

Thomas Bonnie James



Abstract:

Qatar in Paris: Paris St-Germain, Cosmopolitanism, and National Identity Performance Post-2022

In this project, I take the negative media coverage that the 2022 World Cup has received from much of the western press as a starting point to discuss the Qatari ownership of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) football club as a means of national identity performance in the years after the tournament. I argue that this ownership of PSG allows for a cleaner model of identity performance than the World Cup in that the team's inherent cosmopolitanism acts as bridging capital for the club's Qatari owners with the Cultural West. It is this capital which dismantles anachronistic binaries of 'east v west' and 'us v them'. This cleaner identity, occurring because of the team's successes derived from a multitude of diverse factors, generates what Norbert Elias describes as a 'group charisma.' More closely aligned to an image of an urban, chic, diverse, and successful football team brought together under the auspices of Qatari ownership, I suggest that this charisma marginalizes to some degree previous negative images of Qatar. It is argued that a pivotal part of this process is the readymade legion of supporters willing to overlook any negativity while acting as proxy-defenders of the club in public forums. PSG's transfer policy since the QSI takeover of recruiting several of the most high profile football players in the world is also analyzed in light of this argument. Here, it is argued that what Markowitz and Rensman describe as 'the Beckham effect' acts as a catalyst in promoting the brand of Qatar by recentring the world of football away from traditional powerbrokers to new actors. The crux of this argument lies in harnessing the star power of some of the highest profile players on the planet and combining that with Michael Billig's views on banal nationalism. The outcome I suggest is a form of banal cosmopolitanism that enlarges Qatar's brand on a global stage by allowing it access to a hegemonic sporting culture previously beyond its reach.

The project concludes by asking a number of critical questions of this attempt at identity performance. How effective is ownership of PSG as a 'vector of identification' (Ranc) for Qatari citizens and also those critical voices located overseas? Does playing for or even supporting PSG now constitute a proxy form of social nationalism for the Qatari state, even for those fans whose support for the club pre-dates the QSI takeover? Is the Qatar Sports Investment authority's ownership of PSG effectively a form of subtle nationalism at work capable of magnifying the presence of the Gulf state to a global sporting audience? Finally, is the success of this identity performance contingent on success on the pitch, and will an absence of the latter result in the kind of soft disempowerment (Brannagan & Giulianotti) that has become increasingly evident in the build up to the World Cup?

Bio:

Thomas Bonnie James is a lecturer and specialist in West Asian Studies. He is also a Ph.D. Candidate and Graduate Research Assistant at the Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University. He holds a Bachelor's and Master's in Political Science from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. His primary research areas include International Relations, Global Political Economy, Foreign Policy Analysis, and South Asian Studies.