How the “People’s Game“ Conquered the World. A Short Socio-Economic History of Football in Europe and Serbia

Contemporary football represents a highly commodified spectacle, a segment of the entertainment industry where huge amounts of money change hands, and the popularity of football competitions – whether national or international – is a global phenomenon, which billions of people take part in. Only thirty years ago, however, the situation was very different. In Western Europe, and especially Great Britain, football was mostly associated with hooliganism, and the audiences at the run-down stadiums were dwindling in numbers. On the other hand, in Eastern Europe before the fall of the Berlin wall football was at its peak, only to fall from grace and onto the European periphery in the 90’s, where it is, by and large, still situated. This dramatic transformation which turned football into “entertainment for rich people” did not occur by accident, it has deep roots in the history of the sport, but also in the wider socio-economic transformations within the context of which this segment of pop culture exists.

In this paper I will offer a look at the social and economic conditions in which football developed with the aim of establishing a framework for understanding the changes which occurred within the sport and within the society, with a special focus on the connection between football and the rise of nationalism in the former Yugoslavia, but also wider social processes linked to the descent of Serbia into the so-called process of “transition”, or the acceptance of parliamentary democracy and capitalism as bases of social order. It is my intention to, through the analysis of socio-historical elements which influenced the development and transformation of the game of football, indicate the wider frame of possibilities for the analysis of contemporary events through the prism of this segment of pop-culture.

Key words: football, history, Serbia, Europe, socio-economic transformation.