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# David Goldblatt on the Sociology of Football

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**Nigel Warburton:** *Football – soccer if you prefer - is a global sport, the beautiful game. But is it really a suitable area of study for a social scientist? And could attending football matches be part of your research? Yes. Emphatically yes, says David Goldblatt, a sociologist, journalist, and author of several books on football, including [The Ball is Round](#)...*

**David Edmonds:** *The topic we're going to focus on is the sociology of football. Sounds like a trivial subject...*

**David Goldblatt:** Well, it's only a trivial subject if you've not been on the planet for the last 30 years. I mean, the World Cup finals, let's just start there, no event has a larger television audience; no event has such extraordinary global reach. Even the Olympics can't match up to the scale of viewing that the world cup engenders and in a globalized world, here's the singular most global event. Now, whether you like football or not - and a lot of the people who think football is a trivial subject, are actually making a category mistake because most of the time what they're saying is, 'I don't find football interesting, therefore I don't find it an interesting area of study,' and I have to say it doesn't matter whether people find it interesting or not or whether they think it trivial or not. The point is that absolutely no other human behaviour can gather these kinds of crowds. And if you're a sociologist and you're interested in the origins and consequences of collective action, you really can't beat that.

**David Edmonds:** *So what is the sociology of football?*

**David Goldblatt:** OK, so I understand sociology as a discipline, broadly speaking, to be you start from what actors think they're doing when they're acting, and then you have a think about the unacknowledged origins and consequences of those actions. So I'm in a stadium in Belgrade in 2003, its Derby day, Red Star of Belgrade versus Partisan Belgrade and Red Star were 3-0 up, at which point the Partisan fans set fire to the stadium. Now, if this were happening in England, or perhaps or in France or in Germany, the fire engines would've arrived, you know, it would've stopped. But on this occasion I was the only person in the stadium saying, 'What's happening? Why are we not stopping?' Everybody else just watched the football to its conclusion and indeed the police, in an extraordinary theatrical display

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David Goldblatt June/2014

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marched around the edge of the stadium like something out of a Busby Berkeley movie, lined up in front of the Partisan fans and their burning stand and systemically cleared it while the second half was played. And I said to my Serbian kind of guide at the end of the day, Da, 'What is going on here?' And he looked at me you know, 'You fool. You don't understand anything.' He shrugged his shoulders and said 'Old Serb proverb: He who loses has the right to be angry.' Now, I think that's just extraordinary, as a sociologist. What's going on? Why is that permissible? Why do that at football? How come the authorities are prepared to allow that to happen? What are the meanings and power relations that create an event like that?

**David Edmonds:** *So it's deconstructing norms of behaviour, is that right?*

**David Goldblatt:** Well, sometimes it's about deconstructing the norms of behaviour. The range of disciplines and the range of topics that football offers are way beyond mere norms or the kind of traditional stuff of sociology. First and foremost, it's now a very considerable industry, probably globally in the billions, certainly 10, 20 billion, and certainly significant enough to be worth studying in its own right. And it has its own very peculiar economics because, let's not forget, this is a market driven commercial sector where all the people who are in charge are not interested in making a profit: they're actually interested in winning football games. So what's going on there? Then I'm interested geographically. Look at the nature of professional football clubs in most countries and you'll start seeing some really interesting geographical features. For example, in Argentina 75 percent of the top division entirely comes from Buenos Aires; whereas in this country London has perhaps a quarter of the Premiership, and in other countries it may be just one or two in the capital city. This is all telling us something about the degree of centralization. In Italy we find the industrialized north overwhelmingly has the biggest, most powerful, richest clubs and wins everything and the south -- traditional more agrarian, more backward, more isolated and marginal -- wins nothing. And of course this is not unrelated; one can read the geographical situations, the economic to the sporting. Of course, as Sven-Göran Eriksson, the Swedish manager of England in the early 2000s said, there is more politics in football than in politics, and he's not wrong. At the international level FIFA is now notorious as an international organization, one which is far better known, I would say, than almost any other than the IMF, perhaps, or the World Bank, and who's dealings are closely followed all over the world, clearly a highly political organization both in terms of its internal politics, but its relationship with nation states, national football associations, so on and so forth.

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**David Edmonds:** *So you've talked about organizations, and you've talked about football as an industry, but presumably there are other more traditional sociological topics: there's the crowds that watch the football, there's ethnic relations and so on.*

**David Goldblatt:** Yes, if you're interested in kind of collective action and the sociology of the crowd, well, football is just extraordinary for that. Football chanting, for example, dramatizes one of the most interesting and important dilemmas in sociology which is: What is the relationship between agency and structure? How do individuals combine together collectively to produce different results? How come crowds sing spontaneously? How do they react to stuff the way they do? One of the things you actually discover when you actually sit in a crowd: First of all you have chant entrepreneurs, people who've got enough hutzpah and enough energy to be able to stand up and not care whether nobody else sings line two or three: they'll just get up and do it.

And then you'll see the people closest to them, sometimes they'll bring their friends, will join in on the second line and then the question is will it hit that sort of critical intensity where you've got enough people singing the third line that everyone is prepared to come in. And then have you noticed how - and this happens with applause -- how it doesn't end in a random fashion but it ends, you now, it suddenly starts dipping and it comes that moment where a very large number of crowd go, 'Oh god. I don't want to be the last person clapping,' and it all stops simultaneously? And so that works with singing and chanting as well.

And then questions of ethnicity and gender, you really couldn't ask for more. And I think this is particularly interesting because football is an arena where the politics of the body, the politics of visibility, the sociology of performance, all come together in extraordinary, dramatic fashion. So certainly in the case of post-war England, what was the case in which young black men were most often seen publically? I mean there's no question that it's the football pitch. And so we can tell a story, not really metaphorical, but one that really bit into the structure of feeling of post-war Britain, which looks at the experiences of that first generation of black footballers, how they were received by their crowd, how their grit and bravery and determination in the face of racist chanting was a really important moment both for immigrant communities here, who - it's like the message is 'We are not leaving. We are part of this and you can say what you like. We're dug in' and also in forcing the crowd and the football authorities to start engaging with these issues. And this is repeated all over the

world. It's not just an issue of black or white. It's an issue of religion. The experience of Palestinian Arabs or Israeli Arabs within Israeli football takes on this form; the experience of Poles or new African migrants to Germany. Mario Balotelli, a man of West African roots but brought up as an Italian citizen, all of these people have provided - they're lightning rods, both for the racism that is inherent in the wider society and expressed through football crowds, as well as opportunities to make an anti-racist case, and fight against that.

**David Edmonds:** *I want to pick up on one of the phrases you used in that answer which is you said, we can 'tell a story; and I wondered how important narrative is in doing what you do, the sociology of football.*

**David Goldblatt:** Narrative is really important to me. Sociology, on the one hand, has a bent towards the analytical of the now: you sort out what structural relations of a moment or an event are, and that's important. But at the same time, sociology is just inevitably a historical discipline because you're always asking what the structural origins of something are, where did this stuff come from? You're never going to be able to capture the meaning of contemporary action without understanding how it is rooted in historical structures. So for me to do sociology is always to be doing history.

I think the second thing about narrative that's important is that if you're interested in communicating with the wider public, and for me that is absolutely on top of my personal agenda, then you have to do some story telling. There are a very few people in this world who can write abstractly, theoretically, and intellectually and really, really engage an audience without the use of narrative, and I certainly am not up to that task, and I think a lot of the kind of energy, as well as the intellectual strength of the work that I do is in narrative, is in storytelling. It's a very un-academic term: it suggests triviality and entertainment, but I don't see it in that way. I just think that's the sort of prejudices of academic language, and actually a lot of the best intellectual work does always have a kind of narrative quality to it. I think particularly in football it's interesting as well. So much of football culture is about narrative history.

People who love Arsenal, when you buy into Arsenal and you start supporting arsenal, you're not just supporting the Arsenal of now, you're supporting and embracing a whole series of cultural meanings, stories of the past which cumulatively constitute what Arsenal is. Because Arsenal is not a stadium, that can change. It's not the Board; it's not the shares; it's not the [www.socialsciencebites.com](http://www.socialsciencebites.com) David Goldblatt June/2014

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players: all of these things can come and go. What gives it consistency over generations and across time is this accumulated fund of cultural capital, the emotional narrative stories invested in it. So football is completely hooked on that. Now of course, most of the history that is told and constructed in popular football culture is complete *ersatz* history: it's got no kind of documentary basis; it's unchallenged; it's unreflective; it's desperately sentimental; it's appallingly clichéd; and it's unreferenced and unchecked. However, all of that can be remedied, and actually I think often a better story emerges from a sort of critical sociological engagement and one that speaks to people who might not otherwise engage.

**David Edmonds:** *And is sociology that isn't narrative driven, and which doesn't communicate so well with a general public, bad sociology?*

**David Goldblatt:** No, not necessarily. I use a lot of that stuff myself. I stand on the shoulders of other people. I haven't been around the stadiums of the Premier League counting how many women and how many ethnic minorities are attending. That's really, really important work and I don't denigrate it in any way. Someone's got to do that stuff and I have great respect for it when it's done well, but I often feel that in contemporary British academic culture it's slightly the be-all and end-all of life. It's like that's just what you do, and you churn it, out and that's a shame because I think more and better can be done with it. But that stuff's really important. It's not bad. It's just going to be very underused, which is a shame given how much time and energy is put into producing it in the first place.

**David Edmonds:** *So you used that material, and obviously football is a topic which is enormously widely covered in the newspaper and so on and you could read newspaper articles. You've already talked about going to football matches. Is that part of your research?*

**David Goldblatt:** Yes. I'm a huge participant observer. I've been to see football in, I don't know, 35 countries. If comparative sociology is what floats your boat, then football is perfect for doing this, and actually being at the games - because it's the same everywhere, 90 minutes, two ends, two halves, and yet everywhere it's completely different.

**David Edmonds:** *And are you taking notes?*

**David Goldblatt:** I don't take notes because then you look like a participant observer at that point. So no, I absolutely do not take notes ever in those situations. I do it all mentally.



**David Edmonds:** *As you're watching a game, are you filtering through what's happening? Are you deliberately there with a sociological perspective on what's going on?*

**David Goldblatt:** You can't leave the sociological perspective at home. As Popper said in his famous lectures at the LSC when he held up a pencil, he said, 'Observe!' and then sat down and then after 15 minutes one of the braver members of the class stood up and said, 'Observe what?' 'Ah-ha!' And so of course one always goes with a purpose, with a structure. I don't show up at these things and go, 'Oh who am I going to see?' I've got a mental checklist of what I'm looking for. I do an instant demographic of the crowd. Is it male; is it female? What's the ethnicity? What's the age? I look at the geographical distribution around the stadium. Where are they standing; where are they sitting? How do the hard-core fans organize themselves? How are people dressed; what emblems do people bring, what flags? What kind of choreography is going on? Do they arrive early; do they arrive late? What is the setting of this stadium? How do we read the architectural meaning of it? Who owns this football club? What are their political interests in doing so? Are they here? How do they behave when they are here? I've got like a checklist of about 500 questions in a way, and I always try and go to these occasions to make contact with people. Before I go I've probably spent a couple of hours in the centre of town hanging out with people who run a fans group or who are the ultras. That's how I go to the football, and I try and watch the football too.

**David Edmonds:** *You have to understand the language of football to participate with the crowds. You have to be a fan yourself really.*

**David Goldblatt:** I don't think you actually have to be a fan. I would say: What do we mean by 'fan'? Do we mean a fan is someone who's emotionally involved in one of the two sides that are participating, or a fan in the sense that you like watching football. I think it would be quite hard to do if you didn't at some level like watching football. The way I put it is this: Eduardo Galeano in *Football in Sun and Shadow*, the great Uruguayan writer, he's a Peñalor supporter and their great opponents are Nacional in Montevideo, and he describes a moment where he sees Nacional scoring a fantastic goal and despite himself, he loved it, he enjoyed it. He described himself as a beggar. 'I'm just a beggar for good football, from wherever it comes.' And I'm a beggar too, but I'm a beggar for other people's meanings, and that's what really blows me away. Everywhere I go in this world, I find that all sorts of complex

narratives and meanings are associated with the plain following of football. That's what's really exciting me when I'm standing in a crowd.

**David Edmonds:** *It sounds like a very descriptive approach to the discipline. Is there any normative element to it?*

**David Goldblatt:** There is a normative element to it. I come at this from a pretty left wing perspective I don't hide that. I come at it from a perspective that thinks the institution should be democratic. I come at it always from the side of the little people rather than the big people, so in all the fights and oppositions that end up in football, I always end up taking a position, but I think everybody considers it political. It's not me coming along and politicizing an otherwise lovely, gentle, innocent, apolitical game. The playing of football and the watching and the consuming and the following of football has assumed political dimensions everywhere. Look at FIFA: their slogan is 'for the world, for the game.' We might love and we might be cynical about that, but it is extraordinary that an international sporting body is making a claim in some sense to represent humanity, or be reflective, or a contributor to the global common good. That is a political position. Once you want to start talking about the common good in the public realm, we're in the land of politics, and then we have a conversation about what is the public good? Who represents it? How does the way this game is played, watched, followed and experienced, reflect that?

**David Edmonds:** *And if you have a political stance, can your writings be an implement of change?*

**David Goldblatt:** I really hope they can be. I mean that's what motivates me. For so long, football, as a set of cultural institutions, has hidden its politics and hidden its power precisely behind the arguments that deem it trivial, apolitical, just a game; but what actually that's done is provide ideological cover for the people who actually run the show, and football, if nothing else, is a popular creation. Arsenal doesn't mean anything unless a lot of people think that it matters. A football game played in an empty stadium is the most miserable, meaningless experience. We have to have a popular conception of sovereignty in football politics because the meanings of this game are generated collectively, and once we're in that realm, then questions of democracy, questions of the distribution of power, questions of common ownership, come into question. And I hope by demonstrating the degree of politicization and the way in which meanings are collectively produced, one can encourage amongst the people

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who love football in all of the millions of different ways that you can love and engage with it that there is a political dimension to it.

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