

Europe's 'Orientalism'

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■ **All too easily, western Europe still talks and behaves as if a visit to Poland is a voyage into the unknown.**

Imagine a Polish TV crew determined to expose the true face of Britain. It uses footage of the riots, both from last summer and (it notes) from many other occasions in the past 30 years. It films football hooligans on the rampage – and chanting at a black player: “Your dad washes elephants, your mother’s a whore.” (It notes, disapprovingly, that the football authorities ruled that this was not racist.) It highlights the bad behaviour of English football fans and stag parties abroad, showing a collection of signs from cities such as Krakow saying “English not welcome”. It interviews Poles living in Britain who have been beaten up or robbed by people with brown or black skins

Such factual reporting could then support a damning conclusion: Britons' violent streak makes the country unfit to host the Olympics. Poles should stay away.

The BBC's flagship “Panorama” television programme about football racism in Poland and Ukraine was not that bad. The comparison is in some senses absurd, not least because nobody in the UK knows or cares what Polish media say about Britain, whereas Poles give outsiders' views neurotic scrutiny. The BBC counts (or counted) in Poland and many other countries as the epitome of journalistic integrity. Anything it says matters, arousing soul-searching if accurate, and outrage if wrong.

To be fair, the overlap between football and politics in Poland is indubitably interesting. Why do so many football fans detest the prime minister, Donald Tusk? Why do supporters of the Legia Warszawa team have big banners demanding “Szechter, apologise for your father and brother”? (Szechter is not a footballer, but the birth name of the leading liberal writer Adam Michnik, whose family were part of the Communist establishment). They were Jewish. Is that anti-Semitic?

These would be good subjects for a documentary (though perhaps not a prime-time one). One could even imagine a follow-up one on Ukraine, which would explain why some Karpaty Lviv fans took a Nazi swastika flag to an away game in Kiev.

Some specific points in the BBC programme, and the way the programme-makers used (or allegedly misused) their material, have sparked a huge controversy in Poland. Either the allegations against the BBC are a tissue of lies (and those who make them will be exposed), or the programme-makers have a lot of explaining to do. Time will tell.

But what bothered me most was the programme's tone – the story of a voyage into the unknown. The reporter spoke of the “football family” having decided to “pay a visit to eastern Europe”. The idea that “eastern Europe” (whatever that is) might already be part of the “football family” was ignored. It was as if the programme-makers were visiting another planet, rather than a country that is a day's drive from London.

Similarly, it rightly decried the use of “Jew” as an insult, but never mentioned that just the same – deplorable – language is used by rival fans against Ajax in the Netherlands or Tottenham Hotspur in Britain. It said ethnic minorities were “all but invisible” – but did not mention that Poland has two black members of parliament (Britain elected its first only in 1987). Poland certainly has its problems – but

the highly questionable assumptions behind eastern 'backwardness' and Western 'progress' went blithely unexamined.

It would be easy to scent a kind of 'orientalism' here: the belief that 'ex-communist' is synonymous with 'poor', 'nasty' and 'ignorant'. The muddy wastelands of the east are great places to make shocking documentaries. Best of all, because nobody there knows English, you can say pretty much what you like and get away with it. Not any more.

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