

**The University of Chicago**

***Les Bleus: The Social, Political, and Cultural Influence of the  
French National Football Team***



Peyton Craig Lane

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Preceptor: Jack Wippell

Second Reader: Chad Broughton

## **Abstract**

This thesis delineates the unique cultural influence of ‘Les Bleus’ – France’s National Football Team. The paper traces the evolution of the social, cultural, and political discourse in France from 1998 – the year of Les Bleus’ first World Cup triumph – to 2018 – the year of their most recent title. The qualitative approach utilized in this paper draws on interviews with academics and scholars and places them alongside media and political discourse to provide a holistic understanding of the influence that the team has wielded in France over the last two decades. This paper’s qualitative angle highlights the strong correlation that exists between the performances of Les Bleus and prevailing social, cultural, and political discourse. The findings presented throughout lend themselves to a handful of governmental strategies that would enhance Les Bleus’ cultural role, enabling continued social and political influence, while also protecting against the negative externalities of the team’s sporting failures.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Literature Review</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Methods</b>	<b>9</b>
- <i>Qualitative Approach &amp; Interviewees</i>	9
- <i>Interview Choices &amp; Structure</i>	10
- <i>Limitations of the Approach</i>	13
- <i>Objective of Methodology</i>	14
- <i>List of Interviews</i>	14
<b>Background</b>	<b>15</b>
- <i>History of French Colonization in Africa &amp; Immigration to France</i>	15
- <i>African Immigrants in France - 'The Banlieues'</i>	17
- <i>Historical Role of the World Cup in Culture, Politics, &amp; Society</i>	20
<b>Findings</b>	<b>22</b>
- <i>1998 World Cup</i>	22
- <i>2002 World Cup</i>	29
- <i>2006 World Cup</i>	34
- <i>2010 World Cup</i>	38
- <i>2014 World Cup</i>	44
- <i>2018 World Cup</i>	47
<b>Discussion of Findings</b>	<b>52</b>
- <i>Perception of Team &amp; Immigrants After Victory &amp; Defeat</i>	52
- <i>Long-Term Influence on Race &amp; Immigration Discourse - Media &amp; Politics</i>	54
- <i>Importance of Les Bleus' Footballers as Cultural Figures</i>	55
- <i>Implications of Findings</i>	56
<b>Policy Recommendations</b>	<b>57</b>
- <i>Pass Progressive Immigration Policies</i>	57
- <i>Provide Increased Access to Sporting Facilities &amp; Teams in Banlieues</i>	58
- <i>Implement Stricter Punishments for Public Racism &amp; Prejudice</i>	59
<b>Direction of Future Research</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Interview Questions</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>64</b>

## Introduction

Since the 1990's, the successes and failures of the French National Soccer Team have crystallized France's social and political discourse, particularly as it relates to rhetoric surrounding post-colonial immigration, ethnic nationalism, and the nation's broader conception of individual belonging.<sup>1</sup> 'Les Bleus,' as the team has been more affectionately known, have often been perceived to represent a favorable illustration of multiculturalism and racial integration, priding themselves on the popularized adage: "*Black-Blanc-Beur*" (Black, White, Arab) - a term of endearment coined after France's 1998 World Cup triumph that has continued to serve as a testament to Les Bleus' enduring commitment to immigrant representation, cultural inclusion, and religious pluralism.<sup>2</sup> The team's successes have seemingly ushered in stretches of collective understanding, national unification, and demonstrated the resounding merit of immigration and cultural diversification. However, the team's diverse, predominantly immigrant composition has often left it exposed to prejudiced derision after losing performances, frequently undermining the semblance of cultural progress that team's occasional success had yielded.

Les Bleus' influence on public discourse has been both a function of the central cultural importance of the sport, as well as the team's role as a salient reflection of France's complex, abiding legacies of colonialism, immigration, and racial antagonism. These realities underscore Les Bleus' importance to broader cultural debates, illustrating the extent to which this team has exhibited the potential to ease existing multicultural hostilities, or involuntarily provide the foundation for heightened post-colonial political and social tension.

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<sup>1</sup> Dubois, L. *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*. University of California Press, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, C. S. *From Black-Blanc-Beur to Black-Black-Black? L'Affaire des Quotas' and the Shattered 'Image of 1998' in Twenty-First-Century France*. *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 33(1). (2015) <https://doi.org/10.3167/fpcs.2015.330106>

The inextricable relationship between soccer, or ‘football,’ and the political and social spheres is well established in countries across Europe. While domestic rivalries at the club level are capable of producing large-scale disputes between supporters, it is the competition at the international level that has the potential to renew latent historical tensions that often transcend the game itself. Because the sport represents so much to people across the globe, it should not come as a surprise that the successes and failures of teams at the international level have enough influence to shape the social and political fabric of a nation, for better or for worse. For centuries, this intersection has represented a dangerous, yet inevitable interaction - one that detracts from the excitement of the spectacle, while forcing those on the outside to consider both the positive and negative externalities of international sporting outcomes.

This juxtaposition of soccer and politics, which most would argue should be independent entities, has created a challenging dilemma for governing bodies throughout Europe, as communities grapple with the social and political aftermath of contentious international competition. Although the sport has frequently served as a mechanism for bringing about positive sentiment, it would be remiss to fail to acknowledge that competition at the international level has often been founded upon sectarian politics, sovereign pride, and intense nationalistic and territorial disputes. Despite the agenda that governing bodies attempt to push, the game is laden with damaging political undertones.

This paper intends to explore the marked contrast in national discourse surrounding Les Bleus, and its diverse racial and religious composition, following both triumphs and failures, through an in-depth examination into the social and political responses, beginning with the 1998 World Cup. There is a great deal of existing literature detailing the essential cultural role of soccer in France, but far less research that examines the notable changes in French public

discourse surrounding racial and religious differences that are witnessed after each World Cup. While the idea that Les Bleus' performances have a lasting, causal effect on cultural attitudes is unsubstantiated, there are observable differences in the character of the media coverage and the divisiveness of political discourse after Les Bleus' triumphs, as compared to after the team's failures. Therefore, this paper strives to answer the following central question: how have the performances of Les Bleus at each World Cup since 1998 affected the nature of the discourse surrounding the team's racial and religious differences, and the conception of national belonging in France at large, both in the political sphere and in the national media?

The chief objective of this research paper is to elucidate the historical foundation of France's tenuous relationship with racial and religious differences, before dissecting the manner in which Les Bleus have been used as a political instrument to substantiate rhetoric on both sides of the aisle. I intend to examine the discourse surrounding the team after each World Cup since 1998, drawing on relevant pieces of journalism and reporting from each period, as well as the expertise of the individuals that I interviewed throughout this process. I expect that this approach and this combination of modern perspectives and historical media will yield a holistic understanding of the influence that Les Bleus have had on France's social and political discourse. Throughout, I will use existing literature and available interview data to explore this unique, tangled relationship. The desired result is a rigorous analysis of Les Bleus' impact and the influence, though sometimes overstated, that sport can have on cultural attitudes.

### **Literature Review**

The critical cultural importance of soccer in societies around the globe is well-documented, with the sport functioning as a "universal referent" and the most popular mode of mass entertainment, capable of providing a "fleeting and illusory sense of unanimity which

masks the tensions and conflicts of everyday life.”<sup>3</sup> According to Bromberger, soccer’s widespread acclaim is a product of the game’s embodiment of “the cardinal values that shape modern societies,” serving as a parable that “metaphorically magnifies achievement against ascription, conquered status against acquired status,” illuminating the often-shared meritocratic nature of sport and life. These enchanting qualities are largely responsible for attracting its billions of supporters, yielding a consumptive practice that is considered “an especially privileged site” for conceptualizing nationalism through the formation of ‘imagined communities,’ as Benedict Anderson once described.<sup>4</sup>

Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined communities’ posits that individuals within a nation or nation-state “are bound together by shared cultural imaginings,” whereby “the imagination needs to be redirected toward particular places, occasions or events at which people express their feeling of belonging to a nation that is quite distinct from a range of cultural and national ‘others.’”<sup>5</sup> This concept of ‘imagined communities’ helps explain the manner in which Les Bleus have evolved into a crucial social and political instrument in France, with the team’s successes and failures being used to contextualize the broader understanding of national belonging.<sup>6</sup> Beginning in the 1990’s, Les Bleus began to assume a larger role in the cultural sphere, with “debates about post-colonial immigration, national identity, and republican citizenship” lending “considerable significance to the team’s composition and results.”<sup>7</sup>

The discourse surrounding Les Bleus reached its height following the team’s triumph at the 1998 World Cup, resulting in the propagation of the flawed notion that this sporting success

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<sup>3</sup> Bromberger, C. *Football as World-View and Ritual*. French Cultural Studies, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Watson, G. et al. *Friends and Foes Volume 11: Friendship and Conflict from Social and Political Perspectives*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, C. S. *From Black-Blanc-Beur to Black-Black-Black? L’Affaire des Quotas’ and the Shattered ‘Image of 1998’ in Twenty-First-Century France*. French Politics, Culture & Society, 33(1).

was emblematic of the nation's effective racial integration and social cohesion.<sup>8</sup> Despite the emergence of this belief that “the successful multiracial team epitomized a successful multicultural society,” there was a latent awareness that the “newfound virtues and values” were fleeting, calling in to question “how permanent is the power of a game to transform national identity and image.”<sup>9</sup> While prominent politicians and national media hailed the achievement as “the dawn of a new era in French social and political life,” the years that followed quickly revealed that these hopeful sentiments were merely “utopian.”<sup>10</sup>

This notion that the success of 1998 ushered in a “nation free from racial divisions and conflict... that gained strength from diversity” vastly overstated the impact of the event.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the racialized discourse in France surrounding Les Bleus resurfaced in the wake of the 2002 World Cup, where the team fell short of expectations. Les Bleus then underperformed again at the 2006 World Cup and the 2010 World Cup, and each time the team's racial and religious composition became a target for criticism, with both politicians and intellectuals citing the abundance of team members from immigrant backgrounds as reason for Les Bleus' shortcomings.<sup>12</sup> This resurgence of negative rhetoric in the public sphere manifested itself in relative polling success for conservative political candidates and scathing pieces of journalism across national media outlets.<sup>13</sup>

Since Les Bleus' victories at the 1998 World Cup and the 2000 European Championship, this illusion of seamless racial and religious and pluralism has continued to dissipate, revealing that the team's performances have merely aided in the construction of particular social and

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<sup>8</sup> Dauncey, H., & Hare, G. *France and the 1998 World Cup: The National Impact of a World Sporting Event*. Routledge, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Dubois, L. *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*. University of California Press, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ervine, J. *What Does France's World Cup Win Mean for the Country?* French Cultural Studies, 2014.



political narratives, rather than effectively altering long-term cultural attitudes.<sup>14</sup> While it would be misleading to suggest that the performances of Les Bleus have had lasting causal effects on public opinion, there is a discernible influence on national discourse, particularly as it relates to race and immigration, that results from the team's successes and failures.<sup>15</sup>

The available literature on this subject provides unique insight into the tenuous relationship between Les Bleus and French public discourse, illuminating the various points of contention that arise from the racial and religious composition of the team. The expertise of scholars like Christian Bromberger, Graeme Watson, and Barbara Renzi provides a nuanced understanding of the cultural importance of sport, highlighting the specific characteristics of soccer that imbue it with such relevance, both on an individual and societal level. Christopher Thompson, Jonathan Ervine, and Laurent Dubois further contribute to this line of research, exploring the manner in which the performances of Les Bleus influenced cultural discourse surrounding immigration and race throughout the 1990's and 2000's. However, there is little current research that has endeavored to explore the manner in which Les Bleus have been used as an instrument to rationalize narratives on both sides of the political aisle.

The use of qualitative data to delineate the role that Les Bleus have occupied in political discourse and national media can yield valuable perspectives from the parties that have been able to observe first-hand the social and political fallout in France following each World Cup, dating back to the 1990's. These observations gathered from the data collection process will cast further light on the complex nature of Les Bleus' societal role and the far-reaching implications that the team's diverse racial composition has for national discourse. Given the breadth of findings on the issue, it is essential to distill the varied collection of societal factors that have contributed to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

public discourse following each World Cup, while avoiding overstating the causal influence of Les Bleus' performances.

This process will examine the research of some of the field's prominent scholars, while attempting to develop a framework for understanding how Les Bleus' successes and failures are utilized to propagate partisan narratives surrounding racial and religious pluralism, immigration, and the broader conception of national belonging.

## **Methods**

### *Qualitative Approach & Interviewees*

The qualitative data utilized in this research paper was derived from 12 out-of-class interviews with a diverse collection of sources. These interviewees all possessed a nuanced understanding of the subject matter, stemming from each's differing research specialties. Whether involved in research or academia, these subjects were able to provide distinctive insight into the unique relationship between the French National Soccer Team and the nation's social and political discourse, particularly as it relates to race, immigration, and national identity.

The list of interviewees that I compiled throughout this process consists of academics and authors that have dedicated themselves to this general area of research. These individuals, though all extremely familiar with the topic in question, possessed different academic backgrounds, providing a diverse collection of qualitative data rooted in everything from sociological and anthropological perspectives to political and historical perspectives.

I chose to interview these specific academics - John Hoberman, Christopher Thompson, Jonathan Ervine, Joseph Downing, Andrew Hussey, David Murphy, Laurent Dubois, Hugh O'Donnell, Afshin Molavi, Hugh Dauncey, and John Marks - because of each's distinct perspective on the subject and the publications that I had seen from each of these individuals. All

of these interviewees had written about soccer as a cultural phenomenon and the societal influence of Les Bleus to some extent, whether that was the specific focus of their research or not. Consequently, each of these interviewees were able to offer a unique academic perspective that complemented the broader understanding of the subject quite well.

David Goldblatt is the sole individual that I decided to interview who is not an academic, but rather a distinguished sociologist and author that has written extensively on football's influence on communities and nations around the world. I believe that his perspective provided a valuable bird's-eye view of the footballing world and the manner in which the sport has radically changed the cultural landscape of the nations it inhabits - not just France. His inclusion in the research incorporates a strong sociological angle to the analysis that is much needed given the nature of the question I am attempting to answer.

The interviews were conducted individually via Zoom outside of class, ranging in length from 30-45 minutes. The full duration of each Zoom interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed using Otter.ai, an automatic transcription tool. Following the completion of each transcription, I performed an in-depth annotation of the interview transcript to underscore the important details and the most salient talking points provided by the interviewee.

#### *Interview Choices & Structure*

I utilized a semi-structured interview process with each source, in which I asked a handful of identical, baseline questions to all interviewees (attached in the appendix), before probing with inquiries specific to each's area of expertise. I tried to avoid posing leading questions on these issues, so as to enable the interviewees to put forth a thoughtful line of reasoning independent of the question being asked. I entered these interviews with the expectation that there were certain themes - immigration, race, and national belonging - that I

sought to discuss, which served to inform the direction of the dialogue. I then hoped that common trends would emerge from these interviews, painting a clearer portrait of the role of Les Bleus in bringing difficult conversations to the forefront of national discourse and further elucidating the aforementioned themes that I aimed to explore. This method of qualitative analysis provided me with an effective approach to interviewing a diverse range of academics, while aiding in challenging personal presuppositions about Les Bleus' role in influencing national discourse.

The use of personal interviews to gather data provided certain strengths to the research that could not otherwise have been achieved using a quantitative approach. First, it allowed me to gain access to the unique perspectives and anecdotal experiences of the individuals who have studied and dedicated a significant portion of their lives to researching this issue, providing them with valuable insight into Les Bleus and French national discourse. Furthermore, it offered the interviewees a comfortable space to share honest thoughts and observations that transcend the often-limited value of surface-level quantitative data. This approach was beneficial given the abstract nature of the research question at hand, and the various axes of social, political, and cultural evidence that factor into our broader understanding of this complex, constantly evolving, and relatively ambiguous subject matter.

I made the decision to interview individuals involved in academia and scholarship, rather than members of Les Bleus, for a couple of reasons, both practical and theoretical. The main reason that I decided against interviewing Les Bleus' team members is because gaining access to some of the world's most famous sportsmen would have bordered on impossible. There are no available avenues through which I could have approached these individuals, and the chances that these professional players would even be willing or able to participate in an interview were

slight. However, I do not believe that I would have chosen to interview these individuals, even if I could, because it is unlikely that members of Les Bleus could have provided the unbiased, holistic assessment that I was looking to obtain. While much of Les Bleus' roster could speak to the immigrant experience in France, these perspectives are well-documented in media and lack the same historical nuance as those of academics and journalists that have garnered a certain depth of understanding through decades of research and following these issues.

I also did not interview any journalists as part of this research paper for a handful of reasons. As part of the initial interview outreach process, I extended inquiries to a limited number of journalists because I was not convinced that these interviews would be able to yield the depth and breadth of knowledge on the subject that I was hoping to obtain. Often, the journalism that I encountered pertaining to this subject was quite limited in scope and lacked the level of contextual insight that I was hoping to gain from an interview. However, throughout the outreach process I began to reach out to additional journalists as I started to realize the potential value that an individual on the ground in France, and in touch with the social pulse, could provide. Despite this heightened effort to obtain journalists' perspectives, I found them either unwilling to chat or lacking the requisite confidence to speak to me on the subject matter, such that each recommended I reach out to someone else. I am aware of the research deficiencies that arise from the absence of local journalistic perspectives, but I am confident that the outside online research completed as part of this process, in which I referenced a number of these journalists' articles, will help bridge this informational divide.

Although it is likely that there were minor biases underpinning the perspectives of the chosen interviewees - one of the inevitable realities of discussing a subjective issue - I know that their appraisals are steeped in evidence and sound reasoning. Because of their big-picture

understanding of Les Bleus' cultural relevance dating back to the 1990's, these interviewees were able to avoid overstating the long-term causal influence of the team's performances, though still lending credence to Les Bleus' prominent societal role. While this method of qualitative data collection possesses both advantages and disadvantages, engagement in rigorous post-interview analysis and tangential academic research helped ground the interviewees' ideas and minimize the issues that arise from inherent biases.

#### *Limitations of the Approach*

The limitations of quantitative research to address the aforementioned research question became apparent at the outset of the research process. The issue that this research aims to understand is quite sociological in nature, without a concrete foundation conducive to numerical analysis. While it would have been possible to examine political voting outcomes or immigrant polling data from a quantitative standpoint, in isolation, this methodological approach would not be able to capture the complex interaction between the political, social, and cultural spheres that are married together in our understanding of this matter. There are an untold number of potential confounding variables arising from these angles, such that an attempt to encapsulate this complicated topic into a regression or some other form of statistical analysis would inevitably fail to account for the degrees of nuance wrapped up in this question.

I am also well aware of the sampling issues likely present in this project, which often afflict qualitative research. Because of the limited time frame and a general reliance on the voluntary participation of academics from other universities, the interviewees that were included in this project cannot possibly reflect the range of experts on the issue. This issue of sampling is something that I attempted to minimize during the process, through reaching out to a diverse range of academics, spanning different disciplines, countries, and backgrounds in order to obtain

a plethora of perspectives. Although this is not something that could be avoided completely, I believe the acquisition of an array of perspectives provided the most effective means of mitigating the effects of such an issue on the findings presented in this paper.

### *Objective of Methodology*

This collection of qualitative research, situated alongside analyses of existing literature and journalism, aided in yielding a greater understanding of the interaction between the performances of Les Bleus and France's social and political discourse, particularly surrounding immigration, race, and national belonging. The analyses presented throughout this thesis are twofold. The first avenue of analysis utilizes media articles and political information that appeared around the time of each respective World Cup, providing insight into the immediate aftermath of Les Bleus' performances, as understood through the nation's discourse. The second level of analysis derives its foundation from the interviews that were conducted as part of this qualitative process. This analytical angle supplies a much-needed modern understanding of the lasting impact of Les Bleus' successes and failures on the social and the political discourse of the present. This twofold analytical approach lends itself to a balanced, objective examination of Les Bleus' cultural importance, bereft of decisive biases and baseless assertions.

### *List of Interviews*

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>Date of Interview</i>
John Hoberman	UT Austin Professor	11/3/2021
Christopher Thompson	Ball State University Professor	11/5/2021
Jonathan Ervine	Bangor University Professor	11/15/2021
Joseph Downing	Aston University Professor	11/17/2021

Andrew Hussey	University of London Professor	11/22/2021
David Murphy	University of Strathclyde Professor	12/15/2021
David Goldblatt	British Sociologist & Author	1/17/2022
Laurent Dubois	University of Virginia Professor	1/26/2022
Hugh O'Donnell	Glasgow Caledonian University Professor	2/1/2022
Afshin Molavi	Johns Hopkins University Professor	2/21/2022
Hugh Dauncey	Newcastle University Professor	2/22/2022
John Marks	University of Nottingham Professor	2/25/2022

### **Background**

#### *History of French Colonization in Africa & Immigration to France*

The cultural importance of Les Bleus cannot be understood without becoming familiar with France's colonial past and the policies of imperialism that created this multicultural nation. France's colonial empire, reaching its height in the latter half of the 18th and 19th centuries, laid the foundation for the massive waves of immigration into France that are responsible for the nation's large immigrant population at present.

Beginning with the 1830 invasion of Ottoman Algiers and continuing into the 1900's, France established a vast colonial empire encompassing "the vast confederations of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa, the western Maghreb, the Indian Ocean islands of Madagascar, Réunion, and the Comoros, and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa."<sup>16</sup> During this same period, otherwise known as the 'Scramble for Africa,' France also established protectorates in Tunisia and Morocco, further cementing the nation's presence throughout Africa. Because of this

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<sup>16</sup> Ginio, R., & Sessions, J. *French Colonial Rule*. Obo., (2016, February 25).  
<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199846733/obo-9780199846733-0029.xml>



process of violent colonization, “French control was established over much of Northern, Western, and Central Africa by the turn of the century, including the modern nations of Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Niger, Chad, Central African Republic, and the Republic of Congo.”<sup>17</sup>

France continued to maintain a substantial foothold in these regions through the first half of the 1900's, prior to the completion of the decolonization process in 1962. Despite the formal recognition of the independence of these former French colonies and protectorates, “the ties it forged continue to shape relations between France and its former colonial territories throughout the continent.”<sup>18</sup>

While immigration is a concept that dates back to ancient times, the significant wave of migration from Africa to France that occurred following the aforementioned process of decolonization was a “new phenomenon.”<sup>19</sup> This surge of immigrants that occurred was attributable to a collection of specific factors relating to conditions in both France and the African countries from which the migrants arrived, but there is no question that this “immigration... occurred in substantial part as a consequence of this decolonization.”<sup>20</sup> The principal reason for these migrant flows stemmed from the fact that “after decolonization, the European economies needed cheap labor and African workers were attracted by the prospect of paying jobs.”<sup>21</sup> Because these waves of colonization which continued coming, to varying

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<sup>17</sup> *French Colonial Empires*. The Latin Library. Retrieved March 6, 2022, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/imperialism/notes/frenchempire.html>

<sup>18</sup> *The Legacy of French Colonialism in Africa*. United World International, (2021, September 13). <https://uwidata.com/20956-the-legacy-of-french-colonialism-in-africa/>

<sup>19</sup> Fassin, D. *Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa in France: Some Elements for the Present Discussion*. PubMed, (August, 1986). *Developpement et Sante : Revue de Perfectionnement Medical et Sanitaire en Pays Tropical*, 64. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12341902/>

<sup>20</sup> Alba, R., & Silberman, R. *Decolonization Immigrations and the Social Origins of the Second Generation: The Case of North Africans in France*. *The International Migration Review*, 36(4), 1169–1193. (2002). <https://doi.org/10.2307/4149496>

<sup>21</sup> Fassin, D. *Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa in France: Some Elements for the Present Discussion*. PubMed, (August, 1986).

degrees, throughout the latter half of the 1900's and 2000's, the now approximately 6.5 million foreigners of African descent represent ~10% of the population.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the relative lack of immigration from Africa at present, “the composition of the immigrant population in France is changing... and the proportion of immigrants born in Spain or Italy who came to France long ago and are now in old age is continuously falling, while immigrants born in North Africa, who are younger and came more recently, now make up a considerable share of the immigrant population.”<sup>23</sup> Approximately 50.3% of France's immigrant population arrived from seven countries: Algeria, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, Italy, Turkey, and Spain.<sup>24</sup> The other half of the French immigrant population largely stems from elsewhere in Africa, including: Senegal, Ivory Coast, Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Mali, and Guinea, among others.<sup>25</sup>

This immigrant population born out of the process of colonization and decolonization throughout Africa during the 18th and 19th centuries is a critical ingredient in the social and cultural composition of modern France that is responsible for the foundation of this paper. Les Bleus' diverse collection of footballers, most of which are of African origin, would not exist if not for this period of colonization, which transformed French society.

#### *African Immigrants in France - 'The Banlieues'*

The larger part of the African population in France is concentrated in urban areas across the nation's three major cities: Paris, Lyon, and Marseille. However, most of this population, approximately 60%, is located in Greater Paris, meaning the suburbs outside the center of

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<sup>22</sup> *How Many Immigrants are there in France? - Demographic Fact Sheets*. Institut National d'études Démographiques. (2020, April 6). [https://www.ined.fr/en/everything\\_about\\_population/demographic-facts-sheets/faq/how-many-immigrants-france/](https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/demographic-facts-sheets/faq/how-many-immigrants-france/)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *Immigrants in France 2020, by Geographical Origin*. Statista (August 2021). <https://www.statista.com/statistics/944172/geographical-origins-of-immigrants-france/>

Paris.<sup>26</sup> The translation of ‘suburb’ in French is *banlieue* which is inherently a socially neutral term used to refer to the neighborhoods on the ‘periphery’ of Paris.<sup>27</sup> The word itself is “the product of two French words: *ban* (to forbid) and *lieue* (league, or about four kilometers)” and has historically been used to “refer to both rich and poor neighborhoods.” However, since the 1970’s, *banlieue* “has become a pejorative euphemism for neighborhoods with low-income housing projects, predominantly for immigrant families, that are characterized by widespread employment, poverty and violence.”<sup>28</sup>

Since the latter of half of the 1900’s, the continued development of Paris’ metropolitan areas, alongside the historical lack of investment in these suburban neighborhoods has “caused differences between the city center and the *banlieue* so great that the relationship between the two areas has been reduced to a standoff of good versus evil - a divide between the orderly center and its dangerous exterior.”<sup>29</sup> Despite concerted efforts to further integrate immigrants in France over the course of the last couple decades, there is still a marked racial and religious divide and “tensions between the *banlieue* and the city core are the result of social and spatial inequities that arise from class and ethnic territorial segregation.”<sup>30</sup> The consistent marginalization of the immigrants living in these areas has fostered a repressed anger in these communities, resulting in communities where “young people... turn to drugs, violence, and criminality in hopes of escaping the despair.”<sup>31</sup> Simultaneously, these communities “develop an increasing rage against authority that is often expressed through repeated bouts of active or indirect destruction,” fueling

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<sup>26</sup> Gosselin, A., Desgrées du Loû, A., et al. *Understanding settlement pathways of African immigrants in France through a capability approach: Do pre-migratory characteristics matter?* European Journal of Population = Revue Européenne de Démographie, 34(5), 849–871. (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-017-9463-z>.

<sup>27</sup> Angelil, M., & Siress, C. *The Paris “Banlieue”: Peripheries of Inequity*. Journal of International Affairs, 65(2), 57–67. (2012) <https://doi.org/10.2307/24388218>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

racialized assertions of conservatives that immigrants in France are uncivilized, lack respect for the nation, and are ‘scum,’ as Nicolas Sarkozy, a former French President, once described them.<sup>32</sup> These negative perceptions of the immigrants from the *banlieues* is something that has been exacerbated as a result of the rise of the National Front, France's far-right political group, which has often decried the large immigrant population in Paris, and France at large.<sup>33</sup> The existence of the *banlieues* is critical to understanding Les Bleus and both the success and failures of the nation’s team.

Beginning in the 1930’s, black footballers began to represent Les Bleus on the national stage. Raoul Diagne, a defender born in French Guiana but of Senegalese descent, marked the start of decades of immigrants representing the French National Football Team.<sup>34</sup> Since Diagne, numerous footballers of African descent have donned the uniform of Les Bleus at major international tournaments, often operating in leading roles, and often having been raised in the *banlieues*. Some of the most recognizable French footballers in the world are from the *banlieues*, including: Paul Pogba, Kylian Mbappé, and N’Golo Kanté. Pogba has Guinean origins and was raised in Lagny-sur-Marne, a neighborhood East of Paris; Mbappé has Cameroonian origins and grew up in Bondy, a region to the Northeast of Paris; and Kanté has Malian origins and hails from Suresnes, a district West of Paris.<sup>35</sup> These three footballers, all coming from the *banlieues*, were at the forefront of France’s 2018 World Cup triumph, yet represent just the tip of the iceberg with respect to the diverse nature of the squad. The 2018 World Cup winning group was comprised of 15 footballers of African descent out of its 23 members squad, with eight hailing

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Burdeau, C. *French Politics Swing Right and French Muslims Feel the Sting*. Courthousenews.com. (2021, March). <https://www.courthousenews.com/french-politics-swing-right-and-french-muslims-feel-the-sting/>

<sup>34</sup> *Diagne Blazes a Trail with Les Bleus*. Fifa.com. (2016, February 15). <https://www.fifa.com/news/diagne-blazes-a-trail-with-les-bleus-2765374>

<sup>35</sup> Bradshaw, L. *Banlieues and Les Bleus: Football, the Suburbs and French National Identity*. The Culture Trip. (2018, October 1). <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/france/paris/articles/banlieues-and-les-blues-football-the-suburbs-and-french-national-identity/>

from the *banlieues*.<sup>36</sup> This substantial *banlieue* and immigrant influence was present throughout the 1998 World Cup winning team also, as Patrick Vieira, Thierry Henry, and Lilian Thuram - all of African descent and raised in the *banlieues* - occupied leading roles in the team's success.

The presence of immigrants, particularly ones from the *banlieues*, in Les Bleus teams is something that has been and will continue to serve as an image of multiculturalism and immigration in France. The plight of immigrants in the *banlieues* around Paris is a microcosm of the immigrant experience across France. Ultimately, the understanding of the immigrant experience in France is best understood through the *banlieues* and it would not have been possible for Les Bleus to reach such heights without the contribution of the immigrants born out of these disadvantaged areas.

#### *Historical Role of the World Cup in Culture, Politics, & Society*

The discussion of Les Bleus' outstanding societal importance cannot be had without first gaining an understanding of the significance of the FIFA World Cup - the world's premier international soccer tournament, occurring every four years. This tournament represents "the largest sporting event in the world, surpassing even the Olympics in the size of its audience."<sup>37</sup> There is no sporting event capable of channeling a nation's hopes and grievances like the World Cup either, with this critical competition "crystallizing political conflicts and hopes, and creating a seemingly endless and inexhaustible site into which people have pumped their hatreds and phantasms, not to mention their money."<sup>38</sup> While the European Championship - Europe's premier international tournament - and the Copa América - South America's crowning

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<sup>36</sup> Pradier, P. *Diverse French Team Brings Home World Cup Championship*. ABC News. (2018, July 16). <https://abcnews.go.com/International/diverse-french-team-brings-home-world-cup-championship/story?id=56619062>

<sup>37</sup> Dubois, L. *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*. University of California Press, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

competition - are capable of inspiring a certain fanaticism that borders on religious extremism at times, “the World Cup... remains the defining competition for the sport.”

The World Cup has the potential to transform mere individuals into national heroes and global celebrities, elevating victorious footballers and international teams to an exalted status in a single moment. Laurent Dubois, a Professor at the University of Virginia, best captures this unparalleled relationship between the World Cup and national politics that often transcends the game of football itself, writing:

*“Novelists and filmmakers often struggle to transform individual characters into symbols of a larger collective. But for its fervent fans, a national football team really is the nation, at least for a time. An athlete can instantly become a national icon after even one play on the field. When this happens, the accident of his biography, of the story that brought him to the crucial moment when he changed the course of a game, and therefore history, become charged with larger meaning. At such moments football produces a crossroads between personal history and national history that illuminates and shapes the language of politics.”*<sup>39</sup>

Dubois effectively describes both the fanatical passion for football, as well as the influence that it is capable of wielding outside the lines, highlighting the manner in which the sport is capable of altering cultural and societal attitudes.

Similar to Dubois, George Orwell once described the zealous nature of footballing enthusiasm, albeit to an exaggerated extent, writing: “serious sport [football] has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words it is war minus the shooting.”<sup>40</sup> Orwell continues, ascribing the rise of footballing fanaticism to the “lunatic modern habit of identifying oneself with large power units and seeing everything in terms of competitive prestige,” as

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *The Sporting Spirit*. The Orwell Foundation. (2010, October 20). <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/the-sporting-spirit/>

compared to earlier centuries where sports “were played, and probably played with much physical brutality, but they were not mixed up with politics nor a cause of group hatreds.”<sup>41</sup>

Although not a footballing scholar, Orwell’s observations are entirely consistent with the footballing world of the present, in which nationalistic disputes and regional politics are superimposed on international football matches, with the impact of the outcomes spilling over into the cultural, social, and political spheres of modern societies.

This section should help contextualize this discussion of Les Bleus’ cultural importance and the potential it has to either inspire a positive interpretation of the principles of multiculturalism and immigration that the team represents, or garner criticism for those exact same principles from the conservative members of France. The following analyses of each World Cup since 1998 and the societal outcomes that have resulted should further elucidate Les Bleus’ function as a social and political instrument whose perception filters through France at large.

## **Findings**

### *1998 World Cup*

Les Bleus entered the 1998 World Cup on the heels of a third-place finish at the 1996 European Championship, after failing to even reach the World Cup in 1994. Given Les Bleus’ relative lack of success throughout the 1990’s and their diverse, star-studded roster, the team became a subject of criticism among politicians from the National Front, France’s far-right political faction. In 1996, Jean-Marie Le Pen, then President of the National Front, took aim at Les Bleus, criticizing the numbers of immigrants in the squad:

*“It’s artificial to bring foreign [football] players here and baptize them in the French team, though I could think of other names for them. They put an Algerian*

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

*in to please the Arabs, a Kanak who can't even sing the National Anthem, blacks to satisfy the Antillais. None of them have any place in a French team.*"<sup>42</sup>

Le Pen's critiques didn't end there. During the European Championship in 1996, he directed additional criticism at the members of Les Bleus that possessed non-European backgrounds, alleging that "these players who come from elsewhere and do not sing the Marseillaise" were undeserving of representing the French team.<sup>43</sup>

According to Le Pen, some of the players' unwillingness or inability to sing the national anthem in the lead-up to matches "reflected the unpatriotic and mercenary motives of men who had opted for French citizenship out of economic calculation and lacked an authentic bond to France as a result of the "artificial" process by which they had been "brought from abroad," naturalized, and integrated into the French national soccer team."<sup>44</sup>

However, a number of politicians on the other side of the political aisle condemned Le Pen's comments, citing Les Bleus as a crucial symbol of multiculturalism and successful racial integration.<sup>45</sup> Despite Le Pen's bigoted agenda, Les Bleus headed into the World Cup with an incredibly diverse roster of footballers.

The expectations for Les Bleus were high going into the 1998 tournament, as the squad was composed of star footballers representing some of the world's most prestigious teams at club level, and the tournament was set to be hosted on home soil. This diverse collection of footballers in the squad resulted in heightened pressures for Les Bleus, as "there was hope this team could help improve the legacy of France's complex history of race relations."<sup>46</sup> The 1998

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<sup>42</sup> Thomas, J. *Le Pen vs. Les Bleus*. Slate. (2002, April 26). <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2002/04/le-pen-vs-les-bleus.html>

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, C. S. *From Black-Blanc-Beur to Black-Black-Black? L'Affaire des Quotas' and the Shattered 'Image of 1998' in Twenty-First-Century France*. French Politics, Culture & Society, 33(1). (2015) <https://doi.org/10.3167/fpcs.2015.330106>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Grez, M. *France's "Rainbow Team" Looks Back at Historic World Cup Triumph*. CNN. (2018, June 8). <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/08/football/france-1998-world-cup-win-anniversary/index.html>



team, endearingly referred to as the “rainbow team” because of its racial composition, contained members with backgrounds that could be traced across the globe.<sup>47</sup> Despite the racial inequities and impoverishment plaguing immigrants throughout France, Les Bleus offered these communities hope. The diverse nature of the squad became a fixture of footballing discourse around the globe, as Hugh Dauncey, a Professor at Newcastle University, points out in *France and the 1998 World Cup: The National Impact of a World Sporting Event*:

*“During and after World Cup ‘98, the issue of the ethnic composition of the French side became one of the most talked-about aspects of the finals, moving from the sports pages in both France and Britain, to become a significant object of discussion. The French squad was the most ethnically diverse of all the competing countries. Apart from Karembeu, Lama, Zidane, Thuram, Djorkaeff, Desailly, Lizarazu and Barthez (all immigrants), the squad [also] included Henry (parents from Guadeloupe), Diomède (parents from Guadeloupe), Boghossian (Armenian extraction), Trezeguet (Argentinian father), and Patrick Vieira (born in Senegal). France’s victory quickly became associated with the possibility of new, positive developments particularly towards acceptance of a multicultural society.”<sup>48</sup>*

This excerpt draws attention to the significance of Les Bleus as both a sports team and as a manifestation of the perception of successful cultural and racial integration, escalating the pressure to perform at the World Cup.

Les Bleus started the tournament well, rolling through the group stages of the competition with three straight victories. The team then managed to pass through the knockout rounds, emerging as the winning side against Paraguay, Italy, and Croatia in succession, before encountering Brazil in the final. Les Bleus ended up trouncing Brazil 3-0 in the World Cup final, with Zinedine Zidane, a footballer of Algerian descent and the face of the French team, scoring

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Dauncey, H., & Hare, G. *France and the 1998 World Cup: The National Impact of a World Sporting Event*. Routledge. 2014.

two of the game's goals. The outcome triggered crazed celebrations throughout the nation to an extent that France had not experienced in decades.

This World Cup triumph, the first in French football history, sparked an unprecedented level of national optimism. The accomplishment led to more than a million French citizens arriving at the Champs Élysées to celebrate as a nation, with Paris projecting a picture of Zidane, a symbol of hope for immigrants, onto the Arc de Triomphe. These levels of shared national delirium had not been seen in centuries across France. Alban Traquet, then a prominent journalist at L'Equipe, a leading national sports paper, claimed that "it was a defining moment in France's history," and suggested that "the two major moments of collective euphoria, in terms of crowds on the street, are the liberation [of Paris in 1944] and the World Cup victory in 1998."<sup>49</sup>

However, the national jubilation was perceived to be not just a celebration of sporting triumph, but as an indication that France had cast off the racial and religious divisions that had long plagued the nation, marking the emergence of a harmonious multicultural republic. Joseph Downing, a Professor at Aston University in England and expert on French soccer, echoed this sentiment that the World Cup triumph had adopted a much greater, more symbolic meaning following the tournament:

*"There was a real sense of positivity and hope that this was the moment of some kind of integration. In '98, there was a real sense of a multicultural France emerging. There was this idea of 'Black-Blanc-Beur' (Black-White-Arab), and this idea that France was becoming this multicultural idea of nationhood."*<sup>50</sup>

Downing alludes to this notion that the rise of immigrants with Les Bleus' was perceived to mimic the ascension of immigrants in the nation at large, resulting in the broader belief that this

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<sup>49</sup> Sire, A. *After France Won the 1998 World Cup, French Diversity was Celebrated. But it was Short-Lived.* The World from PRX. (2018, June 29). <https://theworld.org/stories/2018-06-29/after-france-won-1998-world-cup-french-diversity-was-celebrated-it-was-short>

<sup>50</sup> Joseph Downing, interview by author, Chicago, November 17, 2021.

triumph was a manifestation of the successful integration of France's immigrants. This charge was echoed among liberal politicians, including then President of France, Jacques Chirac, who exclaimed that "this is a France that wins and is, for once, united in victory."<sup>51</sup> Similarly, *Le Monde* - a prominent national newspaper - suggested that the Les Bleus' squad "was a symbol of the diversity and of the unity of the country."<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, Le Pen, who had been actively criticizing the team in lead-up to the World Cup, was noticeably silent after this success.

Lilian Thuram, one of the most prominent members the 1998 World Cup squad of African descent, further highlighted the importance of Les Bleus' successes on the image of immigrants in France and the nation's understanding of racial issues:

*"The success has been very useful, because when France wins and people examine the make-up of the team it goes against what people are told about immigration. Through football people can see that many of the very best players began their lives as poor children, in many cases from immigrant families. When France wins matches it's very important for the country's image and for the image of immigrants. 1998 was a very important moment, it helped to legitimize immigrants. It's now far easier to speak about these issues than before then."*<sup>53</sup>

Thuram's viewpoint was not uncommon, as a number of prominent academics that have studied this relationship in France have arrived at a similar understanding, in that the performances of Les Bleus have some potential to leave an impression. Although the influence cannot be accurately quantified or determined in the aftermath of an event like the World Cup, there is legitimate reason to believe that the ramifications of such a triumph have a nonzero effect on France's social, political, and cultural discourse. Laurent Dubois, a Professor at the University of

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<sup>51</sup> Hooper, S. *French Spirit of 1998 Turns Tour*. CNN.com. April 26, 2002. <https://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/worldcup/04/26/france.lepen/>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Martin, R. *France's World Cup Triumphs Changed Attitudes to Immigrants - Thuram*. Reuters. (2018, November 14). <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-soccer-france-thuram-idUKKCN1NJ2XV>

Virginia and the author of *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*, alludes to the transformative aspects of sport, though gradual:

*“I think you can be cynical. There's always good reason to be cynical about some of this stuff, but I think the extreme cynicism I hear is probably misplaced, because, after all, cultural shifts have long term political and social impacts. I think the culture does drive what people can imagine politically. So, having sports figures and teams like Les Bleus that can have a really major cultural impact, means there's no doubt that it has political impacts, not in a super easy or direct way, but gradually over time.”<sup>54</sup>*

Dubois’ assertion lends credence to the notion that Les Bleus’ have occupied a critical cultural role, serving to drive forward the dialogue about race, immigration, and national belonging, as the team draws on the power it derived from the success of ‘98.

Despite this general belief in Les Bleus’ potential to drive discourse and influence cultural attitudes in the long-term, it is important to be cautious about overstating the near-term impact of a single event, regardless of the ensuing national reaction. Andrew Hussey, a Professor at the University of London and historian of French culture, warned against exaggerating the impact of the 1998 triumph, as the broader narrative often fell victim to sensationalist media and instances of political opportunism on both sides of the aisle, writing:

*“If you look at 1998... and all the political capital that was made out of ‘Black-Blanc-Beur’ (Black-White-Arab), that this was the new multicultural France. I think that it was a bit of two things. I think it was a bit of an illusion and also I think it was a bit of wishful thinking on the part of politicians, intellectuals, and the media who genuinely, and quite rightly so, desired to envision France as a more integrated place.”<sup>55</sup>*

This hesitance to lend too much credence to the influence of the ‘98 triumph was shared across the range of academics that I interviewed on this issue. David Murphy, a Professor at the

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<sup>54</sup> Laurent Dubois, interview by author, Chicago, January 26, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Andrew Hussey, interview by author, Chicago, November 22, 2021.

University of Strathclyde, expressed a similar sentiment, in which he acknowledged that “we shouldn’t underestimate the symbolic resonance of what happened in 1998,” while also suggesting Les Bleus’ effect on social and cultural progress is not linear, stating:

*“I looked at the celebration of ‘98 and then years later it was like a Yo-Yo. You just swing backwards and forwards. You see this reaction in ‘98 when they do well, and in 2002 they do really badly, and the narrative just swings backwards and forwards with performances. I think that's what happens with sport, it can be read in this way. Sport is a reflection of wider society there continues to be a real struggle around issues of identity, citizenship and inclusion.”<sup>56</sup>*

While the triumph of 1998 triggered unprecedented national celebration, the effect appeared fleeting as the excitement of the accomplishment began to dissipate. The feat captured the imagination of the French public, providing citizens with heroes to admire and immigrant communities, in particular, with symbols of hope and optimism.

However, as a number of the interviewees mentioned, it is important to place the claim that France had become a harmonious multicultural nation within the context of the developments that followed 1998. Prior to declaring that a single event, even one of the size and magnitude of 1998, had a long-term effect on cultural attitudes, it is imperative to understand the latent nature of Les Bleus’ influence.

Les Bleus, though a significant representation of France, are just “participating in a larger set of changes, and at times pushing forward those changes very gradually,” but it would be misleading to suggest that the 1998 World Cup success, in isolation of parallel cultural and social developments, ushered in significant cultural changes, rather than just influencing the existing national discourse, as it relates to race, immigration, and the conception of national identity.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> David Murphy, interview by author, Chicago, December 15, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Dubois, interview.

### 2002 World Cup

Les Bleus followed up the World Cup 1998 with another triumph at the 2000 European Championship, seemingly extending this celebration of multiculturalism and national camaraderie. However, these back-to-back victories had little to do with the sudden fall from grace that would soon occur. While the success of 1998 was branded “the beginning of a new era in French cultural life,” the sentiment surrounding the 2000 European Championship was far different, at least in hindsight.<sup>58</sup>

According to Andrew Hussey, a Professor at the University of London, this event would mark the closure of an extended period of unprecedented sporting success for France, and with it came a deterioration of the positive attitudes and optimistic social and cultural perspectives that had emerged after the 1998 triumph:

*“That victory was, in effect, the beginning of the end of the new order. The national team would soon fragment into a group of drab mediocrities and, worse still, the illusion of a multiracial team as the reflection of a multiracial society was destroyed.”<sup>59</sup>*

This notion of multiculturalism that had captured the French collective imagination after 1998 met further resistance in October 2001 when France and Algeria faced off for the first time in an arranged ‘friendly’ match. According to Hussey, the meeting “was meant to signal a new maturity in the relationship between the former colony (Algeria) and its arrogant overlord (France),” but it was far from that.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Special report: French Football*. The Observer. (2006, April 2).  
<https://www.theguardian.com/observer/osm/story/0,,1741569,00.html>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

The match devolved into a contentious, nationalistic affair as spectators on both sides engaged in vicious name-calling and political antagonism, before reaching a disastrous low point, which Hussey describes:

*“During the match Zidane and other players were insulted as traitors to Islamic youth. Throughout the game chants were heard in favor of Osama bin Laden from kids waving Algerian flags and the match ended in the 75th minute with a violent pitch invasion. Zidane would later describe that match to me as 'the worst day in my career.'”<sup>61</sup>*

This match was a clear indication, if one was even needed, that France had not overcome the racial and religious division that plagued the nation’s communities.

This cultural tension permeated France, further manifesting itself in the national election that occurred in May of 2002, just a month prior to the start of the 2002 World Cup. During the 2002 election, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the racist founder of the National Front (FN), reached the run-off stage of the voting process, alongside the incumbent, Jacques Chirac. While Chirac would go on to be re-elected in a relative landslide, Le Pen’s performance proved a surprise to the nation, flouting all expectations and polling predictions “and spurring a nationwide crisis of confidence.”<sup>62</sup>

The success of the National Front (FN) in the 2002 election reflected principles that ran counter to all that Les Bleus were supposed to represent. For Le Pen and the political faction that he founded, “the rejection of a multicultural society and the preservation of French national identity are the... *raison d’être*.”<sup>63</sup> According to local media describing the feeling on the ground, there was a sense that the French public was “incredulous that the National Front could

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> McNicoll, T. *French Election History: Jean-Marie Le Pen’s “Thunderclap” Shocker 15 Years On*. France 24. (2017, April 21). <https://www.france24.com/en/20170420-france-presidential-history-looking-back-jean-marie-le-pen-thunderclap-election-shocker>

<sup>63</sup> Godin, E. *The French Exception*. Berghahn Books. (2004).

advance in France,” the home of “human rights, tolerance, the Enlightenment, the Resistance.”<sup>64</sup> These political developments, just a month prior to the World Cup, served as a reminder that France still had much to do with respect to racial and religious tolerance.

Les Bleus entered the World Cup in June of 2002 with a squad that contained eight footballers of immigrant descent, five of whom were starters and quite prominent figures within the team. The diverse nature of the squad in large part mirrored the composition of the team that graced the field in 1998, as a number of the same footballers were selected for both tournaments, including Thierry Henry, Lilian Thuram, and Zinedine Zidane. There were high expectations for Les Bleus heading into the tournament, considering the team had been crowned champion at the most recent European Championship and World Cup, and most of the team’s key figures were also members of the squad in 2002. The New York Times, alongside other major media outlets, tipped the talented French squad to emerge victorious once again.<sup>65</sup>

Despite high hopes and the team’s recent successes, Les Bleus gave a terrible account of themselves, falling well short of the expectations placed upon them in the lead-up to the competition. Les Bleus lost to Senegal in the team’s opening match, before drawing with Uruguay, then losing to Denmark in their final match. The team was eliminated in the group stage and failed to score a single goal across the three games, making it the “first time ever a defending champion had failed to score a goal at the following World Cup, and the first time in 36 years that the defending champion failed to survive the Group Stage.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> McNicoll, T. *French Election History: Jean-Marie Le Pen’s “Thunderclap” Shocker 15 Years On*. France 24. (2017, April 21).

<sup>65</sup> Roth, J., & Talpalar, D. *The Recent History of French Football: A Turbulent Ride on and Off the Pitch*. Soccer Politics / The Politics of Football. (2016, April 19). <https://sites.duke.edu/wcwp/tournament-guides/european-cup-2016-guide/identity-and-the-french-national-team/the-history-african-influence-in-french-soccer/#69629968>

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.



The success of 1998 provided Jean-Marie Le Pen with little ammunition to suggest that immigrants were not a valuable part of France, leaving him unable to double-down on the prejudiced comments he had made about Les Bleus' immigrant footballers in 1996. However, the miserable showing at the 2002 World Cup gave Le Pen another chance to suggest that a losing, immigrant-laden French squad served as an indication that non-white immigrants were not a positive addition to French society. Geoff Hare, a Professor at Newcastle University and expert on French football, had warned that "a World Cup exit for the multi-ethnic French football team will serve as a major political boost for the country's Far Right leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen," and the dismal performance that followed did just that.<sup>67</sup>

Le Pen jumped at the chance to advance his own bigoted political agenda, as the "poor performance of the French team during the 2002 football World Cup gave the National Front (FN) the opportunity to deride a society based on multiculturalism."<sup>68</sup> This avenue for criticism that the 2002 World Cup failure afforded to Le Pen served to broaden the understanding of the importance of a successful French team, because although a single title cannot change "French society fundamentally... it does seem to represent some sort of positive statement of identity, which temporarily silences the voice of Le Pen and his like."<sup>69</sup>

John Hoberman, a Professor at UT Austin and an expert on the intersection of sports and globalization, highlighted the detrimental nature of the rhetoric of Len Pen and the National Front, which surfaced to a greater extent following the 2002 World Cup:

*"His [Le Pen] obvious purpose was to denationalize these people [immigrant members of Les Bleus] and, in classic fashion, deny them the French identity. No matter how many goals they score, racial essence is what matters [to Le Pen]. So,*

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<sup>67</sup> French Footballing Loss will be Le Pen's Gain, Says Expert. EurekAlert! (2002, June 20). <https://www.eurekalert.org/news-releases/757735>

<sup>68</sup> Godin, E. *The French Exception*. Berghahn Books. (2004).

<sup>69</sup> Dauncey, H., & Hare, G. *France and the 1998 World Cup: The National Impact of a World Sporting Event*. Routledge. 2014.

*a big shot like Le Pen is out there trying to delegitimize multiracial French sport at that level.”<sup>70</sup>*

Le Pen’s use of Les Bleus to further his radical agenda bears similarities to the degree of political opportunism that was exhibited in 1998, as liberal politicians used the triumph to set forth dramatic, unsubstantiated claims about integration and racial tolerance in France. Jonathan Ervine, a Professor at Bangor University and expert on French soccer, emphasized the role of self-serving political opportunism in shaping the discourse around Les Bleus’ performances:

*“I think they [Les Bleus’ performances] provide an opportunity for opportunist politicians to make political or electoral capital out of their successes and failures. And I think what’s quite noticeable in 1998, is that you have both people on the right and the left politically, seeking to do so.”<sup>71</sup>*

The dismal performances at the 2002 World Cup provided the public with little to cheer about. This resulted in much of the ridicule that appeared in the political and cultural discourse being directed at the immigrant members of Les Bleus and, in turn, the discussion of immigration and race turned sour, particularly in comparison to the sentiment of ‘98.

Afshin Molavi, a Professor at Johns Hopkins University familiar with France’s footballing culture, encapsulated the influence of Les Bleus and the potential that an international team representing a footballing nation like France possesses:

*“National teams in certain countries take on a similar importance to a national currency. I think it does play this role. When your national currency gets beaten down, it’s seen as an indictment of the economic policies of the government, and these national teams have taken on a similar kind of significance, in the sense that their... losses are interpreted as being indicative of a nation’s underlying issues.”<sup>72</sup>*

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<sup>70</sup> John Hoberman, interview by author, Chicago, November 3, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> Jonathan Ervine, interview by author, Chicago, November 15, 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Afshin Molavi, interview by author, Chicago, February 21, 2022.

While the '02 World Cup didn't elicit the same level of impassioned discourse of '98, it provided right-wing politicians, conservative media, and the bigoted fringes of the French public with an avenue through which immigrants at large could be criticized, illustrating Les Bleus' critical role in shaping national discourse, particularly as it relates to race and immigration.

### *2006 World Cup*

The belief in the successful racial and religious integration of France born out of the '98 triumph encountered further challenges during the French Riots of October and November of 2005. These events occurred over the course of a three-week period throughout the *banlieues*, beginning with “the death of two immigrant teenagers in an electrical substation in a Paris suburb,” as the individuals fled from the police.<sup>73</sup> The men were electrocuted and died, and “in response, car burnings and violent clashes between youths and police took place in the area.”<sup>74</sup>

However, the situation escalated in the face of political antagonism and police aggression, and “the riots soon spread to 300 cities and towns across France - the worst domestic disturbances in [France] since the student riots of 1968.”<sup>75</sup> The escalation of the situation is best described in the excerpt below, highlighting the racial and religious issues that plagued France:

*“It was the use of tear gas on a mosque and the comments made by Sarkozy—who claimed he was going to clean the “scum” off the streets— that ignited the Parisian suburbs. By early November, the revolt had spread to other French cities and even downtown Paris. Banlieues throughout the country, from Strasbourg to Rennes, Nice to Lille, burned at night. The sheer scale of the revolt highlighted the French integration model’s growing inability to incorporate immigrants and the ethnic minorities comprised by their children (both second and third generations) into the nation’s social, economic, and political fabric.”*<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Gross, O. *Law in Times of Crisis*. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved March 6, 2022, from [https://books.google.fr/books?id=XgbEUxcKBgAC&pg=PA200&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.fr/books?id=XgbEUxcKBgAC&pg=PA200&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)

<sup>74</sup> Mestries, F. *The French Autumn Riots of 2005 And the Crisis Of Republican Integration*. Estudiodeldesarrollo.com. (2007). <https://estudiosdeldesarrollo.mx/migracionydesarrollo/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/9ing-7.pdf>

<sup>75</sup> Gross, O. *Law in Times of Crisis*. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved March 6, 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Mestries, F. *The French Autumn Riots of 2005 and the Crisis Of Republican Integration*. Estudiodeldesarrollo.com. (2007).

These riots were illustrative of the continued marginalization of immigrants in France, despite the wishful thinking of politicians and the national media following Les Bleus' success in '98. These disheartening developments called into question the supposed progress born out of '98, illustrating that the performances of Les Bleus alone were capable of changing near-term cultural attitudes surrounding race, immigration, and national belonging.

However, the World Cup in June of 2006 presented Les Bleus with a welcome chance to lighten the mood around the nation and perhaps capture the spirit of '98 once again. Les Bleus entered the tournament with a team more diverse than the 1998 group - 17 of the 23 footballers selected to the squad possessed immigrant backgrounds and "family histories that connected them to colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, and the Indian Ocean."<sup>77</sup>

Jean-Marie Le Pen, emboldened as a result of the team's recent struggles, began to criticize the diverse composition of Les Bleus again, as he did back in 1996. According to Le Pen, Les Bleus failed to garner the same level of support it received in 1998 because "France didn't totally recognize itself in the [2006] team," suggesting that the immigrant-dominated side didn't coincide with his vision of a racially homogeneous nation.<sup>78</sup>

The team struggled in the group stage of the tournament, but finished second in the group behind Switzerland and managed to squeeze into the competition's Round of 16. Les Bleus then defeated Spain, Brazil, and Portugal in succession before advancing to the final of the competition. Les Bleus' success in the earliest stages of the tournament was due in large part to the ethnic minorities within the team, as "no white French player scored for the national team in any match leading up to the final."<sup>79</sup> Despite the leading performances of Zinedine Zidane, Lilian

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<sup>77</sup> Dubois, L. *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*. University of California Press, 2011.

<sup>78</sup> *Football Can't Heal All*. Orange County Register. (2006, July 9). <https://www.ocregister.com/2006/07/09/football-cant-heal-all/>

<sup>79</sup> Roth, J., & Talpalar, D. *The Recent History of French Football: A Turbulent Ride on and Off the Pitch*. Soccer Politics / The Politics of Football. (2016, April 19).

Thuram, and Patrick Vieira, there was still a certain sentiment among subsections of the population that perceived the team to be ‘too black’ or ‘not French enough,’ given that most of the team were minorities of immigrant descent.<sup>80</sup>

The World Cup final was a contentious affair, which resulted in Zidane receiving a red card in the second half of extra time for delivering a headbutt to the chest of Marco Materazzi. France would proceed to lose on penalties, 5-3, spoiling Les Bleus’ attempt to claim a second World Cup title. This unfortunate result meant that France would not get to experience the emotional high of ‘98 and Les Bleus could not function as the same unifying force that it had at that time. The defeat also left the team, and immigrants at large, exposed to the same derision that the National Front had leveled at minorities in 2002.

Le Pen criticized Les Bleus following the competition, claiming that the team had “too many players of color,” alluding to the notion that these footballers were responsible for the loss and didn’t represent the ‘true’ France.<sup>81</sup> According to Lauren Dubois, a scholar of French football, “for Le Pen the diversity of the French team was a distressing symbol of how immigration was changing the face of France.”<sup>82</sup>

The link between sporting success at the World Cup and positive narratives around immigration and race were well-documented. Nonna Mayer, an accomplished sociologist from the Center for Political Research at Paris’ Science Po University discussed the poisonous rhetoric of the far-right and the value of Les Bleus’ successes:

*“They are afraid of globalization and ethnic mix, they are afraid of change, especially Le Pen supporters, who long for a ‘white’ France and accuse*

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Dubois, L. *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*. University of California Press, 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

*immigrants and their children of everything that goes wrong in the country. The victory of the team is a good argument for those who fight against racism.*"<sup>83</sup>

This resurgence of negative rhetoric surrounding minorities representing Les Bleus, and immigrant communities in France at large, was a clear indication that people need to be cautious about overstating the influence of Les Bleus, according to Professor Joseph Downing:

*"I think it is promising that there is something like that [a diverse French team] in the public sphere, in that there's a demonstration of diversity and that the diversity can be a success. But at the same time, I am quite cautious in saying it has these larger societal effects on public opinion, because I do think it can be something that people utilize to bring their existing biases into reality."*<sup>84</sup>

However, Downing acknowledged that much of the negative rhetoric that surfaces following poor performances from Les Bleus is a product of political opportunism, particularly among the National Front and other conservative groups:

*"I think it's more just about political opportunism. I think if they failed terribly again, on the international stage, then I do think similar debates may reemerge."*<sup>85</sup>

Within the context of Les Bleus' performance at the 2002 World Cup, Downing's assessment of the influence is quite measured, but still lends some credence to the impact that the French team is capable of having on short-term discourse.

While the 2002 World Cup did not yield the same degree of success or national fervor as 1998, it is critical to understand the social and political context of the time in order to effectively trace the evolution of the discourse around Les Bleus, particularly as it relates to these notions of race, immigration, and national identity. The 2002 performance was a continuation of the

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<sup>83</sup> *Football Can't Heal All*. Orange County Register. (2006, July 9). <https://www.ocregister.com/2006/07/09/football-cant-heal-all/>

<sup>84</sup> Downing, interview.

<sup>85</sup> Downing, interview.

negative slide that occurred following the 1998 triumph, which came to a climax at the 2010 World Cup, where the social and political dialogue in France reached rock bottom.

### *2010 World Cup*

Les Bleus came into the 2010 World Cup following an embarrassing showing at the 2008 European Championship, in which the team was eliminated in the group stage after securing just one point and finishing bottom of the table. The French Football Federation (FFF) decided to let Raymond Domenech, the manager of Les Bleus, remain in his role through the 2010 tournament, despite ample evidence to suggest that he wasn't cut out for the position. This would prove disastrous and result in the eventual firing of Domenech, providing vindication for those that had called for his dismissal much earlier. Still, it would have been near impossible to predict the extent to which Les Bleus' 2010 performance would come to represent such a cultural low.

The social and cultural environment in France even prior to the disaster that was the 2010 tournament was certainly nothing to celebrate. According to 2010 research from INED, the National Institute of Demographic Studies in France, "61 percent of immigrants... and an identical percentage of their descendants, claimed to have experienced or 'to feel exposed to' a racist situation."<sup>86</sup> This research illustrated the prominence of the racial divide in France around this time, lending importance to Les Bleus and the broader cultural impact of the team.

The recent lack of success, coupled with the fact that France had arguably the most talented squad in the world, meant that expectations were soaring in the lead-up to the tournament, despite the apprehension surrounding the coach. Similar to the Les Bleus teams of the last decade, the 2010 side contained 13 players of color out of the 22 that were selected to represent the nation. This hope that a diverse Les Bleus team could once again improve the

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<sup>86</sup> Thompson, C. S. *From Black-Blanc-Beur to Black-Black-Black? L'Affaire des Quotas' and the Shattered 'Image of 1998' in Twenty-First-Century France*. *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 33(1). (2015).

social and cultural sentiment around France characterized most of the dialogue in the weeks and months leading up to the tournament.<sup>87</sup> However, the French public would soon realize that this team would come to do the exact opposite for national sentiment.

Les Bleus got off to a terrible start, with off-field troubles beginning at the outset of the tournament, before the first group stage game. The first sign of trouble appeared in training on the eve of their opening match when Florent Malouda, a footballer of immigrant descent and one of Les Bleus' more prolific attackers, had to be restrained from an altercation with Domenech. This dispute resulted in Malouda's benching, and France ended up drawing in their opener with Uruguay. The issues within the team spiraled from there and performances suffered as a result.

The defining moment of the tournament came at half-time of France's second group stage match against Mexico, when Nicolas Anelka, a fellow footballer of color and one of Les Bleus' star attackers, got into a heated argument with Domenech. France would lose this match 2-0 and Domenech proceeded to dismiss Anelka from the team, an unprecedented occurrence for Les Bleus on this stage. This punishment from Domenech did not sit well with the rest of the team.

Patrice Evra, the team's captain and a fellow black footballer, is said to have been responsible for the entire team's decision to skip training the following morning. Les Bleus would go on to lose their final group stage match against South Africa, cementing the team's embarrassing exit from the competition.

Les Bleus' shameful performance at the 2010 World Cup poisoned the social and political discourse in months that followed, with immigrants and minorities bearing the brunt of the criticism and condemnation. However, the nature of the criticism reached a level of

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<sup>87</sup> Vignal, P. *Analysis: Domenech's Traumatic Tenure Ends in Shame*. Reuters. (2010, June 22). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-soccer-world-france-analysis-idUKTRE65L5AR20100622>



sordidness that had not been seen in decades, as it began to exhibit clear racial undertones. This sentiment is echoed in a New York Times from 2010 discussing the aftermath of the World Cup debacle, in which it is stated:

*“There is a more troubling aspect to the reaction to the defeat, which has focused on lack of patriotism, shared values and national honor on a team with many members who are black or brown and descended from immigrants.”*<sup>88</sup>

This recognition of the increase in racialized discourse that followed the 2010 World Cup was widely acknowledged throughout the media. Foreign Policy, a popular global magazine, presented a similar analysis in the months following the World Cup:

*“After the mostly black French soccer team’s defiance of its white leaders in South Africa, Le Pen’s racist critique of multiracial sport has entered the French political mainstream with a vengeance. During the 1990s, it was only the French extreme right that ridiculed the idea that multiracial sport could facilitate racial integration in France. Now the derision directed against the indiscipline of a “black” team and the implicit failure of sport’s integrative role in French society rains down from across the political spectrum.”*<sup>89</sup>

These examples are illustrative of the manner in which the performances of Les Bleus have been used to drive national discourse, particularly as it relates to notions of race and immigration.

This racialized rhetoric wasn’t just limited to the media, as both politicians and intellectuals issued statements exhibiting both overt and veiled racism. Marine Le Pen, the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen and a prominent political figure in her own right, claimed that she “did not see herself in the makeup of the team,” and that “most of these guys consider at one moment that they represent France at the World Cup, and at another they are a part of another nation or have another nationality in their heart.”<sup>90</sup> These comments were a poorly disguised

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<sup>88</sup> Erlanger, S. *Racial Tinge Stains World Cup Exit in France*. The New York Times. (2010, June 23). <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/24/world/europe/24france.html>

<sup>89</sup> Hoberman, J. *Le Scandal*. Foreign Policy. (2010, July 1). <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/07/01/le-scandal-3/>

<sup>90</sup> Erlanger, S. *Racial Tinge Stains World Cup Exit in France*. The New York Times. (2010, June 23).

attempt to suggest that the non-white members of Les Bleus are not truly ‘French.’ However, this questioning of Les Bleus’ minorities’ allegiance to France became mainstream following the team’s failure at the 2010 World Cup.

Alain Finkelkraut, a prominent public intellectual in France, utilized the same sort of racialized rhetoric as Le Pen and the National Front. According to Finkelkraut, the rebellion within the squad at the 2010 World Cup presented “proof that the French team is not a team at all, but a gang of hooligans that knows only the morals of the mafia,” and he “compared the players to youths rioting in the banlieues.”<sup>91</sup>

Elsewhere, “some legislators blasted the players as “scum,” “little troublemakers” and “guys with chickpeas in their heads instead of a brain,” according to news reports.”<sup>92</sup> The divisive, anti-immigrant rhetoric that permeated France in the wake of the 2010 World Cup highlights Les Bleus’ influence on social and political discourse.

The performance of Les Bleus served to exacerbate much of the existing discourse in France at the time, enabling politicians on both sides of the aisle to rationalize and further propagate the negative image of immigrants around the nation. The intense reaction to the 2010 World Cup failure provided an example of the opposite extreme of the French spirit, as compared to the response that was witnessed following the 1998 triumph. Professor Hussey highlighted this stark contrast, while also explaining Les Bleus’ potential to both elucidate and influence the racial divide in France at large:

*“The reaction amongst French fans and French politicians was like: ‘This is what immigrants are like, they’re anti-France, they should not play for the French team, this is not a real French team.’ You can see straightaway that football, in particular, exposes the fault lines in French racial politics.”<sup>93</sup>*

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Hussey, interview.

Professor Ervine echoed Hussey's assessment of Les Bleus' influence on public discourse following the 2010 World Cup, while also speaking to the racialized rhetoric that ensued:

*"Between 2002 and 2018, the key event was the 2010 World Cup. As a result of the early exit from the tournament, you have all sorts of politicians piling on... suggesting you have got immature, misbehaving... individualistic footballers and questioning how fit they are to represent the nation. Some of the ringleaders, like Nikola Anelka, were perceived as ill-disciplined players from the banlieue. Anelka was a player of French Caribbean descent. It kind of emboldened a certain type of politician who sought to underline what they saw as the otherness of certain footballers and to suggest that they didn't represent, in effect, French values or Republican values. And it allowed certain people, especially on the right [politically] to rehash clichés about young people from the banlieues."*<sup>94</sup>

The observations of Ervine underline the manner in which the performances of Les Bleus have shaped national discourse around immigration and race, at least in the short-run. The dramatic nature of the 2010 fiasco served to increase the emotion embedded within the discourse and the extent to which the team was characterized as a reflection of the misbehavior of immigrants in France at large, and particularly throughout the *banlieues*.

David Goldblatt, a prominent British sociologist and author of *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Football*, alluded to the important role of opportunism and expressed doubt that Les Bleus' performances are capable of influencing cultural attitudes in the short-run, but acknowledges the manner in which football brings discussion of race to the forefront:

*"I think in a way you're just hearing different sides of France. It is not like one is France and the other isn't France or that one is a more authentic France. It is just the different voices of France. Because the people who were loving it in '98 probably kept it pretty quiet in 2010. And the people who were freaking out in 2010, probably didn't celebrate much in '98. Racism is hidden from public view; it occurs in very personal and private settings and it is deeply embedded and hidden in the structures of institutions and cultures. Football just... has a way of*

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<sup>94</sup> Ervine, interview.

*putting it on the stage, both in terms of what's happening on the pitch, and who's allowed to play and who isn't, and how we treat them and respond to them.*"<sup>95</sup>

Goldblatt's message illuminates the racial undertones that follow the game of football, with Les Bleus' successes and failures serving to either obscure or reveal them, respectively.

Professor Hugh Dauncey provides a balanced, well-founded assessment of Les Bleus' position within French culture. While he acknowledges that experts' opinions on the matter differ in some respects, he suggests that the team is a unique cultural force capable of both representing and driving various avenues of discourse, irrespective of its long-term effects:

*"While debate on sport's role in society generates widely diverging opinions, commentators generally recognize the symbolic function performed by those rare sportspeople who transcend their practice to gain international renown and become iconic figures in France. Inevitably, such sporting heroes are interpreted within the context of debates regarding the state (and/or fate) of French society and frequently constructed as representing or resolving abiding social tensions and divisions."*<sup>96</sup>

Dauncey explicates the complicated cultural of role Le Bleus and emphasizes the magnitude of the team's importance to national discourse, while also conceding that there is no consensus on the extent of the impact of sport in France. Although the national discussion around race and immigration reached a low point following the 2010 World Cup, the reaction itself speaks volumes to the influence of Les Bleus when it comes to shaping broader sentiment.

The public response to the 2010 World Cup served to highlight the weight of Les Bleus' failures and the manner in which such a poor exhibition on the international stage is perceived to represent domestic failures. Because Les Bleus are composed of numerous footballers of

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<sup>95</sup> David Goldblatt, interview by author, Chicago, January 17, 2022.

<sup>96</sup> Dauncey, H. & Ervine, J. *Special Issue: Sport Media and Identity in France and the Francophone World Introduction*. Research Gate. (February, 2014).

immigrant descent, this failure came to be characterized as a microcosm of the larger failures of immigrants throughout France.

### *2014 World Cup*

Despite the massive embarrassment in 2010, Les Bleus began trending in the right direction once again, due in large part to the continued contributions of team members of immigrant descent. The 2012 European Champion saw France finish second in their group, before losing to Spain in the quarter-final. This was considered a success because France was not expected to beat Spain, and Les Bleus had consistently put in solid performances throughout the tournament, even having rotated the squad significantly since the 2010 debacle.

Between 2010 and 2014, the national discourse remained submerged in racialized rhetoric at a political and social level. This troubled sentiment in France was exacerbated in 2011 when a race scandal emerged within the French Football Federation (FFF). Francois Blaquart, then technical director of the FFF, was secretly recorded speaking to Laurent Blanc, then coach of the national team, about the implementation of race quotas at the youth level, in order to limit the number of footballers of immigrant descent progressing through French academies.

According to a special report detailing the specific idea, “the secret plan for ethnic quotas allegedly involved limiting non-white youngsters entering the selection process through training centers as early as age 12 or 13... football bosses wanted to set a cap of 30% on players of certain origins.”<sup>97</sup> The recording of the meeting even revealed a call for the implementation of other evaluative criteria that “should be used to bring in players with ‘our culture, our history,’” which seemed to be a direct result of the 2010 World Cup performance, which was “privately blamed by some on black or Muslim players, suggesting the team had fragmented because there

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<sup>97</sup> Chrisafis, A. French Football Official Admits Blowing Whistle in Race Row. *The Guardian*. (2011, May 4). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/04/french-football-official-race-row>

was not enough “national identity.”<sup>98</sup> This scandal inflamed racial tensions and the lack of punishment for the FFF also served to heighten the conflict surrounding this issue.

During the 2012 election, the relative success of the National Front was another indication that racial divides were becoming more apparent. Marine Le Pen secured a “stunning result” in the election, whereby she received approximately “18% and 20% of the vote,” which was an unprecedented vote share for the National Front.<sup>99</sup>

This revival of the National Front, securing a sizable share of the vote for the first time since 2002, signaled the increasing disillusionment with the ideals of diversity, integration, and unity that had begun to be championed after the 1998 triumph. While Les Bleus’ 2010 performance clearly wasn’t solely responsible for this result or the prevailing discourse, it is evident that the team served as the foundation of arguments that shaped the National Front’s agenda in quite a visible manner.

Les Bleus entered the 2014 World Cup with another diverse squad full of footballers of immigrant descent. The team’s leaders - Paul Pogba and Karim Benzema - were both of African descent and some of the most talented and recognizable players in the world. Although Les Bleus did not emerge victorious, having lost to Germany in the quarter-final, the tournament was a relative success considering that the team was inexperienced and had not come into the tournament as one of the favorites.

The German team would go on to win the tournament, softening the blow of Les Bleus’ loss in the mind of the French public. However, the lack of concrete success did little to assuage

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Willsher, K. *Marine Le Pen Scores Stunning Result in French Presidential Election*. The Guardian. (2012, April 22). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/22/marine-le-pen-french-election>

the intense rhetoric of racial and religious division that emerged in the years that followed the 2010 World Cup.

While discussing the potential relief that a World Cup triumph could have brought to a nation like France, Professor John Hoberman highlighted the enormous cultural boost that sporting victories of this nature can provide:

*“It is almost always soccer. There is just nothing like World Cup level soccer in order to produce reports that... a national population went bananas and felt better. What is perceived as a great sporting victory can be interpreted by many people in a population as an emotional lift, or it can give them an emotional lift if it can be interpreted in terms of national glory or national greatness or, in some circumstances, the superiority of a certain social system.”<sup>100</sup>*

Hoberman’s insight is illustrative of the power that Les Bleus have to positively influence French discourse, at least in the short-run. Similarly, Les Bleus have the same potential to affect discourse in a negative manner, provided that the team’s failure incites a level of emotional displeasure like that of 2010.

Because there were few expectations entering 2014 and France seemed to meet them, the reaction from the French public was quite tame, making it difficult to discern a specific directional change in cultural attitudes in the weeks and months that followed the tournament. If Les Bleus had experienced another massive triumph or miserable failure, it is likely that we would have witnessed similar social and political reactions as 1998 and 2010, respectively. The propagation of certain narratives around race and immigration using the he minorities in the French team as a rationale for political agendas would have become standard once again.

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<sup>100</sup> Hoberman, interview.

While trivial in isolation, the continued cultivation of these narratives over decades has the potential to move the needle from a cultural perspective, assuming that other societal indicators are trending in similar directions as part of this broader national discourse.

### *2018 World Cup*

The 2018 World Cup would come to be the second ever French triumph on this international stage, providing a much-needed social and cultural lift. The success came at a time when France was experiencing some of its highest levels of racial and religious tension in decades. The social and political developments preceding the 2018 tournament set the stage for a Les Bleus team to provide a sense of hope for a nation in desperate need of a unifying force.

During 2015, France experienced a series of terrorist attacks that were committed on behalf of ISIS, a Sunni jihadist group that has carried out violence across the world for the last couple decades. First, France experienced the Charlie Hebdo Attacks from January 7th to January 9th, 2015. Charlie Hebdo is a satirical magazine in France that with a controversial past, having published cartoons and articles mocking certain aspects of religion, but notably Islam.<sup>101</sup> According to CNN, “a total of 17 people were killed in attacks on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, a kosher grocery store and the Paris suburb of Montrouge,” which resulted in the indictment of 14 accomplices of ISIS, many of whom had ethnic backgrounds similar to those of the footballers representing Les Bleus.<sup>102</sup> This event would come to serve as the basis for broader opposition to immigration and integration.

Later in 2015, a succession of deadly terrorist attacks was carried out across Paris on the night of November 13th. Paris witnessed “six coordinated attacks” on that fateful night,

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<sup>101</sup> *2015 Charlie Hebdo Attacks Fast Facts*. CNN. (2015, January 21). <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/21/europe/2015-paris-terror-attacks-fast-facts/index.html>

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*



including both suicide bombers and gunmen, claiming 130 lives and wounding hundreds more throughout the capital.<sup>103</sup> Both of the aforementioned acts of terrorism placed Paris on edge and led to a sharp intensification of the discourse surrounding race and immigration.<sup>104</sup>

This general displeasure and heightened concern with respect to immigration and racial integration manifested itself in the 2017 election. Despite losing to Emmanuel Macron, the current French president, Marine Le Pen established a substantial foothold in the race, scoring more than 11 million votes.<sup>105</sup> This was also the first time since the 2002 election that a National Front candidate had reached the second round of the election, illustrating the increasing pull of the group's ideological perspectives. However, this relative success was notable in that it marked the mainstream arrival of the National Front as an acceptable political faction, as explained in this Guardian article from May of 2017:

*“The party’s presence at the heart of French politics – where its ideas are regularly appropriated by mainstream parties – is now so taken for granted that Le Pen’s presence in the presidential final round was accepted as inevitable by the political class for years. It was not met by the shock and mass street protests that greeted her father’s reaching the final in 2002.”<sup>106</sup>*

The moderate success of the National Front in the 2017 election was an indication of the continued descent of the discourse around immigration, race, and national identity. These conditions set the stage for France to restore some degree of social accord and cultural open-mindedness through a World Cup triumph.

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<sup>103</sup> *November 2015 Attacks: A Timeline of The Night That Shook the French Capital*. France 24. (2021, September 8).

<https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210908-paris-november-2015-attacks-a-timeline-of-the-night-that-shook-the-city>

<sup>104</sup> Jungkunz, S. et al. *Xenophobia before and after the Paris 2015 attacks: Evidence from a natural experiment*. Sage Journals. (February 2018). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1468796818757264>

<sup>105</sup> Chrisafis, A. *Marine Le Pen Defeated but France’s Far Right is Far from Finished*. The Guardian. (2017, May 7).

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/07/marine-le-pen-defeated-front-national-far-from-finished>

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

Les Bleus entered the 2018 World Cup with a diverse squad once again. 15 of the 23 team members in the 2018 team were of immigrant descent, “with families hailing from places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Morocco, Angola, and Algeria.”<sup>107</sup> Kylian Mbappé and Paul Pogba, the team’s most talented footballers, are children of immigrants from Cameroon and Guinea, respectively. The expectations heading into the tournament were quite high given the combination of talent and experience within the squad, and there was hope that the immigrant-laden team could once again arouse the spirit of 1998.<sup>108</sup>

Les Bleus handled the group stage of the competition with ease, defeating Australia and Peru in quick succession, before drawing to Denmark in the final match, having already qualified for the next round. France would proceed to defeat Argentina in the Round of 16, Uruguay in the quarter-final, and Belgium in the semi-final, before meeting Croatia in the Final. France would defeat Croatia 4-2, winning France’s second-ever World Cup. The triumph prompted an outpouring of support for Les Bleus, but particularly for the immigrants within the team, which were celebrated as representing all that was great about multiculturalism and cultural integration.

The Guardian highlighted the importance of the French accomplishment in a 2018 article, emphasizing its critical significance given the social, cultural, and political discourse at the time:

*“France’s World Cup win comes a year after far-right leader Marine Le Pen reached the run-off stage in the French presidential election. Le Pen ran on an anti-immigration platform that found support in parts of French society. This diverse team’s victory contrasts with the struggle France has had in welcoming immigrants in recent years.”*<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Pradier, P. *Diverse French Team Brings Home World Cup Championship*. ABC News. (2018, July 16).

<sup>108</sup> Simpson, C. *World Cup Favourites 2018: Contenders and Updated Group Odds for Top Squads*. Bleacher Report. (2018, June 11). <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2776513-world-cup-favorites-2018-contenders-and-updated-group-odds-for-top-squads>

<sup>109</sup> Pradier, P. *Diverse French Team Brings Home World Cup Championship*. ABC News. (2018, July 16).

This sentiment was shared both in the media and throughout academia, as individuals sought to reconcile the importance of immigrants to the nation's greatest sporting triumph, with the xenophobic sentiment that had engulfed France over the last decade, in particular.

Khaled Beydoun, a Professor at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law and a leading scholar on Islamophobia, penned a rhetorical note to France as a nation that bears a similar sentiment, writing:

*“Dear France - Congratulations on winning the World Cup. 80% of your team is African, cut out the racism and xenophobia. 50% of your team are Muslims, cut out the Islamophobia. Africans and Muslims delivered you a second World Cup, now deliver them justice.”<sup>110</sup>*

Beydoun's call for racial and religious integration in France was a product of Les Bleus' triumph, providing him with a foundation upon which he felt he could further rationalize the acceptance of immigrants throughout the nation.

This appreciation for the success of Les Bleus' and the diverse squad that enabled such an achievement was echoed throughout media across the world. SB Nation, a prominent sports blogging network, shared a similar message in the wake of the tournament:

*“It is profoundly beautiful to see so much diversity in the victorious French national team. The players are close-knit and their joy with and celebration of each other is infectious. They emanate love and unbridled happiness. This Black, White, Arab, Christian and Muslim team, of players who are mostly immigrants, children of immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Seeing them jumping around and hugging after coming together to achieve a shared dream is an image that can act as an ideal for what our greater world should be. Especially in a time when the world is increasingly hostile to the identities of those players.”<sup>111</sup>*

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<sup>110</sup> Khaled Beydoun, Twitter Post, July 15, 2018. <http://twitter.com/khaledbeydoun>.

<sup>111</sup> Madu, Z. *World Cup 2018: France's Diversity Was their Biggest Strength*. SBNation.Com. (2018, July 16). <https://www.sbnation.com/soccer/2018/7/16/17576336/france-world-cup-diversity-immigrants>

This idea that a victorious French side filled with descendants of immigrants could elicit positive cultural changes throughout the nation grew increasingly popular following the World Cup, but not to the extent that it did after the success of 1998.

There was a certain hesitance to embrace the triumph as an indication that lasting change would result. After 1998, politicians and academics rushed to hail the success as a signal that France had emerged as a model of multiculturalism and racial integration. However, as national sentiment ebbed and flowed over the next decade, and Les Bleus failed to provide cause for celebration, the effects of 1998 began to be called into question.

Professor Ervine highlighted this contrast between the reactions to the triumphs of 1998 and 2018, illustrating the changing influence of Les Bleus on national discourse:

*“In 1998, you've got more politicians and public intellectuals saying, ‘Look at this squad. It's a positive symbol of modern France,’ implying that the French model of integration is working. ‘Look at the diversity of the squad. This shows something positive about our nation.’ But in 2018, I don't think I saw anything to the same extent. There were not people making these sorts of declarations and there weren't politicians saying, ‘Look at this team. It is such a fantastic symbol of our diversity.’”<sup>112</sup>*

Ervine is not alone in this assessment of the contrast, which seems to be shared across a number of academics. Professor Dubois, for example, offers up a similar appraisal, suggesting that there was a far more pessimistic view in 2018, regarding the potential of the triumph to lead to change:

*“In 2018... there was a generally more pessimistic sense. It just meant that it was harder to go on the kind of rhetorical flights that people took in 1998, where people were just like, ‘everything's going to change.’ It almost felt like people were thinking, ‘yeah, we know that this isn't going to change.’ On the other hand, we're going to totally enjoy the hell out of it. It is still great, but it was different... to how people look back now to 1998.”<sup>113</sup>*

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<sup>112</sup> Ervine, interview.

<sup>113</sup> Dubois, interview.

Dubois' reluctance to ascribe the same influence to 2018 is characteristic of the more measured approach to evaluating Les Bleus' long-run cultural influence that academics and the media began to embrace, having seen the manner in which discourse can revert during times of failure.

While there was widespread acknowledgement of the continued contribution of minorities within the national team after the 2018 triumph, there was also a general awareness that the successes or failures of Les Bleus are not necessarily indicative of lasting cultural or social change, to the extent that it was recognized during the celebration of 1998.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This extensive examination of the social and political discourse that bookended each World Cup since 1998, combined with the collection of interviews amassed throughout this process, has revealed certain continuities regarding the cultural role of Les Bleus in France.

#### *Perception of Team & Immigrants After Victory & Defeat*

The most explicit finding from this research effort is the discernible change in the public perception of the team and its members after successes and failures. The extent to which the general public, including politicians and intellectuals, perceives Les Bleus to be a strong representation of France has been shown to fluctuate widely following the World Cup.

When Les Bleus captured the World Cup in 1998, the team was hailed as a perfect representation of France at large, symbolizing both the merit of immigration and racial integration. The members of the team, most of whom were descendants of immigrants, were also celebrated as cultural icons and as models of French excellence, despite being of 'non-traditional' backgrounds. The triumph silenced the fringe conservatives around the nation and concerns about whether these footballers were 'sufficiently' French dissipated in the months that followed. While much of this seeming progress would prove overstated, as I will explain in a

later section, the immediate social and political environment after the competition was one that championed ethnic differences and glorified multiculturalism and immigration.

The reaction following Les Bleus' failures elicits the opposite end of social and political discourse. When Les Bleus were eliminated from the 2010 World Cup in embarrassing fashion, the aftermath was shocking. The nation came down on these footballers in disgusting fashion and the national discourse became divisive. The team was made out to be emblematic of the perceived failures of integration and politicians and intellectuals used this sporting collapse to rationalize their opposition to immigration and the diverse communities around the nation. There were no limitations to the discourse that resulted from Les Bleus' World Cup debacle and much of the criticism and discussion surrounding the team and its members crossed racial and religious boundaries. This bigoted rhetoric was echoed on both sides of the political aisle, throughout all areas of France, and placed Les Bleus at the forefront of all discourse relating to immigration and race. This kind of sporting failure and the reaction that has historically ensued, albeit to a lesser extent, is illustrative of the central cultural role that the team occupies.

The up-and-down performances of Les Bleus have exhibited a clear correlation with the broader social, cultural, and political discourse in France. When Les Bleus either exceed expectations or fall below them, there is a discernible change in the tenor of the relationship between the team and the French public. Because the national team is filled with footballers of immigrant descent, this change has often coincided with a shift in the perception of the nation's immigrant communities at large. While the responses are often not as dramatic as the reactions that were witnessed after 1998 and 2010, one can rest assured that if there is a chance to either accentuate the importance of a high-achieving team or denigrate a low-performing group, politicians and intellectuals alike will capitalize on this unique moment, using the public's

entrenched emotional relationship with Les Bleus as the foundation for steering national discourse in their desired direction.

The full extent of Les Bleus' influence cannot be quantified using this methodological approach, but there is widespread agreement among most scholars on the subject that the team possesses the potential to influence cultural and social attitudes, at least in the short-run.

*Long-Term Influence on Race & Immigration Discourse - Media & Politics*

While the short-run social and political influence of Les Bleus' World Cup performances is apparent, it is less clear how these successes and failures come to impact cultural attitudes in the long-run and whether these effects are lasting or merely transitory. There was no concrete agreement on whether the effects of a single World Cup triumph or failure were lasting, among the academics that were interviewed as part of this process. However, there was a general consensus that such dramatic cultural moments are part of a much larger puzzle that serves to move the needle on social and political issues, such as immigration and racism. This pragmatic sentiment, which was shared, in some form, throughout all the interviews that were carried out as part of this process, is the most effective summation of Les Bleus' impact in France.

While the team's influence on cultural attitudes and the extent to which it prompts changes in social and political discourse cannot be quantified, it would be remiss to dismiss its effects as negligible. As Professor Dubois, the eminent scholar on French footballing culture, stated in his most prominent piece of literature on this issue, football has become "a deeply powerful force in politics, a place where nations take shape in the the form of eleven players on the field" and "... in today's world football crosses and even seems to erase some barriers... and at the same time it also helps to deepen and sometimes even create differences and barriers."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Dubois, L. *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*. University of California Press, 2011.

Although it is quite evident that the sport of football in and of itself is not capable of triggering a complete reversal of cultural attitudes in the long-run, it would be naive to suggest that it isn't a significant factor in shaping social and political discourse, which is the foundation for altering perspectives over an extended period of time. The notion that Les Bleus "have some potential [to impact long-run attitudes], but are part of a much broader, bigger puzzle," was the most common characterization of the team and its unique cultural role.<sup>115</sup>

Despite lacking an obvious answer to answer the paper's central question, there was a shared belief that Les Bleus are an unrivaled cultural phenomenon whose impact, though capable of being overstated, should not be discounted or underestimated when it comes to understanding national sentiment and the long-run social, cultural, and political dialogue.

#### *Importance of Les Bleus' Footballers as Cultural Figures*

The research process highlighted the critical role of footballers themselves, outside the scope of the national team. While Les Bleus are a broader manifestation of multi-cultural France, the minorities within the team itself are largely responsible for propagating these progressive notions of race, immigration, and religious difference.

Since the 1998 triumph, a number of footballers in the national team have emerged as important voices for social and cultural change, helping to move the figurative needle on a handful of the issues discussed throughout this paper. Lilian Thuram, Patrice Evra, Karim Benzema, and Paul Pogba – all members of the national team at some point in the last two decades – have served as essential cultural figures on and off the pitch since emerging as footballing stars around the globe. This willingness to embrace their status as a 'model' for the merit of immigration has been a central factor in the ongoing national discussions surrounding

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<sup>115</sup> Downing, interview.



race and immigration. The increase in footballers willing and able to contribute to the evolution of this discourse bodes well for the continued influence of the team itself.

Professor Dubois alluded to this notion, describing the increased prevalence of footballers willing to speak to these issues and their importance to ideological progress, asserting:

*“At a certain point it went from just a few athletes being willing to take political stances and feeling like that was a big risk. Now... many athletes almost feel like they should or that they... kind of have a duty to their community to speak up.”<sup>116</sup>*

Dubois’ sentiment was largely shared among the scholars and academics that I interacted with throughout this process. Professor Murphy echoed this notion, referencing the manner in which footballers are using social media and their outsized cultural presence to affect discourse:

*“It’s really about the impact that can happen in terms of changing social modalities and having an impact on the wider discourse. How do you change legislation? How do you change educational policies? The role of people like Lillian Thuram, or Marcus Rashford in the UK, is really to get other people thinking and to help them transform the way that they think about things. They’re using their platform to bring attention to it and to help spark wider changes.”<sup>117</sup>*

The chance to represent Les Bleus provides a special foundation for prominent footballers to reach large audiences and challenge existing social and cultural ideas. While I have only included excerpts from the interviews with Professor Dubois and Professor Murphy, this line of thinking was consistent throughout the research process, illustrating the fundamental importance of Les Bleus’ minorities in communicating positive messages around immigration and race.

### *Implications of Findings*

The findings presented in this paper, though not conclusive, highlight a number of continuities in this complex relationship that have spanned decades. While this methodological

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<sup>116</sup> Dubois, interview.

<sup>117</sup> Murphy, interview.

approach cannot yield a measurable impact, the perspectives obtained through this extensive interview process are illustrative of the clear correlation that exists between Les Bleus' performances and short-run social, cultural, and political discourse in France.

The insight that resulted from this research process should serve as the basis for future government policies, which can aid in the mitigation of the discrimination that often emerges in the wake of Les Bleus' performances, which I will delve into in the following section.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The findings presented in this paper lend themselves to a handful of governmental strategies that would enhance Les Bleus' cultural role, enabling continued social and political influence, while also protecting against the negative externalities of the team's sporting failures.

#### *(1) Pass Progressive Immigration Policies*

I believe that the research presented in this paper, though focused on sport, lends credence to the merit of progressive immigration policies. There is clear evidence to suggest that immigration and the continued arrival of individuals from foreign countries is beneficial to the development and continued success of France on the international stage, both inside and outside the lines of the football pitch. While the implementation of such policies would likely invite criticism from the more conservative contingents of the French public, their reasoning for holding anti-immigrant, often xenophobic positions on such policies are frequently founded on false premises pertaining to employment, crime, and terrorism.

The merit of immigration is found throughout the nation's communities and Les Bleus are a prime example of the incredible glories that can be achieved if immigrants are granted entrance, integrated, and provided the requisite opportunities to succeed in France. While this paper does not examine the influence of immigration in other sectors in France, the continued

contribution of immigrants to the successes of Les Bleus, which has provided the “most significant moments of national unity and public celebration in France during the past decades,” is reason enough to support the passage of more liberal immigration policies.

The extent of such policies would require a more holistic analysis of the present state of France, but the findings in this paper suggest that a more relaxed approach to immigration would lead to results on this pitch, which spill over into France’s communities.

*(2) Provide Increased Access to Sporting Facilities & Teams in Banlieues*

The success of Les Bleus is a testament to the potential of the immigrant-laden communities in France, most of which are concentrated in the nation’s banlieues. During the French triumphs of 1998 and 2018, more than a handful of the team’s members, and some of the group’s most talented footballers, were raised in the banlieues around Paris. However, these communities are often disadvantaged, as a result of being poor, under-resourced, and often disregarded in government. Furthermore, these areas fail to provide the same opportunities from a sporting perspective that are offered in some of France’s richer, less immigrant-dominated communities, often placing limitations on what children from these areas can achieve.

Les Bleus’ dependence on the contributions of the talented footballers from these areas is just one reason that these districts should receive increased funding from the government. It is in the best interest of Les Bleus, and France at large, to provide these communities with increased access to footballing opportunities, which enables banlieue children to pursue better lives, whether inside or outside the lines.

The findings outlined in this paper illustrate the benefit of supporting disadvantaged youth, emphasizing the critical importance of the provision of opportunities to these areas.

France would be doing itself a disservice if it did not deliver increased financial support to these areas, alongside increased sporting and educational opportunities.

### *(3) Implement Stricter Punishments for Public Racism & Prejudice*

The findings presented in this paper have illustrated the racialized rhetoric that follows Les Bleus' underwhelming performances, which is detrimental to the nation's social and political discourse, as well as the immigrant communities both inside and outside of the team that bear the brunt of such divisive, prejudiced dialogue. The obvious solution to such an issue is the implementation of stricter legal consequences for hate speech, veiled or overt, depending on the extent of such remarks.

As illustrated throughout the paper, neither politicians nor public intellectuals were immune to racialized rhetoric, which served to poison the nation's social and political discourse, representing one of the main negative externalities stemming from Les Bleus' occasional failures. The passage of stricter punitive measures, whether financial or imprisonment, depending on the severity of one's hate speech is a crucial step. While the attempt to implement such policies would face opposition from those who could be concerned about how such measures would impact freedom of speech, the proliferation of racism throughout social and political discourse necessitates harsher policies.

France's immigrant communities would benefit enormously from such measures, and the social and political discourse, particularly in the wake of Les Bleus' failures, would be far more constructive, preventing the escalation of harmful, racialized discourse throughout the nation.

### **Direction of Future Research**

This research paper, though extensive, could not capture all of the nuances and complexities built into this issue, because of the limited time-frame afforded to complete the

project. However, there are a number of other avenues through which further research and exploration of the issue could potentially yield fruitful insight into this intricate relationship between Les Bleus and the social, cultural, and political discourse in France.

The most obvious improvement to this line of research would be to obtain a greater number of perspectives, which would provide a far more balanced, holistic understanding of the issue on the ground in France. The findings presented in the paper draw on interviews with some of the world's most prominent scholars on the subject, but there is still enormous room for additional research. I would have liked to obtain the unique perspectives of Les Bleus' star footballers past and present, which could have produced interesting insight into the general feeling within the National Team and on the ground in France. I also would have liked to obtain the perspectives of local French journalists and sociologists that have covered this issue for decades, which was made impossible due to the language barrier. While this paper is capable of serving as the foundation for understanding this complex relationship, additional research should attempt to procure the aforementioned perspectives, which would likely add much-needed layers to this elaborate dissection of these issues.

The future research on this issue should continue to contextualize the performances within the broader social and political situation of the respective time period, while also factoring in the influence of certain material events. However, I would suggest that future research on this issue also engages in comprehensive analyses of Les Bleus' performances at the European Championships, which would make it easier to trace the evolution of the national discourse over the preceding decades. This would paint a fuller picture of the influence that Les Bleus have had on national discourse, complementing the existing exploration of World Cup performances.

This line of research could also benefit from a quantitative angle, which I decided not to incorporate within this project, given the scarce available data on these specific issues and the limited time-frame provided to perform individual studies. I would suggest that those attempting to build on this research should endeavor to include quantitative figures that lend credence to Les Bleus' influence on the national dialogue. This could consist of more detailed polling information, national surveys, or accredited studies from third-party research organizations. The inclusion of a quantitative aspect would strengthen our understanding of the issue at large.

This paper just scratches the surface of the issue and there is so much more to be discovered and understood regarding Les Bleus' outsized social, cultural, and political role in France. There are numerous different directions that future research on this topic could go, but an attempt to build on this particular line of reasoning should consider the suggestions above in order to construct an even more comprehensive evaluation of the subject matter.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, this thesis arrives at the conclusion that Les Bleus' cultural significance is something that deserves serious consideration when it comes to understanding the social and political sentiment in France. While it is important to avoid overstating the long-run influence of the team itself, without also monitoring various other societal developments, one must acknowledge that Les Bleus' have an undeniable influence on short-run social, political, and cultural discourse, which is part of broader societal changes that accumulate over the course of an extended period of time. Beginning to understand Les Bleus' level of societal influence is crucial to aiding the immigrant communities that are so vital to the team's continued success, and using sport as a force for social and political change.

The findings presented throughout this paper provide critical insight into the positive potential of sport, but also into the manner in which it is capable of yielding negative externalities that can prove detrimental to France's social and political discourse, if governing bodies fail to implement sufficient policies. This thesis' exploration of the period from 1998-2018, and each World Cup that occurred in this period, represents a piece of work that is unique in both scope and approach. While Les Bleus alone are not capable of prompting lasting cultural change alone, it is the team's influential cultural position that imbues it with the potential, alongside other critical social developments, to shape social and political discourse, translating into gradual, long-run progress.

### Interview Questions

1. *People often discuss the integrative role of sport, particularly when it comes to international soccer. What kind of integrative role does football play in France, if you perceive it to have a role at all?*
2. *Can you discuss the manner in which Les Bleus reflect France's colonial past and continue to symbolize this complicated national legacy?*
3. *How would you characterize the unique relationship between Les Bleus and the French public, particularly as it pertains to discourse around immigration and race?*
4. *Can you discuss the reaction to the '98 World Cup in politics and media?*
5. *Can you discuss the reaction to the '02 World Cup in politics and media?*
6. *Can you discuss the reaction to the '06 World Cup in politics and media?*
7. *Can you discuss the reaction to the '10 World Cup in politics and media?*
8. *Can you discuss the reaction to the '14 World Cup in politics and media?*
9. *Can you discuss the reaction to the '18 World Cup in politics and media?*
10. *How would you characterize the influence of Les Bleus in cultural discourse – is it capable of altering long-term attitudes or guiding the discourse, if at all?*
11. *What role does political opportunism play in propagating certain agendas, while using Les Bleus as part of the rationale? What about in media?*
12. *Looking at the extremes of 1998 and 2010, are there any lasting continuities that you can point to as a reflection of the team's influence, if any?*
13. *What kind of cultural role does soccer play in France?*
14. *How have Les Bleus' successes and failures shaped conversations around race, immigration, and national identity in the short-run following World Cups?*
15. *Have successes ushered in any lasting changes, or is at all transient?*
16. *How does the French National factor into social, political, and progress, however large or small this role may be, if at all?*



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