

# **Race, Ethnicity and Football**

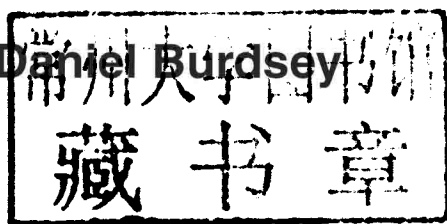
Persisting Debates and Emergent Issues

**Edited by Daniel Burdsey**

# Race, Ethnicity and Football

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and Emergent Issues

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## DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to the memory of Mark Dacosta Alleyne (1961-2009). During the early stages of this book's production, Mark passed away unexpectedly during a study trip in Guatemala. Mark was an important influence during my early years as an academic, helping specifically to shape my ideas about race and anti-racism, and more broadly demonstrating what a life in the academy entailed. An erudite scholar, passionate anti-racist, dedicated activist and respected teacher, Mark was also a great friend, a brilliant wit and possessed a personality that would literally light up the room. I hope that this volume does justice to everything I learnt from Mark about critical, interventionist scholarship in the field of ethnic and racial studies.*

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DB  
Brighton  
August 2010

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# Introduction



# 1 They Think It's All Over . . . It Isn't Yet!

## The Persistence of Structural Racism and Racialised Exclusion in Twenty- First Century Football

*Daniel Burdsey*

### FOOTBALL: WHAT'S RACE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

During the early stages of this book's production, a debate developed in the media regarding the significance of race in contemporary British society. It followed the comments of the then Labour government's Communities Secretary, John Denham, in January 2010 that 'focusing on somebody's race or ethnic background to explain their achievements or opportunities is far too simple' (cited in Travis 2010). Detailing the social changes that Britain had undergone during his party's tenure, he spoke instead of the salience of individuals' class status in underpinning contemporary inequalities, adding that 'we must avoid a one-dimensional debate that assumes all minority-ethnic people are disadvantaged' (cited in Sparrow and Owen 2010).

In one respect, this was simply another intervention from a party that displayed an inconsistent stance on race equality during its administration. Having overseen the Public Inquiry into the murder of black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, in 1993 and the introduction of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, this government also introduced draconian legislation around immigration, asylum and the so-called "war on terror" (Pitcher 2009). Yet, in another sense, Denham's comments signified a broader shift towards a neo-liberal approach to engaging with race and racism. Through this increasingly pervasive way of (avoiding) thinking about racial phenomena, 'in diluting, if not erasing, race in all public affairs of the state, neo-liberal proponents nevertheless seek to privatize racisms alongside most everything else' (Goldberg 2009: 331). Either way, it was a particularly crude dismissal of the enduring spectre of race at the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup>

The relevance of the debate to this book was immediately apparent, with Denham's claims closely echoing commonsense discourses within British football about the decreasing influence of race and racism in the recruitment and selection policies of professional clubs and national federations.

Whilst few would posit its total absence from the game, racism is now viewed by many people as confined largely to history and/or remaining predominantly the preserve of a small number of residual bigots tucked away on the terraces, rather than permeating the clubs, structures and organisations that comprise this area of popular culture. Increasingly, in football as in other aspects of society, ‘the individualization of wrongdoing, its localization as personal and so private preference expression, *erases institutional racisms precisely as conceptual possibility*’ (ibid.: 362–3, emphasis added). The (selective and myopic) list of “evidence” underpinning this shift towards a perception of post-racial football is substantial: the number of minority ethnic players (both men and women) playing at the highest echelons, dominating domestic leagues and the UEFA Champions League at club level, and the World Cup on the international front; the global flows of player migration between countries and continents; the decision to award the 2010 men’s World Cup Finals to South Africa (the first ever on that continent); and a general decrease (in some countries, at least) in the prevalence of overt, racist incidents taking place in the stands and on the pitch.

Despite the superficial and simplistic nature of many of these claims regarding a move towards racial equality in British football, it would be clearly incorrect to assert that there has been no progress over the last couple of decades. Perhaps most notably, the establishment of an anti-racist movement, consisting of both independent organisations with a national remit and local fan-based initiatives, has been one of the most marked social changes in the post-Hillsborough British football landscape. It has certainly led to a shift in perceptions amongst *some* individuals involved in the game, as well as those who follow and report on it. My own experiences as a fan are testimony to the improvements that the game has seen. As an Everton supporter growing up in the 1980s, I watched what were always “all white” line-ups and endured widespread allegations that the racism found on some sections of the terraces was reflected in the club’s selection policy. I can still painfully recall the despondency and sickness I felt deep in my stomach on the occasion that large numbers of fans around me repeatedly chanted “Everton are white!” during a match at Arsenal in the early 1990s. I equally remember my sense of hope when the Everton fanzine, *When Skies Are Grey*, initiated its ‘No Al Razzismo’ campaign shortly afterwards, and my feelings of pride and sense that meaningful change was perhaps afoot, ten years later, in seeing a team in which minority ethnic players made up the greater part. I now cheer on a squad including Nigerians, black Britons and Frenchmen, a Moroccan-Belgian, a Samoan-Australian, an Albanian-German, and dual heritage players from England, the United States and South Africa.

The symbolism of this cultural shift and its wider ramifications certainly should not be dismissed. However, I am at risk here of endorsing the very reasoning I want to argue so strongly against. Hence, great caution is required and it is necessary to question what, if anything, this symbolism

actually means. Put simply, the numerical representation of minority ethnic professional players no more represents a genuine change in the overall culture of football than, say, the number of minority ethnic police officers signifies a truly multicultural police force. Whilst the representation of (some) minority ethnic communities has increased significantly over recent decades, only a very superficial reading could claim that this signifies a meaningful shift in the occupational culture of football as a whole. Overly optimistic views of progress neatly sidestep questions around power and politics, and ignore the fact that to look beyond the multiethnic spectacle on the pitch, in Europe at least, football remains a primarily white institution: games are watched by crowds of predominantly white supporters, controlled by white match officials, and teams are run by white (male) managers, coaches, owners and directors. More broadly, the game is governed by institutions in which most members are white (and again male). Look closely though and, apart from the action on the pitch, you will often see a significant presence of minority ethnic people in the stadium: they will be directing you to your seat or serving you refreshments. The racialised historical antecedents, and continuing legacy, of these roles—entertaining or serving the white folk—should not be lost within the contemporary clamour of positivity.

One might counter that both within the everyday interactions of player subcultures at professional clubs and in amateur leagues based in large urban centres throughout Western Europe a form of multiculturalism or, perhaps more accurately one of ‘conviviality’, has become habitual (Gilroy 2004). In such instances, although racism persists, ‘processes of cohabitation and interaction . . . have made multicultural an ordinary feature of social life’ (ibid.: xi). However, studies of football, in the Netherlands for instance, have demonstrated how popular beliefs around the game’s integrative potential—or, more specifically, dominant attempts to facilitate this—can often be misguided, ephemeral and actually contribute to enhanced segregation and absolutist ideas of difference (Burdsey 2008, Müller *et al.* 2008).

Taking the above discussion into account, the overarching aim of this book is thus to highlight football’s position as an exemplar of the unequivocally political nature of the putatively *apolitical* (Carrington 2010). It is a sphere that, a decade into the twenty-first century, continues to facilitate a prominent and forceful articulation and contestation of the cultural politics of race, ethnicity, racism and multiculturalism, and still reflects many of the contemporary ethnic, racial and religious divisions, antagonisms and inequalities present in the wider local and global society. Accordingly, this book proceeds from a position that racism in football is much more than a matter of individual bigotry or occasional, spontaneous prejudice; it is *structural*, or what has also been labelled ‘systemic’, i.e. ‘a material, social, and ideological reality that is well-embedded in major . . . institutions’ (Feagin 2006: 2). As Michael Eric Dyson (2009: 186) poignantly remarks, ‘we must not reduce the problems of race to face and skin; we must also see them in structure and system’.



## THE MARGINALISATION OF RACE AND THE 'NON-PERFORMATIVITY' OF ANTI-RACISM

A decade ago, Les Back *et al.* (2001: 164) identified that:

the typical “public” response of football clubs and individuals associated with the game to allegations of racism has historically been one of denial: denial that the problem exists at any significant level at individual clubs or amongst players, denial that there is a problem within the game more generally and, on occasion, denial that racism exists itself as a problem in society.

This is a worldview that arguably continues to permeate aspects of the game, as well as sections of the mass media and the general public. Yet, the subtle difference is that rather than contending that racism has *never* existed, the current dominant position recognises that whilst it was once a problem, it has now been largely eradicated. When racism does occur in stadia—or, more precisely, when its presence cannot be denied—it is habitually deflected from the game itself, with blame attributed to extremists (for instance, neo-Nazis and hooligans); groups which, we are told, are not “real” football fans and have thus infiltrated the game in order to purvey a broader political agenda (see Back *et al.* 1999). On the pitch, racist incidents are viewed as sporadic occurrences caused by sport’s highly charged, competitive nature or emanating from occasional, individual prejudices (Müller *et al.* 2007). In terms of participation levels, communities that are under-represented as players, coaches and managers are blamed for causing their own exclusion, rather than being seen as the recipients of exclusionary attitudes and practices. In short, the idea that racial inequality in football is structural and institutional is still widely shunned.

Specific, practical reasons why racism might be denied in various aspects of sport (Long 2000), and football specifically (Burdsey 2007a, Lusted 2009), have been outlined in detail elsewhere, noting individuals’ inability to recognise, acknowledge, accept and ultimately eradicate racism. In addition, we might also look, more theoretically, to a broader shift in “race-thinking” that impacts on sport as much as it does on the wider society. In football, it is generally agreed that race *should not* be a criterion in recruitment and selection processes, and that racism *should not* be present in stadia. On the surface, this is clearly and unequivocally a positive standpoint, yet in its practical manifestations it is rather more problematic. This is because the position “should not” is frequently conflated with that of “is not”. As notions of race *per se* are seen to be irrelevant and/or counter-productive in football (e.g. “they are just footballers”, “we want the *best* players, whatever colour”, invoking notions of race to target opposition players has a negative impact on one’s own team as well, etc.), other ways of thinking about, and through, race—including, at the most extreme,