

# European Context of Cultural Blending and Integration through Sport

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**Abstract:** *Central to the republican French model, the process of integrating populations of migrant origin has been the subject of debates and controversy for several decades. The concept of integration had its heyday from the early 1990s onwards, but is flagging and giving way to that of “blending” or “diversity”. The virtues and vices of these new concepts lie in their “portmanteau” character, providing a peg on which public opinion hangs complex realities that are hard to define. The relationship with ethnic diversity concerns a nation now aware of the need to reinvent a concept of citizenship more suited to the major changes of this century’s early years and to the cultural realities of the population that makes up usually developed countries of the EU. To integrate people into a society seems to be the easiest way through the involvement in sport and thus produce a good citizen.*

**Keywords:** sport, blending, integration, ethnic diversity, citizenship.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Sport and intercultural relations

Sport presents itself as an asset, which has gained indisputable value for conceiving regenerated forms of “community living”. Educating through sport, the legacy of the gymnastics lesson that originated in the 1880s can be seen primarily as instilling republican values. Thanks to a practice that gained ground under the Fifth Republic and to a marked increase in media impact since the 1980s, sport has gained a prime position in public life, both as a factor in socialization and as a cultural object. True, many scientific studies have shown that sport offers migrant populations original possibilities to take root in a host society. But there is often a very fine line between sports participation based on separate communities, where exclusiveness holds sway – as illustrated by the Maccabi teams comprising Jews, or the Portuguese or West Indies clubs – and ethnic mixing through sport.

It is also true that both participation in sports disciplines and spectator sport can bring divisions and rejection. Still, intermingling through sport can be deemed to occur insofar as the development of international matches, the worldwide dissemination of certain types of sport and the scope for intercultural encounters – not to mention solidarities – provide favorable ground for real opportunities of blending. Significantly, sport has a place of honor in the permanent exhibition and various temporary displays offered at the “Cité nationale d’histoire de l’immigration”, inaugurated in 2007 with the object of showing how France was built under conditions of diversity. In intercultural relations, the realm of sport does, in fact, hold a complex position that should be selectively approached through several levels of analysis [1]. The role of sport among migrants and even more so its “cultural mediation” function – creating scope for exchange between French nationals and migrants – has only belatedly

attracted attention. Nobody extolled the merits of diversity when Boughera El Ouafi won the gold medal in the marathon at the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928, or when Raymond Kopa was a star of French football at the end of the 1950s. Conversely, for several years now, political discourse and social perceptions concerning the “trouble on city outskirts”, and the civic aspirations of populations of migrant origin, have all been fuelled by the perception of sport as a field where an ethnic mix earns preference and appreciation, whereas in other fields such as political representation, the impediments continue to be powerful. It is not by mere chance that sport and immigration are subjects which, for different reasons, have had incontestable success in the media, prompting public opinion and public authorities to envisage sometimes realistic and sometimes artificial bridges for linking the two dimensions, in the hope of contributing to a social harmony with a complex formula [2].

## 2. Young people’s socialization through sports experience

Whether learned or lowbrow, most of the talk concerning sports participation, the veracity of which is not always verifiable or quantifiable, credits the idea of its “integrative” capabilities. As an institution in a society, expressing that society’s values of courage, solidarity, zest for participation, patriotism and even heroism, sport partakes of the spontaneous or deliberate mechanisms that ensure the society’s perpetuation. By virtue of its function, principles and accepted and internalized rules, it is part of an ongoing process of social construction and identity building, like school, work and formerly the army. But, unlike these three spheres, which are losing momentum as vehicles for values, sport is remarkably buoyant in this respect. Consequently, playing sport is perceived as a good medium of citizenship, one of the last agencies of socialization where community values are learnt. Several scientific studies have

demonstrated the historical significance of associations in the integration of foreign populations [3].

Sports clubs have indubitably formed a vital link in the chain as a sometimes ethnocentric, but often intercultural point of encounter, offering its members scope for sharing values and customs and cementing relations of complicity, solidarity or friendship. Associations stimulate social bonding, even as they consolidate the process of acculturating young people with a migrant background. Some clubs like L'Olympique, at Noisy-le-Sec, zone 93, run by its general manager Jamel Sandjak, or AS Minguettes, on the outskirts of Lyons, are renowned as "citizen clubs", combining high-level sporting activity with major social commitment. Other more obscure examples, such as the municipal club of Aubervilliers-Landy, or the La Courneuve club, make intercultural relations their lifeblood.

In addition to the quality of building "sports experience", there is the positive image of a setting conducive to a form of equity which society is deemed no longer capable of securing. Everyone has their chance, the potential – according to their physical qualities or capacities – to assert themselves and, why not, climb the social ladder: sport as a parallel road to success, a fresh chance for persons of humble social origin. Subjected to moral as much as physical discipline, a top-class player enjoys full bodily control in particular, and thus significant self-recognition, effectively counteracting the "summer unrest", idleness and disquiet from which young people in "sensitive neighborhoods" are supposed to suffer. Sustained by the rhetoric of the many advocates of the sporting spirit, especially politicians and professional people, teachers, instructors and coaches, sport seems to forge a robust personality that helps to shield players from fatal extremes by fostering perseverance, pugnacity and competitiveness, togetherness and respect for others and for rightful authority. Indeed, before being a blending agent, sport presents itself as a more general force of socialization, integration or resettlement [4]. Socialization through sport, if the scope of reflection is extended to other population categories such as the homeless, the unemployed, people with disabilities or prisoners, denotes a process similar to integration, but transcending strictly ethnic issues. This gives rise to a terminological ambiguity that bears out the difficulty of conceiving the true role of sport in the social mechanisms.

Confusion persists at the particular level of sport, although at a general level the argument was settled during the 1980s, with "inclusion" concerning the social arena as a whole and "integration" for the more specific realm of migrants' children, and corroborated by the creation of a Higher Council for Integration in 1990. One reason for the uncertainty may relate to the impossibility of distinguishing the categories involved, particularly "young people" and "children of migrants". This imprecision invalidates the integration of aliens through sport; admittedly it is more a matter of socializing a class of young people for whom the questions of ethnic affiliation hardly arise, less still because sport is a physical activity. Bearing in mind this

epistemological stumbling block, the terms "blending" or "ethnic mix" affords a possibility of overcoming the social/racial antithesis to enter a vaguer and more global cultural dimension [5]. Sports participation as a crucial aid to integration has been spoken of for two decades, whereas until then the process needed no words. The compulsion to express and portray it points to the doubts but, paradoxically, also to a certain resolve in a public mind, eager to prove its effectiveness. Finding the remedies to social ills on the playing field is not a new principle. In the 1960s, in the interests of regenerating French sport according to General de Gaulle's request as soon as he resumed power in 1958, participation developed extensively, to give France the sporting elite it lacked, of course, but also to propose solutions for the alarming rise of juvenile delinquency, especially that of the "leather jackets". Sports clubs were thus the adjunct of holiday camps and the Catholic or lay sponsorships created from the late 19th century onwards, in training and controlling young people by emphasis on the body and nature in a community-oriented context.

### 3. Invitation for integration – Sports associations and their chances

Integration means the experience that different ways of living and traditions are not inconsistent with the equal participation of all citizens in social processes in society. The aim of organized sport is to involve the non-native population group in sports clubs as a part of the native society. Integration and participation should not mean assimilation, but a permanent communication and learning about each other's common foundations and rules in a society. This is an ongoing process and needs the eternal support of the society. It requires a comprehensive awareness raising (intercultural sensitization) for all parts of the population living in a single society, especially in sports. Integration can't be focused only on the non-native population group. Integration also demands the active participation of the native society [6]. Organized sport has to develop strategies for participation for non-native people, as well as promoting the understanding of each other's cultural stories, thereby giving access to communicative conflict solutions. The richness of a social structure is its diversity – this is also valid for sport and its organizations. More than any other section of society, sport offers its members the opportunity for different individual developments, as well as diverse possibilities for social learning and a platform for intercultural encounters. The contacts between different social groups in sports are both regular and intensive. The social status of minorities in sport is equal, because the actions of the athletes are focused towards a common goal. But that only happens in situations where people are practicing sports together. Competitive sport is less supportive in terms of intercultural learning.

After establishing a definition of integration through sport, this article will give a short overview about the structure of sport and its potential for integration in Germany. Using past experiences, possible approaches to define the requirements

for intercultural learning trainers will be presented in order to launch further discussions.

#### 4. The German context and the current integration policy

More than 27 million people belong to more than 91 000 sports clubs in Germany. This is about 33% of the entire German population, that means every third male and every fourth female is a member of a sports club and taking exercise. The German Olympic Sports Confederation is the biggest umbrella organization, with 97 member organizations. The associations are organized in three groups: 16 state sports associations, 61 federal Olympic and non-Olympic associations and 20 associations with a special remit, for example, the University Sports Association. This structure is equipped with a tremendous number of people working on a voluntary basis, for example as board members or consultants. The motto is: Sport for all! There are two major sectors in sport – competitive sports and leisure sports. The leisure sports sector is open to every person in society. That means sports not only for talented people, but for everybody. For healthy, sick, old, young, handicapped, male, female people – nearly every kind of sport is available, on a regular basis, at a reasonable price. Different kinds of sport offer a range from traditional individual and team sports and also new games and sports from other countries [7].

Sports clubs get financial support from the federal government and from the regional authority. They use the money for building gymnasiums, outdoor sports fields and for maintaining these sports facilities. The sports associations support the further education of sport trainers and coaches and work on the qualitative education of trainers in the 91 000 plus sports clubs. Germany has 82 million inhabitants, of whom more than 15 million have a migrational background. This corresponds to 18.4% of the total population. In addition to the 15 million people with a migrational background who are already living in Germany at present, we will have another 10 million with a migrational background, according to latest prognostications [8]. These current and predicted developments have led to the effect that the topic of integration has become an inherent part of political planning, even in sports. (DOSB, Lecture, 2008).

The challenges for society and for the non-native population are based on different aspects. The dangers of ethnic segregation and a failure of integration are particularly strong, which leads to uncertain social positions [9]. Non-native people are more often jeopardized by unemployment, and it is, in particular, the poorer strata of the population who will face more difficulties in terms of access to social systems, such as health care, educational establishments and organized sport, for reasons including the language barrier. There is a need to overcome this barrier in order to facilitate access to local networks and communities for non-native people, which is – after all – the pre-condition for a successful integration and for social protection. The number of non-native people within organized sport is lower than

that within the native population [10]. There are also significant differences between the men and women as members of sports clubs. While men in football clubs, for example, are quite highly organized, the non-native female population in sports clubs is plainly less organized.

The European melt pot also embraces small countries such as Serbia which has over recent years shown promising prospects of cultural blending through different sports disciplines. We take pride in having so many young people with different religious backgrounds proudly representing the country in the world sports arena with tremendous success. Recently, we could witness elite sports results and achievements from young people of Serbia in athletics, archery, swimming and many other individual or collective sports. Those young people become the ambassadors of any country, the same way as the Serbian athletes have recently become, promoting the idea of equality, cultural diversity, unity and harmonization of life styles, languages, religions, cultural patterns and many other virtues. We could say they became the epitome of blending culture through sports.

#### 5. Conclusion

The concept of blending, in the glow of the French team's 1998 World Cup victory, found its place in sports vocabulary as a signifier of diversity in clubs and in national and regional selections [11]. Far more than football alone, all disciplines are concerned to a more or less intense degree, depending on their popular support or lack of it, and on the culture which they convey. Multiple origins and complex careers are now a hallmark: handball, rugby, basketball as well as individual sports like athletics, judo and tennis have their champions stemming from diversity, who form the tip of an equally variegated iceberg of school and amateur sport [12]. Thus sport is completely permeated by the question of the diversity which it vividly enacts. The same way sports blends sporting spirit, competition drive and fair play it should also blend culturally different envisaged notions of non-uniformity, diversity, enrichment through other culture, other skin color, other language and other style of living. One should also take into account the role of language didactics since different languages can bring the flavor of different attitudes towards culture and especially culture of sports [13], [14]. That is what sports serves for and should continue doing so. Future impact of this particular study could be reflected in broadening the scope and volume of PE and sports curricula. Besides studying domain specific courses educational policy makers could also accommodate contents which are going to raise the awareness and need to respect diversity and promote varied cultural patterns through sports sciences. There is always scope for improvements and if this topic is frequently presented and researched extensively we might hope to nurture athletes ambassadors of different cultures advocating blending of sports and culture worldwide [15], [16].

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