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THE 1969 SOCCER WAR: A LOOK FROM THE NEOCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

Sports in International Politics

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**Theory of Neocolonialism**

The word “Colonialism” is incredibly loaded, complicated, and extremely controversial, its mere invocation can invite heated debates among scholars, politicians, and ordinary people alike, especially in the last fifty years. And this is not without a reason, considering how profoundly the practices of colonialism transformed the entire globe, affecting histories of entire societies, countries, and continents. Colonialism is a multifaceted and multileveled process where one group of people (or a state) subjugates another group of people with the intention to exploit subjugated land and people (Ashcroft et al., 2007, pp. 40-44). This is only one part of what colonialism means, since there is also the matter of settling subjugated land, oppression of subjugated people, cultural hegemony and many other things that come with the process of colonization (Ashcroft et al., 2007, pp. 40-44). In many ways the outline of the entire contemporary world’s political hierarchical structures, economic system and wealth distribution, and socio-cultural structures is a direct result of colonialism and its lingering effects.

The period of direct and active colonialism had come to an end in the 20th century when major colonial powers began losing control over their colonies due to mounting pressures at home and/or the colonies, or due to other reasons. Some countries like France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the United States, and, to an extent, Spain have managed to decolonize most of their remaining overseas possessions in a relatively peaceful manner; some countries like Netherlands lost their colonies due to a revolt in them; some, like Portugal, lost colonies due to combination of revolutions at home and in colonies, while some, like Japan, lost colonies due to a defeat in a war.

At the end of the decolonization period in the ‘60s and ‘70s most of the colonies had become totally new countries. However, it was not long before those who were decolonized realized that while on paper their countries were freed from the yoke of the metropoles, in practice many of the colonial vestiges of control and exploitation remained in place or were replaced by entirely new ones. One of the first public people to decry the continuing dependence and exploitation of decolonized nations by their former overlords was the first president of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah, a situation which he described with the word “neocolonialism” (Ashcroft et al., 2007, pp. 146-148; Haag, 2012). Being initially a system of observations of social, economic and political realities in various post-colonial nations, through the works of Nkrumah, his contemporaries, and scholars after them, neocolonialism eventually coalesced into a proper theory, which will be used as a theoretical toolset within this paper.

Incidentally, due to the absence of a clear definition of the term “neocolonialism” (Haag, 2012) and a period the term was coined in, it was often conflated with another theoretical term: “post-colonialism.” To prevent further confusion, both terms are now usually separated on the spatial axis. This means that while both terms designate the research in the same research field, they are distinguished by the period both theories are interested in. Post-colonialism is used for designating and studying colonial experiences of the past and their influence on contemporary reality. Neo-colonialism, on the other hand, also sometimes referred to as “neo-imperialism,” is concerned with the present day, encompassing contemporary and less overt forms of exploitation and control over people and countries by old and new actors (Ashcroft et al., 2007, pp. 146-148; 168-173). Returning to the theory of neocolonialism, it asserts, in general, that shortcomings of nation building in former colonies – high tensions or active conflicts, weak economic performance, and general poverty of the population – exist because of subtle pervasive influences of former overlords and new powerful players (Ashcroft et al., 2007, pp. 146-147; Haag, 2012). These influences can take many forms, like unfair and disbalanced trade, control of financial flows, unequal ownership of lands and industries (Mwaura, 2004, pp. 5-13; Haag, 2012; Uzoigwe, 2019), overwhelming promotion of the former colonizer’s culture (Mwaura, 2004, p. 15), education of local elites in the former metropoles (Haag, 2012; Ashcroft et al., 2007, pp. 146), and oppressive international institutions (Mwaura, 2004, p. 8). However, while at this point it is understandable what the theory of neocolonialism asserts, it remains murky for application. For a more refined version of the definition of neocolonialism we turn to Diana Haag (2012) who defines it as:

“[a] retro-alimenting system of domination and exploitation installed and preserved by the former colonial ruler in its ex-colony, in which economic, financial and military means serve to keep in power favorable leaders and impose favorable policies which again secure economic and financial benefits”.

However, some additional refinement of the working definition is needed in order to adapt it for the paper in question:

*“A system of domination and exploitation installed and perpetuated by a powerful country through its agents as well as international structures, in which economic, financial, cultural, and military means serve to keep in power favorable leaders and impose favorable policies which assist in securing economic profits and required political standing/alignment.”*

With a working definition of the theory of neocolonialism provided, it is possible to proceed to the analytical part of the paper.

**Historical overview**

***The Situation in El Salvador and Honduras Before the War***

El Salvador and Honduras are small neighboring countries in Central America. They both share numerous socio-cultural features: having a common colonial past, both countries have Spanish as the official language; the majority of their population is Roman Catholic; both received independence from Spain in 1821, and later from the Central American Federation – Honduras in 1840 and El Salvador in 1841 (Browning et al., n.d.; Clegern et al., n.d.). They also experienced political instability during the whole of the 20th century; for instance, Salvador was ruled by the military from 1931 up until 1979. The populations of the two countries grew extremely fast during the mid-20th century, posing a considerable problem for employment and housing (Browning et al., n.d.; Clegern et al., n.d.).

However, unlike Honduras, El Salvador has much less to offer in the agricultural domain. El Salvador’s territory is replete with volcanoes. The central plain and interior valleys have mostly volcanic soils that are relatively fertile, but are also vulnerable to erosion. As a consequence, less than one-fifth of El-Salvador’s soils is suitable for agriculture (Browning et al., n.d.). This was the main reason for Salvadorian peasants to move to Honduras. Even though Honduras is five times larger than El Salvador, its population at the time of the war was significantly lower: in 1969 Honduras had a population of 2.6 million, while El Salvador had 3.7 million. By 1969, 20% of Honduran population had been made up of Salvadorians which led to conflicts over land ownership. In 1969 Honduras began the expulsion of large numbers of Salvadorians (mostly illegal immigrants), and the Salvadorian government closed its borders to its citizens (Browning et al., n.d.; Clegern et al., n.d.).

Salvadorian migrants were seen as an economic burden by Hondurans. These migrants were mostly farmers with a low social status. However, those who immigrated legally were economically active which led to the expression of sentiments like “they are taking away our jobs” (Chirinos, 2018).

In 1962 Honduras enacted a new land reform. Its aim was redistribution of the land. This meant taking away lands from illegal immigrants and businesses which did not use it properly. This fact led to tensions between the Honduran government, which was quite friendly to the US, and a number of US legislators and business representatives. Such reactions forced the government to back up and change the reform. After the military coup in 1963 the reform had changed even more. It turned Salvadorian immigrants into a scapegoat, leading to the expulsion of thousands of Salvadorians from the country. Understandably, this led to a resentment towards Honduras by Salvadorians. (Brockett, 1987)

***Football***

Football has a special meaning for people in Latin America: it is both cultural and political. For them it serves as one of the ways of manifesting national identity in the region, especially in competitive tournaments, where the teams represent the country and its people. This is one of the defining characteristics of Latin American peoples who are very active supporters of their national football teams. This might be a consequence of the accessibility of football to everyone, regardless of one’s socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, this accessibility is also a driving force of authoritarian, national, and class-based aspects of identity and culture. This attitude is especially clear towards other states (Chirinos, 2018).

In the middle of the extremely tense situation between the two countries, they had to face each other in the 1970 FIFA World Cup qualifier games in June 1969. These matches became not only the outlet for anger towards each other, but also were perceived as an alternative battlefield. The first game took place in the Honduran capital Tegucigalpa. The night before, Honduran fans were making all kinds of noises outside the hotel where the Salvadorian team was staying. The match was obviously won by the well-rested Hondurans; it was followed by fighting between Salvadorian and Honduran football fans. Salvadorians were enraged not only by their defeat, but also by the suicide of Amelia Bolaños, a Salvadorian who could not handle the loss of her team. She would become the symbol of revenge against Honduras.

The second game was played in the Salvadorian capital of San Salvador. Now the tables had turned: this time Salvadorian fans were throwing bottles and eggs into the windows of the hotel where the Honduran football players were staying. The team had to be taken to the stadium in armored vehicles. The match was won by the Salvadorian team which had led to further violence between fans. However, it went further: in Honduras Salvadorian shops and houses were vandalized, and Salvadorians themselves were harassed and forced to leave the country. In this light, Salvadorian government turned to the Organization of American States (OAS) to intervene, accusing Honduras in genocide towards its citizens. The OAS, however, decided to remain silent.

The third and final game was played in Mexico City, and it saw Salvadorians emerge victorious with a score 3-2, the final goal being made in overtime, making the game a real thriller. However, El Salvador was not satisfied with this victory, especially if taking into account the silence from the international community. The Salvadorian government dissolved diplomatic relations with Honduras because of the lack of its government’s actions concerning the harassment of Salvadoran immigrants. Both countries started bulking on military equipment. On July 14, 1969, El Salvador’s Air Force began striking targets in Honduras, starting with the international airport in its capital. Four days later, on July 18, the ceasefire agreement was reached, with the help of the OAS. The ceasefire came into force two days later. Later, in August, El Salvador started the withdrawal of troops after the OAS threatened economic sanctions and Honduras’ promise of protection of the remaining Salvadorian immigrants (Chirinos, 2018).

***Consequences***

More than 300 thousand Salvadorians were displaced before and during the war; they were coming back with no assistance from the government just to face more poverty and overpopulation. During the war El Salvador suffered about 900 deaths, mostly civilians. Honduras lost 250 combat troops and over 2,000 civilians. Thousands of people in Honduras were left homeless. Trade relations between El Salvador and Honduras were stopped and the border was officially closed (Anderson, 1981, pp. 145-155).

The war damaged not only economic relations between El Salvador and Honduras, but those of the whole region. It threatened the Central American Common Market (CACM), a regional integration project which was pushed by the US. It was suspended for twenty-two years.

Both countries suffered the increase of the political power of the military, despite the trend for democratization at the time. El Salvador also felt social consequences, mostly because of being unable to provide for their returning citizens. These consequences would later lead to the Salvadoran Civil War.

As for the Salvadorian football team, they had successfully qualified for the World Cup. However, they were shortly eliminated after losing their first three matches.

**Applying the Neo-colonial Methodology to the Events**

As can be seen from the definition of neo-colonialism provided in the methodology section, the base of neo-colonialism is formed by agents of powerful actors and their influence. This influence from American agents can be clearly seen in the example of the land reform in Honduras. Even though Honduran president at the time, Ramón Villeda Morales, was a relatively friendly politician towards the United States government, his project of the land reform was far from being popular among the US business circles, which had a stake in Honduran economy, as well as with US political circles that were close to business circles (LaFeber, 1993, pp. 177-179). Consequently, the Honduran government was pressured by Washington to alter the content of the Land Reform. Although Villeda Morales caved to the US pressure and began altering the content of the reform, it did not prevent his oustage from power (Ibid.). In 1963 Honduran government with Villeda Morales at its helm was overthrown in a coup d'etat, days before elections, by the Honduran military circles and their supporters from conservative Honduran elites. The new masters of Honduras had much more conservative views on Land Reform, and were much more favorable towards the foreign, mostly American, companies and their use of Honduran land (LaFeber, 1993, pp. 179-184). Land Reform was eventually implemented in 1967, but it had not had any similarities with the original project of the pre-coup government (Ibid.). It is also worth noting that the new Honduran government could not abolish the reform altogether, as it had certain problems with the legitimacy. In this situation Salvadorian immigrants had become the scapegoat for the nation’s frustration with social problems (Brockett, 1987).

This enables us to assume that the US influence through their agents had an important role in the amendments and implementation of the Honduran land reform. This influence made the government change the outlook on the reform significantly. As for the military coup, there is a reason to believe that it was staged with the help of the American business representatives in order to have a more “cooperative” regime that would help to defend their political and economic interests. Even though this is quite a common opinion, this is still largely up to debate. However, there is an interesting catch with Honduran situation. Although the US government did not want to deal with the military government in Honduras initially, they eventually relented. In fact, new Honduran rulers patiently waited for the US to return and when it did, they made sure that American business and political influence spread in their country unopposed (LaFeber, 1993, pp. 179-184). So whether or not the US, as a singular unit, wanted to escalate the situation in Honduras until the coup, it did reaped the benefits from it nonetheless.

On the other side of the border, El Salvador also had its share of woes from neo-colonialist actions of the US. Military strongmen of El Salvador and the US began their very productive relationship back in the 1930s, when the Salvadorian military destroyed socialist movement in their country (LaFeber, 1993, pp. 73-74). By the 1960s the military was still at the helm of Salvadorian political leadership. However, when more progressive military circles couped the government in 1960 and promised very moderate reforms, they met powerful resistance in Washington, which led to their downfall in yet another coup by right-wing military circles with even more pro-American stance in 1962 (LaFeber, 1993, p. 173). The US presence in El Salvador skyrocketed from that point, getting recognition from Washington as a role model of cooperation with the US in the region (LaFeber, 1993, pp. 174-175). This “role model of cooperation” put a great pressure on the common El Salvadorians, who were already suffering from poverty and overcrowding in their homeland. As a result, by 1969, the year of the Football War, around 300,000 Salvadorians moved into Honduras for better prospects (LaFeber, 1993, p. 175), putting a strain on Honduras in turn. In essence, the US actions and policies towards El Salvador made sure that the country, led by Salvadorian military circles was staying on the path that Washington desired, not permitting even slightest detour from that path. As a result of this close “management” from the US, socio-economic developments in El Salvador hundreds of thousands Salvadorians have migrated to neighboring Honduras, while the political landscape at home was akin to powder keg (LaFeber, 1993, pp. 175-176).

In the end, machinations from the US governments and various agents affiliated with the US created favorable conditions for acute tensions between both Central American countries. As was discussed earlier, interference in both countries from the US contributed to deterioration of socio-economic situation in them, the main example of which is the acute migration crisis in Honduras. Important addition to this is that in both cases the US supported military elites that illegitimately seized power, leading to militarization of both nations (LaFeber, 1993, p. 172), which also contributed to tensions between El Salvador and Honduras transforming into armed conflict.

Another neo-colonialist trait can be found in the following event. After the second football match El Salvador asked the OAS to help stop the harassment and expulsion of its citizens from Honduras. However, the OAS did not offer any help, even in the form of statements expressing concern. The OAS started acting only after an armed conflict had started. This might be a sign that the organization did not see reasons to act in relation to internal conflicts unless the status-quo was threatened by a war or a comparable event. This seems to be one of the characteristics of the American foreign policy towards Latin and Central America at the time (Sánchez, 2008, pp 56-58; 77-78; 98-101). This fact lets us assume that the OAS was largely influenced by the US. Its domination in this instance also constitutes part of the neo-colonialist relations between the US and other countries in the region. The war was virtually ended by a “white peace” which only confirms the assumption of the desire of certain actors to ensure the existing status-quo.

**Conclusion**

Football in the Football War was actually just an expression of tensions between El Salvador and Honduras. The roots of the war itself were deeper than the football matches. The conflict started considerably earlier than the qualification matches for the World Cup; these matches became an outlet for the already existing problems in two countries’ relations.

The base of the conflict tends to be the neo-colonial influence of the United States. The land reform in Honduras was significantly changed because of the expectations of the American business. A military coup shortly after might also be a consequence of the afore-mentioned influence. We can clearly see the development of tensions between El Salvador and Honduras through the actions of American agents, which had led to an armed conflict. If the degree of these actions and the overall influence had been less severe, maybe there would have been no war at all.

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