

Crusaders and Spartans: The Performance of Masculinity at the Euro 2012 Championships



Mark Doidge is an early career academic whose research and teaching primarily focus on globalisation, performance and sport. In this post he discusses the construction of homogenous national masculine culture in the context of the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship.

Four Spartans stand facing forward. The sun glints off their steel helmets. Their naked torsos bear witness to the intensity of the summer sun. Yet this is not a scene from history, nor a scene from the film *300*. The unusual situation of the Spartans is that they are surrounded by hundreds of other men, but all wearing the blue and white football jersey of Greece. And amongst them stand four half naked men in historical hats. Greece are playing Germany in the quarter finals of the Euro 2012 championships and thousands of Greeks are showing their support for their national team, but in very different ways. This situation is by no means restricted to the Greeks. Similar scenes were witnessed when England played Italy two days later. A group of lads dressed in chain mail and helmets with sheets sporting the cross of St. George draped over their shoulders could be spotted amongst a sea of red and white England jerseys. Evoking images of medieval knights or Spartans, these young men harked back to a period of history in order to recreate contemporary national pride.

These key cultural markers are predominantly worn at sporting occasions like the European Championships by young men. At Euro 2012 there have also been Italians dressed as Venetian gondoliers, Danes dressed as Vikings and Germans in lederhosen. What unites these images is the reconstruction of national image through historical cultural symbols. Yet history has been predominantly a male preserve. The national constructions that are evoked are not inclusive, but restricted to an image of an homogenous national masculine culture.

Gender is a key aspect of an individual's identity. "One is not born", argued de Beauvoir, "but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 2010). Butler developed this and argued that gender is performed through regular iterative practises which become inscribed upon the body (Butler, 1990). This is not restricted to women. Men also have a wide range of spaces to become male and perform their masculinity. Since it's modern inception, sport is one cultural space that systematically has permitted the articulation of male identity and a dominant form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994). Football, in particular, provides the global emotional space for the articulation of specific forms of masculinity dominated by national identity.

The globalisation of football has witnessed an increased media exposure of football and a growing commercialisation of the sport. National football leagues, like the English Premier League, have become global leagues (Millward, 2011). Teams in these leagues have attracted a more diverse audience as clubs and competitions have sought to maximise revenues and media exposure. Throughout the 1990s new social movements emerged that sought to maintain the 'traditional' aspect of football. In doing so, these groups drew on certain invented traditions of local, working-class male fandom (King, 1997). Specific aspects of local history have been incorporated into the rituals of football fandom and these help re-articulate and reinforce the group's identity (Doidge, 2013).

International competition also provide a space to articulate national difference. Football symbolically provides this on the pitch, but it also provides a space for fans to perform their identities. Through the repetitive actions of the chants, banners and dress, identities are

performed and reinforced. When topless tattooed England fans consume large quantities of beer and sing “no surrender to the IRA” they are repeating an existing image of a specific form English masculine identity. Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque is useful when analysing international tournaments (Bakhtin, 1984). Giulianotti has highlighted how the ‘Tartan Army’ of Scotland fans was constructed in the liminal carnivalesque space of the European Championships (Giulianotti, 1991). The performance within the carnival helps present the group’s identity to a wider audience. The construction of the identity of the ‘Tartan Army’ was performed using particular cultural symbols, such as kilts and tam-o-shanter hats. It was also constructed in opposition to international rivals. The Scots wanted to be seen as hard-drinking party animals, in contrast to the hooligan image of the topless tattooed English chanting anti-IRA songs.

A close reading of Bakhtin also reiterates how the carnivalesque reinforces cultural hierarchies, despite the apparent subversion of identity within the carnival. The media spectacle of the European championships depicts the presentation of national stereotypes. With the Italians wearing Venetian garb, or English fans dressed as Crusaders, these images are being beamed across the globe as a marker of national identity. These images recreate a moment from the past, but at the same time they’re creating them anew for a new audience

The fancy dress of carnivalesque fans becomes a form of performative drag. By drawing on specific cultural markers, these fans are adapting and reinforcing certain forms of identity. And in doing so they reinforce specific masculine forms of national identity. To be seen in militaristic drag, such as a knight from the Crusades or a Spartan, is to draw on a specific masculine image of history. Moreover it suggests a religious or ethnic aspect to national identity. Those not conforming to this cultural identity are excluded.

And it is through exclusion that we see some of the worst excesses of chauvinistic nationalism. The “dark sense of the carnival”, as Robson argues, permits the degradation of symbolic targets (Robson, 2000). Those players who do not conform to a specific image of national cultural identity are marked as outsiders and profaned. Racism has been directed at those who are not seen as ethnically European. Players from England, the Czech Republic, Italy and the Netherlands have all been victims of racist abuse in a variety of forums: in the stadium, at training and on the Internet.

A section of the Russian fans appositely illustrated the extremes of masculine national identity on Russia Day (June 12) when Russia were scheduled to play Poland. The Russian fans symbolically marched en masse through Warsaw. Some Polish fans took this as an affront and violence ensued. The symbolic take over of territory continued in the stadium as some Russian fans unfurled a banner that covered the stand. It depicted a Russian military commander, Dmitry Pozharsky, who led an invasion of Poland in the early seventeenth century. Underneath, in English, it stated “This is Russia”. Once again, the militaristic symbols of national history are symbolically utilised to inscribe contemporary identity. Yet despite their supposed pride in their country, they use the international language of English in order to make their point to the global television audience.

Globally, there are few cultural forms that are more popular than football. There are more members of FIFA, the governing body of football, than there are in the United Nations. Football provides the shared space and rituals that brings people together. Yet they also provide the space to articulate difference. In particular, specific forms of masculine national identity are performed in these shared spaces. By drawing on historical masculine, and predominantly militaristic national symbols, certain sections of the fanbase are performing and reinforcing a particular image of national identity. Unfortunately, it is precisely these images that the media focus upon.

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July 16th, 2012 | [Arts & Culture, Society](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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