


source at a time of increasing efforts to decenter dominant narratives, as it introduces a more diverse array of voices and perspectives into the curriculum.

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Egypt's Football Revolution: Emotion, Masculinity, and Uneasy Politics

Carl Rommel (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2021). Pp. 294. \$55.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781477323175

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Egypt's Football Revolution is an excellent ethnography of Egyptian football culture during an extraordinary and dramatic historical period. The book is based mainly on extended field-work and interviews conducted non-continuously between the late 2000s and 2019, informed by reviewing football coverage in Egyptian media in those years. Although it is not the first scholarly study of contemporary Egyptian football, it is unprecedented in its depth, breadth, and analytical rigor. While the book covers various sub-spheres of fandom, its core plot is the rise and fall of the Egyptian fan groups known as the Ultras, which took place in tandem with the rise and fall of Egypt's democratizing dynamics. Through the parallel examination of the dynamics in football and the series of regime changes, the book details the convoluted, multifaceted, and unplanned relations between football fandom and politics.

The Ultras are known in football scholarship as informal or semiformal fan organizations consisting of young working-class men, usually with an anti-establishment orientation and transgressive tendencies, which have become part of the European football landscape since the 1960s. They resemble English "hooligan" groups that emerged earlier, but the Ultras have developed an articulated stand against commodified and media-saturated football. In their Italian model (which has been adopted in some other Mediterranean countries), they might also have a radical right-wing or left-wing political orientation. This context is important for understanding the uniqueness of the localized version of the Egyptian Ultras and their relation to *siyāsa* (politics), powerfully illustrated in the book.

Rommel studied the major Egyptian Ultras groups, Ahlawy and White Knights (cheering for the two Cairo rivals, Al-Ahly and al-Zamalek, respectively), both founded in 2007. They shared many of the characteristics of their prototypical European predecessors, including lower-class grievances and an anti-commodification stand, but unlike them, they claimed to be "apolitical," namely, to represent an imagined Egyptian national consensus. Throughout the book, there is an evident tension between this self-labeling and the undeniable political contingencies of the Ultras' action and rhetoric. As the book illustrates, the emotionality of football rituals is a fertile ground for political exploitation by various actors, and the Ultras have inevitably become part of this power struggle.

Rommel's major metaphor in reference to Egyptian football is the "bubble." The late Mubarak era, so goes the argument, was dominated by sentiments of frustration and despair and in those years Egypt's international success in football (three consecutive African championships in 2006, 2008, and 2010), provided "exhilarating happiness, boisterous pride, a rare sense of possibility, and collective feeling of victory" (p. 10). It was not only international



success that provided a layer of legitimacy for the regime. The convergence between the ethos of the normalized football subject—moderately Muslim, not overly intellectual, and somewhat brutish—and the public persona of Hosni Mubarak and his two sons also played a role. In this regard, Egyptian football presents a familiar pattern in the sociology of sport—the apolitical image of sport is a major element enabling its political power. The inevitable end of the golden years of Egyptian football cannot explain the 2011 revolution, but the book adopts a common argument among Egyptian commentators, namely, had those years continued, football could have brought the Mubarak regime the boost required to survive for another year or two.

The Ultras tried to distinguish themselves from the legitimizing potential of the “bubble” and Rommel describes a process through which the football bubble of the late Mubarak era was “squeezed from two directions”: by Islamist politicians and secular intellectuals who considered it a distraction from pressing concerns, and by the Ultras who insisted on exposing its corrupting aspects (of course, these groups had various, and somewhat contradictory, agendas).

The Ultras emerged during the heydays of football popularity, and they challenged the commodified and pacifying order. Not surprisingly, back then, the media dismissed them as “rowdy and partisan thugs.” Representing middle-class moral panics, framing poor young undisciplined males as a major public threat, most media echoed the regime’s interest in stability. However, during the 2011 struggle for democracy, the Ultras’ anti-establishment tendencies, and even their readiness to exercise regulated forms of violence, became their most important assets. Especially after commentators in the media identified the new direction of political winds, the revolutionary times enabled the Ultras to equip their working-class model of masculine bravery with an image of middle-class respectability and nationalist sentiments. Now, their appeal bridged class and political divides, and they became everyone’s darling.

Once the unpopular Mubarak regime ended, the religious-secular divide came to the fore. Since the membership of both major Ultra groups was split right across this divide, their pretension to represent an “apolitical” national consensus could not persist. Between the choices of taking a side in this divide or becoming politically passive and therefore irrelevant, the book illustrates how the Ultras picked the latter, and lost their broad appeal and their iconic revolutionary status. In 2012–13, the Ultras continued to be visible and vocal, leading the struggle for convicting those responsible for the killing of seventy-two of their members in football riots in Port Said. However, with the absence of the old regime as the villain, and their ambiguous relation to Mohamed Mursi’s presidency and his power grab, the Ultras lost their clear and focused moral voice. This decline in popularity made it easier for the al-Sisi counter-revolutionary regime to outlaw the Ultras and contain their oppositional potential. In 2018, Ultras Ahlawy took a decision to dissolve themselves. The White Knights did not make a similar declaration but had practically disappeared.

Evidently, one of the strengths on this ethnography is its temporal overlap with the most dramatic years of both Egyptian politics and Egyptian football. The rise and fall of the Ultras, which the book fascinatedly illustrates and analyzes, could be read as a sad allegory of Egyptian democratic aspirations and of a brave but failed attempt to liberate citizens from alienating commodification and oppressive regimes.

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