

The football players' trade as a global commodity chain. Transnational networks from Africa to Europe.

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Introduction

The goal of my presentation is to apply the analytical framework of the global commodity chain (Gereffi 1994) to the case of football players' trade from Africa to Europe. This involves considering the football player not as a working migrant, but as a commodity. This assertion is not neutral: can a human being such as a football player be considered as a commodity? With regard to ethical considerations, we would answer no. However, when taking into account the empirical functioning of the global football players' labour market, I would be tempted to answer yes. I'll shortly further explain why.

The second consequence of applying the global commodity chain framework to the footballers' trade case is less ethical and more methodological. According to Dicken (2001: 89), the global commodity chain approach, as a network methodology, entails identifying "actors in networks, their ongoing relations and the structural outcomes of these relations". To this extent, the foundational unit of analysis of the research becomes networks rather than individuals. In my case study, this means that instead of focusing the analysis on, for example, players' biographies and the ways through which they develop transnational relations linking together their country of origin and their countries of circulation, we have to analyse the whole configuration of networks into which players' migrations take place. Career paths of African football players in Europe have to be interpreted in the light of the analysis of both the agency of the actors involved in networks (players themselves, players' agents, clubs officials and clubs managers) and the structural background and outcome of the relations linking these actors in networks. The study of the structural background of networks implies taking into account the role that institutional actors such as States and football international and national federations play, and to consider the relations

between the actors present in networks in terms of the unequal distribution of power in the global economy.

Can a football player be considered as a commodity?

The economic organization of world professional football is such that the players are not only a human resource for clubs, but also a financial capital. In the professional football economy, football players acquire different values according to their performances. This monetary value is both virtual and real. It is virtual when the player is under contract with a club, but it suddenly becomes real when a player under contract is transferred from one club to another. When this occurs, the buyer club has to pay an indemnity to the seller one. Thus, strong speculations are made on footballers, who then become commodities exchanged through clubs. The footballers' trade is particularly prevalent in well off leagues of European countries. The sums paid for the best football players can be very significant as these figures illustrate.

Highest transfer's sums paid for football players

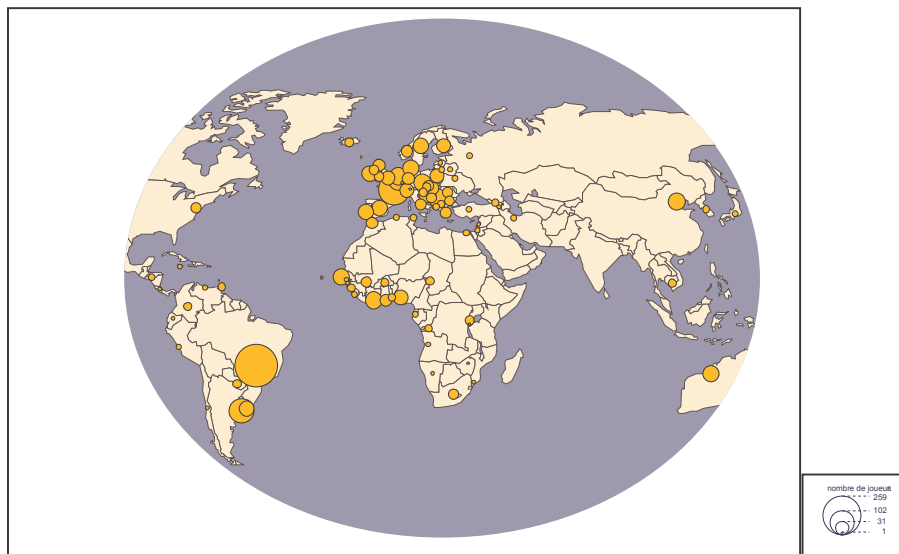
Player	From	To	Year	Amount
Zinédine Zidane	Juventus	Real Madrid	2001	75
Luis Figo	Barcelona	Real Madrid	2000	61
Hernan Crespo	Parma	Lazio	2000	56
Gianluigi Buffon	Parma	Juventus	2001	53
Gaizka Mendieta	Valencia	Lazio	2001	48
Rio Ferdinand	Leeds	Manchester U.	2002	47
J. Sebastian Veron	Lazio	Manchester U.	2001	46
Ronaldo Nazario	Inter	Real Madrid	2001	45
Wayne Rooney	Everton	Manchester U.	2004	44
<i>And further</i>				
Michael Essien	Lyon	Chelsea	2005	38
Didier Drogba	Marseille	Chelsea	2004	37,5

Sources: La Lettre du Sport, 23.07.2004, World Soccer October 2004, La Gazzetta dello Sport 17.08.2005

The fact that money circulates in the football economy mainly through players' transfers has resulted in the creation of specific networks whose goal and function is to provide the best conditions for players' circulation. From a spatial point of view, since the implementation of the "Bosman law" in 1995, which introduced free movement for communitarian sport workers in the European Union, the football players' trade networks are increasingly organised transnationally. The possibility to recruit a larger number of foreign footballers has been largely exploited by European clubs. The

percentage of football players that have been internationally recruited in the clubs of 11 Western European top league championships increased from 21.2% in 1995/1996 to 37.2% in 2004/2005. The profitable ratio between quality and price of Latin American and African football players is such that their percentage among the total number of players recruited abroad increased from 35.7% to 41.4%. In absolute terms, the number of African players in the top eleven Western European leagues almost doubled from 1995/1996 to 2004/2005, growing from 160 to 316.

“Production” zones of professional football players recruited abroad



The increasing recruitment of European clubs in Africa, more precisely in West Africa, indicates and reflects the existence of an important set of cross-borders relations. According to Vertovec’s terminology (2003), these relations can be considered as a transnational social formation, which, for the reasons mentioned above, is business oriented. As several authors pointed out (Dicken and others 2001, Crang and others 2003, Vertovec 2003) it is helpful to transpose onto this specific case of human migration, concepts and theoretical approaches that have not been developed in the migration studies field. Because of the transnational spatial configuration of the footballers’ trade and the business oriented structure of the latter, approaches developed in order to understand the functioning of the global economy are particularly interesting and provide a means for conceptual cross-fertilization. Among these approaches, the global commodity chain is

one that furnishes an especially interesting analytical framework for the empirical study of my subject.

Dimensions of global commodity chains for African football players' trade case

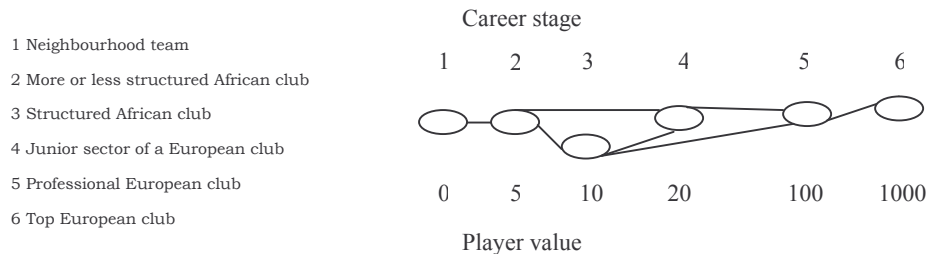
Gereffi (1994) highlighted four main dimensions of the global commodity chain. First of all, the *input-output structure* refers to a “value-added chain of products, services, and resources linked together across a range of relevant industries” (in Dicken and others, 2001: 98). Industries in the football players' trade example assume different forms.

The African footballer usually begins to play with peer-friends in informal structures located in his neighbourhood. This allows him to develop physically and acquire technical skills. The neighbourhood functions as the first “industry” in the global commodity chain input-output structure. If the young football player is particularly good, he'll be picked up by a more formal football structure with a coach who will provide him a tactical knowledge. This more or less structured football club is typically the second stage for an African football player. This incipient stage in the player career path can already be the first one integrated into a transnational network. Indeed, if, traditionally, the departure from his country of origin happened only once the African footballer had played for the top national clubs, nowadays, players' agents and European club's observers scout already at this level of age and competition. These agents build transnational bridges making possible a premature international migration towards the junior sector of professional European clubs. Once in Europe, the next step for the African football player is the signing of a professional contract either with the European club that had integrated him into its junior sector or with another one.

From this moment on the value-added chain can really become lucrative. Through his performances and different transfers the player can acquire a very considerable value. The input-output structure intervenes from now on between clubs, with players' agents playing the role of contacts facilitators. Nevertheless, it is also important to underline that the cases of players increasing in value are more the exception than the rule: many of the African

footballers exiting out of the professional football economy or ending up on a downward career trajectory.

Linear ideal-typical input-output structure



The second main dimension highlighted by Gereffi is the *territoriality*, which refers to “a pattern of geographical distribution that may be spatially dispersed or spatially concentrated” (in Dicken and others, 2001: 99). On a global scale, we have already seen that most of football players’ international transfers spread out from a few “zones of production”. On a more restricted scale, if we take into account Africa, we have seen that most of the African players playing for professional Western European clubs come from West Africa. If we consider just West Africa, only a few countries have a very significant place in players’ flows: Nigeria, Cameroon, Senegal, Ghana and the Ivory Coast. In these countries, most of the players’ trade link together clubs from the main cities (Lagos, Yaoundé, Douala, Dakar, Accra, Abidjan) with European clubs. The destination country of the African player tends also to vary according to his country of origin. Players from former French colonies continue to be mainly transferred to French clubs. On the other hand, players from former British colonies are less concentrated in England. However, in general, we can assert that the global commodity chains through which African players come to Europe are characterised by a pattern of geographical distribution relatively spatially concentrated.

The third dimension of global commodity chain is the *governance structure*, which refers to “authority and power relationships between firms that determine how financial, material, and human resources are allocated and flow within a chain” (in Dicken and others, 2001: 99). This dimension is of great importance when we want to highlight the economic globalization issues in terms of geometry of power (Massey 1993). Gereffi (1999) proposes

to operate a distinction between key or leading agents and subordinate ones. According to this distinction, African clubs' officials can be considered as subordinate agents in respect to key agents such as officials of top European clubs and the most powerful players' agents' societies. Indeed, agents at the bottom of the chain do not have a direct access to top European clubs and their capacity to create value-added earning is insignificant in comparison with key ones. Moreover, European clubs' officials and players' agents have the power to exclude or marginalize Africans' agents from the network, which is not the case for the latter. In terms of capacity "to create, join or escape networks" (Dicken and others 2001: 94) the geometry of power is radically unbalanced. Inequalities in the governance structures of the specific global commodity chain studied in terms of key agents and subordinate ones are both economic (different possibilities in value-added creation) and socio-relational (different powers in creating, joining or escaping networks).

The second differentiation operated by Gereffi between vertically organized producer-driven global commodity chains, where the producers own the whole chain of production, and more horizontally organized buyer-driven commodity chains, where controlling firms do not own production facilities, can also be applied to the footballers' networks trade. Generally, European based agents of the chain do not directly own football structures in Africa. Indeed, such as in the case of the Belgian team Anderlecht with the FC Biba in Abidjan, they very often prefer to reach partnership agreements allowing them to have priority to pick up the best players in exchange for sports equipment and balls. This governance structure is similar to the buyer-driven one and is aimed at creating a competitive decentralised system of subcontractors. In pursuing this policy, the European based agents enjoy a dominant position on African football without any important investments. Typically, transnational networks set up in Africa by FC Nantes are buyer-driven. On the contrary, others European clubs and player agents' societies tend to set up vertically organized networks. Ajax Amsterdam, for example, owns clubs both in Ghana and in South Africa. The African Football Management society owns clubs in Ghana and in the Ivory Coast. Nevertheless, most of the time key agents of the players' chains do not own

« production facilities », but they exercise their power in determining whether or not their local partners can earn money.

The last dimension of global commodity chains is the *institutional framework*, which “identifies how local, national, and international conditions and policies shape the globalization process at each stage in the chain” (in Dicken and others, 2001: 99). This dimension needs also to be considered in a multiscalar way. On a national level, from the African States’ point of view, local players’ international migration is generally encouraged. Indeed, football is essentially perceived in geopolitical terms, as a means to valorise the nation. Instead of supporting local development of the game, federations’ officials prefer to favour migrations, which are for them an easier means to ensure players’ skills’ development. They count afterwards on the possibility to reintegrate into national teams the more competitive expatriated players. European football federations try on the contrary to avoid too great an immigration of non-communitarian players through specific rules restricting their presence in national clubs. This has also to be explained in geopolitical terms: in acting in such a way, national football Federations try to favour the development of national players, which can represent their national team at an international level of competition. Top European clubs, on the contrary, having the financial possibility to be present all over the globe, don’t want to have restrictions on foreign players’ recruitment and would prefer that these quotas were abolished. Their recruitments strategies are effectively becoming more and more transnational. Less well-off European clubs also recruit an increasing number of non communitarian players: this allows them to save money, the quality-price ratio for football players coming from Africa and Latin America being generally favourable. A last actor whose influence is important on the institutional frameworks of players’ trade is player agents’ societies. These develop policies in order to control new “market areas”, which aims in discovering new territories of recruitment where they can obtain a dominant position. For example, players’ agents were present in Africa before European clubs. The latter began prospecting in this continent only once players agents’ had already established networks and placed African football

players in Europe. In discovering new areas of recruitment, players' agents actively contribute to the "resettlement of forgotten territories".

Conclusion

Through this presentation I've shown that an analytical approach developed to study the global economy such as global commodity chain one can be applied to specific human migrations. However, if the conceptual cross-fertilization resulting from the transposition of an approach to an original case study is evident, some questions remain open.

Considering the specific territoriality of football players' trade networks, should we not more properly speak of transnational instead of global? To me, this would better allow underlining the existence of "multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states" (Vertovec, 1999), without suggesting the idea that players' trade networks are necessarily global in scale.

Considering the multiplicity of actors and dimensions intervening in football players' case, perhaps should we better speak of networks instead of chains? To me, this would avoid having to consider player's trade as an exclusive economic, mechanic and linear process of a value-added input and output chain, by referring more broadly to "an integrated structure of ongoing economic and non-economic relations" (Yeung 1998, 65, in Vertovec 2003). The tendency of the global commodity chain approach to view the input-output structure as too much linear has already been highlighted by Raikes (1999) and Dicken (2001) among others.

If it is evident that players are treated as commodities in the football economy, is this term really an adequate one to describe them? To me, another term, in which the human dimension of this very particular kind of "commodity" would be inscribed, would be more decent and acceptable in the academic field. Unfortunately, I do not as yet have any proposal. Perhaps you can help me to find such a term.

In conclusion, I'd assert that if the analytical framework provided by the global commodity chain approach is very useful to study football player's trade from Africa to Europe, the conceptual framework proposed has to be reformulated to avoid semantic misunderstandings.

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