Social Movement *Ruptures* and *Legacies*: Unpacking the Early *Sedimentation* of the Anti-European Super League Movement in English Football

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Abstract

Building on Della Porta's work on social movement events, critical junctures, and legacies, this article studies the discursive practices, emotions and networks of the instant 48-hour mobilizations of the anti-European Super League (ESL) movement in English football in April 2021. In doing so, we show how this case reveals a new generation of conflict between the different supporter demographic and corporate constituencies that characterize elite football in England, and their politicized temporal structures. Showing how social movement 'legacy' operates as a multifaceted concept of *power* and *time*, we argue that the 'puzzling out' of a new post-ESL regulatory regime in football reveals the tensions between what are considered legitimate, and illegitimate, practices, which characterize the moral economy of the contemporary English football crowd.

Introduction

Transformative or momentous 'events' might spark, spur and change bouts of collective action (Della Porta, 2020; McAdam and Sewell, 2001). Such events have been under

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explained in social movement research but span environmental catastrophes, wars on terror, crises of capitalism, racial injustice and policing or global health pandemics (Della Porta, 2020; Gillan, 2020; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017). On the one hand, association football (soccer) seems apolitical and banal. On the other, its supporter cultures have provided fertile sites for mobilizations relating to issues inside and outside the sport (Cleland et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Millward, 2012, 2013, 2016; Numerato, 2018; Turner, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023). Football is widely regarded as the British national sport with a truly global reach (Millward, 2011). In various acts of consumption, millions engage in football fan practices every week. For many football supporters, fandom shapes significant aspects of their identities, as a form of 'serious leisure' or a social glue that binds communities together.

On Sunday 18 April 2021 news broke that six of the most historic and best supported clubs in England – Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City, Liverpool, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur – intended to leave the English Premier League (EPL). Instead, they planned to join with leading clubs from Italy and Spain to set up a new European Super League (ESL). By Tuesday 20 April, after just 48 hours of football supporter mobilization, this threat had subsided with key figures at the football clubs 'pleading for forgiveness' and 'offering grovelling apologies to fans' (Jackson et al., 2021). On 14 April 2021, then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson reportedly described the development as a 'great idea' (Smith, 2021), but within six days he had utilized a COVID-19 public health briefing to declare 'the government is exploring every possibility, including legislative options, to ensure these proposals are stopped' (Boris Johnson quoted in Walker et al., 2021). Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer and Liberal Democrats leader Ed Davy also made statements opposing the new competition (Mason, 2021). In doing so, strategic interactions highlighted how the ESL threatened the semblance of financial solidarity and the principle of meritocratic competition in elite football. Immediately emerging from these plans, the UK parliament announced its intention to launch an Independent Fan-Led Review into the governance, ownership and financial sustainability of clubs in English football (HM Government, 2021).

Social movement outcomes are notoriously difficult to measure (Corry and Reiner, 2021) but the changing positions did not occur by chance. Public health statements are not normally interrupted by even the most 'serious leisure' pursuits. Rather, even though the UK was engaged in various COVID-19 led restrictions – including the banning of football supporters from stadiums – the 48 hours of the ESL proposal was categorized by sudden, intense mobilizations in both street protests and online anger. This was largely coordinated by independent football supporters' networks, and the national Football Supporters Association (FSA), with an anti-ESL movement instantly drawn from many fans of otherwise rivalrous football clubs and mobilized through the adaptation of existing tactics, reflecting both the constraints, and opportunities posed, by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kowalewski, 2021). Tellingly, there was little widespread condemnation of fans congregating around football grounds in terms of legitimacy of protest, and at a time when the UK government's rule on outdoor socializing was limited to groups of six people (April) (HM Government, 2021). This contrasts sharply with the views expressed by some British politicians towards Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestors as 'thugs' and 'criminals' (Sparrow, 2020), and their risking of spreading COVID-19 (Mason, 2020).

What is permitted or perceived as a *legitimate* form of protest is characterized by inter-pretations of the *lifeworld* in which historical rituals, practices and identities are both embedded, and racialized. In the case of BLM, mobilizations are considered progressive and characterized by their capacity to highlight racism, discrimination and racial ine-quality. In the case of English football fandom, these practices remain informed by his-torically imagined constructions of white working-class identity and authenticity, and thus anti-ESL protests are framed as 'protecting' or 'in defence of' the English game.

Capturing the events in this 48-hour period is hugely sociologically significant for three reasons. First, it is important to empirically understand how a network of predomi-nantly white, male, 'supporter-activists' aged between 50 and 65, formed a movement at a time when football stadia were closed due to COVID-19, thus extending recent work on contentious politics in emergency critical junctures, and the shrinking of physical space for collective action (Della Porta, 2020). In doing so, they drew formal public apologies from those who were initially its adversaries, while also mobilizing support from across the political spectrum. Second, by telling this story, we help to fill the lacuna on *rupturing* moments in social movements. And third, it tells us about the capacity for activists to instantly mobilize a collective identity, including the challenges of sustaining this, in ways to address more broadly the logic of late (global) capitalism. Bringing these insights together, we argue that football fandom as a social practice spanning three cen-turies is pertinent for the critical study of collective identity. The social relationships, identities, values, meanings and understandings that arise through the interactions of football supporters must be situated within a wider social and historical whole. These collective identities are temporally significant, and coalesce around what are predomi-nantly, local, or club-specific, interests and communities. Here, as Melucci (1989: 15) noted, collective action is produced by 'loose, informal networks' within a 'complex society' and 'multipolar action system'. We add empirical and theoretical value to the study of social movements by understanding the impact of anti-ESL mobilizations on the capacity for networked collective action that create, negotiate and reproduce shared understandings of momentous events. In doing so, we reveal the possibilities and con-straints of building collective identities, where understandings of the circumstances of events, and the sources of conflict, are felt most viscerally at a local, parochial level, and through consumption practices that are compatible with advanced capitalism.

To do this, we illustrate an intense wave of protest that characterized the 48-hour football supporters' mobilizations between 18 and 20 April, and their aftermath. Examining the discursive practices, emotions and networked identities of this movement *in-action*, reveals a new generation of conflict between the different supporter demo-graphic and corporate constituencies, which characterize the contemporary *lifeworld* of football in England. The impact of the long-term neoliberal, deregulatory political econ-omy of English football *in* Europe, becomes analytically illuminated in qualitatively studying the working tactics of the anti-ESL movement. Of key significance, the sudden *rupture* of the ESL became a *critical juncture* for the future governance, regulation and sustainability of football in England. It is through this lens, that we evaluate whether the mobilizations against the ESL were constitutive of a 'successful' social movement both *in*, and *through*, football (Numerato, 2018). To do this, we draw upon Della Porta's (2020) thematization of rupture sequences; notably the *cracking*, *vibration* and

sedimentation processes, which, while producing abrupt changes to the *lifeworld*, develop contingently and become path dependent. Here, the 'puzzling out' of a new post-ESL regulatory regime reveals the tensions between what are considered legitimate and illegitimate practices, which characterizes the moral economy of the contemporary English football crowd.

Rupture Sequences, Relational Thinking and the Political Sociology of Time

Della Porta (2020) brought together ideas on temporality and momentous events, paying particular attention to the ways in which mobilizations and their socio-political environments produce moments of protests, which 'shock' or 'punctuate' the cultural and material flows of social interaction. This approach to social movements demonstrates the ways in which mobilizations are relational to complex temporal sequences. Embedded within relational sociology and the idea that social worlds have temporal dimensions (Crossley, 2011), any eventful analysis of social change must recognize how the networks, relationships and interactions that constitute social life both shape and constrain what happens in the future. For Goldstone (2004), the dynamic socio-political environments of movements become symbolic and discursive spaces in which interactions between networked activists, and other social, political or corporate agents take place across time. Bringing the focus of events and time together, Gillan (2020) theorizes the socio-political environment of movements as a *timescape*; an uneven temporality, which encompasses both repeated patterns of interaction and the contingent unfolding of historical events, which produces interpretations, social action and new events. To understand the contours and flows of power and counter-power in society, we must capture both the sudden, and gradual, social changes, and linkages and disjunctures, which take place across an uneven temporality (Gillan, 2020; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017).

The study of *critical junctures* focuses upon the ways in which long periods of path-dependent social, political and institutional stability are occasionally punctured by phases of institutional flux, underlying societal cleavages or crises (Della Porta, 2020). These punctures may occur in both discrete, and indiscreet, ways. *Critical junctures* reflect the importance of unpacking the 'agitation' stage of social movements. The micro-dynamics of *critical junctures* tell us how extraordinary events both mobilize, and are mobilized by, networks of protest action. *Critical junctures* are characterized by the conditions under which social unrest is triggered, producing a 'moral shock', which in turn, directs networked action, through an urgent need to interpret and respond to the event (Jasper, 1997; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017). According to Della Porta (2020), *critical junctures* challenge social actors' visions, producing contextual opportunities and resources, to create – or resist – social change. Initial protest events are produced relationally, by both a *crack* within the institutional, or corporate, environment, and the coexistence of affective and cognitive dynamics within networks. These emergent relational impacts shape both the cultural meanings and framings of the event.

Della Porta (2020) says that protests acquire momentum after the initial *crack* if they intensify in number and effect. Through this, *vibrating* patterns of social relations are both *ruptured* and reproduced; with outcomes shaped by activists through network

configurations and strategic interactions. But they do so through important 'choice points', which develop the organizational culture of networks and new movement frames. Such choice points are made in a context of instantaneous interdependence because the intensity of momentous events and *critical junctures* reduce the availability of time to reflect or deliberate (Della Porta, 2020). Thus, while the capacity for counter-power creativity is enhanced, new norms, or forms or prefigurative politics tend to emerge quickly, and then *sediment* both outside, and inside, the social movement. As the process of *sedimentation* occurs, institutional legacies may emerge as *critical junctures*, which re-produce themselves in legacies that differ from the political-organizational structure that preceded (Della Porta, 2020). Here, new regulations and legislation may represent institutional legacies of the *system*. However, more significant, are the ways in which culture and power of the *lifeworld* are embedded within the construction of new relational collective identities, and what is perceived as *the* legitimate future, by influential movement actors.

We adapt Della Porta's work in two micro-level ways. First, we centralize the importance of understanding the networked biographies and demographics of the protestors in the *lifeworld* at the point of *rupture*, and through the *vibration* and *sedimentation* of the *rupture*. This is hugely sociologically significant because it strengthens a relational conceptualization of social movements, centralizing the wider *timescape* in which the *rupture* is situated, and the specific cultural meanings and memories – affirmed and altered – by the *crack*. By historicizing momentous events, we explore the important ways in which they are linked to other events, which ensure we see the emotions, networks and tactics of protestors, as having a history (Crossley, 2011). Therefore a 'relational logic of legacy' becomes a defining feature in the evaluation of *critical junctures*. Second, we suggest that work on *critical junctures* and *rupture* sequences extends understanding of the political nature of time as a particular element of power and counter-power. A political sociology of social movement temporality helps grasp the politicized nature of the temporal structures of the contemporary world (Gillan, 2020); in our case, we must recognize the ways in which the long-term neoliberal political economy of English football has set temporal boundaries for purposes of legitimatizing the centralization of the driving influence of elite football clubs (King, 2000). Following on, we analyse ruptures emerging in relation to the ESL to ask why, when and where they happened, and what do the emotions and networks of protest tell us about the ways in which time is contested, negotiated and politicized by football supporters.

Methodological Approach

Three interconnected data-collection activities took place between April 2021 and June 2022. First, we undertook participant observation at two important online meetings held by the Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer, MP, and Shadow Minister for Sport, Alison McGovern, MP, on Tuesday 20 April, and Football Supporters Europe (FSE) on Saturday 24 April. Both meetings encompassed actions at the explicit political process level, and practices of activist planning and transnational organization during the immediate aftermath of the *rupture*. Second, newspaper, radio, fanzines and other public-made social media content, including blogs, podcasts and Twitter, focusing on the FSA and six

ESL-club supporters' networks, were purposively sampled. Initial data analysis involved multiple readings of documentary sources, resulting in a network of reflexive accounts of the *rupture*, and both the focus of the Independent Fan-Led Review and its final report. And third, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 supporter activists and a member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Football Supporters in the UK Parliament on Zoom, between April and October 2021. This ensured we were able to capture activist life-story accounts at the point of *crack*, *vibration* and early *sedimentation*. Approaching social movements *as* relational networks of interaction (Crossley, 2011), we are interested in the ways in which formally independent actors, in our case football supporter activists at each of the six ESL clubs, were linked through various forms of cooperation. In football, these networks were a complex and diverse hierarchy of status groups, which often coalesce and unify at specific clubs, and occasionally, at a cross-club regional and national level, to develop relational fan cultures. We identified two or three core activists in positions of chair or vice-chair within each of the independent supporters' networks at the ESL clubs, and the national FSA movement. Having previously established ourselves within the core FSA network, we were familiar with the 'formal' and 'soft leaders' (Cleland et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018) who held important social, cultural and political capital. Our prior research also showed that those in core club-specific network positions were most likely to know others across the wider movement field. The six ESL-club supporter networks selected were: Arsenal Supporters' Trust (AST); Arsenal Independent Supporters' Association (AISA); Chelsea Supporters' Trust (CST); Spirit of Shankly (SOS); 1894 Group; Manchester United Supporters' Trust (MUST); and Tottenham Hotspur Supporters' Trust (THST). We followed Della Porta's (2014) approach to activist life-stories by creating three stages of analysis as a type of summary for each. These were: a chronology of their biography, a semi-codified scheme, examining their emotions of 48-hour *rupture*; their networks, tactics and resources of interaction; their perception of 'successful' outcomes, and a synthesis of those main themes. This interpretivist approach pays attention to the practices of elaboration of different socially constructed versions of the *lifeworld* and the networks that build relational collective action. Each interview lasted between one and two hours in length. We followed the British Sociological Association's ethical recommendation on consent, recording and confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms in the write-up.

'We Want Our Cold Nights in Stoke': Unpacking the 'Moral Shock' of the European Super League

King (2000) foresaw a new Europe in which major city-based clubs became increasingly prominent and independently connected through a transnational network society. In 1998, the financial and political empowerment of 16 leading city-based clubs was realized through a free-market proposal to create a new 'European (Super) League' with no promotion or relegation. Organized independently of the governing body of European football, UEFA (Union of European Football Associations), the clubs would receive five times the revenue of their current *Champions League* European competition contract. This became a strategy for clubs to gain political leverage over UEFA and demonstrated

that key personnel viewed transnational audiences as sufficiently mature to find further expansion of European competition appealing. However, the proposed Super League was not intended to replace domestic football, with its historical, cultural and economic significance (King, 2000). Twenty-three years later, the formal announcement of the ESL and its associated radical deregulation of European football arrived.

Resistance to earlier bouts in deepening commercial processes in English football had already *ruptured* it and pre-existing networks of football supporter-activists had formed, sped up with faster communication structures afforded through online and other instant communication (Hill et al., 2018). Consequently, the intensification of market-driven policies has agitated supporter social unrest across a wide range of areas, including political issues, social issues, governance, security, performance, experience, symbolism and atmosphere (Numerato, 2018). This relational culture of contestation is both resistant towards, and compliant with, the neoliberal *timescape* as the deepening of free-market hegemony centralized power and wealth at the top of the football pyramid, while occasionally channelling more independent grassroots activism. Formalized, these groups fostered working relationships with corporate and political organizations (Millward, 2023). Yet, despite any 'crisis of capitalism' in football, national supporters' organizations like the FSA had failed to persuade the state of the need for independent regulation in football to oversee the financial sustainability of clubs.

The ESL events on 18 April 2021 highlight the politicized nature of these temporal, neoliberal, structures. To understand the *collective effervescence* of activists in relation to the ESL, it is important to recognize the intersubjective emotions and understanding of what was being experienced in such sudden, intense ways, made influential through networks of interaction, and the histories of those interactions. Some activists were suspicious of an ESL breakaway attempt prior to 2021 and networked through the FSA and FSE. However, the sudden *uncertainness* posed a serious threat to the pre-existing trust and relationships established between activists and the corporate constituencies within football's transnational capitalist class. Tommy, from Manchester United supporters' group MUST reflected on how this uncertainness made him feel:

> I have been through the gamut of emotions from the rumours half-way through the game on Sunday, going to bed with the feeling that everything could be lost, that this was an all or nothing fight, and waking up to actual news on Monday morning and being very emotional about it. So, you know, all that was at stake, all the work that we have done building relationships inside the club; the reputational work we'd built up was at threat of going, bang, immediately. So, it's that emotion the first morning, the anger kicking in, the planning, the resolution trying to see it through. (Tommy, MUST, 22 April 2021)

Jasper (1997) captured how 'moral shocks' motivate networks to mobilize into action. While the six ESL clubs and their supporters' groups have different histories, ownerships, cultures and places within the long-term transformation of Europe, their 'moral shock' at the ESL was characterized by two interdependent issues. First, the long-term deregulation of Europe had crossed an important symbolic line by no longer protecting English and European competition structure. Here, the football 'pyramid' characterized what is perceived to be authentic, and legitimate, in the minds of these different status

groups, while concepts of tradition and heritage were mobilized to engender and legitimate appropriate forms of practice among this particular white, male, middle-aged activist scene. Indeed, there is evidence of mobilizations around imagined constructions of working-class identity, and a concern for the working-class consumption of the game. 'Whiteness' informed their readings of themselves (historically), and their movement identities. Through this lens, the anti-ESL street-based protests that emerged during COVID-19 are embedded within a *lifeworld* of contemporary football, which remains predominantly policed, reported on, governed and watched by (mostly) white men.

Born from this, relational shared memories emerge, based upon eventful experiences, and utilizing memorable moments as a resource for generating commitment. Jason from the AISA group drew upon his personal social history to situate the ESL within a wider (long-term) neoliberal *timescape*:

> When I was a young man at work, I could be stood in the pub at Finsbury Park an hour before kick-off chatting to a few mates and one would suddenly be 'yeah, I'll come with you, who they are playing today' – you can't do that [spontaneity] anymore. The game was an expression of mass culture, historically it came from the upper-middle class but was popularized by the working class and became synonymous with working-class life and culture. (Jason, AISA, 23 April 2021)

Informed by historical notions of class and football, Dean, from the SOS group, noted:

> We've all got the same viewpoint whether you're Tranmere Rovers or Liverpool, it's about the same things, protecting our working-class game, it's about protecting the football pyramid; I must deal with multibillionaire owners, but it's no different than what Tranmere happens to deal with, with a millionaire owner on a local basis. (Dean, SOS, 11 October 2021)

Second, the sudden need to respond to, and interpret the meanings of, the ESL, agitated a series of protest events at some of the six clubs, which began to *crack* the institutional and corporate environments. According to Wagner-Pacifici (2017), the sense of uncertainty that grows from the needing to know what an event '*is*' takes key significance. The 'moral shock' of the ESL produced a *rupturing moment* within the *lifeworld* because it was triggered by an event perceived to be extraordinary by different social groups. The extraordinary nature of the event demonstrated the relational logic of collective action in social movements as former professional players now turned media pundits, with important levels of cultural capital, took to Twitter and television to join collective opposition across football's corporate constituencies. Supporters like Simon, from Arsenal fans' AST group noted:

> It was interesting the way the media went for it, the way Sky went for it, in many ways because it was an attack on traditional structures that made quite a lot of money – the only people who spoke up for it [ESL] were the ones perpetuating it. Even Fergie on the Man United board hated it. Everybody was so fundamentally against it that it created a groundswell, which made it easier for politicians to act. (Simon, AST, 18 June 2021)

On 18 April, the lives and fates of activists in football mutually entwined when an ESL source labelled them 'legacy fans', arguing that the ESL was a project for 'fans of

the future' – who are instead motivated through superstar players rather than a club's history or heritage.[1] Tottenham Hotspur supporter Jen, influential within the THST group, drew upon her professional experience to reflect:

> It's an insult, but as a marketeer, I also understand that it is total marketing crap. Somebody has sat down there and just thought 'oh right, okay, the fan of the future, the legacy fan, of please do fuck off', it's just awful. We're all going to reclaim that. (Jen, THST, 28 April 2021)

Arsenal supporter, Jason, similarly important within the AISA collective, offered similar thoughts:

> We've heard this really insulting reference to heritage fans, or legacy fans, basically 'fuck you, we don't want you, you're old, smelly, drink beer and fart'. Who will really protect fan culture? One of the battles undoubtedly going to play out over the next 10 years is this definition of what a fan is; it was interesting that, when you see the protest placard at Chelsea saying, 'we enjoy our cold nights at Stoke'. (Jason, AISA, 23 April 2021)

In the supporter cultures of English football, the legacy of the 'global football (Premier) league' becomes significant; the ESL advances our understanding of the transnational political economy of English and European football, because it demonstrates how these global (ESL) clubs are increasingly concerned with generating large shares of broadcast revenue from new (younger) global markets. Paying attention to the biographies and demographics of core anti-ESL activists, reveals how the interpretation of, and response to, the event, speaks more widely to the long-term histories of supporters' mobilizations both inside, and outside, of football. Those who coordinated the supporter-led mobilizations have most fully experienced the long-term neoliberal *timescape* of English football in Europe. This made the 'moral shock' of the ESL profoundly personal, speaking to the construction of authentic fan 'identities', which characterizes both the football pyramid structure as *legitimate*, and the cultural meanings and memories of fan rituals, which contest and shape the future consumption of football.

'Legacy Fans 1–0 Billionaires': Movement Identities and a Relational Logic of Collective Action

The programming of new logics in social movements requires communicative work to ensure frames or strategies are endorsed by core actors, who 'switch' together networks (Castells, 2013 [2009]). Here, they are influential fans in each of the ESL club-specific supporters' groups. At the national and transnational level, the professionalization of the FSA and FSE in the past 20 years has been led by a small homophilous network who have successfully switched the networked practices of different fan groups, and become important political actors in football, through diplomacy building with institutional structures of state power. The long-term institutional legacy of these political networks is evident by the reprogramming of what was, through the birth of the FSA in 1985, a movement to 'reclaim the game' from corporate power, to 'sustaining the [current] game' by taking measures to protect the existence of clubs (FSA, 2022).

In the case of the ESL *rupture* on 18 April, the sudden and intense organizational culture and capacity of an emerging core anti-ESL network was characterized by the legacy of switching and reprogramming that had taken place over several years. This was not *the* collective identity of the anti-ESL movement, but important symbolic capital present in social and cultural forms, including the knowledge and skills of alliance building, and mobilization of resources. This had been achieved through 'formal' and 'informal' EPL networks, within, and around, the FSA as a social movement organization (SMO), which helped connect disparate fan groups into campaign coalitions. Jasper (1997) argued these affective bonds are important for mobilizations. James, from the FSA discussed his organization's role:

> We [FSA] play an important role in putting the right people in touch with each other across different groups and we've restructured ourselves as an organization based on the work done around networks; we have a Premier League fans network so that helps bring the right people together. (James, FSA, 17 April 2021)

Similarly, Tommy discussed how – despite on the pitch rivalries – the people in the network of activists held 'shared values':

> There are discussions with other clubs whether it be Simon at Arsenal, Jen at Spurs, Dean at SOS, we have shared values, and this is where those supporter groups of the big six were important, we had a meeting at 7.30 a.m. on the Monday [19 April] morning. (Tommy, MUST, 22 April 2021)

Jen picked up the point, explaining that the network had predated anti-ESL action but had been strengthened by it. She highlighted that the communication architectures that facilitated these connections included WhatsApp instant messaging services. To be 'in' the WhatsApp group meant fans were 'in' the network and the frontline of the mobilization:

> We already had a loop that had been going since 2019 when we were lobbying UEFA for the same stuff across different competitions. It had been dormant, but it was there and then reactivated through the ESL – most of my Sunday morning was then spent with people on the core WhatsApp group going 'can you add in Steve from 1894, can you add in Tom from AST?' (Jen, THST, 28 April 2021)

In October 2020, a plan put together by Liverpool and Manchester United named 'Project Big Picture (PBP)' was a response to calls from the English Football League (EFL) for financial support for its member clubs, many of whom were experiencing financial distress. In exchange, clubs like Liverpool and Manchester United would exert greater influence over English football's governance structures. While PBP emerged six months before the ESL *rupture*, it was connected in two important ways. First, the prior switching and reprogramming of relational collective action by the core FSA and EPL supporters' networks helped intensify a sudden period of Zoom-facilitated activism during 'lockdowns' (as Stefan, from MUST, recalled 'Zoom was everything then', 9 November 2021). Consequently, a core anti-ESL network was already in place to respond directly to the *rupture*, which *cracked* the institutional and corporate environments of the ESL in England.

Second, PBP emerged the same week as Sky News broke the story of talks between Liverpool and Manchester United over a FIFA-backed 'European Premier League'. As such, the ESL *rupture* must be situated within a wider (but recent) *timescape* in which the national supporters' movement, including fans' groups of the six ESL clubs, were pushing the UK parliament to independently review ways of improving the governance, ownership and financial sustainability of clubs across the football pyramid, but in consultation with supporters. AST's Simon drew attention to this, while underlining the significance of the 'noise' those in the network made in their collective action:

> Policy base is important but these [political interactions] had come in a pandemic where you are in the middle of a government being frustrated at bailing out football and they had seen PBP override the discussions between the EPL and the EFL. There was a lot going on and the fact that activists were there to make the noise helped but the political environment in which we were operating was a big factor. (Simon, AST, 18 June 2021)

This political context was important because it captured how activists were 'negotiating a stronger ethical definition' (Turner and Killian, 1987: 7) of unsustainable business models in football that COVID-19 had laid bare. At the point of the ESL *rupture*, a political opportunity was in place to help mobilize and coordinate relational collective action. However, the movement 'field' was symbolic and discursive, characterized by the relationships, resources, creativity and experiences of activists, and their political networks. On Monday 19 April, the pooling of these resources, political networks, and the speed of digital mobilizations were all key in bringing together a critical mass of activists across the six ESL clubs to lead both club-specific protests, and strategic interactions at the national level. SOS' Dean discussed how this pooling of resources and skills were important:

> In these moments, the right people with the right skill sets come together – because of my previous working trade union background it just played into line. We mobilized collectively and spoke on behalf of each other so when Craig at THST was on Radio 5 Live he was representing all of us. So, there was a sense of unity and collective strength that none of us were speaking in isolation unless there was a specific question about our clubs. I think that element of fan collectivism of supporting each other, of trusting each other really challenges the notion that we [rivals] hate each other; we don't, we have the same viewpoint. (Dean, SOS, 11 October 2021)

Equally important in maximizing this rupture was unity in message across fans in disparate clubs and cities, as Tommy points out: 'Our communication and formulation of ideas, action points and seeing it through is so much better and easier now and that has reflected in how organized we were coming out with a unified message' (MUST, 22 April 2021). Despite the production of anti-ESL protests across the 48-hour *rupture*, and their potential to *crack* powerful institutional and corporate environments in football, the building of a collective identity involved mobilizations that were not centrally coordinated. Distinctions between organized, collective protest, and unorganized individual protest are also important; the individuals were those outside the network who were drawn onto the streets to 'mill around' the emerging protests at Chelsea before their game against Brighton

(20 April), in the early aftermath at Liverpool and Arsenal (24 April) and Manchester United (25 April). The ESL gives a *cracking* sequence produced by both lay fans and professional activists where emotions, tactics and networks of protest are characterized by strategic interactions at the political level, but also street-based protests that capture the visceral anger and 'moral shock' at club-specific owners, and the wider game.

Despite this, there is often a perceived need to 'control' or 'regulate' the affective and cognitive dynamics of street-based direct action by those within SMOs or core networks. This is important because, as Stefan from MUST suggested 'if [MUST] want to maintain the relationship with the club [Manchester United], we need to be careful' because 'we'd have been, you know, hung out to dry by the less savoury elements' but still '[. . .] their role [lay fans] stung the club' (9 November 2021). Tommy further picked up this thread of 'taste in tactics' (Jasper, 1997: 246) by offering:

> It's a very difficult balancing act. My past 24 hours has been trying to calm some people down, educate them in terms of what is happening, what we're working on, what we want to achieve; we agree with your call to protest but let's do it the right way under one banner; throwing your scarf or season ticket onto the pitch, or storming buildings, I've done them all, but what's worked? What have we achieved? (Tommy, MUST, 22 April 2021)

As with many other historical moments in social movements, abrupt protest events or sudden processes of mobilization can alter both the perception of time, and the intensification of networking (Della Porta, 2020). To conceptualize the ESL as both a *rupture* within English football, and a *critical juncture* for the future of the game, we must consider how prominent levels of uncertainty produced by the sudden *crack*, and subsequent 48-hour *vibrations* of protest, triggered political mobilizations, which partly transformed the pre-ESL *timescape*.

A Victory Paradox? The 'Puzzling Out' of a New Regulatory Regime

When protests spread after the initial crack, new norms emerge in the *vibrating* open spaces created by the social movements (Della Porta, 2020). That is, the intensity of emotions regarding the ESL began to prefigure subjective alternative visions around the need to regulate capitalism across football. Consequently, the *sedimentation* of a type of prefigurative politics emerges quickly, and indecisively, through which important institutional legacies are produced. Therefore, any temporal analysis of the ESL *rupture* and its short-term demise, must consider the roles of networked supporter activists and 'external' political opportunities. Indeed, activists' political capital and resources were influential in mobilizing the formal support of politicians because those relationships were already established before the *rupture*. However, these mobilizations were situated within a *populist* political climate, with the then-Prime Minister's pledge to use a 'legislative bomb' against the ESL never materializing. Supporters in the network did not believe it would, though, as evidenced by Chelsea fan Ted, central to CST, describing how he felt about the government's words:

> I want to be optimistic about it [political intervention] but there's always the 'but' there, it's an easy thing for Boris Johnson and his populist buddies to come out with and say but whether anything comes out of it is the main issue. (Ted, CST, 7 May 2021)

The institutionalization of abrupt changes in the wake of the ESL *rupture* became a defining aspect of the game's *critical juncture*. The *rupture* provided a sudden proliferation of internal and external movement dynamics and mechanisms, with a 'puzzling out' of a post-ESL *timescape* deliberated and consolidated. This is relational, because the 'what to do next, what did this event mean and how might it be prevented in future?' narrative is informed by historical circumstances and events, and the contingent unfolding of new events produced by the *rupture*.

In many ways, the announcement that all six ESL clubs in England were withdrawing from the project on 20 April evening represented an important movement 'victory'. Dom from AST said, 'the clubs know they've absolutely messed up here' and in his next breath asked 'how do we use this as an opportunity to get more influence on the Board of football clubs?' (13 October 2021). Questions about new political opportunities in the future governance of the game emerged from this 'victory'. Dave from the FSA called this 'a once in a lifetime and generation to really make a difference and reshape the landscape around football' (26 April 2021). This ushered in a *sedimentation* of rupture as the supporters were collectively presented with the opportunity of 'meetings with Boris Johnson and Keir Starmer' (Dom, AST, 13 October 2021), which crystalized as it 'brought forward the announcement of the Fan-Led Review, it's helped shape the agenda and there's proper momentum' (Dave, FSA, 26 April 2021).

Della Porta called for research that addresses critical moments in which a *crack* happens before partly *sedimenting*. In this example, the present connects with the future in football in two important ways. First, the immediate triggering of the Fan-Led Review demonstrates that dramatic moments of historical change can produce important, and immediate, consequences of collective action. Second, the long-term restlessness of other historical events in football – notably, the formation of the EPL in 1992, debates around the independent regulation of football through the government's *Football Task Force* in 1998 and the government's *Supporters Direct* policy initiative in 2000 – became important collective memories within the *sedimentation* of eventful protests. The unfolding interpretative and interactive disruptions of the ESL *rupture* and the Fan-Led Review, further reinforces capitalist relations of power within the football pyramid structure. This is because any new, stable, and favourable equilibrium must build a collective consensus on how best to align new outcomes within the movement field (Useem and Goldstone, 2021). Herein lies the challenge; while the ESL *rupture* represents a *critical juncture* for major reform in football, it must also reproduce itself within the legacy of the *rupture*. This challenges notions of 'success' because there is a lack of consensus as to what role supporters should play within the ownership structures of clubs in a post-ESL *timescape*. The emergence of the German football '50+1 rule' as a post-ESL discursive frame evidences the ways in which different constituencies often compete. This rule states that fans as members hold most of the club's voting rights, preventing commercial investors from implementing decisions without supporters' consent. This has long provided a seductive – if idealistic – promise to the 'legacy fans' in the network as CST's Ted picks up:

> I think collectively we would all go for the 50+1 German thing but if I'm brutally honest it's never going to work in this country where things have gone too far. [. . .] What legislation could be brought in that would tell an owner that he's got to give 50+1 of his assets to the supporters? (Ted, CST, 7 May 2021)

Despite an incoherent 'puzzling out' of English football's post-ESL landscape, the *sedimentation* of *rupture* is marked by long-term questions about the democratic rights of supporters and diverse ways of achieving stronger supporter engagement within decision-making structures in football. Tellingly, its institutionalization is characterized by building a consensus that some type of independent regulation is now necessary for football's future sustainability. However, Steve from the FSA offered a fear that the Fan-Led Review may leave EPL, Football Association and elite football club personnel thinking 'what is the minimum we can get away with?' or 'we'll pick these little things we'll do and the rest of it will not get done or not implemented' (15 October 2021). While Dom expressed concern that:

> The Fan-Led Review could throw up some big challenges to the FSA and supporter movement because we could be asked to define a fan or supporter and define which ones of those fans should exercise a vote. That is a massive challenge, which could split the whole thing. (Dom, AST, 13 October 2021)

While it is inevitable that English football will bear witness to some form of corporate resistance to the Fan-Led Review, the institutional legacy of the ESL as a momentous event speaks to the long-term challenges of bringing about radical democratic reform in football, and the building of a collective (supporter) identity strong enough to address broader social, political and structural issues beyond the specific event. Indeed, the *sedimentation* of *rupture* continues to reproduce capitalist relations of power, but through a new regulatory (capitalist) regime (Braithwaite, 2008). As Thompson (1971) noted, a lack of popular consensus discerning *legitimate* and *illegitimate* practice may create internal grievances. There was a collective sense of the ESL being an *illegitimate* practice, but notions of what are *legitimate* are often presented within the parameters of a need for capitalism to work in a 'fairer stakeholder fashion'. Notably, anti-ESL movement activists, while deeply concerned about the future of the game, and the protection of the football 'pyramid', are also compliant with the long-term deregulatory political economy of football. Here, reform becomes *legitimate* when it is workable in a way that enables those six clubs to continue being globally 'successful'.

A 'victory paradox' emerges (Useem and Goldstone, 2021). The anti-ESL movement was a moment to change the imagery and narrative on regulation in football. This revealed the capacity for temporal political opportunity structures and durable activist networks to shape a long-term effective, and professional supporters' movement. Despite this, the ESL is also characterized by competing legacies: on the macro-level, the deregulatory political economy of Europe; on the meso-level, the EPL and the transnational capitalist class of many of its clubs' owners within the organizational structure of the football 'pyramid'; and at the micro-level, the legacy of some aspects of traditional fan culture within the *lifeworld*. We extend Della Porta's (2020) work by offering this as *the*

critical juncture. The concept of *legitimate* and *illegitimate* practices and the moral economy of the contemporary crowd captures tensions within changing supporter demographics; any evaluation of movement 'success' is temporal, and so to achieve longer-term 'success' of preventing a future ESL while bringing about a new regulatory regime in football, this movement must contribute towards a favourable new alignment among the major actors and groups in the wider movement field (Useem and Goldstone, 2021). This is particularly challenging in football because the movement field remains a site of cultural contestation. The manifestations of global capitalism continued to run through football and within two years we witnessed the 'sportswashing' of regimes with questionable human rights records through new ownerships of EPL clubs and the hosting of World Cup finals (Millward, 2023).

Conclusions

A particularly longstanding member of the supporters' network described the anti-ESL mobilization as 'a week like no other in 30 years of football activism' (Dave, FSA, 26 April 2021), underlining its significance. This article adds to debates on the consumption of football, and temporality in social movements because it illuminates the reality of the long-term deregulation of English and European market societies, and how *ruptures* drive, but also constrain, the capacity of durable activist networks to address larger social contradictions in modern capitalism. Locating eventful protests within an overarching *timescape* shows how legacy operates as a multifaceted concept of *power* and *time*. Eventful protests themselves often produce institutional legacies, in our case, through new memories and mechanisms, which shape regulatory reform in football and serve to legitimate the social value of supporters and their rights. But we must anticipate, and consider, future consequences of collective action; particularly, how the present moment connects with new regulation in football, but across a temporality in which professional activists, and match-going fans, with memories and experiences of events, are getting older. But resistance to the ESL also took place within the context of shrinking public spaces during the COVID-19 lockdowns, and, like other forms of sociality in the period, was part facilitated through digital-mediation. Images, messages and statements spread virally, giving great memetic power, akin to other social movement mobilizations in the years that proceeded it (Castells, 2013 [2009]). The anti-ESL movement may have benefitted from the shrinking space for collective action as lockdowns had further normalized increased online network communication and participation, concentrating collective attention on the ruptures ushered in with each fresh news cycle. The significance of this is that, like BLM protests and their mobilizations, this enabled rapid, organized and impromptu responses to the ESL announcement. Key events, news updates and the architecture of online communications aided the development of resistance to the ESL, as with other movements in similar temporal landscapes. In this article, we extend knowledge of contentious politics in emergency *critical junctures* and eventful protests, by suggesting that what makes some events transformative is not the outcome per se, but the negotiation of legacy within the hermeneutic struggle between activists and corporate actors. Here, the networked biographies and demographics of activists reveal legacy to be a contested field; one that demonstrates how long-term social transformations are

most fully experienced by those with a historical narrative of events, but also prefigures a future for new generations of social actors. It is precisely here, we argue, that the hidden rhythms of political life in football and late capitalism are elucidated; time is negotiated, contested and politicized through the temporal boundaries, which characterize the long-term neoliberal hegemony of English football *in* Europe, through the everyday lives and practices of supporters.

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Note

1. See https://twitter.com/danroan/status/1384062591450771465.

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