man basis, on the field of football, we can show them who is really superior (p. 47).” Alegi scrupulously notes that the squad ended their tour with a record of 65 wins, 13 losses, and 13 draws.

Dubois provides an equally detailed account of the team, but he also describes a different kind of soccer-generated national movement, one that developed after World War II and through to the post-independence era. This cuts to one of the central points of the book. He explains that the French national team, because of its embodied recognition of French colonial history, became a national movement of sorts. This was not a movement fighting against a colonial power or against apartheid, but rather a movement pushing for the successful realization of a multicultural France. During this time, France was unified in “technicolour” on the field, but off it the country was divided as it confronted war and decolonization in Algeria, the influx of immigrants from former colonies, and later the policies of socialist president François Mitterrand. Division continued into the 1990s with Jean-Marie Le Pen and others on the Right deriding the “black-blanc-beur” team for including “foreigners” and “fake Frenchmen.” This made the team a “rallying point for antiracist political commentary (p. 101, 104).” However, when France won World Cup ‘98, the sense of national feeling, of *all* France celebrating, Dubois argues, seemed to defeat “the enemies of immigration (p. 157).” He suggests that because the team “emerged from and showcased the history of empire, [it] could inspire the construction of a future that was based on this past (p. 174)” and that the victory “exposed and valorized what France truly was: a multicultural and multiracial society . . . and that this was a source of strength (p. 163).”

During the independence era in Africa, Alegi explains that new countries scrambling to solidify national identities built giant stadiums and established national leagues. Governments encouraged people to unite around national teams while using FIFA membership to assert themselves in the international community. Alegi also shows how soccer helped develop pan-Africanism on the continent: the *Confédération africaine de football* was founded in 1957, six years before the creation of the Organization of African Unity (the pre-cursor to the African Union).

Alegi closes his book with the commercialization of soccer in the 1980s and the “new scramble for Africa”: the growing trend of African players migrating to professional leagues in Europe. He also addresses the degeneration of grassroots

soccer, explaining that in Nigeria people are willing to pay to watch the English Premier League on television, but not to sit in the stands to watch local teams. Then, for those that play, he says that school programs are often inadequately funded while soccer academies, even when run well, do harm by releasing 18 year olds with no skills except soccer skills.

The final part of Dubois' book turns to Lilian Thuram and Zidane. Before becoming soccer stars, both grew up in the *banlieues* – Zidane in Marseille and Thuram in Paris, though he was born in Guadeloupe. Dubois uses them to symbolize North Africa and the Caribbean and he intersperses their biographies with an analysis of contemporary French society. After the optimism of 1998, mentioned above, things soured for France, both on and off the field. In a 2001 game in France against Algeria, Algerian fans booed the *Marseillaise* and later ended the game by charging the field. In the 2002 World Cup, France lost all three of its games and did not even score a goal. Then, after an equally disappointing European Championship in 2004, Thuram and Zidane left the team. Off the field, there were riots in November 2005, and President Sarkozy and Thuram publicly exchanged verbal jousts. Finally, in 2006 there was France's bittersweet effort at the World Cup. The country surged with optimism when Zidane and Thuram announced their return to the team and that feeling grew as the team advanced from round to round. Yet, the sense of community felt in 1998 was not repeated to the same degree as unrest continued around the country. In Dubois' words, "the vision of the republic being played out on the football field was far from being realized off of it (p. 247)." Dubois then turns to Zidane's *coup de boule*. He does a thorough job of explaining and contextualizing every aspect of the incident. However, instead of stopping there and merely lamenting the lost opportunity for victory, he draws a link between the *coup de boule* and people from the *banlieues* standing up for themselves with an interpretation of Zidane's thought process: "If you insult me . . . I will, no matter what the moment or cost, strike back. I will knock you down, and I will walk away and refuse to regret what I did, because I should be able to live and play free from insults (p. 274)."

It is a bit odd for a historian to put the word "future" in the title of a book, but Dubois ends his book with an optimistic prognosis for the future of France, in large part because of the potential for dialogue and unity that he believes lies in the beautiful game. Dubois' unabashed love of soccer and *Les Bleus* was probably a factor in this conclusion, and a reason why Dubois wrote the book in the first place. His enthusiasm, however, does not compromise his scholarship. Rather, it brings emotion and excitement to the book. One cannot help but wonder what he would add to the book in light of France's remarkably poor showing at the 2010 World Cup, replete with internal dissent, insults, expulsions, boycotts, and resignations. If anything, those stories only make his questions more relevant. Even without this imaginary coda though, *Soccer Empire* has major strengths: it provides a comprehensive history of the French national team, and with this, a new way of looking at the French empire. It also adds a fascinating angle to the study of multiculturalism in France.

While writing about soccer marks a change from Dubois' other work, it is familiar territory for Alegi. This extrapolation from his earlier work on soccer in South Africa is a strong achievement. The major drawback of Alegi's book is its brevity, and the information and analysis that are excluded because of this. The most striking example of this is the rushed inclusion of women and soccer – an eight-page section near the end of the book. Yet, despite having to confront a wide swath of material, Alegi has produced a cogent and absorbing history of soccer in Africa. Both books use the game creatively and effectively to link together larger questions on empire, national movements, decolonization, and post-independence societies. They leave the field of soccer scholarship with two exemplary works and with plenty of questions for new research.

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