

# Book Review

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**Rommel, Carl. *Egypt's Football Revolution: Emotion, Masculinity, and Uneasy Politics*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021, 312 pages.**

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In this detailed ethnography, anthropologist Karl Rommel explores the intersections between politics, emotions, and masculinity in Egyptian football between 2007 and 2019. Based on several years of fieldwork in Egypt with players, fans, sports journalists, members of football associations, and ordinary Egyptian men during and after the revolutionary events, Rommel shows how events changed the perception of football in Egyptian society as well as related aspects of emotionality, politics, nationalism, and masculine identity: the growing attention to football in the late Mubarak era reached its peak during the international football championships in which the Egyptian national team participated. Football was literally everywhere, from everyday conversations in cafés to political talk shows on television. This “football bubble” grew, but after the tragic events in 2011 and 2012—police violence against protesters during political revolutionary events and the massacre at the Port Said football stadium—interest in football crashed and it lost its significance. Only recently has it been rehabilitated by the actors engaged in it. Again, and again, football-related emotions and affects have defined and redefined what it means to be an Egyptian man, what the Egyptian nation is, and what its members should be. The peculiarity of Rommel’s account is that he focuses on individual actors and specific events, thereby highlighting his work against the background of historical works that fit revolutionary events into large political-economic narratives.

Football in Egypt is more than just a sports game. Football is a reality in which power relations and the effects they produce are initially embedded. The first part of the book is devoted to revealing how the close interaction of power, state support, money, the media, pop culture and bright victories on the football pitch in the late 2000s created a national emotional “bubble” that covered

the whole of Egypt. Rommel's understanding of bubble comprises a special emotional and affective space of football, which can grow and increase, can retract and even burst. This is a space of close emotional-political connectedness of things: "I picture the bubble as a social assemblage of qualitatively distinct mediators—humans, symbols, objects, and texts—that all mattered, and which worked on and off each other" (31). Rommel describes the formation of this bubble generated by the success of the country's football teams, which engulfed both ordinary people and the political regime of Mubarak, creating a connection between the presidential family and the ordinary people. Sports generally, and football, in particular, created the Egyptian national sense of We, which surpassed each individual and their ideas about the national community. This initially built-in nationalism has contributed to the fact that football has become a powerful and effective political instrument. The growing football bubble determined how, when, and what normal Egyptian men, members of the national community, should and can feel.

But, like any phenomenon related to the sport, this instrument cannot be completely controlled—there is always a moment of unpredictability and uncontrollability in sports. The emotional-national unity produced by the football bubble was not stable and hermetic. Unpredictability manifested itself when the national team was defeated in two matches in Algeria in 2009. After the unexpected defeat, the strength of the bubble was called to question. A critical reflection and assembly of the new perception of football began—the events in Algeria in 2009 prompted the formation of new emotional discourses about football. As soon as football begins to be increasingly perceived as political (*siyasi*) and fanatical (*muta'assib*), its emotionality is separated from the national project. The more political (*siyasi*) football became, the more it lost its ability to act as a unifying national-political force, forming a sense of belonging to the nation. This process of destruction of the football bubble led to attempts to revise social hierarchies—on the ruins of the bubble, it was easy to justify your position and show your voice. The two "respected" groups that criticized football from different positions were secular intellectuals and Muslim thinkers. The groups of critics are different, but they are united by one common claim to football as too political an action—over-politicized (*siyasi*) and fanatical (*muta'assib*). In order to preserve the national unity that these groups claim to represent, it is necessary to resist football fanaticism because it carries the spirit of division, struggle and competition, and these things are incompatible with national solidarity.

The resistance and lack of control of the emotional and political becomes an important topic in the second part of the book, dedicated to the Egyptian Ultras—highly organized communities of football fans. Rommel tells the story of the Ultras, their origin, their appearance in public space, and how they became a visible part of this space. Ultras bring with them a new, in every sense revolutionary emotional-affective style, different from what football has already cultivated, while also offering a radical alternative, popping the football bubble. Fun, freedom, self-independence, and control over what is happening (at the stadium and beyond)—these are the components of the new football emotionality that allowed the Ultras to gain wide popularity in 2011 and 2012. The independence and energy of the Ultras challenged the government’s discourse about football as part of a national project. The new style-decentralized, materially supported by fan symbols and social media, collective support networks-based Ultras founded a new form of power—it was a revolution within a revolution. This provoked a reaction from the establishment and the media associated with it. Ultras began to be accused of partisanship and violence, and were portrayed as marginal thugs (*baltagiyya*) who were trying to destroy national stability using their brutal force. The young Ultras had to develop strategies of resistance to an increasingly counter-revolutionary Egypt and challenge the understanding of what football and the Egyptian nation should be.

An important point of the book is the description of the 2012 tragedy in Port Said—a mass massacre between fans of different football teams, which led to a drastic change in the attitude of all actors involved in football. Egyptians realized that football had been used as an instrument in the hands of the authorities for a long time, which made it more political (*siyasi*). *Siyasa* (politics) is a very important category that Rommel (and his interlocutors in the field) uses throughout the book to demonstrate the variability and inconsistency of attitudes towards football and politics in Egypt. Rommel notes that most Egyptians share an antipathy to the political—for a long time, nationalist thinkers and the ruling class were skeptical of *siyasa*, because being a good nationalist means working for the common good of the entire Egyptian nation. Political partisanship and actions driven by one’s own vision and personal demands are designated in this context as dangerous and harmful. The 2012 Port Said stadium massacre made the ambivalence of *siyasa* obvious. On the one hand, after the Port Said tragedy, the Ultras gained the moral right to anger and the agency to act, to radically change the established order in football,

which had become too political, and the state, which had become corrupt and violent. On the other hand, actions against over-politicization and its negative consequences imply some politicization and involvement in the political process of struggle, disputes, and conflicts. The Ultras found themselves in a difficult dilemma between their declared nonpolitical nature and the need to participate in the political process to achieve their goals and values. The dialectic of the political becomes an important argument of the book, appearing repeatedly in the text.

The complex relationship between football feelings and the phenomenon of *siyasa* is the main theme of the third part of the book. Increasingly mixed with politics, football has become alien to Egyptian men, once actively involved in the special realm of the game. The national football bubble has burst, leaving behind disappointment, alienation, and a bitter aftertaste. But a paradox arises: while Egyptian national football is going through hard times, attention and interest in foreign football remains, and nobody finds disappointment in it. Why? Rommel offers several explanations for this phenomenon: the best technical equipment of European football, which captivates the viewer; the alienness of foreign football, its exclusion from the practical contexts of national Egyptian politics—“it’s just football, nothing more;” the routine of watching European matches, which gives a sense of normality of what is happening in the difficult revolutionary and post-revolutionary years.

“In this exceptional period of Egyptian modern history, when so much had to be meaningful, proper, and politically useful to count and fit in, international football and the played game remained attractive because of their separateness and non-political meaninglessness. This football stayed outside the revolution’s turbulence and seriousness. How could it not, when it was just a game?” (210). This description once again gives the reader an important understanding of the complexity and ambivalence of the category of the political (*siyasa*) and the associated meanings, discourses and emotional styles that constitute uneasy politics.

This vivid ethnography provides the reader with a special grasp of the extraordinary complexity of such a seemingly simple phenomenon as football, its interaction with the nation, politics, gender, and emotionality. Rommel’s account allows everyone, even those who have little to do with sports, to understand the exciting and constantly changing transformations to football, helping them gain a better understanding of why people are so sensitive and receptive to sporting events.