and aesthetic sensibilities of players, in the same manner they had championed Zanetti earlier in the evening. Sitting on the fringe of this conversation, Zanetti listened intently, looking over the shoulder of other participants. At first, he tentatively tried to interject himself into the conversation, providing illustrative first-hand observations about playing for Inter. But these interventions weren't heard, as far as I could tell, over the din. Debating Inter's heroes of the past, the table ignored the Inter hero of the present they had just celebrated in such glowing terms. After a few minutes, Zanetti gave up on the conversation and focused on quickly finishing the pizza on his plate. The hero politely excused himself, gathered his paintings, and fled.

"How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization" by Franklin Foer
pp (193-216)
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8

How Soccer Explains the Discreet Charm of Bourgeois Nationalism

I.

The motto of FC Barcelona is *"mas que un club,"* more than a club. For the purposes of full disclosure, I agree. It's more than a club; it's one of God's greatest gifts to leisure time. I wrote that last sentence while wearing a Barca cap and a frayed replica jersey that I bought ten years ago. Later today, I'll pretend to write this chapter while constantly refreshing my browser for updates of Barca's game against Newcastle United in the Champions League. And tonight, I'll have a dream about a long curving pass from Xavi that will be met by Javier Saviola after the little man unbelievably crosses a large swath of grass. Even if the rules of reality have been suspended, it's too much of a stretch to imagine myself on the field with Saviola. But I will still picture myself in the scene, in the lower tier of the Camp Nou, Barca's stadium.

With the rest of the stadium, I will be singing Saviola's name like a Gregorian chant, exaggerating each syllable for maximum haunting effect. The person sitting next to me will be flying a ten-foot Catalan flag above my head.

Barca became my team in 1994 on a winter trip through the city. My visit coincided with the annual gratis opening of Barca's museum. It is the most visited museum in the city, even ahead of a massive collection of Picasso canvases. With no admission fee, lines crawled across the stadium parking lot, filled with eight-year-old boys and their mothers, silver-haired men paying a visit to old friends in the trophy case, and teenage girls apparently brushing up on team history. The transcendent enthusiasm for a bunch of artifacts and sepia photos moved me. I felt like a nonbeliever watching a religious pilgrimage. And the sheer depth of their faith made me a believer, too.

If you have liberal politics and yuppie tastes, it isn't easy to find a corner of the soccer firmament that feels like home. The continent has too many clubs that have freaky fascist pasts bleeding into a xenophobic present. And this is only the first obstacle to finding a team. You could never accept clubs with a cloud of virulent racism trailing after them. (Remove from the list of potential favorites, then, Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea, Glasgow Rangers, Red Star Belgrade, and almost half the teams in Italy.) And for the sake of the underdog, you couldn't possibly abide the multinational conglomerates, like Manchester United and Juventus, which buy championships every year.

Barca elegantly fills this vacuum. Over the course of its history, it has self-consciously announced its sophis-

tication. The Barca museum houses paintings by Dali and Miro. Outside its front gate, it displays modern sculpture, ranging from Donald Judd–like minimalism to neo-futurism. A disciple of Le Corbusier designed the roof of its old grounds.

I've heard, but never confirmed, a theory that the club explicitly plucked its colors—red and blue—from the tricolor of the French revolution. If not true in fact, the story has a spiritual truth. Indeed, the team's modernist aesthetic flows from its leftist politics. At the height of the 1930s anarchism fad, Barca became a worker's collective, a legacy that continues. Its season ticket holders still vote for the club's administration, with presidential debates broadcast live on television and candidates making impossibly grand campaign promises to purchase a team of superstar players. More important, according to the lore of the institution, the club was the heroic center of the resistance to Franco's military dictatorship. Only the Camp Nou provided Catalans a place to yell and scream against the regime in their own, banned vernacular. Manuel Vazquez Montalban, one of Spain's great contemporary writers, published a novel about Barca called *Offside*. He described the club as "the epic weapon of a country without a state. . . . El Barca's victories were like those of Athens over Sparta."

Even now in more placid times, a charming fervor surrounds the club's politics. Government officials expound on affairs of club as if they were affairs of state. At various moments, the longtime president of Catalonia, Jordi Pujol, recommended changes of lineup, strategic formation, and recruiting tactics. The major

Catalan political parties form stealth alliances with the candidates for the Barca presidency, in hopes that the Barca president will invite party leaders to sit in the Camp Nou's tribune of honor in the center of the stadium.

Because of this sense of mission, the club makes fantastic gestures to prove its purity, to show that it resides on a higher plane than the base world of commerce. Of all the clubs in the world, only Barcelona has no advertisements covering the front of its jersey. Until 2003, the club refused even to entertain offers to buy this sacred space. When the highest paid players in the world—Maradona, Ronaldo, Rivaldo—demonstrate insufficient enthusiasm for the cause, Barca and its fans turn on them. They send them to another city, despite the many goals they have scored for the team. If a coach adopts utilitarian tactics that skimp on artistry, he gets sacked, no matter the trophies he has accumulated. Supporters of Barca want nothing more badly than victory, except for romance. And as the club's long history of underachieving shows, they get far more of the latter.

Unfortunately, large swaths of the world don't fully appreciate these many splendors of Barca. More than Real Madrid and Manchester United, richer teams that win far more championships, Barca provokes irk and ire. I've had Serb translators and Croatian friends bridge the deepest divides and shout their mutual hatred of Barca. I've witnessed Israeli academics and Muslim taxi drivers unknowingly form a union of schadenfreude when Barca self-destructs. I guess I can understand the sentiment. *"Mas que un club"* implies

superiority. The pious refusal to turn its jersey into a billboard damns the business decisions made by every other club to stay afloat. The modern art and the novels may seem too precious by half. Soccer should be watched with beer and burgers, perhaps, not cappuccino and cigarettes.

But if Barca's enemies objectively considered the club they despise, they would find an important reason to stand up and bathe it in applause. Critics of soccer contend that the game inherently culminates in death and destruction. They argue that the game gives life to tribal identities which should be disappearing in a world where a European Union and globalization are happily shredding such ancient sentiments. Another similar widely spread thesis holds that the root cause of violence can be found in the pace of the game itself. Because goals come so irregularly, fans spend far too much time sublimating their emotions, anticipating but not ever releasing. When those emotions swell and become uncontainable, the fans erupt into dark, Dionysian fits of ecstatic violence.

Barca redeems the game from these criticisms, by showing that fans can love a club and a country with passion and without turning into a thug or terrorist. Sure, its fans can ascend to the highest levels of irrationality—positing wild conspiracies, imagining their own victimhood, and pitting themselves against supposedly existential enemies. Yet they almost never cross into the darker realms of human behavior. There are no opposing fans that Barca considers subhuman and hardly any violence associated with the club. Its stadium is filled with more women and children than any

in Europe. It is also filled with immigrants from the south of Spain, who affiliate with the club to ease their assimilation into Catalan life.

Put more strongly, Barca doesn't just redeem the game from its critics; it redeems the concept of nationalism. Through the late twentieth century, liberal political thinkers, from the philosopher Martha Nussbaum to the architects of the European Union, have blamed nationalism for most of modernity's evils. Tribalism in a more modern guise, they denounce it. If only we abandoned this old fixation with national identities, then we could finally get past nasty ethnocentrism, vulgar chauvinism, and blood feuding. In place of nationalism, they propose that we become cosmopolitans—shelving patriotism and submitting to government by international institutions and laws.

It's a beautiful picture, but not at all realistic. And it turns its back on a strain of liberalism that begins with John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville and continues through Isaiah Berlin. This tradition understands that humans crave identifying with a group. It is an unavoidable, immemorial, hardwired instinct. Since modern life has knocked the family and tribe from their central positions, the nation has become the only viable vessel for this impulse. To deny this craving is to deny human nature and human dignity.

What's more, this strain of political theory makes a distinction between liberal nationalism and illiberal nationalism. The Serbs at Red Star, to take the most obvious example, practice the illiberal variety, with no respect for the determination of other nationalities. But there's no reason that nationalism should inherently

culminate in these ugly feelings. To blame the Croatian and Bosnian wars on excessive love of country drastically underestimates the pathologies in Serb culture. Besides, in theory, patriotism and cosmopolitanism should be perfectly compatible. You could love your country—even consider it a superior group—without desiring to dominate other groups or closing yourself off to foreign impulses. And it's not just theory. This is the spirit of Barca. I love it.

II.

FC Barcelona could have easily gone the other direction. It could have become a caldron of radicalism, violence, and grievances. But the roots of Barca's cosmopolitan nationalism run too deep. They are part of the national culture and part of the club's founding spirit. In 1899, a Swiss Protestant businessman called Joan Gamper joined with English expats to launch FC Barcelona. It is stunning that a foreigner created what would become a defining institution of Catalan nationalism.

There's a simple explanation for Catalonia's openness to foreign influences: Catalonia sits in the middle of the Mediterranean world. Before the fifteenth century, as part of the kingdom of Aragon, the Catalan conquered their way as far east as Athens, Sicily, and Sardinia. Even then, at the height of its greatness, the nation's most powerful men were traders and capitalists. Barcelona became a great trading city deeply entangled in the global economy, growing into an industrial giant. By the late nineteenth century, only the United States,

England, and France outpaced the production of Catalonia's textile mills.

But as it advanced economically, Catalonia sustained political subjugation. Spain's political power, concentrated in Madrid, consisted largely of Castilian landowners. The interests of the central government and Barcelona's capitalists clashed. Barcelona's growing cadre of bourgeois nationalists resented that the Castilians used the government to impose "Spanish" culture and language upon them. Nor did it help that Madrid tilted government policy so strongly away from industry and toward the protection of agriculture. The Catalans took out their anger at this unjust arrangement by crudely stereotyping the Castilians and their capital. Where Catalonia represented modernity and progress, Madrid consisted of cultureless yokels. It wasn't entirely a self-serving image. Barcelona's bourgeoisie proved its greatness to the world, by patronizing monumental works of art and architecture—Gaudí, Doménech i Muntaner, Miró. And because of its immersion in the world of global commerce, it happily opened the doors to foreign influences.

Joan Gamper and soccer were just another of the imports to become part of the Catalan fabric. It didn't hurt Gamper's local image that he fervently admired the Catalan cause and had translated his own name, Hans Kamper, into the local language. By some accounts, Gamper wanted the club to celebrate the Catalans and their dreams of autonomy. Under his stewardship, Barca adopted a crest containing the colors of the nation and the cross of St. Jordi, Catalonia's patron.

Catalonia's proclamations of national superiority didn't go down well in Madrid. The ancient Castilian regime tried to put the upstarts in their place. With the support of the king, in 1923, general Miguel Primo de Rivera seized power and ran a dictatorship that prefigured the Francoism to come. Primo de Rivera banned the Catalan flag and purged the Catalan language from the public sphere. Because of its symbolic role, Barca inevitably faced the same repression. After its fans booed the national anthem before a 1925 exhibition game, the dictator shuttered Barca's stadium for six months and fined its directors. The government made it clear to Gamper that he should leave Spain or his family might suffer some unfortunate consequences. Gamper fled. A few years later, in a fit of depression, compounded by his losses in the 1929 stock market crash, he took his own life.

Primo de Rivera had Franco's agenda without Franco's totalitarian state apparatus to back him up. Rather predictably his repression backfired. He resigned in 1930, replaced by a democratic republic imbued with the utopian fervor of the interwar era. There was, however, an important difference between Franco's attitude and his forerunner. Primo de Rivera had reacted to Barca with fury because he was a classic caudillo, your run-of-the-mill dictator who squashed any dissent that threatened his fragile grip. For Franco, the battle against Barca took on the form of epic personal struggle. On the most obvious political level, he had good reason for punishing the club's devoted supporters. Catalonia had held out the longest against his coup. Barcelonans, after years of pre–civil war indus-

trial strife, had become Henry Fords of barricade construction. Although parts of the city welcomed Franco with open arms, many of its residents fought urban warfare with a savvy that Che Guevara could never equal. Franco extracted a price for this resistance. When the city fell, Franco killed unknown numbers of them and buried them in a mass grave on Montjuic hill, the future home of the Olympic stadium.

But there was another, equally important reason for Franco's hatred for Barca. The Generalissimo followed the game obsessively, and, more specifically, he followed Barca's rival, Real Madrid obsessively. He could recite Real lineups going back decades and let it be known that he relaxed in his palace by watching the game of the week on television. (Not coincidentally state TV featured Real Madrid in its weekly broadcast far more than any other team.) When he watched, he even had a stake in the outcome. Franco liked to play a state-sponsored pool that allowed him to place bets on soccer.

Franco prosecuted his personal vendetta against Barca to the fullest. Manuel Vazquez Montalban has written, "Franco's occupying troops entered the city, fourth on the list of organizations to be purged, after the Communists, the Anarchists and the Separatists, was Barcelona Football Club." At the start of Franco's three-year revolt, fascist gendarmes arrested and then executed Barca's left-leaning president Josep Sunyol as he drove across the Guadarrama hills to visit Catalan troops guarding Madrid against a right-wing siege. When Franco's troops made a final push to conquer obstreperous Catalonia, they bombed the building that

held the club's trophies. After demolishing the club's hardware, the Francoists set out to strip it of its identity. The regime insisted on changing "Football Club Barcelona" to "Club de Football Barcelona"—not a tiny aesthetic point, but the translation of the team's name into Castilian Spanish. It also insisted on purging the Catalan flag from the team crest. And these were only Franco's opening salvos. To oversee the ideological transformation of the club, the regime installed a new president. He should have been well suited to the task. During the war, he had been captain of the civil guard's "Anti-Marxist Division." At Barca, he carefully kept thick police files on everyone involved with the club, so that he could impede and undermine any officials with latent nationalist sympathies.

During these early years of the Franco era, one event jumps from the history books. In 1943, Barca played Real in the semifinals of the Generalissimo's Cup. Moments before game time, the director of state security entered Barca's locker room—a scene enshrined in the journalist Jimmy Burns's magisterial history of the club, *Barca*. He reminded the players that many of them had only just returned to Spain from wartime exile thanks to an amnesty excusing their flight. "Do not forget that some of you are only playing because of the generosity of the regime that has forgiven your lack of patriotism." In those recrimination-filled years, the hint wasn't hard to take. Barca lost the match 11–1, one of the most lopsided defeats in team history.

This was the first of many favors the regime granted to Real Madrid, which seemed to return the affection by placing its new stadium on the Avenida de

Generalissimo Franco. According to some, the regime gave decisive aid to Real Madrid in its signing of the best player of the fifties, the Argentine Alfredo Di Stefano, even though Barca had already agreed to terms with him. When Real Madrid won championships, Franco bestowed medals on the club and honorifics not granted other winners. Paul Preston, the caudillo's biographer, wrote, "Franco saw the triumphs of Real Madrid and of the Spanish national team as somehow his own." All this is fact. But there's a way in which these facts don't add up to quite the anti-Barca conspiracy that Catalans present. One significant detail gets in the way. In the early years of the Franco era, Barca experienced one of the better runs in its history.

It's a paradox—repression and triumph—and leads to one of the thorniest questions in the political history of the game. Umberto Eco has phrased it this way: "Is it possible to have a revolution on football Sunday?" For Barca this subject sits especially uncomfortably. Its fans like to brag that their stadium gave them a space to vent their outrage against the regime. Emboldened by 100,000 people chanting in unison, safety in numbers, fans seized the opportunity to scream things that could never be said, even furtively, on the street or in the café. This is a common enough phenomenon. There's a long history of resistance movements igniting in the soccer stadium. In the Red Star Revolution, Draza, Krle, and the other Belgrade soccer hooligans helped topple Slobodan Milosevic. Celebrations for Romania's 1990 World Cup qualification carried over into the Bucharest squares, culminating in a firing squad that trained its rifles on the dictator Nicolae

Ceausescu and his wife. The movement that toppled the Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner had the same sportive ground zero.

But when Barca fans proudly point to Camp Nou's subversive spirit, they can't satisfactorily explain why Franco didn't just squash it. Of course, he could have easily. He ran an efficient police state, where both the trains and the grand inquisitors ran on time. To crack down on Barca, as Primo de Rivera had done in the 1920s, would have required few troops. But he set this option to the side and he chose to let the partisans scream their obscenities against him. Franco never explicitly justified this policy of tolerance. But its purpose was clear enough: to let the Catalan people channel their political energies into a harmless pastime.

If Barca let Catalonia blow off steam, it turned out to be a tidy arrangement for all involved. Franco never faced any serious opposition from the Catalans. Unlike the Basques, the other linguistic minority suffering under Franco, the Catalans never joined liberation fronts or kidnapped Madrid bank presidents or exploded bombs at bus stations. And Barca supporters, for all their noise in the Camp Nou, never seriously objected to the Franco apologists who ruled the club's boardroom. While Catalonia kept its head down, it got on with business. Franco's nationalist economics, which included subsidies and tariffs, abetted a massive industrial boom in metropolitan Barcelona. Immigrants from the south of Spain, many thousands in the fifties and sixties, came to work the region's factories. The new industrial strength and concomitant wealth helped take the mind off oppression and memories of slaughter.

Catalans have a self-description that explains this temperamental instinct toward going along. They like to say that they possess a national quality called *seny*, a word that translates into something in between pragmatism and canniness. It's the legacy from their centuries as Mediterranean traders, a businessman's aversion to trouble. (A classic example of *seny*: Catalans insist that their language be taught in universities and deployed on street signs. It can be found everywhere, except the real estate sections of many Catalan-language newspapers. Nationalism shouldn't ever obstruct a deal.) In this self-description, the Catalans also admit that they possess a yin to the *seny* yang. They have another national characteristic called *rauxa*, a tendency toward violent outbursts. This characteristic propelled Catalonia to fight so determinedly during the Spanish Civil War and made it so pugilistic in the years before.

Whether by Franco's design or not, Barca helped to preserve Catalonia's *seny* and *rauxa* in a state of comfortable equilibrium. A sportswriter told me a parable that illustrates this point. Two criminals, locked away in one of Franco's prisons, execute a perfectly planned break. They time their escape so that they can watch Barca play Real Madrid in the Camp Nou. As good fortune would have it, the liberated watch their beloved Barca triumph. They have both freedom and victory. From here, they had simply to follow the script provided by dozens of buddy movies and hit the road. But they performed their roles as Catalan men, not Hollywood actors. Cured of their *rauxa* by Barca, they retrace their steps to the building where they had

suffered for so long. They seek out a warden and turn themselves in.

III.

There's a thin line between passion and madness. The former Barcelona striker Hristo Stoichkov constantly crosses it. As a teenager in Bulgaria, he once instigated a massive mid-game brawl. His performance that day was so violent, so feral and uncontrolled, that the Bulgarian soccer federation banned him from the game for life. But he was too good and too adored to suffer this fate. When the Bulgarian public complained that it had been deprived of a great hero, the federation downgraded the punishment to a year's suspension. With maturity, his violent outbursts never really abated. In four years at Barca, referees tossed him from 11 games. He would not only put himself in the faces of referees, he would stomp on their toes. A few months before I went to visit him in Washington, D.C., where he played last season, he had just scrimmaged against college kids, a meaningless "friendly" match. But Stoichkov has only a limited ability to modulate his style, and the notion of friendly has no cognitive resonance with him. In the game, he slid into a freshman from behind with both his legs turned up, so hard that he snapped the player's bones. The sound of cracking traveled across the field. On the sideline, spectators and players retched.

Reducing Stoichkov to his temper, however, sells him short. He isn't without incredible appeal. A poll once found him the most popular Barca player of all

time. In part, his popularity was a just reward for performance. Between 1990 and 1994, he scored 104 goals for the club. His eccentric playing persona, in turns delicate and brutal, contributed massively to Barca's *annus mirablis,* including its lone Champions League title. In 1994, he won European Player of the Year. Catalans also worshipped Stoichkov, because he replicated their passion—and the unreasonable expectations, unfair demands, and hypercriticism that come with such passion. "My colleagues are lazy, dumb and money hungry," he once complained. Like the Catalans, Stoichkov believed that Barca should be playing for the cause and not a paycheck.

Only a few native Catalan players have more enthusiastically championed the political ideology of the club or the country. It goes beyond the requisite hatred for Real Madrid, although Stoichkov has expressed his disdain with singular intensity. ("I will always hate Real Madrid," he once said. "I would rather the ground opened up and took me under than accept a job with them. In fact, I really do not like speaking about them because when I do it makes me want to vomit.") He has a fanatical devotion to Catalonian nationalism. When Bulgaria played Spain in the 1998 World Cup, he hung a Catalan flag from the balcony of his hotel. He promised that he would wear a T-shirt beneath his jersey agitating for secession from Spain. These gestures, much hyped and appreciated in Barcelona, only culminated a personal history of rabid Catalanism. He has been a leader in a campaign for Catalonia to withdraw its support for the Spanish national squad and to field its own separate team at the

World Cup. Barcelona papers have reported that he has endorsed the Party for Catalonian Independence—strangely placing himself left of the mainstream of Catalan nationalism.

Stoichkov proves the inclusiveness of Catalan nationalism, its greatest virtue. It welcomes, even worships, foreigners. Barca's history is full of foreign players—Scotsmen, Hungarians, Dutchmen—who have taken up residence in the city and become proponents of the club's politics. (Dutch great Johan Cruyff named his Barcelona-born son Jordi, possibly the first Franco-era baby with this Catalan first name.) The foreigners can become Catalan, because the ideology of Catalanism holds that citizenship is acquired, not inherited. To become Catalan, one must simply learn the Catalan language, disparage Castilian Spain, and love Barca. Catalan nationalism is not a racial doctrine or theocratic one, but a thoroughly civic religion. Catalan nationalism is so blind that it will accept you even if you have an impossible personality.

Getting an interview with Stoichkov is not easy. After weeks of putting me off, he agreed to meet after practice in the locker room of his club, D.C. United. Stoichkov sat on a chair fresh from a shower, wearing a terry cloth robe with a hood. To amuse his teammates, he pulled the hood over his head, jumped out of his chair, and mimed the motions of a boxer preparing to fight. There was a wild quality to his drama. He threw hard punches in the air and bounced into naked guys as if he were going to pound them. When he returned to his chair, I sat down beside him and began to introduce myself.

"In Spanish," he said. "Much better in Spanish."

"Bueno. Yo soy..."

I realized that Stoichkov made me too nervous to ask questions in Spanish. He blurts out his phrases and has perfected the tough man's look that seems menacing even in the nude. He wears a permanent coat of stubble over gaunt cheeks. His most innocuous movements look like wind-ups to a punch.

I asked the team's press handler for some help. He recruited the team's equipment manager to translate. Clearly, our interview would be a disaster. But I had spent too much time negotiating logistics to waste the opportunity. As I began to explain my project, Stoichkov cut me off.

"How many copies will you sell? Sharing my thoughts, will that entitle me to earn some money out of this?"

There was a long pause, during which he stared at me intently. I had no idea how to measure the seriousness of his question.

"No," I replied.

"Why not?"

"I'm a poor journalist."

He seemed very self-satisfied with his line of questioning. His responses preempted the translations. "Will you earn money?"

"Sure, maybe a little bit."

"But there are poor children in this world."

"Are you one of the poor children?" I asked.

"I'm giving you an opportunity to earn some money and we won't receive anything? I don't want the money, I won't keep the money. I'll give it to poor children. I

wrote a book in Spanish and it sold 600,000 copies. Am I going to receive something or not?" I was now in the embarrassing position of having most of the team eavesdrop on our conversation.

"That's not the way that I work as a journalist," I told him.

"Would you pay Michael Jordan? Hristo Stoichkov will sell you many copies." He said that if I wrote him a check he would personally deliver the money to UNICEF. "It's not for me."

I tried to explain the practice of American journalism. "This is just not the way we do business. It's not part of our ethical system."

While I spoke, he rose and stepped into his locker. "Well, it's part of my ethical system."

"Then we can't talk?"

"No." He stripped off his robe.

We didn't shake hands. As I left the locker room, I angrily described Stoichkov's solicitation of this bribe to his press handler, who just shrugged. Because Stoichkov is a hero of Barca, I couldn't stay mad long, either. Besides, in our short exchange, he had told me nothing yet managed to encapsulate the Catalan ethos—canny about commerce alongside a streak of feistiness. And if Catalonia could find it in its heart to forgive his lunacy, so could I.

IV.

Some close followers of the game, especially in Madrid, might object to this characterization of Barcelona as a

bastion of healthy, nonviolent patriotism. They will point to recent games against Real Madrid in the Camp Nou, where Barcelona fans threw projectiles on the field, including sandwiches, fruit, golf balls, mobile phones, whiskey bottles, bike chains, and a severed bloody boar's head. If there was any democratic spirit in such displays, it was the universality of this rage. Men with cigars and three-button suits, women with pearls and Escada pantsuits screamed the same obscenities, just as vulgarly and loudly as the working stiffs.

As a supporter of Barca, I can't deny these offenses. My club suffers a pathological hatred toward Real Madrid. They are the Celtic to our Rangers. But there are several key differences between this rivalry and the Scottish one. Where Celtic and Rangers cynically collude to exploit and profit from hatred, no rationality governs our ill will, no superego regulates our id. When Barcelona froths over Madrid, it moves in stupid, self-defeating directions, not financially profitable ones. Barca has a long history of underachieving, results that don't befit its all-star rosters and enormous payrolls. And this history can be attributed—at least in part—to our Real Madrid complex.

It is not easy to overestimate Real Madrid. By any measure, they are the most successful club in the sport—the New York Yankees on a continental scale. They have won more Spanish League titles than anyone. They have dominated the Champions League. Nevertheless, Barca still succeeds in giving Real Madrid far more credit than it deserves. This is their description of the politics of Spanish soccer:

A party with Francoist roots runs the Madrid city

council. To subsidize the footballers, the council bought Real Madrid's training ground from the team, paying $350 million. With one check, the city council helped finance the purchase of David Beckham, Ronaldo, and Zinedine Zidane, arguably the three best players in the world. In the Catalan view, Real's political network starts locally but extends all the way to the top. Spain's right-wing president Jose Maria Aznar has been a Real fan since his seventh birthday; he cries when the club wins championships; he dines with Real's board of directors. Because of Madrid's political connections, it gets what it wants. When Barca fans pelted Real players with the contents of their pockets, the league unjustly punished the club by making it play two home games behind closed doors, no fans allowed. "Madrid only wins championships when dictators, like Aznar and Franco, have power," the Catalan talk radio host Xavi Bosch told me.

It's a compelling portrait of power and influence, except in the details. Just as Madrid exploited a sympathetic city council, Barca has tried to do the same. But bumbling Catalan politicians have interfered with the sweetheart deal. When they describe Aznar as the new Franco, they are being highly ungrateful. For many years, Aznar included the Catalan nationalists in his governing coalition, plying them with lots of state spending and never saying a word against Catalan nationalism. Nor can they prove that Aznar has ever thrown his political weight around on behalf of his beloved club. Nevertheless, they go berserk over Aznar's sympathies. After the president dined with Real's directors, Barcelona's president demanded that he be accorded the same honor.

When Real fans hear these accusations, they say that they are symptomatic of the Catalan mau-mau. They argue that the Catalans like to cry over their "victimization" so that they can bully the central government—and the Spanish soccer federation—into giving them undeserved favors. How else can Catalonia get so much more money from the central government than any other Spanish region?

This explanation, while containing a seed of truth, lacks any empathy. Barca fans hate Madrid, because they also feel a measure of survivor's guilt. Their fathers and grandfathers suffered under the tyranny of Madrid; they died in the civil war; they couldn't speak their own language. But in the prosperity of the democratic era, Catalans have no objective basis for complaint. Their wealth and cultural renaissance should have provoked triumphalist celebrations. It hasn't, because most Catalans aren't in a mood to gloat. After witnessing their fathers' heroism, they feel as if they have lived lives devoid of struggle and without any epic dimension. They worry that their fathers would be disappointed with their staid existence.

Barca is a balm to these feelings. In its small measure, it allows Catalans to imagine they have joined the centuries-old struggle against Madrid and Castilian centralism. It lets them feel as if they, in the same way as their ancestors, have been stuck under the thumb of the arrogant imperialists. "Catalans don't want Barca to win," the journalist Joan Poqui says. "If they did, they wouldn't enjoy being victims so much."

But even in this unbecoming, self-pitying side of Barca, there's a becoming side. Contrast Barca to Celtic

or Rangers. The Scottish fans consider one another enemy tribes with inferior beliefs, who don't really deserve to occupy their town. It is stunning that, for all the rage toward Real, Barca fans feel so little animus toward the supporters of the club. There are scant examples of Barca hooligans battling Real. That's because they don't hate an opposing group of people; they feel rage toward an idea, the idea of Castilian centralism. And you can't beat up an idea.

Without a group of enemies to focus attention, there's an aimless, scattershot quality to the hatred of Barca fans. Consequently, they turn their rage on themselves as often as they turn it on others. During my visit, I watched the city rise up against the club's Dutch manager, Louis van Gaal. The city has a particularly robust press covering the club. Two daily sports papers have no other obvious purpose than expending approximately 280 pages each week delving into every bit of the club's minutiae. For months they devoted this space to vilifying Van Gaal. A typical story analyzes lunches consumed by the Dutch coach, alongside photographs documenting the growth of his belly. When he sits in the thirteenth row of the team plane, reporters interpret this as a sign of his poor judgment and imminent demise. Remarkably, this only begins to chart the Catalan media landscape and its hatreds. A weekly TV segment parodies Barca, using puppets to produce cruelly cutting send-ups of players and management, regularly portraying Van Gaal as a pile of bricks topped by a mop.

For a week, fans held anti–Van Gaal rallies in front of the Camp Nou. At times, the hecklers turned so vile, so personal, and so distracting that Van Gaal interrupted his training sessions and moved them to another, more private pitch. When I visited the protestors, they looked to be mostly a group of middle-aged men. They stood behind a black iron gate and shouted toward the field, about thirty yards away. Although they only numbered about two dozen, they amplified magnificently. They didn't have a single message, just insults and quixotic demands for new lineups and new strategies. Because they had been protesting for a week already—and their demand that Van Gaal be fired seemed so close to being met—neither the team nor the media paid them much attention. They solemnly went about their business.

I tried to talk to these malcontents. A short stocky man with a combover in a sweater and blazer allowed himself to be momentarily distracted from his shouting. As I approached, his abuses came out so fast that I couldn't really follow him. It was an unseasonably warm Mediterranean day and he constantly wiped his brow dry with a handkerchief.

"Why are you so angry?" I asked.

He grabbed my forearm with one hand. It was hard to know if this was a gesture of hostility or intimacy. In the moment, he might not have known himself.

"We hate him so much, because we love Barca so much. It hurts."

9

How Soccer Explains Islam's Hope

I.

The biggest stadium in Tehran, in the world for that matter, is the 120,000-seat Azadi. Its name comes straight from the lexicon of Orwellian Newspeak. Even though it translates as "freedom," it represents something close to the opposite. Ever since the Islamic revolution of 1979, females have been forbidden to watch soccer in the Azadi. This prohibition isn't exclusive to the venue or even to Iran. It applies in broad swaths of the Muslim world, where it holds without much controversy. But the fundamental fact of Iran is that it is not Saudi Arabia. During the last decades of the shahs, it hadn't locked its women in black burqas. They had been high government officials, writers, lawyers, and fans of the beautiful game.

With so many people flowing through the Azadi's turnstiles, it's impossible to ensure conformity with the