

"European integration and football as a source of national and regional identity"

6 October 2004 – Committee of the Regions – Brussels

WITH

Arsène WENGER (Manager of Arsenal FC),
Marc KELLER (Managing Director of RC Strasbourg).

CHAIRS

Daniel COHN-BENDIT (Co-President of the Green Group) and
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A debate organised by the Association for the Promotion of Alsace (APA) on the occasion of its 25th anniversary, on the initiative of – and in cooperation with – KEA European Affairs within the framework of the European Year of Education through Sport.

Mark Keller and Arsène Wenger are both from Alsace, a region at the heart of the European project and a leading-edge workshop of the European integration process. As highlighted by Philippe Kern, they are "telling examples of this Alsatian dual nature, products of that mixture of German affectivity and French sensitivity". This duality is a vehicle for the European ideal.

The plan to hold a debate on the role of football as a source of national and regional identity originated from these considerations. The discussions were chaired by MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit, an enthusiast of both football and European integration.

The manager of Arsenal FC inherited his "moral code" from his grandfather, who spoke no French. On the other hand, his formal education as well as his training as a football player are French.

Arsène Wenger, who grew up astride two cultures and is "considered neither French nor German", fittingly pointed out that "when you are abroad you take something from all the cultures you love." For his part Mark Keller recalled the importance of family values: "What stays with you when you travel, at the core of your personality, are the years you spent with your family." He added that "pride, hard work, tact and not taking anything for granted are typical Alsatian traits."

Football and identity

There is something of a paradox between the fact that football clubs are identified with a particular region (and hence their supporters) and the fact that most football teams are a mix of nationalities, a meeting point of different cultures. How does identification with a multicultural team take place?

Wenger believes that if supporters are interested in the game, it is largely because "they take sides with one team or the other", and they do so "without making any race considerations", added Keller, completing Wenger's thought.



Arsène Wenger



Daniel Cohn-Bendit



Marc Keller

"When the team wins, supporters feel they have also won," said Wenger. Such identification with the club happens when the latter represents the supporter effectively. The team is therefore, in a sense, "responsible for people's happiness", he added. However, he also pointed out that identifying too closely with a team is not without dangers for supporters.

"The mystery," said the Gunners' coach, "is that people are able to identify at the same time with multicultural teams and with a national team." Europe's development is also characterised by this paradox: "People are multicultural but, when they have an opportunity to express their identity, we also observe a very strong resurgence of local values." Wenger sees this as a form of "coexistence".

"Integration means communication".

Arsène Wenger

"As with food, you only really like the kind of football you've experienced in your childhood." Thus, remarked Cohn-Bendit, explaining the comparison, identification is a process of "continual search for our past".

Some clubs have always preserved a certain specific identity while others are completely devoid of any such thing. "Arsenal is a multicultural club, but at the same time the Gunners will always be the Gunners," proclaimed the MEP. He then went on to ask how the club had managed to remain true to itself and preserve its identity.

Proud of Arsenal FC's success, Wenger explained that the many nationalities that make up the club (14 altogether) have led it to give special attention to encouraging communication between the players through an in-house culture and an in-house identity. The aim is to create a sort of "miniature nation so as to define what we want to become". "How do we want to be perceived from the outside?" This, said Wenger, is a key question. Moreover, "a group that does not communicate has no dynamism." Therefore "integration means communication. Integration means sharing things." In Europe, he remarked, many multicultural bodies find it difficult to establish effective communication. Do European institutions have something to learn from football?

"Sport is inherently fair and you learn to say who is the best without looking at the colour of their skin or where they come from". Arsène Wenger

"When I'm thinking of hiring a player," said Arsenal FC's manager, "I don't look at his passport." Motivation and intelligence are the most important criteria, in his view, for deciding to recruit a young person. The principle at work here is "The proof is in the pudding". Football is a high-level sport, and a player must always surpass himself to be recognised as the best by others."

For his part, Keller admitted that the availability of quality players from certain countries where they are less expensive is a major "factor in the balance" for a club like RC Strasbourg, which cannot afford to recruit players from the UK, Spain or Italy.

Football and European integration

While promoting multiculturalism, football also contributes to building a European identity. Wenger gave the example of French players in Britain who are helping to change perceptions of France among the British general public. "People identify with Thierry Henry and Patrick Viera". The increasing number of players transferred from one European country to another is really helping to change people's mentalities.

"Football is ahead of the rest of society".

Arsène Wenger,
speaking of multicultural integration.

According to Wenger, therefore, football is at the forefront of the European integration process. He added that integration, whether in Europe as a whole or in a football club, is not aimed at imposing the same culture on everybody. Individuals, groups and nations should retain their cultural specificities. This is indeed what Wenger is trying to do at Arsenal by upholding a quintessentially European ideal: unity within diversity. Cohn-Bendit mentioned the example of the many Brazilian players in Europe. Brazil's national team has now adopted a more European style, which has "deprived football of a certain magical quality". But "national teams benefit from the experience gained by players working abroad," noted Keller.

The manager of the Gunners added that what is important in football are the feelings you share with people who are different from you. "Is there anything more heart-warming than seeing a Ukrainian player jump into the arms of his Brazilian team-mate when they've scored a goal?"

Football a conveyor for social integration?

Football can contribute powerfully to social integration, particularly in terms of promoting equal opportunities. "It is a genuine school of social skills and teamwork, which promotes solidarity," said Cohn-Bendit. "Sport is inherently fair and you learn to say who is the best without looking at the colour of their skin or where they come from," added Arsène Wenger. The manager of RC Strasbourg went on to say that football teams play an integrating role at a very practical level. He mentioned the social work carried out by his club in favour of disadvantaged groups and young people.

Wenger believes that too much emphasis on the local community is not good for sport. There is a risk of turning one's back on the rest of the world and this can cause problems during matches because it exacerbates peculiarities and differences between groups. It runs counter to the integrating role of sport.



"We should also highlight the fact that football, and sport in general, promote the social integration of women," he said. More and more women are playing football all over the world, and this is undoubtedly a highly significant social trend.

In Cohn-Bendit's opinion, the change in nationality legislation in Germany will enable young Turks to identify more closely with the "Mannschaft", which will incorporate players born in Germany from Turkish parents.

Football, competition and solidarity between clubs

Cohn-Bendit believes that the European Union has changed the world of football, somewhat distorting the competitive balance between the larger clubs and the smaller ones. The issue of how to organise the sport internationally must be addressed because, in his opinion, it is not a normal situation for Italian or Spanish clubs to have no obligation to submit a financial audit and therefore to be able to incur colossal debts. It is necessary to establish a level playing field by adopting a set of common European regulations for all teams, particularly in such areas as financial control, license management and government aid.

The MEP mentioned the risk that "football may follow the same path as competition cycling, with national teams evolving into brand-name teams, which elicit much less enthusiasm from supporters."

However, as Cohn-Bendit recalled, the European Union has integrated sport in the Constitutional Treaty alongside culture, thus recognising that sport should not be treated like a mere commodity.

"It is necessary to establish common European regulations for all teams, particularly in such areas as financial control, license management and government aid".

Daniel Cohn-Bendit

Cohn-Bendit believes that all European clubs should be "placed on an equal footing" and comply with the same rules. The Arsenal manager thinks that one day a common championship – a "European League" – may come into being in Europe but added that such a system ought to include automatic relegation and should not be a closed league. Furthermore, it should not exclude small clubs, though admittedly the aim of high-level sport is to bring together the top athletes.

As the representative of what is, by European standards, a "small" club, Keller pointed out that "revenue from football varies significantly from one country to another" in terms of advertising and sponsorship, ticket sales and TV broadcasting rights. As regards the latter, the degree of "solidarity" varies across countries. In the UK, unlike the situation in other countries, stadiums are run and main-



tained by football clubs operating like companies. Wenger added that solidarity existed in the football world but that "basically, it's like politics: each for himself".

In order to narrow the gap between the smaller and larger clubs and have a fairer sport – stressed Arsenal FC's coach – we must recognise the importance of individual efforts and determination, as well as of the mobility of the players as a means of promoting exchanges of know-how about training techniques, etc. "If they work hard, the smaller outfits can beat the big ones. Nothing is decided beforehand in this sport," he argued.

Football and doping

Marc Keller believes it is not easy for a football player to take drugs because "he has to be fit and ready to play every three days for a whole season". Drugs "perhaps enable a player to run faster, but they do nothing for his intelligence."

For his part Arsène Wenger believes that the problem of doping in football is underestimated, and he favours EU intervention in this area, as indeed does Cohn-Bendit. "I wouldn't say that doping is a major problem for football, but I wouldn't say there is no problem either," said Wenger. "Some football players have been encouraged to take drugs by unscrupulous coaches."

A European team?

Wenger stressed that "unfairness is greater at the level of national teams than among clubs." At present, Europe's fragmentation prevents most European national teams from being able to compete, for example, with Brazil. "How can Slovenia, with a population of barely two million, be a match for Brazil, which can draw on the resources of 200 million inhabitants?" asked Wenger. If we are serious about equal opportunities, he argued, then we must create a European team to play against Brazil. "We must change the existing structures and enable Europe, as such, to play against Brazil" he argued. Similarly, "the day Europe will function as a nation, we will have a European championship," he stressed.

The debate was organised with the support of



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