

Labouring Across Borders: The Movement of Global Labour within European Soccer

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In this response, I want to examine how the movement of soccer labour, primarily through youth soccer academies, can help us to make sense of contemporary immigration flows and debates over citizenship and belonging. Identity and belonging are intimately tied up with soccer, particularly when it comes to who should represent a country at the international level. The migration of foreign players into the European leagues is connected to the global movement of capital, yet unlike other forms of migration, soccer renders immigrant labour highly visible and public. This makes it a fascinating site to interrogate how the global labour market is changing and how these changes are themselves affecting notions of belonging and borders.

Often, the labour of immigrants in the private sphere is largely invisible, but in the case of soccer, immigrant labour is highly visible and public. This visibility, of course, is made possible by the massive global media presence soccer enjoys. As a result, European teams are desperate to uncover the most promising talent, regardless of where a player may have been born. Unlike in the United States, where universities often serve as training grounds for promising young athletes, in the top soccer leagues, each team has its own academy where it trains players it has recruited. In England, for instance, players are signed to a single team's academy starting at age nine. In addition to recruiting talent from within their own borders, teams are now looking abroad to secure young talent, either bringing these young players to their own academies, or, more frequently, setting up academies in African and South American countries (similar to what MLB teams do in the Dominican Republic).

While FIFA rules make it challenging to move players into domestic academies there are no rules or oversight governing academies set up abroad. While these academies are ostensibly meant to prepare players for life beyond soccer (since the vast majority of them will not have professional soccer careers with top-tier teams) the educational and vocational training provided is often lacking. In addition, by setting up their own academies, European teams deprive local community teams of resources and revenue. Selling a player to a European team was often how local teams and communities generated revenue, but the local community is now being cut out. This led former FIFA President Sepp Blatter (hardly a model of morality) to refer to the trend of European soccer clubs establishing soccer academies in Africa and South America as an example of neo-colonialism since these academies exist solely to extract labour from local communities. This movement of labour extends notions of neo-colonialism and the international division of labour by moving cultural production to the global

North. In the case of soccer, players from the global South are labouring in the global North, but their labour is sold back to their home countries through the mediatisation of the League, which again leads back to the question of belonging and citizenship.

According to FIFA rules, players who have lived in a country for five years are eligible to play for that country's national team, which means that foreign academy players are often eligible to play for their adopted country raising questions over belonging and representation. Perhaps the best example of this debate is Lionel Messi, who was born in Argentina but moved to play in Spain at the age of 13. Despite having lived more than half his life in Spain, Messi plays for Argentina; however, his decision to play for the country of his birth has not inoculated him from criticism, and, given Argentina's poor showing at this summer's World Cup, there were questions raised about Messi's commitment to his country of origin. International tournaments (and the World Cup in particular) are often sites of fierce debate over belonging and identity. Whereas league play is seen as business, playing for the national team is "supposed" to be about love of country (which is seen publicly as transcending labour – it is not work, it is a privilege). National teams are increasingly multicultural in ways that reflect migration patterns (which often reflect old colonial relationships), yet it is often these naturalized or first-generation players that are singled out for criticism when a national team struggles. For instance, German players Mesut Özil and İlkay Gündoğan recently had their German-ness questioned after meeting with Turkish President Recep Erdoğan ahead of the World Cup. In contrast, the multicultural makeup of the French and English teams were praised for how they represented the (literal) changing face of those two countries (which conveniently glossed over racial tensions in those places). The dynamic movement of soccer labour and its high media visibility raises many interesting and challenging questions about the intersection of labour, identity, and belonging.