

# Pelé, Romário and Ronaldo: The Social Trajectories of Celebrity Politicians and the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil

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## Abstract

In the 21st century, sport mega-events (SMEs) have become platforms where the interplay between international and national politics, economics, and the social unfold. Moreover, it is not just nation-states that utilize SMEs for leveraging their image in the world stage. Drawing from theories on celebrity politics, this article analysed how three Brazilian sport stars - Pelé, Romário and Ronaldo - who were involved with the organization of the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, used the event for their own personal image construction. We argue based on the three sociological portrays (Lahire, 2005) that their relationship with the SME evolved following a conscious actor approach that sought to maximize or minimize damages to their individual capital (Bourdieu, 1977).

Keywords: sport mega events; sport celebrity politics; 2014 World Cup; Brazil;

## Introduction

As argued by Beck (2005) the once distinct boundaries that separated the political, economic, and social spheres are eroding. Sports, which were once conceived as parochial pastime activities have now become gigantic and complex structures (Gupta, 2009; Horne, 2015; Roche, 2000; Müller, 2015). The development of sport mega events (SMEs) has led them to be platforms for a growing number of issues and occupy a central position on a variety of fields (Roche, 2000; Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006; Horne, 2015). SMEs are growingly related to nation and city branding (Knott, 2010), and also 'an increasingly popular political and developmental strategy for a wide range of urban, regional, and national governments, along with their social and economic allies' (Black, 2007, p. 261). Moreover, it is clear that 'states seek to host sports mega-events because, above all, they believe it will enhance their international prestige' (Grix, 2012, p. 289). It can be considered that image leveraging is one of the most important drivers for stakeholders when the subject is SMEs. What has not been explored by SMEs related literature is the fact that potentially they are used for investments in 'personal branding'. In other words, people can use SMEs to obtain individual advantages being them either symbolic, material, or financial.

Although it is not a surprise that SMEs can leverage personal brands, the intricacies of the blurring of boundaries between sport, stardom, and politics is yet to be fully recognised within mainstream sport sociologists' discourses - with the notable exception of Doidge and Almeida (2017). Celebrity studies within sport have extensively focused on the socio-cultural and economic spheres

of stardom, particularly on how sport stars can become role models and influence behaviour (see Lines, 2001; Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Martin & Bush, 2000; Melnick & Jackson, 2002), the cultural meanings those stars carry (see Chung, 2003; Pope, 2016), how athletes are used for brand endorsements within economic globalization (see Gilchrist, 2005; Marrs; 1996; Moorman, 2006; Smart, 2005; Van Heerden, Kuiper & Saar, 2008), and how athletes-celebrities are connected to discourses of nation creation (see Nalapat & Parker, 2005; Wong & Trumper, 2002). Inasmuch as those researches have touched upon the political sphere, the investigation of the intersects between economics, social and political, where the latter takes central stage is yet to be instilled within sport sociological lexicon.

This chapter analyses the involvement of three athletes who were involved with Brazilian politics and with the loosely defined organising committee of the FIFA World Cup 2014 (hereafter World Cup). The chapter follows with a literature review on celebrity politics, to then the methods of the empirical research to be discussed. In a third moment we present the three athletes' portraits and how their political and social spectrum positions varied during our data collection period (2011-2016). Finally, we discuss our findings in relation to how they express the particularities of the social dynamics of celebrity politics in Brazil and how the tensions, spacings and approximations of those three actors with the organisation of the World Cup were a reflection of the political situation Brazil faced in this period - which culminated with the impeachment of the then President Rousseff in 2016.

### Celebrity Politics

Inasmuch as celebrity politics has not entered the established political science grammar until the beginning of the 21st century (see Street, 2004; 2012; Van Zoonen, 2006; Wheeler, 2013), its features in Western democracies are not solely confined to late modern times. The scrutiny of the relationship between personal characteristics and political implications can be traced back to the writings of Ancient Greek philosophers. In Ancient Greece, morality, courage, dexterity, and virtue of heroes were expressed by the notion of arete (see Barnes & Kenny, 2014), what conveyed individuals with suitable political qualities for the ideal Greek democracy. In a second moment, we can trace it to the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli (2011), especially in regard to how individuals in power should act in order to maintain such position. Not far from the late modern times, another author who influences our present understanding of celebrity politics is Max Weber (2013), especially his notion of legitimate authority deriving from three different ideal types of leadership - rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic. The charismatic leader as described by Weber (2013) shares the same roots as the Ancient Greek heroic figure as conceptualised in Plato (see Barnes & Kenny, 2014). Nevertheless, the manner in which Weber (2013) sees charismatic leadership already points to a direction that recognises personal qualities taking prominence over political positions.

By taking those three different authors as informing the current debate in political science on celebrity politics it is possible to envision at least two distinct approaches to the topic. On one hand there are researchers who focus on the politicisation of celebrities (see Doidge & Almeida, 2017; Inthorn & Street, 2011; Schultz, 2001; Street, 2004; Wheeler, 2013) akin to the works of Plato and Weber, while on the other hand there are researchers who focus on the celebritisation of politicians (see Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2016; Street, 2004, Van Zoonen, 2006; Wheeler, 2013) akin Machiavelli. Street (2004) in his seminal work on celebrity politics conceptualise the latter type as Celebrity Politics Type 1 (CP1) who are characterised by either an elected/appointed politician with an historical background in the celebrity culture or an elected/appointed politician who utilises similar approaches as celebrities to enhance his/her image amongst the electorate. The second type of Celebrity Politics (CP2) that Street (2004) conceptualises is when an individual who already possesses the quality of a celebrity starts to announce her/his political perspectives to his/her already captivated audience. The politicisation of celebrities can happen in relation to more confined campaigns as through petitions and shows/festivals organised for one particular cause, or more broadly when those individuals decide to enter the political realm as candidates.

## Methodology

As part of a broader research project on SMEs in Brazil, the data collection for this chapter started in 2011 and finished at the end of 2016, with the addition of few older news that helped to contextualise the profiles. Several alerts were organised in traditional communication media as well as one of the authors made weekly observations on social media in order to collect news about the World Cup. The former football players were chosen because they represented certain trajectories due to their appearance on World Cup related news. Above all, we follow Da Matta (1992) in considering those three former footballers as embodying the characteristics of persons in Brazilian society by the possible ‘credibility’ effect their past football success can give to their statements regarding the World Cup. For the analysis we decided to work with Lahire’s concept of sociological portraits (2005). This boils down to work with a closer range to the individual in order to produce a sociology grounded in the human experience in its many faces and forms of manifestation (Lahire, 2005; 2011). The temporal approach to the development of the relationship between the three actors emanated from the methodological tool itself. Profiles (portraits) were built with news that involved at least one of the three actors referred to in this paper throughout the period studied. We subsequently selected 23 news about Pelé, 18 about Romário and 22 about Ronaldo, which were chosen because they were either important alone or they synthesised a wider set of news. Three periods emerged through the data analysis: a friendlier approach to the World Cup (around the bid); a more conflicting

period in which certain roles were forged (the building up to the World Cup); and finally the year of the competition, when all seemed to change (2014 onwards).

## The Social Trajectories of Celebrity Politicians

### Pelé

Edson Arantes do Nascimento (Pelé) is probably the most known Brazilian athlete to date (see Kittleson, 2014). Born in 1940, Pelé won three World Cups with Brazil (1958, 1962 and 1970) and immortalised the number 10 shirt in Brazil's social imaginary. Decades after retiring, Pelé had a brief stint in politics when he was appointed Extraordinary Minister of Sport in 1995 by the then President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB - Brazilian Social Democratic Party). During his time as Extraordinary Minister of Sport, Law 9.615/98 (known as Lei Pelé) was promulgated, which mainly allowed football players to freely transfer after their contracts ended, and private investors to own football clubs. This law can be read as part of the neo-liberalisation project that took place during the PSDB presidency years (1995-2002).

Despite proclaiming his support for Brazil's bid (Reporter Diario, 2007), he was absent from the bidding process (BEM Parana, 2007). In 2007, he claimed that the then CBF (Brazilian F.A.) President Ricardo Teixeira has not asked him to be part of the ceremony that confirmed Brazil as host of the event (JCnet, 2007), although Teixeira later stressed that Pelé would be an international representative of Brazil (Tribuna do Norte, 2008). It was in contrast to this marginal role in the World Cup's preparations (Terra, 2011a) that Pelé was announced in August 2008 as an official ambassador for Rio de Janeiro's bid to host the 2016 Olympic Games (Vicelli, 2008). However, after being announced as an ambassador for the World Cup in July 2011, Pelé's presence increased during the build-up to the event (IG, 2011; Blog do Planalto - Presidencia da Republica, 2011), with him speaking out against delays in the preparations for the event (Ramil, 2011). In 2012, Pelé described his role as of 'putting out fires' (Souza & Martins, 2012) regarding widespread public discontent in the lead-up to the event. Following significant public demonstrations during the 2013 Confederations Cup, Pelé called Brazilians to 'forget' any concerns on the financial costs of hosting the event (R7 Esportes, 2013a) and to leave protests until after the event (Brock, 2013). These statements were heavily condemned on social media, as illustrated by the Twitter campaign '#calabocapele' ('shut up Pelé'). In 2014, Pelé continued to call for an end to protests against the event (UOL, 2014; Terra, 2014) and sought to deter the Brazilian public from 'spoiling the party' (Folha de Sao Paulo, 2014). Although reportedly limiting his public appearances in order to avoid association with the protests (Kfoury, 2014), it was reported that Pelé stood to earn around R\$58 million from commercial deals relating to the event (Spacca, 2014).

## Romário

Romário de Souza Faria, or simply Romário, was born in 1960, and won the 1994 FIFA World Cup with Brazil. Romário can be said to represent in Brazil's social imaginary the rogue figure described by Da Matta (1992) as 'the malandro', the master of 'trickery' (malandragem), or as the 'trickster politic' as described in Doidge and Almeida (2017). One year after retiring from professional football, Romário was elected Federal Deputy (2011-2015) and then elected as Senator in 2014 both representing the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) of the Rio de Janeiro state. Thus, part of his relationship with the World Cup was mediated by his legislative role. Romário was announced as an official ambassador for the city of Rio de Janeiro in the World Cup by the state governor Sergio Cabral (Doro, 2007), and then CBF guaranteed a role in the World Cup organisation (Globo Esporte, 2008). In the build-up to the World Cup, Romário was announced alongside former teammate Ronaldo as the face of the Local Organising Committee, in a move that would help lend 'credibility' to the event (Cassado, 2011). In this role, Romário announced that an average of 500 free tickets per game would be provided to disabled people during the competition (Luiz Maurício, 2011). Despite this, Romário made several strong criticisms on the preparations of the event, especially regarding the refurbishment of Maracanã (Monteiro, 2011). More broadly, he also directly criticised Ricardo Teixeira and the then FIFA General Secretary Jerome Valcke (Savarese, 2011). Romário's outspoken criticism of both FIFA and the World Cup continued by describing the works carried out for the event as the biggest robbery in the country's history (Castro, 2013; Marcelino, 2012), even claiming that the presidents of both CBF and FIFA were thieves (R7 Esportes, 2013b). This criticism was also aimed at the perceived ignorance of former teammates Ronaldo and Bebeto for their support of the World Cup (Terra, 2013; Folha de Sao Paulo, 2013). In the year of the event itself, Romário maintained this strong line of criticism with specific reference to Blatter and Valcke (O Estado de Sao Paulo, 2014) as well as claiming that both the president and vice-president of CBF should have been arrested (O Dia, 2014). He also had a call for a Parliamentary Inquiry Commission into CBF's dealings approved by the Senate (Whitaker, 2015).

## Ronaldo

Ronaldo Luis Nazário de Lima, or simply Ronaldo (1978-), another prolific striker who won the FIFA World Cup in 1994 and 2002 for Brazil. Different from the other two former footballers turned into politicians, Ronaldo got involved just marginally in politics by canvassing for Aécio Neves (PSDB) against Dilma Rousseff (PT - Workers Party) in the run-up for the 2014 Presidential Election due to his embarrassment at Brazil's preparations for hosting the event (Globo, 2014). His political participation culminated in 2015, following the corruption scandal that afflicted Ms Rousseff

when he protested against her government wearing a shirt saying 'it's not my fault, I voted for Aécio' (Price, 2015). Despite personal image issues including an infamous 2008 scandal involving three transvestites prostitutes (G1, 2008), Ronaldo was also given an official role in the 2014 World Cup. Following reports that he would lead the organising committee (Goal.com, 2011), Ronaldo took part in the draw for the qualifying rounds of the competition in 2011 (Terra, 2011b) and also spoke enthusiastically about the social legacy of the event (Globo Esporte, 2011). After welcoming new local organising committee chairman Jose Maria Marin to his role in 2012 (FIFA, 2012), Ronaldo was named as ambassador for both Confederations and the World Cup in January 2013 (FIFA, 2013). Despite his role in the organising committee and strong support for Brazil's hosting of the World Cup in the face of public discontent - as illustrated by his statement that "you don't make World Cups with hospitals" - Ronaldo began to take a more critical stance in the lead up to the event (WSC, 2014). Beyond criticising delays in the construction of stadia (Boadle & Downie, 2013) and the scaling down/cancellation of related infrastructure projects (Mercopress, 2014), Ronaldo declared himself appalled at Brazil's World Cup preparations in terms of both the lack of planning and disregard for the host population (Wade, 2014). He claimed to have joined the organising committee as the event represented a great opportunity for Brazil, but one that was not being taken advantage of (Wade, 2014).

## Discussion

As presented, the three portraits shared similar histories with the event. Wherever they were in their trajectories, they approached the event friendly, and even tried to climb higher within the organisation. The unpopular beginning of event related constructions and the unfolding of protests against them give room for an interpretation of those portraits as conscious actors (Bourdieu, 1977; Lahire, 2005; 2011). The three athletes-turned-politicians had different postures regarding public criticisms towards the event. Their places in the event's social universe, however, had a grand influence in what paths they would choose to follow. Pelé, at the end, found himself in a peculiar position. He was trying to support the event critically, but he produced such conflicting and embarrassing statements that the organisers preferred to keep their distance from him. Ronaldo performed comparable role. However, he moved away from the World Cup in a very unpredictable fashion once he had no previous involvement in politics and his main reason was apparently to further his support for Aécio Neves. Finally, Romário played a heavy role against the event at the end by attacking the organisation as well as the organisers. At one point he even teamed up with Andrew Jennings (Downie, 2015; ESPN, 2015) in order to make the most of his campaign, bringing the latter to the Brazilian Congress. At least two different issues could be raised from this study in regard to celebrity politics and SMEs. The first issue relates to the way the three celebrity politicians

approached the World Cup with ‘malandragem’ (trickery). The second concerns the specific field of sport mega events and its use as a platform for sport celebrities’ engagement.

As pointed out by Street (2004), celebrities tend to show their political persona through more confined agendas as in relation to petitions or shows/festivals for one particular cause. Taking the World Cup as mega scaled sporting festivals, we can understand how and why the three athletes turned politicians adhered their images to the event. The World Cup did not have an inherent political agenda behind it, but it was a perfect field where those three persons (see Da Matta, 1992) could leverage their stardom by politicising it. Moreover, their political statements could give credibility to the organisation, or as in the case of Romário and Ronaldo could discredit the organisation, and especially for the latter discredit the political party in power (Workers Party). What we see in this particular Global South case was the Brazilian way of conducting public affairs. Akin to their football prowess, their political participations during all the periods of the World Cup were marked by tricks, step-overs, fake passes that left the audience - akin as their markers in the past - to not know if they were fully in favour or against the World Cup, a distinct mark of trickery as described by Da Matta (1992). As such, in contrast to Street (2004) and Wheeler (2013) where the politicised celebrities produced a more coherent political agenda, what we saw was the ‘Brazilian way’ of politics, with a higher degree of malleability in terms of the acceptance of different and to some extent contradictory messages (see Silva, Sanches-Justo & Rodrigues, 2013). By not being fully in favour or against the World Cup, and by being sometimes in or out of the official organisation of the event, the three celebrity politicians could, as past world class football artists, surprise their audience by lending credit or discrediting the organisation in order to avoid affecting negatively their images. Moreover, as the popular dictum in Brazil says: ‘Brazilians have short memories in respect to politics’ (see Gazeta do Povo, 2014), the trickery approach taken by the three politicised celebrities allows them in the future to navigate again through all the spectrum of Brazilian politics.

Our second contribution relates to the intersection between (sport) celebrity studies and SMEs, by the creation of a distinct space for sociological inquiry. For example, Lahire (2011) highlighted the need to deepen the analysis on the relationships among actors, capitals and fields. This would be a way to avoid assumptions that resonates in contemporary sociology without going through greater scrutiny. Studies may develop a more Bourdieusian take once the field described seems to allow a rather exciting stage. The tight timeline of SMEs and the enormous attention they attract can function as a gravitational field for sports celebrities, who are invariably linked to these events, either by the initiative of organisers or by their own initiatives. Although, it is still necessary to better understand the strategies used by sport celebrities when engaging with these SMEs. The cases presented in this chapter show that such an approach can be rather rational and oriented by external issues, instead of the being motivated by the common frenzy associated with sport mega

events. For example, as soon as the 2014 World Cup started to face troubles both Romário and Ronaldo disembarked from the event. Romário apparently did not want to be associated with both the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics anymore, once they were a sensible matter in Rio de Janeiro, his electoral domicile. Ronaldo went further, even publicly campaigning for the government's opposition during the World Cup. And however, Pelé decided to support the event even though the criticism was widespread at that point, the way the organisers treated him suggests that from the side of the event there was also a more pragmatic approach. Our analysis suggests that the actors measured carefully the investment made – they were conscious (Bourdieu, 1977; Lahire, 2005; 2011). The distance to the field - approaches and spacing - were performed in very specific moments, not being possible to attribute the decisions to phenomena other than the event in the public opinion eye. Also, the intensity of actions suggests the same. Romário started to gain attention of the media, inclusive the international media as with his participation at BBC's Hard Talk (BBC, 2014), once he started to be more effectively against the World Cup, leading him to be the main critical voice in the spectrum of the social development of the event. Ronaldo, in turn, seems to have decided to not get involved into further polemics after the 'you do not make a World Cup with hospitals' incident. He gradually disappeared from the news related to the event. Pelé, who was apparently not as careful as Ronaldo, nor engaged as Romário, ended up damaging his image and allegedly risking the capitals at play.

## Conclusions

This article evidenced how sport mega events can be used as a stage for individual's image construction. We presented three distinct sociological portraits to demonstrate the fluidity of sport celebrity politics in terms of how their participation unfolded over the period of the organisation of the SME, and how those individuals used the SME as platform for personal development. We did it by linking the field work to (sport) celebrities' studies. Distinctively to both Street (2004) and Wheeler (2013), we approached the phenomena through the use of Lahire's (2005, 2011) sociological portraits methodology in order to present our data, and Bourdieu's (1977) theory of the field to guide part of our analysis.

Our findings point out that the approaches of the actors studied in this article - Pelé, Romário and Ronaldo - were conflicting and changeable. The three actors started their World Cup trajectory with a friendlier relationship towards the event, eventually altering their relationship to the event when it came closer to its staging. This behaviour suggests a conscious approach to the field (Bourdieu, 1977; Lahire, 2005, 2011). Romário and Ronaldo appear to have followed the tendency of the public opinion (see DataFolha, 2014), distancing themselves from the event once it started to be systematically criticised. Pelé stayed in the shadows for some time, only to be then challenged by



the general public through new media platforms as Twitter and Facebook once he decided to appeal to the population to support the event. Furthermore, our analysis also suggests that the actors were pragmatic in their approach to the event, considering external factors while interacting with event's related issues. Romário and Ronaldo did so with political concerns as background, whilst Pelé was apparently trying to keep his international bonds to FIFA and his World Cup related sponsorships. These apparent changes in direction regarding their support or criticism during the building-up process and the staging of the World Cup adds another dimension to the literature on sport celebrity politics - their decisions were not only related to maximising their political capital but were also governed by an economic rationality of profit maximisation. That said, the blurring of boundaries between the political, economic, and social capital of those celebrity politicians was a constant feature in their historical involvement with the organisation of the World Cup. At the end, it was unclear for the Brazilian population if those three actors when supporting or criticising the mega-event were doing so for personal gains in their different capital (their celebrity persona), or if they were doing so for the benefit of the electorate (their political persona). Further research is needed in order to investigate how or if sport celebrity politicians can disassociate the personal from the political, or if the blurring between those two realms is so permanent that being a celebrity politician actually means using the new political capital solely for personal social or economic capital gains.

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