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Indigeneity and the Disruption of Anglo-Australian Nationalism in Australian Football

Introduction

Nationalism remains one of the most potent social and political forces in the world today (Hutchinson, Smith, 1994). Despite its global significance in defining human relations, the specific characteristics of nationalism and its constituent idea of nation remain contentious.

Competing theories of nationalism remain divergent in their focus and conclusions. This situation reflects the fact that:

[...] nationalist phenomena, which includes the growth of nations and the national state, as well as ethnic identity and community, is vast and ramified. It spills over into any number of cognate subjects: race and racism, fascism, language development, political religion, communalism, ethnic conflict, international law, protectionism, minorities, gender, immigration, genocide. The forms that nationalism takes have been kaleidoscopic: religious, conservative, liberal, fascist, communist, cultural, political protectionist, integrationist, separatist, irredentist, Diaspora, pan, etc. The fluidity and variety of national sentiments, national aspirations, and national cultural values create another obstacle to systematic research, as do the many differences in national identities (Hutchinson, Smith, 1994).

Given this state of affairs, a definitive statement on nationalism is impossible. However, by engaging with the various definitions of nation, some of its essential features can be discerned. The advent of nationalism in 'modernity' can be traced to several key dates that include the First Partition of Poland (1775), the American Declaration of Independence (1776), and the commencement and second phase of the French Revolution (1789 and 1792) (Hutchinson, Smith, 1994). Initiated by the Creole (in this context, a person of European descent born in the Americas) populations of South and North America and soon adopted by the European metropole, the first bloom of nationalism sought to reignite the civic spirit of the Hellenic city state and the Roman Republic. In

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the 19th century, European nationalism became a vehicle for Romanticism and the quest for discovery of an authentic self. During this period, the nation coalesced around the symbols and ideas of the revolutionary impulse in the republics of the United States of America and France. Where dynastic rule survived, as in Germany and Britain, a pre-national past of shared blood, history and destiny was initiated to promote national unity. The extent to which myth was used to forge national unity was more pronounced in Germany than it ever was in Britain. Bismarck's famous exhortation to the German people to 'think with your blood' is indicative of nationalism which uses the myths of race and shared tradition to advance nationalist ideology (Hutchinson, Smith, 1994). In the 20th century the 'European' discourse of nationalism was adopted by the peoples of Africa and Asia as a rallying point against colonial rule (Fanon, 1970). More recently, Indigenous peoples have adopted the language of nation in their ongoing struggles against nation-states.

Australian Football as Idealized Anglo-Australian Nationhood

In 1990, the premier Australian rules football competition, the Victorian Football League (VFL), changed its name to the Australian Football League (AFL). The name change, and the expanded national competition, that it symbolized, occurred as Australia prepared to celebrate its centenary of nationhood in 2001. Almost 100 years had passed since six British colonies in Australia had federated to form the Commonwealth of Australia, united under the popular slogan "One nation, one destiny". That it took the governing body of Australian football so long to accomplish what politicians had achieved in 1901 says much about the relative importance of sports and politics in Australia. Victoria, the state in which the game had originally been conceived as Melbourne Rules, might have acquiesced to the other states on matters of politics, but had long remained unwilling to bequeath its most treasured cultural invention to the rest of the nation. Although Victorian parochialism effectively stalled the game's national aspirations for nearly a century, the renaming and expansion of the Victorian Football League as the Australian Football League reflected the reality that the sport's popularity had achieved in Australian society. Australian football had become the pre-eminent sporting code in Australia, and could rightly claim its status as 'our' national game. Despite the time lag between the establishment of an Australian state and the Australian Football League, the development of both institutions is deeply intertwined with formations of Anglo-Australian national identity.

In 1908, Alfred Deakin, then Prime Minister, was provided with an opportunity to combine his political and sporting interests as guest of honour at the Jubilee Football Carnival in Melbourne. Celebrating 50 years of Australian football, the Carnival brought together representative teams from Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales, Queensland,

South Australia, Western Australia and New Zealand. Deakin's speech at the occasion underlined the role that he foresaw Australian football playing in the development of the Australian nation. Received with acclaim by the large audience, his address, "the gem of the evening", was later described in the press as "a powerful panegyric on clean, manly, health giving sport, as portrayed in the Australasian game at its best" (Cashman, O'Hara, Honey, 2001). Deakin's address is worth quoting at length:

My days of football are past so many years that although the memories are not clouded, I have perfect recollection of the game as I played it. I venture to think that the spirit which animated us was of no discredit to this country and no bad training for the youths of this country. The games of football that I have played since then have been many and various, speaking symbolically, and they have been carried on in other fields, but I have yet to find the game that carries as much pleasure, as much harmless excitement, and as much stimulus as the Australasian game of football. The one qualification which perhaps led to my being selected to propose this toast is that officially at all events I am associated with the Parliament which represents the whole of Australia. The time when there was a Victorian game is not far distant. I well remember it, and it is a great gain to find it displaced, and replaced by the game played wherever the sea washes the shores of Australia and all the interior between. May I say the spirit that activates the true footballer is that which had been tersely expressed in a memorable poem by Newbolt, when he spoke of the true sporting spirit as that which puts the game above the prize. In that you have simply stated and as shortly as possible the very essence of British sport, the very leading principle which has made British sport what it is today – a powerful factor in national development. There was a time when these competitions were looked upon by the civilized world as purely insular, a kind of special development peculiar to the AngloSaxon race because it had strong sinews, and a love of competition. But within the last thirty or forty years a most remarkable change has been noted over the whole of Europe. In every nation there has been a rebirth of sport in consequence of their recognition of the part it plays in a healthy national life. A stricter discipline that you will find, in the training of a football team, you will rarely find in after life. You are laying the foundations of physique, a stamina and capacity that is not only exercised in sport, but which will in the hour of need respond to the nation's call. The game is Australian in its origins, Australian in its principle, and I venture to say, essentially of Australian development. It and every expression of the sporting spirit go to make the manhood which is competent for the nation's tasks. Those who have tumbled on the football field will be prepared to tumble on the political arena. And when the tocsin sounds the call to arms, not the last, but the first to acknowledge it will be those who have played, and played well, the Australasian game of football before that played the Australian game of nation making and nation preserving to stand by the old land (Cashman, O'Hara, Honey, 2001: 111).

Rich in the symbolism of nation, the prime ministerial address says much about how Australians viewed the role of 'their' game in the years immediately following Federation. The fact that these comments on the relationship between the character of the Australian nation and its 'national' game are those of Deakin adds weight to their historical significance. No political leader of his generation was more qualified to articulate the connection between the Australian nation and the Australian game. Unlike many of his political peers, Deakin was Australian-born and his contribution to the federal cause outshone those of Parkes, Barton and Kingston in

terms of its longevity and vision. As Sir Anthony Mason recently pointed out, “what distinguishes him from his contemporaries more than anything else was his clear articulation of a vision of Australia’s future” (Mason, 2001). Although a nationalist, Deakin was not a republican.

His nationalism was a rejection of colonial status. He thought of the Federation as a union of the peoples of the Australian colonies ‘under the crown’. In his mind, Australia would remain an integral part of the British Empire. His conception of the British Empire centred on Great Britain and the old self-governing white Dominions. His was a white Australia. The essence of Deakin’s vision can be grasped in his commentary on Australian football. For Deakin, Australian football is a game that both reflected the emerging national identity and the continuity of links between the new Australian nation and Britain. Informed by the ethos of Muscular Christianity and its credo, *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind and a healthy body) Deakin’s speech draws inspiration from the sporting models of the British public school. Here sport was regarded as appropriate training for the rigours of imperial duties that former students would later face in the administration and defence of Empire. Deakin believed that this sporting model could serve a similar purpose in Australia, where Australian football might provide an appropriate training ground for youth to be forged into the type of men the new nation required for its progress and maintenance. Deakin accepted the connection between sport, nation and politics as self-evident, in accordance with British attitudes. This is confirmed by his appeal to the extreme imperialism of the poem, *Vitai: Lampada* in which English poet Sir Henry Newbolt associates the playing of cricket with the ‘playing’ of war. In Newbolt, the cult of Muscular Christianity is extended to its very limit, as the poet recalls the Duke of Wellington’s ‘pronouncement’ that “the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing field of Eton” (Newbolt, 1912). It is clear that Deakin’s vision of Australian football and its relationship to Australian nationalism, although perceptive, was conceived in the context of the Crimson Thread of Empire that bound Australia to the imperial metropole. The Deakinite vision of both sport and nation was, therefore, limited and bounded. Deakin considered the Nation and its game the exclusive domain of white Australia whose inventiveness had forged both institutions. Deakin’s view of Australian football finds parallels with his vision of Australia. The framework of protective trade tariffs, discriminatory immigrations laws and a federal constitution that established and maintained a white Australia during the period 1901-1967 represent Deakin’s enduring legacy to the nation (Atkinson, 1995). Deakin found in football a sport he considered capable of protecting the white Australian identity in a way that supported the fortifications he had raised in defense of the state. His vision that sport would become an ally to politics proved to be prophetic. When Deakin said “when the tocsin sounds the call to arms, not the last, but the first to acknowledge it will be those who have played, and played well, the Australasian game of football” (Cashman, O’Hara, Honey, 2001: 111), he accurately

predicted the price that footballers would pay in the 1914-1918 conflict: a collision between sport and politics made famous in Peter Weir's classic film *Gallipoli*. It is no surprise that Deakin, a committed nationalist, ended his address by challenging the football world to match the progress already achieved in Australian politics by forming a Football Federation.

Beyond its immediate subject matter, Alfred Deakin's address tells us much about how Australians perceived themselves and 'their' country during the Federation decade. Deakin, like the newspaper men of Ballarat and Bendigo, refer to Australia, Australians and the nation with the certainty of a terminology that is considered both as known and unproblematic. Within the protective structures that made White Australia credible, the concept of nation and national identity were accepted as self-evident truths without need of explanation. White Australia, however, was never a concrete historical reality. If a white Australia existed at all, it was in the psychological fantasies of the settler society. Realization of this fact reveals that notions of Australian identity and nation are both highly problematic and highly contested in ways that Deakin and his fellow 'Australians' never considered. In an effort to provide meaning to the now problematic and contested terminology of nation, it is necessary to define nation with reference to critical theories of nationalism, before returning to explore how the idea of nation has been applied in the Australian context.

Aboriginal Peoples as 'Others'

Australian national identity shares many commonalities with North American counterparts. Nationalist sentiment in Australia gathered momentum during the latter part of the 19th century promoted by a 'free' press and growing inter-colonial trade and communications that underlined the shared experience of Anglo-Australia. A growing distance that separated Anglo-Australian inclination from those of the mother country were underlined when the overland telegraph line linked Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney to London in 1879, transmitting messages via Morse code. Although the Australian concept of nation remained ambiguous in terms of its relationship to the British Empire, the limits of the Australian nation were confirmed by reference to the Aboriginal Native – an individual who was neither British nor Anglo-Australian. It was impossible for Australians to imagine themselves as a community inclusive of the Aborigine.

Australia, unlike the United States, lacks a declaration of independence and, unlike India, a moment of formal (and substantive) imperial departure. Lacking a definitive point of departure from the mother country to specify the boundary line between the national identities of England and Australia, the nation in Australia defined itself against its imagined opposite: the Aborigine. Unlike the permeable line between Nation and Empire which allowed Englishman like Harry 'The Breaker' Morant and John Simpson Kirkpatrick to become 'Australian' legends: the frontier

between nation and Aborigine has been considered in terms of a definite line of separation. The disjuncture between the national character and the Aborigine considered in terms of absolute difference, served to mark out the components of Anglo-Australian identity. Positioning the Aborigine as Other, the Australian nation revealed itself through reference to its manufactured antithesis in a negative process of self-definition. The Australian nation has defined itself through a process that mirrors Edward Said's critique of Orientalism and which in the local context has been described by historian Bain Attwood as the discourse of Aboriginalism. Said's analysis of Othering and Attwood's application of Said in considering constructs of the Aborigine and white nation provide useful conceptual tools to (re)trace the construction of Australian nation and locate the specific characteristics of Australian national identity. The process of Othering those who are 'racially' and 'culturally' different constitutes a key characteristic of Europe's colonial project. Stephen Muecke also provides analysis of Aboriginal/Anglo-Australian relations, according to the idea that Australian identities are the outcome of representations constructed through discursive means. Colonial and racial discourses and their attendant fictions and sciences, as well as anticolonial thought, have been preoccupied with these questions (Muecke, 1992). The Othering of vast numbers of people, and their construction as backward and inferior depended upon what Abdul Jan Mohamed calls the Manichean allegory, in which a binary and implacable discursive opposition between races is produced. Such oppositions are crucial not only for creating images of the outsider, but equally essential for constructing the insider, the (usually white European male) self (Loomba, 2005: 104).

At a highly theoretical level, the construction of the Other is the outcome of the decisive relationship that exists between knowledge, power and the production of 'truth'. The critiques of Said and Attwood draw on the insights of Michel Foucault whose writing exposes the essential relationship between knowledge and power. According to Foucault, knowledge is not incidental to power relationships that operate in society. Rather, knowledge is critical to the deployment of power and directs the means of its application (Attwood, Arnold, 1992).

Sport and the Disrupting Development of Aboriginal Nationhood

Following on from the invasion of the British colonists, Aboriginal peoples were deemed intellectually insufficient to negotiate a treaty. Indeed, the British determined that Aboriginal peoples were childlike and, thus, in need of protection. Hence, a series of legislative enactments resulted in Aboriginal peoples being classed as non-citizens and excluded from most forms including many sports. It was not until the late 20th century that Indigenous Australians began to participate

in major Australian Football competitions (Hallinan, Judd, 2009). And, even as the numbers grew, research suggested that their participation was not only limited to on-field assignments (as distinct from managerial and leadership roles), but those assignments were aligned to stereotypes surrounding the general perceptions of athletic abilities (Hallinan, Bruce, Coram, 1999).

Beyond the stereotyping, Indigenous players were often racially vilified as well as celebrated. They were celebrated in the media outlets when their actions aligned with what Anglo-Australians deemed positive role modelling and abiding by the overriding Anglo-Australian standards. One such player who, at least initially, seemed to fit that idealized role model was Adam Goodes. He was twice voted the best player in the AFL competition and was arguably the most decorated Aboriginal man to have ever played Australian Football. Furthermore, Goodes was selected 'Australian of the Year' for 2014. He delivered the following speech on Australia Day, 2014.

Growing up as an indigenous Australian I have experienced my fair share of racism. While it has been difficult a lot of the time, it has also taught me a lot and also shaped my values and what I believe in today. I believe racism is a community issue which we all need to address and that's why racism stops with me. I believe we are all connected whether we like it or not. We are all equal and the same in so many ways. My hope is that we as a nation can break down the silos between races, break down those stereotypes of minority populations, indigenous populations and all other minority groups. I hope we can be proud of our heritage regardless of the colour of our skin and be proud to be Australian. I'm not here to tell you what to think, or how to act to raise your children. All I'm here to do is tell you about my experiences and hope you choose to be aware of your actions and interactions so that together we can eliminate racism. I'm so grateful for this award and this honour, however the real reward is when everyone is talking to their mates, to their families and their children, having those conversations and educating others about racism. What it looks like, how hurtful and how pointless it is and how we can eliminate it. The ultimate reward is when all Australians see each other as equals and treat each other as equals. To me, everything is about people and the choices we make. I believe it's the people and the interactions between us that makes this country so special. Thank you so much and have a great Australia Day (Australian of the Year Awards 2014).

However, instead of understanding his award acceptance speech as a call for unity in the quest for racial equality, many attacked the speech as nothing but a call for Aboriginal separatism. He was frequently misquoted and many vocal critics conceded they had not read the speech in its entirety (Judd, Butcher, 2016). Goodes played on in the 2015 season but was routinely heckled and booed with derision from the crowds in attendance as well as several media commentators. Despite his on field achievements as one of the best ever players, the 2014 Australian of the Year was repeatedly subjected to accusations of being 'un-Australian'. The controversies and circumstances surrounding his treatment and sudden departure shed light on the AFL's ideological association with an idealized and seemingly embedded Anglo-Australian nationhood.

Conclusions

It is our contention that Australian football exists as a realm in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities have consistently been thrown together at close quarters, a situation which makes a situation of cultural exchange a possibility. Australian football provides a rare context in (post)colonial Australia in which the identities of colonized and colonizer have been changed through a process of ongoing and dynamic dialogue; a place in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities have sometimes come to some kind of mutual accommodation or reconciliation through the advent of new and hybrid identity formations that exist somewhere 'in-between' Anglo- and Aboriginal Australia. While Australian football is flagged as a space where Australian identities that exist 'in between' might emerge, the oppositional poles of the Aborigine and the Anglo Australian – the possible emergence of the hybrid – seem extremely limited in the context of white Australian nationalism which constructs a social reality in terms of binary oppositions – a world characterized by the type of native/settler relationships that Fanon considered Manichean. Our investigation so far confirms that the nationalist invention of the Aborigine as the negative image of the Anglo-Australian creates two oppositional spaces that are polarized according to constructs of race and/or culture. The poles are considered incommensurate and communication across this divided social reality is characterized as improbable if not impossible. As previously outlined, this social order was provided direction and substance by Deakin whose political life work enshrined the morally offensive edifice of White Australia (1901-1967). His political vision of a white Australia was mirrored in his 1908 vision for 'the Australasian game of Football'. The alignment between the Anglo-Australian nation and Australian football – demonstrated with reference to the 'conservative' Deakin, but equally applicable to 'progressive' Labor politics in figures such as John Curtin and Herbert Vere Evatt – suggests that the presence of Indigenous men in Australian football was read as an anomaly. According to the logic of Australian nationalism, the Aborigine cannot coexist with the Anglo-Australian in space and time in either society or on the football field. Yet, the textual attempts of Australian nationalism to exclude and eliminate the Aborigine through a process of discursive Othering that we have outlined in this article operate with optimal efficiency only at the level of theory. The idea of a white Australian nation like that of the Aborigine are, after all, the manufactured creation of creole intuitions and colonial desires. Operating as discursive tools of power and knowledge, they articulate the kind of Australian homeland the Creoles wished they inhabited and not the one they actually found themselves residing in. That neither construct has accurately portrayed the reality of Australian society since 1788 was the starting point of this research.

In Australian football, the connection between Indigenous people and the game since its inception in 1858 candidly shows that the colonial project of building a white

Australia through the elimination of the Aborigine is a task that remains incomplete. Despite repeated attempts to eliminate the Indigenous peoples of Australia, against the odds they have survived, persisting as small cultural islands in the midst of the white nation. The case studies that we investigate retell the story of how small islands of Aboriginality have survived and indeed prospered in the game of Australian football. Our research explores how the game provided spaces for Indigeneity within a sport that remains emblematic of Anglo-Australian nationalism. Indigenous players from Joe Johnson at the beginning of the 20th century to Adam Goodes into the 21st century, and those in between, have not only competed in the game at its highest level, but have often achieved sporting greatness and a lasting fame. Their presence in the game breaks down the myth of incommensurate racial and cultural divides between colonized and colonizer and opens up a reality characterized by the ever-present possibility for cultural exchange and the transformation of both indigene and colon identities into new and hybridized forms. Given these facts, the exploration of Aborigines and Australian football is required to move between the fictitious racial and cultural boundaries imagined by Anglo-Australian nationalist discourse, and proceed to the reality of a (post) colonial context in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal have met in close proximity. It is on moving to this (post)colonial reality that Immanuel Kant's terminology which we have borrowed and (mis)used comes into its own as a productive theoretical tool. The Othering of the Aborigine is viewed as a discursive ploy to cast Aboriginality out of the concrete historical realm of phenomena into the intuitive world of noumena, although designed to enforce a division which parallels that between the living and the dead, which suggests the possibility for continual crossover. Like the troubled spirits of the dead who sometimes make their presence felt in the world of the living, exclusion of the Aborigine to the noumenal realm unwittingly provides the native with the ability to return and haunt the white nation. Excluded from the realm of physical objects, the Aborigine as noumena exists as spirit. The Aborigine as noumena, therefore, might be seen as the ghost in the machine. A figment of colonial imagination, the Aborigine created by white desire operates in the nation like the gothic vampire, a spectre which intuition tells us might exist and which, therefore, might return to 'our' space in retribution for past injustice. It is my thesis that Australian football as a key signpost of white Australian nation has been a place in which creole society has been constantly and productively haunted by the spectre of the Aborigine. The continued Indigenous presence in Australian football enables the game to be reformulated as the key site in which the spectre of the Aborigine has haunted the nation. Anomalous to the national ethos of the game, the Aboriginal players possess ghost-like qualities. The Aboriginal player exists in a space which the logic of white Australian nationalism deems to be impossible, and yet their presence is always felt. Half there and half elsewhere, half remembered and half-forgotten, the Indigenous presence in Australian football exists at a rare point in our universe where subject meets object, colonized meets colonizer, noumena meets phenomena. Australian football is a place where black meets white. Australian football

is place that suggests the possibility for productive interaction, communication, accommodation and reconciliation. The idea of the Aborigine as a spectre that modulates between the metaphysical plane and the world of phenomena inhabited by the white nation is one that focuses attention on the act of crossing boundaries, realms and the realities of being human. The next task is to explore the state of being 'in-between' racial and cultural realms as contrary to the rhetoric of Aboriginalism and Australian nationalism. It is this ghost-like state of being which best characterises the relationship between Australian football and Indigenous peoples.

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Abstract: Situated in the overall context of the ideals of the nation, this article outlines the formation of Anglo-Australian nationhood and its strong connection to sport, the historical treatment of Indigenous Australians as 'others', and the inherent racism within the nation and within sports systems. The vocal antagonism directed at a leading player who was also named Australian of Year is described and analyzed within the framework of conditional contemporary change, protests by the general public, and the emerging resistance by leading Indigenous Australians to Anglo-idealized nationhood.

Keywords: indigenous, football, nationalism, racism

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