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# From fanzines to foodbanks: Football fan activism in the age of anti-politics

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## Abstract

This article is concerned with an emerging trend in political participation: the role played by football fans in engendering activism and protest. The role of fan activism in the debate on patterns of civic and political (dis)engagement – in the age of so-called anti-politics – has been ignored by the scholarly literature thus far. As a corrective, this article examines the development of football fan activism over the last thirty years, since the creation of the English Premier League in 1992. It adopts a case study approach centred on supporters' movements since 1992. It argues that the political activism of football fans has both quantitatively and qualitatively changed over this period. Employing the sociological theory of Manuel Castells it claims that collective identities developed in resistance to the commercialisation and commodification *within* football have developed into more distinct 'project identities' that seek bring about more profound social change *through* football.

## Keywords

fan activism, anti-politics, English Premier League, social movements, football

## Introduction

This article analyses the changing nature of football fan activism over the last thirty years. It argues that a broader perspective, which encompasses the wider patterns of political (dis)engagement in the age of so-called anti-politics, should be adopted to adequately

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theorise the shift from a generally passive and apolitical supporter base to a more activist and politicised English football fandom. Notwithstanding that fan activists represent a ‘vocal minority’ amongst the wider population of ‘free riders’ (Olson, 1968), the article explores the trend from passivity to activism as well its wider significance for contemporary political participation. The conception of the ‘political’ constructed by most of the existing literature on fan activism is too narrow, tending to focus single case studies of club-fan relations (Cleland, 2010). But, football fan activism has shifted from an almost exclusive focus on football issues to a wider political agenda, with fan activists seeking to engage and build alliances with other groups and social movements. The article employs Numerato’s (2018) conceptual distinction of activism *within* and *through* football to highlight the increasing range of socio-political issues engaged with by activist football fans. We claim that the growing activism *through* football is becoming ideologically ‘thicker’ and has moved beyond largely symbolic gestures motivated by primarily material concerns (such as affordability) to engage in more ambitious campaigns to bring about social and political change. The article extends the literature on football fan activism (Millward, 2013; Numerato, 2018) by demonstrating that these emergent forms of grassroots fan activism are not only a countervailing reaction to the prevailing neoliberal political economy of football, but also a reflection of wider anti-political sentiment.

As we approach the 30th anniversary of the English Premier League (EPL), this represents an opportune time to reflect on how football fan activism, including its political dimensions, has evolved. The article explores the establishment of the EPL and its development into hyper-commercialised global product. While many of the economic forces, as well as the repertoires of fan activism in counteraction, pertain to other national leagues and contexts (especially European), the process of commodification has arguably advanced furthest in England (Numerato and Giulianotti, 2018: 344). We argue that this economic transformation of English football took place coterminously with the rise of anti-politics: the growing dissatisfaction with and alienation from traditional modes and arenas of representative democratic politics. More institutionalised forms of contemporary supporter activism have been driven by wider changes in political participation, as well as the commodification and globalisation of football. Synthesising the literature on relational sociology, social movement studies and anti-politics, the article sets the establishment of the EPL within a broader historical and political context.

The article offers a diachronic analysis of supporter activism within and through football. It posits the existence of three distinct phases of fan activism in the EPL era. The first period between 1992 and 2003 witnesses the consolidation of the fan networks and organisations (that emerged in the mid-1980s) to provide ‘cultural contestation’ (Jary et al., 1991) against the ascendant neoliberal logic of the EPL. This first period is covered extensively in the existing literature (King, 2002; Millward, 2011). This article extends that research through a more contemporary analysis of the evolution of fan movements across two temporal case studies of: ‘Love United, Hate Glazer’ and ‘Spirit of Shankly’ in 2004–2011; and ‘Fans Supporting Foodbanks’ (FSF) in 2015–21. Although there are lines of continuity throughout, we contend that this periodisation, characterising fan movements in three waves, helps to conceptualise the transition from activism *within* to *through* football in England.

The article traces the development of football fan activism through analysis of its coverage in the conventional media as well as fan-generated communication via football fanzines and social media platforms. This is supplemented by ten in-depth semi-structured interviews with key activists, conducted between June 2019 and June 2020 (via web conferencing software, as well as face-to-face), relating primarily to the contemporary post-2015 period. The research answers the following key question: how does the widening scope of football fan activism, in terms of its aims, repertoires of contention, and mobilisation, relate to the wider context of anti-politics over the last 30 years? The key contribution of the article is the analysis of the FSF case study, which serves an empirical referent for Numerato's (2018) theory of activism through football and enables us to theorise fan activism within the broader context of anti-politics.

The article is organised into four main sections. The first places the establishment of the English Premier League into historical and socio-political context and highlights the key implications for the political economy of English football. The second section draws on the sociological theory of Manuel Castells to provide a conceptualisation of football fan activism. The third section offers 'thick description' of the two temporal case studies of fan activism under analysis: 2004–2011 and 2015–2021. The fourth and final section provides a multi-dimensional analysis of the central question regarding how and why football fans have become more politically active over the last thirty years. The article concludes with the claim that new project identities are emerging within football fandom and contends that it is an emerging space of political engagement and participation.

## **Money, Murdoch and movements: English football after 1992**

On 18th May 1992 the English Premiership (later to be renamed the Premier League) was inaugurated. On that day in the Royal Lancaster Hotel, a deal worth £304 million was agreed with Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB for the rights to televise the Premier League for five years – a marked uplift on the previous terrestrial TV deal of £11 million (Penn and Penn, 2020). The breakaway league, in tandem with the advent of satellite broadcasting, has transformed the finances, culture and spatial scale of English football. Since 2013, the broadcast market has become more competitive with new entrants, such as BT and Amazon, forcing up the price of broadcasting rights (Beek et al., 2019). The domestic rights to show Premier League games over the three seasons from 2019 to 2022 was worth £4.8 billion to the EPL (Sweeney, 2021). Since 1992, the EPL has transformed into a truly transnational media spectacle. Overseas broadcasting rights have come to represent a much larger proportion of the EPL's overall revenue, rising from an initial £40 million for the first five seasons to a staggering £4.2 billion for the three seasons between 2019 and 2022 – an increase of over 10,000%. By 2019, EPL games were being broadcast to over 978 million homes in 188 countries (Premier League, 2019). The globalisation of the revenue streams in English football has been accompanied, and partially fuelled, by the rapid increase in the numbers of overseas players, management, and owners in the EPL (Millward, 2011).

The growing neoliberal logic of English football, involving the incremental decoupling of many EPL clubs from their traditional supporter base and communities, has

provided the impetus for an increase in football fan activism since 1992 (García and Welford, 2015; Nash, 2001). Earlier fan movements, notably the Football Supporters Association (established in the wake of the 1985 Heysel disaster) and high-profile club-based campaigns – such as the protests against the Bond Scheme at Arsenal and West Ham in 1992 and the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association's (IMUSA) fight against the BSkyB takeover in 1998–1999 – laid a template for future football activism.<sup>1</sup> From 1985 onwards, fan activism, supported by a burgeoning network of football fanzines (Jary et al., 1991), was increasingly motivated 'to protect a democratic ethic in football: its role, in other words, as a participatory, "people's game"' (Brown, 1998: 63). Writing in *The Sunday Times*, Peter Wilson noted that by the early to mid-1990s 'fans emerge[d] as a political force in the game's future' (Wilson, 1995).

The growing activism of football fans has taken place against a backdrop of increasing political and civic detachment. Since the early 1990s, there has been scholarly recognition of increasing public disengagement with traditional forms of 'arena politics', manifested in the notable decline of electoral turnout and party membership, and growing mistrust of politicians and key institutions (Hay, 2007; Pattie et al., 2003; Richards et al., 2019). A diverse body of literature, which identifies different drivers and alternative explanations for political disengagement, has come to coalesce around the term 'anti-politics' (Richards et al., 2019). In contrast to this narrative of decline, a range of scholars have highlighted the growth in new forms of political participation and activism (Inglehart, 2015/1977; Melucci, 1989; Norris, 1999), arguing that since the post-war period there has been a coinciding growth in engagement in public demonstrations and other modes of protest, such as signing petitions, boycotting products or companies, or joining new social movements (Marsh et al., 2007; Melucci, 1989). One feature of advanced democratic societies is the politicisation of areas of social and cultural life hitherto perceived as apolitical (or depoliticised). Sport, and English football, in particular, offers an example of such politicisation.

This article posits an iterative relationship between new forms of political activism within football and the wider context of anti-politics. It asserts that the shift to activism through, not just within, football on a range of socio-political issues reflects underlying changes in the nature of the British polity as well as the transformation in the political economy of English football. Key amongst these changes is the emergence of new political spaces, such as football, that serve as an anchor point around which to enact the key representative functions of liberal democracy (such as participation, linkage, integration, and aggregation) that other conventional institutions and actors – namely political parties – are failing to achieve in this era of anti-politics (Dommert and Rye, 2017). In doing so, the article explores how these emergent 'mundane experiences of collective democracy' can become embedded in people's everyday lives (Lazar, 2008: 257) and offer an important case study of contemporary 'post-tribal' politics that operate 'outside or beyond the established way of "doing politics"' (Flinders, 2015: 254). The study of fan activism is therefore sociologically and politically important. Following Millward (2013) and Cleland et al. (2018), we draw on Castells (2000, 2009, 2010) to theorise how collective action by football fans is reflective of the changing nature of social relations in the 'network society'.

## Football fandom in the network society

At the core of the Castells' analysis is the tension between globalisation and identity. As the process of globalisation has unfolded (entailing the restructuring of social and economic relations), people search for and construct identities that provide shared conditions of belonging and help them make sense of the world around them. This globalisation-identity couplet is well-suited to an analysis of modern football in the twentieth-first century. Football is the most globalised media entertainment industry, occupying a critical intermediary position in the cultural logic of late capitalism (Belanger, 2008). At the same time, football has not been completely decoupled from its traditional local communities: the 'people and groups who can be affected either directly or indirectly by the existence and operation of a football club within a particular space' (Morrow and Hamil, 2003: 1–2). Allegiance to a particular football club continues to be a core aspect of people's personal identity, inextricably bound up with a deep sense of topophilia. The last thirty years of the EPL has been the era of glocalisation rather than globalisation, with traditional identities (or least facsimiles of them) becoming intensified rather than diminished in the face of universalising forces (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004). Indeed, part of its cultural appeal of the EPL to global audiences rests on the putative authenticity of the clubs 'local' identity, which continue to be rooted – at least symbolically – in the same civic, predominantly working-class communities that fostered the genesis of the original Football League in the late nineteenth century (Webber, 2021).

Castells provides theoretical insights useful in framing this research. Firstly, his work helps us understand how digital networked technologies have empowered football fans in their mobilisation and initiation of collective action. Millward (2013), for example, draws on Castells to show how virtual communities have enabled the construction of both individual and collective fan identities. The advent of social media has fostered a 'new species of social movement' (Castells, 2015: 15) and generates 'leaderless non-hierarchical, open-ended organisations that enhance the possibility to mobilise support and forge reforms' (Hill et al., 2018: 689). Hill et al. (2018: 689) discuss how 'Stand Against Modern Football' (StandAMF) emerged as an Internet-based mobilisation in protest against 'commercialisation processes designed to generate more manageable and profitable ways of "consuming" sport'. Second, and more substantially, Castells (2010: 3) provides a theoretical framework that conceptualises social movements – defined as 'purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society' – as the outcome of the interaction between personal and collective identities and the prevailing structural basis of society.

Castells posits a three-level schema of collective identities, which are formed in response to structural changes in society: legitimising; resistance; and project. A legitimising identity is introduced by hegemonic interests in society and reproduced via sets of institutions, such as the church(es), trade unions, political parties, cooperatives, and civic associations, that perpetuate their continued privilege, power, and sources of structural domination. Football, with its evocative mythologies of 'the people's game', was itself once a legitimising identity. In the post-war era, the passion of the football crowd on the terrace was matched by their passivity and ambivalence to the way in which the game was run (Cleland, 2010). The very notion of a football supporter was

premised on a sense of deep emotional attachment and loyalty and thus antithetical to any serious challenge to 'their' club (Fitzpatrick, 2016). While fans may have regarded themselves, however illusorily, as authentic members of the football club, there is little evidence of active engagement or agitation on their behalf (Cricher, 1979). For much of the twentieth century, UK football fandom was emblematic of the wider 'deferential civic culture' (Almond and Verba, 1963): the general acquiescence of football supporters with the existing power structures of football mirrored the relationship between the citizen and the state (Taylor, 2007).

Resistance identities relate to the construction of cultural communes constructed in people's minds often based on religious, national or territorial foundation, serving as a defensive reaction to the dominant discourses and institutions. Supporters groups can act as 'trenches of resistance' (Castells, 2010), based on locality, shared symbols, and collective memory, against the globalising commercial force of modern football. Castells (2010: 64) notes that these movements had three main sets of goals: 'demands on living conditions and collective consumption; the affirmation of local cultural identity; and the conquest of local political autonomy and citizen participation'. The coalescence of activist movements in English football since 1992, such as the movement for Safe Standing<sup>2</sup> the 'Twenty's Plenty' ticket pricing campaign,<sup>3</sup> replicate these demands within sport. Castells (2010: 9, 10) portrays these acts of collective resistance as 'the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded', which expands 'towards the transformation of society'. Fan activism in English football post-1992 began as resistance communities focused on affecting change in conditions for fans (as consumers) within football, but more recently football has become the site of the construction and expression of project identities performing their demands for broader changes in the political, social and economic life in contemporary Britain. Thus, these new fan movements are collective agents of social transformation, constructing new meaning around project identities (Castells, 2010: 70).

Mapping this evolution of collective identities with English football fandom is the focus of this article. By analysing the most prominent fan activist campaigns since 1992, the social and political profiles of those involved, their objectives and the repertoires of action, we demonstrate the emergence of a more politicised and participatory football fandom in England.

## **Case study analysis**

By analysing the temporality of fan activism in the EPL era, the article argues that a transition from resistance to project identities can be witnessed in English football fan activism. The empirical analysis centres on two club-level fan movements and one that purposefully transcends traditional rivalries in English football. These two case studies offer a contribution to our understanding of how fan activism has changed over the last thirty years. We contend that in the first temporal case study (2005–2010) a shift can be witnessed from the prevailing resistant identities of the anti-Glazer protests engaged in by Manchester United supporters to embryonic project identities of the Spirit of Shankly (SoS) campaign group. This evolution is further evidenced by the emergence of groups such as Fans Supporting Foodbanks in the second case study period

(2015–2021), which extends fan activism beyond stadium. In providing this analysis this article contributes a conception of change in English football fan activism. As Turner (2021) notes such temporal sensitivity has been underplayed by the existing literature on fan activism. As a corrective, we engage in a relational analysis of micro-level networks of football fan activists over fifteen years to examine the evolving nature of fan activism within the wider social, economic and political context (Turner, 2020).

### *'Yanks out!' – Manchester United and Liverpool 2005–2011*

Between 2005 and 2011 there was definitive transformation in fan activism, reflecting an emerging trend from resistance to project identities. During this period fans protested against the owners of two of England's most famous and storied clubs: Manchester United FC and Liverpool FC. The campaigns against the Glazer family at Manchester United and Tom Hicks and George Gillet at Liverpool were well organised and sophisticated, demonstrating a global network of educated, highly informed activists with experience in community and political activism.

The profile of those involved in the Manchester United and Liverpool protests indicated the changing social and political profiles of fan activists and the increasing cross-over between their professional lives, political affiliations and engagement, and their activities as supporters. Andy Walsh, co-founder of the IMUSA, who would go on to help establish the breakaway club FC United of Manchester, was a long-time community activist and former member of Militant Tendency who had cut his political teeth in the anti-poll tax movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Poulton, 2013). Among the founding members of the Liverpool fan union (SoS), established in 2008, were Labour Party organiser and local council regeneration manager Paul Rice and trade unionist James McKenna. In the opposition to the leveraged buy-outs of both clubs, the considerable organisational and rhetorical skills of these leading fan activists were coupled with the business and financial expertise of other professionals, such as Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill and the investment banker and former chairman of the Football League, Keith Harris (Gibson, 2010).

At Manchester United, fan-club relations had been fractious since the early 1990s when the club doubled the price of tickets to pay for the redevelopment of Old Trafford (*When Saturday Comes*, 1992). United fans started organising in greater numbers via independent fan associations and using fan media, such as the fanzines *Red News*, *Red Issue* and *United We Stand*, as a means of networking (Millward and Poulton, 2014). In 1995, fans formed the IMUSA and in 1998 it joined with a group of shareholders – titled 'Shareholders United Against Murdoch' (SUAM) – to successfully oppose the sale of the club to BskyB's Rupert Murdoch. It against this background of mobilisation that Manchester United fans campaigned against the sale of the club to the Glazer family in 2004.

Under the banner of 'Love United Hate Glazer', fans devised strategies that combined targeted and sophisticated campaigning tactics with conventional modes of protest: demonstrations, occupations and boycotts, alongside media relations campaigns that combined fan and mainstream media (Lutz, 2005). Illustrating the increased use of political and ethical consumerism employed by fan activists noted by Numerato and



Giulianotti (2018), Shareholders United (the successor to SUAM) proposed boycotts of club merchandise, to the cost of £18.5 m per year (O'Connor, 2004). From 2010, anti-Glazer protests were captured visually through the 'Green and Gold'<sup>4</sup> scarves, replica shirts and banners that pervaded Manchester United's home stadium (Old Trafford) in place of the club's official merchandise.

Originally founded as the 'Sons of Shankly', SoS was established in 2008 with objectives similar to the anti-Glazer campaigns: principally the removal of the current owners. However, it would broaden the scope of its ambitions beyond a rejection of the current owners to encompass more structural reforms, such as fan representation on the board, the preservation of local Liverpoolian culture in the face of increased football tourism and commercialisation, as well as engaging with wider social and political campaigns outside of football (Millward, 2011; Research Interview, 15 June 2019). At the height of the battle over Liverpool's ownership, their supposed radicalism saw the SoS decried in the boardroom as 'Sons of Strikers'. A leaked internal Liverpool FC briefing document, which read as a blacklist, described members of SoS as 'the sporting equivalent of the Khmer Rouge' (Evans, 2019). Operating ostensibly as a 'fan union', with a highly networked corpus of international actors, in both an offline and virtual public sphere, SoS evolved from a resistance identity to a burgeoning project identity in this period (Castells, 2015). Facilitated by digital platforms, SoS pursued several campaigns and initiatives that established a connection between the fans of Liverpool FC to a range of socio-economic problems that impacted the lives of those living in the communities surrounding its home stadium of Anfield (Research Interview, 15 June 2019): such as mental health awareness; anti-discrimination; and the impact of matchdays and stadium regeneration on the local community (Spirit of Shankly, 2021). The social capital built up in these networks would be a crucial factor in the development of new fan media platforms (Research Interview, 15 June 2019) and success of perhaps the most notable contemporary fan movement, Fans Supporting Foodbanks.

### *'Hunger doesn't wear club colours' – fans supporting foodbanks (FSF) 2015–2021*

During the twenty years of the EPL era football activism was mainly focused on delivering specific reform limited to individual clubs. In the last decade, football activism has broadened its ambition, exerting influence on local and national government policy to achieve more macro-level political change. The increasingly digitally networked nature of the football fandom has resulted in a closer interaction with fans from across the different clubs and leagues, enabling the sharing of ideas and strategies across national boundaries.

Fans Supporting Foodbanks (FSF) can be seen as among the most successful fan activism of the last 30 years. Beginning in late 2015 initially as a local campaign – between the Spirit of Shankly and Everton supporters' organisation the Blue Union – to gather supplies for foodbanks in the city, it spread beyond Liverpool and the Premier League and has filtered down to all levels of professional and amateur football. From the outset FSF emphasised the power of the connections between fans who had previously

been divided by club and geographical affiliations. Founders Ian Byrne, Dave Kelly and Robbie Daniels recognised the need for and power in collective action:

When we first got into fan activism there was lots of factionalism and ‘us versus them’ and it suited the powers that be. But, by coming together and moving forward collectively as a force, fans working together is a hugely powerful tool with which to change society for the better. (Research Interview, 20 June 2020)

The transcendence of the tribalism of English football fandom is strategically and symbolically important. It demonstrates the capacity of fan activism to overcome one of the major obstacles in the ‘logic of collective action’ (Olson, 1968) – how to coordinate a large disparate, often antagonistic, assemblage of actors to form a united position and act cooperatively.

The backgrounds of Kelly and Byrne as trade union organisers is important to note. Some of Kelly’s formative political experiences had been being involved in collecting food for striking miners in 1984–85 and Mersey Dock workers a decade later (Magee, 2020). Their experience in mobilising support for campaigns and developing capacity in networks and identifying and implementing effective repertoires of action, allowed FSF to grow rapidly. In forging coalitions between previously disparate political and fan activists, Kelly and Byrne are resonant of Castells (2013: 429) conception of ‘switchers’, who are able ‘to connect and ensure the cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources’. Their ‘Do-It-Yourself’ approach was centred on three key strategies: collecting food donations for partner organisations and developing relationships with partners to distribute food; developing awareness of food poverty in communities across the country; and, building a class-based solidarity among fans of different clubs as a means of developing a network of football fan foodbank initiatives across the country (Research Interview, 20 June 2020). Highlighting the growing demand for food bank services under Conservative-led austerity, FSF has sought to make meaningful political contributions to local and national debates on food poverty.

These repertoires of action blended the development of communications and social media strategies which in turn supported partnership building with clubs, existing foodbank networks, fan organisations, charities, and other organisations engaged with food poverty. The simplicity of its message – its slogan ‘hunger doesn’t wear club colours’ became a popular hashtag on Twitter – has also seen it develop a sophisticated and far-reaching presence on social media at a low cost. FSF has featured on national British television and radio, as well as online and print publications.<sup>5</sup> Byrne and Kelly were on the boards of their respective supporters’ associations and the early support of Liverpool and Everton was crucial in both encouraging people to donate food and in spreading FSF’s message.

The spread of the FSF movement to other professional clubs throughout the football pyramid<sup>6</sup> is rooted in existing, and increasingly enmeshed, networks of political and fan activism. After the introduction of Universal Credit, FSF dubbed the December 2018 match between Everton and Liverpool the ‘Universal Credit Derby’ to draw attention to the problems caused by the controversial welfare reform. As a result of the publicity, more than two tons of food were collected on the night of the match (Reade, 2018). In

October 2020, the various FSF affiliates in the English Premier League came together to boycott the introduction of £14.95 pay-per-view charge on games by satellite broadcasters. Organised around the Twitter hashtags #BoycottPPV and #CharityNotPPV more than £300,000 was raised for foodbanks (Pope, 2020), with £100,000 coming from the city of Liverpool alone (Kay, 2020). Reflecting broader anti-political sentiment, FSF's success lies partly in its organic emergence as a grassroots network rather than being driven by more traditional party political, corporate or media campaigns: 'It's a fan-led initiative we work with the football clubs but FSF was built by the fans and run by the fans ... it's a grassroots football initiative and I think that is extremely powerful' (Research Interview, 20 June 2020).

FSF's mobilisation was facilitated by both official and unofficial fan networks, online and offline. The Football Supporters' Association helped to facilitate consecutive meetings of the various FSF affiliate organisations in Newcastle in 2017 and Liverpool in 2018, each of which saw fans come together with community activists, debt and welfare campaigners and clubs to develop more effective means of collecting food, understanding the issues faced by economically and socially marginalised people and groups, and how to lobby and agitate more effectively around food poverty issues. This means of bringing fans together and emphasising solidarity on problems faced by deprived communities was the central core of FSF's message and it was an important factor in politicising increasing food poverty across Britain.

We have focused people's minds on food poverty and educated people about the issues around food poverty. [...] One of our proudest collaborations is the first donation to the Manchester United foodbank came from the Spirit of Shankly – that's a huge moment for fan activism. We have both Manchester United and Man City fans working collaboratively on food poverty. That's a huge move forward for fan activism. (Research Interview, 20 June 2020)

FSF's organisers appreciated that foodbanks were sticking plasters that did not tackle the underlying problems that were causing rise in hunger and malnutrition (Research Interview, 20 June 2020). In a bid to address the structural issues surrounding food poverty and insecurity, as well as challenging austerity and promoting community initiatives, FSF affiliates partnered with charities and businesses across Britain to offer support for those using foodbanks. In a micro-sense these FSF affiliates have helped make meaningful interventions into the lives of the disadvantaged: a Newcastle United fan activist noted it was FSF members who managed to get a pension for a homeless man (Research Interview, 20 June 2020). On a more macro-level in Liverpool, FSF delivered 6000 food packages from its own hub during the Covid crisis in 2020 and sourced and distributed PPE equipment in the same period. It also partnered with other grassroots advocacy groups to establish a food union in Liverpool which foodbank users can join for a small fee. The mobile pantry service, operated in partnership with the North Liverpool Foodbank, launched in October 2020 (Johnson, 2020) and works in some of the most deprived areas of the city. It also became a partner in the push for the right to food to be enshrined in law and incorporated into the government's National Food Strategy (FSF, 2021). In June 2021, Byrne, by now the Labour MP for Liverpool West Derby, wrote to the government to lobby for the legally enforceable 'Right to

Food'. FSF are at the forefront of this campaign, calling for radical changes in food policy – such as the introduction of universal free school meals, an enhanced role of community kitchens, the need for benefits and wages to accurately reflect the cost of food – to be underpinned by a statutory duty to ensure food security and oversight by an independent regulatory body (Geraghty, 2021).

FSF represents a new type of football fan activism. It has evolved to address urgent social problems beyond football (both material and cultural) that extend beyond the consumption of football.<sup>7</sup> Contra to earlier fan movements that were in essence a type of consumer group focused primarily on questions of price and corporate governance, FSF are emblematic of a new social movement: decentralised in its leadership and adaptive to the dynamic political, economic, and social context. However, unlike new social movements – that tend to be focused on broad, cosmopolitan issues such as world peace and the environment or the inequities related to gender, race, or sexuality – FSF campaigns on one of the oldest material concerns: food insecurity. FSF illustrates how football has become a highly effective site for political and social activism in the age of anti-politics, where people eschew conventional arena politics and are drawn to local grassroots mobilisation.

### **Discussion: Fan activism in the age of anti – politics**

At the core of this article lies the following question: how and why has football fan activism in England become more politicised since the establishment of the Premier League in 1992? The dominant explanation in the existing literature seeks to account for the political mobilisation of football supporters according to the relational aspects of football. The relational approach to the study of supporter activism forwarded by Cleland et al. (2018) provides a theoretical foothold. In their account they demonstrate the advantages of football for collective action: a ready-made network of actors with a shared collective identity; emotional, affective commitment; its sociability and provision of established spaces for communal gathering and the exchange of ideas and experiences; common aims and often an agreed 'villain'. As Lestrelin (2012: 509) observes, 'Far from being reduced to the consumption of a spectacle, supporting means organising, mobilising, and socialising'.

The notion that football fandom involves relational qualities, such as strong collective identities and communal feelings of membership, is not novel (nor casual of politicisation). Since the inception of football as a mass spectator sport at the end of the nineteenth century, professional football clubs and their supporters helped forge a wider civic identity, making a significant contribution to the reproduction of the imagined community of the burgeoning towns, cities, and regions of industrial Britain (Phelps, 2005). Also, it is important to note that the vast majority of English football fans remain passive and largely acquiescent. What is lacking from this relational account is an explicit theory of change. The neglect of the change in the nature of football fandom and activism is derived from this focus on the relational at the expense of the structural underpinnings of evolving football fan activism.

The key structural changes can be organised into three inter-related categories: (1) the political economy of football; (2) the technological and communications infrastructure; (3) a decline in the legitimisation of authority in both professional football and democratic

politics, allied to an enhanced critical reflexivity on behalf of fans. The changes to the political economy of English football have been well-documented (Grant, 2021), with the increase in activism characterised as a Polanyian ‘double-movement’ against the increasing hyper-commercialised, globalised trajectory of the EPL (Webber, 2017). The ascendancy of this neoliberal logic over the last thirty years can be seen as the primary driver of the increase in football fan activism. Important too are the advances in communications technology and their implications for grassroots activist media. The hyper-digitalised nature of contemporary football fandom has enabled fans to create dialogical spaces online in which to articulate their socio-political positions, build relationships with online and offline allies and connect the realms of street and screen activism (Monaghan, 2014) – in short, to ‘communicate, collaborate, and demonstrate’ (Garrett, 2006: 202). However, the focus of this article is not primarily on the quantitative change in the aggregate level of activism or politicisation amongst fans (which still only accounts for a small minority) but rather the qualitative shift in aims and scope. The relational and technological accounts of the extant literature fail to explain the shift from activism *within* to *through* football.

The growing politicisation of football and the attendant increase in fan activism cannot be explained by the structural dynamics in the political economy of football and communications technology alone. The broader legitimisation crisis of English football and UK democratic politics in the last 30 years and the agency of fans in that process is also crucial. Since the breakaway of the Premiership in 1992, the untrammelled commercialisation and globalisation of football has given rise to the perception that the elite of the professional game have drifted from their roots, leading to a more existential crisis for ‘traditional’ supporters (Conn, 2010). The prevailing power structures of football, along with other enduring features of the Victorian era, are increasingly seen as anachronistic and have been subject to growing challenge and contestation in recent years. The legitimising mythology of ‘the people’s game’ – the notion that those in charge are benevolent custodians – has been undermined as football has become increasingly ‘commodified, professionalised and embourgeoisified, leaving the game’s core working-class supporters marginalised and alienated’ (Taylor, 2007: 6). The changes in structure and finance of English football have led to a recasting of the relationship between club and supporter.

What was crucial was that amid the tumult of the English game’s multiple crises, some fans began to take a more critical, reflexive position to their relationship with their clubs and the national governing bodies. The conception of fans as critically reflective agents, invoked by Numerato and Giulianotti’s (2018) ideal type of the citizen-consumer (or ‘citi-mer’<sup>8</sup>), has its basis in broader theoretical debates on late-modern reflexive modernisation (Beck et al., 1994). One parallel between the emergent literature on contemporary fan activism and wider political sociology can be found in Pippa Norris’ (1999) work on ‘critical citizens’. To paraphrase Norris, these critical ‘*citi-fans*’ are more reflexive in their consumption of football than the idealised ‘traditional’ supporter. The emergence of these increasingly well-networked fans (supported by national organisations such as Supporters Direct and international bodies like Football Supporters Europe) reflect the enhanced access to information and methods of communication that have exponentially increased with the development of online fan forums, websites, social media, podcasts

and vlogging over the last thirty years. However, it is argued here that the emergence of the *critical citi-fan* is based on a growing realisation that the existing power structures fail to adequately represent their interests as football supporters, rather than any significant change in the demographic composition of the football crowd. The increased reflexivity of football fans, allied to the growing politicisation of football (in terms of its governance, relationships to fans, and wider social responsibility), has transformed who is perceived as the legitimate arbiters of the future of football.

In the mid-1980s football was held up as a metaphor for many of the ills of British society. The crisis of English football was attributed principally to the moral decay of people who watched it, rather than the decisions (or more accurately non-decision-making) of the elite who governed the game. The legitimisation crisis that has enveloped football over the last thirty years is converse: it is the owners and authorities who are seen to lack competence, integrity and virtue, with fans increasingly seen as the moral bulwark against rapacious greed and venality. To adopt Castells' terminology, many football supporters eschewed their legitimising identities as passive supporters and adopted increasingly critical reflexive attitudes to those in authority, with *some* fans beginning to assume resistance and proto-project identities.

## Conclusion

The growing activism of football fans should be set within broader patterns of political and cultural change. In seeking to characterise the broad trends of both British and comparative politics, various scholars over the last decade or so have appealed to the 'crisis' (Richards et al., 2014), 'the end' (Moran, 2017) or the transition (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014) of the prevailing institutions and politics of representative democracy. Running through all these studies is the concept of anti-politics. The literature of anti-politics identifies a range of complex, multi-dimensional phenomena, highlighting 'numerous pathologies concerning power, democracy, legitimacy, representation, participation and accountability' (Richards et al., 2019: 334). We argue that many of these same trends can be identified in the dynamics of English football over the last thirty years. Rampant commercialisation and globalisation of the English game led to a growing sense of voicelessness and dispossession amongst fans, who have become increasingly critical and reflexive about their lack of representation and participation in the governance of football. It is in this context of anti-politics that fan activism, setting itself 'against modern football', has burgeoned.

What can the literature on anti-politics tell us about the evolving nature of football fan activism in the last three decades? Two broad approaches to anti-politics – with contrasting diagnoses of the pathologies and the possible remedies for representative democracy – can be identified. The first tends to frame anti-politics as predominantly a crisis of 'demand' (in terms of the expectations of citizens on representative democracy); conversely, the second regards anti-politics mainly as the outcome of failures in 'supply' (in terms of the state and its related institutions' ability to deliver politics [Richards and Smith, 2015]). Both perspectives offer analytical purchase for the study of contemporary football fandom. From a demand-side view, and analogous to some of the analysis of the wider 'democratic malaise', the fundamental problem with modern football can be

attributed to the unrealistic and contradictory demands placed on clubs by fans themselves – for example, to engage in an ‘arms race’ of ever-increasing players wages and transfers while maintaining the long-term identity and sustainability of the club and surrounding community. From this perspective, fans, in a similar fashion to citizens vis-à-vis representative democracy, engage with their clubs and football authorities in ‘bad faith’ (Flinders, 2012). The argument presented here firmly rejects this perspective and adopts the supply-side approach, which is predicated on the need to modernise the way in which both contemporary politics operates, stressing the necessity of reform to the composition and practice of institutions, processes and actors involved in supplying politics (Hay, 2007). The vitality of grassroots fan activism reflects the deficiencies in the structure and culture of football governance in England, and indirectly some of maladies of conventional modes of democratic political participation.

Fan activism represents a new, and growing, type of grassroots political participation and an empirical referent for the supply side perspective of anti-politics – that is, a transformation, rather than diminution, in political engagement, participation and representation that is indicative of a growing frustration with mainstream politics rather than apathy. It has moved beyond club-based social movements to form coalitions with other supporters and public, private and third sector organisations to challenge local and central government, as well as the prevailing neoliberal logic of contemporary English football. In the context of declining associational life and other civic institutions (notably political parties, but also trade unions, churches, and charities) that hitherto served as anchors of community and place and enabled democratic participation, football, despite globalisation, continues to be geographically rooted and can act as a rallying point for identification and solidarity. As Monaghan (2014: 244) argues, in an era saturated by social media, where activism is increasingly orchestrated in the virtual sphere, there is a need to reassert a sense of place. In this age of anti-politics, the football stadium offers an affective reference point for political activism that can connect online and offline communities. This novel type of activism through football is epitomised by FSF, whose leaders ‘switched’ (Castells, 2013: 45) their focus from the more conventional political terrain of trade unions and party political campaigning to football. The enduring collective identity of football, which has been animated rather than diminished by the transformation in the political economy of the game, is an outlier in a political culture dominated by the notion that we should pursue our individual interests. Given the trends in anti-political sentiment and the importance of place in the increasingly virtual world of activism show no sign of abating, football looks set to become an important space of political and social change.


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**Notes**

1. The importance of the political and legal campaigning by the Hillsborough Family Support Group (HFSG) should also be noted here. Formed in 1989 following the Hillsborough disaster, which has claimed the lives of 97 supporters to date, the HFSG campaigned for truth and justice for the victims and survivors for 32 years. Officially disbanded in 2021, following the inquest jury's verdict that the then 96 victims has been 'unlawfully killed', the dignity and resilience of the families was a constant source inspiration to other campaigners throughout the period under investigation. Indeed, as other have observed (Fitzpatrick, 2016; Webber, 2017), it is the Hillsborough disaster that constitutes the critical juncture in the fandom and political economy of English football.
2. Emerging in the wake of the Hillsborough disaster in the early 1990s, the 'Safe Standing' movement has campaigned for a change in the existing all-seater legislation that prohibits the introduction of purpose-built 'safe standing' areas in the EPL and Championship (see Turner, 2020, 2021).
3. This was a coordinated campaign involving several different fan organisations, and led by the Football Supporters Association (FSA), launched in 2013. It involved protests and lobbying of the football authorities to cap the price of away match tickets, which had risen to £60 for some games. The aim, as the slogan suggests, was to cap tickets at £20 to reflect the significant costs incurred by travelling to away games. In 2016 a maximum price of £30 for match tickets was introduced. See FSA for more information: <https://thefsa.org.uk/our-work/ticket-prices/>.
4. Initiated on the internet forums of the Manchester United fanzine RedIssue, the Green and Gold movement adopted the colours of the club's forerunner, Newton Heath, as a symbol of protest against the ownership of the Glazer family.
5. Without any budget for public or media relations, various affiliate branches of FSF gathered large amounts of national, regional and local media coverage on television, radio and print and online media in Britain. See: Matthews and Scott (2020) for national online coverage by the BBC and Barthram (2020) for online and television coverage from the regional ITV franchise, Tyne Tees.
6. Taking inspiration from FSF, over thirty match day food collections have been established by other clubs (such as Leeds United and Tottenham Hotspur) and fan organisations (such as Aston Villa, Doncaster, Huddersfield, Sunderland, and West Ham) across England.
7. It should be noted that earlier fan movements, notably the anti-racism campaigns launched in the late 1980s (such as 'Leeds Fans United Against Racism and Fascism' [LFUARAF]), also sought to have an impact beyond football. However, there is a nuanced difference: with anti-racism, football was seen as the appropriate site for activism because it was perceived, according to founder of LFUARAF Paul Thomas, as the "most obvious manifestation" (Conlon, 2017) of racism in society at the time. So while a wider social problem, the impetus and immediate focus was the scourge of racism *within* the game.
8. This portmanteau employed by Numerato and Giulianotti (2018: 338) highlights how the 'civic engagement of football fans has strong continuities with, and contributes significantly to, forms of critical, political and ethical consumerism'. 'The prefix *citi* – expresses how these fans would identify themselves as citizens within football culture and society more broadly; the suffix – *mer* expresses the consumer logic that they would prefer to avoid, yet within which they have to live' (2018: 343).



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