
Essay

Les Bleus and Black: A Football Elegy to French Colorblindness

Khaled A. Beydoun[†]

“If I score, I’m French. If I don’t, I’m an Arab.”

- Karim Benzema, French footballer¹

“There is no room for the word ‘race’ in the Republic.”

- François Hollande, the 24th President of France²

INTRODUCTION

In 1998, the chiseled face of the French football team’s talisman, Zinedine Zidane, was illuminated on the *Arc de Triomphe*. An endless sea of French men, women and youth of all races flooded the *Champs Elysee*, screaming in unison, “Zizou for President! Zizou for President!” lauding an Algerian man who rose from the ghettos of Marseille to become the most beloved

[†] Associate Professor of Law, University of Arkansas-Fayetteville School of Law; Senior Affiliated Faculty, University of California at Berkeley, Islamophobia Research & Documentation Project (IRDP); and author of *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (University of California Press, 2018).

1. Rabih Alameddine, *Just How Good Would France Be if Every French-Born Arabs Opted to Play for Les Bleus?*, THE NEW REPUBLIC (Jun. 23, 2014), <https://newrepublic.com/article/118315/what-if-all-french-born-arabs-opted-play-les-bleus>.

2. *Hollande Propose de Supprimer le mot “Race” dans la Constitution*, LE MONDE (Nov. 3, 2012), https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2012/article/2012/03/11/hollande-propose-de-supprimer-le-mot-race-dans-la-constitution_1656110_1471069.html.

man in France.³ A cast of racially and ethnically diverse Frenchman, led by Zidane, had delivered colorblind France its first World Cup trophy.⁴

Twenty years after France claimed its first title, a team widely embraced as the “last standing African team in the World Cup,”⁵ placed a second star atop the Gallic rooster emblazoned on the iconic French jersey. This time, the face of Paul Pogba—the dabbling midfield dynamo of Guinean origin and Muslim belief—shined brightly on the *Arc De Triomphe*. Pogba’s 2018 team outclassed a gritty Croatia side 4-2, and it was far more African, more Black, and more Muslim than the breakthrough 1998 team.⁶

On the backside of the 2018 champions’ jerseys were names like Kante and Mbappe, Dembele and Fekir, who rounded out a roster that featured 14 players of immediate African ancestry. 19 of the players are the children of immigrants.⁷ Seconds before the final whistle that would signal the end of the World Cup in Russia and a second golden trophy for France, I tweeted:

Dear France,

Congratulations on winning the #WorldCup.

80% of your team is African, cut out the racism and xenophobia.

50% of your team are Muslims, cut out the Islamophobia.

Africans and Muslims delivered you a second World Cup, now deliver them justice.⁸

More than just rival, the tweet went ballistic. It was shared over fifty thousand times in a half-hour, resonating deeply with viewers that struggled to reconcile the visibly Black and Brown identity of the world champions with a French commitment to colorblindness that facilitated racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia. A week later, the tweet was shared over 215,000 times,

3. See Craig Whitney, *World Cup’98; City of Lights Erupts in Victory Celebration*, N.Y. TIMES (July 13, 1998), <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/13/sports/world-cup-98-city-of-light-erupts-in-victory-celebration.html>.

4. See *id.*

5. Khaled A. Beydoun, *France, the World Cup’s Last Standing ‘African’ Team*, THE UNDEFEATED (Jul. 4, 2018).

6. Daniel Taylor, *France Seal Second World Cup Triumph With 4-2 Win Over Brave Croatia*, THE GUARDIAN (Jul. 15, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/jul/15/france-croatia-world-cup-final-match-report>.

7. Myriam Francois, *After This World Cup Victory, Can France Finally Throw Off Racism?* THE GUARDIAN (Jul. 17, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/17/world-cup-france-racism-olive-farmer-court>.

8. @KhaledBeydoun, TWITTER (July 15, 2018, 11:59AM), <https://twitter.com/KhaledBeydoun/status/1018540593897705473>.

helping to spur a revitalized discourse on enshrined colorblindness in France, and how this myth and mandate ignores racial realities in the Republic.

The turbulent ballad that is French Football reveals that colorblindness—for French footballers of color and the millions living in France that share their race, ethnicity or religion—is contingent upon excellence. This myth is fleeting, and demystified by racial realities on the ground, including the emergent white supremacist populism rising from the right. These threats, which orient race and religion as inimical to French identity, combined with the vividly African, Arab and Muslim identity of the French football team that captured the World Cup 2018 title, signals the end of the myth that is French colorblindness.

I. FRENCH MYTH: ENSHRINED COLORBLINDNESS

Days after France won its second World Cup, *Daily Show* host and comedian, Trevor Noah, echoed what much of the world believed, shouting into the camera, “Africa won the world cup! Africa won the world cup!”⁹ These words shot at the heart of the gatekeepers of French colorblindness, and more pointedly, at those who contest that French national identity overrides and supplants the racial, ethnic and ancestral origins of the footballers. Noah’s words were an affront on the very hallmark of French citizenship: that one is exclusively and only French, an ultimatum that clashes with the existential realities of the nation’s vast population of Black, Arabs, Amazigh,¹⁰ Jews, and other ethnic and religious minorities.

Members of the French governmental establishment shot back, defending colorblindness during a moment when all the world’s eyes were on France. Gerard Araud, the French Ambassador to the United States, responded sharply,

Unlike in the United States of America . . . France does not refer to its citizens based on their race, religion or origin. To us there is no hyphenated identity. Roots are an individual reality. By calling them an African team it seems you are denying their Frenchness.¹¹

9. @TheDailyShow, TWITTER (Jul 16, 2018, 5:14PM), <https://twitter.com/TheDailyShow/status/1019012366082723840>.

10. The Amazigh, or “Berbers” are they are commonly known, are peoples indigenous to North Africa, and in France, generally of Algerian or Moroccan origins.

11. Rachel Donadio, *The French Don’t Understand American Identity Politics: Trevor Noah and a French Diplomat Spar over a Very Public Spat over*

While hyphenated identities are (theoretically) accepted in the United States and 14th Amendment Equal Protection jurisprudence casts race as a suspect class, race—and all of its conceptual derivatives—is explicitly illegal in France.

Therefore, Zidane is not Algerian-French according to law, and N’golo Kante cannot be Malian-French. These football stars, who captured the imagination of Algerians and Malians in France and beyond, were exclusively and simply French by law. Choosing to be Algerian or Malian would require them to forfeit their Frenchness, in line with a constitutional amendment that, in 2013, formally struck race from the Constitution.

On May 16, 2013, one year before an embattled French Football Federation (F.F.F.) would embark on Brazil for the 2014 World Cup, the National Assembly formally amended the Constitution. Making good on his campaign promise to eliminate genealogical distinctions in the French Constitution, President Hollande pushed the Assembly to strike the word “race” from the charter. The author of the bill, parliamentarian Francois Asensi, stated, “In eliminating the legal category of race, the Assembly has helped our country move forward on ideological and educational levels.”¹²

The French cultural commitment to colorblindness was *now* a legal mandate. It was enshrined in the Constitution and enforced on job and college applications, academic research and government data collections, and perhaps most vividly, on the football field. Race was now legally proscribed in France, and the turbulence this caused domestically became a subject of global concern with the World Cup, and billions of eyes locked on the French team.

This was the political landscape the French football team was compelled to perform atop in 2014 in Brazil and four years later in Russia— where a predominantly African and Muslim side broke through to claim its second golden trophy and broke the myth of French colorblindness wide open. Following in the ideological footsteps of the state, the FFF “enforced evaluative criteria like ‘professionalism,’ ‘harmony,’ and ‘team unity’ risk

Race, ATLANTIC (Jul. 20, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/07/french-american-identity-politics-world-cup-trevor-noah/565637>.

12. Christiane Taubira, *No Such Thing As ‘Race,’ Say French Lawmakers*, FRANCE 24 (May 17, 2013), <https://www.france24.com/en/20130517-no-such-thing-as-race-french-lawmakers-france-racism-hollande>.

becoming new modes of exclusion, new forms of racism and Islamophobia that no longer have to speak with the vocabulary of race and religion.”¹³ These facially neutral proxies (for race) enabled the state to carry forward racial and religious profiling measures throughout France, particularly its immigrant heavy *banlieues*, and the FFF to tailor its team in the image amenable to society, and in line with colorblindness.

II. FRENCH REALITY: RACISM, XENOPHOBIA AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

In France, football is more than sport. It is a societal mirror, exposing everything strategically guised by French policy and meticulously concealed by the rhetoric of presidents and politicians. It tells all—during moments of triumph and, more candidly, when things fall apart.

French footballers of color are embraced as full, bona fide Frenchmen following victory on the field, and demonized as “outsiders” or “lowlifes” when they lose. Eric Cantona, an icon of French Football, summarized it best, “When they win, they’re black, white, Arab, and when they lose, they’re lowlifes from the ghetto.”¹⁴ Cantona’s words echoed those of Karim Benzema, the world-class forward who has been blacklisted from the French team since 2015, whose void has triggered suspicion of racism within the FFF.

This binary dictated the discourse following France’s 2018 World Cup victory. The result on the pitch, again, dictated when colorblindness and the core French principles of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* would be extended to the French footballers of color. And alternatively, when the intensifying reality of institutional subordination and political scapegoating—embodied by the revitalized, white supremacist and xenophobic National Front party, spearheaded by Marine Le Pen—would descend on the shoulders of players named Benzema and Nasri, Makelele and Anelka.

The latter unfolded in 2010, following the lowest point in modern French football history at the World Cup in South Africa. Following a loss to Mexico that derailed France’s prospects of advancing, star striker Nicolas Anelka, a Black Frenchman

13. Paul Silverstein, *World Cup Summer in Postcolonial France*, PLUTO PRESS, <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/world-cup-postcolonial-france-football>.

14. See *Les Bleus Une Autre Histoire de France* (2016), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6020236/>

that converted to Islam, was dismissed from the team for (allegedly) cursing at coach Raymond Domenech.¹⁵ Led by team captain Patrice Evra, another Black footballer, the French team unanimously stood alongside Anelka and against Domenech and the FFF, then staged a “revolt” before losing their final match.

Winless and roundly condemned by French media before they boarded the plane northbound, the French team faced the reality of returning to a nation that hated them.¹⁶ Anelka was widely condemned in France, and the remainder of the team—again comprised heavily of Black, Arab, Amazigh and Muslim players—was cast as an embarrassment and unrepresentative of France.

The debacle in South Africa would create a vacuum for French nativists and white supremacists, particularly the National Front party, who drowned out the commitment to colorblindness with calls for ousting immigrants, Africans and Arabs from French football. Marine Le Pen, fixing her ire on Black and Arab players that do not sing along to the French national anthem, stated, “[Benzema] shows an inconceivable and unacceptable contempt for the jersey he has the fortune to be able to wear.”¹⁷ Echoing her father, and former National Front head, Jean-Marie, who nine years earlier, condemned the 1998 World Cup and 2000 Euro Cup champions as “‘unworthy’ representatives who did not even know the words of ‘La Marseillaise.’”¹⁸

For father Le Pen in 2002 and daughter Le Pen in 2011, race and color meant everything. From their vantage point, the establishment’s allegiance to colorblindness was expediting the downfall of the Republic, and eroding their conception of French identity that is conflated with whiteness.

What distinguished 2002 from 2011? France won the two biggest football prizes in 1998 and 2000, the World Cup and the European Championship, respectively, enabling the myth of

15. See *World Cup 2010: Nicolas Anelka Kicked Out of France Squad*, THE TELEGRAPH (Jun. 19, 2010), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/france/7840438/World-Cup-2010-Nicolas-Anelka-kicked-out-of-France-squad.html>.

16. Par Erwan Le Duc, *Pour Apprécier la Coupe Du Monde, Oubliez les Bleus*, LE MONDE (Jul. 6, 2010), https://www.lemonde.fr/sport/article/2010/06/07/les-francais-et-la-coupe-du-monde-je-t-aime-moi-non-plus_1368874_3242.html.

17. Dan MacGuill, *Benzema’s Anthem Snub Riles National Front*, Local France (Mar. 20, 2013), <https://www.thelocal.fr/20130320/national-front-fury-over-benzema-anthem-refusal>.

18. Simon Hooper, *French Spirit of 1998 Turns Sour*, CNN (April 26, 2002), <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/worldcup/04/26/france.lepen/>.

colorblindness to dictate the decision-making and culture within the FFF. The shame of the 2010 World Cup, however, would steer French Football toward the favor of Le Pen and her rising base of xenophobic and white supremacist supporters, when the FFF considered imposing racial and “homegrown” quotas for its football team. The Federation proposed to restrict, “the proportion of black and north African players to 30% at certain regional youth training centres, including the renowned Clairefontaine facility,”¹⁹ where the national team trains.

French identity, following defeat, specifically meant white. Fueled by Le Pen and the National Front, racial quotas were seriously considered by the FFF to placate a growing segment of France that subscribed to the notion that immigrants, Africans and Muslims, were overtaking *their* nation, and overpopulating the team. While never formally implemented, juxtaposing this era of French football defeat with the 2018 moment of World Cup glory, which restored the veneer of national unity and post-racialism,²⁰ reveals that the myth of colorblindness is only extended to French footballers of color, and the diverse populations of minorities they represent in France, when they score goals and win trophies. But it is only a temporary acceptance that is swiftly retrenched and replaced by racial scorn when they fall short on the football field, leaving those that look like them—or worship like them—to be more vulnerable to the private and public backlash that defeat summons off of it. This backlash comes in the form of headscarf and face covering bans,²¹ tightened borders, “homegrown radicalization” surveillance,²² and the mainstreaming of political white supremacy.

19. *French Football Association Investigates 'Race Quota,'* BBC (May 3, 2011), <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/13274283>.

20. Louis Sarkozy, *Stop Saying the French World Cup Team Was Really African*, WASHINGTON EXAMINER (Jul. 18, 2018), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/stop-saying-the-french-world-cup-team-was-really-african>.

21. See Adrien Katherine Wing & Monica Nigh Smith, *Critical Race Feminism Lifts the Veil? Muslim Women, France, and the Headscarf Ban*, 39 U.C. DAVIS L.REV. 745 (2006).

22. See generally Khaled A. Beydoun, *Beyond the Paris Attacks: Unveiling the War Within French Counterterrorism Policy*, 65 AM. U. L. REV. 1273 (2016).

CONCLUSION

“Everything I know about morality and the obligations of men, I owe it to football.”

- Albert Camus²³

Football is a metaphor, and French Football, a tell-all reflection of the political contestations and racial crises unfolding in real time. In the summer of 2018, France outwardly celebrated their long coveted second World Cup trophy. Yet, underneath the waving *tricolor* flags is an anxiety, and beneath the cries of a restored national unity lurks a palpable fear of France’s rapidly growing non-white population, embodied by the predominantly “African” team that gave them glory.

The world saw it that Sunday in Russia—when an overwhelmingly African, emphatically Black, and unapologetically Muslim French team claimed the center of the world’s stage. Their melanin and faiths acting as an indelible reminder to billions watching throughout the world, and millions in France, that *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*, the pillars colorblindness stands atop, were demystified by another trilogy looming aside them: racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia. They knew colorblindness was a lie. Footballers of color, like Zidane and Henry in 1998 and Pogba and Mbappe in 2018, were French when they won, and demographic threats when they lost.

But for the emergent National Front and their growing legions, French footballers of color are perpetual “citizen outsiders.”²⁴ Or in the words of Camus, *strangers* in their own land,²⁵ waiting to be pounced on when defeat removes the pale shelter of colorblindness. Or more ominously, when the white supremacist populism rising from the right kills it once and for all—as if colorblindness were a nameless Arab left for dead on the beaches of French occupied Algiers.²⁶

23. Stefan Simanowitz, *World Cup: Playing Fair On and Off the Pitch*, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL (June 15, 2018), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/world-cup-playing-fair-on-and-off-the-pitch/>.

24. See generally JEAN BEAMEN, *CITIZEN OF NORTH AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS IN FRANCE* (2017).

25. ALBERT CAMUS, *THE STRANGER* (1942).

26. *Id.* at 35–36.