

POLITICS, THEORY AND PRACTICE

‘Our club, our rules’: fan communities at FC United of Manchester

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This essay concerns the formation of FC United of Manchester, a fan owned non league football club in England, that was formed during the Glazer take over of Manchester United. It considers some of the approaches to thinking about ‘communities’ in relation to football supporters. It considers the disruption to football supporter communities in light of that take over; different community formations amongst the club’s fans; and the political purpose and ‘politicised’ expressions of community within the club’s fan culture.

Introduction

This essay considers some of the approaches to thinking about ‘communities’ in football discussed elsewhere in this volume in relation to FC United of Manchester (FCUM). In this essay we will first look at the formation of the club in the changing context of English football and its threat to established communities of Manchester United fans; we will then consider the different community formations amongst the club’s fans; and thirdly the political purpose and ‘politicized’ expressions of community within the club’s fan culture.

FC United were formed as part of the rejection by some fans of the take-over of Manchester United by the Glazer family in 2005. Since then the club has been successful in gaining two successive promotions that has lifted them from the North West Counties Division Two to the Unibond Northern Premier League Division One, four promotions from the Football League. They have at times attracted enormous crowds for that level of football, averaging 2,500–3,000 with a high point of over 6,000, in leagues where the average is below 100. However, this progress has not been without its controversies – not least from Manchester United fans opposed to the club – and difficulties, with the club suffering a drop in attendances in 2007/08 and as yet unable to secure a permanent home ground.

‘FCUM’ – ‘Fuck ‘em!’: formation and threats to established communities

Origins and background

Two key elements of Manchester United’s fan culture underlie the formation of FC United which are important to recognize in order to understand the nature of its fan communities. First, is the ‘football-political’ position adopted by a significant section of Manchester United’s Manchester-based match going support over the preceding decade, which sought to oppose the Plc structure of the club and which most notably helped prevent the sale of the club to BSkyB in 1999.¹ This created a lineage and tradition among fans – including the attempts of campaign group Shareholders United to build a collectively owned stake in the club – in which certain principles about football became accepted. This ‘common sense’ – encapsulated by the cry of ‘Not For Sale’ – was actively

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promoted by the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association (IMUSA) and included a belief in football clubs being not-for-profit, owned by their fans (with the Barcelona example routinely cited), and not exclusionary in commercial practices. This itself was fed by the broader development of a constituency promoting fan ownership of football clubs.²

Second, this cultural-political position of United fans ran alongside and was underpinned by a resurgence of expressions of a local Mancunian identity among the club's more vocal fans. This sought to contest popular characterizations of Manchester United supporters as 'glory hunters', southern, 'plastic' and lacking in authenticity as fans³ by affirming their origins in (working-class) Manchester, and re-igniting a rivalry with neighbours Manchester City. This process, at times nostalgic for a pre-Premiership form of football, problematically stressed the importance of 'authentic' notions of football and attacked the 'television-driven', 'commercialized' form of the game.

This linked directly to opposition to the development of the club as a global leisure brand and to successive Plc Chief Executives, Peter Kenyon and David Gill, whose strategy was to 'monetise the fan base' and 'turn fans into customers'.⁴ Within this we can see a revitalized, localized cultural 'resistance' becoming a resistance to forces of international capital, the most recent form of which came with the Glazer takeover.⁵ This opposition also stood in contrast to the broader direction of the game's development, in particular its symbiotic relationship with media capital and the more recent inward investment of international capital into English football.⁶

Although unique in this context – something which contrasts to previous 'fan movements'⁷ – the broad and varied opposition of Manchester United supporters ultimately failed in stopping Glazer's takeover.⁸ Thus, whilst both of the forces outlined above fed the opposition to Glazer and later helped shape the characteristics of FC United, the fragility of oppositional fan communities was exposed under the weight of the corporate takeover of the club. These fluctuations and different responses emphasize the fluid, temporary and conflictual nature of football supporter communities and the problematic use of the term. The emergence and persistence of FC United however, which one critic claimed 'won't last until Christmas', also suggests the contrasting sustainability and regenerative resilience of them.

Although the possibility of forming a 'breakaway' club was initially mooted in 1998/99, FC United was first publicly proposed in United fanzine, *Red Issue*, in February 2005. During the Glazer takeover, in May and June, a series of public meetings were held for Manchester United fans which led directly to the founding Extraordinary General Meeting of FCUM on 5 July 2005.

Within these discussions, various references were made to the notion of 'community'. Supporters talked of the need to 'keep the community together' referring to groups of fans who had followed the club home and away over the preceding years, essentially match day communities. People referred to the struggles that had been fought against the Plc and BSkyB and the need to carry that on through FC United, by the more politicized fans who had among themselves developed a sense of collective community during the campaign. There were also claims that the Glazers had taken a club which, despite all the rhetoric and stereotypes maintained a strong fan base in Manchester, away from its 'local communities' and that 'local fans' would be further 'priced out' (a suggestion which perhaps failed to take into account the regenerated and gentrified city).

Two other factors are important to note about this stage of developments. One, that the issue of pricing local fans out sat alongside long-standing complaints about the 'commercialization' of English football, the deterioration of the match-day experience, particularly at Old Trafford, and the antagonism many local fans felt from the 'bag carriers', 'Johnny Come Latelys' or 'new fans' that they felt were displacing them.⁹ For these fans the Glazer takeover was a 'tipping point' in a gradual process of alienation from the top flight of the modern game.

Second, the public meetings and pronouncements by fans were dripping in unashamed socialist symbolism. At the meeting at which fans decided to pursue the FC project, in late May 2005, a huge flag hung behind the members of the FCUM Steering committee on stage reading: ‘Hasta La Victoria Siempre’.¹⁰ T-shirts to help fund raise for the new project were already on sale, declaring in 1970s style, stencilled type-face around a clenched red fist: ‘FC United: Our Club, Our Rules’. This, above all, is the symbolic motto for fans of the club and epitomizes a collective *political* belief in how football should be governed and owned, something which we return to in more detail later.

‘FCUM – Judas Scum’: fragility and conflict in fan communities

Of course, sentiments such as those above were not shared by all, or even the vast majority of Manchester United fans, local or otherwise, in the light of the Glazer takeover. If the formation of FCUM was the result of an ‘atomized football environment’ (see below), this atomization was explicit in terms of the division which cut across Manchester United fan communities as the club was formed. The politically symbolic nature of the fans’ communities and expressions that we discuss below must also be recognized, as with all communities, as defining ‘the other’. In this communities are exclusive as well as inclusive, and it is some of those that have not ‘joined’ FCUM that demonstrate the limits, fragility and problematic nature of thinking of fan ‘communities’.

For all the tangible, long term and deep relationships that may have been formed among groups of FC United supporters that we discuss below, however ‘solid’ some of the manifestations and protestations of ‘community’ are, we do also have to recognize that, taking the unity around the Glazer protests as a starting point, the FC collective represents a *choice* and a minority one at that. Faced with the Glazer takeover fans had a number of options with the following polarities:

- Boycotting MUFC and either supporting FCUM or not attending any football versus remaining as before, attending Manchester United matches regularly.
- ‘FC loyalists’ only attending FC United versus ‘Dualists’ attending both Old Trafford and Gigg Lane
- Disinterest and hostility to the team being successful which would bolster the Glazer regime versus
- Supporting Manchester United by watching on television and not giving ‘one penny’ to Glazer

These divisions have rumbled on through the FC fan communities since the club’s formation. From the outset – at those meetings held in Manchester’s Methodist Hall – the club sought to portray FC United as a ‘broad church’ to which a broad spectrum of Manchester United fans and local communities would be welcomed. Officials were careful not to be drawn on calling for those still attending Old Trafford to give it up and come over to FC; and many fans worked hard to promote unity across this division.

However, some of those still attending Old Trafford have been particularly antagonistic to FCUM and its supporters. Particularly centred around some of the club’s hooligan elements (also some of its most hardcore *local* fans), opposition to FC United was characterized by accusations of ‘deserting’ Manchester United, of ‘disloyalty’ and even wild accusations of ‘profiteering’. One character, a leading figure in the ‘Men in Black’ hooligan grouping,¹¹ even went as far as to hand out leaflets urging supporters to give up FC United – albeit on the one day which saw the club’s record attendance of 6,028 on the last day of the 2005/06 season. At one moody FCUM match in Salford in 2006/07, two Manchester United fans ran onto the pitch with a banner reading, ‘FCUM – Judas Scum’.

From the very formation of the club there was widespread debate with at times very acrimonious discussions in pubs, between friends and family and on internet message boards. FCUM was for some itself the ‘splitting’ of a formerly united fan community; whilst for FC fans, the failure of others to uphold the ‘no customers, no profits’ and ‘not for sale’ position of the anti-Glazer campaign was itself a betrayal, some describing those that carried on at Old Trafford as ‘Vichy reds’.

So as well as FC United’s fan communities being understood as based on *gemeinschaft*, face-to-face relationships, themselves a rebirth of community from the atomization of the Glazer take-over; we also have to recognize that these community formations embody both division and unity, inclusion and exclusion, and the personal, cultural, economic and politically motivated choices of individuals which are geared toward collective, political action and community formation. What is certain is that these fluid ‘communities’ of fans at FC United and Manchester United remain intensely contested.

‘Real’ and ‘liquid’ fan communities

‘See you at the match’: geographical, match-day and face-to-face communities

As we have argued elsewhere in this volume, there are a number of ‘common sense’ assumptions made about football clubs and the representative role they play for particular geographical communities. Historians such as Holt, Mason and Russell¹² have highlighted the roots of this in the key role football clubs played in creating a sense of common identity for particular geographical areas in the UK in the midst of rapid late nineteenth-century industrialization. Most clubs, through their name, nickname, badge, fan songs and in some cases ground location, to varying degrees still reflect those origins in one way or another.

In some ways the call to ‘keep the community together’ in the formation of FCUM was an appeal to this notion. It was a concern with the locally-based, match going community of Manchester United fans that are referred to in King and elsewhere.¹³ This ‘community’, which in some ways had been bound tighter during the campaign against Glazer – a process Delanty refers to as ‘community as action’¹⁴ – was partly based on notions of what ‘authentic’ football consumption meant to them and the superiority of consuming it ‘live’ at the match – the ‘you don’t know unless you go’ philosophy of some fans.

The supporters who ‘left’ Old Trafford and now follow FC United did not decide to simply gather in pubs to watch Manchester United, although of course many fans do just that, creating communal atmospheres I refer to elsewhere.¹⁵ That would have satisfied the boycott of the Glazer regime and an ability to keep supporting ‘United’, but instead they decided to form a new club ‘in the image that we wanted Manchester United to be’. This was based around their notions of maintaining their match day experience with their friends and families and creating a ‘spectacle’ around which these communities could continue; as well as propagating a political position about how football clubs should be run. It was in part, a desire to recreate the face-to-face local communities that such geographically based understandings of football communities embody.

Indeed, notions of locality were centrally important to the identity of the club and it has maintained a desire to be locally focused. However, for a club which is based in Manchester, plays its games in Bury and has a fan base that is spread across Greater Manchester (with a handful much farther a field), this is problematic to say the least. The ‘nomadic’ existence of FC United will continue until it secures its own ground when it will be presented with the issue of creating new connections with long-standing residential local communities.

There have been a number of protracted debates in a variety of contexts (at the match, on internet forums, in pre- and post-match drinking sessions, at members’ general meetings, at the Junior Supporters Group) about where FC United should target as its ‘home’. Frequently these

are very subjective to the individual concerned, but it will present a fascinating process when the club does attempt to lay roots in one particular locality. It will be a relatively unique situation in which a pre-existing fan community that has been, to some extent maintained, to some extent re-born with a new identity, moving into an established area with its own traditions, communities and allegiances. The implications that has for understandings of football clubs representing geographically based communities remains to be seen.

Perhaps more pertinent to FC United's formation is the discussion around Giulianotti's view that football clubs can be understood in terms of providing 'pre-modern' forms of local community bonding:

According to this line of thinking, football clubs developed links with communities because they helped to sustain the close, face-to-face, geographic, affective communities that were under threat during modernity. To put it another way, they helped to preserve a version of Tönnies' [1974] pre-modern *Gemeinschaft* emotional community bonds amongst people.¹⁶

As we have seen above, at the very formation of the club, fans talked of the need to 'keep the community together', referring to the shared sense of belonging of match going Manchester United fans and some of those involved in the campaign against Glazer. Faced with the absence, due to refusing to attend Old Trafford, of the only gathering point most fans have – the match – many of those behind FC United felt that they were providing an event, a location, a match day, around which the micro communities of supporters could coalesce. This was about a face-to-face relationship with each other that only attained any sustained meaning around football matches. We have seen how Giulianotti and others talk of an atomized urban environment creating the need for opportunities for people to form collective bonds in the late nineteenth century. For these fans it was the atomized *football* environment of the take-over of Old Trafford that was creating the need for a new club; but in some ways the instrumental nature of the process remains similar.

'This thing of ours': liquid communities?

As outlined elsewhere in this section of this volume, theorists such as Cohen, Delanty and Bauman have contended that it is a mistake to regard communities as uniform, static or singular. For Bauman, although in contemporary society 'community' has been a convenient, warm, catch-all for a 'lament to modern times and as an appeal to a better future',¹⁷ to regard communities as meaning anything substantial is wrong. Bauman goes on to argue that trying to understand communities as solid, meaningful and based on face-to-face relationships of some depth is a mistake, referring to ad hoc or 'cloakroom' communities, temporary in nature, shallow in form. The *choice* that Manchester United fans made to form FC United is perhaps an example of what Bauman would term a 'cloakroom community' in a 'liquid modernity'.

Certainly, observing FC United fans around match days supports the thesis that the club has provided a location for the sustenance of fan communities, the contingency around which they might form. Fans have for instance formed their own, overlapping groupings around travel – with particular groups meeting up in Manchester city centre pubs and travelling on the tram to the ground the club uses for home matches, Gigg Lane in Bury; or travelling together from Prestwich in a minibus now bedecked with the club's name; or on the self-styled 'boogie bus' which some supporters organize for away games.

Occasions such as key away dates in the season's calendar provide opportunities for the reaffirmation of match day communities of fans. FC United's first season threw up an attractive fixture against Blackpool Mechanics to be played at Blackpool FC's ground. Dubbed the club's first 'Euro away' by the 5,000 supporters who made the trip, it cemented many face-to-face relationships of groups still falling and reforming out of the boycott of Old Trafford.¹⁸

Certain pubs have become the location for the maintenance and creation of both old and new microcosms of fan communities. The Swan and Cemetery on Manchester Road was a favourite FC United pub in the early days and some groups of supporters still gather there loyally. The team's manager routinely took players to The Swan after matches with the deliberate aim of promoting bonding between fans and players and an attempt to contrast it to the isolation of 'celebrity' players at the top of the game. However, this 'closeness' also served to cement the 'local celebrity' of players and, whilst some clearly felt uncomfortable with this new found status, others revelled in it. This reached its apogee at the end of the first season when, as Winners of the North West Counties League Division Two, the team travelled by open top bus the few hundred yards from Gigg Lane to the pub where thousands of fans celebrated in the streets.

However, this pub location was never 'fixed' or unchallenged as some notions of geographical communities suggest. As fans grew accustomed to the unfamiliar environs of Bury in 2005 and 2006 – which had for many replaced very long standing haunts in Manchester associated with Manchester United match days – new pubs were discovered and there has been a fluidity to the locations for pre- and post-match drinking of different groups of fans. 'The Swan', Waterloo, Pack Horse and Staff Of Life all have vied for the attention of groups of fans and whilst for many it is a case of where it is easiest (or cheapest) to get a drink, for others these pubs are the key to match day rituals of meeting friends, sharing gossip, discussing football and enjoying drunken humour.

Yet even here, divisions are evident between some who refuse to, or can't, watch Manchester United on television, and those that enthusiastically support the team. Furthermore, some fans have been accused of being 'cliques' at away games by deliberately seeking out pubs that have not attracted large numbers of FCUM fans. Again, this is partially pragmatic: less fans means smaller queues, less noise, less attention from authorities, and more chance of establishing a positive relationship with the bar staff and landlord, which could prove invaluable in securing a post match beer. It is also of course part of fans' distinction that King has discussed. This desire of some fans to 'stay under the radar' whilst others 'balloon around' in public (to use local vernacular for excessive displays) reflect different understandings of 'a good match day' which produces different communities of fans that then tend to stick together, particularly around away matches.

These collective expressions and identifications may indeed be very temporary and contingent as Bauman would contend. People who drink together in the same pubs even end up in different parts of the ground during the match. However, it is the very ability to stay together and celebrate as a collective that has been a key attraction for most supporters alienated from the Premier League-era all ticketing which King has described as the 'panoptic isolation of the seat'.¹⁹

Within the 'home' ground of Bury, a playful rivalry has developed between the Manchester Road End (the first popular area for fans to gather) and the end of the Main Stand nearest to them. The Manchester Road End respond to taunts of 'jesters' (a jibe to 'plastic' fans who wear club merchandise) with chants of 'MRE', to which the Main Stand respond with 'we are the Main Stand, we're louder than you' (a claim to authenticity and the importance of vocally supporting the team). Although this suggests different match day communities forming, however playfully, in practice the space that this rivalry occupies is in part the result of the absence of many opposition fans at this level of football. It is also a 'division' that disintegrates in the instance of unifying celebration or backs-to-the-wall support of the team. Nowhere was this more evident than when a relatively small crowd of 1,800 watched their team crash out of the FA Vase to Quorn FC in December 2006.

Although at the start of the game there had been the usual exchanges between the two stands, by extra time, with FC down to nine men, the disparate communities of friends, families, travel, pubs and stands were unified as a supporter community through unending singing and clapping. Notably, it was also about much more than the moment, much more than an event of bonding

that would be soon forgotten as fans returned to their ‘mundanity’: many reflected that it had been a key watershed for the club and its fans, cementing a collective sense of belonging in the struggle of the match – and a performance of (an imagined) community.

It was a game (albeit a defeat, or perhaps especially because it was a defeat in a season of easy wins) at which fans enthused about how they had felt ‘as passionately as I ever did about “big United”’, a game which had ‘the best atmosphere since the 1980s’ and was the ‘coming of age’ for the newly formed fan communities of FC United. Indeed, the sense of belonging that is evident in internet posts, fanzine articles, interviews and conversations suggests aspects of strong community formations, epitomized by the fans’ flag in red, white and black which says simply: ‘This Thing Of Ours’.

So, whilst one has to recognize the temporality, fluidity and multiplicity of fan communities, we also have to recognize the unifying, binding, singular, resilient tendencies within fan groups, and in particular the power of football to generate these more lasting senses of unity.

As we argue in the introduction, Bauman’s articulation that such spectacles are events around which people temporarily unite as communities, which are *ad hoc*, ‘peg’ communities, in which they ‘do not knit themselves into deep reciprocal relationships as a result’²⁰ is inadequate in describing some football fan communities. As with our wider research into Football and its Communities, we can see at FC United both the temporary and ad hoc nature of community, but also the forming of deep and lasting bonds between fans, in which their participation at the club – as supporters, branch members, families, volunteers, helpers, propagandists, even manager and players – has been a structuring part of their lives, many of whom will say the experience has ‘changed them forever’.

In the first two years of the club’s existence, there were at least 300 people regularly volunteering, up to 100 of those regularly on match day. This activity includes: manning the reception and dealing with visiting teams; security; selling draw tickets; writing, editing, designing and selling programmes; selling fan merchandise (at the ‘Mega Stall’ as opposed to Manchester United’s ‘Megastore’); running internet sites and fan forums; organizing meetings; raising sponsorship; working on grant applications; the organization of reserve and under-18 teams; drafting club policies and procedures; producing architect’s drawings and schemes for a new ground; helping the promotion of the club; and helping with coaching and community work and more. It is a vast input of human resources and for many a huge personal commitment that stretches way beyond match day.

In 2007, the club moved to formalize the volunteering structure so that fans who were working for free for the club received some form of accreditation that might be of use to them in their non-football ‘real’ work. However, such participation – this deep commitment in very practical ways – does not include both the additional commitment that it has taken from fans to leave their former club and form FC United; the formation of supporter branches and groups which meet outside of match day; the organization of fund-raising events; nor the ongoing, day to day engagement between fans, the emotional commitment supporters give, and the way in which ‘real’ meaning in their lives is provided through their fandom of FC United.

Even on-line, in internet forums where there is perhaps the greatest possibility to temporarily adopt different characteristics, identities and names, where sociation can be at its most fluid and ‘thin’, there have developed structuring, deep commitments between fans and between fans and the club. Given the atomization of previous, Manchester United match day fan communities, these ‘virtual’ forms of association have produced lasting, meaningful friendships and collective identifications in the ‘real’ world. Crucially, it is the match day that brings the real meaning for fans, the opportunity to do what is being written about, but the internet offers an opportunity to ‘extend’ the match day long into the week. For some, however, the internet becomes a structuring element in their lives, not only in terms of the amount of time spent on fan forums, but even in

the adoption of chat room names in real life. Whilst that is the accepted norm for some supporters, others have disparagingly called those who do this as ‘internet mongs’.

Although of course fan communities at FC United do also ‘dress for the occasion’ and ‘return to their ordinary, mundane and different roles’,²¹ such a level of commitment and structuring of their lives by their decision to support FC United undermines any attempt to dismiss these as lacking in ‘grounding, structuring, deep forms of sociation’ as in Bauman’s cynicism about contemporary communities.

‘Our club our rules’: symbolic communities and political action

The ‘politics’ of FC United is not easily thought of in a conventional way, or as suggesting any sort of homogeneous unity among fans. Indeed, the amount of debate is very high, with a recent club poll on ticket prices generating 25 pages of comment within a day. Rather, such statements represent a symbolic summary of one of the central tenets of FC United, that it is supporter owned and democratically run, around which the various debates rage. ‘Our club, our rules’ was also embodied in the structure and formation of the club, as a supporter-owned, democratic, not-for-profit organization, which was ratified at the EGM in July 2005 and infuses the fan expressions at the club.

Political formations

Fans adopted a legal entity as an Industrial and Provident Society (one of the few mutual forms of ownership possible in English football and still outlawed by the Football League). This enshrined a one-member one-vote governance structure, allowing members to determine the rules of the club as well as policies such as name, badge, shirt design, ticket prices and so on. A ‘Manifesto’ was adopted and incorporated into the club’s rules, which declared:

FC United of Manchester is a new football club founded by disaffected and disenfranchised Manchester United supporters. Our aim is to create a sustainable club for the long term which is owned and democratically run by its members, which is accessible to all the communities of Manchester and one in which they can participate fully ... a football club which addresses the concerns which many Manchester United fans have had over the last decade or more with how the club and football have developed, culminating in the club’s takeover by Malcolm Glazer ... Above all we want to be seen as a good example of how a club can be run in the interests of its members and be of benefit to its local communities. Seven core principles of how the club will operate are set out below, and once agreed by the membership, will be protected by all elected Board members:

- (i) The Board will be democratically elected by its members.
- (ii) Decisions taken by the membership will be decided on a one member, one vote basis.
- (iii) The club will develop strong links with the local community and strive to be accessible to all, discriminating against none.
- (iv) The club will endeavour to make admission prices as affordable as possible, to as wide a constituency as possible.
- (v) The club will encourage young, local participation – playing and supporting – whenever possible.
- (vi) The Board will strive wherever possible to avoid outright commercialism.
- (vii) The club will remain a non-profit organisation.²²

This belief in democracy, mutualism and ‘not-for-profit’ was a counterpoint to the dominant, corporate, consumer-driven football culture. Yet the *Manifesto* also emphasized issues of accessibility, inclusion (particularly of young people), participation (including volunteering), ownership and responsibility. It placed the club’s local context and obligations as a central issue, maintaining a thread about a Mancunian identity which had been a feature of Manchester United

fan expressions. All these concerns have been ‘buzz words’ for New Labour in the last decade, but expressed and executed here very differently indeed.

Songs and stories – the cultural politics of fan expressions

To understand this in the context of FC United, however, also means understanding the individual and collective political project that the club represents and the political-symbolic nature of supporter communities and identities at the club.

As argued elsewhere in this volume, Cohen’s notion of symbolic communities seems particularly relevant to understanding football’s communities. Certainly at FC United it is important to recognize the individual agency of actors – particularly those who took the decision to completely boycott Manchester United – in actively creating and promoting community formations and their different interpretations of them. Even the extent to which FC United represent communities in the locality of Greater Manchester, is something that is actively promoted and ‘performed’, emboldened by rituals and match day symbols.

At home games the average 2,500 crowd stands in the Main Stand and Manchester Road End of Bury’s 10,000 capacity Gigg Lane. The other two empty sides are adorned with flags and banners proclaiming a huge array of associations. These range from geographical ones such as ‘Tameside Reds’, ‘Bury and Prestwich Branch’, ‘Monsall, Innit’; to musical associations ‘FCUM: Punk Football’ (complete with skull and cross bones, a tag promoted by club fanzine and reflecting the ‘DIY’ and rebellious nature of the club’s beginnings) and ‘FCUM: Northern Soul’; to personal ones – ‘Kev Lewis On Tour’ – reflecting the desire for celebrity of some.

These visual representations are enhanced by the adoption of colourful club-related memorabilia, most notably the red, black and white ‘bar scarf’ that thousands carry to the games. This itself is a symbolic gesture loaded with meaning: some supporters of FC United will have spent the previous decade and a half shunning the ‘official’ merchandise at Manchester United, not only for their ‘distinction’ from other fans as King has described,²³ but as a symbol of ‘resistance’ to the ‘commercialization’ of Manchester United and football more broadly. Yet, with the twin desires to both resurrect what are perceived as former modes of consumption in football (standing, singing, drinking, ecstatic display) and helping the club by providing funds, supporters have taken enthusiastically to club merchandise. Indeed, even in this, it is not a ‘passive’ consumption, but one in which fans suggest the merchandise to be produced and at times help design it (the new shirt for the 2007/08 season was voted on in principle by fans, then the design was democratically selected).

Aurally, of course, this performance is enhanced by the songs and singing that are a badge of honour for many FC United fans, some of which we outline below. The manager, Karl Marginson, has described the supporters as adopting a ‘90/90/90 culture’: ‘90% of the fans singing for 90% of the 90 minutes of the match’²⁴ and the at times raucous atmosphere is something that is frequently referred to in newspaper and television reports on the club, as well as by opposition fans.

Symbolic nostalgia for a more ‘traditional’ epoch of football consumption is also evidenced in events such as the hiring of a steam train to take fans to an away game at Ramsbottom – the ‘Rammy Rattler’ as it became known. In this case, as you looked down the platform from the Victorian railway bridge at the Ramsbottom station toward hundreds of fans disembarking into this Lancashire mill town, through the smoke with bar scarves waving and the cacophony of ancient football rattles, you could be forgiven for needing to check that it was in fact the twenty-first century. Yet the key point about this was that it was not a re-enactment, like the Sealed Knot battle recreations, of a past event, it was not ‘fake’, but a contemporary event. For many fans it was realizing – through a day long drinking session, chaotic standing conditions behind the goal,

match-long singing, and celebrating winning promotion – a mode of supporting football that has been outlawed in much of the higher levels of the English game. Yet, it *was* also deliberately nostalgic and as such performative – something rudely hammered home as fans woke, wearily to the modern world the next day.

Within this process we can see the active pursuit by fans of the ‘liminal’ moments that Turner describes and which we referred to in the Introduction to this volume. These are the “‘between” moments such as carnivals, rites of passage and rituals in which normality is suspended²⁵ and the role they play, according to Turner, in the symbolic renewal of collective identity. Days such as the ‘Rammy Rattler’ may be ‘out of time’ in more ways than one, but it also produced ‘intense group bonding and feelings of associated community’²⁶ that last far beyond the day itself.

These events are themselves not uncontested. The tendency of some fans to ‘go too far’, get too drunk (indeed some have bemoaned the ‘drinking culture’ of FC fans) and even get involved in conflict, for some undermines the ‘family’ community atmosphere they wish to promote. The boisterous fandom has brought the unwanted attentions of fans of much larger clubs which, on occasion, has resulted in violence. Such was the case when Stoke City fans attacked FC United supporters at their game in Newcastle Under Lyne, only to be met with an equally robust response as well as a police helicopter, possibly for the first time at a ‘Step 5’ English non-league match. These events, combined with the size of crowd and reputation of some of the fans from their days at Manchester United (whether key figures in United’s ‘firm’ or others’ involvement in the at times illegal activities of the anti-Glazer protests) has meant police restrictions. Games have been moved due to safety concerns, some matches have been policed by as many officers as you would normally expect at a Premier League match, and pubs have at times been closed on match day disrupting match day rituals.

Yet even here, some fans have attempted to ‘police themselves’, chanting against anyone who invades the playing area because of the fines the club (which they own) might receive; holding back others who might be going too far; and recognizing, to some extent at least, a collective responsibility for the club’s image. This represents a self-policing in the fan communities, and, whilst the boundaries are drawn very wide indeed, it is one which can exclude on the grounds of acceptable behaviour.

Nowhere are the radical tendencies of FC United more wilfully communicated than through the fans’ songs which can confront the very origins of the club, whilst at the same time taking a sideswipe at those who failed to leave Old Trafford:

Glazer wherever you may be
You bought Old Trafford but you can’t buy me
I sang ‘Not For Sale’ and I meant just that
You can’t buy me you greedy twat

This is how it feels to be FC
This is how it feels to come home
This is how it feels when you don’t sell your ass to a gnome

One ‘pub’ song (too long for the terraces), borrows from Irish republicanism.²⁷ This is the only mention of the Manchester Education Committee (which undertook illegal direct action against the takeover²⁸) in FC United songs. It also references Glazer’s debt, the long-standing opposition to the drift to commercial revolution under former Chief Executive Martin Edwards at United and the ‘127’ years of ‘existence’ from 1878 to 2005.

Go on home Malcolm Glazer, go on home
Have you got no fucking home of your own
For 127 years, we fought you and your peers

And we'll fight you for 127 more.
 If you stay Malcolm Glazer you will see
 You will never defeat the MEC
 You can take your fucking debt
 And your Edwards Cheshire set
 And go on home Malcolm Glazer go on home.

There are also reactions to the effects of television on football – especially kick off times being moved from the traditional 3pm Saturday slot – and a rejection of contemporary forms of consumption. However, in others, the division within fan communities is also expressed. This last song also expresses the desire among many FC United supporters to maintain a sense of unity with those that still watch Manchester United – two ‘Uniteds’ but one ‘soul’. So it is particularly through the songs of the fans where the collective expression of cultural politics is perhaps strongest, a symbolic and radical community.

When FC United go out to play,
 It's 3 o'clock on a Saturday,
 We don't work for Sky Sports anymore²⁹

Won't pay for Glazer
 Or work for Sky
 Still sing 'City's gonna die'
 Two United's but the soul is one
 As the Busby Babes carry on.

Political communities

The desire for a ‘return’ to a different form of football consumption is a cultural expression of a collective *political* will and desire to affect social change. Delanty has argued that a ‘communitarian’ understanding of community is essentially conservative and ‘reflects a very anti-political view of community’.³⁰ He seeks to address ‘the radical dimension of community as expressed in protest, in the quest for an alternative society or the construction of collective identities in social movements’ which seem particularly pertinent to a consideration of supporters communities at FC United.

In this Delanty argues that ‘community as dissent or “communities of resistance” are essentially communicative and in this they contrast with the emphasis on the symbolic’ as particularly articulated in communitarianism. He says that research on new social movements suggests:

Community is not a static notion, but is defined in the achieving of it. In this sense, then, community has a cognitive function in imagining and instituting a new kind of society ... this radical impulse has always been present in the idea of community which has often been a quest for a new age. However, what is different about the idea of community implicit in the politics of new social movements is that the search for an alternative society is connected with everyday life and the mobilisation of the resources of the life world ... a culturally radical concept of community comes into play in re-shaping the political field.³¹

This seems particularly relevant to a football club such as FC United which, unlike almost any other in the country, was ‘wilfully constructed’ around a political belief of how football should be organized, governed, owned and consumed through ‘the construction of discourses of meaning’.³² Its stated ambition of wanting to influence and change the way the game is run may not be at the forefront of everyone’s mind at the moments of ecstatic celebration (and there may be as many views on how this is to be achieved), but it runs deeply through the fan culture.

Concluding comment

The formation of FC United of Manchester offers a chance to consider fan communities in unique circumstances. These are also ones which emphasize the fluid, changing, contested nature of community at the same time as the unified, rooted, structuring tendencies we can find in fan communities. The character of the club and its fans is inherently 'political' and oppositional, whilst at the same time providing opportunities for ecstatic consumption and celebration, as well as geographical representation.

The identity of the club and the expressions of its supporters embody symbolic representations and rituals around which FC United fan communities coalesce, but within the politics of football they are highly charged ones. In this, we can move toward an understanding in which different theoretical positions on community can be usefully employed with varying relevance to different aspects.

But the over-riding conclusion has to be that any understanding of community cannot be as a fixed, static, unified or necessarily beneficial entity. The story of FC United has to include an understanding of community as fluid and contested as well as 'real', robust and rooted. In this, it is the overt aim of club, members and fans to use the formation of the club for a political purpose within football that not only binds the many disparate views and approaches within the fan base, but also gives life to its multiplicity. The fascinating question going forward will be whether these binding political principles which have underpinned the creation of FC United and the character of its fan communities can be maintained as the club progresses and meets greater commercial, and footballing, pressures?

Notes

1. Brown and Walsh, *Not for Sale*; although disputed in Bose, *Manchester Disunited*.
2. Football Governance Conference, February 1999, Clore Management Centre, Birkbeck College, University of London. Hamil, Michie and Oughton, *Game of Two Halves*; Conn, *The Football Business*; <http://www.supporters-direct.org/>; see Hamil *et al.* *Changing Face of Football*.
3. Brown, "'Manchester IS Red'"; for a discussion about authenticity in fandom see Crabbe and Brown, "'You're not Welcome Anymore'".
4. Interviews with Peter Kenyon and David Gill, 2001.
5. For further detail on this and fan resistance to it, see Brown, "'Not For Sale'".
6. Haynes and Boyle, *Power Play*; Bose, *Manchester Disunited*; Brown and Walsh, *Not For Sale*; Conn, 'Owners are Treating English Clubs'.
7. Brown, 'United We Stand'; Nash, 'English Football Fan Groups'.
8. Andrews, *Manchester United*; Brown, "'Not For Sale'". See also, Bose, *Manchester Disunited*.
9. See King, *End of the Terraces*.
10. 'Hasta la victoria siempre' was the signoff used by Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara in the last letter he wrote to Fidel Castro. It translates as 'Forever, Until Victory' or in other words, 'Keep fighting until victory'.
11. O'Neil, *Red Army General*; O'Neil, *Men in Black*.
12. Holt, *Sport and the British*; Mason, *Sport in Britain*; Russell, *Football and the English*.
13. King, *End of the Terraces*; Brown, "'Manchester IS Red'".
14. Delanty, *Community*, 123.
15. Crabbe and Brown, "'You're not Welcome Anymore'".
16. Brown, Crabbe and Mellor, 'Introduction', this volume, 304.
17. Brown, Crabbe and Mellor, *Football and its Communities*, 160.
18. Crabbe *et al.*, *Football*, 76.
19. King, *End of the Terraces*, 161.
20. Brown, Crabbe and Mellor, 'Introduction', this issue, 308.
21. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 200.
22. FC United of Manchester, 'Manifesto', <http://www.fc-utd.co.uk/manifesto.php>
23. King, *End of Terraces*, 155.
24. Marginson, speech to FC United of Manchester general meeting, March 2006.

25. Delanty, *Community*, 44.
26. Brown Crabbe and Mellor, 'Introduction', this volume, 307.
27. Adapted from an IRA 'rebel' song 'Go on home British soldiers'.
28. Brown, "'Not For Sale'?".
29. To the tune of 'Spirit in the Sky'.
30. Delanty, *Community*, 112.
31. *Ibid.*, 124.
32. *Ibid.*, 130.

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