

NATIONALISM

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Sport and Nationalism in South Africa and Australia

In popular thought the histories of Australia and South Africa share little in common. Where British settlers ‘skirmished’ with Aborigines in Australia, Dutch and British settlers fought wars with the indigenous peoples of Southern Africa. Where political rebellions in Australia were small, isolated and quickly contained, in South Africa they marked enduring hatred and bitterness. Where Australian colonists sought political progress in democratic institutions and the legal process, South Africans put their faith in political absolutism and authoritarianism. Where Protestantism sanctioned social equality in Australia, South African Calvinism denied racial and spiritual equality. Where the “fair-go” saturates ‘Australian’ discourse, South Africa ‘boasts’ the world’s severest economic inequalities. Where Australians look to the future, South Africans share a cultist devotion to history. Yet, closer analysis of historical and contemporary nationalist projects in Australia and South Africa reveal remarkable similarities. Intense racial fear and intolerance were characteristics of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant nationalism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia and Afrikaner nationalism in the mid-twentieth century. On the other hand, the multicultural nationalism advocated by left-leaning and liberal Australians over the last quarter of a century shares key hallmarks with the non-racialism advocated by middle-class liberal blacks and English-speaking South Africans since the 1930s.

This paper develops this argument with a comparative analysis of the sporting content of competing nationalisms in Australia and South Africa. Sport, perhaps better than any other social practice, clarifies the essence of nationalism, namely the tensions and contradictions involved in forming collective social identities. While at first glance, South Africa with its four competing nationalisms—Afrikaner, Africanist, English-speaking and non-racialism (i.e., liberal-pluralism)—appears to offer the paradigmatic example of these tensions and contradictions, I will argue that the Australian experience is not altogether dissimilar.