

Who Says “No to Modern Football?” Italian Supporters, Reflexivity, and Neo-Liberalism

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Abstract

This study explores the complexities and ambiguities of the recent increase in criticism among football supporters of so-called “modern football.” Drawing on existing elaborations of the concept of reflexivity in sociology, this contribution theoretically extends the hegemony/resistance analytical framework that has commonly been used to portray the criticism of football supporters in strict opposition to neo-liberal trends. The examination of the social and symbolic mechanisms surrounding anti-neo-liberal campaigning suggests that the slogan has been embraced by heterogeneous actors with contrasting topics, values, beliefs, and opinions. Considering the different reactions of contested anti-neo-liberal institutions and the context in which these processes take place, it has been demonstrated that protests and reflexive discursive practices can both inhibit and enhance the transformative potential of the “Against modern football” slogan.

Keywords

emotions, neo-liberalism, reflexivity, resistance, football supporters

Introduction

Picture the following: a casual-style sweatshirt with an image of an old-fashioned football surrounded by an olive wreath and the slogan “Against modern football” with “our passion is not a business” underneath. The slogan represents, both symbolically

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and verbally, supporters' discontent with recent developments in the game that they love. In particular, pay TV, the increased costs of attending football matches, kickoff times based on mass media and advertising needs, and security and risk management technologies are viewed as the vehicles that have transformed an enchanting authentic *passion* into a disenchanting neo-liberal *business*.

This globally understandable iconic representation has framed numerous supporters' protest initiatives worldwide. The slogan is commonly expressed through chants and banners in the football terraces, referenced in fanzines and e-zines, quoted frequently on supporters' websites, discussions, and forums, and painted on city walls. A closer look at the sweatshirt suggests some internal contradictions that arise beyond this iconic representation. The sweatshirt is produced by a multinational company that participates in the neo-liberal sports production business complex. In particular, the slogan appears on sweatshirts manufactured by "Fruit of the Loom," a global brand that was acquired in 2002 by Berkshire Hathaway Group, which is chaired by the neo-liberal financial guru Warren Buffet. Regardless of whether this contradiction is considered by football supporters, at least at the abstract theoretical level, the message conveyed by the sweatshirt is incongruent with the neo-liberal principles that the slogan actually criticizes. However, the multinational brand also has connections with casual supporters' subcultural style. Hence, the "Fruit of the Loom" brand may recall the lost "tradition" of the 80s, before football began to be "modern."

The introductory example of "Fruit of the Loom" is relevant for this article in several regards. First, the diffusion of protest culture even into popular imagery provides a testimony of the increasing importance of resistant football supporters' culture in contemporary football culture. Second, it suggests that the impact of any protest on social change is potentially limited due to the capacity of neo-liberal actors and institutions to co-opt and strategically accommodate criticism. Third, it foreshadows the ambiguity of meanings and interpretations surrounding contemporary supporters' protest movements against neo-liberalism. This ambiguity is related to the heterogeneity and complexity of football supporters who interpret and accommodate the slogan and principal ideas surrounding the oppositional discourses in different ways. This article is based on the assumption that there is not a single notion of a supporter; instead, there are diversified supporters who can potentially contribute to transforming football culture in different ways.

Considering these observations, the main objective of this study is to examine the potential of anti-neo-liberal supporters' movements to transcend and change contemporary football culture. To achieve this aim, different social and often discursive forms of anti-neo-liberal oppositions are analyzed.

The adjective "modern" in the slogan "Against modern football" does not refer to the sociological idea of modernity in contrast to traditional societies. Instead, its meaning is related to everyday and lay usage. Translated into a sociological vocabulary, "modern" football is late-modern, globalized, and deeply entrenched within the media/sports production complex (Jhally, 1984). Simultaneously, "modern" football has increasingly become an object of reflexive discourses deconstructing these neo-liberal and global encroachments.

This theoretically framed discussion is empirically informed by documentary evidence from the environment of Italian supporters. The data that underpin the analysis are drawn from a variety of resources: the previous literature on the topic and available documents, such as newspaper articles, e-zines, blogs, Internet discussions, and websites. The data collection followed the logic of the snowball technique and was conducted simultaneously with the elaboration of the theoretical framework. Considering the continuous comparison of empirical data with theoretical objectives, the ambition of this study is not to present an exhaustive description that is representative of Italian *curves*. Rather, the study takes advantage of the complex and heterogeneous conditions of the Italian football culture to capture the multifaceted nature of an opposition movement against neo-liberalism and to discuss its potential for social change. This is accomplished through the analytical strategies of thematic and axial coding. However, the article does not aim to adjudicate which social forms prevail or even to determine the further developments of “modern” football culture. More modestly, with respect to the processual and vivid nature of developments in the Italian football culture, this study reveals the diversity of meanings beyond the resistance gaze and explores a variety of consequences related to a critical social agency.

These analytical objectives have further theoretical implications. The concept of reflexivity is used throughout the article to understand the mechanisms and processes of social change and to capture the complex and often ambiguous nature of football supporters’ protest movements. The adopted theoretical perspective extends the hegemony/resistance framework that has often been used in recent studies of football supporters’ protests. The existing literature on resistant football supporters is briefly reviewed, and the concept of reflexivity is presented, elaborating a theoretical interpretative framework to understand the complex nature of contemporary football supporters’ protests.

Football Supporters and Resistance Against Neo-Liberal Principles

The first expressions of supporters’ discontent with the so-called “modern” development of football occurred in the post-war period as a response to the increasing professionalization of the transfer market and increasing bourgeois engagement with football. These processes disrupted the traditional relationships between clubs’ management and supporters who reclaimed the lost subcultural control over decision-making processes (Taylor, 1971a, 1971b). The opposition against the so-called modernization of football has been more frequently captured by scholarship since the late 90s. In particular, various academic examinations of supporters’ opposition have focused on critical engagement related to the modernization of sports facilities and stadiums (Giulianotti, 2011; Hognestad, 2012; A. King, 1998; Nash, 2000), the increased costs of attending sporting events (Williams, 2007), the use of specific police control strategies and surveillance tools among supporters (Antonelli, 2010), or the breakdown of tradition and local communities due to multinational entrepreneurship (Brown, 2007, 2008; Giulianotti, 2005; Millward, 2011).

Numerous case studies have examined supporters' opposition to single football clubs. To provide some examples, critical engagement with the neo-liberal principles of the following clubs has been examined in detail: Manchester United F.C. (Brown, 2007, 2008; Dubal, 2010; Millward, 2011), Sport Club Corinthians Paulista (Dubal, 2010), Liverpool F.C. (Millward, 2011; Williams, 2012), Everton F.C. (D. Kennedy, 2012), Atlético Bilbao (Groves, 2011), A.S. Livorno (Doidge, 2013), and Sankt Pauli F.C. (Daniel & Kassimeris, 2013; Totten, 2014).

The inherently conflictual nature of the dynamics of supporters and neo-liberal institutions is mirrored in the theoretical framing of academic explorations. Distinctions between active and passive supporters (Cleland, 2010), between participatory and passive fans (Redhead, 1993), between hegemonic neo-liberal forces and supporters' resistance (Dubal, 2010), and between life worlds and systems worlds (D. Kennedy, 2012) have been used to capture the dynamics between supporters' initiatives and football clubs' management. However, it has also been argued that a more nuanced framework should be used to understand the more subtle dynamics (Dubal, 2010; Hognestad, 2012; P. Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012; Williams, 2007) between football fans and neo-liberal principles to avoid a simplistic dichotomization that often disregards how sport is experienced in everyday life and located in different contexts (Crawford, 2004). This article provides a response to this nuanced understanding, complementing the hitherto diffused hegemony/resistance interpretative framework using the concept of reflexivity. This concept is used to argue that the relationship between resistant football supporters and hegemonic "modern" football culture cannot be exclusively conflictual and based on incongruent interests that remain stable over time and are related to specific social groups. It is rather suggested that in conjunction with the increasing proliferation of reflexivity in contemporary societies, the relationship between supporters and institutions of "modern" football is dynamic and blurred, and that supporters' reflexivity can foster a certain degree of reflexivity in "modern" football culture. The study therefore explores different reflexive social forms that are not a priori attributed to particular social groups (albeit originating among supporters) and that potentially transform the object to which they relate. The theoretical explanation of these dynamics is empirically informed by a thorough discussion of Italian supporters' opposition to "modern" football.

Reflexivity: Extending the Resistance/Hegemony Framework

Theories of reflexive modernization define reflexivity as a permanent revision of social agency (individual and collective) and social institutions in light of (new) knowledge and new circumstances (Beck, Bonss, & Lau, 2003; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1991). The concept has been used to describe the capacity of social actors to view and assess their own positions or their socio-cultural surroundings in relation to other social actors and to the external world, to express doubts, problematize the social order, and identify new opportunities for social action or wider social transformation. Reflexivity is, by some accounts, connected to emancipation,

chances, and opportunities (Archer, 2007) or to the capability for the redirection and reorientation (Donati, 2011) of individual life trajectories and societal developments.

In relation to sport, two previous studies systematically referred to the concept of reflexivity. The concept was used either to frame other phenomena, such as detraditionalization or individualization in the case of female student athletes' socialization (Falls & Wilson, 2013), or to interpret the processes of disembedding and reembedding depicting judo as an example of a reflexively modernized sport (Villamón, Brown, Espartero, & Gutiérrez, 2004). With reference to reflexive modernization, the concept of reflexivity has been used in a diagnostic manner to describe the macro-societal conditions of late modernity and to explore how these have been mirrored and reproduced within the sphere of sport. Whereas the former mentioned study suggests that reflexive modernization processes are expressed at an individual level in terms of a reflexive monitoring of individual biographies by young female athletes (Falls & Wilson, 2013), the latter explores the reflexivity principles at an institutional level by demonstrating that reflexivity is inherent in modern judo developments. More specifically, judo's reflexivity is enhanced by Westernized representations and agendas and by reflexive monitoring of the discipline through science, measurement, and technology (Villamón et al., 2004).

Similar to these two studies, this article is based on the assumption that contemporary societies witness a period of increased reflexivity that structures the socio-cultural processes in contemporary sport. However, reflexive modernization principles are understood exclusively not only as the driving principles of social reproduction (of football culture) but also (and, throughout this work, mainly) as the principles that contest and challenge the (neo-liberal) social order. Furthermore, in the two aforementioned sport-related studies, similar to other mainstream conceptualizations, reflexivity has been coupled with social change and the emancipation of social actors. The analysis that follows captures the reflexive practice not as *the* social change but rather as the potential for *a* social change.

Supporters' anti-neo-liberal initiatives are understood as expressions of reflexivity with the potential to enhance social change. Social mechanisms that both inhibit and facilitate social change are examined. It is argued that reflexive discourse equips supporters with a transcendental meaning that is detached from the existing football culture and that the transformative potential of social practice for social change can be reinforced if this transcendental meaning is retained and reproduced.

The analytical framework to interpret the transformative potential of supporters' oppositions is elaborated by discussing the impact of supporters' critical engagement on the object of such reflexivity. This is why two principal analytical dimensions, *the reflexive subject* and *the reflected object*, are introduced. Moreover, the need to explore *the context* of these *reflexive processes* is suggested. The *reflexive subject* is represented by individual supporters and by the informal social networks and official bodies that they form. The *object of reflexivity* is represented by neo-liberal manifestations of "modern" football and by institutions contributing to such developments: football clubs and associations, private management and ownership, multinational companies, mass media, sponsors, and neo-liberal state politics. The *context of reflexive processes*

is represented by the broader sphere of sport and its specific adherence to emotions, competition, and passion. Moreover, it is characterized by the macro-societal conditions in which reflexive processes have become more common.

In this article, reflexivity is represented by supporters' active engagement against neo-liberalism in contemporary football culture. Reflexivity is conceived as an individual and primarily collective expression of opposition toward "modern" football developments. It is argued that reflexive engagement is stimulated by the increasing proliferation of supporters' awareness of the neo-liberal mechanisms that underlie contemporary football culture and are at odds with supporters' experience of the game, often perceived as traditional and authentic.

The object of this reflexivity is socio-cultural and is represented by the so-called football supporters' culture (or by football culture, more broadly). Supporters' reflexive discourses related to the position of supporters' culture and recent developments in football culture can be understood in terms of opportunities, chances, and emancipation, as well as in terms of redirection and reorientation. These two interconnected dimensions can refer to collective actions to transform, redirect, and reorient contemporary football culture, to struggle against the negative impact of football's allegiances with business within the context of neo-liberal principles and the mass media, and to address corruption or mismanagement in football governance bodies.

Considering a broader theoretical elaboration of the reflexivity concept, a narrow definition of reflexivity is used throughout this study, similar to what Archer (2007) refers to as meta-reflexivity, although without fully adhering to its rational and deliberate character. Reflexivity, above all, encompasses a critical engagement with the culture of "modern" football, an active opposition toward neo-liberalism. Hence, reflexivity does not endorse an individual supporter's self-reflexive stance based on a cynical or pragmatic acceptance of neo-liberal logic accommodated into the supporter's passive agency. Moreover, although it is understood to mirror broader societal trends, reflexivity does not represent an institutional asset, an attribute of the neo-liberal and hegemonic football culture, but rather an asset of a selected group of actors within football culture: engaged, resisting football supporters.

Reflexivity is understood to be a social practice of a discursive nature (Ailon, 2011; Alexander, 1996; Argyrou, 2003) coupled with emotions (Burkitt, 2012; Holmes, 2010; D. S. King, 2006). This is particularly relevant in the case of football supporters due to the strong role played by iconic and symbolic representations of the struggle against modern football and due to supporters' emotional attachment to local clubs and communities. Emotions are intrinsically intertwined with supporters' opposition initiatives and can function as both facilitators and inhibitors (Jasper, 2011) of social change. Emotional dynamics can contribute to both reinforcing and undermining the transcendental nature of reflexive discourses and practices.

This assumption suggests a need to revisit and reframe the existing understanding of reflexivity, conceptualized primarily as a deliberate, rational, and emancipating social practice. In relation to supporters' protest movements, two layers of emotions should be considered: first, the layer of sociability, affective loyalties, rituals, and passions related to the practice of supporters' engagement with football; second, the layer of anger and threat as a means to protect the emotions explained in the first layer.

The following sections will be structured according to the analytical distinction between *the reflexive subject*, *the reflected object*, and *the context* in which reflexivity processes, particularly anti-neo-liberal oppositions, occur. In each of these sections, social mechanisms that potentially enhance social change are first discussed and interpreted. The examination of enhancing social processes is followed by a discussion of the social processes that can undermine the transcendental nature of reflexivity and therefore inhibit social change.

The Reflexive Subject

The anti-neo-liberal initiatives adhere to globally understandable iconic representations. A shared meaning given to terms such as “the juggernaut,” “the monster,” and “the system of modern football” bonds football supporters together against the common “enemy” in the spheres of finance, corporations, mass media, sports federations, club management, and government. The emblems of an old-fashioned football, an olive wreath, and symbolic references to the euro or dollar currencies imply the role of neo-liberal business that corrupts traditional football culture and causes the disappearance of passions, emotions, the “real” atmosphere, authenticity, spontaneity, history, tradition, rivalries, rituals, and attachment to local communities.

The transcendental nature of anti-neo-liberal football protests is reinforced by their history and memory. Supporters involved in the discursive struggle “Against modern football” have accumulated experiences that overcome historically maintained rivalries. The most emblematic in this regard was an Italian informal network of supporters, “Movimento ultras,” founded in 2002 (Carlo Balestri, personal conversation, December 5, 2013) in an attempt to defend the tradition of Italian supporters vis-à-vis the commodification and commercialization trends that had significantly accelerated since the 90s. Supporters’ opposition initiatives bridged both club rivalries and national borders. A typical illustration of these transnational efforts can be found in the “Against Modern Football Manifesto.” The Manifesto represents a communication platform that was introduced on the Internet by an Italian AS Rome supporter in 1999 and has been joined by 72 supporters’ groups from 21 countries.¹ A common vocabulary and shared experiences enhance the supporters’ sense of solidarity and contribute to the development of tactics of protest. A “supporters’ strike”² is a tool commonly used by the Italian ultras. We can illustrate this tactic through one of many possible examples: On January 12, 2005, AC Parma players found empty stands in their home fixture of the Italian Cup against ACF Fiorentina. Only a banner was left on the terraces to silently protest the fixture being scheduled for Wednesday afternoon: “Do you prefer money over your supporters? This is the terrace that you merit” (*Lungoparma*, 2005).³

The protests may be motivated differently and may address different neo-liberal principles. To provide another example, the AS Roma ultras left their terrace, “Curva Sud,” empty during the home match against AC Cesena on August 28, 2010, to protest the Supporter’s ID card, a surveillance tool with apparent commercial exploitation interests (Guschwan, 2013) that was introduced in Italy in the 2010-2011 season. The AS Roma fans’ protest was not unique; the introduction of the Supporter’s ID card faced strong resistance from Italian supporters across the country and culminated in a

national protest initiative in Rome on November 14, 2009.⁴ Although the opposition of fans has been continuously strong, the Supporter's ID card remains active.

Generally, the Italian ultras culture provides a rich history of protests. The threat of neo-liberal cultural practices has occasionally been recalled through analogies with global North American leagues, such as the NBA (National Basketball Association) or NHL (National Hockey League), which are strongly intertwined with neo-liberal cultural and economic practices. According to Italian ultras, the quest for authenticity must avoid repeating situations from the NBA where supporters' applause is not spontaneous but is imposed by a clapping hands icon on the screen (*Il Fatto Quotidiano* blog, 2012).⁵ In a similar analogy, a banner saying "Modern Football: Waterloo of the NHL teaches us!" occurred around Italian terraces in 2005. The initiative, organized by the Progetto Ultras network of supporters, recalled the NHL lockout in the 2004-2005 season due to the crisis of the NHL business model.⁶ In general, the negative impact of the mass media is often recalled, as documented by illustrations from banners that were posted around the Italian terraces: "Stop football business, stop PAY TV" (Italian national team supporters, game against Wales, 2003),⁷ "If you want real emotions, turn off the television!" (UC Sampdoria ultras), "Never slaves of anyone"⁸ (AS Bari ultras), "Yesterday Tele+, today SKY, the real supporters never count" (Genoa CFC ultras),⁹ or an ironic statement, "Have a nice lunch to all of you,"¹⁰ which recalled an early kickoff due to the global broadcast of the AS Roma—Novara Calcio fixture on April 1, 2012.

The vocabulary and symbolism of anti-neo-liberal protests suggest a high level of emotional investment among supporters (Cacciari, 2010). The emotional dynamics involved in protests not only influence discursive but are likely to also influence social practices. It is argued that the emotional discursive repertoire and supporters' solidarity mobilize protest movements and enhance the transcendental nature of reflexivity. Following Collins' (2001) explanation of emotional dynamics in protest movements, it can be argued that shared participation in protests might reinforce feelings of group solidarity that overcome the traditional boundaries between clubs. Slogans, chants, banners, and bodily expressions during matches can contribute to the creation of emotional energy. Furthermore, symbolic expressions can help to encapsulate the memory of collective participation and build collectively shared feelings of morality or superiority (see Testa, 2009) in relation to common fans based on authenticity.

Spontaneous and emotional expressions of discontent with "modern" football have recently been coupled with formalized, systematic, and expert expressions of discontent with "modern" football. Initiatives labeled with the slogan "Against modern football" are often part of established national and transnational networks and associations, such as *Progetto Ultras* (Balestri & Viganò, 2004; Porro, 2008) or *Supporters in Campo*, in Italy, or with *Football Supporters Europe* or *Supporters Direct Europe*, at the European level. The processes of formal institutionalization and expertization may enhance the credibility and recognition of supporters vis-à-vis the neo-liberal representatives of "modern" football, such as football clubs or national governments. These processes potentially contribute to maintaining and reproducing the transcendental

dimension of protests related to social change. Further allegiances with these associations have recently promoted significant institutional changes in the case of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), policies, and national legislations.¹¹

The nature of late-modern reflexivity, however, cannot be understood exclusively in terms of emancipating action. Various expressions of supporters' discontent with modern football may inhibit social change and maintain the status quo of "modern" football. Some protests used as a means to counteract neo-liberal football culture risk losing their transcendental—and therefore transformative—character and becoming ends in themselves; hence, their potential to function as vehicles of social change is weakened. A loosening of the transcendental character can occur in the following circumstances: a substitution of emotional energies, an overemphasis on the technical or aesthetic facets of protest, and the unintended consequences of formal institutionalization and expertization of opposition initiatives.

First, the shared feelings accumulated during these protests can lead to the substitution of emotional energies, or the production of new forms of emotional energy similar to the one implicitly reclaimed vis-à-vis the developments of "modern" football. The difference is the origins of those emotions: Whereas the "traditional" emotional energy was primarily related to passion and sport rivalries, the late-modern, reflexive emotions originate from anger and threat and are related to the "juggernaut of modern football."

Second, participation in protests can turn excessive attention to their technical or aesthetics facets. Hence, a protest as a means to counteract neo-liberal culture can be transformed into an end in itself. For example, an engagement in choreographies "Against modern football" can sideline the original interests to express discontent with neo-liberal forces.

Third, hand in hand with the processes of formal institutionalization and expertization of opposition initiatives, a certain co-optation of business-like language and public relations strategies is inevitable. Protests framed by the "Against modern football" slogan can formally become very close to the grammar of neo-liberal principles that the critical movement tends to criticize. This does not necessarily mean that supporters fully endorse the principles of the commercialization of football culture (D. Kennedy & Kennedy, 2007). Nevertheless, the use of business-like language could be alienating for some groups of supporters (P. Kennedy, 2012).

Furthermore, the processes of expertization or formal institutionalization can result in a hierarchization of previously horizontally organized relations within the supporters' communities. This further internal differentiation can develop alongside the values, opinions, and beliefs of supporters. The initiatives against "modern" football are frequently coupled with opinions, values, and beliefs that are not broadly accepted by the overall movement due to its heterogeneity. More specifically, campaigns against racism or those promoting greater inclusion of women supporters are not necessarily welcomed in the overall community that shares the idea of the struggle "Against modern football." This situation may lead to a decrease in the emotional energy and to a disruption of feelings of solidarity within protest communities.

The Object of Reflexivity

More than a decade of intensified protests and resistant initiatives has brought winds of change to football culture. New bodies in favor of supporters' engagement have been established in either a bottom-up or top-down manner, as in the cases of *Football Supporters Europe* or *Supporters Direct*, which have extended the original U.K. activities to the European level since 2007. The need to listen to supporters' voice, and a call for their stronger involvement in clubs' ownership has been emphasized in several European policy documents. The positive role of football supporters for European societies was acknowledged in the White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007) and in the "Fisas" report ratified by the European Parliament in February 2012. Representatives of supporters are recognized in some countries to the extent that they are invited to give talks in national parliaments. A significant milestone for supporters' initiatives can be seen in the request for every club participating in European competitions to appoint a Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) since the 2012-2013 football season.¹² The role of this newly introduced figure is to mediate the relationship between the clubs and their supporters.

A closer look at these measures suggests that the formal recognition of supporters can represent a response to a broader agenda of football supporters rather than a direct reply to the struggle against "modern" football. Topics such as financial sustainability, good governance, anti-racism, and anti-discrimination are often promoted on public agendas by recognized formal bodies either at national or European levels. The connection of supporters' protest initiatives with a wider social engagement, the connection of engagement *for* fandom with engagement *through* fandom, most likely increased the legitimacy of supporters' movements across Europe.

Notwithstanding this legitimacy, supporters in Italy are still frequently viewed through the lens of criminalization or consumerism. In such contexts, supporters rarely obtain access to decision-making processes. As suggested by an Italian sociologist of sport, Pippo Russo, "It will be necessary to work on the football culture to see fan involvement as 'normal', and realise a virtuous model in which the trust movement could be a solution to the crisis" (*Supporters Direct*, 2013, para. 5).¹³ Russo's comment is related to the limited access of supporters to ownership structures in Italy. The supporters' majority ownership has no support in legislation or football federation rules. When this form of ownership emerges, it is usually to rescue bankrupt football clubs.¹⁴

Supporters' reflexivity expressed through resistance initiatives does not exclusively result in recognition of supporters and their ideas to transform "modern" football. Some acts of resistance and engagement can lead to an even stronger opposition on the side of the reflected object and to a reinforcement of neo-liberal principles in terms of both surveillance and market. Italy represents one of the countries in which the mainstream governmental perspective works with a highly stereotyped image of ultras as potentially violent social actors that must be kept under observation and control. The surveillance measures in Italy have reached such a level that since the beginning of the Serie A 2012-2013 season, any banner intended to be displayed at the

terraces must be approved in advance before a fixture is played by the Italian National Observatory on Sports Events, an advisory body of the Ministry of the Interior.¹⁵ This originally anti-racist and anti-violent measure tends to be (more or less deliberately) used against any opposition to the contemporary mainstream Italian football culture.

Furthermore, the transformative potential to change modern football may be related to the responses of the reflected objects that manifestly seem to work in the direction of transformation. However, a closer look can reveal some latent processes in favor of the reproduction of football culture rather than its transformation. It is questionable what the SLO measure can introduce into the European football clubs. Considering the relatively recent introduction of the measure, it will become a topic of further research to examine the extent to which this tool, which originated as a product of football supporters' engagement, will help to enhance transformative processes and the extent to which it will be co-opted into neo-liberal strategies of football clubs, such as legitimizing their supporters or transforming the SLOs into allies that could promote security measures at the risk of limiting the civil liberties of fans. Last, as demonstrated in the example of the commercial attractiveness of the culture of protest, a certain colonization of protests and anti-neo-liberal initiatives can also represent the potential reactions of the reflected objects, neo-liberal institutions.

In summary, the inclusion of supporters in ownership structures and their recognition of football clubs represent an indicator of social change and can help to mediate, in a moderate and credible manner, some of the main ideas of the struggle against "modern" football. At the same time, symptoms of colonization or even the refusal of the transcendental potential of reflexive practices can be observed.

In a more theoretical vein, the capacity of supporters' opposition to enhance social change can be observed in the degree to which an object of reflexivity adopts a critical standpoint toward neo-liberalism and begins to reflexively monitor its impact. In such circumstances, the object of reflexivity is transformed into a reflexive subject. These processes can be either individual, in the case of the individual reflexive agency of single club officials, football association representatives, or policy-makers who become more sensitive to neo-liberal issues raised by football supporters, or institutional, through the imposition of new measures and rules that mirror supporters' anti-neo-liberal voice.

The Context of Reflexivity

The impact of reflexive practices on social change cannot be fully understood without considering the nature of the social sphere in which the resistance against "modern" football takes place. In the case of football supporters, the context of reflexivity is represented by a very specific system of leisure with its own logic and organizing principles, based on emotions, routines, and rituals (e.g., Dal Lago, 1990). Furthermore, the sphere of football fandom is competitive by nature and, in some geographical contexts, is a highly politicized and ideological sphere. This context can have ambiguous consequences for social change and for the transcendental capacity of reflexive practices.

On the one hand, a social tissue made of relations among supporters can nourish the emotional energy for anti-neo-liberal initiatives. There is likely no better space to train protests than the space of football terraces. On the other hand, logical and rational constructs beyond the resistance against “modern” football can disrupt the lived experience in the social sphere, which is considered by numerous supporters to be a depoliticized realm of leisure and fun. As suggested by Crabbe and Brown (2004), acts of resistance might be organized to improve fans’ enjoyment of the game and to intensify consumers’ experience. In this context, any attempts to formally institutionalize the enjoyment may be viewed as intrusive because the need for a detached view can be alienating and problematize this enjoyment. Similarly, it is questionable to what extent the emotional energies that derive from anger and threat can disrupt the “original” emotional energies based on ritual, passion, and spontaneity. Resistance initiatives “Against modern football” formulated in a sophisticated policy language can represent an intrusion into the spontaneous and authentic experience of supporters, similar to the intrusion of neo-liberal principles expressed through the commodification of football culture or through surveillance technologies.

Considering the rich ideological plurality of football supporters, the slogan against “modern” football can support quite distinct social practices. In some specific contexts, the resistance toward modern football can enhance the reproduction of homophobia and gender stereotyping and can contribute to aggressiveness and violence. Hence, a protest used as a means of counteracting neo-liberal logic can be transformed into a means of a different nature; it can become a pretext for an end that is different and contradictory to the mainstream “Against modern football” agenda. The neo-liberal meaning of the term *modern* and its connections with commodification and commercialization are sidelined, and the term *modern* connotes surveillance and official power.

This situation may lead to further radicalization and an a priori violent discontent with any expression of control. This is why the frequent juxtaposition of the slogans A.C.A.B. (all cops are bastards) and “Against modern football” can be observed. The initiative *Progetto Ultrà* embraces various supporters’ initiatives across Italy, and the struggle against “modern” football is accompanied by the promotion of social inclusion and anti-racism activities, which may be contrary to some Italian supporters’ contesting of the “modern” surveillance culture. An example is the following banner presented by Reggina Calcio ultras in September 2005 during the fixture with A.C. Chievo Verona: “The illegal immigrants without permission to stay sow terror in our cities . . . we with an identity card on our stadiums . . . Shame to the Italian state” (*Rangers*, 2005).¹⁶

Similar contradictions and ambiguities that are inherent in several clusters of supporters’ culture and that may undermine the external legitimacy of the opposition movement are related to ethnic and gender relations. The “traditional” idea of masculinity (Free & Hughson, 2003; A. King, 1998) may be in contrast to calls for women’s emancipation at the terraces. An emblematic example is the “Sampdoria Rude Boys & Girls” ultras group that decided to change its original name, “Sampdoria Rude Boys,” after inspiration from an anti-sexist leaflet distributed by German football supporters

(Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2013).¹⁷ This example contrasts with the Ternana Calcio fans who presented the following masculine banner in response to neo-liberal efforts for newly introduced security technologies: “Who are these stewards? Give us at least some hostesses!”¹⁸

Finally, recent macro-societal developments, institutionalization, and the omnipresence of reflexivity in contemporary societies (Archer, 2012; Numerato, 2008) can transform any reflexive practice from an entropic endeavor into a rather redundant social behavior. This redundancy renders any transcendental capacity of reflexive action fragile vis-à-vis the threat of colonization and strategic appropriations on the side of the reflexive object. The omnipresence of reflexivity or the heterogeneity of supporters’ movements with sometimes conflicting values, meanings, and ideologies can also result in the reduction of reflexive discourses to mere protest *forms* that are disconnected from their original opposition *contents*.

In a more theoretical vein, the very nature of sport and the institutionalization of reflexivity in late-modern societies determine the capacity of reflexive subjects to act in favor of social change and influence the adoption of a reflexive stance on the side of the objects of reflexivity. To conclude, the transformative potential of the reflexive processes expressed by reflexive subjects in relation to the object of reflexivity must be situated within the broader societal context in which these processes take place.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study examined the potential of “Against modern football” protest initiatives to transform the contemporary football culture. An in-depth look at the social and symbolic mechanisms surrounding anti-neo-liberal campaigning suggests that the slogan has been embraced by heterogeneous actors and is coupled with a variety of often contrasting topics, values, beliefs, and opinions. Considering the different reactions of contested anti-neo-liberal institutions and the context in which these processes take place, it has been demonstrated that protest initiatives and reflexive discursive practices can both inhibit and enhance social change.

The transformative potential of protests can be reinforced through iconic representations, shared language, emotional investments, and collective memory of struggles. Furthermore, formal institutionalization and expertization can enhance the recognition and credibility of protest initiatives. At the same time, the transformative potential of the opposition initiatives risks being weakened as the protests become ends in themselves. This can happen when the aesthetic and technical dimensions of protest are overemphasized or when an embodied expression of protest secures emotional energy that replaces the original emotional energy that disappeared under the pressure of neo-liberal forces. Processes of formal institutionalization can also contribute to the restructuring and hierarchization of supporters and can lead to internal conflicts within supporters’ communities. It has been suggested that the transcendental potential can be weakened by the responses of the objects of reflexivity—neo-liberal institutions—that have the capacity to colonize or neutralize the language of protest. There are other social mechanisms through which the transcendental potential of the “Against modern

football” initiatives can be weakened. Articulations of supporters’ interests in the official language of policies and the politicization of support, which is primarily viewed as enjoyment, can be alienating for some supporters. Last, the struggle against “modern” football can result in expressions of homophobia, racism, gender stereotyping, and violence.

These empirical conclusions suggest that the reflexive discursive practices diffused in late modernity are not necessarily viewed as deliberate and emancipating forms of social action. Supporters’ resistance, despite its rational pretext, is often expressed in a routine, ritualized, and highly emotionalized way. This assumption makes the study of football supporters particularly appealing for the theoretical advancement of the concept of reflexivity, which considers reflexive action in contrast to routines (Archer, 2010; Giddens, 1991).

The empirically informed discussion of the dynamics between *the reflexive subject* and *the reflected object* attempts to theoretically overcome the limits of the hegemony/resistance framework that emphasizes the conflictual nature and inherently oppositional nature of social dynamics and tends to firmly attribute either the hegemonic or resistance position to a specific social group. By exploring resistance, viewed as an expression of reflexivity, in terms of a dynamic transmittable social form rather than as a stable attribute that is strictly bounded to a particular social group, this article provides an interpretative tool for understanding the relationship between reflexivity and social change. The distinctions among the *subject*, *object*, and *context* of reflexivity also suggest the need to explore different layers of reflexivity at the macro, meso, and micro levels rather than to assume that micro-, subjective-, and meso- institutional levels of reflexivity simply mirror its macro-level emergence, as frequently occurs in narratives framed by the reflexive modernization framework. In this debate, this article may provide a theoretical stimulus for a further analysis of the critical engagement of supporters with “modern” football culture and, more generally, of social actors with the developments of late-modern sport.

Considering this theoretical scope, the study is not meant to be representative of football or Italian football and does not aim to generalize conclusions for the Italian supporters’ movement. Reflexive social processes, represented by anti-neo-liberal opposition, are explored due to their mere occurrence and not because of their firm links with specific social groups and actors. Hence, examples of anti-neo-liberal opposition expressed by *Supporters in Campo* or *Supporters Direct Europe* do not mean that these associations are programmatically and exclusively anti-neo-liberal. It is worth remembering that the empirical evidence in this study is drawn from the existing literature and documentary analysis, such as newspaper articles, e-zines, blogs, and web sites. By focusing primarily on secondary documents, the article does not consider the socio-cultural origins of football supporters involved in opposition initiatives. Further research should engage with more direct research methods to understand the meaning given to the resistance movement by football supporters and by the representatives of neo-liberal institutions. An empirical analysis of primary data would contribute to the examination of the links between reflexivity and emotions and to a thorough understanding of the role of the socio-cultural origins of the supporters who

are involved in resistance initiatives. A closer look at the socio-cultural origins of resistant supporters would also provide more theoretical implications and would inform the discussion of the relationship between reflexivity and *habitus* (Adams, 2006; Elder-Vass, 2007; Mouzelis, 2007; Sweetman, 2003).

Last, the role of public intellectuals has recently been discussed in the field of sport sociology (e.g., Bairner, 2009; Jarvie, 2007; Sugden, 2010). Considering the academic involvement of numerous advocates¹⁹ of authentic football culture vis-à-vis its “modern” developments, an in-depth understanding of the role of social scientific knowledge could inform scholarship on the relationship between sport, social change, and public intellectuals.

Notwithstanding the use of social scientific knowledge, particularly its critical facet, we should remember that engaged supporters are not social theorists. Hence, they tend to perceive the struggle against “modern” football in terms of single issues rather than in relation to the plurality of meanings that can be identified at the level of abstract theorizing. In this vein, Crawford (2004) has argued, “[o]rganized acts of fan ‘resistance’ tend to operate most commonly only around single and individualistically motivated issues, such as when the supporters’ own interests are challenged” (p. 36). Regardless of how limited these single issues are and how specific the fans’ requirements may be, I argue that the combination of different initiatives contribute to the transformation of football culture, although these are not necessarily manifested. This transformation does not have to necessarily follow the direction suggested by the reflexive discourse practices. The reflexive discursive and social practices can themselves enhance the emergence of new, unintended consequences.

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Notes

1. <http://www.asromaultras.org/manifesto2.html>
2. The literal translation of the term *sciopero* is used here. This tactic is commonly labeled a

- boycott in the United Kingdom.
3. www.lungoparma.it/web/news.php?extend.2261
 4. <http://www.repubblica.it/2009/11/sport/calcio/ultras-tessera/ultras-tessera/ultras-tessera.htm>
 5. <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2012/09/06/stadi-panopticon-e-albo-striscioni/344164/>
 6. <http://www.urb74.it/fanze/0405/fanza13.pdf>
 7. Palinsesto televisivo... per un monopolio annunciato. [TV Schedule...of the Announced Monopoly] *Il Megafono* (2003: 12))
 8. <http://freeforumzone.leonardo.it/discussione.aspx?idd=2576416>
 9. <http://www.rangers.it/fanzine/142genoa.pdf>
 10. http://www.ilpost.it/2012/09/06/striscioni-stadi/small_120401-134021_bast010412spo_32
 11. Some of these measures will be discussed further in the section “The Object of Reflexivity.”
 12. According to Article 35 of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Club Licensing and Financial Fair Play.
 13. <http://www.supporters-direct.org/?news-article=una-nuova-governance-per-il-calcio-la-partecipazione-dei-tifosi-e-il-ruolo-dei-supporters-trust>
 14. In contrast to the German *Bundesliga* (Merkel, 2012) and the Swedish *Allsvenskan* (Supporters Direct, 2012), in which supporters can benefit from the so-called 50+1 rule, which guarantees them at least 51% ownership. In Germany, there are two exceptions of long-lasting partnerships that guarantee the continuity of the relationship of the club with local communities: Bayer 04 Leverkusen, owned by the Bayer corporation, and VfL Wolfsburg, owned by Volkswagen.
 15. http://www.repubblica.it/rubriche/spycalcio/2012/09/05/news/ecco_l_albo_degli_striscioni_bari_impizziamo_per_te_-42002310
 16. <http://www.rangers.it/fanzine/148reggina.pdf>
 17. An in-depth discussion about women among Italian ultras is provided by Rinella Cere (2002).
 18. <http://freeforumzone.leonardo.it/discussione.aspx?idd=2576416>
 19. To provide some examples, names such as Carlo Balestri (Progetto Ultrà/Unione Italiana Sport Per tutti, Italy) and Pippo Russo (Supporters in Campo) from Italy, and Tim Crabbe (Substance Cooperative, UK), Adam Brown (FC United of Manchester, Substance Cooperative, UK), and Dave Boyle (formerly Supporters Direct, UK) from the United Kingdom can be mentioned.

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