

NATIONALISM, IMPERIALISM, AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Better Luyt Than Never. The Rugby World Cup and the Politics of Racial Reconciliation in South Africa

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Throughout the apartheid era, rugby union was a powerful symbol of, and prop to, the racially-exclusive South African nationalism entrenched and propagated by the "apartheid state." Notwithstanding the persistent popularity of rugby in some segments of the non-white community, rugby was generally perceived as a "white" and indeed Afrikaner sport, most particularly in the white community itself. South Africa's rugby prowess was a source of great pride in this community; and its steady isolation from world rugby competition through the sanctions era was a potent source of pressure for change. Through the transitional period of 1990-94, moreover, rugby was the most recalcitrant of the major sporting codes, with its administrators dragging their feet on unification and its supporters continuing to cling to the racist political symbols of the old order.

This background makes the story of the 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa particularly remarkable. In this fairy tale-like tournament, South Africa returned to the pinnacle of world rugby as a visibly "united" country, apparently collectively embracing the symbols of the new order and the slogan, "one team, one country." Notwithstanding the uncomfortable fact that the Springbok side was almost exclusively white, no less a figure than President Nelson Mandela embraced the team as "our boys" and was a vocal supporter throughout. Mandela, in turn, was feted by the predominantly white tournament crowds, many of whom would not long previously have excoriated him as a "communist" and "terrorist."

It is easy, on this evidence, to suggest that the RWC was a crucial "moment" in the process of South African racial reconciliation. The reality, of course, is more complex and ambiguous. This paper explores these complexities and ambiguities. Several elements are emphasized: The importance for White South Africans of their

black compatriots' enthusiastic support for "their" Springboks; the potential importance of the commitments made by the rugby hierarchy to promote rugby development and racial integration; and the danger of sporting tournaments like this one serving to reinforce a new, "non-racial" hegemonic order which legitimizes the transition, while leaving unaddressed the more profound elements of socio-economic change upon which South Africa's stability and democracy will depend.