

Gregg Bocketti. *Invention of the Beautiful Game: Football and the Making of Modern Brazil.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016. 320 pp. \$79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-6255-6.

Reviewed by Marshall C. Eakin

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Commissioned by Cristian Cercel (Ruhr University Bochum)

Since the 1950s Brazil has been one of the two dominant nations in world football (soccer for us odd North Americans). Winners of an unprecedented five World Cups (1958, 1962, 1970, 1994, 2002) and the only team to play in every World Cup tournament since its inception in 1930, Brazil has often been called the “football nation.” (Germany has now won four World Cups in the postwar period, including the last in 2014.) The dominant narrative of both Brazilian nationalism and football that emerged by the 1950s asserts that racial and cultural mixture (*mestiçagem*)—of Europeans, Native Americans, and (especially) Africans—forms the core of Brazilian national identity, and Brazilian football. This mixture brought to life samba, carnival (Brazilian style), bossa nova, and the vibrant creativity of Brazilian cultural life. On the football pitch, *mestiçagem* gave us the artistic genius of Garrincha and Pelé with their incomparable ability to improvise and dazzle, to play the “beautiful game” (*jogo bonito*). The legendary Scottish sportswriter Hugh McIlvanney wrote of the victory of Pelé and his teammates in Mexico in 1970 that the team “may have represented the highest point of beauty and sophistication the game is destined to reach.”[1]

Brazil’s hosting of the World Cup in 2014 spawned a small industry of new books and articles on Brazilian football. Among the best of these

are Roger Kittleson’s *The Country of Football* (2014), David Goldblatt’s *Futebol Nation* (2014), and a re-edition of Alex Bello’s, *Futebol: The Brazilian Way of Life* (2002, 2014). Gregg Bocketti’s well-crafted *The Invention of the Beautiful Game* joins this fine group of works, although its scope is less comprehensive. Rather than another book that surveys the history of Brazilian football from the late nineteenth century to the present, Bocketti’s study hones in on the “invention” of the game in Brazil from the 1890s to the 1930s.

Bocketti’s focus is on the construction of narratives and their impact, “on questions of mentality and identity” (p. 14). His principal concern is the dominant nationalist narrative as it emerged in the mid-twentieth century, and its misrepresentation of both the nature of Brazilian football in the early decades of the twentieth century and the professionalization and supposed democratization of the game beginning in the 1930s. He is not questioning the core claim that football became central to the story of Brazilian nationalism and national identity, but that important pieces of that narrative about the Brazilianization of football must be seriously interrogated, in particular, the sub-narrative of democratization. The book concentrates on the “omissions and distortions of nationalist history,” most notably the continuing power of clubs and their affluent directors, the

tendency to ignore regional differences, the silence about the role of women in the story, and the tendency “to downplay Brazilian football’s persistently problematic relationship with foreign football” (pp. 4-5). Bocketti’s most important criticism is directed at the “reformers” of the mid-twentieth century, especially the sportswriters Thomas Mazzoni and Mário Filho who played the most prominent roles in creating and shaping the nationalist narrative.

Instead of a chronological structure, the book is divided into five thematic chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. Ideology forms the focus of the first chapter, looking at the discourses of educators, policymakers, and what Bocketti calls sportsmen and reformers. The sportsmen used their exclusive clubs to promote “foot-ball” as the game of amateurs and as a means to teach all Brazilians how to be healthy “good citizens, workers, and soldiers” (p. 10). They hoped to use foot-ball to refashion Brazil in a Eurocentric path. Reformers shared the faith in football to help construct the nation and disciplined citizens, but they wanted to open the game to all classes and races. Chapter 2 then analyzes the creation and functioning of key football institutions, such as leagues, clubs, and the media. Contrary to the dominant narrative, here Bocketti demonstrates the persistence of elite power and privilege even as the sport becomes Brazilianized (as *futebol*) and professionalized, and as skill becomes more important than social status in the success of clubs. The third chapter turns to the place of Brazilian football in the international arena as Brazilians increasingly aspire to international success as a way to prove national worth. Despite the narrative of the Brazilianization of the game, Bocketti shows that Brazilian nationalists remained (and remain) highly sensitive to foreign opinion. (The national anguish over the disastrous losses in the 1950 and 2014 World Cups are powerful evidence of this pattern.) Chapter 4 turns to the fans. His most important contribution here is the analysis of gender norms, the erasure of wom-

en from the historical narrative, and the banning of women from playing the game (until the 1970s).

Chapter 5 delves most deeply and astutely into the debates about styles of play, race, and national identity. Although Bocketti’s aim is to revise and challenge the dominant narrative, he effectively strengthens the prevailing view that nearly all Brazilians eventually come to see football as central to national identity, as much more than a game, as central to how Brazilians see themselves and how outsiders see Brazilians. Clearly, the dominant narrative that emerges with the nationalists is a portrayal of Brazilian *futebol* as “spontaneous, creative, and festive,” the product of *mestiçagem* and the forging of a racially and culturally mixed nation and people (p. 220). Authentically Brazilian *futebol* is, following this view, a sort of jazz on the playing field. Quite correctly, Bocketti emphasizes the continuing elitism, hierarchy, and power wielded by the wealthy to the disadvantage of the great masses and the many players who arose out of the lower classes. The shift highlighted by the reformers and nationalists is not really a break in the 1930s and 1940s, but a gradual transition and the “new” *futebol* continued (and continues) many of the inequities and hierarchies of the “old” foot-ball. The sport professionalized, offering many more opportunities for skilled players of lower socioeconomic and racial status, but oligarchy and Eurocentrism did not disappear.

Bocketti’s book is deeply researched and makes excellent use of newspapers and archives in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, especially of the Fluminense and Athletico Paulistano clubs. It is a nuanced and insightful analysis of the contending narratives about the emergence and expansion of football in Brazil, and of how they have produced the powerful nationalist narrative of the *futebol* nation.

Note

[1]. Hugh McIlvanney, quoted in Garry Jenkins, *The Beautiful Team: In Search of Pelé and the 1970 Brazilians* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), xvii.

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