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This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document, This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in National Identities on 22 June 2016, available online:

[http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14608944.2014.930427.:](http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14608944.2014.930427.)

MacLean, Malcolm ORCID: 0000-0001-5750-4670 and Field, Russell (2014) Performing nations, disrupting states: sporting identities in nations without states. National Identities, 16 (4). pp. 283-289. doi:10.1080/14608944.2014.930427

Official URL: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14608944.2014.930427#>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2014.930427>

EPrint URI: <http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/1638>

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**MacLean, Malcolm and Field, Russell (2014).
Performing nations, disrupting states: sporting identities in nations without states. National Identities, 16 (4), 283-289. ISSN: 1460-8944**

Published in National Identities, and available online at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14608944.2014.930427#>

We recommend you cite the published (post-print) version.

The URL for the published version is

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14608944.2014.930427#>

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Performing nations, disrupting states; sporting identities in nations without states

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As has been well-noted, declarations of the nation's death are premature. The nation is often seen as being grounded in antiquity despite its modernity – it began to emerge in regional pockets mainly in Europe and South America as a meaningful political entity only during the early 19th century – and its ubiquity, the latter a result of the decolonisation associated with European national self-determination after 1919 and the post-1945 global drive to break up the European empires. The antiquity of the nation, or rather its genesis as shrouded in the mists of temporal obscurantism, as well as the nation's quest for its emblematic or epistemic singularity (Morris, 1998, pp97-100) as its singular formative moment and marker of origin (this nation as *ethnie*, to invoke Anthony Smith's framework (1986)) tends to be confused with its existence as a state. Notions of national self-determination, for instance, habitually invoke the political entity that is the State as the vessel of that self-determination leading to circumstances such as ethnic enclaves as states, consider Kosovo, Transnistria or Abkhazia, fratricidal intercommunal conflict such as the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda, and the fraught debates over politically contested notions of sovereignty that we see in contemporary developing relations between First Nations and settler states. It is as if we find ourselves dealing with the "hermetically sealed institutional boundaries of the nation/state"¹.

The appearance of the Abkhazian flag among spectators at the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia, is suggestive of both the symbols of these institutional boundaries and their potential for leakage. It is also one of many moments that point to the imbrication of the modern nation-state and sport, itself also a modern phenomenon developing coincident with late 19th and early 20th century states-as-nations. This nation-state-sport nexus emerged within a growing discursive field of nationhood and modernity that intensified throughout the latter half of the 19th century to celebrate rationality, 'scientific' organisation and practice and to challenge the ahistorical views of an eternal order by highlighting change and progress. These new abstract nations with their states needed to be made real, the imagined but abstract community needed material form, while the members of the nation-with-its-state that in many cases their parents or grandparents had not known needed to be taught how to be of their nation, which itself was often claimed as of antiquity. (James, 1996) Sport was an early factor in the teaching. The first known "international" sporting fixture, a cricket match between Canada and the USA, took place in 1860, seven years before the three colonies became the four provinces that laid the basis for the current Canadian state. This contest, between cricketers from a former and present colony – one a federation of states, the other colonies yet to become a confederated state, point to the ways in which sport could be used to make the nation-as-emerging-state tangible within imperial projects. In such a context, sport could also be a tool that drew the periphery into the cultural practices of the centre. That this process was seen as effective may be borne out by J. Astley Cooper, writing in the early-1890s, noting the benefits of his proposed pan-Britannic sporting event for 'future relationships of the various portions of the Empire'.²

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As Paul Connerton (1989) reminds us, repeated and ritualised bodily activity is one of the ways societies 'remember' and may also be seen as one of the ways nations learn. Modern sport, of a type or in a style that may be branded as local or indigenous, may be understood as a nation building tool that allowed that nation to be performed and for its audiences to recognise the performance. As Gillian Poulter (2009) explores, lacrosse was created and institutionalized in mid-19th century Canada by Anglophone professionals who appropriated aboriginal games and habitant cultural practices to create a sport that was 'originally' Canadian. Yet, efforts to enlist sport in the aim of national signification could not be pursued on their own; the performed nation-in-sport would have no meaning in isolation, it must be understood as an element of its broader discursive field or else the audiences to this sport-as-performance-of-nation would not recognise what they were supposed to be seeing. It was this field combined with a sense that these sports performers were 'just like us' that grants Hobsbawm's oft quoted statement that "the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people" its potency. (Hobsbawm, 1990, p 142)

There is an extensive literature that explores sport's associations with national identities. Furthermore, there is a compelling case that analyses and discussions of sport are to a large extent located within and constrained by a nation-state focus. Australia's so-called Barassi Line, proposed by historian Ian Turner in his 1978 Ron Barassi Memorial Lecture, north and east of which is rugby playing, south and west of which is Australian rules playing unites the nation-as-state under football codes that, before each code's campaign to develop all-of-Australia markets, were widely seen as mutually incomprehensible to their respective adherents. Elsewhere, analyses of sport in divided nations, such as those by Alan Bairner (2001), John Nauright (2010) and Mike Cronin and David Mayall (1998), take their respective nations – Ireland and South Africa – as internally contested but externally given. That this is a consequence of the taken-for-granted of nationhood may be seen in the contested notion of the nation in Tamir Sorek's discussions of Arab football in Israel, the terms of which reflect the contested character and legitimacy of the Israeli state. (Sorek, 2007) In this way, academic investigations to a large extent mirror sport's principal organisational tropes; as Rachael Miyung Joo (2012, p35) has noted "state rhetorics of nationalism continue to inform understandings of sport, and the nation remains a central way of framing consumer practices of sport". In an era of transnational global capital, as the IOC organizes its dual quadrennial spectacles on the backs of the multinational corporations and media conglomerates that comprise its TOP sponsorship programme, the events themselves are framed by the idea of the nation even, as the Abkhazian example highlights, these understandings are far from straightforward. As Joo (2012) suggests, there is a taken for granted association between sport and nation and between nation and state to the extent that much of academic discussion of sport and nation either conflates them as if they are synonyms, otherwise fails to make the distinction between nation and state or accepts that in hegemonic or other dominant discourses the state is the proper political vessel for the nation and, however problematically in other spheres, represents or stands in for it in discussions of the sport-nation nexus. That this is taken for granted is further suggested by the extensive debate within sports studies of sport and nationalism, while the field remains quiet to the point of silent in problematizing the sport-nation association. It is these circumstances that mean that much of the field is contained within a misdiagnosed nation-state-sport nexus.

As a result of this general failure in analyses of the sport-nation relationship to recognise the place and role of the state in the relationship, much of the work in the field does little more than tweak existing models of analysis or add further case studies that, as Shlomo Sand (2009, p 22) has suggested, 'trudge along roads paved mainly with the forged material of national fantasies'. Sand's

observation is in respect of a call to denationalise histories, yet even here he does not draw clear distinctions between the state and the nation. Seeing through this blurring of the state-nation distinction suggests two paths to denationalisation; one is to transnational studies, essential for an agenda based in critical comparative studies, and the other is to explore nationalities in sub-state or trans-state settings. Despite the widespread invocation of notions of imagined communities and invented traditions in nationalism studies, the extent to which, using Sand's term, the multiple meanings of 'forged' as both manufactured and falsely fabricated seem often to be glossed in a received paradigm that has an implicit but seldom critically articulated association with states. The consequence in these explorations of sport is that the nation-state equation should be seen as axiomatic in explorations of the sport-nation association with the effect that a sporting nation without a state is incomplete or in some way not a real nation.

This collection presents a series of case studies that explore instances when the seemingly axiomatic status of the sporting nation state is disrupted or problematized. This axiom is typically seen as being disrupted only in exceptional cases such as in apartheid-era South Africa with its distinctions initially on the basis of crudely defined 'racial' groups and subsequent efforts to invent a 'tribe'-nation-state association through its homelands/Bantustan policy. This attempt was repudiated by the anti-apartheid movement in which the sport sanctions campaign was a major force. Elsewhere, the axiomatic association is disrupted by cases that break the nation-state-citizenship link, as in the case of Israel where Israeli citizenship is not matched by an Israeli 'nationality'. There is also a set of sports practices that disrupt this axiomatic association of nations/states and identities. One of the more obvious places where this may be seen is in indigenous sports, and even more so when indigenous sporting associations are in conflict with the premises on which states operate, as in the July 2010 decision by the UK government to refuse visas to members of the Iroquois Nationals thereby preventing their participation in the World Lacrosse Championships.³ The Nationals travel on passports issued by the Iroquois Confederacy; these passports are widely recognised, including by the USA and Canadian Governments across whose settler boundaries Haudenosaunee/Iroquois territory is located. The UK decision is made even more problematic because of the associations between lacrosse and the Canadian indigenous game known variously as *baggataway* among Algonquin speakers and *tewaarathon* among the Haudenosaunee (also known as Iroquois).

In the essays that follow, Helge Christian Pedersen and Sufian Zhemukhov explore some of the difficulties faced by indigenous sport activists building or reasserting national sport identities within states, as seen in Zhemukov's Circassian example, and across state boundaries as Pedersen shows in his discussion of the politics of Sámi sports organisations. The challenges of these efforts at trans-state and sub-state organisation are shown in these two cases. In the Circassian case there is an instance of incorporation and reinscription within a Russian context to, as is often seen with indigenous body cultures, mark both regional distinctiveness and assert political liberalism marked by tolerance and inclusiveness. In the Sámi example, one of the many struggles faced was the power of the existing state borders to divide and exclude to the extent that Sámi sports organisations do not include Sámi from Russia and are riven by tensions between Norwegian, Swedish and to a lesser extent Finnish Sámi groups. (Similar distinctions are explored by Russell Field in his examination of the VIVA World Cup, in this instance between the lands occupied by ethnic Kurds and the political boundaries of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.) The Sámi case in particular reveals the challenges of attempting to function and build nations beyond states when the state itself provides a potent material frame for daily existence.

Unlike sports studies, nationality studies has problematized the nation-state nexus partly but far from exclusively through a focus on those tensions between states and nations in the era of neo-liberal globalisation.⁴ This focus has allowed exploration of developments such as the devolution of powers in the UK, the break-up of multi-ethnic states in Europe and the accentuation of ‘submerged’ nations in existing states. Mikael Bodlore-Penlaez (2011), in his *Atlas of Stateless Nations in Europe*, identifies 42 cases that he distinguishes between stateless nations, national minorities including those dislocated from existing nations as *ethnie*, regions seeking identities and minorities of the former Soviet Bloc who have formed new states. The blurred definitional boundaries between Bodlore-Penlaez’s four categories point to a key problem in disrupting the sport-nation-state nexus, the meaning of nation, especially, as he notes, in respect of their three principal political characteristics – an assertion of strength, a desire for recognition and an expression of an expectation to a right to self-determination. The challenge is made greater by the ways that many of these different forms of identity-groups engage in similar forms of identity marking activities. Participating in inter-nation sport competition is highly visible among these activities – most prominently in the form of gaining recognition from and membership in the IOC or major international sport governing bodies (such as FIFA in football) – and it is an oft-cited anomaly that organizations such as the IOC and FIFA regularly have more members than other global geopolitical entities such as the United Nations.

Myth making in contexts of social and cultural instability and political uncertainty is significant among identity marking activities. At the heart of much of this myth-making is the creation of common experiences as the basis of a feeling of inclusion, solidarity and cohesion while there are also established foundational myths. As these nation-building struggles develop, the nation and the state at various times operate as both tradition and future with the identity marking practices functioning in a cultural as much as any other realm. (Bouchard, 2008) As Tim Edensor notes, this cultural realm is one of affect and of the sensual rather than the cognitive, of “bodily dispositions, modes of inhabiting space and ways of using things.” (Edensor 2002, p 140) As a result, while flags act as powerful symbols within and beyond sport, it is with athletes marching behind them into ceremonial occasions or their being raised while victory is celebrated (and another symbol, the anthem, is played) that the static representation of nation is embodied. Such associations can be more banal and everyday than global sporting celebrations, but it is in the realm of the affective that deeply felt ways and contexts of knowing and doing nationhood are created, ways of knowing and doing that have little if anything to do with the political, structural and hierarchical monopoly on power and violence that marks the state.

These banal and everyday cultural associations and networks of ideas and practices are explored by Dilwyn Porter and Andrew Smith in their discussions of Cornwall in southwestern England and of the Aude in the south of France. Both regions are characterised by peripheral relations with their respective national cores, both identified by Bodlore-Penlaez as among Europe’s stateless nations, although in the case of the Aude as part of Occitania, and both Porter and Smith apply and extend Michael Billig’s (1995) widely used notion of ‘banal nationalism’ in the context of sub-state national entities. Crucially, while both explore the significance of rugby union in the nationalisms, Smith locates it within a network of other locally signifying practices while Porter contrasts the Cornish assertions of a rugby-nation with the classed and regional characteristics associated with an English metropolitan core that marks rugby’s cultural and institutional hegemon.⁵ Whereas for Porter, Cornish rugby identity operates as a form of opposition from the periphery, for Smith Audois identity is linked to more autochthonous assertions associated with agricultural

production and the politics of the Left. In both cases, however, these are the banal politics of nationalism, not the hot politics of nationalist insurrection even if for some those 'hot' politics are not far away.

Despite this autarkic character of many assertions of national identity, these exist only in contrast and as a marker of distinction against other claims to nationhood. It is in these moments of comparison that tensions may be revealed, where nationality or national identity is seen as understood but not consented to by those on whose behalf it is claimed. Nationalism studies has shown a wide variety of Others, including the obvious not-us groups where divisions such as language, faith or physiognomy are deployed as distinguishing markers. Less obvious are the cases where none of those conventional signs are present, such as where settler colonies draw distinction from both the metropole and from other settler colonies like them; in these cases it is often the practices of the colonised that are held to be both indigenous and indigenising, as Gillian Poulter (2009) has argued for Canada, or the topographical and geographical character of the place itself that indigenises, as argued for Australia in a classic work by Geoffrey Serle (1973). It is this process of making Other that lies at the heart of producing national identities; as Poulter notes, for national identities to be made real they must be "imagined and envisioned, embodied and performed by national subjects" and must also be "witnessed, accepted and emulated" by potential national subjects. (Poulter 2009, p23)

The diverse forms that states or non-state national institutions may take means that this emerging national subjecthood is messy, contradictory and uneven. Russell Field explores the limitations of performed sports identities in his analysis of the 2010 VIVA World Cup (for football teams representing nations without states) held in Gozo. Field's analysis shows the difficulties of asserting non-state nationalisms in contexts where other participants or organisers may not recognise or intend the same performative meanings and where some teams present a recognisable proto-nation state and political programme while others seem principally interested in a social occasion with little that may be seen as a political programme or viable or feasible proto-state entity. Whereas none of the cases Field discusses are close to achieving statehood, Hywel Iwerth's investigation of rules of representation – that is, of the criteria for determining who will be classified as a national subject to 'embody and perform' national identity in internationally representative fixtures – draws on evidence from Wales, among the most state-like of Europe's nations without states. Iwerth's discussion also shifts the analysis back to the practical sphere of sporting nationhoods in a globally commercialising cultural practice, and in doing so returns to some of the economic and cultural forces that drive the cases explored by Helge Christian Pedersen and Sufian Zhemukhov. In doing so he reveals the limits of identity as intangible and deeply felt in the contested world of commercial sports practice.

This collection highlights the range of questions and issues that can problematize the nation-state-sport nexus, and does so by dealing with sporting identities primarily in a sub-state context – Pedersen's trans-state example along with some of the teams in Field's analysis being the exceptions. There are other trans-state contexts where the politics of sporting and arguably other cultural nationalisms may fruitfully be explored. This may be most obviously seen in transnational and transcultural sports events such as the Francophone or Lusophone Games that are premised on a cultural nation beyond the state where that nation is marked by language. Elsewhere we may see sporting practices that mark the players as of an imperial or post-imperial sphere of influence but not of the metropolitan core – consider, for instance, post-colonial discussions of cricket or rugby as marking those who are concurrently members of the 'centre' and the 'periphery'. The third principal

area we see where there may be productive further analyses of the nation-state-sport nexus that could also disrupt the conventions of seeing these cases as sporting nations without states lies in the analyses of diasporic nationhood of the kind explored by Joo (2012) in her discussion of transnational Koreanness in the context of a global sense of Korea. We welcome further explorations along these and other lines that take analyses of this nation-state-sport nexus beyond the centrally defining role of the nation-as-state to consider the banality of cultural practice and performances that construct nationalities apart from states.

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¹ We are grateful to Peter Catterall for this phrase.

² *The Times*, 30 October 1891, cited in Dheensaw (1994) p. 7. We note that the sentence continues, to the effect that these relationships are seen as "as a means of increasing good understanding and goodwill of the Empire".

³ See 'Iroquois lacrosse team denied visas by U.K.' [URL: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/iroquois-lacrosse-team-denied-visas-by-u-k-1.869901>, accessed 18/08/2010]

⁴ An early example of which, pre-dating the era usually seen as neo-liberal, Nairn (1977).

⁵ We note that as we were putting the finishing touches to this introduction and after Porter had completed his paper the European Union recognised Cornish national minority status. See 'Cornish granted minority status within the UK' [URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cornish-granted-minority-status-within-the-uk> accessed 26/04/14]