INTRODUCTION

Football is often considered as an activity which has developed hand in hand with the process of globalization. As the late historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote, ‘There is nothing that illustrates globalization better than the evolution of football in recent years. This sport has become truly international, and teams are no longer tied to a particular country, and even less to a city. There is a nucleus of world class players who are recruited and run around the world, as happened before for the divas of the opera or the great conductors’ (2000: 132). In his book on the cosmopolitan vision, German sociologist Ulrich Beck also proposes a parallel between football and globalization. He underlines that players under contract with Bayern Munich, the club in his hometown, ‘are neither from Bavaria, nor from Munich; they are of many different nationalities, speak many different languages and have many different passports’. For him, ‘Bayern Munich stands for a profane cosmopolitan “We” in which the boundaries between internal and external, the national and the international have long since been transcended’ (2006: 11).

In different ways, Eric Hobsbawm and Ulrich Beck refer to football as a showcase for globalization and cosmopolitanism. To bolster their reasoning, both of them refer to the international migration of professional football players. Approaching this theme from the opposite direction, many authors advocate considering the mobility of athletes rather than an expression of the globalization process. For example, in the introduction to their seminal book on sport as a global arena, John Bale and Joseph Maguire state that ‘the connection of locating sports migration with the issue of globalization is seen as crucial’ (1994: 5). On one hand, the migration of top-level athletes is considered as a perfect example to illustrate globalization. On the other hand, authors like referring to the latter phenomenon to explain the rise in the international mobility of athletes, and more generally to highlight the ever-increasing transnational dimension of sport (Giulianotti and Robertson 2007). In all cases, the migration of professional athletes is highlighted. As a consequence, this issue has become a fashionable one in the study of sport from a social science perspective. Indeed, the increase in the volume of publications dealing with this theme recently led to the publication of the first consolidated books in this area of study (Gillon, Grosjean and Ravenel 2010; Maguire and Falcous 2011).

From a sociological point of view, such analysis of player migration in elite football raises two main issues which can be summarized using two key concepts. The first one is identity,
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which helps us to question the effects of migration, especially at a local and national level. The second is globalization. Generally, this can be analyzed using economic theories, but such frameworks are not normally sufficient as globalization has not led to the disappearance of cultural, historical or geographical patterns. In addition, a more relational approach on the circulation of players and the creation of networks brings a deeper understanding. These networks rely on existing relationships within societies and constantly adapt to new opportunities. Leading to a more functional integration of territories beyond national borders, these processes exemplify the way in which migration contributes to the formation of a global economy in the sports industry.

In this paper, we focus our attention specifically on football (soccer). First of all, this choice is guided by its worldwide diffusion (Gillon et al. 2010) as much for the number of registered players as for the game’s nature as a global sporting spectacle. Football’s globalization has allowed for the rise of a global market within the game, and thus all the resulting migration of elite athletes. In addition, our reflection relies on the academic work produced by the CIES Football Observatory, a research group of the Swiss International Centre for Sports Studies. Since its creation in 2005, the observatory has analyzed the evolution of the professional football player market with reference to international migrations, and provides the original issues and findings which we draw together and discuss in the following pages.3

Player migration and identities

Identity at a local level

Identity issues deriving from the migration of athletes in team sports can firstly be related to the perception that the presence of players imported from abroad threatens the process of identification for supporters of clubs located in that specific living area. This perception derives from the assumption that fans have a preference for local footballers, with whom they can more easily identify. While this assumption may be true, it is hard to state to what extent it corresponds to reality. While empirical evidence has been provided to show the link between sporting success and match attendances (Simmons 1996; Scelles et al. 2013), the same does not hold true for the fielding of local players and numbers frequenting stadia. The relationship even seems to be inverse: attendances in the big-5 European leagues,4 since 1995, have increased in line with the increase in the number of expatriate players.5 For example, in France, Paris-Saint-Germain played the first part of the 2013–2014 season with more than 8.4 expatriate players per game (Poli, Ravenel and Besson, 2013) and attendances at the Parc des Princes broke records. One might thus consider that the driving force for identification is actually success rather than squad make-up. This is clearly confirmed by the much greater popularity of the most successful teams compared to lesser performing clubs. It is hard to find evidence of the importance of player origin for supporter identity, even when looking at very popular but mainly unsuccessful teams. In this case, too, club tradition and familial heritage probably play a more crucial role than squad composition. Success with imported players seems to be preferred to failure with local representatives. While the achievement of success with a majority of local footballers may be reasonably considered as the ideal configuration, this may be called into question when applied to a club that has developed into a global brand with a worldwide fan base (Richelieu and Desbordes 2009). The process of deterritorialization (Poli 2005) and the development of ‘remote supporters’ (Hognestad 2003; Lestrelin 2010) go hand in hand with a redefinition of the ‘local’, a notion that becomes pretty much dependent on the origin of supporters. For a Japanese fan


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supporting Manchester United, for example, the ‘local’ player is probably more likely to be Shinji Kagawa of Japan rather than Paul Scholes of England. This process is also exemplified by the ever-increasing tendency to choose imported players as captains, despite a lack of deep quantitative analysis on this issue.

Identity at a national level

The recruitment of foreign players by professional clubs also raises issues related to identity at a national level. This has to do with the historical role of football, and, broadly speaking, sport, in nation building, stimulating national pride and also a sense of belonging. Indeed, the structural configuration of sport as a competitive activity favours the process of drawing borders between the ‘We’ and the ‘Others’ (Bromberger 1995; Barth 1998; Jaska 2011). For over a century, international competitions have been developed to oppose teams or athletes symbolically representing a nation within a carefully designed scenario which is structured around national anthems and flags. Sporting events and performances have become so important for the national narrative that the highest state authorities all over the world can no longer afford to ignore them, and further proactively use them for political purposes. Within this context, in team sports the importation of players by professional clubs has rapidly become an important issue. Since the 1920s, football associations and state authorities have considered foreign footballers as a threat to national identity. Indeed, foreigners are prevented from playing for the national team in international competitions and their presence in national clubs is often considered as an obstacle for the development of local talent. While debatable insofar as it could also be argued that skilled imported players can to a certain extent help local players to raise their own technical levels, this assumption has led to the introduction of quotas limiting international player migration. Until the end of the 1980s, European clubs in most team sports were prohibited from including more than three foreign players. In some nations and for specific periods, quotas were even stricter. This situation drastically changed in the mid-1990s, when a ruling from the European Court of Justice obliged sporting institutions to guarantee the freedom of movement of all players holding an EU passport, as well as for citizens of non–EU states having concluded free circulation agreements with the European Union. Again, sporting authorities claimed that this would put into danger the power of sport, and more particularly football, to promote the identification of a nation, despite being unable to provide clear evidence. Conversely, many scholars suggest that the role of sport to stimulate national identity has never been as important as today within the context of globalization (Tomlinson 1996; Roche 2006; Gillon et al. 2010). Indeed, due to their extreme media exposure, international sporting mega events are more than ever the ideal occasion to project ideas of nation and identity in a world where borders are constantly challenged. From this perspective, sport has become a very important refuge for identity.

Player migration and globalization

Following a definition provided by the economic geographer Peter Dicken (2003), globalization can be divided into two main concepts: internationalization and trans-nationalization. Internationalization is considered as an increase in the general volume of international flows, and we can see that this trend has influenced all sports during the last decade (Gillon et al. 2010). Transnationalization is understood as a diversification of migratory routes and their spatial fragmentation between multiple states. This concept will help us to understand the mechanisms underlying the player labour market.
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**Internationalization: the increase of player migrations**

Table 41.1 clearly illustrates the impact of the Bosman ruling\(^6\) on club recruitment policies. In just five seasons, between 1995 and 2000, the percentage of expatriate players taking part in the five major European leagues increased from 18.6% to 35.6%, and the number per club has more than doubled (from 4.6 to 10.2). Although the rise in the number and proportion of expatriate footballers has slowed down since then, an overall increase has continued without interruption to the present day.\(^7\) On a larger scale, as of 1 October 2013, 36.8% of the footballers under contract with 500 clubs in the 31 top division clubs in Europe were expatriates – a new record (Besson, Poli and Ravenel 2014). The latter represented the majority of squad members in five national associations: Cyprus (63.8%), England (60.4%), Italy (54.1%), Turkey (53.1%) and Belgium (51.4%). This general increase in the number of expatriates goes hand in hand with the increase in their diversity. In 2013, 82 nationalities were represented in the big-5 leagues, compared to only 31 in the 1960/61 season.

More and more leagues worldwide have reached a level of professionalization which allows them to sign players from abroad. The development of professional football is particularly remarkable in Asia, both in the south-eastern part of the continent (South Korea, Japan, China, Thailand, etc.) and in the Middle East (Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, etc.). Professional leagues have also flourished in other countries were football has traditionally not been the leading sport: the United States, Australia and India, for example. The professionalization of the game on a global scale demonstrates an increase in the international mobility and diversity of players.

In this context of internationalization, certain countries have become progressively more specialized in the training of footballers and their exportation (Table 41.2). They have comparative advantages that are accentuated by global competition. This specialization can be explained by several factors: the number of trained players is connected to the population size of the country (Brazil, France, Argentina) and this is amplified by the successes and profile of the relevant national team (Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Uruguay). The quality of the training system available has a role as seen in France, Serbia, Croatia and the Netherlands. The economic weakness of the local championship also promotes interest in producing players.

Such figures indicate that the labour and transfer market of footballers now has a truly global reach. However, a more detailed study of international transfer flows shows that the latter do not

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**Table 41.1** Evolution of the number of expatriate players (‘big-5’ leagues)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Number per club</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960/61</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965/66</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970/71</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975/76</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980/81</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985/86</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990/91</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995/96</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000/01</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/11</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: CIES Football Observatory*
equally relate to all national markets. On the contrary, there are still privileged migratory routes. For example, Portugal remains by far the main country of destination for Brazilian players. Africans from former French colonies are over-represented in France, and South Americans are still over-represented in Spain and Italy. Such stable preferences reflect the historical and cultural links between the countries. Of course, geographic proximity can also reinforce such migration patterns, as shown on Figure 41.1, which reveals the most common migratory pathways in 2010.
Transnationalization of careers: a relationalist approach

At the same time, the fragmentation of a career between different countries shows a trend towards transnationalization: four expatriate footballers out of ten in the big-5 leagues have played for clubs located in more than two countries during their professional career and such figures have been increasing since the middle of the 2000s. The main beneficiaries of this are players originating from financially underprivileged continents who tend to cross more borders than their counterparts from richer areas of the world. This demonstrates the economic nature of the transnationalization process. Indeed, the transfer costs for young South American players and, even more so, their African counterparts are more affordable than those for footballers trained in richer economies. As a consequence, the former are particularly sought after by professional clubs and intermediaries following a speculative strategy consisting of increasing the market value of players ‘on the move’, through their circulation. The over-representation of Africans and Latin Americans among forwards also partially explains their greater international mobility. Offensive players are generally the best paid and those for which clubs are the most keen to spend money in transfer fees. This also enhances the transfer speculation which surrounds them. The over-representation of players from less developed countries in these positions may thus reflect a sociological adaptation to economic opportunities.

Less ideological than rational choice or Marxist perspectives,8 the relational approach could be developed using network theories. In relationalism the unit of analysis is neither individuals, as in rational choice theories, nor macro structures, as in Marxist approaches, but social networks through which players migrate. The analytical frameworks of global commodity chains (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994), global value chains (Klein 2010) and global production networks (Dicken 2003) are particularly useful in understanding what is at stake in this transnationalization process. Clubs can be considered as industrial units that gradually develop football skills and players as commodities whose transfer rights are bought and sold in order to generate added value. Since 1994 the number of football player transfers has multiplied by 3.2 and the total value of transfers fees by 7 (KEA and CDES 2013). Despite the financial crisis in the European economy, the transfer market has emerged as a growing economic sector and the total amount of transfers generated during the 2013 transfer window by the big-5 leagues exceeded for the first time the sum of €2 billion. Such financial opportunities imply that more and more clubs and agents are active at a transnational level in the search for young and promising footballers whose skills still need to be developed in order for them to be further transferred to wealthier teams and leagues. In reality, the upward transnational career paths of leading players at the very best clubs in the world only concern a tiny minority of footballers. However, this does not prevent a full range of actors from club officials to player agents working on a daily basis to set up potentially lucrative channels and opportunities that form the basis of the whole migration system for professional football players.

This new economic sector attracts new investors who expect high profitability, generated by growing transfer fees. The Third Party Ownership (TPO) system is an example of such an emerging market which uses existing migration networks. TPO refers to the practice of a third party (society, investment fund, agent, etc.) to acquire rights in the future transfer fees of a player. In this situation, the individual player should maximize the number of transfers during a career to ensure the highest possible profits. Existing relations between clubs and countries are reinforced as they can facilitate movements which are disconnected from sporting issues. Clearly, in this type of transaction agreement, one must not only consider the migration of a player from the sociological perspective of identity but also as a phenomenon that questions the ‘values of
sport’ and far wider ethical issues. First of all, we must question the integrity of players in this situation: have they lost their human status in becoming commodities? They are under pressure from investors who decide career choices and opportunities on their behalf. Both physical and moral integrity are also in danger. How can sport continue to transmit values of friendship, respect and effort in this situation? The integrity of sporting events is in question too, as it can be argued that the interests of the investors are disconnected from sport results, specifically when their players are distributed amongst several teams. The owner of various players’ economic rights can have financial stakes in different clubs and thus the power to manipulate match results and the sporting destiny of teams.

As for rational choice theories, relationalism considers that economic stakes play a crucial role in driving the action of individuals within networks. From this perspective, economic divisions between countries tend to favour the emergence of transnational networks, which will consequently increase the volume of international transfer flows. As for Marxist approaches, relationalism applied to player migration considers that it is very important to analyze power relationships between actors involved in transfer networks. On the one hand, this allows us to understand the impact of economic and political macro structures at an individual level. On the other hand, the study of the empirical functioning of transfer networks permits us to understand the strategic actions deployed by the different parties involved to better their position within such networks and to broaden their sphere of influence.

But, in relationalism, the consequences of player migration cannot be determined in advance. The international flows of footballers are not considered as intrinsically positive or negative, but must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis. However, the detailed analysis of transfer networks and player career paths allows generalizations on possible outcomes. For example, statistical evidence can be provided to stress the importance of top league experience in a home country before migration – before achieving a more successful career abroad. From this perspective, migration is generally positive both at an individual and collective level when the player in question has already proven himself in a national league. A move can be less successful without such prior national league development.

While individuals involved within transfer networks know the risks for a player to migrate at a very young age, competition for talent and financial considerations drive the general lowering of the age of international migration. The latter went down from 26 years of age in the 1980s to currently around 22 years of age (Poli, Ravenel and Besson 2011). Competition between intermediaries also promotes the scouting of ever younger players. A survey carried out in 2011 on licensed agents and contracted players domiciled in the five biggest European markets has shown that only 42% were already professional players (Poli and Rossi 2012). This confirms that agents are above all interested in young talent that has the potential of an upward career path and which can further enhance their own careers. As a consequence, the social situations surrounding talented young players can easily lead them to make ill-informed career choices. In such a competitive sector as professional football, where the supply of labour constantly overtakes demand, these problems can heavily undermine the potential benefits of international migration both at an individual and collective level.

**Conclusion**

The migration of elite athletes is a key feature of contemporary sport. Such migration configures the identity of many elite athletes, such as in the cases of US basketball players all over the world (FIBA 2013), rugby players drawn from the south hemisphere (Gillon et al. 2010: 49), Cuban and Dominican baseball players in the United States or Kenyan runners winning
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races worldwide (Bale and Sang 1996). But football, with its advanced forms of globalization, provides an outstanding case study. Its development as a truly global industry has further driven the increase in international player movement and more individuals than ever before are now involved in the transfer process. Networks also have a crucial role to play. However, they are composed of multiple actors who are often competing against each other as they try to manage the transfer and take advantage of their prized asset. Licensed and unlicensed agents – to whom it is possible to refer using the broader notion of intermediaries – are also key figures. Their connections with players and club representatives, on behalf of whom they also often work, are essential to understanding career pathways and, more specifically, migration patterns.

In such a competitive and hierarchical sector as professional football, it is inevitable that a significant number of players will not achieve an upward career path. While migration is often a prerequisite for access to the wealthiest leagues, international migration can prove to be detrimental to long-term career success. Financial speculation linked to young footballers – especially from underprivileged countries – and within the context of the creation of transnational value chains only serves to aggravate the situation.

In a business sector which involves the movement of players as both workers and human beings, it is essential that football governing bodies and state authorities collaborate to ensure the enforcement of existing rules on transfer and labour rights. To preserve the potentially positive impact of international mobility both on an individual and collective level, it is also crucial that football governing bodies at the national and international level continue to proactively investigate and implement new ways to regulate the market in accordance with state laws.

Notes

1 Translated into English from the French version.
2 See also Poli (2010a) for more examples.
3 More information is to be found on the CIES Football Observatory’s website at http://www.football-observatory.com.
4 The five major European football championships (‘big-5’) are the English Premier League, the Spanish Primera Liga, the Italian Serie A, the German Erste Bundesliga and the French Ligue 1. These leagues comprise the wealthiest clubs in the world, which have the financial means to attract the best-performing players regardless of their origin.
5 The notion of expatriate refers to footballers who are employed by a club that is outside of the national association where they began playing and from where they departed following recruitment by a ‘foreign’ club.
6 The ‘Bosman ruling’, decreed in 1995 by the European Court of Justice, has obliged the national football associations and national football leagues of all European Union countries to review their regulations and to allow for the free circulation of players holding an EU passport. This ruling has allowed clubs to take advantage of new recruitment possibilities and accelerated the globalization of European football.
7 More information is to be found on the CIES Football Observatory’s website at www.football-observatory.com.
8 For more details, see Poli (2010a)

References