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# *Football: an introduction to a rite of rites*

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## Abstract

We live in a society that is anything but devoid of rituals. We see it from football, a sporting phenomenon that impassions the whole world moving amid rituals of appearance and affiliation, warlike ones and ones of cohesion, and practices of exhibition and celebration. For around the game of football a total social fact has developed, able to go beyond the confines of simple fun to interweave with the seriousness of life and thus become an object worthy of analysis that sociology cannot afford to ignore.

Keywords: football, ritual, serious life

## Introduction

Social science scholars are guilty of never having given sport the attention that it deserved and that it still today (indeed, above all) deserves. Receiving "the inheritance of an academic culture that has for a long time experienced with disorientation, even with irritation, the relationship with the various manifestations of despised mass culture, (…) they are satisfied with observing through the keyhole a phenomenon at once gigantic and enthralling, complex and even disturbing" (Porro, 2001: 11-12), to be relegated among leisure activities or in which to read "the sign of a decadent society, constantly in search of distraction" (Tolone, 2010: 5).

This is a very serious error since it tends to ignore "how complex the panorama of post-modern sport is and how difficult it is to draw up a balance" (Russo, 2004: 120) on a world in such an accelerated phase of transformation. The sporting phenomenon is a real lens of social change[1] able to throw out a subtle intellectual challenge to sociology, that is to say the "refusal of that comforting dichotomic reading of social life around which a system of false or at least obsolete coherences has developed: work versus leisure time; mind versus body; sphere of seriousness versus fun sphere; economic versus non-economic (…). Sport is embarrassing because it is placed at the crossroad of each of those dichotomic dimensions" (Porro, 2001: 14-15), without however being fully worked out in any of them. Isidori and Reid (2011: 5) even consider sport a "bearer of values and the encoded mechanisms that regulate its working and control it give much greater guarantees of observance of the principles of human ethics in comparison to other fields of social life (one thinks of the political field or that of work)."[2] It is therefore time for sociologists' inaction in relation to sport to disappear, and precisely this outlook is behind the present essay, which describes the manifold rituals ready to fuse/get confused in the world of football. Why exactly football? Because, among all sports, it is the one that "has developed most mythopoeic abilities. It is shown both by the 'sport café' chat [A typical Italian phenomenon – *Translator's note*], which starts again everywhere at the beginning of every new championship, and by the propensity of a good number of writers to tell football stories or, even more

[1] For example, competition and the pursuit of success are two elements typical of sport and our everyday interactions. According to Welte (2010: 52), the sporting phenomenon "symbolically shows life in its conscious deployment and its desired and pursued form, as a competitive interaction," celebrating the fragility of values and destinies typical of the contemporary world (Bromberger, 1999, [1995]). Nevertheless, it remains "at the same time one of the most discussed and least understood phenomena of our daily lives" (Porro, 2001: 14).

[2] In this connection, "sport is a philosophical and social system from which one can start for a reconstruction of ethics and a reform of our society" (Isidori and Reid, 2011: 5).

interestingly, to interpret the world in a soccer key"[3] (Dal Lago, 2001: 7). Accordingly it is not surprising that football ceased "long ago to merely be a game (…). The planetary dimensions of its success make it a social phenomenon that the traditional sporting system, moulded on the De Coubertin amateur model, has difficulty in containing" (Porro, 2008: 9). In other words, nowadays "football is at the same time a sport, a game, a show, an industry, a terrain of clashes, a secular religion, and a political fact" (De Biasi, 2008: 12), in short a *total social fact* that has grown up around the game, no longer detached "from what we generally call the seriousness of life" (Welte, 2010: 62), of which it becomes an integral part,[4] able to ritualize its contents so as to give a voice "to expectations, demands and paradoxically moral tensions, which remain in the latent state in ordinary social life, or are confined in the shadow of the private and anonymous life of the actors"[5] (Dal Lago, 2001: 89). The sociological discipline "can find in its own toolbox some useful tool suited to perceiving the sense and direction of this cultural transition"[6] (Porro, 2008: 50). It has always been the case that "where there is a rite or a ritual[7] (…), there seems to be a moment of interruption or temporary suspension of ordinary life; a parenthesis in which an individual or even a whole community get their breath back, before getting back in step with the flow of social life" (Navarini, 2003: 9); football, which moves continually among rites of *appearance* and *affiliation,* breaks with the schemes of daily life though constituting one of its main constitutive elements: this is the magic of the soccer ritual. Besides, as Dal Lago reminds us (2001: 179), "precisely from the ritual match day voices there rises a certain message on the quality of our weekdays."[8]

## The rites: beyond man as *finis naturae*

Studying rituals means focusing on a border object (Navarini, 2003: 13), able to involve very different disciplinary spheres: from sociology to anthropology, passing through ethology, religious sciences, historical research and psychology, political sciences and those of communication.[9] Hence the rite "is an expression of a particular way to interpret and decipher the surrounding world" (Leonini, 1995: 9) in that it affords a key for a *transversal* reading through which to investigate society "abandoning the claim to furnish a universal theory of its working. Rites generally (…) allude not to society as a whole but to significant *episodes* (…), whose form recurs or is repeated during the social life of a given moral community" (Navarini, 2003: 13) and are referable to a *sacred* sense[10] of respect.

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[3] The nobility of football, however, as "an inexhaustible source of existential mythologies, does not stop at literature and poetry. Having to illustrate the way in which humans perceive their movement, Merleau-Ponty found it natural to refer to the subjective perspective of a player, who moves on the pitch imagining openings in the defence of the other side" (Dal Lago, 2001: 7).

[4] Bearing witness to the mixing of sport and serious life, the last summer Olympics and Paralympics in London (2012) were organized with the dual aim of "attracting to London a quarter more than today's tourists and (...) revitalizing the area south-east of the capital" (Martelli, 2011: 8).

[5] "In summary, since it is a complex social and layered phenomenon, the players involved simultaneously take up a plurality of perspectives – often opaque to a lay observer – that do not coincide with the definition of the situation officially taken for granted" (De Biasi, 2008: 12).

[6] Emblematic, in this sense, are the seven cultural breaks identified by Guttmann (1995 [1978]) in the itinerary that leads modern sport "from ritual to record": secularism, equality, specialization, rationalization, bureaucratization, quantification and, precisely, record.

[7] Although, nowadays, the terms "rite" and "ritual" are used interchangeably, the Zingarelli dictionary of the Italian language defines "ritual" as follows: "Norm, rule or set of rules governing the conducting of a rite."

[8] Today, in fact, "with the advent of (...) of commercial television and (...) with the possibility of receiving images from stadiums around the world by satellite, digital or internet, football has become an everyday occurrence and, therefore, a weekday one" (Martelli, 2010: 8).

[9] An important feature of the ritual is to use simultaneously "several means of communication (auditory, tactile, visual, olfactory) and multiple modes of presentation (song, dance, music, acting, etc.). The ritual, using different communication channels, builds up a social reality that would not exist in its absence" (Leonini 1995: 8).

[10] Van Gennep (1981 [1909]: 165) considers the distinction between the sacred and the profane one of the two big main divisions (the other is the dichotomy between men and women) that "run through all societies, from one end to the other of the world and of history." For, after all, "of the sacred in general, the only thing that can be said with certainty is included in the definition of the term: that which is opposed to the profane. As soon as one tries to specify the nature and the modes of this opposition, one comes up against the most serious obstacles" (Caillois, 2001, [1950]: 9). As Collins maintains (2006 [1988]: 185-86) the artefacts of man can be

Besides, instead of understanding or defining what a rite represents for men (and we are talking about a rite whose meaning in the course of time has undergone profound transformations[11]), it is much more important to identify what men *do* with rituals. And they do quite a lot of things: from the "congress of the National Party to the ceremonies for the presidential oath, from the hearings of a commission of Congress to the roar of the football stadium crowd that gathers around the national anthem" (Kertzer, 1989[1988]: 7-8), and again a "funeral procession,[12] a memorial day, a solemn beatification, (…) a political duel" (Navarini, 2003: 12). Thus there are "various functions with which rites can be associated and to which they make significant contributions" (Pasquino, 1989: VI). According to Turner (1993[1986]: 176), the rite is able to contain almost anything, since any aspect of social life, behaviour or ideology can be ritualized.[13] In short, the ritual "must not be seen as a formal action empty of meaning, a 'mere ceremony', but as a performative action[14] (…) so mixed with symbols and culture, but also with materiality and moral effects, that tries to intervene modifying, or at any rate organizing, the world in which we live"[15] (Navarini, 2003: 19). It is an action through which anyone who "is structurally inferior aspires to a symbolic structural superiority (…); anyone who is structurally superior aspires to a symbolic *communitas* and submits to penances to reach it" (Turner, 2001[1969]: 216). The passage is clear: "this resultant (…) tells individuals they are in unison and it leads them to take stock of their moral unity. It is by throwing out the same cry, uttering the same word, performing the same gesture concerning the same object that they become and feel in harmony" (Durkheim, 2005[1912]: 289). The group is thus able "to reflect knowingly on their own affiliation" (Fele, 2002: 218) because through rituals men succeed in "recovering and representing the necessary strength to adore the group, the tribe, the society of which they are part, and at the same time in re-creating it (…): without periodically celebrated rites, groups and societies (…) cannot exist, because of the fact that individuals would not have the opportunity to experience the social and moral world in which they live, and therefore could not go on being part of it and *acting as human beings*" (Navarini, 2003: 33). It is only starting from these characteristics of the ritual – Durkheim (2005[1912]: 510) maintains –that it becomes possible to find a new way of explaining man, no longer considered as *finis naturae*, but rather as an individual above which there is that system of working strengths called society.

Can we then affirm, with Collins (2006[1988]: 188), that "participation in rituals procures a feeling of strength and support that individuals can then use in their life" of every day? Yes, but it is not enough, since in "our societies the extraordinary (…) does not come from outside daily life to then penetrate it attributing to it some direction. On the contrary, (…) it already resides in the ordinary world-of-life of every individual, that is to say in the ceremonial dimensions present in small practices and in relationships with others: (…) in the meetings, discourses and conversations of every day" (Navarini, 2003: 171-72), in those *rituals of interaction* (highlighted by Goffman[16] and Garfinkel[17])

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sacred (for example a crucifix), as can people themselves (the priest in his vestments), but also actions (praying or singing) and ideas (one thinks of the idea of God, written not by chance with a capital G).

[11] When it is a matter of rituals, uncertainty and ambiguity reign not only in the semantic field, but also in the etymological one. The fact is that the word "ritual" is said to derive (Navarini, 2003: 16) both from Greek (*artýs*) and then from Latin (*ritus*), both from Sanskrit (*ar*, *arta*) and from Indo-European linguistic roots (*ri*).

[12] In oral funerary ritual it is interesting to note that tears are not "exclusively psychological or physiological phenomena, but social phenomena, above all marked by the sign of non-spontaneity and the most perfect obligation" (Granet and Mauss 1987: 4).

[13] It is not possible to "separate *absolutely* what is ritual from what is not (...). But the *relative* distinctions, by contrast (...), help to distinguish between certain types of social activity" (Tambiah, 1995, [1985]: 126).

[14] Schechner (1993: 55-56), expressing Turner's thought, stresses the fact that performative genres are "living examples of rite as action. And this is not only so when the performance is openly 'ritualistic' – as in a Mass, a therapeutic ceremony, a shamanic journey or an event in Grotowskian theatre or a para-theatrical one: each performance has a ritual action at its centre."

[15] Not surprisingly, for Tambiah (1995 [1985]: 43) the ritual is "something that consists of words and acts."

[16] "Goffman's project (...) can be seen as the attempt to apply to the order of face-to-face interactions the ritual regulation that Durkheim described only for pre-literate societies and fateful religious ceremonial occasions" (Fele, 2002: 222-23). His is in fact "a derivation of the theory of primitive religion formulated by Durkheim (...) even if, as is known, of this theory there is omitted in the empirical analysis of collective rituals, (...) on which instead the French sociologist focused his attention" (Navarini, 2003: 174).

[17] In the ethno-methodological field, unlike Goffman, "the basic question is not 'what happens when individuals interact', but a *practical problem*: 'how can individuals do what they do since they interact within a

through which the different subjects attribute a *sense of reality* to the world, making it recognizable and intelligible. Quoting Marshall, Bauman (2011[2000]: 86) observes that, "when a lot of people all run together in the same direction, we have to ask ourselves two questions: *what are they* running *after* and *what are they* running away *from*." Ritual practices allow us to run away from empty repetitiveness which is an end in itself to pursue a serious routine, full of meanings. But where are the rituals in contemporary society? Everywhere.[18] Indeed, they move on different levels: "the 'individual' one, relative both to certain modes of expression of the crucial experiences of subjects and to the sacred game of interactions or social relationships; the 'collective' one, related both to ceremonial practices with which some social formations take on a public dimension, and to their internal symbolic organization; the more 'general' one of the form that recurrences or great events take on"[19] (Navarini, 2003: 223). For this reason, analysis of symbolic systems and analysis of ritual processes "take on both an importance that goes far beyond a purely academic interest, in that both touch our social perception in depth" (Zadra, 2001: 7).

## Return journey: rites of passage

Van Gennep (1981[1909]: 5) reminds us that in every society all our life "consists of subsequently passing from one age to the other and from one occupation to another." To each of these passages[20] (like birth, adolescence, marriage, paternity, specialization in occupation, advancement of class, death) there correspond ceremonies that have a very precise function: to transfer the individual from a given situation to another, making possible the interpretation of this change. Such ceremonies are called *rites of passage*. Let us now analyze, specifically, the working of the "ceremonial mechanisms that guide, control and regulate the changes of every type in individuals and groups" (Remotti, 1981: XVIII). According to Van Gennep (1981[1909]), a ritual of passage is only complete when all of its constitutive moments end: these "three phases, or "small rites in the big rite",[21] have to do with different types of spatio-temporal experiences" (Navarini, 2003: 66) and they are the *break* (or separation), *liminality* (or marginality) and *reintegration* (or re-aggregation).[22]

The break traces out "a borderline that closes with the past and symbolically celebrates its death (…). Breaking with the order of existing things implies entering a new dimension (…), in which the identity of the subject and the meanings of things are *suspended* and remain (…) such for a certain time. This is the ritual threshold call liminality: (…) an interstitial condition in which one 'no longer is' but 'is not yet'" (Navarini, 2003: 66), and in which "liminal beings are neither on one side nor on the other; they are in an intermediary space (…) among the positions assigned and distributed by law, by custom,

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domain of ordained phenomena.' It goes without saying that both the domain in which people act (the order) and the concrete way in which they act (practices) can be rituals" (Navarini, 2003: 208).

[18] Even "a mere aperitif (...) can be seen as a rite of passage between the daytime world (the time and space of work) and that of the evening" (Navarini, 2003: 228).

[19] Each ritual, giving "its participants a tacit sense of where they are placed in the ranks of society "(Collins, 2006 [1988]: 390-91), is a bridge capable of linking micro- and macro-sociology.

[20] Obviously, "all these worlds which we pass through do not exist by nature but because they are socially and culturally produced "(Navarini, 2003: 64).

[21] Actually, the discovery of the various phases of the ritual comes, to a great extent, from some of the insights of Hertz (1994 [1907]). Durkheim's alumnus focused on the study of the *sinister side* of social life, the collective representation of *death* and *funeral rites*. These reaffirm the moral commonalty, and so even a terrible event like death serves to celebrate the living, giving society the opportunity to regain its faith just when it seems to have lost it (the double reintegration of the deceased with the ancestors and with society itself).

[22] In addition to identifying the small rituals in the big rite, Van Gennep (1981 [1909]) also makes a distinction between the various types of rites of passage, through the following dichotomies: *animist rites* and *dynamist* ones (the former convey a personified power, the latter are based on impersonal power); *sympathetic* rites (which are based on the belief of action) and *infectious* ones (they are based on the transmissibility of acquired natural qualities); *direct* rituals (which do not require the intervention of an autonomous agent) and *indirect* ones, *positive* rites (volition translated into acts) and *negative* ones (prohibitions, taboos). And again on the subject of classifications of rituals, Cazeneuve (1974 [1971]) makes a distinction between the following ritual orders: taboos (marked by psychological mechanisms of suppression and repression), magic (characterized by the prevalence of unconscious drives) and religion (which sums up the two previous orders and is dominated by the mechanism of sublimation).

by conventions and by ceremonial" (Turner, 2001[1969]: 112). Once it has run its course, liminality[23] (from *limen*, which in Latin means "threshold") gives way to the last phase of the ritual of passage: reintegration, with the liminal subject regenerated and, after facing tests and exploring unknown territories, finally entering a new status and accordingly returning to the social order in a different condition than the preceding one. Through these three stages,[24] the *rites de passage* construct "with actions a system of interpretations and signs that face and check the change, and if necessary produce it, causing the change itself to be recognized as endowed with meaning by the individual and by the community and thus confirming the order of things" (Navarini, 2003: 68). We have referred to an "individual framed, synchronically or through successive stages, in different compartments, and forced to submit, from the day of his or her birth to that of his or her death, to ceremonies that are often different in their forms, but similar in their mechanism: all this serves to be able to pass from one compartment to the other"[25] (Van Gennep, 1981[1909]: 165); football too has its compartments, because football too "obeys a rule, (…) a ritual. One cannot compete at random" (Welte, 2010: 55) but, rather, amid "constraints, obligations (…), restrictions and taboos of various kinds" (Porro, 2001: 44).

## Rituals in football

Football revives the spirit of the *communitas*. Like every ritual (indeed, as a ritual), this sport succeeds indeed in "getting over all the barriers of rank, of class and even of nation" (Welte, 2010: 31), serving as a real social adhesive[26] (Vinnai 2003[1970]). From a sociological point of view, the single game constitutes a 360-degree event, which is concretized on the pitch[27] but which even arises outside *the sports facility*, placing itself "at the acme of a sequence of social micro-events that involve the stadium, what is around it and some strategic places in the city like railway and underground stations: (…) the arrival of visiting fans under police escort, the flowing in of spectators, the closing of the stadium area (…), the jostle at the entrances" (Dal Lago, 2001: 131) and so forth. In other words the stadium-sanctuary becomes an integral part of the metropolis (Risse, 1921): the match has not begun yet, but the soccer rite has.

And it is precisely by immersing himself or herself in this flow of events that the fan experiences the ritual phase of the break, which breaks (temporarily) with the past, and people leave "behind them conscious intentions and calculations"[28] (Isidori and Reid, 2011: 36), strip themselves of daily life to put on the "ritual clothes of soccer support" (the colours of one's favourite team are worn on hats, scarves, shirts, bracelets, ribbons, but also painted on people's faces, without mentioning flags and banners): we can say "that the habit (…) makes the man. University teachers, otherwise composed

[23] Since we are talking – as noted by Dal Lago (2001) – of a phase of uncertainty, it is not surprising that liminality is often compared to "the fact of being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the desert and an eclipse of the sun or the moon" (Turner, 2001, [1969]: 112).

[24] It must be borne in mind that summarizing rituals is not a simple task: we are "still far from knowing, in each case, their *raison d'être* and their mechanism and classifying them safely with sufficient justification" (Van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 6). Suffice it to say that for Tambiah (1995 [1985]: 127) it is absolutely not "possible, in any society, either linguistically or demonstratively, to define the boundaries of a ritual area (separated from other areas)" and, in this regard, Van Gennep (1981 [1909]: 11) states that we are "far (...) from the claim that all rites of birth, initiation, marriage etc. are nothing other than rites of passage, partly because these ceremonies, in addition to their general purpose – which is to ensure a change of state or a transition from a magical-religious or secular society to another – each have their own end." For example, ceremonies of birth involve rites of protection and prediction.

[25] "Human society, according to Van Gennep, is similar to a designated area outside boundary lines and organized within a number of sectors according to precise dividing lines" (Remotti, 1981: XIV).

[26] With significant differences depending on the country in question: for example, if now "in Italian society passion for football involves a multiplicity of individuals (not necessarily male) from all walks of life, in the English case we have to do with a sporting event which, until recently, mainly involved the working class" (De Biasi, 2008: 12).

[27] "It is the spatial and temporal frame that delimits the subject – the white lines on the field, the whistles opening and closing a football game (...) – that take it out of the world of the ordinary and offer it as a package for aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment" (Isidori and Reid, 2011: 38).

[28] "We are not so reasonable or rational or sensitive as we like to think. The life we lead is still dictated by unconscious rather than conscious reasons" (Alexander, 2006 [2003]: 19).

professionals, calm men in the street and heads of families express the evident voluptuousness of provoking and being ritually provoked" (Dal Lago, 2001: 145). *Entering the stadium* coincides with the opening of the phase of liminality, that is to say that "spatial-temporal condition of suspension and uncertainty" (Navarini, 2003: 66) that can be experienced on the terraces of the stadium (especially in the places behind the goals, the territory of hooligans) through *support rituals*, *warlike ones* [29] and/or *exhibitionist ones:* a "head of a family that shouts (…) 'bastards' to the fans on the other side, 'bribed' to the referee or 'murderer' to the player in the other team (…); a student (…) that, at the signal from a choir leader, applauds, chants, jumps about, raises his fist, sways, whistles, sings, howls, in perfect harmony with others (…) that are around him; a hooligan that after an offensive slogan from the fans on the other side makes the gesture of the umbrella" (Dal Lago, 2001: 50-51), or exults at a goal by his or her own team shouting, falling on the spectators below and raising his or her arms to the sky. The very spectacle of the hooligan area "would be impossible without organization, coordination, work of preparation during the week, a militant appointment by the most active hooligans" (De Biasi, 2008: 17). On the terraces of the stadium, however, there are not only fans but also sporting journalists (the difference between the two categories is not always so clear-cut) and, in general, *media operators*, ready to recount the game live (radio and TV commentators) or, in delay, also in the pages of the daily paper (local and otherwise) and in the most disparate Internet sites using an emphatic language (loaded with war terms[30]), a ritual. By way of example, on 17 June 2006, Fabio Caressa, the sports commentator of Sky television, presented the competition between Italy and the United States (valid for the eliminatory round of the football world championship played in Germany) with the following words: "We have suffered with them and for them, we have sung their songs, we have seen and loved their films, we have eaten their sandwiches, worn their jeans, we have seen them fly in basketball and reach the Moon, but football is another thing. In football we want to command!" This is a further example of the fact that "television has concretely modified sporting accounts[31] and the very collective representation of disciplines that have been constituted and have developed in the context of the physical participation of the spectators in the event and in the setting (…) of the field of competition and of its regulatory planning"[32] (Porro, 2001: 146), and of how football ritualizes the serious contents of life: "passion, factiousness, but also aesthetics and romanticism, found (and still find) in stadiums cheap expressive possibilities. Football is nothing but a deformed mirror (…) of what happens in serious life, or at least in its deepest layers" (Dal Lago, 2001: 17). "Football spectators thus see in the symbol of the game their very life. This does much to explain their interest" (Welte, 2010: 35). Football "belongs to real life like any other thing; but it is taking up a stance or an attitude on the part of the players that makes it extraordinary" (Isidori and Reid, 2011: 32). Thus speaking of this sport means above all focusing *on the players and on the match*. In this connection Dal Lago (2001), recalling (in addition, naturally, to the concept of *frame*) Goffman's stage/backstage dichotomy, distinguishes between *public frame* and *hidden frame* of a stadium. The fact is that every game is harbingered by various preliminary operations at which most of the spectators do not assist, like the arrival of the teams at the sporting facility and the preparation in the changing rooms, "up to the moment that precedes entering the pitch, when the team 'is formed', becomes a group, often resorting to some rite *of cohesion* (depending on the

[29] As mentioned, it is mainly hooligans that experience in full the rites of war associated with football, constantly trying to clash with the police and other supporters (through physical violence, throwing stones and other objects, attempts to gain control of enemy flags, hunting down infiltrators). It is aggression typical of organized football fans, defined by Morris (1982 [1981]) as "football tribes." To explore the concept of football support, its group rituals and the new scenarios in which such practices are materialized, cf. De Biasi (2002) and Lava (2008).

[30] Consider, among the many, words like defence, rearguard, bunker, attack, battle, offensive, assault, helmet and bomb.

[31] Not only, but the growing importance of the major television networks in the world of football has produced – or at least suggested – changes of regulation (just think of the ephemeral fortune of the golden and silver goals) focused on the maximum spectacularity of the sport.

[32] "Football, before anything else, is a spectacle. It is a show of extraordinary versatility and one that more than any other competing genre has benefited from the media revolution of the late twentieth century and especially the transformation of television" (Porro, 2008: 51). Martelli (2010: 141) argues that in our "individualized and atomised society football is an opportunity for the recomposition or formation of new identities, personal and collective, thanks to the encounter" between the local affiliation (identification with a prestigious club or with a champion, even a foreign one), the re-appropriation of a nation's spirit *sui generis* and involvement in the circuit of sports consumption and multi-platform communication.

circumstances, a choral cry, a password, or simply joining hands, etc.)" (Dal Lago, 2001: 74, my italics). At this point the wait is about to end and there finally starts to materialize the passage from the secret frame to the public one,[33] which also takes place in a ritually minute way: the players of the two teams (often accompanied by music[34] and by the voice of an announcer ready to "warm up" the spectators), preceded by the referee[35] and by the linesmen, draw up in two lines and run onto the pitch, placing themselves at the centre. The ritual of the start of the match ends with a look at the public by the players, an exchange of flags and a handshake between the captains of the teams, a check by the assistants on the lines of the pitch and the nets at the back of the goals, the draw by the referee with the traditional tossing of a coin to determine the position of the teams, in one half of the pitch or the other, and to see who will kick off. Once these preliminary operations have been carried out, the match can begin: "every single game is played as if it were the only one that has any meaning (…). Yet the game is continually repeated (…), without the tiredness of monotony taking over. This may allude to the fact that that unique event is experienced as something that always, each time, continues to be meaningful" (Welte, 2010: 33), just like the rite. It is a rite during which the two teams challenge one another going after the main objective: the goal. Not by chance, an example that is "symbolic of the emotional reaction of the players is constituted by the rituals *of celebration*[36] of goals or victories. The most common ritual takes place when the player that scores a goal races toward his own curve (above all if he is playing an away match) blowing kisses or inciting the fans" (Dal Lago, 2001: 78, my italics), who mostly respond by moving in a mass towards the pitch, even clinging onto the barrier.[37] When the referee blows his whistle three times the match ends and there starts the *after-game*, i.e. that phase of re-aggregation that the fan experiences on going out of the stadium – and out of its highly formalized and standardized interactions (Russo, 2004) – to gradually get back into the social order and into the role played before the soccer event (waiting to re-experience the passage the following week or at all events on the occasion of the next match), but in a different condition. In this connection, a game is memorable when it sends the fan home with a feeling of fulfilment (Hornby, 2007[1992]).

## The seriousness of football

It is correct to conclude this essay "in a ritual way (…), drawing up a balance of what has been illustrated (…) and confirming the theses maintained in it" (Russo, 2004: 119). We have seen that in today's society rites are everywhere, including in football. Without offending those "social science scholars (…) that inexorably imagine our society as a world without rituals, that is to say governed at various levels by orders and structures of relationships (…) where feelings, symbols, beliefs, experiences, behaviours and ceremonial idioms no longer seem to take place as in the past (…). Today rituals are seen as a sort of superfluous symbolic frill" (Navarini, 2003: 225-26), an object no longer worthy of analysis. It would seem "that serious researchers (…) do not want to waste time (…) examining the ritual critically" (Kertzer, 1989[1988]: 22).

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[33] By contrast, when a player is sent off, he leaves the public sphere of the match to return to the hidden frame.

[34] For example, Liverpool home matches are introduced by the hymn *You'll never walk alone*, "one of the most evocative symbols of the culture and style of English supporters" (De Biasi, 2008: 7).

[35] "The ritual is represented and enforced by the referee. Recognized by both sides in the match, he is not an opponent to fight, nor does he himself participate in the clash. This normative ritual (...) distinguishes a meaningful form of sport competition from a senseless and evil form (...). Hence the ritual fixes this qualitative limit between a race involving rivalry between opponents and a clash of hostilities between enemies" (Welte, 2010: 56-57).

[36] Connecting up with Van Gennep (1981 [1909]), we can label the rituals that follow the creation of a network – for the joy of both the players and the fans – using the following combination: dynamist, direct, infectious and positive (in the latter case, the positive rite of exultation is limited by certain negative rites. For example, if a player takes off his shirt during the exultation, the referee applies the rules and warns him with a yellow card).

[37] Regarding the exultation of the spectators, Umberto Saba writes in the poem "Goal": "The crowd - united in its thrill - seems to overflow onto the pitch (...).Few are moments as wonderful as this, to whom, burnt by hatred, love is given, under the sky, to see." In some cases, players give life to some rites of celebration typical of the public, possibly chanting slogans and chants against the opposing team at the end of a victorious game. But the opposite also happens, with the audience sometimes reproducing the styles of exultation of the players.

On the contrary, among the manifold segmentations and specializations of sociological science there must be room for the study of ritual practices, which circulate "crossing every corner, even the apparently most private, utilitarian, material or rationalized one, of the world we live in" (Navarini, 2003: 15). There must also be careful analysis of the phenomenon of football, "the most popular sport in the world, the most commercially attractive and at once the most able to arouse emotions and dynamics of identification, (…) being contaminated with endless national and local cultures and subcultures" (Porro 2008: 35). It is up to the sociologist of sport "to succeed in combining in the freest, most suitable and creative way possible" these elements (Isidori and Reid, 2011: 101), seeking "to understand the game instead of undergoing it" (Bourdieu, 2003[2001]: 138). A few days ago I again saw, thanks to YouTube, one of the goals that have most contributed to making me fall in love with football: 1 April 2001, in the Italian series A championship, Juventus was winning at home against Brescia, but three minutes from the end a young Andrea Pirlo launched Roberto Baggio who, in a single kick, succeeded in stopping the ball and getting past the Juventus goalkeeper, leading to the definitive draw. A mixture of aesthetics and technique, a football lesson steeped in ritual practices (the spectators holding their breath just as the ball was suspended, the journalists' emphasis, the cathartic exultation of public and players), a goal that sums up the content of this essay in a few seconds. We are speaking, in short, of two objects of investigation inseparably connected to one another thanks to the "stadium rituals, individual or collective, amusing or threatening, tightly ludic or in their own way (…) serious" (Dal Lago, 2001: 177). Serious but not grave: the beauty of football lies precisely in its ability to conceal a complex soul behind the lightness of a ball rolling on the grass.

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