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Fear and Loathing on the Pitch: El Clásico, Catalan Nationalism, and the Symbolic Politics of Rivalry in Spanish Football

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Abstract

This article examines El Clásico, the rivalry between Futbol Club Barcelona and Real Madrid Club de Fútbol, as a case study of how sport, nationalism, and collective memory intersect in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Spain. Moving beyond the popular shorthand of the fixture as simply 'Catalonia versus Spain', the article traces how revisionist historiography historically constructed the rivalry's political charge, contested it, and periodically reactivated it through events such as the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. Drawing on theories of banal nationalism, imagined communities, and social identity, it argues that El Clásico functions less as a direct proxy for a political conflict than as a symbolic field onto which competing national narratives are periodically projected, contested, and commercially amplified. The analysis proceeds through the rivalry's origins, its politicisation under Francoism, Barcelona's self-fashioning as 'més que un club' (more than a club), Real Madrid's more ambivalent relationship to Spanish centralism, and the psychosocial dynamics of fear and loathing between the two fan communities. A concluding critical section considers how globalisation and the commercial saturation of El Clásico as a media product have simultaneously preserved and hollowed out its historic political meanings. The article contributes to the literature on sport and nationalism by offering an integrated historical-theoretical account of Spain's most consequential football rivalry.

Keywords: Catalan nationalism; Banal nationalism; Football and politics; Francoism; Sport rivalry

Introduction

Twice, sometimes four times, each season, two football clubs from cities three hundred and ninety kilometres apart bring Spain's everyday business to a halt. Bars empty of conversation, city squares fall quiet, and a television audience stretching across some one hundred and ninety countries watches eleven players in blue and garnet face eleven players in white (LaLiga, 2026). El Clásico, the fixture between Futbol Club Barcelona and Real Madrid Club de Fútbol, is routinely described in the global sports press as the world's biggest club match, and almost as often, that description is followed by a caveat: it is not really about football at all. People say it is Catalonia against Castile, the periphery against the centre, the club of the people against the club of the regime (Lowe, 2013). Journalist and historian Sid Lowe, in the book from which this article borrows part of its title, captured the fixture's affective register as one of fear and loathing, a rivalry sustained not merely by sporting competition but by a century of accumulated historical grievance, myth-making, and political

projection. The two clubs have met on the pitch on more than 260 occasions since their first encounter in 1902, a fixture list dense enough that El Clásico functions not merely as a periodic sporting event but as a recurring calendar around which entire seasons, presidencies, and, at moments, national political cycles have come to be organised (LaLiga, 2026).

Yet, as Lowe and other scholars of Spanish football note, the popular shorthand of Barça as the vessel of Catalan resistance and Real Madrid as the instrument of Spanish centralism is far more complicated than it first appears. This article takes that complication as its starting point. Rather than treat El Clásico as a straightforward allegory for the Catalan question, it asks how the rivalry's political meanings were historically constructed, by whom, for what purposes, and with what degree of accuracy; how those meanings have been maintained, revised, and periodically reactivated across nearly a century of Spanish political history; and what the rivalry's evolution under conditions of commercial globalisation suggests about the durability, or fragility, of sport as a vehicle for national and sub-national identity.

The stakes of this inquiry extend beyond football. Spain's experience with peripheral nationalism, Catalan, Basque, and, to a lesser extent, Galician, has been one of the country's most persistent fault lines in modern political development, surviving dictatorship, democratic transition, and, most recently, a constitutional crisis precipitated by Catalonia's 2017 independence referendum. Because organised sport in Spain developed largely along regional and municipal lines before national ones (Duke & Crolley, 1996), football clubs became unusually effective vessels for expressing identities that were, for long periods, unwelcome or illegal in other public forums. FC Barcelona's self-description as més que un club—more than a club—is only the most famous instance of a broader pattern in which Spanish football has functioned as what Llopis-Goig (2008) calls a barometer of the country's shifting balance between state nationalism and peripheral nationalisms. Real Madrid's own history, meanwhile, is bound up with the consolidation of a very different national imaginary: one organised around the capital, the monarchy, and, for nearly four decades, an authoritarian state that saw the club's sporting success as a useful advertisement abroad.

This article proceeds in six main parts. It begins by situating the analysis within the theoretical literature on nationalism and sport, drawing on the concepts of imagined communities (Anderson, 1991), banal nationalism (Billig, 1995), and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), together with the specific literature on football, nationality, and the Spanish state (Duke & Crolley, 1996; Llopis-Goig, 2008). It then traces the rivalry's historical formation from the clubs' late-nineteenth-century origins through the trauma of the Civil War and the Franco dictatorship (1939–1975), the period in which the rivalry's enduring symbolism was largely forged. Subsequent sections examine Barcelona's construction of Catalan identity through the club, Real Madrid's more ambivalent relationship to Spanish state nationalism, and the psychosocial architecture of the fear and loathing between the two fan communities. A penultimate section considers the 2017 independence referendum as a case study in the rivalry's continued political salience, before a concluding critical discussion addresses how commercialisation and globalisation have complicated, without fully erasing, El Clásico's historic political charge.

Materials and Methods

Theoretical Framework: Nationalism, Banal Symbolism, and the Sociology of Rivalry

Any analysis of football and nationalism must begin from the now-canonical premise that nations themselves are, in Benedict Anderson's (1991) formulation, imagined communities: horizontal fraternities of people who will never meet one another but who nonetheless carry in their minds the image of a shared belonging. For Anderson, print capitalism, newspapers, novels, and the standardised vernacular provided the technical means by which this imagining became possible on a mass scale. Ernest Gellner (1983) offers a structurally similar, though more functionalist, account: nationalism, for Gellner, is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness but the invention of nations where they did not previously exist, driven by the needs of industrial society for a culturally homogeneous, mobile workforce. Neither theorist wrote primarily about sport, but both supply the conceptual scaffolding for understanding why a football match could ever come to bear the symbolic weight of a national struggle: if nations are themselves imagined and constructed, then any cultural practice capable of making that imagined community vivid and emotionally present- a shared flag, a shared anthem, a shared team- becomes a site where the nation is, in a very concrete sense, produced and reproduced.

Eric Hobsbawm's (1990) contribution sharpens this point considerably. Writing on the interwar consolidation of international sport, Hobsbawm observed that the imagined community of millions feels more real when compressed into a team of eleven named individuals, with the ordinary spectator, even one with no other political consciousness, transformed into a symbol of the nation simply by cheering. This insight travels well beyond the international fixtures Hobsbawm had primarily in mind. In stateless or sub-state contexts such as Catalonia, where the trappings of official nationhood (a national team competing at the World Cup, a seat at the United Nations) are unavailable, a club side can come to perform much the same symbolic function that a national team performs elsewhere—a substitution that helps explain why FC Barcelona has, at various moments in its history, been asked to carry a representative burden disproportionate to its formal status as a private sporting association.

Michael Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism offers a second, complementary analytical register. Billig's central argument is that nationalism in established states is reproduced not chiefly through dramatic, "hot" episodes—wars, referenda, terrorist attacks—but through the endless, unremarked repetition of national symbols in daily life: the flag hanging unnoticed outside a public building, the newspaper's routine use of "we" to describe the national football team, the weather map's silent assumption of national borders. Billig singles out the back pages of newspapers, with their routine flagging of "our" team and "their" opponents, as a particularly potent site of this banal reproduction. Applied to El Clásico, banal nationalism helps explain why the fixture's political charge does not require any single dramatic intervention to persist: the routine repetition of the Senyera and the Estelada in the stands at Camp Nou, the reflexive framing of the match in the Catalan and Spanish language press, and the everyday vocabulary of supporters (Barça as "our" club, Real Madrid as "the regime's" club) reproduce a national narrative continuously, beneath the threshold of conscious political reflection, whether or not any individual supporter holds strong separatist convictions.

A third body of theory, drawn from social psychology rather than political sociology, helps explain the affective intensity of the "fear and loathing" that separates a mere rivalry from a routine sporting contest. Social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), holds that individuals derive a meaningful part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, and that this membership motivates a systematic favouritism toward the in-group and derogation of relevant out-groups, even when group boundaries are minimal or arbitrarily assigned. Applied to sports

fandom, social identity theory illuminates why supporters of Barcelona and Real Madrid so readily interpret contested refereeing decisions, transfer sagas, or press controversies as further evidence of the opposing club's essential illegitimacy: once a supporter's identity has become fused with the club, information that threatens the in-group's standing is met with defensive reinterpretation rather than neutral evaluation. Group memberships that are not merely arbitrary but historically freighted—as Catalan and Spanish national identities plainly are—intensify this dynamic considerably, since a defeat on the pitch can be readily assimilated into a much older narrative of historical grievance.

Finally, because the specific national identity at stake on the Catalan side of the rivalry is that of a nation without a corresponding sovereign state, Montserrat Guibernau's (2000, 2004) work on stateless nationalism provides an essential corrective to frameworks developed primarily with sovereign nation-states in mind. Guibernau (2004) argues that nations without states pursue distinctive strategies of cultural reproduction and political mobilisation precisely because they lack control over the state apparatus, education systems, armed forces, and formal diplomacy that sovereign nations typically use to reproduce themselves. Civil society institutions, intellectuals, and, this article argues, football clubs take on a correspondingly amplified significance in such contexts, since they represent rare domains in which a stateless nation can achieve visible, internationally legible representation. It is this structural asymmetry Catalonia's need to find substitute vehicles for a nationhood the Spanish state does not formally recognise, against Real Madrid's comparatively unmediated access to the symbols of the state itself that gives El Clásico its distinctive, asymmetrical charge, and it is to the historical origins of that asymmetry that the article now turns.

Historical Origins and the Making of a Rivalry, 1899–1936

Neither club began its life as a vessel of nationalist sentiment. Real Madrid Football Club was founded in 1902 (as an offshoot of a club established in 1897), its earliest members drawn substantially from Madrid's professional and student classes, while FC Barcelona was founded in 1899 by the Swiss businessman Joan Gamper together with a small, cosmopolitan group of local and expatriate enthusiasts (Ball, 2011; Burns, 2009). In other words, both clubs were products of a distinctly international, bourgeois sporting culture that had little to do with the ethnolinguistic politics that would later define their rivalry. What altered this trajectory was less any founding ideology than the two clubs' subsequent embeddedness in cities with sharply differing relationships to the Spanish state.

Catalonia in the early twentieth century possessed a distinct language, legal tradition, and civil society that had survived, in attenuated form, the centralising Bourbon reforms of the eighteenth century, and Barcelona was by 1900 an industrial and commercial powerhouse whose economic weight increasingly chafed against its comparatively limited political autonomy within the Spanish state. Catalanisme, the political and cultural movement asserting Catalonia's distinct national character, gathered force across the first decades of the century, and FC Barcelona, still a relatively young institution, became progressively enmeshed with this movement, not through any single deliberate decision but through the cumulative effect of a membership drawn disproportionately from Barcelona's Catalanist middle classes (Shobe, 2008a). Gamper himself, though Swiss by birth, became a naturalised advocate for Catalan causes, and by the 1920s the club had already acquired enough of a reputation for oppositional politics that Miguel Primo de Rivera's dictatorship (1923–1930) briefly closed its premises and forced Gamper into exile after crowds jeered the Spanish royal anthem during a 1925 match (Burns, 2009).

This regionally uneven development was not unique to Catalonia. As Duke and Crolley (1996) demonstrate in their comparative survey of Spanish football, the game took root across Spain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries along lines that closely tracked existing centres of industrial and commercial activity: Barcelona, Bilbao, and, later, Madrid well before it became a vehicle for any coherent national project directed from the centre. Athletic Club de Bilbao, founded in 1898, developed an analogous relationship to Basque nationalism, adopting from an early date a distinctive recruitment policy restricting its playing squad to players of Basque origin or formation, a policy that endures to this day and that offers an instructive comparative case to Barcelona's own, less exclusionary, mode of identity construction. Real Madrid, by contrast, developed in a city whose institutional life was already organised around the machinery of the Spanish state, and its early growth proceeded less through asserting a distinct regional character than through steady integration into, and eventual pre-eminence within, an emerging national footballing establishment.

The clearest embodiment of this early fusion of club and cause was Josep Sunyol, a Catalan lawyer, journalist, and left-nationalist politician who became president of FC Barcelona in 1935 while simultaneously serving as a deputy for Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya in the Spanish parliament (Burns, 2009). Weeks after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, Sunyol travelled from Barcelona to visit Republican positions near Madrid; his car strayed across the front line into territory controlled by Francoist forces in the Sierra de Guadarrama, and on 6 August 1936 he was summarily identified and executed without trial. Sunyol's death, his body was not recovered and reburied until 1996, cemented an association between FC Barcelona's leadership and the anti-Francoist cause that would decisively shape the club's identity for decades afterwards. It is not incidental that when club president Narcís de Carreras coined the phrase més que un club three decades later, in 1968, he drew on a lineage of civic and political engagement that Sunyol's martyrdom had already given concrete, tragic form.

Real Madrid's early history offers no equivalent founding trauma, and its own relationship to Spanish nationalism in this period was considerably more incidental than intentional. The club's Civil War-era leadership was, if anything, heterogeneous: its president from 1935 to 1936, Rafael Sánchez Guerra, was himself later persecuted by the Franco regime as a Republican sympathiser, a fact frequently invoked by revisionist historians to complicate any simple reading of Real Madrid as the Nationalist side's football club even in its own era (Lowe, 2013). What both clubs shared, in short, was not a fixed political character inherited from their founding but a structural position: Barcelona as the flagship club of a historically autonomist region, Madrid as the flagship club of the national capital that would be filled with increasingly explicit political content only once the Franco dictatorship began deliberately to use football as an instrument of state.

Football under the Regime: Francoism and the Politicisation of El Clásico, 1939–1975

Francisco Franco's 1939 Civil War victory inaugurated nearly four decades of dictatorship organised, in substantial part, around suppressing the very peripheral identities Barcelona had come to represent. The regime banned Catalan-language publishing, education, and public administration outright; for a time, it criminalised the public use of Catalan even in private commerce; and it dissolved Catalonia's institutions of self-government. Under these conditions, football stadiums became one of the few spaces where Catalan identity could still find any form of collective, public expression, however coded. Historian and geographer Hunter Shobe (2008a) describes Camp Nou during the dictatorship as a site of quiet counter-hegemonic resistance, where the singing of songs in

Catalan, the informal use of the forbidden language among spectators, and the simple, repeated act of assembling as Catalans in large numbers constituted a modest but real defiance of the regime's assimilationist project, even when no explicit political statement was ever made.

The event most frequently cited as the symbolic origin of the modern rivalry's political charge is the Copa del Generalísimo semi-final of June 1943. After winning the first leg 3–0 at Barcelona's Les Corts stadium, FC Barcelona travelled to Madrid for the return fixture amid a hostile press campaign accusing Barcelona's supporters of insulting the Spanish nation. Multiple participants later testified that, before kickoff, a Francoist security official entered the Barcelona dressing room and reminded the players that they were permitted to compete only through the regime's forbearance, testimony that, while contested in its precise details by later historians, is corroborated across several independent accounts (Burns, 2009; see also contemporaneous reporting cited in Lowe, 2013). Real Madrid won the match 11–1, and 11–4 on aggregate; the Barcelona goalkeeper of the day recalled decades later that there had been no rivalry to speak of before that afternoon. Whatever the precise balance of footballing and political causation behind so lopsided a scoreline, the 1943 match was absorbed almost immediately into Catalan popular memory as proof of the regime's willingness to manipulate the sporting field itself in the service of centralist humiliation, and it remains, more than eighty years later, one of the most frequently invoked reference points in discussions of the rivalry's origins.

It would, however, be a significant overstatement to conclude from episodes such as this that Real Madrid was simply, or straightforwardly, "Franco's team." The historiography on this question has grown considerably more careful in recent decades. Sid Lowe (2013), drawing on extensive archival and interview research, argues that the relationship ran in something closer to the opposite causal direction than popular memory suggests: Real Madrid did not rise to dominance because the regime favoured it, but rather came to be associated with the regime because it had already, through footballing and administrative decisions substantially independent of state direction, become Spain's most successful club. Phil Ball (2011) reaches a similar, if more cautiously stated, conclusion, noting that the claim that Franco personally engineered Real Madrid's success is considerably overstated relative to the available evidence, even as he acknowledges that the regime was fully prepared to make retrospective political use of the club's achievements. What is not in serious dispute is the sequence of events beginning in the mid-1950s: club president Santiago Bernabéu himself a veteran of the Nationalist forces during the Civil War recruited Alfredo Di Stéfano in a controversial transfer that Barcelona had believed it had already secured, built the team that would win the first five editions of the new European Cup between 1956 and 1960, and in doing so gave the Franco regime an instrument of international prestige that Spanish diplomacy, isolated as it then was by the democratic world's post-war ostracism of the dictatorship, could not otherwise obtain. Foreign Minister Fernando María Castiella's later description of Real Madrid as the regime's best embassy (as recounted in Lowe, 2013) captures this instrumentalisation after the fact, rather than any prior design.

The Di Stéfano affair deserves closer attention, since it illustrates in miniature the pattern of grievance and counter-grievance that would come to define the rivalry's emotional life thereafter. Barcelona had agreed to sign the Argentine-Colombian forward from River Plate, while Real Madrid separately negotiated with Millonarios, the Bogotá club that also held a claim to his registration under the irregular contractual arrangements then prevailing in South American football. Spain's football federation, adjudicating a dispute it was institutionally ill-equipped to resolve cleanly, initially proposed that Di Stéfano alternate seasons between the two clubs; Barcelona's board, for reasons that

remain disputed among historians, variously described as financial caution, boardroom indecision, or reluctance to antagonise a football authority answerable to the Franco government, chose instead to withdraw its claim entirely, leaving Di Stéfano free to sign for Real Madrid outright in September 1953. Lowe (2013) is notably sceptical of the more conspiratorial versions of this episode that later entered Catalan popular memory, stressing the administrative confusion and boardroom miscalculation documented in the historical record over any deliberate act of political sabotage. What is not disputed is the outcome: Di Stéfano scored in each of Real Madrid's first five European Cup final victories, becoming the player most closely associated with the club's golden era, while the manner of his departure from Barcelona's grasp became, and remains, one of the most bitterly recounted episodes in the club's own institutional memory, a grievance revisited by Barcelona supporters with an intensity that seven intervening decades have done remarkably little to diminish.

This revisionist correction matters for this article's argument because it illustrates a pattern that recurs throughout the rivalry's history: people frequently retrofit political meaning onto footballing outcomes that had more immediate, non-political explanations, then sediment that meaning into popular memory as though the political explanation had been primary all along. This is not to say that the regime's fingerprints are absent from the story; the suppression of the Catalan language, the intimidation documented around the 1943 fixture, and the regime's evident later enthusiasm for associating itself with Real Madrid's European successes are well documented, but rather that the relationship between football outcomes and political intention in Francoist Spain was considerably more contingent, and more retrospectively constructed, than the "regime's team versus the people's team" formula usually allows. Even FC Barcelona's own conduct in this period resists easy categorisation: the club fielded some players and, at various points, board members with connections to the regime, even as its broader institutional identity continued to accrue anti-Francoist meaning (Lowe, 2013). The rivalry's politicisation under Franco, in short, was real, consequential, and emotionally asymmetric, but also far messier in its documented detail than the tidy morality tale in which it is popularly remembered.

"Més Que un Club": Symbolic Politics and Catalan Identity at Camp Nou

The phrase most closely associated with FC Barcelona's political identity—més que un club, more than a club—was first spoken publicly by club president Narcís de Carreras in his acceptance speech of 17 January 1968, and given more deliberate, campaign-ready form five years later by his successor Agustí Montal (Burns, 2009). The timing was not accidental. By the late 1960s, the most repressive phase of Francoist cultural policy had softened somewhat, but Catalan political and linguistic autonomy remained formally proscribed, and the phrase's original resonance was therefore substantially political: it announced, in coded but broadly legible terms, that the club's significance exceeded the football pitch and extended into the defence of a suppressed collective identity. The slogan's roots, as the club's own historical materials make clear, in fact reach back to Gamper's foundational vision of the 1900s and 1910s, and were reinforced by the "sport and citizenship" ethos that Sunyol had championed in the 1930s; 1968 thus represents less an invention than a public codification of an identity the club had already substantially acquired.

This identity found continuous, everyday expression at Camp Nou, which opened in 1957 and rapidly became, in Shobe's (2008b) account, the most visible stage for performing Catalan identity publicly under conditions that foreclosed nearly every other avenue of collective expression. The stadium hosted the routine display of the Senyera, Catalonia's historic flag, at a time when its public

use elsewhere carried legal risk; it was, and remains, a space in which Catalan is spoken as a matter of course; and its very existence as an arena capable of holding tens of thousands of Catalans in a single assembly gave concrete, physical form to a national community that had no other legal venue for congregating at such scale. This function did not disappear with the return of democracy after 1975. Rather, as Llopis-Goig's (2008) periodisation suggests, the post-Franco decades saw a partial redistribution of these symbolic functions: the newly restored institutions of Catalan self-government, the Generalitat, the regional parliament, assumed some of the representative burden that the club alone had previously carried, even as FC Barcelona retained, and in some respects intensified, its symbolic centrality, particularly at moments of renewed constitutional tension.

This redistribution of symbolic functions was inaugurated by a moment of direct institutional cooperation between the club and the restored polity. In October 1977, shortly after his return from more than three decades of exile, the reinstated president of the Catalan Generalitat, Josep Tarradellas, was invited by Barcelona president Agustí Montal to address the crowd at Camp Nou before a league match, a gesture that fused the club's stadium with the physical re-establishment of Catalan self-government in front of tens of thousands of spectators and a watching national television audience. The choice of venue was itself telling: no comparable civic space existed in Catalonia at that moment capable of hosting so large and so symbolically resonant a public gathering, a fact that underscores the argument, developed above through Guibernau's (2004) account of nations without states, that football grounds had come to substitute for the conventional institutional infrastructure of national life that decades of enforced statelessness had denied Catalonia. The episode also marks an instructive point of transition in the rivalry's history: it is one of the few moments in which the club's Catalanist symbolism was expressed through formal, celebratory cooperation with the restored Spanish democratic state, rather than through the coded resistance or open confrontation that characterise most of the episodes examined elsewhere in this account.

Barcelona's governance structure reinforces this self-understanding in ways that are not merely rhetorical. Uniquely among Europe's dominant football clubs, FC Barcelona remains formally owned by its own members, more than 140,000 socios, as of the mid-2020s, who elect the club president and board directly, rather than by a private owner, sovereign wealth fund, or publicly traded holding company (see club membership figures as reported in contemporary club and press sources, e.g., Soccer Trippers). This member-ownership model is regularly invoked by the club's leadership, including president Joan Laporta, as itself an expression of the club's "more than a club" ethos: a private corporation answerable to shareholders, the argument runs, could never occupy the same representative position in Catalan civil society as an institution formally governed by, and accountable to, a mass membership. Whatever the accuracy of this self-presentation as a matter of day-to-day institutional practice, it has provided a durable structural basis for the club's claim to speak, at moments of political crisis, in something like a civic voice rather than a purely commercial one, a claim examined in detail in a later section of this article, in connection with the club's conduct during the 2017 independence referendum.

Finally, the identification of Barcelona with Catalan nationalism, however durable, has never been uncontested, even within Catalonia itself. RCD Espanyol, Barcelona's smaller cross-town rival, has historically drawn part of its identity from a more explicitly Spanish-nationalist self-positioning, showing that Barcelona has long contained competing articulations of national belonging rather than a single, homogeneous Catalanist consensus (Barceló et al., 2015). Nor has Barça's own supporter base ever been ideologically uniform: the club's socios include committed Catalan independentists,

Catalan federalists content within a reformed Spanish state, and Spanish nationalists who support the team purely as football fans indifferent to its political symbolism. The persistence of més que un club as a meaningful identity marker, in other words, rests less on unanimous political conviction among supporters than on the broader, more diffuse process of banal nationalism described by Billig (1995): the routine, repeated invocation of Catalan symbols within and around the club reproduces a sense of Catalan distinctiveness among the wider fan community regardless of any individual supporter's explicit position on the question of independence.

Real Madrid, Spanishness, and the Politics of the Capital

If Barcelona's political identity has been constructed around resistance and cultural survival, Real Madrid's has been constructed, less deliberately but no less durably, around proximity to the institutions of the Spanish state. The club's addition of the "Real" (royal) prefix in 1920, granted by King Alfonso XIII, is itself a marker of this early and largely uncontroversial closeness to the Spanish establishment, a closeness that predates Francoism by more than a decade and that would later be inherited, in altered form, by the post-Franco constitutional monarchy restored in 1975. Real Madrid's stadium, inaugurated in 1947 and renamed for club president Santiago Bernabéu in 1955, sits in the Spanish capital, and the club's supporter base, though drawn from across Spain and increasingly from across the globe, has historically been disproportionately associated with Madrid's administrative, military, and commercial elites (Ball, 2011).

As discussed above, the club's specific association with the Franco regime is better understood as a product of its footballing success than as its cause, but this correction should not obscure the fact that the regime did, in the end, derive substantial international benefit from that success, and cultivated the relationship accordingly once it had been established. The dominance of Bernabéu's team in the first years of the European Cup coincided with a period in which Franco's Spain was seeking to escape the diplomatic isolation imposed after 1945, and Real Madrid's victories offered a rare, apolitical-seeming avenue through which the regime's international image could be softened (Lowe, 2013). This dynamic produced a genuinely reciprocal, if asymmetric, relationship: the club benefited from favourable treatment in various administrative and infrastructural respects available to a well-connected Madrid institution, while the state benefited from the reflected prestige of a team that came, in the eyes of much of the world's football public, to define Spanish football itself throughout the 1950s.

The Santiago Bernabéu stadium itself has functioned as a physical anchor for this identity in ways that parallel, while remaining distinct from, Camp Nou's role in Catalan public life. Located a short distance from Madrid's Paseo de la Castellana and named for the president who transformed the club into a European institution, the stadium has hosted state occasions, royal visits, and, on numerous occasions, the Spanish national team's own matches, reinforcing an association between club and country that Camp Nou, as the home of a team explicitly outside the Spanish national mainstream, could never straightforwardly replicate. The early 2000s galácticos policy, pursued under club president Florentino Pérez through the sequential acquisition of the world's most marketable individual stars, from Luís Figo and Zinedine Zidane to David Beckham and Ronaldo Nazário further cemented Real Madrid's self-presentation as Spain's, and indeed the world's, pre-eminent footballing institution, even as critics noted that a policy built on individual global celebrity sat uneasily beside the club's claim to embody a coherent national tradition. Pérez's subsequent, unsuccessful 2021 attempt to establish a breakaway European Super League, an initiative Barcelona

also briefly joined, would later expose this same tension between institutional self-mythology and commercial ambition in especially stark terms, a tension this article examines more fully later.

The persistence of this association into the democratic era owes much to the same banal, repetitive mechanisms that sustain Barcelona's Catalanist identity. Real Madrid's continued closeness to the restored constitutional monarchy, the club retains its royal designation, and its honorary presidency has periodically been associated with the royal family together with its self-presentation as a genuinely national, rather than regional, institution (its historic slogan-like self-description centres on being "the club of Spain" rather than of Madrid alone), reproduces an association with Spanish state nationalism through routine symbolic repetition rather than through any single dramatic political act. It is worth stressing, in the interest of the evenhandedness this subject demands, that the great majority of Real Madrid's more than 100,000 socios and its vastly larger global following support the club for reasons entirely unrelated to Spanish nationalism, footballing tradition, family loyalty, admiration for its record eighteen European Cup and Champions League titles, in precisely the same way that the great majority of Barcelona's support is not primarily motivated by the Catalan question. The point of this section is not to suggest that either club's contemporary fan base is chiefly a political constituency, but rather to trace the historical process by which each institution became available, at moments of heightened political tension, to be read as a proxy for a much larger and more consequential national conflict, a conflict to which the article now turns in its examination of the rivalry's underlying psychosocial dynamics.

Fear and Loathing: The Psychosocial Architecture of Rivalry

George Orwell's (1945) observation that international sport is, in effect, war minus the shooting is frequently invoked, sometimes glibly, in discussions of football rivalry; applied with appropriate care to El Clásico, however, it points toward something more precise than mere hyperbole. Orwell's essay argued that serious competitive sport channels group loyalties, aggressive impulses, and a desire for the collective vindication of one's own community against a rival community, all without the physical violence of actual warfare; though, as decades of football hooliganism across Europe have demonstrated, the containment of that aggression within purely symbolic bounds is never fully guaranteed. Applied to Barcelona and Real Madrid, this framework helps explain why the rivalry generates behaviours, sustained booing of former players who have switched sides, conspiratorial explanations of refereeing decisions, ritualised insults exchanged between supporter groups that would appear wildly disproportionate if the fixture were understood purely as a contest between two well-run football clubs, but which become considerably more legible once the fixture is understood as a periodic re-enactment of a much older and more consequential national antagonism.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) supplies the psychological mechanism underlying this pattern. Once a supporter's sense of self has become bound up with membership in the Barcelona or Real Madrid "in-group," a range of well-documented cognitive biases follow more or less automatically: in-group successes are attributed to skill and virtue, in-group failures to bad luck or external sabotage, while the reverse pattern is applied to the out-group's successes and failures. Because Catalan and Spanish national identities are, for many supporters, layered directly onto club identity, a refereeing decision perceived as unfair is readily assimilated into a pre-existing narrative of historical grievance, Catalan supporters interpreting a decision as evidence of a Madrid-centric football establishment's structural bias, Real Madrid supporters interpreting Barcelona's

institutional advocacy on Catalan political questions as evidence of the club's illegitimate politicisation of sport. Both interpretive habits are self-reinforcing: each fresh controversy supplies further "evidence" for a narrative the supporter already holds, deepening rather than testing the underlying conviction.

Phil Ball's (2011) concept of morbo, a term he treats as resistant to precise translation but that broadly connotes a morbid fascination with, or diseased relish for, the discomfort of one's rivals, captures this psychosocial dynamic's specifically Spanish inflexion. Morbo, in Ball's account, is not confined to Barcelona–Real Madrid but runs through Spanish football more broadly, expressing itself with comparable intensity in Basque football's relationship to the Spanish state and in more narrowly local rivalries such as Seville's Betis–Sevilla derby; what distinguishes El Clásico is the sheer scale at which this morbo operates, amplified as it now is by global broadcast audiences and social media, and the specific gravity of the historical material, civil war, dictatorship, executed presidents, suppressed languages available to be drawn upon. Media institutions, for their part, are far from neutral conduits of this rivalry; Ortega (2016) demonstrates in detail how Spanish- and Catalan-language outlets each mobilise footballing success selectively to reinforce competing national narratives, most visibly in their strikingly different framing of the Spanish national team's own triumphs, which Catalan outlets have at various moments sought to partially reclaim by foregrounding the disproportionate contribution of Barcelona-trained players.

The rivalry's fan culture further complicates any assumption that political alignment maps neatly onto club identity even at the level of organised supporter groups. Hardcore ultras organizations emerged at both clubs from the early 1980s onward: Real Madrid's Ultras Sur, founded in 1980, developed an association with far-right symbolism and, at various points, documented instances of violence and racist abuse directed at opposing players, eventually prompting the club to formally sever ties with the group's leadership; Barcelona's own Boixos Nois, founded shortly afterward, likewise became associated with hooliganism and, controversially, with the infiltration of far-right elements into a supporter culture nominally attached to a club whose institutional identity was explicitly anti-Francoist and progressive. Both clubs have since taken formal steps- stadium bans, membership revocations, public disavowals to distance themselves institutionally from these groups. The persistence of such organisations nonetheless serves as a useful corrective to any account of the rivalry that maps political virtue neatly onto one side of the fixture: the lived reality of fear and loathing among the most intensely committed supporters has, at its more troubling margins, generated forms of aggression that sit uncomfortably beside both clubs' preferred public self-narratives, whether Barcelona's civic Catalanism or Real Madrid's cosmopolitan sporting grandeur.

It is important, finally, not to romanticise this rivalry's political dimension as though it were experienced uniformly, or even primarily, in political terms by the millions of people who follow it. For a great many supporters, on both sides and around the world, the fixture's appeal lies overwhelmingly in its footballing quality, the density of world-class talent on display, the tactical contrasts between the two clubs' historic playing philosophies, the individual brilliance of players from Alfredo Di Stéfano and Ferenc Puskás through Johan Cruyff, to Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, and, in the current generation, Kylian Mbappé, Jude Bellingham, Vinícius Júnior, and Lamine Yamal. The psychosocial intensity described in this section operates as a substratum beneath this footballing spectacle rather than as a fully conscious motivation for most spectators on any given match day; it is, in the terms developed by Billig (1995), a banal rather than a hot nationalism, most

of the time, present, structuring, and largely unremarked, until a specific political event brings it forcefully back to the surface, as occurred with particular intensity in the autumn of 2017.

2017 and After: The Independence Referendum and Its Reverberations

On 1 October 2017, the Catalan regional government held a referendum on independence from Spain that the Spanish Constitutional Court, and the central government in Madrid, had already ruled illegal. Spanish national police were deployed to prevent voting at numerous polling stations, and the resulting confrontations left several hundred people injured across Catalonia, according to figures cited by Barcelona's mayor at the time (Amid violence in Catalonia, FC Barcelona plays in an empty stadium, 2017). FC Barcelona's men's first team was scheduled to play a La Liga fixture against UD Las Palmas that same afternoon. The club requested a postponement; the Spanish professional football league refused, reportedly threatening a significant points deduction if the match did not proceed. Barcelona's board of directors, in an act that itself constituted a significant political statement, elected to play the match behind closed doors, issuing a statement condemning the day's events as an attempt to prevent citizens from exercising their democratic right to free expression (Amid violence in Catalonia, FC Barcelona plays in an empty stadium, 2017). The resulting images- Barcelona's players scoring goals into an entirely empty 99,000-seat stadium, the Camp Nou's usual roar replaced by an eerie silence audible on global television broadcasts became one of the most widely circulated visual symbols of the day's events, arguably doing more to communicate the referendum's atmosphere of crisis to an international audience than any conventional news footage could have achieved on its own.

The decision was not without internal cost to the club: one board member resigned in protest at the choice to play the match at all rather than refuse outright, illustrating that the club's leadership itself was not of one mind about how far its civic voice should extend into active confrontation with the Spanish state (Amid violence in Catalonia, FC Barcelona plays in an empty stadium, 2017). In the following months and years, FC Barcelona's relationship to the independence movement continued to generate controversy on multiple fronts: European football's governing body issued informal warnings to the club regarding the politicization of its platform; individual players and coaching staff periodically made personal statements in support of Catalan self-determination or expressed solidarity with imprisoned Catalan political leaders convicted of sedition-related offences following the referendum; and the club's own socios remained visibly divided in their assessment of how actively the institution ought to involve itself in a live constitutional dispute, with some arguing that més que un club obligated public solidarity and others maintaining that the club's civic role was better served by institutional neutrality.

In the years since 2017, the acute intensity of that constitutional crisis has itself evolved considerably, in ways an evenhanded academic account must register rather than elide. Catalan pro-independence parties, while retaining substantial electoral support, have not commanded a stable, uncontested majority in the Catalan parliament in every subsequent election cycle, and Spanish national politics has cycled through multiple approaches to the Catalan question, ranging from direct rule and prosecution in the immediate aftermath of the referendum to subsequent measures of pardon and negotiated dialogue under different governing coalitions in Madrid. FC Barcelona's own leadership, for its part, has since 2021 been headed by Joan Laporta, whose public engagement with the Catalan question, while still framed within the historic més que un club tradition, has in practice been substantially subordinated to the club's pressing financial and sporting priorities, most visibly

the multi-billion-euro Espai Barça redevelopment of Camp Nou itself, a project whose successful completion the club's leadership has repeatedly described as existentially important to Barcelona's competitive future (Laporta, as reported in Catalan News, 2026; Goal.com, 2026). This is not evidence that the club's Catalanist identity has been abandoned; the symbolism persists in the stadium, the statutes, and the rhetoric of successive presidents, but it does suggest that the relationship between football club and political movement is considerably more contingent on circumstance, leadership, and material interest than either the club's own promotional self-description or its most committed critics tend to allow.

Results and Discussions

Critical Perspectives: Commercialisation, Globalisation, and the Limits of the Political Reading

A significant strand of the academic literature on El Clásico cautions against treating its political symbolism as either stable or self-evidently primary, and this section engages that critical literature directly, in the interest of the evenhanded treatment this contested subject requires. Jim O'Brien (2013), in an influential analysis, argues that the accelerating global commercialisation of El Clásico, its transformation into a heavily branded media megaspectacle broadcast to audiences with little or no connection to Spanish regional politics has substantially eroded the fixture's historically rooted local and political meanings, even as the clubs themselves continue to invoke those meanings commercially. On this account, the deeper political "authenticity" popularly ascribed to the rivalry is increasingly in tension with its function as a globally traded entertainment product, sold in broadly similar terms to audiences in Jakarta, Lagos, and Los Angeles who consume the fixture primarily as elite sporting theatre rather than as a proxy for Spain's territorial disputes.

This globalisation of the audience is not merely a matter of broadcast reach but of the composition of the clubs' own active supporter bases. Both clubs' official membership and academy structures maintain formal ties to their home regions: Barcelona's La Masia academy continues to prioritise Catalan and wider Spanish youth talent, and the club's socios remain predominantly Catalonia-based, but the far larger constituency of self-identified fans reached through social media, replica-shirt sales, and pre-season tours across Asia, North America, and the Gulf has no comparable regional anchor. Commercial and market research commissioned by both clubs in recent years has repeatedly identified international markets, rather than Catalonia or Madrid, as the primary source of projected revenue growth, a commercial reality that inevitably shapes institutional priorities regardless of either club's historic political self-understanding. The resulting picture is one of a rivalry operating simultaneously at two scales that are only loosely coupled to one another: a comparatively small, historically dense, and politically freighted domestic sphere, and a vastly larger, commercially decisive, and largely depoliticised global one, with each club's leadership obliged to manage both simultaneously, often through public messaging that emphasises historic identity for domestic audiences while emphasising star power and entertainment value for international ones.

A related, more structurally pointed critique comes from Duke and Crolley's (1996) comparative analysis of football, nationality, and the state, which observes what might be considered a genuine paradox at the heart of the "Catalonia versus Spain" reading of El Clásico: because the rivalry is institutionally embedded within, and dependent upon, a unified Spanish football league and cup structure, its very existence arguably works to reinforce, rather than undermine, the coherence of

the Spanish nation-state that Catalan nationalism seeks to exit. A fully independent Catalonia would, under most plausible scenarios canvassed by football administrators and pundits at various points since 2017, face significant obstacles to retaining FC Barcelona's membership in La Liga and Spain's wider footballing structures, obstacles that would jeopardise precisely the sporting prestige, revenue, and platform that have made the club such an effective vehicle for Catalan visibility in the first place. The rivalry, in other words, may function simultaneously as an expression of separatist sentiment and as a structural incentive against the very political outcome that sentiment ostensibly seeks, a tension rarely acknowledged in either club's own public messaging.

The rise of enormous, financially dominant global ownership models elsewhere in European football, state-linked investment in clubs such as Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain, and the accompanying debates over "sportswashing," in which the reputational benefits of footballing success are deliberately harnessed by political actors, provides a useful comparative backdrop against which to assess El Clásico's own commercial evolution. Real Madrid and Barcelona have so far preserved member-ownership structures that formally distinguish them from these newer ownership models, but both clubs have nonetheless pursued increasingly aggressive commercial strategies, including sponsorship arrangements, market-expansion tours, and stadium redevelopment projects explicitly designed to maximise global brand value, in ways that sit awkwardly beside either club's claim to represent an authentic, historically rooted national community rather than a globally optimised entertainment franchise. Barcelona's own Camp Nou reconstruction, discussed in the following section, is illustrative: financed substantially through international capital markets and justified publicly in terms of the revenue required to sustain competitiveness in an increasingly globalised football economy, it exemplifies the same tension O'Brien (2013) identifies between the club's historic civic self-understanding and its contemporary status as a globally traded commercial enterprise.

None of this critical literature suggests that the rivalry's political dimension is simply fictitious or without any continuing basis in lived historical experience; the documented events recounted in earlier sections of this article- Sunyol's execution, the suppression of Catalan under Franco, the 2017 referendum and its aftermath are not diminished by the observation that commercial globalisation has complicated their contemporary expression. The more defensible position, and the one this article advances, is that El Clásico's political meaning has always been constructed, contested, and unevenly distributed across its supporter base, rather than a fixed essence simply "revealed" by any single match or controversy, and that the fixture's globalisation represents merely the latest, if unusually dramatic, chapter in that ongoing process of construction and contestation.

Contemporary Dynamics: El Clásico in 2026

As of this writing, El Clásico's evolving relationship between spectacle and symbolism is clearest in FC Barcelona's recent institutional trajectory. The club spent more than two seasons playing home matches away from Camp Nou, first at the Estadi Olímpic Lluís Companys, then at a partially reconstructed Camp Nou operating at reduced capacity while the stadium underwent the Espai Barça redevelopment, a project intended to expand capacity beyond one hundred thousand seats and substantially increase the club's commercial revenue base (Footballgroundguide, 2026). On 10 May 2026, with the renovated stadium newly reopened, Barcelona secured a 2–0 victory over Real Madrid at Camp Nou to clinch the club's twenty-ninth La Liga title under manager Hansi Flick, a result achieved substantially through the contributions of a core of home-grown La Masia academy

players, most prominently the teenage forward Lamine Yamal, whose emergence has been widely described in the Spanish and international press as heralding a new generation of specifically Catalan-developed footballing talent at the club's centre (Al Jazeera, 2026).

Real Madrid, for its part, enters this period of the rivalry as an institution increasingly defined by its own transnational commercial and sporting ambitions, a squad built around global superstars such as Kylian Mbappé, Jude Bellingham, and Vinícius Júnior, marketed with comparable intensity to worldwide audiences, and likewise engaged in continual stadium and commercial infrastructure investment at the Santiago Bernabéu. That both clubs' recent multi-billion-euro stadium projects have been justified publicly in almost identical commercial language, expanded hospitality revenue, year-round non-matchday programming, and global brand positioning illustrates the extent to which the two institutions, for all their historic political divergence, now compete within a broadly convergent commercial logic, even as each continues to draw on its distinct historical mythology in marketing itself to its respective core supporter base.

This convergence should not be mistaken for the disappearance of the rivalry's political charge, however. Catalan flags remain a constant visual presence at Camp Nou; Barcelona's leadership continues to invoke més que un club as a live institutional principle rather than a historical curiosity; and any future reactivation of Catalonia's constitutional dispute with Madrid would almost certainly place FC Barcelona back in the position it occupied in October 2017, whether or not the club's leadership actively sought that role. What has changed is less the underlying availability of the rivalry's political symbolism than the relative weight it is currently accorded, by both clubs' leaderships and by the global audiences that now constitute the large majority of the fixture's actual viewership, alongside the sporting and commercial considerations that increasingly dominate each institution's day-to-day priorities.

Conclusion

This article set out to move beyond the familiar shorthand in which El Clásico is treated simply as a proxy war between Catalonia and Spain, and to offer instead a historically grounded, theoretically informed account of how that shorthand was constructed, sustained, complicated, and periodically reactivated across more than a century of Spanish political history. Several conclusions follow from the analysis. First, the rivalry's political charge, while genuinely rooted in documented historical events, the suppression of Catalan identity under Francoism, the execution of Josep Sunyol, the coded resistance enacted within Camp Nou during the dictatorship, and FC Barcelona's institutional conduct during the 2017 referendum has always been more contested, more unevenly distributed among supporters, and more historiographically complicated than the popular "regime's team versus the people's team" narrative allows, as the revisionist scholarship of Lowe (2013) and Ball (2011) in particular demonstrates. Second, theoretical frameworks drawn from the study of nationalism more broadly Anderson's (1991) imagined communities, Billig's (1995) banal nationalism, Guibernau's (2000, 2004) account of nations without states, and Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory together supply a more analytically precise account of how and why football comes to bear this symbolic weight than either club's own promotional narrative or a purely journalistic treatment of the rivalry typically provides. Third, and finally, the accelerating commercialisation and globalisation of the fixture documented by O'Brien (2013) and evident in both clubs' contemporary stadium and commercial strategies has not erased the rivalry's political dimension but has placed it in genuine, unresolved tension with the clubs' status as globally traded entertainment products, a tension neither

institution has fully resolved, and one that is likely to define the fixture's next chapter as much as its historical inheritance does.

These conclusions carry implications beyond Spanish football. As sport becomes an increasingly globalised commercial industry, the capacity of clubs and other sporting institutions to function as authentic vehicles of sub-state or stateless national identity, rather than as commercially managed brands that merely reference such identities for marketing purposes, cannot simply be assumed; it requires the kind of careful, historically grounded, and periodically updated analysis this article has attempted to model. Future research might usefully extend this framework comparatively, examining how other stateless-nation football clubs (Athletic Club de Bilbao in the Basque Country, for instance, with its distinctive cantera policy restricting recruitment to home-grown or Basque-heritage players) navigate the same tension between political authenticity and commercial globalisation, or might track longitudinally how FC Barcelona's Catalanist identity evolves as the completed Espai Barça stadium reshapes the club's revenue base and, potentially, its supporter demographics over the coming decade. What can be said with reasonable confidence at present is that El Clásico will continue to generate fear and loathing in roughly equal measure to admiration and spectacle, and that any adequate account of the fixture must hold both registers in view simultaneously, resisting the temptation either to reduce it to pure political allegory or to dismiss its political history as mere marketing.

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