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Escape to Football



Péter, László (2016):

A labdarúgás szociológiája [The Sociology of Football]

Presa Universitara Clujeană/Kolozsvári Egyetemi Kiadó

Péter, László (2017):

Forbidden Football in Ceaușescu's Romania

New York – London, Palgrave MacMillan



DOI 10.14232/belv.2018.4.14

<https://doi.org/10.14232/belv.2018.4.14>

Cikkre való hivatkozás / How to cite this article: Balog, Iván (2018): Escape to Football. Belvedere Meridionale vol. 30. no. 4. 211–215. pp.

ISSN 1419-0222 (print)

ISSN 2064-5929 (online, pdf)

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I have always loved football and as a sociologist I consider it as an indicator of important social issues (insomuch that I have become a football blogger in my later years). In the eighties I've been regularly watching the football matches (usually the Steaua) which were part of *Album Duminical* on Sundays from 1 pm in the Romanian television accessible also in Szeged. Accordingly, I was able to admire Hagi, Bölöni, Belodedici and the others. I got to know László Péter on a workshop in Szeged ten years ago, and by reading his book¹ on social problems I've got

¹ PÉTER, LÁSZLÓ (2009): *Elmélet és empiria öt globális társadalmi probléma vizsgálatában*. Kolozsvár, Kriterion Kiadó.

ascertained of him being a good expert. That is why I appreciated a lot that recently he has published two books on the sociology of football.

Let's see first *The Sociology of Football*. Prior to all the reviewer has to highlight that this book fills a lack of writings in such issues. Some might be confused about the interconnection of these two words: what has football to do with sociology? (It's a pity that the Giddens book, which is considered a 'Bible' in the education of sociology, doesn't mention football or sports at all!) Well, the author's answer to the question is quite acceptable: "It's a fact that football [...] is not just about sports, but means much more: it's a political tool, in many cases source of legitimacy for power, business, channel of social mobility, replication of long lasting conflicts, the postmodern variant of ancient rites [...]. I consider football a symbolic and deep game, along which different social drama's take place generating strong individual and collective experiences and memories, frustrations and hopes."² Unfolding the Geertzian definition of deep game, later he continues: "By playing football, different big social groups struggle with each other in a symbolic way: ethnic groups and the majority, metropolitans and people from the rural areas, natives and newcomers, working class (at least what is left of it) and the middle class, winners and losers of changes, the representatives of local and international capital, leaders and followers, minority and majority. It can give explanation for wars, national characters and even globalization. And as for the main social issues, the relation to power, media, racism and masculinity are also central subjects of football."

The book begins with a short summary of the history of football. The main thesis of the author is that "football, as we know it in Europe, is a modern product."³ By relying on classical works,⁴ László Péter highlights properly the main points. The uncivilized, vandal, but at carnivals played 'ancient football' was followed by a traditional period. However, the term 'traditional' refers just to a certain period in the history of the game because football is the product of the modern, industrial era. Contrary to popular belief, in the beginning football was not a working class sport as it had been evolving at English schools for boys. Later the rules of the game were standardized, international sports associations and championships were set up, and then international competition systems have been organized. In the later stages, which László Péter calls pre-modern, transitory modern, late modern and post-modern,⁵ the game became more and more professionalized (it means the standardization of the game's inner practice and institutionalization), national styles of football appeared,⁶ the national and international football fields evolved.⁷ Football had become the main form of entertainment for the crowds of workers living in the big industrial centers. Parallel to deindustrialization and the decline of the working class, the workers begun to lose their position which played a crucial role in the emergence of football hooliganism. This was partly the reason for the 'civilization' of football stadiums, namely the extrusion of the working class spectators being considered 'dangerous class' again. However, by the appearance of satellites the management

² PÉTER, LÁSZLÓ (2016): *A labdarúgás szociológiája*. Kolozsvár, Presa Universitara Clujeană/Kolozsvári Egyetemi Kiadó. 9.

³ PÉTER 2016. 24.

⁴ For example: GIULIANOTTI, R. (2004): *Football. A sociology of the global game*. Cambridge, Polity Press.; GOLDBLATT, D. (2006): *The ball is round. A global history of football*. London, Penguin Books.

⁵ The use of the terms "traditional" and "post-modern" in the periodization of the modern is somehow confusing.

⁶ PÉTER 2016. 37.

⁷ PÉTER 2016. 38.

of the clubs has changed: they don't make a living by the spectators – who come more and more from the middle class – visiting the football matches, but by the fans sitting in front of the television. This mediatization enhances commercialization and celebrity cult.

For Hungarian readers the part of the book about the Romanian situation is particularly interesting. It is perceptible that László Péter is sad about his favorite sport in his homeland getting more and more manipulated, 'estranged' and determined by money.⁸ Still the problems of Hungarian football which is on a lower level are not this sophisticated. At our eastern neighbors the building of stadiums is less politicized⁹ and less divisive, while in Hungary it has become a political catchword: "Go Hungary, go Hungarians!". That's why not only the attitude towards certain teams, but towards football itself is a question of political identity. Moreover, Romanian football gained its biggest international success – Steaua won the European Cup – in the same year when Hungary faced its historical catastrophe losing 6–0 in Irapuato. Later Romanian football kept on being successful and has just begun to fall back slightly in the last few years. By contrast, Hungary used to be one of the best football teams in the world before losing to the Soviets at the 1986 World Cup in Mexico. After 1989 Hungarian football began to decline even more and this process is still going on. It is true that it's not a sociological problem but rather an issue of professional football, however it seems that the author doesn't take the professional aspect into account elsewhere either.¹⁰ He also neglects that the great development of football in terms of tactics and conditional training¹¹ wouldn't have been possible without scientific training methods, which can be financed due to the penetration of *big business* into football.

All in all *The Sociology of Football* is like a course book, which summarizes the main results and approaches of a special field of sociology in a logical and clear way. Of course it's not avoidable to be lesson like, but books like this are necessary¹² because the sociology of sports is quite a new discipline. That's why¹³ it is now at a stage like sociology itself was in the beginning, at the time of 'Introductions' and 'Einleitungen'.

I started to read *Forbidden Football* with even higher expectations than *The Sociology of Football* because its subject is not well-known. This quite slim book deals with a phenomenon very specific in Eastern Europe: the very prevalent and illegal watching of football matches. The reason for this phenomenon was that at the time of the Ceaușescu dictatorship, parallel

⁸ However he admits (see PÉTER 2016. 14.) that mediatization helps to fight the manifestations of racism on the football pitches.

⁹ PÉTER 2016. 113.

¹⁰ There is also a counter-example: when talking about the contrasts between *menottismo* and *bilardismo* he notices sensitively that at the time of the Argentinian military junta the creative football of Menotti signified a way of thinking opposite to the military discipline. By contrast, the *anti-fútbol* of Bilardo didn't generate resistance because then there was democracy and no need for subversion. A deeper analysis reveals that the cynical defensive football was first established also at a time of military junta when fluid possession football, the *la nuestra* tragically lost 6–1 to Czechoslovakia at the World Cup in 1958. See: WILSON, JONATHAN (2016): *Angels with Dirty Faces*. London, Orion Books. 197–225.

¹¹ See the "revolution" of Barcelona with the 'tiki-taca'.

¹² See also a deep analysis: SZEGEDI, PÉTER (2014): *Riválisok. Debrecen futballtársadalma a 20. század első felében*. [Rivals. Society and Football in Debrecen in the First Half of the 20th Century]. Budapest, Korall Kiadó.; HADAS MIKLÓS (1995): *Futball és társadalmi identitás*. [Football and Social Identity] *Replika* 6. 17–18., 89–120.

¹³ See the book which presents how to apply the classical theories in sociology for sports: (*Sport and Modern Social Theorists*. GIULIANOTTI, RICHARD [ed]: Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2004).

to the passing of the period of so-called socialist consumerism, from the mid 80s the television broadcasted almost only programmes about the Conducator and his wife. That's why hardly any football matches had been broadcasted although in similar regimes sports and specifically football were important factors of system legitimation.¹⁴ Therefore the fans of this sport (Romanians and Hungarians as well) tried to watch the channels of the neighbour country. This required deep technical knowledge and remarkable organizational skills. Moreover, if a Hungarian team played or the MTV (Hungarian Television) broadcasted the match, illegal TV watching involved political commitment and – because of the paranoia of the Romanian communist system about the Hungarians – even a risk similar to the listening of Western radio stations.¹⁵ The absurdity of this very similar to *Ubu Roi* by Jarry and is also indicated by the title *Forbidden Football*.

The patterns of common watching of football matches were different according to the possibility of catching the channels at a given town or residential area. Where it was possible, for example at some places in Cluj-Napoca, the “ceremony” was quite the same as in Hungary at the beginning of the 60s: those who had a tv hosted several people during the football match. Where it was not possible, for example at Szeklerland, many people had to cooperate to assure the conditions of watching. Some were responsible for the technique (television set, antennas), others for the transport, the supply of food and drinks, or the fooling of authorities.

There were different patterns of the relationship of the fans and the power. The members of the nomenclature formed a separate group, who enjoyed the matches apart from the common people, within a small and ‘good’ company. Among the common spectators sometimes there were policemen, however, the police many times took measures against the organizers and the participants. It's a big question why the Securitate didn't take a stronger line; maybe many of them were interested in World Cup or European Cup games. Sometimes spectators ably took advantage of state infrastructure: there was a case when a technical description from the magazine of the communist youth organization was used to construct a device. The silly censor didn't notice what an antenna, which receives signals from big distances, could be used for.¹⁶

The main thesis of the book is that the underground movement of watching football matches was some kind of struggle for freedom. This contradicts the theories of totalitarianism¹⁷ and the saying “hominy doesn't explode”, i. e. the Romanians endure everything. The meetings were not only motivated by fandom but also by escape from tyranny at the village of Csomafalva¹⁸ in Szeklerland and the socialist town of Balánbánya¹⁹ where the “masculine”²⁰ worker culture had been destroyed in the 80s as well. This is indicated by the very witty chapter title referring to Erich Fromm:²¹

¹⁴ This led to astonishing anomalies; for example even the Steaua vs MTK game in the European Cup wasn't broadcasted. PÉTER, LÁSZLÓ (2017): *Forbidden Football in Ceausescu's Romania*. New York–London, Palgrave MacMillan. 3.

¹⁵ The author has conducted many in-depth interviews and is relying on his own experience from the 80s as well. (PÉTER 2017. 18–20.).

¹⁶ PÉTER 2017. 64.

¹⁷ PÉTER 2017. 128.

¹⁸ Here the tradition of escapism and the brave self-organizing was established by ice-hockey, a speciality of the Szeklers. (PÉTER 2017. 19.).

¹⁹ PÉTER 2017. 60–62. The part of the book which presents the situation of this town in the 80's has value.

²⁰ Erről ld. WILLIS, PAUL (2000): *A skacok*. [Learning to Labour] Budapest, Új Mandátum Kiadó – Max Weber Alapítvány.

²¹ FROMM, ERICH (2002): *Menekülés a szabadság elől* [Escape from Freedom]. Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó.

Escape to Freedom,²² but also by an excerpt of an interview: “We went outdoor to be free”.²³ Another interviewee mentioned²⁴ Woodstock when talking about the adventurous, party-like happenings of watching matches. The community building character is highlighted where common entertainment reduced even the conflicts²⁵ between workers and intellectuals. Of course ethnic Hungarian viewers expressed their national identity by singing the forbidden hymn of the Szeklers and rooting for Hungarian teams. Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church didn’t take back the land during privatisation where the crowd had watched the 6–0 disaster because they thought “the place was damned”.²⁶

The author notices by a witty association that escapism occupying spaces and protesting against formal norms is similar to *gangs*. Finally, these outdoor meetings which were identifiable by the authorities and therefore quite risky meant much more than *escape*: they were forms of *protest*²⁷ and *riot*. When at the Romanian revolution the crowd shouted: “ole-ole-ole-ole, Ceausescu nu mai e”, they could rely on a background and antecedents.

Forbidden Football somehow gives a feeling of nostalgia, connected to the cult of civil society, towards the televised football samizdat and *underground* sport consumption.²⁸ This romanticism is longing for a time when belonging to the underground gave a feeling of moral and cultural superiority, when Western products were rare and one needed special communication competencies and finesse to get them. After “second society” became first society, nowadays anyone has access to these goods, including football in television, *if* he has enough money.

The sociology of sports and of football is not an apprentice any more. It is coming of age, as the books of László Péter prove it.

Translation: Vincze, Anikó

²² PÉTER 2017. 93.

²³ PÉTER 2017. 47.

²⁴ PÉTER 2017. 117.

²⁵ PÉTER 2017. 66.

²⁶ PÉTER 2017. 133.

²⁷ For the understanding of the differences between these, see: HIRSCHMANN, ALBERT O. (1995): *Kivonulás, tiltakozás, hűség. Hogyan reagálnak vállalatok, szervezetek és államok hanyatlására az érintettek?* [Loyalty, Exit, Voice] Budapest, Osiris Kiadó.

²⁸ D. LŐRINCZ, JÓZSEF (2002): *A civil társadalom problémája 1989 után. Politikai kultúra az átmenetben.* [The Problem of Civil Society after 1989. Political Culture in the Transitional Period.] WEB 10. sz. 9–12.