

Peter J. Watson, *Football and Nation Building in Colombia (2010-2018): The Only Thing That Unites Us*

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022. 276 pp.

Michael J. LaRosa / Rhodes College

Football and Nation Building in Colombia (2010-2018): The Only Thing That Unites Us by Peter J. Watson, focuses on soccer as a unifying element in Colombian society. This country has defied all attempts at unification, and frequently fragmentation and divided are words attributed to Colombia's history and society.

The book is organized in five chapters, which seem to have grown out of a doctoral dissertation, and the long lead up to the main argument is somewhat meandering. The premise of the book is fairly straightforward: Colombia, according to the author, came to understand in the early 21st century (after the 2014 World Cup where Colombia had a successful international run) the political power and potential for national unification inherent in the game of soccer. Precisely at that time, the nation was working toward a peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), an insurgent organization active since the early 1960s and now, officially, part of the nation's past tense.

This is the first scholarly book in English dealing with Colombian soccer; previous texts by the sociologist Janet Lever, and Tony King, a British writer and rally driver, have animated scholars and soccer enthusiasts alike, helping them contextualize the “madness” of soccer in Latin America. Uruguayan writer and public intellectual Eduardo Galeano published *El fútbol: de sol a sombra* in 1995, at about the time the game was growing in popularity in the United States.

Those works are timeless—decidedly distinct from one another—books about soccer. *Football and Nation Building in Colombia* falls short because it's a text in need of a strong revision, of an authoritative editor. Professor Watson's writing could be more approachable in places. Humanities professors—all of us—need to fight back against the current assaults and indignities of political leaders in this nation (the USA) and other places. We can help our case by sharpening our communication skills.

Watson focuses squarely on the Colombian presidential administration of Juan Manuel Santos. Mr. Santos was a defense minister during one of the worst human rights crises of contemporary Colombia (the “False Positives” scandal of 2008) and was elected president in 2010 and 2014. He sensed

the time was ripe for peace with the FARC. Previous administrations that attempted peace with this armed insurgency were either foiled by external events (President Betancur, 1985) or humiliated by a FARC leadership with little incentive to produce peace (President Pastrana, 2002). For his indefatigable leadership, which led to a narrow referendum victory and peace agreement in 2016, Mr. Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize that same year.

Watson's book distinguishes “Narcolombia” (his term) from an official, in need of unification nation, and the author is correct when noting the fragility of soccer as a national unifier, a notion “built on unstable ground, given how drug money had invaded the football arena as well as football success being temporary” (61). These are important observations. In tackling the narcotics question the author explores the influence of drug money in Colombian soccer, and society in general, leading to one of the cruelest indignities of World Cup history—the 1994 murder of Colombian soccer star Andrés Escobar, who committed an own goal and was killed, a few days later, in his hometown, Medellín.

The work inserts itself directly into this glaring contrast of contemporary Colombian society. What can a nation do to harmonize the national project and political process within the confines of world opinion that decided, long ago, that Colombia was little more than Narcolombia? Santos rallied the nation and was helped by a national team that enjoyed significant *suerte* on the pitch in the 2014 World Cup; Colombia made it to the Quarter Finals of play that year. Also, at about the same time, young people in Colombia lost interest in the wars of their grandfathers: they wanted to change the narrative away from Macondo, toward something more prosaic, less violent, more modern.

The book is innovative in that it studies tweets of President Santos and more traditional speeches. The tweets—and the relationship between tweets and scholarship continues to evolve—allow for textual/rhetorical analysis, the territory of literature and language professionals.

The author studies specific legislation combined with “Sport for Development and Peace Campaigns” (185), plus the ten-year plan developed through the Interior Ministry.

Santos, unlike previous presidents, understood the power of soccer to promote national unity and he put resources plus legislation behind his words...or under his tweets.

The reference section is clearly presented, and the author has consulted standard texts, magazines, journals and newspapers. Websites, films and some two dozen personal interviews complete the research dimension of this book. A text that

remains timely three years since publication (and nearly ten years since the Peace Accords of 2016) should find readership with students of cultural and Latin American studies, peace studies, *Colombianistas* and people interested in Colombia's recent history. Colombians proved, between 2012-2016, that they could act with determination and courage to promote peace, and Peter J. Watson is to be commended for carefully tracking, through soccer, that difficult process and path.