
Sports, Nationalism and Symbolic Efficiency: The Film *Invictus*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we study the film *Invictus*, directed by Clint Eastwood. We recognize in it the potential to propose and encourage many themes worthy of more careful analysis, especially with regard to the 'sociological imagination' of a sport. The film uses rugby as its referenced sport; however, it does not address issues related to tactical, technical, physical and motor aspects of this sport. In reality, it proposes and discusses one of the most important sociological functions that promotes, justifies and legitimizes the existence of sports activities, namely, the capacity for social integration. In the case of *Invictus*, this theme is associated with a very delicate moment in the history of South Africa—apartheid. This theme is extremely rich and stimulating for reflecting on discussions regarding the sociology and anthropology of sports. Sports and their symbolic identities are beautiful themes to be explored, and *Invictus* certainly contributes a great deal toward relevant discussions.

Keywords: Sports; Film; Sociology of sports; Social integration; Symbolic identities; Anthropology of sports;

INTRODUCTION

Film performs many functions. It can be viewed for leisure and relaxation or for personal and mutual entertainment. Additionally, movie watching can be serious hobbies, or activities that involve friends and family.

However, the role of films cannot be reduced to these recreational purposes exclusively, as there are many other functions as well. Films can be seen, enjoyed and analyzed as artistic, cultural, educational, and symbolic expressions. How many movies, scenes, dialogues and scripts are foundational to illuminating discussions, clarifying ideas, situating contexts, understanding feelings, developing thoughts or inspiring actions?

In this article, we study the film *Invictus*, directed by Clint Eastwood. Regardless of some historical errors, we recognize in it the potential to propose and encourage many themes worthy of more careful analysis, especially with regard to the 'sociological imagination' of a sport. Other authors have also written about this movie, with very interesting analyses, including Buarque de Holanda (2010), Capraro, Medeiros, and Lise (2012), Muhlen et al. (2010), Boscov (2010) and Dias (2014).

The film *Invictus* was completed in 2009; its plot is based on the book by John Carlin, *Conquering the Enemy*. The movie is set in South Africa during the election of President Nelson Mandela and the 1995 Rugby World Cup, which was hosted by that country. Its title comes from a poem written by the English poet William Ernest Henley.

The main actors are Morgan Freeman, starring in the role of South Africa's President Mandela, and Matt Damon in the role of François Pienaar, player and captain of the South African national rugby team.

The film uses rugby as its referenced sport; however, it does not address issues related to the tactical, technical, physical and motor aspects of rugby. In fact, it proposes and discusses one of the most

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important sociological functions that promotes, justifies and legitimizes the existence of sports activities, namely, the widespread and vaunted capacity for social integration. In the case of *Invictus*, this issue was addressed during a very delicate moment in the history of South Africa: apartheid.

APARTHEID

Apartheid refers to the policy of racial segregation and the territorial organization of South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century. The goal was to separate the races on legal grounds (white, Asian, mixed race, or black), establishing a hierarchy in which the white race dominated the rest of the population. This plan materialized officially in 1944, and racism was accepted as legal from 1948 to 1994.

In 1949, interracial marriages were banned. The following year, the Immorality Act prohibited sexual intercourse between whites and blacks. In the same year, the population was registered and separated according to race; physical divisions were established with the creation of specific residential areas.

This racist system received considerable criticism and pressure from the international community because of anti-colonial movements in Africa. The United Nations (UN) applied sanctions in 1960, excluding South Africa from the Commonwealth of Nations. In 1972, facing the threat of a general boycott from African countries, South Africa was excluded from the Olympic Games in Munich. The South African regime was officially condemned by the Western community in 1977 and subjected to an arms and military equipment embargo. In 1985, the UN Security Council called on its member states to adopt economic sanctions against the country.

In 1989, Frederik W. de Klerk became the new South African president in what would be the last term of the Nationalist Party. After numerous pressures resulting from international public opinion and a number of negotiations with representatives of the country's ethnic communities, the segregationist regime ended in June 1991.

History and Legacy of Nelson Mandela

In the political domain, the biography of Nelson Mandela is often confused with the advent of apartheid. Rolihlahla Mandela was born in the Madiba clan in the village of Mvezo, Transkei, South Africa, on 18 July 1918. In 1944, at age 26, he joined the African National Congress (ANC), a political party that brought together blacks. A few years later, with social segregation backed by law, Mandela opposed the regime based on the democratic ideals of equality.

In the early 1950s, Mandela was elected leader of the ANC's youth wing, leading the Congress of the People, which brought together parties from the ANC, South African Indian Congress, Congress of Mixed Peoples and Congress of Democrats. This was a historic milestone, particularly for having been able to gather the country's ethnic groups and present demands for a new South Africa, free from the apartheid regime.

In 1960, the government declared the ANC an illegal party. Mandela opposed this action; inspired by the guerrilla wars in Algeria and Cuba, he became convinced that an armed struggle was inevitable. Thus, he began to organize clandestine military movements. In 1962, he was arrested for treason and conspiracy against the state and sentenced to life imprisonment. From 1964 to 1982, he was imprisoned on Robben Island along with other leaders of the resistance. During these years in prison, his international reputation grew enormously and he was accepted and legitimized as the most significant black leader in South Africa, becoming a symbol of resistance against apartheid. With increasing pressure from the international community, he was released on 11 February 1990. Mandela's international recognition culminated in 1993, when he shared the Nobel Peace Prize with President Frederik W. de Klerk for leadership in the peaceful transition to South African democracy.

In 1994, Nelson Mandela was elected as the first black president of South Africa, facing the enormous challenges of the post-apartheid era, including poverty and crime. He had one concern in particular: the historical divisions, prejudices and ethnic conflicts between black and white South Africans. There were many relational difficulties between the two groups to be resolved, such as an unwillingness to change, immense distrust and many mutual constraints.

Apartheid and Sports

Invictus was situated in this context, mainly after the election of Mandela. Though the film makes mention of numerous historical facts, it is not a documentary (thus, in order to clarify certain errors, we suggest reading Dias [2014]).

The main purpose of the film, as mentioned previously, deals with the vaunted integrative function of sports. In this sense, it is guided by the principles of one of the most important and recognized sociological traditions: functionalism.

Indeed, from the functionalist perspective, sports can foster unity, integration, stability and maintenance of social systems, performing important functions such as forming individual and collective identities, strengthening community and cohesion, supporting the cult of social symbols, constructing heroic and mythical figures, searching for motivation, developing character and channeling tensions and frustrations.

Invictus, seen from this perspective, highlights the power of the symbol in the face of ethnic conflicts and class hierarchy present in South Africa. In many scenes, hostilities related to political breakdowns, which certainly compromise the functions and perpetuation of the social and political system in South Africa, are exposed: segregationist behavior, intolerance, mutual hostilities, conflicts and social tensions, cultural discrimination, historical grievances and collective constraints.

The first sequence in the film demonstrates the theme. Two opposing everyday scenes are described:

On one side of a fence, a rugby team trains with a coach, with uniforms, on a proper field—a high school team, neither rich nor professional. Even so, it might as well be on another planet from the black boys who, on the other side of the fence, play soccer in flip flops, in the dust. Clichés about inequality and injustice immediately come to mind. (Bosco, 2010, p. 120)

The delegation of Nelson Mandela, newly released, passes between the two groups. The black children cheer him on, as the white children watch in silence. A white boy turns to his coach: ‘Who is he, sir?’ The answer is resentful: ‘the terrorist Mandela (...); this is the day our country went to the dogs.’ (Eastwood et al., 2009).

In a following scene, already sworn in as the president, the television presents President Mandela’s first speech to the nation, accompanied by a disturbing comment: ‘South Africa seems to be on the brink of a civil war.’

The film presents Mandela as fully aware of the difficult task of solving the historical South African ethnic and social conflicts, coordinating ‘black aspirations with white fears.’ His ultimate objective, always emphasized by the plot, is to unite a nation torn by serious resentments and divisions.

Because of these issues, scenes filled with hostility, both latent and manifested, are constant. In the first meeting with his palace officials (including those from previous governments who are apprehensive and nervous about retaliation or possible dismissals), Mandela, characterized in the film as in a stubborn struggle for unity and peace, announces flatly, ‘there will be no retaliation or dismissal.’

In the film, the presidential guard also displayed serious disagreements. Friction and deep malaise between the groups comprised of both whites and blacks were continual. In *Invictus*, given the tensions, the new head of the guards approaches the president’s office and exposes these difficulties—naturally, a serious problem in the context of presidential security. Mandela seeks to appease him: ‘You asked for more men. When they see me in public, they see my bodyguards. You represent me, directly. The rainbow nation starts here. Reconciliation starts here (...); forgiveness also starts here.’

Aware of numerous conflicts, the new president resorts to different measures, hoping to reunite and bring together a fragile nation that is likely on the brink of civil war.

Invictus focuses on one of these measures: the Rugby World Cup, hosted by South Africa in 1995. Certainly hyperbolizing individual leadership, the film presents Mandela in a Herculean effort to drive the integrative functions of sports against disunity between blacks and whites:

Rugby is not an image chosen at random. In 1995, feeling South Africa on the brink of disintegration, Mandela embarked on a chimerical enterprise: to transform the Springboks, the national rugby team and emblem of white pride, hated by blacks, into the focal point for national unity (Bosco, 2010, p. 120).

The nation’s social grievances echoed in the sporting universe, and the film highlights them. In a preparatory game for the World Cup, held in the city of Pretoria, the English rugby team faces the South African national team, the Springboks. Mandela is determined to be present, which increases the worry and anxiety of his bodyguard that ‘President will be exposed,’ particularly by those ‘who probably did not vote for him. Who probably hate him. Who were born with guns in their hands.’

This insecurity is confirmed when Mandela enters the stadium (wearing a Springboks cap). A mix of cheers and boos from the crowd awaits him; however, few whites applaud.

As the sociology of sport has exhaustively demonstrated, one of the most significant functions of sports is to articulate and convey symbols of social belonging, both of affirmation and denial. During play, these symbols explicitly reveal themselves. Although the Springboks represented South Africa, many blacks openly cheered for the visiting team. Mandela said, ‘The whites are cheering for the black Springboks. The blacks are cheering for England.’ (Eastwood et al., 2009)

Indeed, the Springboks were an important emblem in South Africa, holding a symbolically elevated power. For many non-whites, especially the most radical, they symbolized white pride and supremacy. Rugby was the sport of white colonizers:

Rugby was introduced in South Africa by the English through private clubs and schools, with the intention of replicating cultural activities that would reaffirm their supposed superiority. The Afrikaners, in particular, began to value it, as they considered it similar to the image they made of themselves—conquering, strong, determined, with a history of conquering territories through the use of force and strategy.

With the most rigid system of segregation, rugby was increasingly identified as one of the key elements of white culture. After the formal institutionalization of *apartheid* in 1948, it became an activity of great political interest. At that time, the conservative forces were able to establish that all captains of the South African team should be connected to the National Party, while at the same time, the opposition forcefully challenged this kind of political interference with the sport. (Dias, 2014: pp. 519-520)

During the practice match, the South Africans were shamefully defeated, which encouraged blacks (fans of England) to take advantage of this result and propose to change the green and gold colors of the uniform, as indicated by an aide to Mandela: ‘This may be the last time they look at the green and gold.’ Quotidian resentments are dramatized in *Invictus*. In a church, social workers donate goods to the needy. A black boy approaches and an assistant sympathetically and unwittingly offers him a Springboks shirt that he promptly refuses, leaving her perplexed. Her friend immediately explains, ‘If he wears it, the others will beat him (...); to them, the Springboks still represent *apartheid*.’

Another delicate moment occurs during a meeting of the National Sports Council (NSC), the governing body for sports in South Africa. Its members, all black, propose the elimination of the name that has so stigmatized: ‘As a prominent symbol of the *apartheid* era, the colors, emblem, and name of the Springboks will be eliminated *immediately*.’ The vote is unanimous for approval of this action.

The decision is immediately reported to Mandela by phone, and he subsequently goes to the meeting site. His main advisor anxiously warns, ‘You are risking your political capital.’

Suddenly, South Africa’s president appears at the NSC meeting, to the surprise and bewilderment of its members, resulting in a feeling of general gravity. Mandela speaks, disagreeing flatly with the decision: I believe we should restore the Springboks. Restore its name, its emblem, its colors, immediately. Let me explain why. Those who jailed me were all Afrikaners ... we must know the enemy before we triumph over them. And we have triumphed, have we not?’

Once again, *Invictus* constructs the image of the president as striving to boost the effectiveness and power of the symbol, stressing the dimension of group solidarity and collective density, which is capable of reinforcing a sense of cohesion, pride and loyalty. Mandela’s inspiring words follow:

Our enemies are not the whites; they are our partners in democracy. They love Springbok rugby (...); by removing it, we will lose them. We will prove to be what they feared we were. We have to be better than that. We have to surprise them with compassion, with restraint and generosity. I know all that they denied us. But this is not the time to take revenge in a trivial manner. This is the time to build our nation using every brick that is at our disposal, even if it comes wrapped in green and gold. You elected me as your leader. (Eastwood et al, 2009)

This sentiment of the nation—the search for a community of people or a collective body that is able to express a symbolic unity—expresses not the sum of individuals but rather its own synthesis, in a Durkheimian sense. Through sports, Mandela sought to amplify the passions and national virtues embodied by the players: loyalty, fidelity and self-sacrifice, with a sense of duty and a pride in belonging to a community. He sought a sense of the group, a ‘we’ that supersedes differentiation and quotidian separation, projecting desires for unity, pride and integration.

‘If we take what they cherish, the Springboks, their national anthem, we only strengthen the cycle of fear between us,’ concluded Mandela. *Invictus* presents him as generally intolerant of a ‘black supremacy project; the only project that he would endorse would be that of one nation’ (Bosco, 2010, p. 120).

The film shows Mandela dangerously risking his legitimacy after his speech. He proposes a new vote to the NSC: ‘Who is with me?’ His position is approved with a minimal difference in votes. Mandela convinces the sports authorities to support the Springboks, a landmark decision.

The vote captained by Mandela deserves further consideration. His aide relativizes the NSC’s decision, questioning the social function of sports: ‘There are problems, housing, food, jobs, crime, our currency.’ Incredulous, he asks, ‘Isn’t rugby just a game of politics?’ Thus, a sociological issue is raised by the film.

Mandela’s speech, from the point of view of the social sciences, points to a complex discussion, particularly in the context of Marxist critical theory. Would Mandela’s proposition be consistent with the old populist and demagogic policy of ‘bread and circuses’? Would sports represent alienation or a banal exaltation, understood as the ‘opium of the people’? To what extent would the symbol actually act as a vehicle for social integration? Wouldn’t nationalism be a dangerous form of mystification of the masses? Would this symbol have enough strength to overcome, or even slow down, class conflicts and historical ethnic disputes? These are some of the great sociological issues stimulated by the film.

The film, represents a defense of symbolic efficacy. Bosco notes that, noting that the movie is ‘always attentive to the subtle line that separates simplicity from the simplistic (...); it speaks of desperate measures in extreme situations, and wonders at the human capacity to, even momentarily, renounce ignorance’ (Bosco 2010, p. 120).

We understand that, regardless of the position taken by the director, the film *Invictus*—despite nationalist excesses and some historical weaknesses—circulates and provokes such inquiries, thereby justifying the debate about sports from a sociological perspective. This discussion is very important for educational and pedagogical purposes.

Rugby World Cup

1995 was an important year for the sport in South Africa, as the country was selected to be the host for the Rugby World Cup. Mandela saw this grand international event as a historic opportunity. He demonstrated great interest, investing much of his political capital and employing numerous strategies to strengthen these symbols.

Among these strategies was calling the captain of the national team, Pienaar, to a private meeting at the Presidential Palace. Receiving him with joy, selflessness and humility (the film portrays the President serving coffee to the athlete), he initiates the conversation with a conciliatory speech: ‘The English have given us many things, including rugby.’

At one point, he asks Pienaar, ‘What is your philosophy of leadership, Pienaar; how do you inspire your team (...); how do you get them to be better than they think they are?’ Pienaar responds with ‘Giving examples.’

Not incidentally, the film highlights the ‘example’ as a unification strategy. Indeed, it is an emblematic act and one of the most important symbolic instruments used by Mandela in the search for and affirmation of his political legitimacy. The fact that he spent 27 years imprisoned for political reasons transformed him into the ‘living example’ of overcoming and pursuing social unity, seemingly transforming him into a martyr or mythical being.

Not surprisingly, some scenes later, the players visit Robben Island, where Mandela was imprisoned. There, Pienaar is moved by the story of Mandela ‘having spent years in a tiny cell and coming out ready to forgive the people who put him there.’ This is reminiscent of the poem ‘Invictus,’ (Henley, 1996) from which the film acquired its title:

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

In the film, Eastwood strives to present Mandela as a president who is deeply convinced of the power of the symbol from this union that, despite having been created ritually—ephemerally—is dense with meanings. The saying, 'We become more than just a rugby team,' reminds us of an observation by the playwright Nelson Rodrigues (1933), always attentive to the socio-anthropological dimension present in sport: 'The blindest player is the one who sees nothing but the ball.' Much more than a physical clash, around the sport, would, in the beautiful image of the anthropologist Victor Turner, a 'forest of symbols'

In this sense, it is important to note the meaning of *outdoor* spread throughout South Africa: 'one team, one country.' Winning the title would represent more than just a sports victory; it would help to unite a country torn by decades of apartheid.

In *Invictus*, we see that, during the World Cup, the Springboks exceed expectations, win their matches, and qualify for the final game to be held on 24 June 1995 at Ellis Park Stadium in Johannesburg, against New Zealand's 'All Blacks,' the most successful rugby team in the world up to that time.

The film shows Mandela at the stadium. He goes onto the playing field before the match, wearing the number 6 Springboks jersey. He addresses Pienaar: 'François, your country is very proud of you.'

Worthy of a World Cup final, the game is tense and disputed; the film contains excellent shots of dramatic sports scenes that are well-crafted and electrifying. Hollanda (2010) observed, 'It is difficult to transpose the dynamics and singularity of the sporting experience onto film. In this regard, Eastwood has transposed it masterfully'. Regarding this 'pursuit of emotion' in sports, we remember the importance of Norbert Elias's study.

During a difficult moment in the match, Pienaar brings together his teammates in the middle of the turf and, listening to the crowd's cries, seeks to capture their attention and encourage them: 'Look into my eyes, you hear? Listen to your country.' It was the 'mother country in soccer cleats' (Rodrigues, 1994), the nation in a cathartic state and collective effervescence, a theme well studied by Emile Durkheim (1996) in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and well presented by Josep Llobera (1994, p. 136). Durkheim affirms that 'modern as well as ancient societies have to restate and defend or sustain with regularity "the collective sentiments and collective ideas which make its unity and its personality"'. The way to do this is by inducing individuals to gather and participate in rituals and ceremonies. It is through unity that individuals reaffirm their common sentiments.

The film depicts the Springboks winning the match 15–12 in the penultimate minute, with a drop kick by the fly-half J. Stransky (played by actor Scott Eastwood).

The film shows blacks and whites commemorating and celebrating together effusively in a collective state of ecstasy. A journalist asks Pienaar to comment on the support of the fans in the stadium; he says, 'We did not have the support of 63,000 South Africans. We had the support of 43 million South Africans'.

Is this feeling real? What social integration are we talking about when we refer to sports? Is it fiction, populism, or a beautiful, fortuitous moment? Perhaps it does not matter whether or not *Invictus* can be regarded as a trusted reality; surely, it is extremely rich and stimulating as a basis for discussions regarding the sociology and anthropology of sports. Its sociological propositions should be highlighted.

When the trophy is presented, Mandela once again thanks Pienaar: ‘I want to thank you for what you did for our country.’ The combination of sports and symbolic identity is a beautiful theme to be explored, and *Invictus* certainly contributes greatly in this regard.

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