

Football in Turkey

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In the run-up to the April 2017 referendum in Turkey, a vote on whether to change from a parliamentary to a presidential system of government, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described the opposition with a particular footballing metaphor: ‘All the matches that they go out to play they lose’, he said. ‘They’ve lost seven before ... Hopefully this time they’ll take the message’. In the event, ‘Yes’ came to win with 51.4% of the vote, in a victory that was clouded by disputes over the ballots. The response of the head of the Republican People’s Party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, to a last-minute alteration to the regulations about ballot counting by the Supreme Election Board was also cast in footballing terms: ‘you cannot change the rules of a match while the match is being played’. And Erdoğan’s response to the narrowness of the victory? ‘It doesn’t matter if you win 1–0 or 5–0, a win’s a win.’

Anyone who spends even the shortest period of time in Turkey quickly comes to realise the importance of football. Even those with no interest in the game cannot escape its influence – from the traffic grinding to a halt in Istanbul on match days, to the hours of television given over to grizzled ex-professionals talking about Galatasaray’s title chances. Football is everywhere in Turkey, bound up in all manner of social, political and economic practices. Given its ubiquity, it is all the more surprising that it has been a relatively neglected area of research in the social sciences.

As an anthropologist, my methods involve spending as much time as possible with those I seek to learn more about: the fans. I have spent close to a decade of my academic career conducting ethnographic fieldwork on Turkish football, in ever expanding circles. I began with my Master’s research, which centred on the Beşiktaş fan group, Çarşı, known for its leftist-anarchist politics and exposed how it had been affected by the increasing commodification and wealth of Turkish football. I found that the group walks an uneasy tightrope – criticising certain aspects of commercialisation and free-market capitalism whilst also harnessing those same forces to grow the group and build its stature. My PhD centred on the Turkish-speaking diaspora in Europe. I explored the ways in which football enables people of Turkish descent to express a connection to a heritage (real or imagined), free from the baggage of religious or political ideas. I focused in particular on the technologies – from internet forums to cheap flights – that have enabled this sub-culture of diaspora fan clubs to grow in recent years.

Most recently, I have spent the last two years researching and writing a book on football in Turkey more broadly. While maintaining a strong interest in the fans, I have also expanded my focus to explore questions of history, culture and politics. I have criss-crossed the country, speaking to and

witnessing people involved in football – from the vice-president of Fenerbahçe to the many thousands of people toiling away on parks and pitches across the country. The process has been invigorating, challenging and eye-opening. The following observations are some of the most striking that I have come away with.

History

Football arrived in Turkey at the end of the Ottoman period. Its three biggest clubs today – Beşiktaş, Fenerbahçe and Galatasaray, all Istanbul-based – were founded at the turn of the 20th century, and came of age during a critical time in the formation of the nation. Turkish historians have frequently sucked football into a nationalist historiography, whereby the games become proxy-nationalist battles of Turks against foreigners (English, French) or non-Muslim minorities (Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian). This narrative culminates in Fenerbahçe beating an occupation team of English soldiers 2–1 in June 1923 for the Harington Cup, which, as the Fenerbahçe Museum states, was ‘a match of Turk’s [sic] pride’.

Whilst a nationalist dynamic is an unescapable facet of the late Ottoman and early Republican period, football was more cosmopolitan and fluid than the dominant narratives allow. And, until the 1930s, the game remained an elite sport – its ‘Turkish’ players often sharing the same ideals of amateurism, gentlemanliness and physical and mental development as the ‘foreigners’ who first brought and played the game. Many people in Turkey can tell you that Galatasaray were the first champions of the Turkish league. Fewer can name their starting 11: Ahmet Robinson, Milo Bakiz, Hasan, Horace Armitage, Fuad Husnu, Idris, Kiril Steryo, Celal Ibrahim, Highton, Emin Bülent, Bekir; the side was a mix of Turks, Greeks, Armenians and other foreigners.

Politics

Football in Turkey is undoubtedly political. The most clear way that this link is drawn is through the participation of football fans in the Gezi Park demonstrations of 2013. Sparked by the proposed demolition of Gezi Park in central Istanbul but quickly mushrooming into broad anti-government demonstrations, the protests saw fans of the Big Three Istanbul teams – Beşiktaş, Galatasaray and Fenerbahçe – put aside their enmity to protest together.

But the politicisation of the game goes well beyond this. Football in Turkey has undergone rapid and profound commercialisation over the past two decades. The legal framework governing stadium management and policing has been overhauled, ostensibly to improve safety but also as part of a project to change the profile of those attending live games and to make the enterprise more profitable. Football is intimately part of the business model that has powered the economy under the governance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Over the past nine years, Turkey

has built the most new stadiums of any country in the world, save the USA. It is, in part, a dimension of the restless transformation of Turkish cities. But there are also questions about the awarding of contracts, the sale of land, of corruption and cronyism. On top of all this, football has also been dragged into the battle between the government and the Gülen movement, whose followers in the judiciary and police were accused of targeting Fenerbahçe in a 2011 match-fixing scandal.

Masculinity

Playing and watching football in Turkey – as in most countries – is seen predominately as a male pastime. This perception obscures the active involvement of women, both as supporters and players. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that football in Turkey is a male-centric domain. Indeed, football is frequently seen as bolstering the macho image of the ‘typical Turkish male’. On the terraces, there is an image of the rowdy, boisterous fan, prone to violence. I can confirm there is some truth to the stereotype – fights frequently break out between rival sets of fans, between fans and the police, and even between fans of the same side. On the pitch, many of Turkish football’s role models do not exactly dispel the image. Fatih Terim, Turkey’s most famous coach, had to resign as the national team manager in July 2017 for getting into a brawl with a restaurant owner who he accused of insulting his family; Arda Turan – Turkey’s most famous player, an attacking midfielder at Barcelona – attacked a journalist during a flight with the national team. The attitudes and actions of players and fans alike in Turkey reveal a strong paternalistic, patriarchal streak, combined with a willingness to take the law into their own hands. But there are exceptions. Take, for instance, Halil İbrahim Dinçdağ, a referee from Trabzon who came out as gay in 2009, and has since become a spokesperson for LGBT rights and a more inclusive footballing atmosphere. There are many men and women working in women’s football trying to break the cultural perception that football is a man’s sport and should be played and watched by men.

Turkey and the world

Finally, football is a valuable lens for examining Turkey’s relations with the outside world. The foreign policy of President Erdoğan’s AKP is frequently described as ‘neo-Ottoman’ – pivoting away from Europe and the West, and towards the Middle East. Analyses that the West is ‘losing’ Turkey seem reinforced by a moribund EU accession process and the deterioration in relations with the US. But switch to the football pitch and we see that Turkey has been a member of UEFA – the official body that organises the game in Europe – since the 1950s. Hundreds of European players play in Turkey. Football is arguably the one area of cultural activity that has been unambiguously connected to Europe – and will be for the foreseeable future. Perhaps the most important tie between Turkey and Europe is the Turkish diaspora that continues to bind the two regions together. Here too, football offers an illustration. Many of the seemingly ‘Turkish’ players in the Süper Lig starting line-ups were born and raised in Europe. Take, for instance, the Beşiktaş side that won the league in 2016. On the surface, the side was a balance of Turkish and overseas stars. Foreigners like Ricardo Quaresma (Portuguese), Atiba Hutchinson (Canadian) and Mario Gomez (German) took their place in a starting 11 containing Turkish players such as Olcay Şahan, Gökhan Tore, Cenk Tosun and Oğuzhan Özyakup. Except, none of those ‘local’ players was born in Turkey. In total, of 11 ‘Turks’ in the squad, only five were born in Turkey.

In the book, I endeavour to show that football in Turkey is too large and diverse a game to be neatly assigned to just one narrative of the nation’s development or place in the world. For every example that presents the game as a divisive force, there is another that shows it to be a unifying factor. For each eruption of chauvinistic masculine behaviour or racist nationalism, there is another example of cooperation and friendship between people from different backgrounds. It is football’s multifaceted nature and wide-ranging appeal that make it such an endlessly rich source of analysis. Even those who think they hate football may be surprised by how much they can learn from Turkey’s favourite game.

John McManus’ book,
Welcome to Hell? In Search of the Real Turkish Football,
is published by Orion Books in April 2018



Beşiktaş fans celebrating their side clinching the Turkish championship, Ankara, May 2017.