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'Protect Me From What I Want': Football Fandom, Celebrity Cultures and 'New' Football in England

John Williams

This essay reconsiders aspects of the cultural and commercial 'reinvention' of English football since the late 1980s. It examines cultural readings of the sport, changes in fandom and in the regulation of fans, both internationally and in domestic contexts, and also the rise of 'new' football in the guise, since 1992, of the television-funded FA Premier League. It also looks at ways in which late-modern football and 'celebrity' culture have become inextricably entwined in England in recent years. The essay then moves on to consider critically a number of alleged 'new' crises in the English game, which revolve around the emergence of new inequalities, a connected relative demise in uncertainty of outcome in football in the wake of a strong new European club market for the sport, and challenges to 'traditional' modernist sporting ties of place and kinship. The essay concludes by examining issues of English football and social exclusion and new ways of framing aspects of the current 'crises'.

This essay intends to re-examine some aspects of what might be called the economic and cultural 'reinvention' of professional football – or soccer – in England over the past 20 years. To do this I want to revisit Nick Hornby's famous book about English football fandom, *Fever Pitch*, published in 1992. I then want to discuss a number of recent, connected developments in the English game, including those around support for the national team, but especially the rise of what might be called 'new' football in England: a heavily marketized, television-driven, version of the sport.[1] Next I return to look at some interventions and events in the heated debate in England about the present 'condition' of professional football. I will conclude, finally, with some comments about English football and social exclusion and observations about the current state of the game.

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***Fever Pitch* and English Football Fandom**

In 1992, Arsenal football fan and later best-selling novelist, Nick Hornby, published *Fever Pitch*, a heartfelt *homage* for his own active support, often in difficult times, for Arsenal Football Club.[2] Its impact was enormous. It is, arguably, the most important and influential autobiographical account of the experience of sports fandom yet written in English. *Fever Pitch* was perhaps especially convincing on the nature and contradictions of English suburban masculinities, and on the linkage of youthful miseries and the collective emotional investment involved in ‘being’ a committed football fan in England in the football hooligan-troubled 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the book brilliantly captures the raw and visceral attractions of football fandom in England at this time, as well as the intellectually troubling intensity, and even the psychic pain, involved in such devotion. It is, essentially, a complex and fully reflexive celebration of the rituals and sacrifices involved in male football support at a very specific moment in the development of the English game. Its cerebral dissection of the construction – partially through sport – of English class and gender relations and identities was also seminal, especially for a popular text. The book later spawned a mediocre, but widely watched, feature film (starring Colin Firth as Hornby) and also many pale written imitators.[3]

Although football hooliganism has a very long history in the English game, troublesome football fans, as Hornby confirms, had especially dogged modern English football pretty much for an entire, uninterrupted 25-year period from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s. Even in 1992 the Cambridge University-educated but reasonably streetwise Hornby still had cause to be ‘worried about’ and to say that he even occasionally ‘despised’ these fighting men at English football. Those fans, in fact, ‘who have neither the need nor the desire to get a perspective on their own aggression’.[4] However, Hornby – the product of a divorced marriage and with a mainly ‘absent’ father – also agreed that, transparently, part of his own ‘obsession’ with Arsenal football club at that time was its important role, ‘as a quick way to fill a previously empty trolley in the Masculinity Supermarket’.[5] His was, undoubtedly, the same story for many other, slightly confused, and dislocated young suburban Englishmen at the time – and since.

By the time *Fever Pitch* was published, the Hillsborough Stadium disaster in Sheffield in 1989 – in which 96 Liverpool fans died after police mismanagement of fans in a stadium that had been dangerously primed to control hooliganism – had already set in motion a comprehensive programme of modernization of English football stadia.[6] This involved, crucially, the forced disappearance of the largely working-class-populated standing football terraces at major grounds in England of the sort that offered Hornby his early football grounding, and whose description runs through *Fever Pitch*. A number of entirely new major football stadia have since been built in England, and others – at Arsenal, Liverpool and already at Coventry City – will follow.

Hornby, himself, certainly approved of the new programme of stadium development, arguing that the English game had to move on – to modernize – following the tragic events of Sheffield in 1989. *Fever Pitch* was argued to have been central to processes of gentrification in English football, especially when this stadium

modernization programme also invoked recruiting more ‘family supporters’ to the game and an associated new Foucauldian emphasis on in-ground CCTV football crowd surveillance and a measurable intensification of the formal and informal regulation of the English football crowd. Above all, following Hillsborough, ‘safety’ was to become the sometimes-suffocating governing rubric for the management of football stadium behaviour in the new era in England.[7] A new national body for stadium regulation, the *Football Licensing Authority*, was soon established in Britain, and it quickly developed stringent guidelines aimed at monitoring stadium development, managing and disciplining football crowds, and promoting crowd safety. Calls from some ‘traditional’ football fans in England for the return of standing terraces have since fallen on deaf ears, and the new programmes of ‘modernization’ have certainly brought profound changes to the general climate inside English football stadiums, if not always to the wider manifestations of fan behaviour. These traditionally chaotic and carnivalesque places and spaces – which sometimes also harboured fan violence – suddenly became much more peaceful, less spontaneous: certainly more ordered. Meanwhile, English football developed a strangely ‘double-headed’ identity with respect to media images and fan behaviour. A good example is provided by the typically bifurcated local news coverage of the Leicester City v Portsmouth Premiership match of 8 May 2004. The *Leicester Mercury* (10 May 2004) reported on a 94-year-old female City fan, who was photographed attending her first football match in 30 years in the new ‘post-hooligan’ Walkers Stadium, which she describes as having a ‘wonderful atmosphere’. Elsewhere, the *Mercury* covered riotous after-match scenes in the Leicester city centre, as police struggled to quell fights between rival hooligan gangs, conflict that resulted in two fan stabbings.

Some fans now claimed that English stadiums were far *too* peaceful, too regimented, and too much aimed at attracting high-spending consumers. Institutionally ‘contentless’ football clubs, increasingly ciphers for television sport,[8] were now argued to be aiming at staging dramatic spectacles in increasingly boring and bland ‘achievement spaces of sport’.[9] Manchester United’s abrasive midfielder player, Roy Keane, even wondered aloud, in 2000, about the deathly silence that emanated from the corpulent and corporate ‘prawn sandwich eaters’ in the expensive sponsors’ seats at United’s Old Trafford stadium. Keane alleged that these freeloaders ‘can’t even spell football, never mind understand it’.[10] Questions began to be asked more widely in the new football era in England about the prized new ‘customers’ attracted to the sport, usually in by now familiar, if rather unhelpful, binaries:[11] were these people real, ‘authentic’ sports fans; or were they merely consumers, ersatz and conditional glossy hangers-on?[12]

The ‘New’ England and National Football Identities

If the ‘Hornby effect’, declining stadium hooliganism and stadium modernization in England all played their part in the cultural transformation of domestic English soccer, other events from the early 1990s also contributed to the wider cultural reconstruction of the English game. Some of these focused around media coverage

and the public construction and consumption of the England national team and its followers and were revealed, initially, in the sumptuous TV sporting theatricality of the World Cup finals held in Italy in 1990. Here, the England team and its fans, written off as deriving from a culture that was 'all played out',[13] instead captured the English sporting imagination by succumbing, undeservedly and heroically, to the Germans only in a semi-final penalty shoot-out in Turin. Coverage of Italia 90, especially for British television viewers, offered a seductive *bricolage* of theatrical Pavorotti vistas and arias, images of unimagined – at that time – space-age Italian football stadia, and also lovingly framed shots of honed, athletic sporting bodies. Such images even contested those, by now depressingly familiar ones, of pre-set TV news coverage of often English-inspired, beer-bellied, fan violence, during the early weeks in Italy.[14]

But revealed here, too, was a sympathetically raw and very public version of 'new man' English sporting patriotism, one to challenge – if not without its own complexities – aspects of those versions of national identity and masculinity typically expressed via English hooligan fan excesses: it was signified, of course, by the televised tears shed by England's players on their defeat in Turin. The edgy, new working-class football playmaker, Paul Gascoigne, was central here: here was an audacious and emotionally fragile man-child, the English North East's troubled and fully tabloided equivalent of the *pivo* Argentinian match inventor, the great but deeply flawed Diego Maradona. Gascoigne also matched well Chas Critcher's much more familiar evocation of the dislocated, vulnerable and ultimately doomed postmodern English 'superstar' footballer.[15]

This cultural epiphany for the England national football team had actually begun earlier in 1990 when the almost impossibly fashionable Manchester-based rock band New Order marked aspects of what was later to become English football's new 'cool Britannia' persona by recording, with England's players, the official England tournament song. This unprecedentedly hip music/football synergy was actually central to the later scoping and presentation of the successful Football Association marketing and media campaign at the European Football Championship finals held in England in 1996, even if its supposedly inclusive message about 'Football coming home' was actually delivered via thematic, excluding and racialized sporting and cultural texts about white English heritage, sport and nation.[16]

In the 1990s, the English FA did manage to launch a non-patronizing (for once) marketing and media campaign, aimed at attracting more girls and young women to football in England as both players and fans. Participation levels in adult and junior female football in England have rocketed in the past decade, although the elite levels of the English female game are still poorly supported and remain badly resourced.[17] All these influences were probably instrumental in building on the new markets for football in England, perhaps especially in its recruitment of new female fans and young, grassroots, female players. Importantly, too, a range of differentially emblematic international football/celebrity, iconic heroes followed, and captured the national (male *and* female) English imagination in international football tournaments in the 1990s and beyond. These included:

- In Euro 96 in England, the yeoman Englishman Alan Shearer, a paradigmatic and mythologized 'traditional' English centre-forward, though the home nation, once more, fell to the Germans on penalties in the semi-finals;
- In World Cup 1998, Michael Owen's emergence in France as a very different type of late-modern English football sporting hero: a scrubbed, highly marketized, boy-next-door, goal-scoring teenager and emphatically national football product;
- In the World Cup finals in Japan and Korea in 2002, a rehabilitated David Beckham's sheer cultural and commercial chutzpah and media global dominance;
- And in Portugal in 2004, Wayne Rooney's remarkable edgy and naive heroics for England at the European Football Championships, echoing aspects of Gascoigne's earlier talented, but troubled, persona.

The cultural commentator Martin Jacques has argued that the growth in the size and scope in sports *spectatorship* in Britain in the 1990s was strongly linked to the perceived new gender and class 'meritocracy' of late-modern sport, as well as to its trans-national global cosmopolitanism. This was in contrast, of course, to the aggressive and near-exclusively masculinist nationalisms of its Victorian and modern forebears.[18] One small sign of this new cultural and sporting aesthetic, and of the new gender dynamics of consumption around global sport today, is that now, during major international football championships, mainstream British department stores positively heave with young women's clothes and products that ape or 'play back' the design of national football uniforms. Recently, too, the ubiquitous and androgynous England football captain and global icon, David Beckham, even became the first-ever male cover of the British edition of the mainstream women's magazine *Marie Claire*. [19]

These wider shifts – and with Beckham now established as the England football captain – opened up real possibilities of a new sense of national community and even of a new national sporting identity for English football, one sculpted beyond and outside older, aggressive England hooligan fan motifs – though some England fans had still been drawn into serious disturbances in Marseilles during World Cup 1998, and the British media was still central to the shaping of wider perceptions of the 'condition' of England fandom. [20] Following a largely peaceful visit by England to Japan in 2002, in Portugal in 2004 'team England' even seemed to have recruited travelling British *Asian* football fans, Crosses of St George at hand, to its cause. [21] This new, paradoxically, disciplinary *and* more inclusive, sporting 'Englishness' has subsequently been worked through and solidified by the England supporters' group *englandfans*, led by England follower and academic, Mark Perryman. [22]

'Protect Me From What I Want': The Rise of the FA Premier League

Two years after Italia 90, and in the same year *Fever Pitch* was published (1992), the new FA Premier League was launched in England. It was the first major sports league in Europe to be developed by, and for, television, in this case the then struggling and newly merged Rupert Murdoch-controlled satellite TV channel BSkyB. [23] In the wake of the enormous hike in TV income for English football brought by the new relationship with

BSkyB, the elite members of the league, led by a new breed of football entrepreneurs, adopted fashionable neo-Liberal, market principles. They, thus, abruptly ditched their historic and constraining cross-subsidy economic associations with the core 72 smaller English professional clubs.[24] The economic chasm this shift later opened up between the elite and the rest of the professional football clubs has become *the* major structural feature of the professional game in England in the new century.[25]

The new league would itself soon, self-consciously, aim to ‘gentrify’ its active following, primarily by:

- Exploiting the image-management potential of the new, exclusive, live TV coverage, which was offered on subscription-only channels;
- Adopting a new, American-influenced, approach to marketing sport, using merchandising, directed mailshots, and new technologies, including the Internet and complex computer databases;
- Excluding unwanted non-consumers and also troublesome groups of younger fans, both by price and by restricted access to tickets. By 2004, up to £40 for a standard match ticket at some grounds was becoming more common in the Premier League. This is more than four times the minimum price at some German and Italian grounds, for example;
- Embracing the new stadium regulation regimes in England. By 2004 the familiar, boisterous and self-regulating stadium ‘ends’ or ‘curvas’, dominated by younger fans and still common in most stadiums of continental Europe, had all but disappeared in England. English club fans were now routinely ejected from top stadia for persistent swearing or else for repeatedly standing in seated areas.

Today, the English Premier League is, probably, the most commercially successful football venture of its type in the world. It has also been held up by Prime Minister Tony Blair as a modernization model for the rest of British industry to follow. It is nothing short, in fact, according to its supporters, of a ‘bust to boom’ economic, global entertainment miracle. Premier League clubs now play to the largest collective aggregate attendances in Europe – challenged only by the German *Bundesliga* – and, routinely, to an average of well over 90 per cent stadium occupancy, well above German figures.[26] The league has a new series of television deals from 2004 worth £1.6 billion – the core deals remain with BSkyB – and, despite interventions by the EU, seems set to extend these links, especially as BSkyB is substantially reliant on live Premiership football for its 7.4 million subscribers and its own long-term survival. The Premier League’s unusual commitment to collective television deals, coupled with problems with new technologies, the convergence of media systems and with marketing, have also, usefully, slowed individual club/media ambitions in England, compared to the greater individualism shown abroad.[27]

These new relationships between television and football were argued to have *stimulated* live attendance at English matches, rather than provided an easy alternative to it, as originally feared.[28] In addition, the new league was claimed, largely, to have helped ‘solve’ the ‘English’ problem with hooligans and to have curbed overt collective fan racism – though it addressed, much less obviously, racism *inside* the game.[29] It

also boasted rising numbers of female supporters and an expanding recruitment of the much sought after high-spending, 'family' fan.[30] Its successes are promoted as if signalling a return to the democratic and pacified 'sport and mass society' era of the 1950s, but they are actually shaped, of course, by a very new age of sporting relations of directed marketing and consumption.

Premier League clubs' income and merchandising returns now outstrip most European competitors, and the Premiership is watched abroad in over 160 countries, whilst often drawing in groups of foreign supporters to attend its games on costly weekend excursions from the continent. Its major clubs now trawl the world to market their products and they also boast global fan bases: Manchester United, for example, is reported to have 53 million fans worldwide – though we are seldom told how these useful marketing sound-bites for clubs are actually estimated. The English Premier League is also increasingly cosmopolitan on the field as well as off it: in 1992 only 11 foreign (non-British) footballers kicked off in the very first Premier League matches. By 2003, players from 61 countries of origin played in the Premier League.[31]

The proponents and sympathisers of 'new' football in England argue, not without reason, that after the calamitous crisis management of the sport in the 1980s and earlier periods, it has decisively taken responsibility for its own future and now offers a positive new direction. It has moved with prevailing socio-economic trends, and has cleverly positioned itself, in market terms, to widen its appeal and its fan base beyond the cultish limits of its sometimes troublesome, active followings in the 1980s. Cultural and promotional developments around the England national team in the 1990s have generally supported these processes. Premiership crowds in England are now large, and largely pacified and apparently content, and they watch their sport safely and relatively free from hooliganism in modern, well-managed stadiums. The Premier League has reasonably secure television deals in place, global markets, and also has sponsorship and merchandising tie-ins to envy. It is, by any measure, a global, as well as a local, success story: victory, for the English game, has been grabbed in the 1990s – or so it is argued – from the very jaws of defeat. Which raises just one question: why, then, does English football today still *feel* like a sport that is perpetually in crisis?

The Man Who Hated Football

I want to mention, briefly now, a number of signifiers of the alleged new 'crises' in English football: information and messages about them surround us. Firstly, the gloomy twenty-first century literary 'reply' to Nick Hornby's football fan confessions on the cusp of major change for the English game in the early 1990s, is a much darker, more comic, vision of English football for 2004, a factually-based novel by the British sports journalist, *The Observer's* Will Buckley. It is called, uncompromisingly, *The Man Who Hated Football*. [32] Buckley's is a semi-autobiographical account of a dishevelled national British sports journalist who has fallen out of love with the game – and especially with the Premier League and all of its current excesses. Buckley's real target, however, is the celebrity-obsessed culture of new football: which means that the book is also a viscous attack on English football journalists, who, Buckley claims,

are no more these days than unscrupulous public-relations executives, the uncritical 'paid cheerleaders' for their new paymasters, the cash-soaked Premier League (Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, of course, controls both BSkyB and large swathes of the British national press). Buckley recently explained his own wider misgivings about the relationship between 'new' football and the press in England by referring to the 'monomaniacal' British media focus on the Premiership and the seeping of football coverage into almost every aspect of news coverage and popular culture in Britain, so that, 'What used to be an escape activity [football] has become inescapable'.[33]

Buckley's complaints about the media obsession with the Premier League and about the pre-construction of 'news' stories about celebrity footballers and their families, are actually quite widespread in England. The football writer Simon Kuper, for example, had already made the same complaint and sociologist Steve Wagg has pointed recently to the 'ubiquitous, almost paradigmatic nature of the game now: it has become a sea of public discourse in which we all might care to swim'.[34] According to a survey carried out by BBC3 in 2003, David Beckham attracted more national annual press coverage in Britain – over 200,000 sq. cm – than any other celebrity, including the near-worshipped royal Princes, Harry and William. News coverage for Beckham and his wife, taken together, swamps the rest. Beckham was also recently described on the cover of the US magazine *Vanity Fair*, immodestly, as: 'The hottest, coolest athlete on earth'.[35] The value of Beckham's image rights at his new club Real Madrid – his late-modern global *sign* value, if you will[36] – now arguably dwarfs his rather limited, and dwindling, value as a professional footballer.

Following in the wake of global press Beckham mania – China, Japan and South East Asia are currently his preferred media and product markets – the faces of 18-year-old new England football 'sensation' Wayne Rooney and his fiancée Colleen, are plastered over the British tabloid newspapers in 2004. Rooney, now transferred to replace Beckham at Manchester United, is already said to be *contracted* to produce at least five 'news' stories a year to the British national tabloid newspaper, the *Sun*. Manchester United, meanwhile, scoping new markets in the post-Beckham phase, have also moved to sign the 18-year-old Chinese striker Dong Fangzhou, a prospective development that looked to have dubious football merits, but was said to, 'delight United's corporate backers' who were already reportedly eyeing the growing merchandise value of the yellow pound.[37]

As part of this new Premiership/media synergy, a 24-hour national radio news and sport channel in Britain, BBC Radio Five, increasingly strains for any stories about the top English football clubs or the sport's major players. Radio Five also devotes hours of airtime, often on a daily basis, to near-indigestible and repetitive football fan phone-ins, in which manager/coaches and occasionally football chairman – but seldom players – are brutally slated by callers (of more later). This seems a good example of what Umberto Eco calls 'phatic speech', constant contact without any message; or else the 'synthesised' fabrication of media non-communication, identified by the postmodernist Jean Baudrillard.[38] Managing the balance between news and Premiership football coverage in an era when audience profile and reach is vital has become increasingly

problematic on BBC Radio Five, particularly with a taxing 24/7 schedule to fill. Priorities here are often skewed, according to Will Buckley:

In the month after September 11 BBC Radio Five Live cut away from a breaking news story about the possible hijack of a plane to go live to Manchester for a press conference in which David Beckham gave the slightly twitchy audience the benefits of his thoughts on England's chances in a forthcoming World Cup qualifier against Greece ... You don't have to interview too many moderate central defenders before concluding that both of you are wasting your lives. They have nothing to say; you have nothing to ask.[39]

In short, according to Buckley and others, British journalism was now damagingly in thrall to a few top football clubs and to a handful of empty stars: cod personalities and 'celebrities', whose fame is largely self-referential.[40] This 'celebrity' focus in late-modern sport is the product of a wider ideological process, characterized recently by Gerry Whannel as 'vortextuality':

The growth in the range of media outlets, and the vastly increased speed of circulation of information have combined to create the phenomenon of a 'vortex' effect, which I term here 'vortextuality'. The various media constantly feed off each other and, in the era of electronic and digital information exchange, the speed at which this happens has become very rapid.[41]

In November 2003, a respected broadsheet British sports journalist, Paul Wilson, even complained that Premiership football was in danger of becoming 'boring' today, primarily because all of its 'star' players were now crammed onto just a small number of clubs. Other football clubs, it seemed by extension, were simply dull by comparison.[42] Here, local identification, sociability and the importance of place and community ties all, effectively, seem to disappear as justifiable motives for becoming active sports fans at all. What was going on here? We needed a few answers – and perhaps a listen-in to some public debate.

Money and the 'Making' of English Football

While working on this essay I was once listening (5 October 2004) to yet another BBC Radio Five football phone-in programme, a morning version entitled, provocatively, 'Is Money the Making of English Football?' On it, a Premier League football club chief executive, Neil Doncaster, from Norwich City FC, was debating with BBC presenter Victoria Derbyshire, sports journalist Jen O'Neill, David Boyle from Supporters Direct, a national body set up to organize and aid Supporters' Trusts at English clubs – and with many 'ordinary' callers, most of them football fans. The discussion and phone calls follow a by now familiar tack in England. The majority of callers – who are often supporters of smaller English professional clubs – argue that the English game may well have some new impressive gloss, but it is actually going to Hell in a handcart: that money and greed now rule the roost, and that many of the smaller clubs are forced, as a consequence, to live on a shoestring. Indeed, 20 per cent of professional players have been cut by smaller English clubs in the past three years, as these clubs try to manage rising costs against income.[43]

Other callers flood in to agree, pointing, too, to the highly publicized, alleged wild and feckless behaviour of a 'too-much-too-young' generation of top English professional players. (A number of top players in England had been variously accused in tabloid and broadsheet press accounts in 2003 and 2004 of assault, heavy drinking and sexual excess.[44]) These callers also argue that 'true' football fans should support their *local* clubs, not opt for glamorous, distant alternatives, where over-paid young football stars are too often out of touch from fans and also, probably, 'out of control.' Evidence suggests, in fact, that today's generation of young, home-based football players in England are actually *monitored* much more closely by a more predatory media, rather than behave too much differently from earlier football professionals.[45]

But this attack on both the *finances* and *morality* of football today generally follows the route also taken recently by a host of investigative writers, including Tom Bowers in his book *Broken Dreams* (2003), which is an angry, if rather overblown, dissection of the motives and actions of the agents, players and self-seeking capitalists who allegedly run the English game today.[46] Another phone-in caller now argues that the necessity of being in the Premier League – 'where all the money is' – means that few football coaches in England today can easily take the necessary time to build a team for the future. They have, instead, to buy ready-made, often foreign, players: 'He [the coach] needs instant success, otherwise he's out of the door'.

Even Neil Doncaster, the football club chief executive involved in the programme, agrees that too much club thinking today is short term and that money is now too dominant in the sport. He argues that most supporters still follow their clubs for two reasons: 'blood and soil' or, in other words, ties of either family or geography. 'Authentic' football fans cannot simply *choose* their clubs, he argues, and it is 'dangerous' when, as in the USA, rich men can easily buy and sell sports clubs and use them as investments, or as their 'playthings', even moving them to different locations. He probably had two recent *English* football examples in mind.

Firstly, Wimbledon FC *had* recently been bought up and relocated, by global venture capitalists, from South West London to a new town outside the capital, Milton Keynes. Wimbledon FC had no stadium base in London and relatively few active fans, but this dislocation of a football club from its local fan base still threatened the European 'blood and soil' sports heritage and also the deep, historical traditions of the English game. The relocated club (now renamed MK Dons) still seeks a convincing audience in its new home, while resistant fans of the 'old' Wimbledon club have successfully re-launched their own club, AFC Wimbledon, but outside the Football League.

Secondly, Russian billionaire and Sibneft energy company owner Roman Abramovich bought Chelsea FC in July 2003 for £150 million, before destabilising the international football transfer market with his apparently limitless funding for new players for the club in 2003 and 2004. Abramovich is one of 23 Russian entrepreneurs who took advantage of the privatization of Russia's state assets in the mid-1990s and who now own 60 per cent of the Russian economy.[47] Abramovich also invested in soccer club CSKA Moscow and was soon reported to be looking to expand his sporting franchises by planning to import a fully Russian ice hockey team into the North American National Hockey League.[48]

A few more callers now ring into the BBC Radio Five debate, but this time to *defend* 'new' football in England: one describes the Premiership competition as the 'most entertaining league in the world'. Another caller contrasts the comfort and order of the Premiership match experience today with his own recent visit to *Serie A* football in Italy, where fan violence and stadium disorganization still clearly reigns. Another caller argues that those supporters who rail against change and against the new forms of football fandom in England, actually need to wise up, 'sport is business today', he argues, and those sporting luddites who oppose change are stuck in what this caller terms a, 'local, outdated world'.

There is some force to these arguments, of course. Most football fans *are* conservative, and they often *do* react negatively to change. Many fans in England opposed new football stadia, for example, but now there is a tendency to embrace them as a sign of club ambition and strategic investment for the future, though fans do not always welcome the new regimes of regulation and control that now govern new venues. But support for a football club is also about the possibility of a shared, collective rootedness, a sense of stability and meaning in a fast-moving, globalizing world. And debates such as this one on national British radio reveal the very *general* unease about the new inequalities and the recent direction of football in England, despite its obvious and impressive claims to be a commercial and cultural success.

The Life [and Death] of Brian

Towards the end of this radio exchange, women's football journalist Jen O'Neill argues that, in the new globalized economics of the Premier League, the 'ideal of sport is missing'. She means here that 'uncertainty of outcome', one of the defining features of all modern sport, is diminishing in football in England. 'Money controls everything', she says. We know, increasingly from the outset in sport, who *can* win.

On the face of it, this position seems far too deterministic and gloomy: it defines out of court, for example, the aesthetic and 'community' seductions of sport and also its consumption and affective attractions.[49] And, although evidence does suggest a growing predictability in Premiership results,[50] why are football crowds quite so enormous in England today if things are also increasingly dull and predictable on the field? Financial analysts have, indeed, shown that the most accurate predictor of all of the final league table rankings in England today is *wages* paid to players.[51] If read literally in this way, 'new' football can actually be reduced – or so its many critics claim – to a crude type of sporting accountancy.

Another caller now rings in to contribute on a connected point: 'Brian Clough', he says bluntly. 'He was the last great English football manager – before the money ruined it.' Brian Clough, an early retiree through injury as a player, an iconoclast manager, an opposer of formal coaching, and the very antithesis of the sort of new global technocrats who manage top football clubs today, had recently died, aged just 69 years of age, to general mourning in the sport in England. In the 1970s and 1980s, Clough had managed two provincial East Midland English football clubs, Derby County and Nottingham Forest: he won promotion and then League championships with both.

With his all-British team at Forest, from 1977 Clough achieved promotion to the First Division, then the English League title and, astonishingly, *two* European Cups, all within four seasons – though Clough later lasted only 44 days at the larger English club, Leeds United.

Clough was a feared motivator, a self-confessed ‘socialist’ authoritarian, and a man who sometimes punched his own players, and even errant Forest fans.[52] He was also later accused of taking unauthorised transfer payments, and was frequently at odds with the game’s Establishment, especially the blazered men from The FA.[53] But Clough could judge football players and, with his management partner Peter Taylor, he frequently got the best out of those who had already been rejected elsewhere. Clough’s was an era, of course, in which the global market for footballers was still severely regulated, by legal constraint, cultural barriers and lack of cash; media and merchandise revenue was still very limited for the larger European football clubs. This was a sporting age before, as Miller *et al.* put it:

A televisualisation of sport and a sportification of television [meant] audiences built up by national services at public expense being turned into consumers by preying capital, and new technology that has not excited customers being pegged to the sports habit.[54]

In short, although corporate finance was available to some large continental clubs, the only real economic advantage held by most in the 1980s was still measured through turnstile returns: the old modernist advantages of place. Liverpool FC actually dominated the English game in the late 1970s and the 1980s and, more briefly, the European game between 1977 and 1984. But it did so, not through economic might, but by eschewing formal coaching in favour of simple scouting and preparation regimes, the promotion of ‘British’ team spirit, and recruiting the best available British footballers – especially, at that time, from Scotland.[55]

Indeed, Anthony King has argued, convincingly, that rather than seeing this period of English club dominance in Europe, nostalgically, as a ‘romantic’ football era of greater *equity*, we should regard this pre-Champions League era as one in which English football clubs were positively *advantaged* over their continental rivals, in a generally poorer level of European competition.[56] The former, after all, had a number of UK markets to draw upon for talent, whilst the movement of players across national boundaries was then ‘artificially’ restricted to limit the strength of the major European city clubs and, thus, the overall equity and quality of top club competition in Europe.

Unlike in Brian Clough’s era at Forest, when provincial football clubs still had realistic ambitions to win the English league title, the commercial rewards for repeat Champions League qualification today risks the emergence of a dominant oligarchy of large clubs from whom the domestic champions, it seems, must inevitably be drawn. The new Premiership has been won, thus far, eight times by one of the richest clubs in Europe, Manchester United, three times by one of the most powerful and cosmopolitan clubs, Arsenal, and in 2005 by the Abramovic-funded Chelsea. In 1995 East Lancashire’s Blackburn (population 100,000) produced the League title winners for the

first time since 1912, but it was able to do so only with a major injection of funds from retired local industrialist Jack Walker, whose ambition was that Rovers become English champions before his death. Brian Clough's own early death, from cancer, was probably hastened by drink. Already ill, he retired from management on 1 May 1993, his beloved Forest relegated on the same day out of the Premier League, where they still remain today – and in some financial trauma.

Brian Clough's passing arguably marks the final closure of the pre-Premier League 'modernist' era of football in England, as Abramovich's 'post-modern' Chelsea now chase consecutive title successes, with his global transfer expenditure already approaching, by November 2005, over £250 million. 'Clough's genius', by contrast, according to veteran *Guardian* football writer David Lacey, 'for turning ordinary footballers into consistently winning teams, will never be equalled'.[57]

The Great Excluded

I want to end this essay with some brief comments on the new social parameters of the game in England today and some observations on the debates about the wider social 'responsibilities' of English football, before returning to some wider conclusions.

The *FA Blueprint for Football*,[58] the document that sketched out the first plans for the new FA Premier League, mapped out a new trajectory for the sport, based on a detailed analysis of social and leisure trends for the 1990s, produced by the private leisure consultancy, the *Henley Centre for Forecasting*. The social forecasters noted, firstly, the 'dramatic affluence gains' in Britain in the 1980s and also the growing disparity between rich and poor during that decade. Important, too, is the 'increasing division between public sector and private sector facilities ... developments rooted in reactions to fundamental class, affluence and attitude shifts'.[59] In this account, English football in the 1980s is portrayed as an outmoded mass spectator sport, one that carries social and psychological baggage from a very different era of social stratification and leisure pursuits from that promised for Britain in the 1990s. More specifically:

In the 1990s and beyond, patterns of affluence and the associated fragmentation of circumstances and interests [mean] hard choices have to be made as to the consumer segment to which the offer is to be targeted, and hence the ingredients of that offer ... [T]he response of most sectors has been to move upmarket, so as to follow the affluent 'middle class' consumer in his or her pursuits and aspirations. We strongly suggest that there is a message in this for football and particularly for the design of stadia for the future.[60]

The new Blair Labour government from 1997 attempted to ameliorate some of the potential excluding effects of this new sporting trajectory – and of these wider social and policy trends – by establishing a Football Task Force in 1998 to examine the excluding economics of the sport and then, ironically, later by trying to harness the resources of Premier League clubs to its own 'social inclusion' agenda.[61] But as Colin King has argued, at least in terms of *racial* inclusion, English football seemed to regurgitate, rather than overcome, racist practices within its institutions, especially by its insistence on 'playing the white man' in its policies of training, employment and

recruitment.[62] Steve Wagg has also recently pointed out that Labour's core 'values': 'community', 'social justice' and the 'stakeholder society', for example – still operate largely at the level of rhetoric and subjectivity.[63] There seems little government enactment, for example, aimed at radically *changing* the material circumstances of the urban poor in Britain 2004 or even to 'reconnect', meaningfully to football, those people who have been recently excluded by the new marketing strategies and the 'sanitising' disciplinary regimes of Premier League club stadiums.[64]

Indeed, members of these specific local communities no longer seem to be regarded by top English football clubs and their administrators as potential customers at all: pre-purchase credit card and Internet access increasingly characterizes ticket delivery for those who can afford to shop. Instead they, and their children, are treated largely as clients to be serviced by the clubs' ancillary football-in-the-community projects, mainly via coaching and educational initiatives. The new reality is that, despite the Premiership's important clinging rump of 'traditional' younger male fans, for many of the larger Premiership clubs today the more prized, well-behaved, 'family' fans, and real consumers, might be better searched for in the well-heeled, Internet-rich neighbourhoods of 'connected' nearby affluent suburbs and market towns – or even in similar locations abroad – than in the depressed neighbourhoods and run down estates of the urban inner core of Britain's post-industrial cities.

The Premier League's own glossy *Community Report* for 2003/04, produced by the league's customer services unit – essentially, one suspects, to stave off the (now weak) threat of statutory intervention by Labour on club/community issues and also to divert potential public criticism of the league's heavily marketized approach to general club/customer relations – typically measures its input in this area in monetary terms. The financial analysts, Deloitte and Touche estimated that the 'combined contribution' by Premier League clubs to local 'community' work in 2003/04 was worth £68 million, or £3.4 million per club on average.[65]

Also listed in the report are the usual coaching and education projects at clubs, as well as information on their work with the disabled and with other 'disadvantaged' groups. These are important interventions, but too little of this input seems designed to connect economic or social disadvantage even to the *possibilities* of match attendance, or to be geared, strategically, to wider local initiatives, for example those directly involving local authorities in regeneration strategies or in policies for meaningfully reducing the effects of discrimination, poverty and exclusion. Finally, as Wagg also points out – though New Labour seems to find it difficult to comprehend – new football can hardly substitute for social policy – far from it. In fact, of course, 'Football cannot be expected to mitigate the effects of the market; on the contrary, it is governed by the dictates of the same market ... football cannot compensate for society'.[66]

Conclusion

New football in England can claim impressive cultural and commercial successes, advances which are probably underplayed by its many vocal critics in the Academy and elsewhere. In the wake of the spectator and facilities crises afflicting the game in

England in the 1980s, an induced period of stadium modernization has contributed to the development of safer, accessible sporting venues, venues that show at least some signs of attracting relatively excluded female fans and, less strikingly, more fans from ethnic minority backgrounds. In the ‘Hornby era’, fan hooliganism was also diminished around major English stadiums – if not entirely conquered – and an uneven, but marked, new cultural reading of the game and of the England national football team and its fans from 1990 onwards has added, in this specific sense, to a climate of greater inclusion, and to the relative marginalization of hooliganism around the game and the England team. All of this helped sustain generally rising crowds and a positive new spectator climate around English football in the post 1992-era.

In the new global television age for sport, increased broadcasting income for the elite of English football has aided in the recruitment of some of the world’s best players to the Premiership, thus adding to the overall quality of club football in England and to the sport’s broader and more cosmopolitan appeal. Indeed, the appeal of ‘new’ football reflects wider social changes and also calls for new ways of conceptualising both the meaning of late-modern sports fandom and the post-national governance of European football.[67] The price paid here, of course, has been increasingly irregular kick off times and dates in order to meet the demands of television schedules, as well as a gaping domestic financial cleavage between the elite clubs and the rest.

Thus, while on the one hand football crowds have been rising in England, there is also a contradictory deep and widespread unease, as we have already seen, about the condition of ‘marketized’ football in England today. In an era in which, more generally, citizenship is increasingly defined by the capacity to consume,[68] the inclusive effects of recent reforms in English football are paralleled by other exclusionary impacts, especially perhaps those concerning price, the intrusions and extent of television coverage and its power in the sport, and the new disciplinary regimes that now routinely operate in around English football stadia. These are added to claims that the new economic and cultural conditions of the game in England and Europe are rendering domestic club football increasingly uncompetitive and are also damaging the prospects of smaller professional English clubs – though smaller English clubs actually seemed plagued by problems of incompetent, and sometimes corrupt, administration as much as by simple issues of growing inequality.[69]

Taken all together, these matters are now popularly portrayed as constituting an emergent new ‘crisis’ in the English game, a crisis of excess, hence the title – ‘The game that ate itself’ – of a major series of highly critical newspaper articles about the Premiership and its ‘failing’ policies, published in the British Sunday liberal broadsheet *The Observer* between 24 October and 14 November 2004. *The Observer* gleefully predicts a new era of falling crowds, rising television apathy and declining popularity for the English Premiership; it may be right, but it seems far too early to make such sweeping assertions.

Indeed, given the conjunction of the real popularity of the Premiership and its products in England since 1992 and more recent concerns about its current condition and impact, a rather better title for *The Observer* series might have been the one I have borrowed from the conceptual artist Jenny Holzer for this article, the more cautionary

and ambivalent aphorism, 'Protect me from what I want', which also raises a closing question for the reader to ponder: for how long will it be possible to mount a rational defence of the marketized English Premier League and its policies, given the consequences of its own identified excesses?

Notes

- [1] See Boyle and Haynes, *Football in the New Media Age*; Williams, 'The Local and the Global in British Football and the Rise of BSkyB'; King, *The End of the Terraces*.
- [2] Hornby, *Fever Pitch* [hereafter *Fever Pitch*].
- [3] See, for example, on Liverpool FC fandom, Williams, *Into the Red*.
- [4] *Fever Pitch*, 81. For information about the history of hooliganism in British football see Dunning, Murphy and Williams, *The Roots of Football Hooliganism*.
- [5] *Fever Pitch*, 80.
- [6] Taylor, 'English Football in the 1990s: Taking Hillsborough Seriously'.
- [7] See Williams, *Is it All Over?*; Crabbe and Brown, 'You're not Welcome Anymore'. On the 'safety' rhetoric in new football see Williams, 'Safety and Excitement at Football'.
- [8] Sandvoss, *A Game of Two Halves*.
- [9] Bale, *Sport, Space and the City*, 126.
- [10] Quoted in Williams, *Into the Red*, 39.
- [11] Crawford, *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport and Culture*.
- [12] Nash, 'English Football Fan Groups in the 1990s'.
- [13] Davies, *All Played Out*.
- [14] See Poulton, 'Fighting Talk from the Press Corps'; Crabbe, 'The Public gets what the Public wants'.
- [15] Critcher, 'Putting on the Style'. For a reading of Paul Gascoigne and English football culture, see J. Williams and R. Taylor, 'Boys keep Swinging'.
- [16] Carrington, 'Football's Coming Home, but Who's Home?'
- [17] Williams, *A Game for Rough Girls*.
- [18] Quoted in Williams, *Is It All Over?*, 2.
- [19] For a more detailed reading of the Beckham phenomenon See Cashmore, *Beckham*.
- [20] Crabbe, 'The Public gets what the Public wants'.
- [21] S. Laville, 'White shirt, no shame for British Asian fans'. *The Guardian* (21 June 2004).
- [22] See Perryman, 'With Ingerland in Japan'. For a critique of the *englandfans* initiative see Crabbe, '*englandfans* – A New Club for a New England?'
- [23] Williams, 'The Local and the Global in British Football'.
- [24] King, *The End of the Terraces*.
- [25] Deloitte, *Annual Review of Football Finance*; Banks, *Going Down: Football in Crisis*.
- [26] Ibid.
- [27] Boyle and Haynes, *Football in the New Media Age*.
- [28] See Kevin Mitchell, 'Sold Out'. *The Observer* (16 March 2003).
- [29] See, Back, Crabbe and Solomos, *The Changing Face of Football*; King, *Offside Racism: Playing the White Man*.
- [30] Williams, *FA Premier League National Fan Survey*.
- [31] See Harris, *England, Their England*.
- [32] Buckley, *The Man Who Hated Football*.
- [33] Reported in *The Guardian* (5 May 2004).
- [34] Wagg, 'Fat City?', 2–3.
- [35] All reported in *The Guardian* (4 July 2003).
- [36] Lash and Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*.

- [37] Reported in *The Guardian* (13 Nov. 2003).
- [38] Both quoted in Williams, 'Sport, Postmodernism and Global TV'.
- [39] Reported in *The Guardian* (5 May 2004).
- [40] Cashmore, *Beckham*.
- [41] Whannel, *Media Sport Stars: Masculinities and Moralities*, 206.
- [42] P. Wilson, 'Yawn ... it's the worst ever Premiership'. *The Observer* (29 Nov. 2003).
- [43] Reported in *The Guardian* (14 July 2004).
- [44] J. Burke, D. Campbell and A. Asthana, 'Too much too soon'. *The Observer* (12 Oct. 2003).
- [45] See, Kennedy and Williams, *Kennedy's Way: Inside Bob Paisley's Liverpool*, 168–72.
- [46] Bower, *Broken Dreams*. See, also, Banks, *Going Down*, and Conn, *The Beautiful Game*.
- [47] A. Levey and C. Scott-Clark, 'He won, Russia lost'. *The Guardian Weekend* (8 May 2004).
- [48] Reported in *The Guardian* (25 Sept. 2003).
- [49] Crawford, *Consuming Sport*.
- [50] Mitchie and Oughton, *Competitive Balance in Football*.
- [51] Deloitte, *Annual Review of Football Finance*.
- [52] Murphy, *His Way: The Brian Clough Story*.
- [53] Bean, 'Clough's glorious heyday was also the age of the bung'. *The Guardian* (22 Sept. 2004).
- [54] Miller *et al.*, *Globalisation and Sport*, 75.
- [55] See, Williams, *Into The Red*; and Kennedy and Williams, *Kennedy's Way*.
- [56] King, *The European Ritual*.
- [57] *The Guardian* (21 Sept. 2004).
- [58] Football Association, *Blueprint for Football*.
- [59] *Ibid.*, 8–9.
- [60] *Ibid.*
- [61] On excluded football fans see: Williams and Perkins, *Ticket Pricing, Football Business and Excluded Football Fans*.
- [62] King, *Offside Racism*.
- [63] Wagg, 'Fat City?'
- [64] Crabbe and Brown, 'You're not Welcome Anymore'.
- [65] FA Premier League, *Community Report 2003/04*, Introduction.
- [66] Wagg, 'Fat City?', 24.
- [67] Crawford, *Consuming Sport*; King, *The European Ritual*.
- [68] Young, *The Exclusive Society*.
- [69] Conn, *The Beautiful Game*.

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