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Ludvigsen, JAL

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Book Review

***Football, Fandom and Consumption*, by O. Brooks, London, Routledge, 2019, 160 pp., £115 (hardback).**

In the sociology of sports, there is an increasingly substantial body of literature on consumption and fandom in football's globalized and hyper-commodified era. This has taken us from Giulianotti's (2002) typology of football supporters, followers, fans and *flâneurs* to Pearson's (2012) 'carnival fans'. Building substantially upon this, Oliver Brooks's monograph marks another important addition to the *Critical Research in Football* series. Brooks's monograph aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of contemporary football culture in England. In his successful attempt to do so, the starting point of Brooks is the oft-articulated notion (or indeed concern) that supporters gradually have become transformed into 'consumers'. By taking a consumer-oriented cultural studies approach, the main argument that can be extracted from Brooks' work is that 'modern fans' exercise agency whilst negotiating and constructing meaningful fan identities against a background of paradoxical and incompatible discourses surrounding 'capitalism' and 'traditions' that are (ever-)present in contemporary football cultures.

The book's data draws from an ethnographic component that includes match attendance with diverse groups of fans throughout the 2011/12 season. The ethnography includes interactions with and observations of fans in three English clubs. The three club-based case studies include Norwich, MK Dons and Chelsea. Norwich is selected as a 'family club', MK Dons the 'franchise club' and Chelsea as a 'tourist club'. Thus, their fans are likely to have experienced football's capitalism differently. As will be returned to, there are some questions surrounding these assigned labels. Though, as Brooks rightfully highlights, the clubs pose interesting cases for fan identity comparisons. The book also includes a pub-based component throughout Euro 2012 that comprises one chapter called 'IN-GER-LAND' resembling Weed's (2007) pub ethnography from more than a decade ago.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter one sets the scene with a discussion around what being a 'real fan' means in the context of Barclays's #YouAreFootball campaign that sought to thank 'real fans' who 'made' the English Premier League (EPL). Here, the author also outlines the book's consumer-oriented approach and the book's aims which relates to a contribution to 'debates about collective identity formation and the scope of representation in modern football culture' (p.7). Concerning broader contributions, Brooks argues that his work

‘contributes to football scholarship’s long tradition of making perceptive social commentaries’ and additionally adds to debates on ‘capitalism’ and ‘collective identity formation’ (p. 7).

Chapter two provides the research’s theoretical considerations, conceptual tools – such as Gilroy’s ‘melancholia’ – and also the construction of ‘Others’, as well as a literature review. This literature is centered on key developments in English football; including its professionalization, ‘hooliganism’ and the global and commercial developments in a post-1980 and 1990 setting which the book anchors itself in. This chapter’s socio-historical contextualization is particularly strong and connects with chapter one’s scene-setter.

In relation to the study’s overarching aims, Chapter three outlines the author’s position in the ethnographic part of this research. Undoubtedly, this chapter consists of valid and interesting reflections. Particularly on the researcher’s own ‘distance’ to the participants and details around the data collection and the broader research process. The monograph’s presented data rests upon extensive fieldwork that is clearly explained and predominantly, this chapter’s narrative works well. A minor shortcoming, however, is that the chapter could have been strengthened with some comparisons to other, earlier football ethnographers’ reflections. Mainly, since this could have proved a valuable addition, attaching another layer to this chapter, given the potential for discussing how football ethnographies have changed and/or developed from the 1990s onwards paralleled with the game’s developments that are examined.

Chapters Four to Seven unpack the case studies (Ch. 4: Norwich, Ch. 5: MK Dons, Ch. 6: Chelsea and Ch. 7: England). The case studies successfully produce strong arguments that must be seen in context of why the clubs were initially selected. In the chapter on Norwich, it is shown how ‘family fans’ and ‘carnival fans’ produce their own meanings of being a fan with ‘traditional’ ideals as reference points. Simultaneously, they display awareness of the game’s commodification. All the chapters are packed with extensive data and insightful dialogues which provide first-hand and fascinating insight into the contemporary fan cultures across different fandom spaces.

The last chapter presents the conclusions. These must be read in the context of the author’s claims maintaining that the book provides a more nuanced reading of contemporary football fandom. The conclusions are coherent: ‘consumer fans’ are favored by their clubs and other stakeholders in the game’s capitalism (p. 149), whereas the game’s ‘traditional fans’ have negative attitudes towards ‘consumer fans’. To that end, the ‘consumer fans’ develop their own fandom identities against such uneasy background, but also against the consumption

possibilities and the ideals of how to be a 'traditional fan'. The conclusion rightfully challenges the oft-held assumption that 'traditional' and 'consumer' fans are binary opposites and provides - as claimed - a more nuanced portrait of a 'consumer fan' that attends games and performs fandom with meaning, enthusiasm and identity. The conclusions stand strong and can lend themselves upon extensive fieldwork and analysis. However, in the sociology of sport, similar arguments regarding the 'shrinking', 'decreasing' or 'imagined' differences between fans that are 'old or 'new', 'traditional' or 'transnational' have been developed in recent years. To be sure, that does not in any way weaken Brooks's conclusions. Yet some more awareness could have been displayed around these important developments in the field.

Another minor shortcoming is that the book could have benefitted from a stronger justification – or at least clarification – around the club case studies. Norwich was 'selected for analysis as a "family club", a club that markets itself to attract families, appealing to women and children' (p. 46, see also p. 38-39). Chelsea, meanwhile, is approached as a 'tourist attraction club' because the club 'positions itself as a "tourist attraction"' in London (p. 96). Moreover, Chelsea promotes the attendance of live matches as 'an event' (p. 39). As such, it leaves the reader wondering if not Chelsea also could be characterized as a 'family club' *if* the specific club's family-directed marketing was a main determinant in deciding this or distinguishing the clubs. And further, *if* promoting a live match as an 'event' is a characteristic unique to Chelsea's marketing team or directors. As the book progresses, the findings chapters assist and enhance this clarification. Yet somewhat more discussion or socio-historical contextualization of the clubs could have been beneficial to trace exactly *what makes* a club a 'family' or 'tourist' club. Moreover, given the plethora of available scholarship emerging in this field since the 1990s, the book could have benefitted from making use of this to an even larger degree. Especially the literature base developed in the field post-2003, which symbolizes the 'entrance' of wealthy overseas owners in the EPL and the leagues below. Undeniably, consulting this literature base would have attached new layers to the monograph's original findings.

These minor shortcomings aside, *Football, Fandom and Consumption* represents a welcoming, valuable and positive contribution to the critical social study of fandom, consumer cultures and consumption. The book successfully reaffirms the significance of studying the connection between football fandom and consumption in itself, but also gives insight into the broader consumer world that sports are influencing and influenced by. Generally, the book provides fascinating empirical insights and will be useful for students at undergraduate and postgraduate

level, and researchers with an interest in the sociology of sports, sports consumption, cultural studies, and sports business and marketing.

References

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