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Marion Fontaine, *Le Racing Club de Lens et les "Gueules Noires."* Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2010. 291 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, and photographs. €29.00. (pb). ISBN 978-2-84654-248-7.

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The summer of 1998 was a memorable one for French football, dominated as it was by the victory of France, additionally the host nation, in that year's FIFA World Cup. This would have been a significant event at any time, especially given that the competition is a French invention and that the trophy had never previously been won by the national side. More importantly for historians, this sporting triumph was also widely perceived as a defining moment for the Republic, particularly as regards attitudes to immigration, ethnicity, and inclusion. Thus, commentators of almost every stripe came together to hail not only the competitive excellence of the so-called *black, blanc, beur* team, but also the social harmony symbolized by such durably influential figures as Lilian Thuram and, *primus inter pares*, Zinedine Zidane. A number of scholars have productively revisited this chapter of an ongoing sporting and societal narrative, including Laurent Dubois in his compelling survey of French football's colonial past and multicultural present.^[1] Patrick Mignon has similarly, and equally persuasively, analysed the fall-out from the spectacular French failure at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa in terms of this continuing and always ethnically-inflected national psychodrama.^[2]

By focusing on the contested national dimension in French football, these and other analysts have sought to foreground the institutional and ideological connections between sport and the modern nation-state—a linkage which was as positively performed in France in 1998 as it was negatively played out in South Africa in 2010. However, football is also a profoundly local game. While its basic format may remain constant, its particular expressions are characterized by almost infinite variety, as amply demonstrated by David Goldblatt in his pioneering comparative study, *The Ball is Round: a Global History of Football*.^[3] For the key to the game's worldwide appeal, whether as a predominantly amateur practice or a mass-mediated professional spectacle, is precisely, if paradoxically, its local specificity. This observation is at least as justified in France as elsewhere; indeed, it underpins the case study now presented by Marion Fontaine in her impressive first book. More particularly, Fontaine's historical narrative opens with the observation that the summer of 1998 was marked not only by French success on the international stage, but also by the first ever victory of the Racing Club de Lens in the national championship—an event which, we discover, mobilized rather different notions of "blackness."

Of course, the most famous sporting son of Lens remains Georges Carpentier, the boxer whose illustrious career in the ring either side of the First World War was complemented by equally distinguished military service during that conflict. As André Rauch has argued, *le gosse lensois* became a national symbol post-1918, as the sporting incarnation of traditionally conceived masculinity in a period of profound social upheaval.^[4] This reassuring image of French manhood would be tested to destruction in the first million-dollar fight at Jersey City on 2 July 1921. Although a predictable sporting outcome, Carpentier's comprehensive defeat by "The Manassa Mauler," reigning heavyweight champion, Jack Dempsey, was nevertheless read in France as an allegory of the country's reduced international influence, specifically in its relations with a United States visibly growing in confidence in the military, industrial, and geo-political spheres. American mastery in the sporting arena would shortly be underlined closer to home by the U.S. team's spectacular domination of the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, where Johnny Weissmuller's three gold medals in the pool served to launch the swimmer on a

successful cinema career as Tarzan. This metamorphosis would see Weissmuller make his own distinctive contribution to the increasing influence of American popular cultural models in Europe after the 1914–1918 hostilities. Yet sport remains a cultural field in which the influence of the United States is restricted, most obviously as regards the limited impact of the principal North American sports on the physical cultures of Europe, with the obvious but still only partial exceptions of basketball and ice hockey. For in France, as around the world, association football (or soccer) remains the leading competitive sport, and its continued popularity may best be understood in terms of the historical circumstances of the game's implantation and development, as may its cultural specificity at both the national and local levels.

Previous English-language studies of French football include particularly the seminal work of Richard Holt and the important cultural history by Geoff Hare.[5] In French, the individual and collaborative writings of Alfred Wahl and Pierre Lanfranchi similarly remain essential guides.[6] More recently, Paul Dietschy has established himself as a leading commentator on the French and world game, while Yvan Gastaut has written incisively on the specific links between football and immigration in France.[7] Also still *incontournable* is Christian Bromberger's ethnographic study of football in Marseille, Naples, and Turin.[8] To this distinguished list, we now need to add the name of Marion Fontaine, who is notably comfortable with scholarly sources in both languages, and who offers here a compelling study of sport and society in the northern heartland of the French coalmining industry. The monograph is based on her doctoral thesis, which was supervised by Christophe Prochasson at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), and her research project as a whole is evidence of the seriousness with which sport is now taken by the most prestigious academic institutions in France. Paul Dietschy's own doctoral work at the École Normale Supérieure and his subsequent dynamism at the Centre d'Histoire de Sciences Po (often in collaboration with Patrick Clastres) similarly underline this disciplinary evolution, and even revolution. The fruits of what is still a relatively new institutional openness to the scholarly study of sport are very well illustrated in the rigorous and engaging volume considered here.

To return, then, to the summer of 1998 and the historic triumph of RC Lens in the national championship. Fontaine shows that this achievement mobilized distinctive forms of sport-inflected representation and commemoration, with immigration, not coincidentally, an important element in the perception of the new champions, just as it would be two months later in the national reading of the all-conquering and ethnically diverse *Bleus*. As suggested by her title, the narrative of this particular sports association is intimately bound up with that of the northern coalfield of which Lens was long the industrial hub and which still remains its symbolic heartland. This characteristically *nordiste* sporting context is one that would have been familiar to Raymond Kopa (born Kopaszewski), the most famous French sportsman of Polish ancestry, who began his working life at Noeux-les-Mines, in the neighbouring Pas-de-Calais. One of the "holy trinity" of French "immigrant" footballers--alongside the Franco-Italian Michel Platini and, naturally, the Franco-Algerian Zinedine Zidane--Kopa would go on to star for both Reims, the leading French side of the day, and Real Madrid, then as now a dominant force in the European game, as well as becoming European Footballer of the Year in 1958.[9] However, as Fontaine notes intriguingly in her discussion of the generally very successful Lens system of recruiting upcoming players, especially those of Polish origin, from local junior sides, the club's scouts failed to spot the exceptional talent of Kopa, who instead joined Angers as a professional. Nevertheless, the broader *polonisation* of the club's playing staff in the 1950s and 1960s epitomized the imbrication of RC Lens and its industrial location, both in practical and symbolic terms. However, as Fontaine's study shows, the relationship between the talismanic club and the region's miners, the so-called *Gueules Noires* highlighted in her title, has been a complex one over the years, constantly evolving in response to changes in the industrial balance of power on the ground (and under it, come to that), as well as reflecting broader societal transformations.

As Fontaine is sharply aware, part of the problem of dealing with this club and its history is the fact that both the Nord and its characterizing industry have been so regularly represented. From Zola's classic *Germinal*, notably adapted for the cinema by Claude Berri in 1993, to Dany Boon's box-office triumph *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (2008), both the region and its inhabitants, especially its mine-workers, are always already known. Revealingly, in the latter film, stereotypes of industry-generated brutalization and football-focused conviviality--specifically at the RC Lens stadium--alternate in what is a characteristically ambivalent perception of the coalfield. In contrast, Fontaine's own ambition, modestly stated but convincingly achieved, is that her study should serve as "l'incitation à sortir de cette double légende et à faire une histoire éloignée aussi bien du culte du héros du prolétariat que de la lamentation sur le sort des victimes, passées ou présentes, de l'industrialisation" (p. 267).

In the spirit of C.L.R. James, who famously commented that any biographer of cricketer Donald Bradman would be required to become a historian of modern Australia, Marion Fontaine has produced a narrative of an iconic football club which is also a history of the French coalmining industry. This is reflected in her sources. In addition to the limited private holdings of RC Lens, and the existing (non-academic) club histories, she draws extensively on municipal, departmental, and national archives, such as the Centre des Archives du Monde du Travail in neighbouring Roubaix. She has also scoured local newspapers, as well as a variety of supporters' publications; she has consulted industrial histories of "Lens les Mines"; and she has conducted numerous interviews with former players and administrators, as well as with local union organizers and politicians. What emerges is a complex narrative which not only presents a penetrating analysis of the club's organizational and representational schemata, but also very effectively dispels the alternately nostalgic and miserabilist stereotypes of the location and its characterising industry.

Central to Fontaine's analysis is the constant evolution and, indeed, regular reinvention of the club. This approach both counters the familiar regional myths and offers insights into the socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts of the highlighted sporting transformations. She begins her account at the Stade Félix Bollaert, the iconic club headquarters opened in 1933, and revealingly named after the *polytechnicien* who had succeeded his father as the chief executive of the Société des Mines de Lens in 1922 and would remain in charge until 1936. Although RC Lens had been founded in 1906 as a middle-class association practising a variety of sports, it was in the years following the First World War that the club emerged as a single-sport club attached to the precursor of the Fédération Française de Football. Its rise as the game moved into the professional era reflected not only the broader popularization and democratization of sport in the 1920s and 1930s, but also a variety of industrial paternalism characteristic of French sport. Like Peugeot's sponsorship of football in Sochaux-Montbéliard, and Michelin's commitment to rugby in Clermont-Ferrand, RC Lens thus became the archetypal company team of the northern coalfield. However, as Fontaine makes clear, the firm's appropriation of and investment in the club, which saw it gain promotion to the first division of the national league in 1937 season, by no means meant that the mineworkers themselves automatically associated with either the game or the local team.

Initially prominent in the denunciation of RC Lens as a puppet of the mineowners and the broader capitalist system, the PCF would revise its view as part of a successful strategy of supplanting the SFIO locally. This power struggle took place against the backdrop of three crises for the Left and the French working class: the Popular Front, the Occupation, and the post-war nationalization of the coal industry. Over the intensely traumatic period from 1936 to 1948, and faced with the undeniable identification of local mineworkers with the Lens club, whose combative approach and red-and-yellow colours--more typically, and evocatively, referred to as *Sang et Or*--they increasingly adopted as their own, the Communists would come to support the club, in a tactical move not unlike that of the sports-conscious Italian Communist Party (pp. 105-106). Thus began a close association between the PCF, the CGT, and RC Lens, in which local Party publications such as *Liberté-Sports* would offer a consciously proletarian construction of the club and its archetypal miner-players. This ideologically-inflected representation

and associated communal identification received a significant boost in the 1947-1948 season, when a combination of industrial crises and sporting disappointments combined to cement the image of the club as “l'équipe des mineurs” (p. 131). The failed strikes of 1947, the Sallaumines pit explosion of 1948, and the club's unlucky defeat in the 1948 French Cup Final against its great rival from the neighbouring Lille metropolis, and in front of a then record crowd of some 60,000 spectators, thereby coalesced in a broader narrative of local and specifically class-based misfortune.

Such was the strength of this affective linkage with the region's mining family that it would be both maintained and reinforced as new Communist-led strikes disrupted the coalfield against the backdrop of the nascent Cold War. Indeed, the PCF's association with the club became so strong that Fontaine is led to describe the Stade Félix Bollaert as “Le Parti communiste en prière” (pp. 182-187). Remarkably, this close association of RC Lens with a distinctively industrial sense of self would survive as the club faced its greatest challenges in the late 1960s, suffering demotion from the first division of the French football league and the loss of its professional status; while the mining region of which it had become the sporting symbol underwent a terminal decline under the Bettancourt Plan and its programme of pit closures.

Yet the demise of the mining industry would not result in the disappearance of RC Lens, but rather in its reinvention as a marker of regional heritage. In 1970, the club was saved by the Lens municipality, which intervened in a particularly bold but economically irrational move, powerfully underlining the club's centrality to the struggling region's self-image. In due course, the club was reconfigured as a modern commercial operation, neither paternalist nor proletarian, which has managed to attract a variety of investors. Famously supported by “[le] meilleur public de France” (p. 232), RC Lens has patiently re-established itself in the national elite, a process which culminated in the club's historic first championship in 1998. This triumph was widely read as the expression of a local working-class identity which had been faced with extinction at the level of the club, just as it had long been under threat in the former coalfield of which that sports association had become the symbolic heart.

The irony is that, in the days of the *Gueules Noires*, it was the workers who forged the club, not only as regards the recruitment of its players and supporters, but also through the establishment of its associative values and communal affinities. In 1998, this mechanism was reversed, with the club's competitive success serving to generate a renewed sense of collective identity and even self-confidence in a city and a region both traumatized and atomized by the demise of the mining industry. Of course, such comforting representational responses to challenging socio-economic circumstances are inevitably fragile constructions and may collapse as quickly as they emerge. Events on the national stage in the heady sporting summer of 1998 make that only too apparent. However, as this powerful study amply demonstrates, such sport-inflected behaviours are no less important for being ephemeral. On the contrary, they merit the scrupulous attention of talented cultural historians such as Marion Fontaine, and her fascinating book itself deserves to be widely read.

NOTES

[1] Laurent Dubois, *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

[2] Patrick Mignon, “Le psychodrame du football français,” *Esprit* (August-September 2010): 6-22. More generally, see Mignon, “Sport and Politics: Another French Exception,” in Emmanuel Godin and Tony Chafer, eds., *The French Exception* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), pp. 179-192.

[3] David Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round: a Global History of Football* (London: Penguin, 2007).

[4] André Rauch, "Courage against Cupidity: Carpentier and Dempsey--Symbols of Cultural Confrontation," in Richard Holt, J. A. Mangan, and Pierre Lanfranchi, eds., *European Heroes: Myth, Identity, Sport* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), pp. 156-168. See also Rauch, *Boxe, violence du XXe siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 1992), pp. 123-152.

[5] Richard Holt, *Sport and Society in Modern France* (London: Macmillan, 1981); Geoff Hare, *Football in France* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

[6] Alfred Wahl, *Les Archives du football: sport et société en France, 1880-1980* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); Alfred Wahl, *La Balle au pied: histoire du football* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002); Alfred Wahl and Pierre Lanfranchi, *Les Footballeurs professionnels: des années trente à nos jours* (Paris: Hachette, 1995).

[7] Paul Dietschy, *Histoire du football* (Paris: Perrin, 2010); Yvan Gastaut (with a preface by Lilian Thuram), *Le Métissage par le foot: l'intégration, mais jusqu'où?* (Paris: Autrement, 2008).

[8] Christian Bromberger, "Football as world-view and as ritual," *French Cultural Studies*, 6/18 (October 1995): 293-311; Christian Bromberger, *Le Match de football: Ethnologie d'une passion partisane à Marseille, Naples et Turin* (Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1995).

[9] See, for instance, Xavier Béal, "La première sélection de Kopa, Platini et Zidane," in Claude Boli, Yvan Gastaut et Fabrice Grognet, eds., *Allez la France! Football et immigration* (Paris: Gallimard / Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration / Musée National du Sport, 2010), pp. 139-142.

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