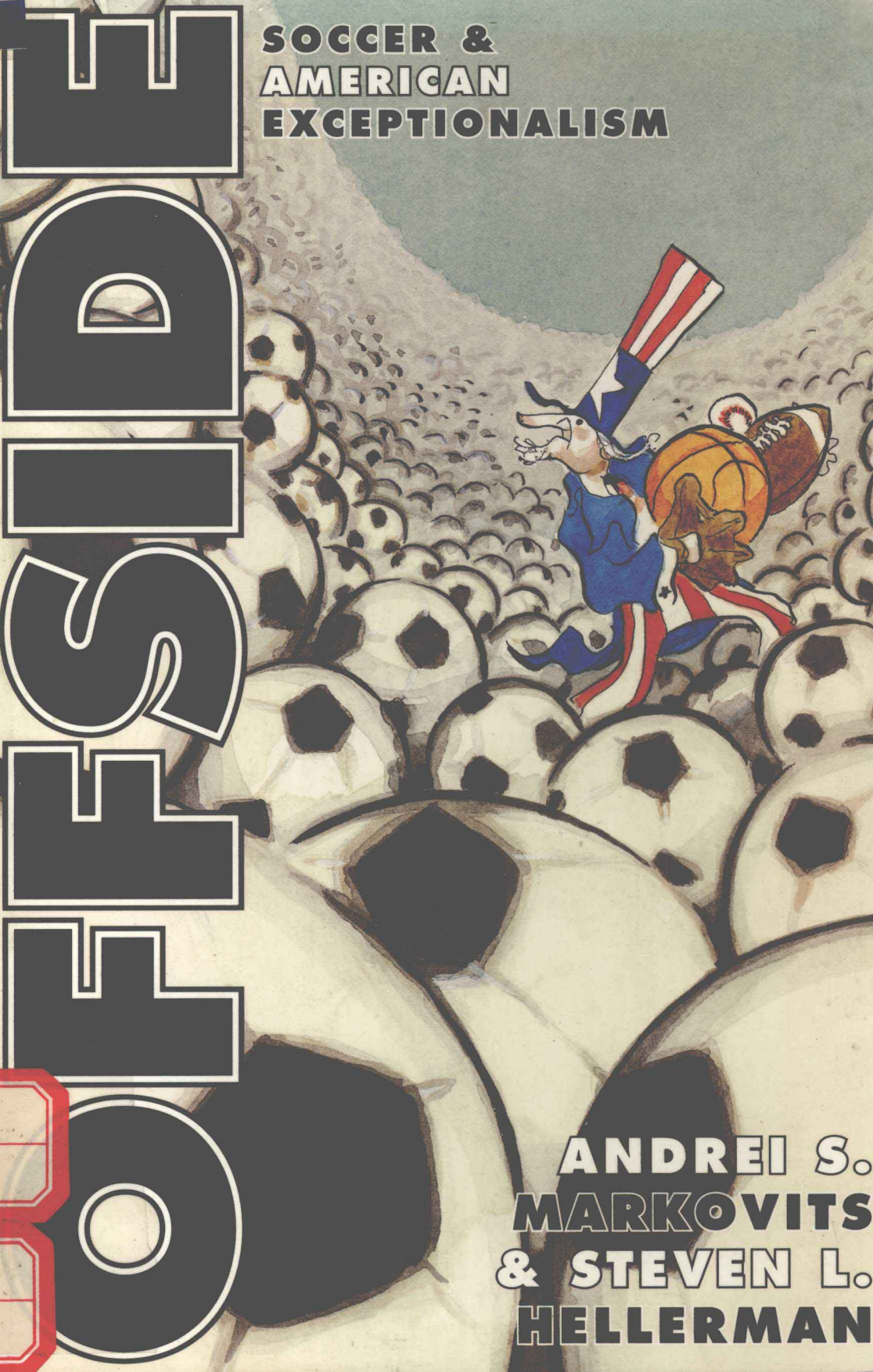
OFFSIDE

SOCCER & AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM



ANDREI S. MARKOVITS & STEVEN L. HELLERMAN

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Steven L. Hellerman

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Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism
by Andrei S. Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman

Preface

THE STORY of this book begins on Saturday afternoon June 21, 1986, when I boarded a plane in Frankfurt on my way home to Boston after completing a lecture tour in a number of European countries. Having been caught up by the World Cup of soccer then being played in Mexico, I bought a number of German newspapers to saturate my interest in the impending—and much anticipated—quarterfinal game between Brazil and France, which I was to miss on account of my transatlantic journey. Needless to say, all papers bristled with detailed pregame analyses and massive previews of the match between two of the best teams playing in that tournament. Upon my arrival in Boston, I proceeded to ask the immigration officer the result of the game that had just ended in Mexico. Whereas the equivalent immigration officer in any European country would have obliged me with delight, this Boston-based officer completely conformed to the expected habitus of the average American male sports fan by looking at me with a mixture of amazement, estrangement, incredulity, and perhaps even some hostility while professing his total ignorance of the event, let alone the outcome, with equanimity bordering on pride. In the corner of his glass booth, however, I detected a small television set broadcasting a Saturday afternoon game between the Boston Red Sox and the Baltimore Orioles then being played at Fenway Park. The officer's demeanor became much more friendly when I asked him the score of this game, and he informed me that the Red Sox were enjoying a comfortable lead in the late innings with their star pitcher Roger Clemens ("The Rocket") well on his way to winning his thirteenth game in a row in what was to become a very impressive personal fourteen-game winning streak (in a superb season culminating in Clemens's garnering the first of his still unprecedented five Cy Young awards). When I arrived at home later that afternoon, I managed to catch the last few minutes of a tape-delayed and abbreviated telecast of the France-Brazil game that NBC had advertised with much fanfare as one of its new (and few) international features in its competition with ABC's *Wide World of Sports* in the summer lull between the NBA playoffs and the beginning of football season that—with all the exhibition games—had gradually encroached on much of August. I was compelled to resort to a number of cross-Atlantic telephone calls that evening to indulge my need to discuss France's victory over Brazil (on penalty kicks)—and the latter's relegation from the tournament—with a bevy of knowledgeable friends in Europe, since the hand-

ful of American friends who knew and cared about this match and the tournament as a whole were either in Mexico or in Europe.[1]

As so often in my life, the lecture trip in June 1986 once again highlighted for me perhaps the single most essential and visible hiatus in the public sphere and cultural interest of American and European males who constituted my world on either side of the Atlantic. Part of the trip involved my job as a lecturer to well over one hundred American college alumni and alumnae on a boat that journeyed down the Danube from Vienna to the Black Sea. In addition to delivering daily lectures on the politics, society, and culture of the region we traversed, my "upstairs" and daytime life on the boat consisted of discussing the then ongoing NBA finals between the Boston Celtics and the Houston Rockets, a topic of such great interest among many male passengers of the cruise that we spent the better time of our "day-leave" in Budapest desperately trying to find a copy of the most recent *International Herald Tribune* so as to be better apprised of the latest events in the series. At night my world changed entirely. I was the only passenger to join the ship's crew of Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and Austrian men in the "downstairs" section of the boat to watch one of the nightly soccer games broadcast from the World Cup in Mexico via Eurovision and commented upon in the language of the country that our boat happened to be traversing at the time. On this trip I found myself deeply involved in two worlds that in some ways were so similar, in that they both followed sports events centered on competitive team sports with their requisite identities, histories, legacies, and iconographies. Above all, both worlds exhibited interests and passions that were visible and tangible, and that had been nurtured for years. For both worlds, the actual events—the NBA finals for the American passengers, the World Cup tournament for the European crew—were merely acute and current manifestations of cultural acquisitions that formed important ingredients of the identities of their respective observers. Thus, for most American followers of the Celtics-Rockets series, the passion of following the series via the sports pages of the *International Herald Tribune* and the hope of catching a glimpse of some highlights on Belgrade television's sports news was part of a much larger package, containing a general interest in basketball and a particular awareness of the importance of the NBA finals in the American sports scene as a whole. "Talking sports"—in this case basketball—was clearly an integral part of male American culture. Same with the Europeans and their passion for the World Cup, underlined by the fact that nightly viewership in the boat's "downstairs" section did not vary according to the identity of the teams in the games being broadcast. To be sure, passions were higher when a team close to the viewers' hearts participated in a game, but viewership hardly diminished when a match between, say, two far-away Latin Ameri-

can contestants was aired by Bulgarian or Romanian television in languages often not understood by many of the viewers, a fact that did not detract anything from the overall interest in the event. Just as "talking basketball" was an integral, indeed important, part of their culture for the American male passengers, so "talking soccer" was to the boat's multinational European crew.

Despite these obvious similarities and affinities, these worlds could not have been more different from each other. Indeed, in terms of the contents of their respective passions, they had nothing to say to each other. As such, I had yet again witnessed something that had baffled me all my life. Having been brought up completely biculturally, I had noticed one major and consistent hiatus between my American and European male friends: the world of sports. Even totally Eurocentric and Europhile American friends and colleagues in my milieu who are deeply steeped in the latest Parisian debates on culture and politics, relish reading Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Jürgen Habermas, and much prefer most things European to American, find themselves following American sports (provided, of course, they are sports fans). And the same pertains vice versa: Among my European colleagues who have become academic experts on the United States and the few who happen to love this country—there are only a handful of European intellectuals who fit this bill—very few, if any, have abandoned their passion for and loyalty to soccer and replaced it with an equivalent knowledge of and affect for any of the American team sports. I could never reconcile my own two worlds of, on the one hand, knowing the names of every player on the Hungarian World Cup team of 1954 and every national soccer champion in Romania, Hungary, Austria, Germany, England, and Italy since 1950, and on the other hand, instantly recognizing the historical significance, and according the proper awe, to such American icons as the 1927 Yankees, the Boston Celtics of the 1960s, and the Green Bay Packers. The content of my conversations on either side of the Atlantic was always different, yet their function, form, role, and substance were surprisingly similar, if not indeed identical. The milieus were virtually the same, yet my experiences in them were mutually exclusive. Thus, in deciding to research soccer's relationship to the United States and American culture I embarked on a highly autobiographical venture.

Like many immigrants and naturalized Americans, comparing the United States with one's place of origin—Central Europe in my case—has been a daily occurrence throughout my life. As a historically oriented political science major at Columbia University, I was deeply influenced by a comparative macrosociology that featured the study of this intercontinental comparison with scholarly rigor. In addition to Werner Sombart, Max Weber, and Karl Marx—whose work addressed the similarities and

differences between the New and the Old World—I was deeply influenced by the writings of Seymour Martin Lipset, whose prodigious scholarship revolved around a constant comparison of the United States with Europe as well as Canada, the latter as a sort of hybrid and synthesis between the two competing models. Hence, it was a foregone conclusion that my decision to spend the summer of 1986 researching why soccer had failed to become culturally hegemonic in the United States would be framed in the epistemologies that had informed not only much of my scholarly work but also my quotidian existence. And so it was that following my boat experience on the Danube in June, I submerged myself in the stacks of Harvard University's Widener Library to shed some light on the "other" American exceptionalism, the original—of course—being the absence of a European-style socialism or social democracy as a systemically dominant political force in American politics throughout much of the twentieth century.

When by October I had finished a draft of the paper, I gave a copy to my dear friend Peter Hall at the Center for European Studies at Harvard, whose views and criticisms I, along with the multitude of colleagues and students all over the world who have been the beneficiaries of Peter's generosity, erudition, and brilliance over the years, cherish. As expected, Peter returned the paper with two pages of detailed, single-spaced comments; to my complete surprise, however, he also suggested that I offer the paper in a forthcoming meeting of the seminar on "The State and Capitalism since 1800," the Center's first and most prestigious study group, a kind of informal but well-known institution in the world of historically oriented political economy and sociology in the United States, as well as in Europe. A huge crowd appeared for my presentation, which was followed—as has often been the case in this seminar's tradition—by the richest intellectual discussion that I have ever experienced. Charles S. Maier's comments were so witty and insightful that in July 1988 they were published together with my paper "The Other 'American Exceptionalism'—Why Is There No Soccer in the United States?" in *Praxis International*, then under the editorship of Seyla Benhabib. That was the beginning of what subsequently proved to be far and away my most successful academic article, as it appeared in four languages in addition to English—German, French, Italian, Swedish—and generated cross-disciplinary interest beyond any of my expectations. The reason for this international interest in my work on soccer's absence in the United States was evident: In the well-known framework of a scholarly debate that had attained a distinguished profile in comparative historical sociology, I had approached a topic that had much popular appeal and had crossed the minds of many a European academic soccer fan. Thus, my study on soccer's absence in American culture complemented the existing scholarship

on other American exceptions, notably—of course—the Sombartian thesis of socialism's manifest absence in the United States. The enthusiastic response to my extensive lecturing on this topic in many European countries, Israel, as well as in the United States, was my own confirmation that a serious engagement of this topic met with the interest of an intellectually minded community well beyond the stricter confines of the most relevant academic disciplines, sports history and sociology in particular.

It was thus no surprise, though an immense honor, that only such an eclectically oriented, interdisciplinary, and profoundly international academic center like the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin—Institute for Advanced Study Berlin—would extend an invitation for me to spend the academic year 1998–99 as a Fellow, with the completion of this book as my project. Anybody who knows the *Kolleg* and its brilliant *Rektor*, Wolf Lepenies, can immediately understand how this institution extended itself on behalf of an author with such an academically unorthodox task. But since Mr. Lepenies is as conversant with the writings of Theodor Fontane as he is with the adventures of Donald Duck, and as insightful and erudite in all topics of the humanities and social sciences as he is with the German Bundesliga and the National Basketball Association, my year in Berlin proved to be far and away the most intellectually rewarding of my academic career. Mr. Lepenies' request for me to write a detailed position paper on the decline of the hook shot in professional basketball was merely one of the highlights of this amazing year. The fact that I completed this manuscript was another. I owe the *Kolleg*, its wonderful *Rektor*, its Fellows, and its able staff much more than I can express on paper.

I also would like to extend my most heartfelt thanks to my coauthor, Steven L. Hellerman. The story of Steve's involvement with this project parallels the book's central argument and its epistemology. I first met Steve in January 1993 when he enrolled in my political sociology seminar featuring the writings of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, as well as those of Werner Sombart, Seymour Martin Lipset, Barrington Moore Jr., and a number of other major political sociologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Steve, an aspiring journalist and struggling sportswriter at the time, had just enrolled as a student at the University of California, Santa Cruz, to complete his undergraduate education, which he had interrupted for a number of years. As we discovered our mutual passion and admiration for the beauty and genius found in the works of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Garcia (Jerry, that is) as well as for the Big Three American team sports, we soon established a common cultural interest that formed the basis of our friendship. As the years progressed, Steve became increasingly involved in this project. By the time we had coauthored two articles on this topic—one published in Germany, the other in the United States—Steve had become a full-fledged partner

in this endeavor. He remained so throughout the writing of this book. While he shares all of this work's contributions, its shortcomings are my responsibility alone. The fact that Steve never showed any signs of truly embracing soccer in an emotional way beyond the intellectual task at hand—that it never became part of his culture the way baseball, basketball, and football so clearly have been—constitutes my only regret in what otherwise has been an excellent collaborative relationship. Then again, it confirms the book's main thesis: that hegemonic sports cultures are very "sticky" and "path dependent" and cannot be acquired through intellect but only through emotion and identity, which is what ultimately sustains them in a historically lasting way. An understanding of them on an intellectual level is simply not deep enough for this to occur.

I am grateful to the United States Soccer Hall of Fame in Oneonta, New York; to Major League Soccer (MLS) in New York City; and to the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in Zurich for their readiness to supply us with materials and to answer our many questions. While those individuals who have helped us over the years by giving so generously of their time and knowledge are far too numerous to list here, I would like to mention only Seamus Malin, one of the most knowledgeable people on soccer in the world. I hope that this book will, if anything, increase the number of conversations that I have with Seamus; when talking with him, hours pass like minutes chock-full of enjoyable details pertaining to the wonderful game of soccer. Paul DiMaggio's national reputation as a careful commentator, brilliant sociologist, and one of the most conscientious and thoughtful colleagues in the social sciences was yet again corroborated by his eleven-page single-spaced comments on a draft manuscript of this book. I remain unsure as to whether our revisions meet Paul's exacting standards. I am absolutely certain, however, that they much improved the published product. I owe Walter Lippincott's interest in this book to his passion for and expertise in soccer. What could easily have become dry meetings solely devoted to discussions of editorial matters invariably evolved into rich and nuanced conversations about soccer, indeed sports in general. Without Walter's patience and commitment to this project, this book would most likely not have been written; Princeton University Press most certainly would not have published it. Ian Malcolm's editorial guidance deserves utmost praise and much gratitude, as does Marsha A. Kunin's expert copyediting. Tim Sullivan was a wonderful production editor, and Sylvia Coates an excellent indexer.

I owe everything in the world to my wonderful wife, Kiki, who always indulges me with humor, if also a slight incredulity, as I continue to watch thousands of hours of baseball, basketball, football, hockey, and soccer on two continents, all under the guise of research. And as usual, without

Kelly's warmth and companionship—which she has brought to bear in so many other projects—this book would not have been written.

Lastly, I dedicate this book to my late father, Ludwig Markovits, lifelong fan of MTK Budapest and Austria Wien, the two most prominent "Jewish" clubs of Habsburg Europe, who so lovingly took me to dozens of soccer games during my childhood in Timişoara (Temesvár), where I first experienced the emotions of the game in the town's local "derby" between the blues of Stinţa (which became my team) and the reds of CFR (that soon turned into a prominent object of my contempt and fear). It was also my beloved father who in 1960—soon after our very first arrival in the United States—took me to my first baseball game, to Yankee Stadium of all places, where I witnessed yet another "derby," between the hometown Yankees and the visiting Red Sox. Even though my father never learned to understand baseball, let alone love it, he still continued to take me to games, fully appreciating my enthusiasm for this new discovery but also perhaps sensing that "talking baseball" was a helpful, if not necessarily required, ingredient for a young immigrant boy's comfortable acculturation to the United States. The moments that I shared with my father watching sports have remained among the happiest and most serene in my life. I know that he would have loved every page of this book.

Andrei S. Markovits
Ann Arbor, Michigan
October 2000

First and foremost, I would like to extend heartfelt thanks and gratitude to Andrei Markovits for giving me the opportunity, privilege, and honor of participating in this project (in which I learned such a great deal while attaining immense enjoyment); for all the interest, generosity, and patience Andy has exhibited in graciously providing wisdom, guidance, and mentoring to me over several years; for our many conversations covering such a breadth of subjects; and, most of all, for his friendship. I would like to add my gratitude and appreciation to Andy's in thanking all those who generously gave their time to make this a better book.

I would like to thank the faculty and staff, as well as my friends and colleagues at Claremont Graduate University's School of Politics and Economics, for providing an excellent and intellectually stimulating environment in which I have sought to learn the tools of the academic trade. I would also like to thank the friends who over the years have shared many moments and hours with me watching and talking sports, including those

at the John Barleycorn in San Francisco and at the Bandbox in North Bellmore, New York.

I dedicate this book to my parents, Leon and Francine Hellerman, for a lifetime's worth of love, encouragement, and support, and also to the memory of my great aunt, Minnie Weissman, and her husband (my uncle), Jack Weissman—a soccer player on two continents, baseball fan on one.

Steven L. Hellerman
Claremont, California
October 2000

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Introduction

A DEFINITE trend toward cultural convergence has been one of the main aspects of globalization. In the course of the twentieth century, especially among countries of the advanced industrial world, a set of common icons has developed that have become part of what we call Western culture. While this has been true on all levels, elite as well as mass, this commonality has been particularly pronounced in what has come to be known as popular culture. Whereas this cultural convergence has to a considerable degree coincided with America's rise to political and economic prominence in the twentieth century—thus comprising part of what has been termed "Americanization"—it would be erroneous to see this development as purely a one-way street in which an all-powerful America imposes its cultural icons on the rest of the world. Any visit to the United States, where wine drinking, coffee culture, sushi, and other aspects of the European as well as the Far Eastern culinary worlds have become commonplace from coast to coast, demonstrates that global culture—though featuring American items—is far from identical with American culture. Moreover, important pockets of popular culture exist that have remained completely resistant to any kind of Americanization in the course of the twentieth century. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the crucial world of mass sports. In this area, Europe and much of the rest of the world took a different path from that of America. Indeed, it is our contention that in the area of sport as culture, the differences between the United States on the one hand and much of the world on the other remain more persistent and noticeable than the similarities.

To wit: whereas both male Americans and Europeans of a certain age (between twenty-five and sixty-five), occupational and employment-related profile (university professor, researcher, social scientist, publicist, student), status (relatively highly educated, urbane, cosmopolitan), class (middle and upper middle), lifestyle, and milieu (urban, "postmaterialist"),[1] of a certain habitus and in possession of particular cultural capital[2] (well-read consumers of high-brow media—both domestically and internationally—well traveled and well connected), all follow the same, or very similar, events, watch the same movies, read the same books, follow the same academic debates, listen to the same music, have very similar, if perhaps not identical, consumption habits. In short, though they share a common public persona, lifestyle, and preoccupation in much of their daily lives of work and leisure, there seems to be one major exception to the surprising commonality of this male milieu: that of sports. Americans