



Les banlieues and Les Bleus: Political and media discourse about sport and society in France

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Abstract

Focusing on the French national football team during the period 1998–2013, this article will trace the evolution of political and media discourses about sport and society in France. It will analyse how the team, and its relationship to France's *banlieues* and French society as a whole, has been perceived by journalists, politicians, public intellectuals and sociologists after both notable successes and significant failures. Although the World Cup victory of 1998 and spectacular failure at the World Cup in South Africa in 2010 may initially seem to occupy different ends of a spectrum, it will be argued that there are also important continuities in the period 1998–2013 that illuminate the study of relations between sport, media, and the political and intellectual elites in France.

Keywords

banlieues, France 98, French football team, French intellectuals, French media, French sport

Introduction

Both on and off the field, the football World Cups of 1998 and 2010 produced drastically different outcomes from a French perspective. The former saw the victory of what the French media widely termed *une équipe black/blanc/keur* amid scenes of national celebration; the latter involved humiliating defeats on the pitch, off-field controversy and widespread criticism of the French players from the media, politicians and public intellectuals. Although the 1998 World Cup initially led to football becoming more popular in France (see Beaud, 2011: 46–9) and, to a certain extent, a change in attitude from intellectuals who had previously been largely anti-football (Abdallah, 2000: 6), recent years have seen French intellectuals frequently criticise the performances and behaviour of footballers. This trend reached its peak at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa and continued during and after the 2012 European Championships. French sports

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journalist Daniel Riolo argues that by 2013 ‘France 98, l’idée Black/Blanc/Beur, représente un passé dont on se souvient à peine’ (2013: 189). This transition has become all the more evident as French football and footballers have increasingly been the subject of public condemnation rather than celebration.

This article will study political and media discourses concerning the French national football team during the period 1998–2013. It will first examine political discourses about the French nation following France’s 1998 World Cup victory and assess the importance of the *banlieues* as a location in which both significant sporting triumphs and social challenges have come to the fore. Next, interactions between sport and the media will be considered. It will be argued that, somewhat paradoxically, France’s 1998 World Cup Final win coincided with tense relations between national coach Aimé Jacquet and the media but that their 2006 World Cup Final defeat saw Zinedine Zidane largely spared press criticism despite an act of violence that led to his expulsion at a crucial juncture. Then, comparison will be made between the symbolic importance that many French politicians and public intellectuals attached to controversies involving the French team at the 2010 World Cup and how the World Cup victory of 1998 was portrayed as a sign of a very different conception of French society. Within this analysis, the study of tensions between the French football team and the media will be of great importance. This analysis will scrutinise political and media discourses that have accompanied significant sporting successes and failures and will illuminate the study of evolving relations between the French national football team and the media, and the way that politicians and public intellectuals have sought to participate in debates that shape the relationship between sport and media in France.

France ‘98 and images of the French nation

The success of an ethnically diverse French football team at the 1998 World Cup in France was interpreted by many politicians as a symbol of a well-integrated and tolerant nation. These discourses generally focused on the diverse origins of the players in the 22-man squad and often did so in a somewhat reductive manner. As the sociologist Stéphane Beaud observes, the 1998 squad only featured three players who were the children of immigrants but many from small, traditional rural towns and villages (2011: 143–44). Beaud further argues that the World Cup-winning national coach Aimé Jacquet symbolised a past era of ‘simplicité’ and ‘sincérité’ (2011: 30, see also Dauncey and Hare, 2000: 340–2) and that the period when many of the team were born meant that ‘à travers l’équipe des Bleus de 1998, c’est en quelque sorte la France ouvrière et rurale des Trente glorieuses qui vit ses derniers feux en donnant à l’équipe nationale ses plus beaux produits’ (2011: 144; see also Barbier, 2012: 207; Riolo, 2013: 21). According to some French sports journalists, longstanding French football fans often feel that modern football is somewhat lacking compared to what it used to be (see Riolo, 2013: 80; Perri, 2011: 67–98). Jacquet’s rural origins help to explain why he evokes nostalgia for a bygone era as does the fact that he spent the majority of his playing career with A.S. Saint-Étienne. Although historically one of France’s leading clubs, this team, popularly known as *Les Verts*, was not in France’s top division at the time of the 1998 World Cup and has not won a major trophy since 1981. Their appearance in the 1976 European Cup Final – which they lost 1–0 to Bayern Munich – contributed to the nostalgia that they evoke in the minds of many contemporary football supporters. A significant factor was Thierry Roland’s television commentary in which he famously lamented the *poteaux carrés* (square goalposts) of Glasgow’s Hampden Park that he blamed for two shots by Saint-Étienne players failing to cross the goal line prior to Bayern Munich’s winning goal.

In addition to his rural origins and career with Saint-Étienne, the Jacquet of the 1990s and his coaching methods also help to explain why he represents an image of tradition. In *Les Yeux dans*

les bleus, Stéphane Meunier's fly-on-the-wall documentary about France's 1998 World Cup success, Jacquet the coach possesses the aura of a traditional rural schoolteacher armed with the time-honoured tools of chalk and blackboard as well as a clear sense of authority and discipline. These factors mean that his demeanour is similar to that which would come to be associated with Georges Lopez, the teacher approaching retirement in Nicolas Philibert's 2002 documentary film *Être et avoir*. The rural Auvergne village in which Philibert shot this film reinforces the parallel, as does Lopez's status as the sole teacher in a single-classroom school that symbolises a traditional vision of teaching and education in France that is progressively dying out. According to some, the success of *Être et avoir* was partially due to its exposition of an appealing vision of innocence that evoked memories of childhood and France's rural past (see Vallon, 2002–3: 3). Just as heritage cinema in 1980s France helped to obscure potentially more troubling contemporary socio-economic realities (Powrie and Reader, 2002: 39), a similar process may help to explain the success of *Être et avoir* given that Philibert's film was released in cinemas within months of the Front National's Jean-Marie Le Pen coming second in France's presidential elections. It also appears logical to view France's 1998 World Cup win as a welcome antidote to a less positive socio-political context. The victory of a team that supposedly symbolised the triumph of the French model of integration came only three years after a presidential election campaign in which *la fracture sociale* was a major theme. This reveals the somewhat shortsighted nature of the way that many politicians and cultural commentators championed France's 1998 World Cup triumph as a symbol of a vibrant, diverse and tolerant modern France.

When one focuses on sporting rather than socio-political history, further reasons to question the ways that the 1998 World Cup success was championed by politicians and cultural commentators emerge. Didier Braun's analysis of French World Cup squads – going back as far as the first ever football World Cup in 1930 – challenges the notion that the 1998 squad was exceptional by highlighting the presence of numerous players of foreign descent in teams that competed in the 1930s, 1950s and 1980s (Braun, 2000: 51–5). Many key figures from these eras, such as 1950s icon Raymond Kopa, record goalscorer in the 1958 World Cup Just Fontaine, and France's 1984 European Championship-winning captain Michel Platini were either immigrants or the children of immigrants. Furthermore, they played in teams that included several team-mates of Polish, North African and Afro-Caribbean extraction. Braun's analysis thus suggests that the presence of players of foreign descent in the 1998 World Cup squad symbolised continuity rather than difference. The 1998 team's level of success may have been new, but the diverse roots of its players certainly were not.

In addition to France's star player Zinedine Zidane (who grew up in the La Castellane area of the northern suburbs of Marseille), the main *banlieue* star of the 1998 World Cup was arguably the Stade de France, where the opening match and the final took place (see Gastaut, 2008: 66–71). The naming of the stadium – a diplomatic choice given the intense debate on this issue (see Dauncey, 1999: 99) – characterised it as a national symbol, despite its location in the sort of suburban area that politicians and the media often represent as part of a different or deviant France. Only four years before saluting the victory of 'une équipe à la fois tricolore et multicolore' (quoted in Tévanian, 2001: 109), Jacques Chirac described the *banlieues* as areas featuring 'ces grands ensembles où la République se défait peu à peu' (Rigouste, 2004: 78–9). The Stade de France is located in Saint-Denis, in the Seine Saint-Denis *département*, a suburban area particularly stigmatised by political and media discourses that associate it with ills such as high unemployment, crime and social tension. However, in Hugues Demeude's 2008 documentary *93 L'Effervescence* the Stade de France is portrayed as a symbol of economic regeneration in a culturally vibrant and diverse area that is very different from the clichéd negative images of it that the French media often projects. This sort of progressive discourse that seeks to re-present French *banlieues* by focusing

on the positive as well as the negative has been evident in several documentary films made in France during the period of almost a decade that has elapsed since the suburban unrest of autumn 2005 (see Ervine, 2013: 137).

This positive spin does, however, mask certain troubles that have been a part of relations between the centre and the periphery where sport and the French capital are concerned. For example, the long-term financial viability of the Stade de France after the 1998 World Cup was called into question when the capital's main football team Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) rejected an offer to move from the Parc des Princes to the new stadium. In the years after France's World Cup victory, PSG spent considerable sums of money on assembling a team composed of emerging young French players such as Nicolas Anelka, Stéphane Dalmat, Peter Luccin and Sylvain Distin, many of whom had grown up in the *banlieues* of the capital and other French cities. Despite their spending, these efforts coincided with a period when the club frequently dismissed coaches and did not achieve the domestic and European success that they craved. Since the takeover of PSG in 2011 by Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), the focus on the local or even the national has become less important as the club has set to establish itself on the European and international stage by signing internationally known players such as Thiago Silva, Zlatan Ibrahimovic and David Beckham.

Although the association between the French national team and the Stade de France has generally been positive, the stadium has also sometimes exposed tensions that exist within French society. For example, 'La Marseillaise' was booed at 'friendly' matches against Algeria (in 2001), Morocco (2007) and Tunisia (2008). Indeed, the October 2001 match between France and Algeria was abandoned after a pitch invasion by supporters of Algeria. What is particularly significant about these incidents is that many of the instigators were young people who had been born and brought up in France's *banlieues* but primarily identified with the North African homeland of their ancestors. Although this situation is partially due to the legacies of France's colonial history, some politicians' heavily mediated reactions to the booing of 'La Marseillaise' sought to characterise such behaviour as the uncivilised actions of suburban youths whose behaviour represented a deviation from the norms associated with the rest of France. A prime example occurred when then Sports Minister Bernard Laporte suggested that matches that posed greater risks should be played away from the Stade de France, a declaration that Riolo saw as tantamount to stating 'jouons loin du 93, loin des quartiers, et on n'aura plus ce type de problème' (2013: 60). However, the booing of 'La Marseillaise' at the Stade de France cannot always be dismissed as an example of improper behaviour by unruly *banlieue* residents, as was evidenced by the hostile reaction to the French national anthem by Corsican fans at the 2006 French Cup Final between Bastia and Lorient in 2002 that led to then president Jacques Chirac leaving the stadium.

Relations between *Les Bleus* and the media from 1998 onwards

In addition to being significant due to several events that saw socio-political tensions become very apparent within an arena associated with a major triumph, the years that followed France's 1998 World Cup victory are also significant for other reasons. A key example concerns interactions between the French football team and the media. A succession of failures following the World Cup and European Championship victories of 1998 and 2000 are cited by some (e.g. Beaud, 2011: 64) as evidence of a changing context in which largely positive relations between the French national team and the media began to disintegrate. It is, however, important to acknowledge that relations between the national football team and the media constituted an area where somewhat paradoxical trends were in evidence in the period immediately preceding France 98 and also during the tournament. On the one hand, the national coach Aimé Jacquet became increasingly frustrated with what he felt was the overly negative attitude of *L'Équipe* towards both himself and the French team (see

Duluc, 2008). On the other hand, a partnership between Canal+ and the Fédération française de football (FFF) led to the production of Meunier's fly-on-the wall documentary *Les Yeux dans les bleus*. In other words, the FFF and its representatives saw some forms of media scrutiny as unwelcome (e.g. that of *L'Équipe*) at the same time as they were literally opening doors to welcome in other media organisations (e.g. Canal+) so that these partners could provide an intimate portrait of the team. This suggests that the FFF was keen to collaborate with the media but only on its own terms. Despite the fact that Aimé Jacquet directed an angry tirade at a *L'Équipe* journalist within minutes of France winning the World Cup on 12 July 1998 (Duluc, 2008: 92), the front page of the following day's edition provided an iconic image and headline that celebrated and has become part of the mythology surrounding the success. The 13 July 1998 edition featured an almost full-page picture of Zinedine Zidane, Emmanuel Petit and Youri Djorkaeff celebrating and the headline 'Pour l'éternité'. In other words, a newspaper that Jacquet often appeared to despise also played a key role in mythologising his greatest sporting achievement.

France's first-round exit from the 2002 World Cup appeared to extinguish the euphoria of 1998 and 2000 as the players were criticised by journalists and public intellectuals for supposedly being overly individualistic and overly focused on money (Gastaut, 2008: 162). Reactions to France's defeat in the 2006 World Cup Final in Germany in 2006 are arguably more notable due to the general lack of criticism directed at a star player whose indiscipline compromised their chances of rekindling the euphoria at a crucial moment. Zinedine Zidane, hero of the 1998 World Cup Final, was heralded as a potential saviour when he came out of international retirement to help France qualify for the 2006 World Cup, and he played a major role in their route to the final against Italy. Having scored in the first half, he was sent off during extra time for head-butting the Italian defender Marco Materazzi. Despite his expulsion, the French press was largely restrained in its criticism of Zidane and rarely sought to portray his behaviour as a symbol of his socio-ethnic origins. Indeed, it was certain foreign press articles that attempted to directly link Zidane's *banlieue* origins and his assault on Materazzi. Writing in *The Guardian*, Andrew Hussey referred to 'an act of superbly channelled rage that seemed to belong to the Marseille backstreets of Zidane's boyhood' (2006). In a statement that runs the risk of further perpetuating *banlieue* stereotypes, he added in the same article that 'France had lost the World Cup but Zidane, the defender of the French Arabs, was still the hero of the often lawless suburbs' (Hussey, 2006).

Categorising Zidane as 'the defender of French Arabs' is somewhat problematic as he has rarely sought to exploit his *banlieue* roots or his parents' status as immigrants. He has consistently distanced himself from political engagement, fearful of being recuperated as a symbol of one cause or another by opportunistic politicians or campaigning groups (see Abdallah, 2000: 9; Dauncey and Morrey, 2008: 303–4; Jeudy and Nedjari, 2010: 77). Riolo cites as examples of this tendency the fact that his agents sought to block sales of a raï CD in homage to him and also brought about the removal of a phrase from a book by Basse (1998) in which he described France's World Cup victory as also being 'celle de tous les Algériens fiers de leur drapeau qui ont fait des sacrifices pour leur famille mais qui n'ont jamais abandonné leur propre culture' (2013: 22). There is much evidence that demonstrates that Zidane had, and still possesses, a broad mainstream appeal in France among those who do not share his suburban or North African roots. During his playing career, he was regularly at or near the top of the list of France's 50 most popular figures that *Le Journal du dimanche* establishes by polling a representative sample of the French population. In December 2012, he remained in the top ten. This demonstrates the pertinence of Dauncey and Morrey's observation that Zidane is 'the subject of awe and veneration' that has been largely unaffected by controversies that 'would have spoiled the reputation of lesser celebrities' (2008: 302).

Zidane's starring role in France's 1998 World Cup victory, and to a lesser extent in the 2000 European Championship, helps to explain why he was spared from greater criticism following his

sending-off in the 2006 World Cup Final. As *L'Équipe's* Vincent Duluc has argued, 'le public a du mal à soupçonner un génie de faire un mauvais choix de manière volontaire' (2010: 98). France's low expectations both preceding and during the early stages of the tournament also doubtlessly helped to spare Zidane from greater criticism, as did speculation that his head butt was a response to verbal provocation from Materazzi that was racist and/or deeply insulting to members of his family. Suggestions that Zidane's hero status has meant that he has been afforded special treatment also pre-date the 2006 World Cup. The sociologist Robert Ebguy provided a prime example the year before when discussing Zidane's announcement that he was to end his international retirement and return to the national team:

Pour justifier son retour, il a déclaré qu'une nuit, une voix mystérieuse lui avait demandé de rentrer ... N'importe quel homme politique aurait été traité de fou! Venant de lui, c'est le signe qu'il est réellement miraculeux. (quoted in Taubes, 2005; see also discussion in Dauncey and Morrey, 2008: 308)

This divine-like status that Zidane enjoyed, and still enjoys, explains why he is a figure of whom politicians might well be jealous. It also shows precisely why Zidane represents a highly desirable potential ally, not just for politicians, but also for campaigning groups and advertisers.

Despite Zidane's reluctance to participate in socio-political debates, several of his team-mates who shared either his ethnic minority or *banlieue* roots have adopted a very different attitude, and indeed have criticised leading politicians. Lilian Thuram is a prime example and notably challenged Nicolas Sarkozy's rhetoric following the suburban unrest of autumn 2005. Indeed, former Sports Minister Jean-François Lamour has said that Sarkozy was banned from entering France's dressing-room at the 2006 World Cup in Germany as 'quelques membres de l'équipe de France – Lilian Thuram en tête – étaient braqués contre lui', adding that 'les débats sur la colonisation, la crise des banlieues et l'affaire des sans-papiers ont beaucoup joué' (in Jeudy and Nedjari 2010: 76). Thuram has regularly evoked such themes in public and has also discussed them in several books that he has either written or co-written. Compared to Zidane, Thuram arguably had less to lose by making such interventions due to not possessing the same star status or being as solicited by advertisers. Although Thuram played for several major European clubs (Monaco, Parma, Juventus and Barcelona) he was in many ways a less exciting player on the field by virtue of being a technically and tactically astute defender rather than a flamboyant attacker or creative genius. His story is in many ways that of an unlikely hero; he scored two goals for France in their 1998 World Cup semi-final against Croatia to overturn a 1–0 deficit despite never having previously scored for the national team and averaging less than one goal per season in his club career.

Les Bleus since 2010: nightmare performances on the field in South Africa; nightmare visions of the *banlieues* resurface back home in France

The at times tense relations between the French national football team and politicians during the past decade are also highly instructive when analysing the events of 2010, when the French team went on strike during its disastrous participation in the World Cup in South Africa. The notion that the post-1998 euphoria had given way to very different attitudes was evident in comments made several months before the competition by Patrick Vieira:

Quand tout allait bien, on nous sortait le concept du black-blanc-beur. Aujourd'hui, on nous retourne le compliment. On voudrait nous expliquer que les problèmes tiennent au fait que nous venons des banlieues et que nous n'avons pas de principes ou pas d'éducation. (in Jeudy and Nedjari, 2010: 50)

Although the origins of the players who formed France's 2010 World Cup squad initially appeared to attract considerably less media attention than those of members of previous squads (Gastaut, 2010: 8), this swiftly changed after the tournament. This transition created a stark contrast between the way that few in France sought to relate Zidane's infamous head butt in 2006 to the suburban unrest of the previous autumn and the fierce criticism that many French politicians and intellectuals directed at the 2010 squad and in particular Nicolas Anelka, originally from Trappes (west of Paris). After having reportedly insulted national coach Raymond Domenech using words that were to adorn the front page of *L'Équipe* ('Va te faire enculer, sale fils de pute!'), Anelka was sent home from South Africa after failing to publicly apologise. Anelka's expulsion led to his team-mates refusing to participate in a training session prior to their final group game against South Africa. Some saw this as a reaction against not only a decision by the French Football Federation but also *L'Équipe's* reporting of words spoken in the changing-room at half-time during the game against Mexico, actions that had 'transgressé la loi sociologique du vestiaire comme sanctuaire de l'intimité des joueurs' (Beaud, 2011: 32). Barbier argues that *L'Équipe's* reporting of the story stemmed from frustration at how Raymond Domenech's time as national coach was characterised by 'une bunkérisation progressive de l'équipe de France' (Barbier, 2012: 140). When this is considered along with the team's inconsistent form in the four years following the 2006 World Cup Final, it appears that the French media's decision to devote so much coverage to off-field issues involving the French team in South Africa stemmed from a dual frustration. Just as the players were not providing the same dynamism and success on the pitch as the golden generation that won the 1998 World Cup and 2000 European Championships, they were also failing to devote as much attention to the press and media. For Beaud, *L'Équipe's* decision to print the words that Anelka used to insult Domenech demonstrated 'un agacement croissant des journalistes à l'égard des comportements des footballeurs professionnels d'aujourd'hui – agacement qui n'est pas dénué d'un certain mépris de classe' (2011: 80). In other words, the *L'Équipe* front page that combined a picture of Nicolas Anelka and the headline 'va te faire enculer, sale fils de pute' can be interpreted as a settling of scores between the national sports daily and French footballers in general. This incident and its repercussions saw the French football team become a palimpsest of evolving relations between the French press and sportspeople as well as wider ills in French society.

The wider ills that many politicians and political intellectuals chose to focus upon following the Anelka incident and its aftermath included the supposed incivility of young people from France's *banlieues*. The UMP's Roselyne Bachelot, then Minister for Health and Sports, denounced the influence of 'les caïds de quartier' within the group (Beaud, 2011: 18). Similar declarations were made by Benjamin Lancar, head of the UMP's youth wing, who referred to an 'équipe de racailles' on his personal website according to an article that appeared in *Le Figaro* on 30 June 2010 (Anon., 2010). The neo-conservative intellectual Alain Finkielkraut went further, stating during a radio appearance on *Europe 1* that 'nous avons la preuve effarante que l'équipe de France n'est pas une équipe, c'est une bande de voyous qui ne connaît qu'une seule morale, celle de la mafia'. He added that 'on a rêvé avec l'équipe de la génération Zidane, aujourd'hui on a plutôt envie de vomir avec la génération caillera' (quoted in Akkouche, 2010), exploiting the *verlan* version of 'racaille' in order to emphasise his disdain for what he appeared to consider a symbol of an alien and undesirable France. When one focuses on the composition of the French squad in South Africa, the potential fallacy of insisting upon what Beaud has termed '[le] seul prisme de la banlieue' (2011: 84) swiftly emerges. For a start, the group did not include several leading players from the *banlieues* (Hatem Ben Arfa, Karim Benzema and Samir Nasri) who were apparently ignored due to 'leur supposé mauvais état d'esprit' (Beaud, 2011: 91, 229). Indeed, as Riolo observes, the presence of Nantes-born 'garçon sans histoires' Jérémy Toulalan among the

strike ringleaders further undermines the arguments of those who were quick to evoke the 'origine sociale' of key agitators within the squad (2013: 48).

Barbier argues that the aftermath of France's World Cup campaign in South Africa saw unprecedented numbers of politicians and intellectuals in France commenting on a sporting event (2012: 119). He also suggested that these individuals passed judgement on *Les Bleus* in a manner that was dictated by their own ignorance of sport: 'comme ce troupeau vociférant à la vue du premier micro était bien incapable d'apporter un avis "technique" sur cet épisode, il fallait bien trouver des raisons hors du terrain' (2012: 120). The declarations of the French politicians and intellectuals cited above point towards a degree of 'mépris de classe' that goes well beyond that which Beaud associates with *L'Équipe* journalists (see above). By refusing to assess sporting reasons why France had failed to beat Mexico, Uruguay or South Africa during the 2010 World Cup, politicians and intellectuals could more swiftly find a peg on which to hang long-held beliefs about perceived social ills in a manner that fitted their own agenda. In some cases, their disdain towards sport was nothing new. For example, Alain Finkielkraut had stated only a few years previously that Nicolas Sarkozy's passion for jogging was not compatible with the refined image that a president should cultivate. Despite the more positive attitudes that public intellectuals in France had supposedly adopted towards football following the 1998 World Cup (see above), it appeared that several started reverting to type following the 2010 event.

Events in South Africa meant that *Les Bleus* needed to strive for redemption on and off the field during the 2012 European Championships in Poland and Ukraine. Indeed, FFF president Noël Le Graët emphasised the need to 'sortir des poules et avoir un comportement positif' and added that 'être bien élevé, c'est la moindre des choses' (Guillou, 2012). On the pitch, the team largely succeeded in doing so before losing somewhat meekly in the quarter-finals to eventual winners Spain. However, problems concerning their relations with the media resurfaced following two incidents involving Samir Nasri. After equalising for France in their opening game against England, Nasri celebrated by placing his finger over his lips in a 'be quiet' gesture apparently directed at critical journalists from *L'Équipe* and shouted 'Ferme ta gueule!' The underlying tension between the French national team and the media was evident post-match when then national coach Laurent Blanc stated 'je ne lis pas les journaux ... On fait tout pour déstabiliser l'équipe de France' in a manner that had echoes of Aimé Jacquet. Nasri again made headlines after France's elimination by Spain due to an exchange that began when a journalist had told him to 'casse-toi' after the player had accused the press of 'écrire de la merde' concerning *Les Bleus*. Nasri's response to the journalist included the following tirade: 'va te faire enculer, va niquer ta mère, sale fils de pute; va te faire enculer, comme ça tu pourras dire que je suis mal élevé' (Moynet, 2012). In other words, Nasri simultaneously demonstrated an awareness of the sort of discourse to which players that shared his *banlieue* roots had been subject and did little to challenge such representations. Within this context, journalist and cultural commentator Élisabeth Lévy described the 2012 French team during a radio interview on RTL after their elimination in a manner that had echoes of the declarations of Finkielkraut and others following the 2010 World Cup, branding them 'une bande de mal élevés' (quoted in Roger-Petit, 2012).

Although Nasri was given a three-game suspension by the FFF, the extent to which he was criticised by politicians and public intellectuals in France remained comparatively low key compared to the aftermath of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. There appear to be both sporting and media-related explanations for this. First, *Les Bleus* had not disgraced themselves on the pitch at the 2012 European Championships and their overall performance was largely acceptable from a sporting perspective. Second, none of the insults that Nasri directed at journalists became the front-page headline of *L'Équipe*. Given that some of the terms used by Nasri were almost identical to

those reportedly used by Anelka when addressing Domenech two years previously, *L'Équipe* may well have been keen to avoid another high-profile event that could have increased tensions between themselves and *Les Bleus* (see Ervine, 2012). Furthermore, a degree of relativism appeared in some elements of the French press, who cited examples of tirades that leading French footballers had directed at the media or coaches during the previous two and a half decades (see, for example, Moynet, 2012).

Conclusions: a team whose difficulties symbolise the French nation?

It is initially tempting to interpret the negative publicity surrounding *l'affaire Anelka* in 2010 as a sign that the image of the French football team had suddenly suffered a major blow. However, it can be better understood as a sign of continuity within the context of progressively more difficult relations between the French national team and the French media over the last decade and a half. Deciding what constitute symptoms and causes within this climate of mistrust is often complicated. It appears that the mainstream media, public intellectuals and politicians have projected onto a significant proportion of the French football team the same negative stereotypes that have long dogged *des jeunes de banlieue* in France.

Although it was not a charge explicitly levelled at the 2010 World Cup squad, it seems that the condemnations of their perceived failings were partly due to failing to provide the French nation with some much-needed optimism. Indeed, Jeudy and Nedjari have observed that in mid 2010 French president Nicolas Sarkozy and national football coach Raymond Domenech shared the status of being unpopular national figureheads faced with a predicament whereby 'une belle épopée relancerait une France résignée à un rôle de second plan' (2010: 16; see also Barbier, 2012: 94). The shared image problems of Sarkozy and Domenech in 2010 were in stark contrast to the way in which France's 1998 World Cup triumph not only saw Aimé Jacquet elevated to the status of national hero but also coincided with approval ratings of close to 70 per cent for both President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (Riolo, 2013: 18).

The failure of a football team accused of being composed of overly individualistic players driven by the pursuit of money and a high-flying lifestyle in many ways meant that it provided an acute representation of issues that were then visible in France as a whole. Indeed, the Médiateur de la République Jean-Paul Delevoye sent a report on the state of French society to Nicolas Sarkozy in February 2010 that cited many problems that are very similar to those that the media saw as failings of the French football team in South Africa:

Notre société se fragmente, le chacun pour soi remplace l'envie de vivre ensemble, on devient de plus en plus consommateurs de la République plutôt que citoyens. Cette société est en outre en grande tension nerveuse, comme si elle était fatiguée psychiquement. (quoted in Jeudy and Nedjari, 2010: 56)

The terms used by Delevoye will sound familiar to those who have studied the ways in which many in both the French media and political circles have sought to represent perceived problems in the *banlieues*. Not only are reactions to the French football team's participation at the 2010 World Cup symptomatic of the media's increasing contempt for a generation of footballers many of whom have *banlieue* roots, but these same footballers symbolise issues which are faced by many in France, whether or not they are from these suburban areas.

Footballers may provide the most frequently cited examples of the supposed ills of modern French sports people or modern French society as a whole, but there are several reasons to delve

deeper and examine other sports as well. Rather than seeing the lifestyle and behaviour of French footballers as inherently linked to their sport, Barbier argues that it is in fact a consequence of the media interest and money that is part of football:

Le jour où les rugbymen, les athlètes, les nageurs et les judokas, seront soumis aux mêmes exigences médiatiques, aux mêmes tarifs sponsoring que les footballeurs, ils en prendront les bonnes et les mauvaises habitudes. (Barbier, 2012: 102)

Barbier's notion suggests that there is an important nexus between media interest, finance and the status of a sport, which provides a reason not to categorise footballers as particularly badly behaved without considering the context in which they practise their sport. As well as expecting certain excesses to occur in the most high-profile sports, it also appears reasonable to assume that bad behaviour in lower-profile sports can be partially obscured by their comparative lack of status. The 2012 London Olympics demonstrated that stars of less glamorous sports are not immune to public exhibitions of behaviour, which suggests an inability to cope with media criticism. During a live appearance on *L'Équipe TV* on 13 August 2012, Claude Onesta and his gold medal-winning French men's handball team vandalised part of the studio. These actions were apparently due to their frustration at the team being portrayed as weary and past their best by *L'Équipe* before winning their gold medal (Assouline, 2012). Onesta later took full responsibility for the damage, agreed to pay for it and was said by the Fédération française de Handball (FFHB) to 'regrette[r] que son attitude ait pu porter atteinte à l'image de l'équipe de France masculine et du handball français en faisant le jeu de nos détracteurs' (Anon., 2012). Although the team's behaviour attracted coverage in the non-sporting press, it provoked much less moral outrage than incidents involving French footballers and the social origins of the handballers were not widely discussed.

When one takes a step back from recent controversies, it becomes clear that the socio-geographic or ethnic origins of volatile French footballers have not always been cited by the French media and politicians as an explanation of their conduct. Indeed, Barbier suggests that a specifically French mentality may highlight supposedly ill-disciplined players:

D'Éric Cantona à Hatem Ben Arfa, en passant par Johan Micoud, l'Histoire du football français est pleine de joueurs stigmatisés comme 'ingérables', contraints de s'exiler pour être compris, notamment dans des contrées où l'on n'exige pas de l'individu qu'il se conforme à un système pseudo-égalitariste. (Barbier 2012: 148)

Of the three iconic examples of supposedly volatile players mentioned by Barbier, Ben Arfa is the only one from France's *banlieues*. Thus, it seems that it is not merely players with suburban roots who seek a way out of the supposed rigidity of a French Republican mindset. However, it is perhaps young players from *banlieues* and ethnic minorities who are most likely to 'ressenti[r] un sentiment de rejet de la part de la République' (Riolo, 2013: 65), given the way that *insécurité* and the perceived need to control immigration have become prominent in recent political and media debates. Indeed, it is the supposed misdemeanours of such players that appear most likely to provoke moral outrage from political and intellectual elites. This tendency to be particularly critical of a group of players defined in socio-geographic terms goes against the notion that politicians, as representatives of the French state, should by words and actions seek to uphold Republican values such as universalism and the concept of the single and indivisible nation. When players with *banlieue* roots are chastised, their behaviour is often portrayed by politicians and intellectuals as a symbol of a deviant and different France rather than the French nation as a whole. However, it is

important to note that the on- and off-field problems of the French national football team mirror the French nation's struggle to assert itself on the international geo-political stage and establish a clear sense of identity in a changing world.

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