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# Colombia's Political Football: President Santos' National Unity Project and the 2014 Football World Cup

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The Colombian football team's performance in the 2014 World Cup has allowed President Santos to use football in his national unity project. The *selección* is a rare unifying symbol in Colombia and politicians have previously sought to use football in the construction of a national political project. This article explores why, on this occasion, football has proved a more effective tool than when it was employed by Presidents Gaviria (in 1993-94) and Pastrana (in 2001). As well as analysing how Santos has appropriated football figures and discourses, consideration will be given to how the *selección* has become a contested symbol involving other political actors.

Keywords: football, Colombia, President Santos, nation, nation-building, World Cup 2014

In the 2014 Men's football World Cup in Brazil, Colombia gave its best ever performance in the competition, losing in the quarter finals. The team gained praise from all quarters for their football and goal celebrations, James Rodríguez ended as the competition's top scorer, the team won the Fair Play award, and Rodríguez's goal against Uruguay earned the Puskas trophy for best goal of 2014. The afterglow of the team's effort engendered a feel-good factor across a nation proud of their representatives, the team leaving an almost entirely positive image of the country, the exciting play on the pitch matched by the exuberance and colour of the supporters. This footballing success regenerated football as a unifying national symbol, with Roa and Salcedo establishing that as a tool it once again had the power to mobilise different social classes around the resurgence of a national feeling, as well as the conjunction between football and fiesta giving the world an idea of the Colombian nation through a very tropical 'carnival' image most associated with coastal regions (Roa and Salcedo, 2014: 49).

Although the tropical image mentioned is not totally representative, it embodies some of the most positive aspects of Colombia as imagined by the national and international community. This positive image has been cultivated by those involved in the footballing project and notably by President Juan Manuel Santos; there has been a renewed attempt to portray a positive national image through football to Colombians and the world, as politics, sponsors, the media and the sport converge. Colombia's 'other' for this rebirth of sporting nationalism is its own troubled image, another attempt to cast aside negative connotations of violence, corruption and criminality. This current generation has had more success in the temporary banishment of Colombia's difficult past, in comparison with the last great Colombian team of 1993-94. That team, that crushed Argentina 5-0 in Buenos Aires on their way to qualifying for the 1994 World Cup, were heralded by President César Gaviria as representing the very best of Colombia, in an era when the country was in the middle of a drug war against the Medellín and Cali cartels. On that occasion, Colombia went out in the first round, having lost humiliatingly to the USA, before defender Andrés Escobar was murdered shortly after returning to the country. After such high hopes, Colombia's football was tarnished and the patriotic sentiment quickly faded.

### **The Search for Colombian Style: Football against a Backdrop of Violence**

Eduardo Archetti suggested that for sporting nationalism to occur, several requirements must be met. Firstly, there must have been rites of passage, to ensure that football has undergone 'creolization', or has been naturalised in the local, regional or national setting in cultural, economic and social terms. There then has to be sporting success, which allows the nation to be positively represented and creates heroes whose exploits can be extolled. Finally, a sense of 'us vs them' should be fomented, ideally engendered through a style of play contrasted to an 'other' (Alabarces, 2002: p.42-43). Success in Colombian football has been fleeting, and creating a national style of football prob-

lematic, when for so long Colombian football slavishly copied the Argentine school. Francisco Maturana, as coach of the national team in the late 1980s and early 1990s, helped Colombian football gain its own identity based around the hard work stereotypical of the Antioquia region and the flair of the Valle del Cauca and coastal regions. Maturana explicitly stressed the footballing strengths of certain regions, showing the nation how combining regional features could strengthen the whole. As more regular victories finally occurred with promising Copa América performances in 1987 and 1989 and qualification to the World Cup in 1990 (for the first time since 1962), these successes could be attributed to a defined and signposted Colombian style, a team making the most of its imagined regional components. Maturana made clear the need for the players to express themselves on the pitch and the press were quick to agree with him, welcoming a *toque toque* football style that was described and perceived to be Colombian. As Dávila and Londoño discuss, through Maturana's deliberate 'signings' of regional characteristics, the population, or certain regions of the population, became present in the national team (Dávila and Londoño, 2003: 134). This style, however, was actually defined against a Colombian 'other', rather than against another nation – Colombia as a country in constant turmoil, wracked by violence and corruption, and defined by insecurity and bloodshed. Colombia announced itself as a footballing power and tried to highlight its best regional characteristics, in so doing attempting to dismantle the way in which the nation tended to be perceived, both domestically and externally. Significantly, large swathes of the Colombian territory (including those where state presence was minimal and where guerrillas were often *de-facto* rulers) were excluded from this footballing image of the nation, problematising its success as a symbol of a national collective.

Although success is essential for football to be a potent symbol for fostering national identity, political, social and footballing factors contributed to creating a more propitious and enduring environment for this process. Lessons had been learned from the 1993-94 generation, football in that period being an unstable, contested symbol that had been too-long ignored by the state. Politi-

cally too, the situation was substantially different in 2014. The World Cup took place as negotiations between the government and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas seemed to offer the best chance of ending the long-lasting conflict. In fact, since 1998, the ongoing three-way conflict between government forces, left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries had shaped the nation's self-confidence and identification towards the nation or lack thereof, during a period when Colombian football was in the doldrums and was therefore of less use in nation-building. Three presidents, Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002), Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and current President Santos, had very different strategies for dealing with the internal war, and with the atomisation of the drug cartels, each strategy impacting on notions of nationhood.

Pastrana announced in July 1998 that he had held discussions with FARC leader Tirofijo (Sureshot) Manuel Marulanda, and that peace talks would begin at the end of the year. Prior to the negotiations, Pastrana conceded sovereignty of a region the size of Switzerland in the Caguán region of Caquetá to FARC, despite opponents believing that it allowed FARC the chance to reorganise. Pastrana's decision may have been 'logical given that the FARC was the only group ever to have administered the territory' (Hylton, 2006: 99), but it also demoralised the nation. It was effectively an admission of state failure, and also legitimised the FARC as *de-facto* regional controllers and as 'legitimate political agents' (Lobo, 2013: 358). As paramilitaries were effectively controlling much of the Magdalena Medio region, Suárez suggests that Colombians worried that the political division of the country could change and give way to three different nations, the Colombian Republic, the Republic of Caguán, and the Republic of the Medio Magdalena (Suárez, 2008: 413). Referencing Anderson's view of the national map as a vital device for the portrayal and imagining of the nation (Anderson, 1991: 175), Suárez argues that conceding territory to paramilitaries and the FARC jeopardised the political map of the country, producing the effect of a disintegrating nation and a state losing sovereignty (Suárez, 2008: 413).

FARC also impacted on football's potential to construct sporting nationalism under Pastrana. Colombia was due to host the 2001 Copa América, the first time a major international event had been hosted in the country. A series of bombs across the country in 2001 led to the South American Football Confederation, CONMEBOL, contemplating hosting the Copa América elsewhere. The tournament became an issue of state pride with the nation's capacity to control its territory questioned. Pastrana fought to maintain Colombia's hosting rights, in so doing also trying to increase his administration's popularity rating in the middle of a failing peace process with the guerrillas. FARC then kidnapped the Vice President of the Colombian Football Federation, and the championship was cancelled, but following pressure from sponsors, Colombia was reinstated as the host nation. FARC, too, gave it their blessing; Hernán Ramírez, a member of the FARC International Political Commission, said that the FARC were not against the hosting of the Cup, the teams, nor against the population being able to have fun (*Copa América: Delegado reitera que las FARC apoya la Copa*, Emol, 21 July 2001). Although the tournament went ahead with Colombia winning the final and Pastrana triumphantly hailing the team and the country's successful hosting of the tournament, the perception was that Pastrana had less influence on the hosting of the tournament than sponsors and the say-so of the guerrillas. Pastrana had repeatedly called it 'the Cup of Peace', but following a reduction in violence during the championships as guerrillas ceased their attacks, things soon returned to normal.

President Uribe's two terms (2002-2010) saw a contrasting approach to the FARC, as he sought to delegitimise them as political actors, and to cast them, their supporters and anyone who opposed his policies, as terrorists or terrorist apologists. He sought also to strengthen the state, particularly the military and security institutions, and to reinvent patriotic symbols. As Lobo establishes, Uribe's 'discourse produced a clear line of demarcation between us - the nation - and them - the nation's enemies' (Lobo, 2013: 355). With this single-minded anti-insurgent policy, and through the

regeneration of national symbols and icons, he managed to ‘rekindle the idea of a nation as one, rather than as many. Which is why his eight years in power are talked about as a second independence’ (359). Suárez gives examples of a number of symbols that were rebuilt under Uribe, notably the widespread appearance of the *tricolor* national flag in everyday use, and the perception that national territory was being reclaimed through the Plan Patriota counter-insurgency strategy launched in 2004. Uribe’s democratic security policy reduced murder and kidnapping rates in the country as well as achieving unprecedented military successes against left wing insurgents, and he also oversaw the demobilisation of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, AUC) paramilitaries. Due to these efforts he enjoyed high popularity ratings. The condemnation of all opposition to his policies as unpatriotic or as terrorist sympathisers is, however, problematic with regard to casting as ‘other’ to the nation those who lived in Colombian territories administered by insurgents. Colombians caught in the middle of the conflict could not consider themselves within the nation, ostracised through geographical circumstance. NGOs and social rights movements were similarly treated with great suspicion, which complicated social integration.

Uribe, never a strong football supporter, made little political capital from the football team, which was struggling and failed to qualify for the World Cups in 2002, 2006 and 2010. During this time the Colombian league had been weakened with the best talents leaving to play abroad, and attendances at stadiums fell. Once Caldas, a largely unheralded team from Manizales, shocked the continent by winning the most important club trophy in South America, the Copa Libertadores, in 2004, but their style of play was defensive and uninspiring, critics labelling it ‘antifootball’ and saying that it ‘betrayed the essence of Colombian football’ (*¿Cuál antifútbol?*, 2004). Club finances were also hard hit as a consequence of the drop in attendances and by money from illegal sources not flooding into clubs as much as it had done, as will be discussed later. The national team was struggling to live up to the expectations of the past and a move away from the Medellín school of football of coaches Maturana and Hernán Darío Gómez had weakened the style and effectiveness of the team. It is debatable whether Uribe would have attempted to exploit football success had the team

been better; he tends not to tweet congratulatory messages following national team wins as his successor, Juan Manuel Santos, so rapidly does.

## **‘Cleaning’ Football’s Image**

Since being elected in 2010, Santos has changed political tack, ‘returning to a discourse of social conflict in Colombia which allows the guerrillas some degree of legitimacy as political actors’ (Lobo: 362). Peace negotiations continue with FARC, but examples of how Santos includes guerrillas (and those in their territories) as equally Colombian, can be appreciated through his statements around football. He excludes no-one, and implicitly refers to his aim of achieving peace in public declarations and has mentioned FARC specifically; when speaking before the 2014 World Cup and giving the flag to captain Mario Yepes as the country’s sporting ambassadors, he said:

No importa a qué partido político pertenezcan, no importa a qué religión pertenezcan, no importa cuáles sean las diferencias. Inclusive aquellas personas con las cuales estamos hoy conversando para terminar el conflicto armado, ellos también los estarán apoyando. Toda Colombia los va a estar apoyando.

It does not matter which political party you may belong to, nor what religion you have, it does not matter what the differences may be. Even those people with whom we are talking today to end the armed conflict, they too will be supporting you. All Colombia will be supporting you (Presidencia de la República, 23 May 2014).

Santos, unlike Uribe, validates FARC as Colombians, worthy of celebrating national football team success alongside other citizens. A Ministry of Defence advertising and social media campaign, ‘*Colombia le está guardando el puesto*’, (Colombia is saving you a seat) tried to convince FARC fighters to demobilise, so they could watch the World Cup with everyone else. The advert showed empty seats ready beside a variety of soldiers, celebrities and ordinary people from across the country. FARC have taken the opportunity to show that they also support Colombia, placing themselves



within the nation, by wearing the national team shirt at press calls during peace negotiations and congratulating the team for victories. An open letter to the team before the first World Cup match declared:

Estaremos con la selección en las buenas y en las malas, acompañándolos hasta el final y deseando que junto al plantel que representa a la Colombia que queremos ver unida, expresando la misma patria que somos, nos la juguemos plenamente por la Paz.

We will be with the national team through the good and the bad moments, accompanying them until the end, and wishing, alongside the squad that represents the Colombia that we want to see united, representing the same nation that we ourselves belong to, that we will be playing entirely for Peace (El País, 12 June 2014).

Santos has seen football as an important tool for social development and national unity since his presidency began in 2010, and has acted to ensure that football enjoys a 'cleaner' image to employ. Here he learned from President Gaviria's experience with the 1993-94 generation who were too closely linked with drug cartels, making their use as a positive national symbol problematic. Araújo, amongst others, notes that the most infamous drug traffickers each had their own club; Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha was involved with Millonarios, Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela with América, and Pablo Escobar with Atlético Nacional (Araújo: 1995). At a sports awards ceremony in December 2010, Santos stated 'either we change football, or football will come to an end' (El Espectador, 1 December 2010). To this end, he has passed legislation responding to revelations of criminal and paramilitary involvement in football clubs, as well as fan violence in and around stadiums. This legislation includes the 'Ley del Fútbol' (Law 1445, 12 May 2011) and the Plan Decenal de Seguridad, Comodidad y Convivencia 2014-2024. He emphasised the need to ensure that football returned to a time when there was a safe atmosphere and the fans were marvellous and promised that during the four years of his government, he would give every possible support to sport. Football (and sport in general) has been a cornerstone of Santos' national unity project; the differ-

ence between the Santos government's use of football and those examples previously discussed, is a greater 'footballization of society' (Bromberger, 2001: 18) - it is more targeted to benefit and develop society, rather than simply to entertain it or to whitewash over social problems.

As Law 1445 was announced, Santos summarised the three areas it tackled, namely establishing greater state control and vigilance over clubs and their financial dealings, defending sportspeople's rights, and providing mechanisms to deal with the violence and criminality around football stadiums (El Espectador, 24 May 2011). The law targets ownership and shareholders, subjecting professional sports clubs to the same laws as other businesses, thereby creating greater transparency. It also ensures that no-one can have financial control over more than one club and income sources should be scrutinised, thereby preventing money laundering by drug cartels, paramilitaries or third generation *bandas criminales* (criminal groups, also known as BACRIM). In this way the government hopes finally to eradicate the influence of organised crime in football, present since the early 1980s. Other sections of Law 1445 establish severe punishments for violent and antisocial behaviour in and around stadiums, including heavy fines and banning orders. The law means that clubs and law authorities must cooperate to ensure the safety of fans, and work together towards reducing violence perpetrated by organised fan groups. Though there have been programmes such as *Goles en Paz* (Goals in Peace) which have attempted to resolve the problem, it has remained. Stricter measures have, therefore, been introduced to address the issues in order to ensure that matches are safer, and more family-friendly. The actions have been generally well received: an editorial in *El País* commented that these were measures that Colombia had been awaiting for years and now was waiting expectantly for them to be fulfilled so that the nation's most popular sport could be saved (El País, 17 May 2011).

The Colombian government has been assisted by the US Treasury Department in the cleansing of national football, through the so-called Clinton List, which restricts financial transactions

with Colombian businesses with suspected links to the drugs trade. Several clubs, notably América, once bankrolled by the Cali Cartel's Miguel and Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, have been affected by the List. América's bank accounts were frozen and they struggled to attract sponsors. Being on the Clinton List, described as a financial death sentence (Pino Calad, 2014), led América to be relegated and to completely restructure its administration and ownership in order to be removed from the list in April 2013. This was extremely damaging for a club which had dominated Colombian football alongside fierce rivals Atlético Nacional from Medellín. Smaller clubs such as Cortuluá in 2006 and the defunct Florida Soccer Club have also suffered from US Treasury investigations into their business dealings. The process remains ongoing: Envigado F.C. was the latest club included on the list in November 2014 for alleged links with the *banda criminal* 'La Oficina' (Semana, 19 November 2014).

Paramilitary organisations that laundered drug money through football clubs have also been targeted. Evidence of paramilitary involvement emerged following the demobilisation talks with the AUC between 2003 and 2006. Testimonies by paramilitary leaders such as 'Don Berna', 'Macaco' and 'Jorge 40' revealed how money was laundered through smaller regional clubs. According to a newspaper article, 'Jorge 40' removed and replaced players in transactions which included clubs América, Real Cartagena and Bucaramanga, while various others such as Centauros de Villavencio, Valledupar FC, Bajo Cauca FC and Alianza Petrolera remained under investigation due to similar links and dubious financial transactions (Semana, 27 November 2011). With emerging accusations, convictions passed and the extradition of guilty parties, alongside greater transparency in club ownership and shareholders, there has been a growing view of Colombian league football as being a cleaner entity. Although the league's financial muscle compared to other Latin American leagues is reduced, it has become a more viable option for sponsorship and crowds are returning to stadiums. Quitián notes that the numbers of fans in stadiums have improved thanks, in large part, to the '*denarcotización*' of society and the State starting to turn the screw on the clubs' management

(Quitán, 2013: 64). The best Colombian players may spend little time at local clubs before heading to Argentina, Mexico or Europe and the quality of matches and players on show may have decreased from the league's heyday when leading clubs could compete to sign some of the best players on the continent and afford to keep domestic stars, but there is growing public confidence in the league's credibility. Current national team members, mostly playing abroad, also remain untainted, unlike the 1993-94 generation. Sandra Bordá contrasts these two teams: whereas the 1993-94 team was closely linked to cartels, she asserts that the current team is a much more professional and humble team, not penetrated by drug culture (Wallace, BBC Mundo, 4 July 2014).

A comparison between the 1994 and 2014 World Cup squads shows the contrast in where players are now plying their trade. Whereas in the 1994 squad only four players played abroad, in 2014, only three players were based in Colombia. The shift towards Colombians playing abroad commenced after 1994 with the 1998 World Cup squad showing a fairly even split in domestic and foreign-based players. This trend distanced footballers from dubious domestic influences, has improved their game, tactical awareness and professionalism, and allows them to compete against the world's best every week. The lack of Colombian league players also eliminates regional prejudices, such as the *rosca paisa*, the supposed Medellín bias of the 1990s when coach Maturana built his team around players from Medellín club Atlético Nacional. These Colombian footballers abroad also represented, therefore, a very different condition of being Colombian, that of Colombians succeeding abroad, as footballing ambassadors representing their country with distinction (Dávila, 2006: 107). There is also considerably less rhetoric about the supposed regional traits of players when discussing the current generation, particularly compared to the 1990-94 generation, with less focus on geographically determined characteristics or how these stereotyped assets are employed towards the team project. Players abroad have become 'deregionalised' but not 'denationalised': they are Colombian, first and foremost, and can represent all Colombians. The more global game

has also meant less emphasis on *lo colombiano*, having a defined Colombian style. Quality and victories supercede a need for stylistic difference.

### **‘Footballising’ the nation: national team/citizen linkages**

The identification between players and even the most unrepresented Colombian communities, was underlined by two open letters to James Rodríguez from the *Comunidades Construyendo Paz en los Territorios* organisation (Communities Building Peace in the Territories, CONPAZ), an ethnically diverse collective of communities and associations that live in territories afflicted by armed conflict. They wrote of the recognisable links between players and marginalised citizens:

Es usted y toda la selección, la expresión de lo que nosotros deseamos para nuestro país, pluralidad en un proyecto de nación, un país en que la diferencia es complementaria. Esa es la alegría que nacerá de una democracia incluyente, una democracia con respeto a las fuentes de la vida.

You and the whole national team, are the expression of what we desire for our country, plurality in a national project, a country in which difference is complementary. This is the happiness that will be born of an inclusive democracy, a democracy with respect for the sources of life. (Comunidades CONPAZ 1 July 2014)

That communities in conflict zones of the country, where government influence has been limited, contested, or unrecognised, which have also been historically excluded from the imagined nation, should identify with the *Selección* as an important national symbol, marks significant progress. It points too to the power of the media, both for football to reach these isolated communities, and for these communities to try to reach back out towards footballers.

Some might argue that footballers playing abroad reduces identification between citizen and player. The challenges of globalisation could mean that footballers become ‘deterritorialised’, be-

coming more identified with clubs or transnational companies than their country of birth. Clubs such as Manchester United or Real Madrid are global brands, and the best players are the face of globally recognised companies like Nike, Adidas, Coca Cola or Pepsi. This current football market, where club sides rival, and surpass, the pull of national sides can also weaken football's power towards forging nationalism. Villena argues that we are witnessing a weakening of the previously successful articulation between football and nationalism, given that globalisation processes favour the dominance of transnational entities, rather than international or national structures, a trend that could debilitate the effectiveness of the football star or team as a national symbol (Villena, 2003: 260). It could thus be that James Rodríguez, the new hero of Colombian football, who also represents Real Madrid and Adidas, will lose some of his 'Colombianness', given these stronger identifying markers and brands dominant on a global level. Commercial branding could reduce his political usefulness as a national icon. However, with more football available on terrestrial or private television channels, or streamed over the internet, it is easier than ever for fans to remain abreast of their heroes' performances abroad. The media, too, have a role in promoting players abroad as cultural ambassadors, and reports of their performances regularly feature in national newspapers and television programmes. Players starring in the best European leagues become a success for Colombia, another stamp of international recognition. Wong and Trumper, focusing on Chilean striker Iván Zamorano, argue that 'in Chile, the successful player playing abroad in the major international leagues in the "developed world" is constructed not so much as the deterritorialisation and transnationalism of the players, but, rather, as a marker of the increasing improvement of Chilean commodities abroad, in this case, fútbol' (Wong and Trumper, 2002: 180). The same has occurred with Colombian players. Footballers also have a reduced regional identity that may have been established in the Colombian league, particularly compared to players in the 1990 and 1994 World Cups who were very much defined by their origins for what they brought to the team. They are viewed as more 'Colombian', representing the country more than a specific region, and can become guarantors of Colombian brands abroad. Radamel Falcao, the Colombian star centre forward, for example,

promoted tourism to Colombia when playing in Spain, commenting that it gave him great pride to demonstrate the positive, true face of Colombia (Procolombia, 19 January 2012). James Rodríguez's fame, and Real Madrid's brand, has been employed by President Santos towards his national peace project, announcing in March 2015 that a seminar would take place in Cartagena alongside the Real Madrid Foundation to promote sport and its influence towards peace (Europapress, 2 March 2015).

The Santos government promotes several social projects targeting reintegration, coexistence and giving the young more options and education through football. Political investment in football as a tool for social development has long been lacking in Colombia; Ramos comments that for too long it had not occurred to Colombian politicians to have a campaign using the sport which most truly integrates the country, as an instrument for development (Ramos, 1998: 205). It seems that the Santos government is finally using football to benefit the country's citizens and social structures, rather than purely for its own ends. In the Plan Decenal, which builds upon the afore-mentioned Law 1445, this intent is confirmed:

El Plan Decenal es la ruta de acción que adoptará el país para fortalecer sus políticas de seguridad, comodidad y convivencia, que se relacionan tanto con el fútbol profesional, como con el fútbol aficionado y recreativo no asociado, así como para impulsar el fútbol como herramienta de transformación social.

The 10-Year Plan is the route of action that the country will adopt to strengthen its security, comfort and coexistence policies, which are related both to professional football as well as amateur and recreational football, as well as to push forward football as a tool for social transformation. (Ministerio del Interior, 2014: 14)

Throughout Santos' presidency, with campaigns such as '*Golombiao*', '*Fútbol por la paz*' (Football for peace), and '*Me la juego por las víctimas*' (I play for the victims), and public dis-

course, there has been a ‘footballization of society’ with the promotion of football as a model for collective life. The ‘*Me la juego por las víctimas*’ initiative organised through the Unidad de Víctimas del Gobierno Nacional is noteworthy. It saw former footballers like Carlos Valderrama, Mauricio Serna and Óscar Córdoba used to promote Law 1448 of 2011, the Law for Victims and the Return of Lands, through which assistance and reparations towards victims of the armed conflict are directed. Events have taken place in Cúcuta, Magangué, Apartadó, Tumaco, Tuluá, Granada, Chinulito, Turbo and Putumayo, towns and regions that have suffered due to the conflict. Through these events that include football matches, performances, discussions and motivational speeches, the government recognises regional problems, seeks to rebuild communities and promotes integration, dialogue, reparation and options away from violence and crime. The footballers, central to the event, speak for the state, arguably with more power than the state could manage in regions where trust in official institutions has been compromised. For instance, Valderrama, the most instantly recognisable Colombian footballer of the golden generation of the early 1990s, told the crowd at one event that the national government was searching for the best way for them to move forwards, as they were their country’s future (Unidad para las Víctimas, 12 November 2013). The state has managed to reclaim old footballing heroes, and employ them for social benefit and towards social development, directly connecting them to citizens in troubled areas. With fond memories of the stars of the 1990s perhaps being more powerful than blame attached to them for World Cup disappointment, these players are re-emerging as heroes and as reference points. At one stage, as Dávila comments, these players seemed to have ‘disappeared into a black hole’, leaving the country without a reference point or memory of the team that had so enthused and united a nation (Dávila, 2006: 109). This reinstatement of footballers has been augmented by their appearances on the television, whether on reality television shows, as pundits, or even by the *telenovela* “La Selección”, (the most watched programme of 2013 in Colombia) which told the story of Valderrama, René Higuita, Freddy Rincón and Faustino Asprilla. In this way, football stars of the past and present are combining and being jointly appropriated by the Santos government.



Current players are also employed in circulating government messages of social development. James Rodríguez wrote an open letter pleading for an end to fan violence, while Carlos Bacca, Luis Perea, and Juan Cuadrado amongst others were all part of the '*No es hora de callar*' (It is not the time to be silent) campaign against violence towards women. Mario Yepes, captain of the national team, supported the Day of Educational Excellence campaign. Through the words of these past and present footballers, the nation is being shaped into a team by Santos, who is urging through public statements and social media the emulation of sports teams and individual success, both male and female, and at different age groups, linking these characteristics displayed to his vision of a more united and harmonious Colombian society.

The statements, soundbites and tweets emanating from Santos are numerous, occurring whenever Colombian individuals or teams compete, but particularly in relation to the various national football teams. For instance, when training with the Under 20 team he declared that the players were people who now carried the hope of Colombians and that the team symbolised national unity (El Espectador, 13 January 2011), but before, during and after the World Cup, football assumed even more importance, especially as it coincided with another Presidential election. With football and the mega event serving as a tool and a moment that could unite Colombia better than perhaps any other, Roa and Salcedo observe that Santos eagerly sought to show his support for the National team, and through metaphors relating to unity, overcoming difference and working together in harmony, constantly related national team success to support for the dialogues with FARC as a political cause for his government. In this way, the sporting conjuncture became the most effective means of being able to talk about a uniform "we": "our country", "our team", "our peace" etc (Roa and Salcedo: 49). Particular evidence of this linking of the efforts of the World Cup team to Santos' national unity project and the peace talks with the FARC can be seen in his statement thanking the team on the 5th July 2014 after their World Cup exit in the quarter finals:

Todo, todo lo podemos lograr si trabajamos –como la Selección Colombia– ¡Unidos por un país! Esa es la gran lección que nos dejaron estos colombianos admirables, estos grandes deportistas y grandes seres humanos que nos representaron en el Mundial de Fútbol...Porque la Selección nos unió como país y nos mostró lo mejor de los colombianos: ese talento, esa capacidad de lucha, esa determinación ...¡Así es Colombia! Así vamos a ganar este otro gran partido que estamos jugando: ¡el de la paz con prosperidad social!

We can achieve everything, everything, if we work like the National Colombian football team, united for a country. This is the great lesson that these admirable Colombians have left us, these great sportsmen, great human beings, who represented us in the World Cup...Because the National team united us as a country, and they showed us the best of Colombians: that talent, that capacity to fight, that determination ...This is Colombia! In this way we are going to win that other great match that we are playing, that of peace with social prosperity! (Presidencia de la República, 5th July 2014)

This televised statement by Santos, which he made while wearing the *Selección* shirt, followed a video of the national anthem, full of patriotic images and positive symbols celebrating the nation's diversity, perfectly demonstrates the extent of Santos's footballisation of society and politics.

Through the association of imagined national characteristics embodied by the country's footballing ambassadors, reinforced with patriotic icons and symbols instantly recognisable as national, Santos attempts not only to validate his peace process, but also strengthen national ties and identity, coalesced into the hope of a brighter future.

## **Beyond the 2014 World Cup**

A year on from the 2014 World Cup, football talk dominated the Colombian media once again with Colombian involvement in the men's Copa América in Chile, at the same time as the women's team, often referred to in 'masculine' or 'militaristic' terms as the '*superpoderosas*' (the super

powerful ones) or *'nuestras guerreras'* (our warriors) played in the Women's World Cup in Canada. The concurrence of these tournaments enabled the women's team to gain a foothold in the national imagination, allowing the inclusion of women, through football, to begin to gain significance for the population. So long a male-only domain in Colombia, the women's creditable performance in the World Cup (losing in the 2nd round to eventual winners the USA), followed by a silver medal behind favourites Brazil in the Panamerican championships, enabled women to appear as a valued part of the national football symbol. Memories have been created around Daniela Montoya's long range strike against Mexico, and by the win against France. One of the team's stars, YorelÍ Rincón, argued that the team was as representative a team as the men's team of the 1980s and 90s' (El Espectador, 17 June 2015). The women's efforts were endorsed on social media by both President Santos and former male players such as Mauricio Serna, who tweeted '#LasChicasSuperpoderosas son la muestra de la FUERZA, CARÁCTER y DEDICACIÓN de la MUJER colombiana. Gracias!!!' (LasChicasSuperpoderosas are the demonstration of the STRENGTH, CHARACTER AND DEDICATION of the Colombian WOMAN. Thank you!!) (@MChichoSerna account, 23rd June 2015). Colombian female footballers (in addition to other successful female athletes such as Olympic gold medallists BMX rider Mariana Pajón and triple jumper Catherine Ibargüen) appear finally to be contributing to the imagination of national characteristics towards a more united future, partially filling one of the gaps previously unrepresented in the symbolic value of Colombian football. It remains to be seen if and when indigenous people and more peripheral states will be similarly represented. The departments of Amazonas, Arauca, Caquetá, Casanare, Guainía, Guaviare, Meta, Putumayo, Sucre, Vaupés and Vichada have yet to have a player born in the region play for the national team, reflective of the manner in which these states are often contested areas between the state and *guerrilla* forces, and which consequently have often felt absent from the Colombian imagined community.

One interesting aspect of the ‘patriotic polyphony’ (Ramírez, 2009:175) around the World Cup and the 2015 summer tournaments was the way they were covered on Twitter, with fans, journalists, former and current players, companies, sponsors and politicians all taking to the ‘Twittersphere’ to comment and report on the matches, benefitting from the exposure. Twitter, amongst all the social media, perhaps best facilitates a place of encounter between diverse members of a national (or international) imagined community, and it is unsurprising that it is increasingly employed towards strengthening national collective unity, in this case behind the football team, as well as commercialising the footballing product. A means of collating support and condensing opinions into an easily searchable stream of consciousness around one topic is the Twitter hashtag, a type of online e-jingle for the 21st century, which helps to create a sense of simultaneousness towards a national group (Roa and Salcedo: 47). It is illustrative to see the hashtags promoted by official Colombian footballing institutions and sponsors to appreciate the message conveyed to their followers. Prominent amongst hashtags used regularly by the official Colombian Football Federation account (@FCFSeleccionCol), were ‘#SomosSelecciónColombia’ (#WeAreTeamColombia) and ‘#LaCopaConMiSelección’ (#TheCupWithMyNationalTeam). In such terms, the ‘deixis of homeland is embedded’ (Billig, 1995: 94) through collective markers, such as ‘somos’, and ‘mi’, invoking in their 3.54 million followers a sense of loyalty and togetherness towards the national team, and by extension, the nation, here represented by the football teams. President Santos (@JuanManSantos, followed by 4.66 million users) also uses this ‘deixis of little words’ (Billig: 94) in his tweets, in both political and sporting matters: prior to the men’s quarter final game against Argentina, Santos wrote ‘Vamos @FCFSeleccionCol No hay desafío imposible cuando trabajamos en equipo, con disciplina y pasión. ¡Toda Colombia en la cancha!’ (Come on the National team! There is no impossible challenge when we work as a team, with discipline and passion. All of Colombia on the pitch!’ (June 27<sup>th</sup> 2015) This is a continuation of his message of national unity, a repeated call for diligence and togetherness, rhetoric that has been so characteristic of his public declarations.

The idea of ‘All of Colombia on the pitch’ resonates with the Grupo Bancolombia hashtag #UnPaísEnUnaCancha, part of their advertising campaign of the same name. In its adverts, Bancolombia, a national team sponsor, promotes its services by playing on a sense of patriotism and, concurrently, echoing the rhetoric of President Santos. The constant message of Bancolombia Twitter updates (@Bancolombia) relating to the tournaments is one of national unity, as evidenced here: ‘Cuando juega la selección podemos ser #UnPaísEnUnaCancha, abrazar nuestras diferencias y convertimos en una familia’ (When the national team plays, we can be #OneCountryOnAPitch, embrace our differences and become a family’) (13th June 2015).

We can observe how the convergence of the media, commercial interests, politics and the public through the prism of football helps to engender a more patriotic sentiment, enhancing national identity, where everyone involved can benefit, either economically, socially or politically. This only functions where football is established as a national symbol, easily identifiable to citizens; this is certainly the case in Colombia, where the Colombian National team, according to Villamarín, is the epicentre of a passion which encompasses every citizen, irrespective of age, gender, race, political affiliation, religious belief or region of birth (Villamarín, 2015: 72) and where the condition of being a “fan” seems to be an obligatory feature in exercising national citizenship (Rozo, 2014: 29).

## **Conclusion**

President Santos, through public statements and social media comments linking together sporting success, nation and society, is trying to build an inclusive national identity around the idea of a team working together, symbolised by male and female sports stars. The professionalism, dedication and effort required for international sporting success are appropriated and redeployed as being the characteristics Colombia requires to make similar advances and leave behind its troubled past. A raft of government and non-government sponsored social projects centred around football as a tool to-

wards social development and coexistence is finally harnessing and employing Colombia's perhaps most potent unifying device. President Santos has taken advantage of an improving political situation with the reduced confrontational capacity of organised criminal organisations, the demobilisation of paramilitaries and the ongoing peace process with FARC to continue with the process of the reclaiming of territory, the reconstruction of national symbols and fostering a more inclusive national identity. The fact that this political scenario has occurred in tandem with arguably the most successful footballing generation in Colombia's history, a generation largely playing abroad and therefore disassociated with problems linked to drug trafficking and internal scandals, has meant that the association of footballing success and the team's constructed virtues with Santos' political project has been less problematic, and far more successful, than in the past.

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