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Laurent Dubois. *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2010. xx + 329 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$27.50 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-520-25928-7. \$18.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-520-26978-1.

Review by Christopher S. Thompson, Ball State University.

Shortly before the 2006 World Cup final, in which he would score France's only goal in regular time and from which he would be expelled a few minutes before the tie-breaking penalty kicks against Italy, Zinedine Zidane enjoined his teammates, as Laurent Dubois notes at the start of this timely and instructive work, "to score spirits [*marquer les esprits*] as we score goals [*marquer des buts*]." It is fitting, therefore, that *Soccer Empire*—thoroughly researched, engagingly written, and admirably executed—itself scores many thought-provoking insights and is likely to *marquer les esprits* of its readers.

In recent decades (especially the past two), scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have increasingly turned their attention to four inter-related issues: the complex legacies of French colonialism, including the racist assumptions and stereotypes that helped to justify the unequal and often horrific treatment of France's colonial subjects under the overarching rubric of *la mission civilisatrice*; the challenges of integrating post-World War II non-European immigrants into an increasingly multi-ethnic French society; the limitations of French Republicanism's notion of "universal" citizenship in addressing the widespread racist discrimination suffered by non-whites in France today; and the equally problematic nature of current interpretations of Republican *laïcité*, which have been marshaled against Muslims (French and foreign alike) living in France on the assumption that Islam and French democracy are mutually exclusive, and that the former represents an existential threat to the latter as well as, so the argument goes, to French national identity itself. As a result of this fertile historiographical trend, we have benefited from excellent studies on French conceptions of nationality and citizenship, the cultural history of the French Empire, the history of immigration to France since the late nineteenth century, and French reactions to the Muslim headscarf.

While *Soccer Empire* builds on much of this scholarship, Dubois approaches these issues in fresh ways; in the process, he makes a host of original, thought-provoking connections that deepen our understanding of the historical foundations of some of the major challenges confronting France today. His device—and it is a well-conceived and successful one—is to use the French national soccer team, especially since the World Cup triumph of its "black-blanc-beur" iteration in 1998, as a way of apprehending the social and political tensions, inherited from France's colonial past, that plague the country today. He convincingly demonstrates that public reactions to the team over the last decade and half—since Jean-Marie Le Pen's criticism during the 1996 European Nations Cup that many of its non-white players did not sing along with (or even seem to know the words of) the national anthem when it was played before their matches, and that they were not truly French—reflect the complex, varied responses across the political spectrum of a nation grappling with the meaning of its increasingly diverse (and increasingly non-European) population. If the 1998 team was widely celebrated for symbolizing France's alleged reconciliation with a colonial past personified by the millions of non-white immigrants whose families had emigrated from its former empire and other parts of the non-Western world, only a

few years later some commentators, notably Alain Finkelkraut, would decry the fact that the team was now made up of mostly black players and thus did not represent France. The French national team, of course, by definition represents France, but that simply begs the question: which France, which version of French history, which vision of France's future does it represent? These are the compelling, hotly debated, and highly charged questions at the heart of Dubois' work.

In order to answer them, Dubois ranges far and wide in pursuit of connections that will clarify what contemporary tensions and conflicts over these questions owe to a colonial past many French, notably among the elites, are reluctant if not utterly opposed to acknowledging (although there are some promising signs that may be changing). He is interested in the links between soccer, politics, and history (especially that of the French empire) with a special focus on the Caribbean and Algeria. In mining the rich possibilities of these connections Dubois provides, interspersed throughout his study, telling biographical vignettes of key players of the celebrated 1998 French team (as well as of members of earlier national sides) in order to illustrate the complexities and contradictions confronting the French as they seek to come to terms with the enduring impact of their empire. These include Marcel Desailly and Patrick Viera, who have ties to West Africa; Thierry Henry, the most prolific goal scorer in the history of the national team and an anti-racism activist who is of Caribbean descent; and Christian Karembeu, a Kanak from New Caledonia whose ancestors were displayed in humiliating fashion at the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris—a violation of their human rights and dignity that has yet to be acknowledged by the French state, hence Karembeu's refusal to sing the Marseillaise before international matches. But it is the stories of two players above all that both structure Dubois' narrative and, one is tempted to say, give his study its soul: the afore-mentioned Zinedine Zidane, born of Algerian parents, and Lilian Thuram, whose family hails from Guadeloupe.

Dubois has chosen judiciously in using the lives of these two men to highlight both the historical origins and the contemporary resonance of the central themes of *Soccer Empire*. As he points out, they are each "bearers of an uncomfortable history, both soothing and reviving the wounds left by that history" (p. xx). If these men have much in common, they are, as Dubois also notes, quite different. Since he scored France's first two goals in the 1998 World Cup final against Brazil, and despite his (in)famous head butt in the 2006 World Cup final against an Italian defender who had insulted his female kin (an incident to which Dubois devotes some of his most insightful analysis), Zidane has remained for the most part an apolitical national hero: one of the most popular men in France (as opinion polls regularly confirm), a corporate pitchman, a global icon, and for many French—his violent act of 2006 notwithstanding—the personification of the safely assimilated North African Muslim who loves France and keeps his religion to himself. And yet, even though he has remained discreet on religious and political issues (with the notable exception of calling on his fellow citizens to oppose Le Pen in the second round of the 2002 presidential elections), Zidane has been unable to avoid being inserted into public debates over immigration and the still undigested (at least in France) Algerian War of Independence.

Meanwhile, Thuram, who has represented France more than any other soccer player in history and who famously scored his only two goals for the national team in the 1998 World Cup semi-final win over Croatia, is in important respects the anti-Zidane. An articulate, informed, and engaged public figure, even before his retirement from the sport Thuram had made a name for himself with his antiracist activism; his willingness to hold Le Pen and Sarkozy accountable for their inflammatory rhetoric on immigration, the *banlieues*, and national identity; and with his thoughtful public declarations linking France's history of slavery and empire to the ongoing

discrimination suffered by non-whites in France. Dubois' evident admiration for this man is justified. In some sense, Thuram provides *Soccer Empire* with its moral core.

As a result of this organizational device, Dubois is able seamlessly to weave together disparate strands of the last century or so of French domestic and colonial history into a coherent and compelling narrative. In so doing, he offers a persuasive, historically grounded explanation for France's continuing difficulties in addressing key contemporary socio-economic ills, including a nuanced reading of the 2005 riots and French reactions to them. We learn about the ways in which soccer was seen in West Africa, the Caribbean, and North Africa as both a way to discipline the native populations (the view of the colonizers) and as a forum (for the native populations) for expressing and organizing resistance against French authorities. The sport "rapidly became a powerful vehicle for individual and community expression, as well as for demands for equality and justice" (p. 11). Historical figures with whom we are familiar take on fresh importance. Readers who understandably associate Félix Eboué with a distinguished career as an interwar colonial administrator, culminating in his rallying France's sub-Saharan colonies to de Gaulle's fledgling Resistance movement during World War II, may be surprised to learn that he was also a central force behind the development of soccer in the French Caribbean where he is remembered fondly and where his name graces soccer stadiums, as it does in West Africa.

Dubois offers other telling examples of the intersection of soccer and the French empire. The black deputy Blaise Diagne, a prominent politician and civil servant in interwar France, is discussed primarily in order to introduce his son Raoul, who played for an already multi-ethnic French national soccer team in the 1930s. Known as "the Black Spider," Raoul Digne was widely depicted in the French media in ways consistent with the French racial stereotypes of the day, which emphasized the "naïve, happy-go-lucky, and childish" nature of blacks (p. 32). Meanwhile, the Moroccan Larbi Ben Barek, nicknamed "the Black Pearl," also starred on the French national team, beginning in the late 1930s, raising the issue of how a colonial subject denied full civic and political rights by a Republic that promotes equality and a "universal" conception of democratic citizenship could also be one of that nation's most celebrated representatives. This question is explored by Dubois in its contemporary version as well, as he analyzes the often openly racist treatment suffered by non-white members of more recent French national teams at the hands of at least some members of the French chattering classes, politicians, and "fans."

If some players made the best of a difficult and ambiguous situation, others openly rebelled. Dubois devotes valuable pages to the Algerian players who sneaked out of France not long before the 1958 World Cup, eschewing a place on the French national team (which ultimately placed third in that competition) to help form a "national team" that represented the Algerian independence movement, the *Front de Libération Nationale*. The FLN team played international matches throughout the Communist bloc and in the developing world during the war to draw attention to the anti-imperialist struggle being waged by Algerians against their French colonial masters. Dubois accurately notes that even in our post-colonial world, an informal but insidious imperialism shapes relations between Europe and its former colonies as agents for Europe's best soccer clubs comb the African and other continents for young players whom they seek to bring back to their clubs. Once in Europe and naturalized (as French or Dutch, for example), the best of these players often end up starring for European national teams rather than for those of their nations of origins. This is one of the few points, presumably, on which Le Pen and Africans might find common ground.

Like the soccer players about whom Dubois writes with such insight and sensitivity, this work cannot be limited to just one simple identity, for it blends several genres. Part first-person account by a soccer fan who experienced some of the events described here *en direct et en*

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*personne*, part careful and thorough investigative journalism into recent developments, and, above all, rigorously researched and thoughtfully argued social, political, and cultural history, *Soccer Empire*--again, like these players--is a success likely to leave its mark.

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