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Italian football as a vehicle of identity: From urban elites to mass culture

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ABSTRACT

The historical evolution of football in Italy is deeply intertwined with the country's socio-political and cultural dynamics, making it a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Initially an elite pastime among the northern urban aristocracy and bourgeoisie, football only became a popular sport after World War I, eventually serving as a propaganda tool under the Fascist regime. The choice of the term "*calcio*", in contrast with the more widespread "*football*", represents a symbolic case of constructing an autonomous linguistic and cultural identity. During the Fascist era, the sport was subject to a systematic ideological operation aimed at legitimizing Italian symbolic superiority and consolidating political consensus. Furthermore, football acquired a dimension of national cohesion while simultaneously expressing local identities, becoming a lens through which to interpret regional and social dynamics. In this essay, the author critically examines the historical trajectory of Italian football, its transformation into a mass phenomenon, and its role in shaping a collective imaginary, with particular focus on its political instrumentalization and the enduring significance of its symbolic meanings.

Keywords: Sport history, Elite football, Cultural history of football, National identity, Football and fascism, Political propaganda.

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THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF FOOTBALL IN ITALY: BETWEEN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SOCIO-POLITICAL DYNAMICS

The Italian designation of the game, *"calcio"*, unlike the Anglicism *"football"* adopted in many European contexts, is a meaningful expression of the nation's cultural and historical specificity. The adoption of a native term does not reflect a chauvinistic stance; rather, it points to the autonomous path that the reception and adaptation of this sporting practice followed within the Italian context. From the founding of the *Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio (FIGC)* in 1898 up to the outbreak of World War I (AA.VV., 1973), football in Italy emerged as an elite activity, predominantly limited to liberal aristocratic circles and the urban bourgeoisie, a social profile that closely mirrored the British model from which the sport was originally imported (Panico & Papa, 1993, p. 14). In stark contrast to its widespread diffusion in the United Kingdom and France (Vidiri, 2002; Spadafora, 2012), Italian football's geographic expansion remained largely confined to the industrialized urban centres of the northern regions, underscoring a marked disparity in the nation's sporting development.

The immediate postwar period marked a profound transformation. Football became a mass phenomenon (D'Angelo & Fonzo, 2016), overcoming its original class-based barriers and taking on a role as a means of social mobility (Rossi, 2018). Within this process of popularization, the Fascist regime identified a privileged instrument for building political consensus and integrating the masses into the totalitarian project (Belloni, 2014; Fonzo & Landoni, 2022). In this sense, Italy stands as a pioneering case in the European context: football was elevated to a national spectacle, an identity-forming sport capable of embodying and celebrating the physical, moral, and virile values attributed to the Italian "*race*" (Porro, 2004; Landoni, 2020).

Football thus acquired a dual significance: on the one hand, it became a popular and widely accessible sporting practice; on the other, it emerged as a symbolic vehicle, functional to political propaganda (Martin, 2008) and the construction of a collective imaginary imbued with nationalist rhetoric (Anastasi, 2017). The interaction between sport and ideology in twentieth-century Italy exemplifies, in paradigmatic terms, the intersections between sporting culture and political identity over the long term. In the context of contemporary Italy's evolving identities, football has increasingly assumed a symbolic function with political, social, and cultural relevance. Since the late nineteenth century, the spread of the sport found particularly fertile ground in Italy for the elaboration of meanings that extended well beyond mere athletic competition. The emphasis placed on the national team's triumphs, especially in victories against teams from historically dominant Western European powers such as the United Kingdom and France, conveyed a narrative aimed at glorifying a presumed moral, cultural, and civil superiority of the emerging Italian nation.

During the Fascist era, this symbolic structure was strategically exploited as part of a broader ideological project aimed at representing Italy as the heir to a refunded imperial civilization, the so-called "*Third Rome*", and as a counterpoint to the decadence of liberal Western powers (Giorio, 2019). Within this framework, sport exceeded the bounds of mere competition to become a pedagogical tool and an instrument of national integration. The convergence of patriotic rhetoric and football storytelling solidified in a lasting way, resulting in the continued presence, even in the republican era, of an imaginary in which collective emotional engagement with sporting events remains one of the few residual forms of symbolic cohesion in post-unification Italy.

A further element of analytical significance is the peculiar designation assigned to the sport by the Italian language. In stark contrast to the prevailing international terminological uniformity, where *football* has become the lexical standard, the adoption of *calcio* constitutes a notable anomaly. The official introduction of this

designation, formalized in 1898 with the founding of the *Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio* (later *Federcalcio*) (FIGC, n.d.), predates by several decades the Fascist regime's intervention in language policy, which, as is well known, promoted an aggressive campaign of lexical purging driven by semantic autarky and cultural xenophobia.

The choice of a term of Romance origin, instead of retaining the Anglo-Saxon phrase used by early Italian sports clubs, as evidenced by the names *Football Club Torinese*[1] and *Juventus Football Club* (Rossi, 2003), reveals an early tendency toward linguistic indigenization, reflecting a desire for symbolic rootedness and cultural autonomy. This terminological operation went beyond phonetic substitution; it entailed a reformulation of the very meaning of the sport, transforming it from an imported leisure activity into the expression of a reconfigured national tradition.

The semantic and symbolic articulation of Italian football, therefore, cannot be disentangled from the historical processes of collective identity construction. The framing of sports competition within a discursive context saturated with mythopoeic references, nationalist tensions, and hegemonic aspirations turned the football lexicon into a field of political signification. The persistence of this discursive structure beyond the collapse of the regime demonstrates the long-term effectiveness of cultural devices capable of outliving their original contexts, embedding themselves in collective memory and in the symbolic fabric of the nation.

During the Fascist *Ventennio*, the sports lexicon was increasingly incorporated into a broader identity-building project. Specifically, the adoption of the term *calcio* in place of the more neutral *football* took on a political, as well as linguistic, function. The word's original meaning, "*kick*", offered propaganda a semantic opportunity to evoke images of strength, momentum, and domination, qualities elevated as emblems of national virility.

The use of the metaphor of *"dare calci"* ("*to kick*"), frequently employed by regime-aligned media during the years of the Italian national team's international successes, aimed to draw a parallel between football victories and political supremacy. The competitive dimension of the sport was interpreted through an aggressive rhetoric focused on physical confrontation rather than technical skill or aesthetic elegance. The ideal of *"il bel gioco"* (the beautiful game), far from being celebrated, was delegitimized as an expression of elitist taste, an aristocratic cultural heritage perceived as incompatible with the new ideological order.

In attempting to integrate football into the nationalist narrative, a retrospective reinterpretation of sports history was undertaken to identify purportedly native roots in the Italian tradition. In this symbolic operation, football was contrasted with its British origins and linked to ancient and medieval Italian games, such as

[1] *The attribution of the founding date of the team known as Torinese to 1894 finds justification both in symbolic elements and in direct historical evidence. The choice to align this year with the birthday of the noble Luigi Amedeo of Savoy-Aosta, a central figure in the club's history, carries a commemorative but not arbitrary significance. In 1889, the Duke of the Abruzzi promoted the adoption of the gold and black jerseys for the Nobili Torino team, colours later revived and used in 1894 by a group of sportsmen from Turin associated with the football section of the Club di Pattinaggio del Valentino. According to contemporary sources, it was precisely in that year that modern football began to be played in Turin, based on the rules introduced by Herbert Kilpin. Although the official establishment of the club dates to 1897, as early as three years prior the group members were commonly identified as "those of Torinese" to distinguish them from other city sports clubs, such as Internazionale. The existence of letters and private documents confirms this early use of the name and attests to regular sporting activity since 1894. However, for reasons of philological rigor, the local press of the time began covering Torinese only from the moment of its official foundation. Later sources, such as the magazine Foot-ball Club Torino from 1919 onward, clearly reported the club's origin as 1894. The statements and writings of authoritative witnesses, including Vittorio Morelli and Vittorio Pozzo, confirm this dating. Based on this evidence, the year 1894 can be considered, both historically and historiographically, the actual founding moment of the club, regardless of the later institutional recognition.*

calcio fiorentino, or even to the unfounded claim that the "*Roman step*" was a precursor to the Fascist *goose-step* (Jusserand, 1901).

These reconstructions, lacking in philological rigor, served ideological rather than historiographical purposes, transforming elements of contemporary sports culture into signs of a mythologized continuity with the classical past.

Despite the clearly British origins of modern football, as attested by its spread across Europe from the mid-nineteenth century onward, the insistence on its "*Italianization*" reflected the regime's desire to neutralize exogenous cultural elements. The emphasis on football's supposed "*Roman-ness*" expressed the need to assimilate a mass sport into Fascist self-celebratory rhetoric, converting a global phenomenon into an expression of national specificity.

The appropriation of football by the Fascist propaganda apparatus was therefore neither neutral nor spontaneous, it was the result of a deliberate process of symbolic restructuring. Through selective vocabulary and the construction of a fictitious genealogy, the regime forged an image of the sport that was functional to its self-representation: disciplined, combative, and proudly autonomous from foreign influence.

THE INVENTION OF MODERN FOOTBALL BETWEEN NATIONAL MYTH AND HISTORICAL TRUTH

The reconstruction of football's origins has, since the late 19th century, been subject to instrumental appropriations by various national contexts. This tendency responded to the need to root an increasingly central game in popular culture within one's own historical tradition. As Alfred Wahl (Wahl, 1989; Huesca, 2003; Wahl, 1990) pointed out, in France this attitude was part of a marked Anglophobia, which led many enthusiasts to seek, or even create, links between modern football and alleged French roots. In Italy, although the English influence was not perceived with the same suspicion, the affirmation of national identity led to a similar operation of "*nationalizing*" the sport. During the liberal era, and even more insistently during fascism, a narrative developed attributing Latin origins to football, identifying its premises in the Roman *harpastum*. The Fascist regime embraced and amplified this interpretation, transforming it into a founding myth useful for reinforcing the rhetoric of Italian-ness. The *harpastum* (Miller, 2004; Elmer, 2008), itself derived from the Greek *episkyrós*, was played in Rome in the early centuries of the Empire. The scarce sources available describe it as a violent and physically demanding team game, played with a ball of rags. However, knowledge of its rules, diffusion, and social meaning remains fragmentary. Some references suggest the existence of matches between Roman legionaries and British populations, including a famous game that, according to tradition, took place in 276 AD, with local teams victorious.

From these hints, however, drawing a direct line of continuity between *harpastum* and modern football is arbitrary. This operation belongs more to the field of propaganda than to sports historiography. Serious scholars recognize in these claims an echo of nationalism which, in Italy as elsewhere, found in sport a powerful tool for cohesion and identity representation.

Similar claims are also found in the Anglo-Saxon world, where emphasis has been placed on the antiquity of *hurling*, a game probably of Nordic origin, attested in the British Isles well before the Roman occupation (Gunnell, 2012). From this practice, *soule* evolved, widespread in Celtic and French areas since the early second millennium. The Florentine football, documented during the Renaissance and still spectacularly reenacted today, is sometimes cited as a link between past and present ball games, but it too cannot be considered a direct progenitor of modern football (Bredekamp, 1995; Galluzzo, 1995; Giovannelli, 2017).

In the absence of codified rules and a common structure, establishing a real "*precedence*" among these practices is speculative. Football, understood as a modern sport discipline, was born in a well-defined context: the Freemason's Tavern in London on October 26, 1863 (Sconcerti, 2009). There, the first official rules of the Football Association were drafted, shaping the game as it is known today. On this point, British primacy is unequivocal. Any other narrative that claims exclusively native origins for football reflects ideological needs rather than historically documentable facts.

Football in Italy originated in the late nineteenth century, with Turin playing a central role in the introduction and diffusion of the sport. Although no historical documents certify its exact beginnings, tradition places the birth of the first football matches at the end of the 19th century, parallel to developments in France. In Turin, a Swiss entrepreneur, Edoardo Bosio, played a fundamental role. After numerous trips to Great Britain, he decided to organize a football team among his company employees, challenging a team composed of Turin aristocrats, including the Duke of the Abruzzi and the Marquis Ferrero di Ventimiglia.

In 1891, the two teams merged into the Internazionale Football Club, which, following later splits, would give rise to important sports clubs such as Unione Sportiva Torinese, Juventus (1897), and Torino (1906). This phenomenon cannot be separated from the socio-economic context of the time, which saw industrial Italian cities like Turin as fertile ground for the growth of new cultural and sporting models. Football naturally developed in a rapidly transforming urban environment, similarly to what happened in the United Kingdom with the industrial revolution.

Another centre of football diffusion was Genoa, where in 1897 a team was founded, composed both of locals and British workers employed at the port. This group gave birth to the Genoa Cricket and Athletic Club (Padovano, n.d.), which distinguished itself from the outset in Italian championships, winning early tournaments between 1898 and 1900, and again between 1902 and 1904[2]. The presence of British players was fundamental to football's affirmation, a phenomenon which, albeit differently, also developed in France[3] and other parts of Europe (Massi Vino, 2020).

In Milan, the third key city for the development of Italian football, two of the most prestigious teams were born at the start of the 20th century. Milan AC, founded in 1899, won its first championship in 1901 with a team partially composed of British and Swiss players (Stretto, 2015). Around the same time, the Milan club split, giving birth to Inter in 1908, which became one of Milan's historical rivals. Under Fascism, Inter changed its name to "*Ambrosiana*" due to regime pressures, which considered the original name too "*cosmopolitan*" (*Almanacco illustrato del Milan*, 1999).The evolution of football in Italy highlights the close connection between the sporting phenomenon and social and industrial dynamics. The first Italian teams were strongly influenced by British experience, but over time football deeply rooted itself in local culture, becoming not only a sport but an important component of urban and national identity. Between the foundation of the Italian Football Federation in 1898 and the end of World War I, football in Italy developed under dynamics that initially limited its social and geographic diffusion. In this phase, the sport maintained an elitist, urban, and

[2] *In the Genoa teams that won the Italian championships in 1898, 1899, and 1900, as well as those from the three-year period 1902–1904, there were four athletes of British origin. Among them was James Richardson Spensley, the club's founder, accompanied by Leaver, Dapples, and Baird.*

[3] *In France, the first football-related associations developed in colonial and urban contexts, particularly in ports and centres with the greatest contact with the Anglo-Saxon world. Among the oldest clubs are the HAC (Le Havre Athletic Club), founded by British settlers in the Norman city, and a series of Parisian clubs with Anglo-Saxon roots, such as the International Athletic Club and the Paris Association Football Club, which formed the first structured nuclei of football practice in the capital.*

strongly northern character, reflecting models already established in Britain and continental Europe (De Ianni, 2015).

Initially, Italian football players came almost exclusively from the ruling and bourgeois classes. The first teams formed within circles connected to aristocratic liberal democracy, the professional world, and the educated middle class, often in direct contact with foreign technicians and entrepreneurs. As in France, high schools and universities played a driving role in spreading the sport, but clubs remained frequented by a narrow circle of upper-class citizens, including many English, Swiss, and Germans active in industrial cities in the North like Turin, Milan, and Genoa. At the same time, only a few sports experienced mass participation. Activities promoted by gymnastics societies and shooting groups, often supported by political and cultural elites with patriotic or militaristic aims, sought to train physically prepared and ideologically aligned citizens. These organizations also became instruments of conflict between socialists and Catholics competing for influence over popular classes. Cycling was the first truly popular sport, with the birth, from 1912 onwards, of openly socialist groups, the so-called "*red cyclists*," active in Romagna, Lombardy, Tuscany, and Piedmont[4]. Football, by contrast, did not participate in this early phase of democratization of Italian sport, remaining foreign to popular milieus and militant circuits (Pivato 1991, 90–105; 1994, 281–293).

Geographical distribution of football practice confirmed this selectivity. Until the years after World War I, football was played almost exclusively in large northern cities and smaller industrial centres. Among these, Vercelli stood out for its relevance: the city's team won the national championship seven times between 1908 and 1922[5], showing how sports development was closely linked to the presence of a solid productive apparatus (Consiglio Regionale del Piemonte, 2024).

During the Belle Époque, Italian football therefore remained confined to northern Italy, while in other European countries territorial diffusion was already advanced. Until the 1930s, the race for the championship involved almost exclusively teams from Milan, Turin, and Genoa. The main players of the period, including De Vecchi, Caligaris, Combi, Meazza, Cevenini, and Baloncieri, almost all came from Piedmont or Lombardy. Only in 1925 did Bologna break the dominance of the "*industrial triangle*," while Rome won its first title only in 1942 and Cagliari had to wait until 1970.

The postwar period marked a decisive turning point. Football progressively lost its elitist character and took on traits of a popular sport. It began to involve a growing number of players from subordinate urban classes and, at the same time, expanded its presence across the national territory. Already before the late 1920s, football had established itself as a mass cultural phenomenon, with an impact such that it attracted the attention of the Fascist regime, which framed it within propaganda mechanisms and transformed it into an instrument of mobilization and consensus-building.

SPORT UNDER FASCISM: POLITICAL CONTROL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

The rise of fascism in Italy did not mark a clear break from the earlier spread of mass sports. Sports practices, already embedded in Italian society before 1922, were absorbed by the regime without leading to true

[4] In August 1913, a national federation was established in Imola that brought together the "red cyclists" active in Romagna, Milan, Mantua, Alessandria, Biella, Turin, and Florence.

[5] Pro Vercelli won the Italian championship titles in 1908 and 1909, then again in 1911, 1912, 1913, and finally in 1921 and 1922. Although the club later disappeared from the roll of honour of Italian football, it had already played a decisive role in the development of an athletic and modern style of football in the country.

democratization. Fascist intervention, far from promoting inclusive participation, progressively transformed sport into a tool for spectacle, aiding in consensus-building and legitimizing power (Cante, 1996).

Contrary to what might be assumed, the regime's primary goal was not the widespread extension of sports practice but its instrumentalization for propaganda purposes. This process was not exclusive to Italy but took on particularly intense and systematic characteristics here, due to the central role assigned to sport within the totalitarian project.

Before the establishment of the dictatorship, movements with socialist, republican, and Catholic roots had initiated autonomous forms of promoting sport as a vehicle for social emancipation. The authoritarian shift of 1926, marked by the introduction of the so-called "*fascist laws*," led to the dissolution of most independent associations, except for the Federation of Italian Catholic Sports Associations, which survived for a limited period. All others were replaced by a pyramid-like system, rigidly connected to the National Fascist Party and integrated into the Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI) (Sanino & Verde, 2015).

According to historian Felice Fabrizio (Fabrizio, 1976, 1977), active participation in sport within official federations remained relatively low. Between 1930 and 1939, athletes with federation cards did not exceed eight hundred thousand, about 5% of the male population aged 15 to 35. A significant portion of these were amateur footballers and hunters. Outside the federal structures, informal sports activity remained widespread, especially among the youth, but the gap between spontaneous practice and institutionalized sport marked a significant cultural divide.

The regime invested heavily in infrastructure: approximately two thousand stadiums were built in the 1920s. This was complemented by the promotion of physical education in school curricula and activities of the Opera Nazionale Balilla and the Dopolavoro. However, the regime's main investment was directed towards organizing sport as a grand media and ceremonial event, capable of strengthening collective identification and social discipline.

In this context, football assumed a central role as a privileged tool for mass manipulation. In 1926, Mussolini entrusted the leadership of the Italian Football Federation to Leonardo Arpinati, an early fascist and mayor of Bologna (Polverosi, 2002). Arpinati maintained a certain managerial autonomy, allowing him to reform the championship structure and promote the integration of northern and southern teams, laying the foundations for the Italian national team's international successes. The adoption of the blue jersey, already introduced in 1911 in homage to the House of Savoy, became an integral part of the national sports imagery.

Despite his achievements, Arpinati soon clashed with prominent regime figures like Achille Starace. His appointment of a non-fascist secretary, personal ties with anti-regime circles, and involvement in a corruption case in football made him politically vulnerable. In 1932, Mussolini removed him and sent him into internal exile, replacing him with Giorgio Vaccaro, a former militia general, assisted by Ottorino Barassi, a regime loyalist (Canali, 2019). Under their management, the fascistization of the sports apparatus intensified, and the process of athlete professionalization accelerated.

Football's centrality within the fascist cultural[6] machine stemmed from its dual nature: on one hand, as a spectacular event capable of engaging the collective imagination; on the other, as a pedagogical and

[6] *The fascist regime initiated a systematic instrumentalization of football, transforming it into an ideological tool aimed at consolidating popular support and spreading totalitarian principles. More than any other sport, football proved* capable of attracting *diverse masses and providing a visual and symbolic platform that effectively conveyed the regime's propaganda language.*

disciplinary tool aimed at constructing a homogeneous, mobilized citizenship loyal to the dictates of power. Football competitions, especially those of international significance, were transformed into true civic rituals. In these contexts, gymnastic choreographies by youth organizations, military hymns, giant portraits of Mussolini, and slogans of the National Fascist Party contributed to building a totalizing representational space, consistent with the logic of permanent mobilization.

Beyond the symbolic dimension, football was used as a tool for mass distraction. The increasing consumption of football through sports press and radio broadcasts helped divert public attention from social crises, employment tensions, and political claims. This mechanism was not exclusive to fascism, but the Italian regime was the first to institutionalize this use of football systematically and coherently with the logic of modern spectacle.

The glorification of the footballer, elevated to the status of a national hero, and the gradual professionalization of the sector responded to a dual strategy: on one hand, to fuel the myth of the champion as the embodiment of Italian strength and genius; on the other, to facilitate the penetration of private capital and economic model's characteristic of industrialized economies. The recruitment of foreign athletes, such as the Italo-Argentine Raimundo Orsi (Chiesa, 1999, p. 124), occurred in violation of existing regulations, highlighting the emergence of a system where sports professionalism was tolerated, if not explicitly promoted, in the interest of international visibility and the projection of national power beyond borders.

The ideological operation extended to the historiographical and cultural level. The regime attempted to construct a genealogy of Italian football that connected it ideally to the games of ancient Rome and traditional practices like calcio fiorentino. This narrative aimed to legitimize football as an authentic expression of the "*Italian people*," portrayed as a disciplined, virile, aggressive, and supportive collective. The collective dimension of the game, in which individuality dissolves within the group, was presented as a paradigm of fascist order, based on the subordination of the individual to the nation.

The victories achieved by the Italian national team between 1934 and 1938, including two World Cups and Olympic gold in Berlin (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), were treated by the regime as manifestations of the superiority of fascist civilization over Western democracies, often depicted as morally and politically decadent. These sporting successes were carefully celebrated through triumphalist rhetoric, transforming footballers into symbolic soldiers of the homeland. Subjected to rigorous discipline, these athletes were managed by technical figures like Vittorio Pozzo with a paramilitary mindset, inspired by values of command and hierarchical submission.

The issue of migration was also absorbed into the fascist football strategy. The inclusion in the national team of *oriundi* (foreign-born players of Italian descent) from Latin America, such as Orsi himself, was justified through the ideological construction of the figure of the "*repatriate*," a term coined to designate emigrants returning to Italy. This operation reaffirmed the centrality of Italian blood, regardless of geography, and reconfigured football as a product of Italian identity spread throughout the world (Santangelo, 2020).

Through the intersection of sport, spectacle, and ideology, fascism helped shape a model of modern, professional, and spectacular football, anticipating global trends that would only become more widespread in the following decades. The Italian experience demonstrates the political potential of sport as a tool for identity construction, social discipline, and symbolic projection of power (Cristiano, 2023).

ITALIAN FOOTBALL: IDENTITY DYNAMICS BETWEEN LOCALISM AND NATIONAL REPRESENTATION

Throughout the 20th century, football in Italy took on a role far more complex than that of a mere sporting competition, becoming a symbolic space where political tensions, collective emotions, and territorial identities were reflected. Initially met with scepticism by the Fascist regime—seen as an expression of a non-native sporting culture—football was soon recognized for its effectiveness in conveying a modern, cohesive, and vigorous image of the nation. Its consecration as the "*national sport*" was not solely the result of ideological imposition, but also the consolidation of trends already presents in Italian society, particularly the widespread popular enthusiasm for a sport capable of catalysing multiple forms of belonging.

Emotional investment in the national team, especially during international triumphs, has often sparked moments of collective participation in which identification with athletes temporarily replaced identification with institutional or historical figures. The 1982 World Cup victory, for example, was perceived as a moment of shared redemption, able to unite the country in a diffuse sense of pride, far removed from political tensions or ideological conflicts (Ferrari, 2022; De Core, 2020).

However, football in Italy has never been reduced to a tool of state propaganda or mere expression of sporting nationalism. Its strength lies in its ability to combine national identity with a deeply rooted sense of local belonging. Club teams, even as they increasingly feature athletes from other contexts, continue to embody the identity of the cities they represent. The emotional bond between fanbases and clubs does not depend so much on players' origins as on their ability to integrate into a shared imaginary that fosters loyalty and recognition.

The adoption of foreign champions by local fanbases, such as Michel Platini in Turin or Diego Armando Maradona in Naples, demonstrates how football allegiance is the result of symbolic processes rather than demographic or territorial ties. Identification occurs through the narration of athletic feats and the perception of individual charisma, transcending linguistic or cultural barriers.

Far from being a folkloric remnant, local pride manifests in football with such intensity that it often challenges the very idea of national unity. Every week, thousands of people move physically or emotionally toward stadiums, renewing a collective ritual that not only entertains but reinforces local identity. The role of the Totocalcio, the football pool introduced after World War II as a means of funding sport, furthered this widespread engagement, introducing an economic element into the Sunday ritual of football.

This dual structure, oscillating between national identification and municipal rootedness, makes football a complex system capable of both integrating and dividing. In a context often suspicious of the central state, local fandom becomes a form of implicit political participation, a reaffirmation of city-based sovereignty. Yet, simultaneously, football constructs a shared collective imaginary that cuts across social classes, generations, and geographic backgrounds (Vinnai, 1970).

Ultimately, the Italian football universe cannot be interpreted solely in sporting terms. It functions as a dynamic social space where forms of cohesion and differentiation emerge, an ideal lens through which to observe the transformations of Italian identity, perpetually balanced between the desire for unity and the persistence of local differences.

The evolution of Italian football offers a useful key to understanding the socio-territorial dynamics that have long characterized relations between North and South. The spread of football in Italy was neither

geographically homogeneous nor neutral. For a long time, football took root almost exclusively in the northern areas of the country, coinciding with the industrial development and increasing urbanization of those regions. The North's productive structure and urban fabric provided ideal conditions for the emergence of football as a mass sport and cultural phenomenon.

It was only during the Fascist period, particularly in the 1930s, that football began to expand into the southern regions. It was in this context that southern clubs such as Cagliari, Napoli, Roma, Lazio, Catania, and Avellino were founded and began to consolidate. However, the rise of a southern team to the top of national competition occurred only in 1987, with Napoli's victory in the Serie A championship (Pacileo & Gargano, 2006, p. 114). This event marked a turning point: the first true sporting consecration of a club authentically representing southern Italy. Napoli's success carried not only athletic significance but also strong identity connotations, generating excitement among southern populations, including those who had migrated to the industrialized North.

The case of Turin illustrates the social and cultural polarization in football. Until the mid-1980s, there was a clear distinction between Torino FC, supported mainly by long-time Torinese citizens, and Juventus, associated with Fiat and supported largely by southern migrant workers. Under the leadership of the Agnelli family, Juventus pursued a dual strategy: on one hand, investing in internationally renowned players to maintain its image as a winning club; on the other, recruiting players from the islands and southern Italy to strengthen its symbolic bond with its predominantly southern working-class fanbase.

The emotional involvement of southern fans reached its peak in 1987, when Napoli defeated Stuttgart in the UEFA Cup semifinal. Celebrations erupted not only in Naples but also in numerous northern cities, Turin, Milan, Genoa, Pavia, where southern communities mobilized in masse. These celebrations triggered mixed reactions: alongside the joy, there were tensions, at times leading to accusations of racism by the southern press against local northern populations.

More than a century after the founding of the Italian Football Federation, initiated by urban, cosmopolitan elites, Italian football stands today as not only a vehicle for social integration but also a lasting reflection of a nation still marked by imbalances and fractures. While the tensions in Italian society have evolved, they have never been fully resolved. Football continues to serve as a prism through which to examine processes of collective identification and the historical persistence of territorial inequalities.

Studying the evolution of football in Italy reveals how the sport transformed from an elite practice into a mass phenomenon and, at the same time, a tool for constructing identity and a vehicle for political messaging. Its early adoption by aristocratic and bourgeois circles in northern urban centres occurred during a period of strong interaction with British culture. However, the gradual "*nationalization*" of football produced a symbolic language rooted in Italian identity, even evident in the choice of the word "*calcio*" instead of the more widespread "*football*." This terminological specificity, far from a mere linguistic exercise, was part of a broader process of constructing a collective imagination that has endured beyond the historical circumstances of its formation.

Fascism recognized in football a powerful tool for political legitimization and mass control. Sporting rhetoric fused with nationalist rhetoric, giving football victories a symbolic value of civil and cultural supremacy. The progressive professionalization and spectacularization of the sport encouraged emotional mass mobilization, exploited to consolidate internal cohesion and project an image of a unified and vigorous nation. At the same time, local fandom continued to express strong territorial roots, making football a site of tension between

localism and national identity. The ability to integrate these two polarities has made Italian football, more than other sports, a privileged laboratory for observing societal and political-cultural transformations.

After the fall of the Fascist regime, football retained its role as a force for both cohesion and differentiation, confirming its nature as a "*symbolic space*" where multiple identities converge. Victories by the national team, such as in 1982, acted as catalysts for transient collective identity and as instruments of redemption in a country marked by socio-economic divisions. Yet the persistence of territorial rivalries and football's capacity to express both urban and national dimensions have made it a privileged observatory for the tensions that run through Italian society. The history of football in Italy, therefore, is far more than a simple sports narrative: it represents a significant chapter in the country's cultural history, reflecting the ambitions, conflicts, and identities that have shaped its evolution.

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who met British sporting culture during work stays abroad, founded the Football & Cricket Club Torino, considered the first structured football association in Italy. The team wore red and black striped uniforms with white collars and caps, following Anglo-Saxon models. In 1889, Luigi Amedeo of Savoy, Duke of the Abruzzi, promoted the foundation of a second city team, Nobili Torino, composed of members of the local aristocracy and recognizable by their yellow-blue jerseys. The two teams merged in 1891 to form Internazionale Torino, which elected the Duke of the Abruzzi as president and adopted a garnet jersey in homage to Sheffield F.C., historically recognized as the oldest club in the world. Among the players was Herbert Kilpin, originally from Nottingham, who would later find the Milan Football and Cricket Club, precursor of A.C. Milan.

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