

"America's Best Political Newsletter" Out of Bounds Magazine

# counterpunch

edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st. clair

August 18, 2010

*Spain and the American Press*

## On Soccer and Bullfighting

By VICENTE NAVARRO

I enjoy watching soccer. I used to play it in my youth in Spain, as do millions of Spanish youngsters. It is the most popular game in the country, particularly in working-class neighborhoods. But soccer also has a political meaning in Spain that for, the most part, was missed in the international reporting on the World Cup in South Africa.

Under Franco's dictatorship, one of the cruelest in twentieth-century Europe (for every political assassination in Mussolini's Italy, there were 10,000 such assassinations in Franco's Spain), the only place where Spaniards could express their feelings in public was at soccer matches. In Catalonia, a region that was particularly repressed because of its left-wing leanings and its support for the democratically elected Popular Front during the years of the Republic, the most popular soccer club was the Barcelona club – popularly referred to in Catalan (a language forbidden immediately following the fascist coup) as "el Barça." This was more than a soccer club. It was the rallying point for the democratic forces, not only in Catalonia but in other parts of Spain, in the struggle against fascism. The matches between Barça and the Royal Soccer Club of Madrid (favored by the Franco regime) were electrifying. When Barça won a game, the numbers of police on the streets of Barcelona would be tripled to repress the popular joy.

When democracy was reestablished, the transition took place in conditions very favorable to the conservative, pro-fascist forces. The electoral law was clearly skewed to discriminate against the progressive regions of Spain. For example, in Soria, a very conservative region, only 30,000 votes are needed to elect a member of the Spanish parliament. In Barcelona, 150,000 votes are needed. The state apparatus, led by the king (whom Franco appointed as his successor), remained in fascist hands. But through left-wing pressure and (illegal) workers' strikes, Catalonia was able to obtain some limited self-government. Then in 2007, a Catalan Constitution giving broad powers to the government of Catalonia was approved by the Catalan and Spanish parliaments, and in a referendum by the Catalan population.

This was unacceptable to the right-wing Partido Popular (PP), successor to the fascist apparatus and presided over by Fraga Iribarne, a former minister in Franco's government. The PP set out to stop adoption of the Catalan Constitution and took the matter to the nation's Constitutional Court. This Court is loaded with judges from the Franco years, most of whom had to swear loyalty to the fascist regime. It took the judges four years to decide on the constitutionality of the new Catalan Constitution, and when they did this year, they vetoed many of its important provisions – including the use of Catalan as the preferred language in Catalonia. They justified this on the basis of the "need to keep Spain united," which is the same slogan used during the 1936 coup that destroyed the Republic and repressed Catalan identity. The Court decision was a clear provocation to the Catalan people. Five days later, one and a half million Catalans took to the streets of Barcelona in protest.

This, then, was the background to the World Cup in South Africa. The Spanish team won, and, understandably, the Spanish people went wild. The PP tried to tout this expression of joy as an indicator of Spanish patriotism, at odds

with Catalan calls for autonomy. The problem with this scenario, however, is that five of the players on the Spanish soccer team were from Barça, and all eight goals by the Spanish team during the World Cup series were made by players from the Barcelona club – the symbol of Catalan identity. When the Spanish team celebrated their victory, the players carried not only Spanish flags but Catalan flags. In reality, without the Barça players, Spain would not have won the World Cup.

In Catalonia, as people celebrated the victory, some Spanish flags were waved, but fewer than in the rest of Spain. The Spanish flag is the monarchical flag, and pro-monarchy feeling is not very strong in Catalonia. For many Catalans, as well as many other Spaniards, the true Spanish flag is the red, gold, and violet flag of the Republic, not the red, gold, and red of Spain under the monarchy and under Franco. The Spanish government tried to use the soccer victory as a way of promoting the Spanish flag, which the left has never considered its own.

Where does bullfighting enter into this story? The Catalan revenge for the Constitutional Court's decision on the new Constitution came when the parliament of Catalonia voted, in late July, to ban bullfighting, which is considered by the Spanish right wing as the "national fiesta" in the rest of Spain and as important to the Spanish national identity. The initiative was led by animal rights groups, but there's no doubt that the anger of large numbers of Catalans toward the Spanish right-wing and the institutions of the Spanish state, and especially the Constitutional Court, played a major role in the ban on bullfighting in Catalonia. Just weeks before, the press had published photographs of three members of the Court enjoying a bullfight. That did it. Within days, the Catalan parliament's ban on bullfighting was passed. None of the above was published in the press of the U.S.

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