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Stadiums of commercial and social control: overlapping rationalities within European football's transformation

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of European football has been subjected to much scholarly attention over three decades. In analysing these changes, we may look towards one research trajectory emphasizing the role of commercial and neoliberal economic free-market forces. Another trajectory highlights how developments in the politics of risk and security shaped European-wide counter-hooligan policies which, again, had a transformational effect on European football. These supplementary insights share European football as a site of analysis and agree that the Heysel tragedy (1985) accelerated new eras of commercialism and social control that, respectively, marginalized supporters. Still, they are seldom drawn together to examine how economic and security rationalities overlap within European football. Filling this gap, this article contributes with an updated, Foucauldian understanding of the interplay between the pursuits of profit and control. As argued, these in tandem, have revolved around the creation of controlled stadiums and spaces that express economic and disciplinary power.

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Introduction

Although Europeans live under a quite different political regime, the new European stadium may similarly illustrate contemporary social and political hierarchies as the Roman arena once invoked the authority of the Emperor (King 2010a: 21).

As King alludes to above, the football stadium often represents an expression of economic and disciplinary power in modern European societies. European football's stadiums and spaces, following King (2010a: 34), 'denote profound institutional transformations at the level of state and capital'. From a social scientific perspective, it is commonplace to speak of the *transformation* of European men's football throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and its cultural, economic, political and social consequences (Kennedy and Kennedy 2017; King 2000, 2003; Numerato 2018). European football's transformation, likewise, is situated centrally in this paper, which examines the question of how – *within* this

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transformation – overlapping economic and security interests intertwine and may be considered characterizing features that influenced and have been influenced by the present-day symbiotic relationships between governing bodies, sponsors, clubs, owners, media and security actors.

The importance of exploring these seemingly overlapping interests originates the fact that, when confronted with the questions of why and how precisely European football has been transformed, we might look towards analyses from two pioneering research trajectories that emphasize or focus upon different dominant logics. These research trajectories, it must be acknowledged, are *not* competing. The term ‘trajectory’ is employed simply to describe their predominant focus on different processes, whilst remaining concentrated on transformations *in* or *through* European football.

On the one hand, most notably King in *The European Ritual* King (2003), European football’s transformation into a public ritual between the late 1960s to early 2000s can be traced and analysed by focusing predominantly on commercial and political economic processes. The EU’s rising significance and the prevailing neoliberal free-market forces enabled more transnational, borderless regimes and centralized power amongst exclusive groups of (super) clubs, while marginalizing football supporters (see King 2003, 2004, 2010a, 2010b). On the other hand, illustrated by Tsoukala’s *Football Hooliganism in Europe* (2009), a story of transformation could also be carefully extracted from analyses that primarily emphasize how risk-based crime control, and pre-emptive security policies were embedded in European football through ‘counter-hooligan’ efforts from the 1980s onwards (Tsoukala 2007, 2009). Accordingly, the significance of the EU and European organizations, alongside the politicization of security institutionalized the control of deviance, standardized the regulation of football crowds and stadiums, and gradually eroded on supporters’ civil liberties and human rights (Lee Ludvigsen 2025; Spaaij 2013; Tsoukala 2007, 2009; Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen 2016).

Whereas these two trajectories place different emphases upon the dominance of wider, economic, political, legal and security processes in Europe, they notwithstanding display a twofold convergence. First, one key outcome of these processes remains the marginalization of football supporters. Second, they pin down the Heysel tragedy (1985) – where 39 Juventus supporters died at the European Cup final in Brussels – as *the* turning point that institutionalized the challenge of, and accelerated European football’s pathway towards, law, order and profitability. This turning point boosted pre-existing tendencies and saw European football’s firm embrace of both post-Fordist deregulated markets (King 2003, 2010b) and the emergence of a ‘new era’ in the social control of football crowds (Tsoukala 2007, 2009). Accordingly, processes of relaxed economic regulation can be juxtaposed to the enhanced regulation of football stadiums, creating the optimal conditions and milieus for economic growth and social control.

However, although these two research trajectories are far from isolated – and, in fact, supplementary – they have seldom been fused together to analyse how exactly economic and security rationalities reinforced each other in context of European football’s transformation (Lee Ludvigsen 2025). Hence, this article’s purpose is to place these trajectories in more direct dialogue than before, thereby enhancing our understanding of the ‘close connection between European football and the wider political and social order’ (King 2010b: 890).

Employing this new era of social control (1985–onwards) as an analytical starting point, exploring these blurring rationalities remains sociologically significant for two primary

reasons. First, it enables us to capture how ‘the legislative and judicial powers are being eroded to the benefit of the executive and/or the market-driven private sector’ in Europe (Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen 2016, 172). Second, it warrants analyses that deconstruct the terms upon which football’s free market emerged (cf. Webber 2017). While the interplay between commercial and security-related forces is widely acknowledged, this interplay is chiefly examined in national contexts, including British (Dubal 2010; Giulianotti 2011), Polish (Antonowicz and Grodecki 2018) and Turkish football (Alpan and Tanıl 2023). Few studies explore how they appear in European-wide competitions and settings. This remains surprising because the regulations and requirements set by European football’s governing body, UEFA, often dictate, standardize and harmonize what occurs across national contexts (Antonowicz and Grodecki 2018). Moreover, European club competitions’ global framework have had national repercussions, by pushing domestic leagues toward new commercial approaches and the market (Blasing 2025). As such, this article contributes not only with an understanding of the established interconnections between pursuits of profits and control, but it documents how these interconnections appear and evolve, as argued, in the construction of controlled stadiums in European football. These spaces illustrate accurately the economic and disciplinary power of clubs, football’s governing bodies and European institutions.

In advancing this argument, the paper draws mainly from secondary literature and media sources and EU and European level documents. It first historicizes and unpacks parallel processes of (de)regulation in European football that, in responding to discontent and crisis, opened a path for a culture of profitability. Second, it employs Foucauldian concepts to discuss how these processes subsequently worked in tandem to establish spaces of *commercial and social control*, that constituted conditions for European football’s economic growth. Lastly, the paper discusses recent examples of football and political authorities, and clubs conceding to ‘customer’ demands (Turner 2021) regarding these spaces of control, by positioning apparently receding regimes of control as extensions of power (Numerato 2018). This, as contended, reveals another important stage in European football’s perpetual transformation.

Historical context: European football, Heysel and (de)regulation

This section historicizes how parallel (de)regulative processes in European football programmed a culture of profitability and control. Between the 1950s and 1970s, European competitions, whilst giving structure to club football (Turner 2014), were organized by sovereign national federations, and based on autonomous player markets coordinated by UEFA. This level of national control and regulation in European football meant that clubs could only capitalize on limited broadcasting revenues, to the frustration of clubs and their football directors (King 2003, 2010b). Post-war European football was therefore situated in an ‘era of affluent, Fordist football under a Keynesian paradigm of national control and limited markets’ (King 2010b: 881).

However, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, forces of economic globalization and the deregulation of television markets laid out the foundations for a new ‘football business’ or ‘industry’. Whilst this quickly transformed numerous domestic leagues (Webber 2017), it also advanced the restructuring of European competitions, including the UEFA Champions League which emerged at this significant moment in European football (Doidge, Nuhrat,

and Kossakowski 2023). The 1992 restructuring and rebranding of the European Cup into the 'Champions League' altered UEFA's selling policies and facilitated for a shift away from the sale of individual games/rounds to 'complete and exclusive packages of Champions League games' (Levermore and Millward 2007, 150). This shift, ensuring that qualified clubs began to receive a greater share of television revenues, the said rebranding, and 1995 *Bosman* ruling (which liberated the player market) are regularly regarded as catalysts for 'modern (European) football' (Kennedy and Kennedy 2017). On the one hand, the solidified entrepreneurial and profit-oriented outlooks of club directors, leagues and UEFA must be situated against the backdrop of wider, external forces. Most notably, the neoliberal regulatory regime, introduced by Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK throughout the 1980s (King 2003, 2010b), which emphasized expansion into untapped markets and measures that freed up capital markets. On the other hand, the consolidation of profit-oriented attitudes in European football was also driven largely by internal forces, or crises.

In the 1950s, European football had entered a new phase aligning with its professionalization (Vonnard 2014). Whereas the European Cup – formed in 1955 – quickly became UEFA's flagship competition (Doidge, Nuhlat, and Kossakowski 2023), a central part of King's (2003) argument is that – despite its prestigious nature – the European Cup was also subjected to vast criticism throughout the 1970s and 80s, after a period of optimism regarding an 'international era' between 1955-70. The new concerns threatened European football's validity and stemmed from widespread issues of corruption, declining playing standards and, crucially, supporter violence and disorder. Accordingly, European football 'suffered its own Eurosclerosis,' characterized by economic stagnation (King 2010b: 881). Throughout the 1970s, football-related disorder and violence, often referred to as 'football hooliganism,' had become a concern in England, and across continental Europe. This included Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands in the early 1970s, and Germany, Greece and Spain by the end of the decade. Responses to this phenomenon, however, were predominantly enacted on local or national levels, by law enforcers, clubs or political authorities (Tsoukala 2009). The Heysel tragedy in Brussels, May 1985, where 39 supporters died following stadium disorder, altered this.

As King (2003, 64) maintains, Heysel was a 'quite specific historic moment' that *affirmed* European football's crisis. From an economic viewpoint, it not only compromised the European Cup, but it amplified the (pre-existing) concerns amongst the biggest clubs and privatized television broadcasters that the competition's format was restrictive. Heysel represented the 'nadir' of football's Eurosclerosis and was therefore followed by calls for a restructuring of the European Cup's format that reflected the new powers of broadcasters and the network of 'super clubs' in Europe, placing football on the path towards a post-Fordist deregulation, as mentioned above (King 2010a, 2010b).

Beyond this, the live television images from Heysel had a deep impact on the European public consciousness and underlined the security threat of 'football hooliganism.' Consequently, as Tsoukala's (2009) pioneering work documents, (re)actions from political and security actors across national, European and EU levels followed shortly after the disaster. UEFA immediately banned English clubs from UEFA competitions for five seasons. Yet, reactions also appeared from non-sporting organizations. In the aftershock of Heysel, the Council of Europe adopted the 'Convention on Spectator Violence and Misbehaviour Sports Events and in particular Football Matches' in August 1985 (Tsoukala 2007). As the first convention of its kind, this symbolized an emerging, external expectation that countries

needed to confront its issues and modernize its supporter cultures (Antonowicz and Grodecki 2018). On the EU level, the European Parliament adopted two resolutions that condemned the disorder preceding Heysel (Mojet 2005), and the EU's position in the 'counter-hooligan' field was solidified throughout the 1990s, bundling 'hooligans' together with other internal security threats, including protestors (Tsoukala 2009).

A new era in the social control of football stadiums and crowds in Europe thus followed, led by UEFA, Council of Europe and the EU who emerged as the primary definers of regulatory mechanisms and their target populations in European football (Tsoukala 2007). As Table 1 demonstrates, however, the new tools in the control of the football stadium and its surrounding spaces reflected the wider risk-based logic characterizing contemporary crime control, and proceeded with a wide-reaching legal vagueness in the definition of the relevant target populations (Tsoukala 2009).

This remains significant, because whereas the dominant economic model in Western societies predominantly emphasized the individual and minimal intervention, the dominant model of social control 'mov[ed] away from that reality and turning towards virtual reality, which disregarded the actual nature of the individual in favour of focusing on the potential nature of the group as risk-producer' (Tsoukala 2009, 68). The new, post-Heysel regulatory mechanisms sought, essentially, to ensure the monitoring of 'known' and 'potential troublemakers', harmonize policing and information-sharing across Europe, and pave the way for new innovative football-specific laws in national contexts that departed from extant criminal provisions (Spaaij 2013; Tsoukala 2009; Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen 2016).

In this respect, the turning point of Heysel, pointed to by Tsoukala (2009) and King (2003) alike, remains sociologically illuminating since this event accelerated simultaneous patterns and forms of de-regulation *and* enhanced regulation. Far from isolated, these (de) regulative processes, marking the start of new eras of commercialism and social control, must be analysed as responsive not just to concerns regarding public safety and internal security; but to issues seen as holding back European football's marketability, commercial value and growth. At different times and paces from the 1980s onwards, this created new imperatives for clubs and football and political authorities in domestic leagues and European competitions to reclaim the stadium as safe, controlled and ordered spaces conforming to modern standards of the entertainment industry (Antonowicz and Grodecki 2018; Giulianotti 2011; Webber 2017). It also created a mutual interest between UEFA and top clubs. Given that European competitions provide revenue streams for both UEFA and qualifying clubs, a repackaging of European football was, for UEFA and clubs alike, deemed

Table 1. Target population EU and European level documents (1985–2006) (table created by author).

Organization	Year	Target population
Council of Europe	1985	'...known or potential trouble-makers, or people who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs' (p. 2).
Council of the EU	2002	'... individuals who represent or may represent a danger to public disorder or to security [in connection to a fixture possessing an international dimension] (p. 3).
Council of the EU	2006	'A person, known or not, who can be regarded as posing a possible risk to public order or antisocial behaviour, whether planned or spontaneous, at or in connection with a football event' (p. 18).

Sources: Council of Europe 1985; Council of the EU 2002, 2006).

necessary for commercial success in form of, *inter alia*, heightened admission prices, lucrative sponsorships or broadcasting contracts (Doidge, Nuhrat, and Kossakowski 2023) and the redefinition of stadiums as ‘exclusive spaces’ (see Giulianotti 2011) characterized by more socially and economically ‘progressive’ football.

It is therefore unsurprising that a host of new regulatory mechanisms seeking to control football crowds and the consumable stadium spaces they occupied emerged in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Whilst the effectiveness or proportionality of numerous restrictive measures like banning orders and alcohol bans remain contested (Pearson and Sale 2011; Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen 2016), the new era of social control also served a reassuring purpose, much in line with how promises of law and order often accompany neoliberal policies (see Wacquant 2009).

Taken together, we hence see how the crisis of European football reached its peak in 1985 and served as a dual turning point positioning European football on the path towards what might be understood as a *post-Eurosclerosis* era, and consequently its transformation. As demonstrated, this transformation cannot solely be explained by the rise of neoliberal regulatory regimes nor internal power struggles (cf. King 2003), because this fails to capture how European football’s transformation was never disassociated from changes in the politics of security. Specifically, the rising significance of pre-emptive policies and regulations that categorize risk-producing groups like football crowds (cf. Tsoukala 2009). As argued, an important challenge therefore becomes to join these political economic and security forces together given their reinforcing nature. To provide an exemplar of this, the next sections will illustrate this inter-play by unpacking Foucauldian conceptions of security and then the instillation and normalization of spaces of control and a ‘new way’ of consuming European football from the 1990s onwards.

Discipline, security and commercial exchange

In *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault 2008), Foucault laid out his theory of security as a modulation of power. Complementing and operating alongside his more famous forms of sovereign and disciplinary power, Foucault was interested in developing a history of technologies of security. Specifically, he argued that security is exercised on the population as a whole, unlike sovereignty and discipline which take aim at individual bodies. This means, for instance, that whilst discipline deals with *the* criminal, security takes aim at the wider, epidemic of crime. Thus, while discipline, assisted by ‘projects of docility’, aims to establish new spaces of control (Foucault 1977), security accepts existing spaces and territories for what they are, and ‘enables the circulation of what is desired to be in these spaces and tries to minimize any risks’ (Pauschinger 2023, 98). This acceptance renders security a matter of providing the ‘best possible circulation’ and minimizing risky circulations that can never be fully suppressed (Foucault 2008).

Employing the eighteenth century French urban town as his exemplar, Foucault therefore demonstrated that a set of practices and strategies making up *security dispositifs* sought to sift the ‘good’ from and ‘bad’. The promotion of commercial and political economic interests is, however, central here, because security has ‘the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument’ (p. 108). Compliant with liberalism’s core tenets, security’s *laissez-faire* rationality

hence emphasizes ‘freedom of circulation’ (Bigo 2008) and in Foucault’s (2008, 18) own words, security serves to facilitate and ensure ‘trade within the town’.

Foucault’s framework which emphasizes how discipline and security operate concurrently with varying strengths and emphasizes, as argued here, is helpful when analysing European football’s overlapping rationalities. These become most visible in *European football’s spaces of control*, where a new form of ‘restrained consumption’ (King 2010b) of commercialized football was instilled.

Programming spaces of control

In their summary of the converging legal and policing tools designed to control football crowds across Europe, Tsoukala, Pearson, and Coenen (2016) assert that these strategies must be seen against the background of the wider neoliberal political context:

In the absence of any domestic or European legal definition of football-related violence, law-makers and the judiciary are circumvented by the executive and, to a lesser extent, by sports authorities that seek to impose their own definition of the phenomenon and, consequently, their own way of addressing public order and safety issues (p. 172).

Consequently, a set of public and private actors across Europe have been positioned in a leading position as the primary definers and assessors of deviant fandom and the supposedly best means to combat it, revealing in turn their own institutional, but occasionally overlapping, interests and priorities (see also Lee Ludvigsen 2025). The programming of spaces of control, therefore, have seen the blurring of aims speaking to public safety and the creation of undisrupted spaces consumption. One oft-mentioned exemplar where such interests converge is the context surrounding the implementation of all-seated stadiums. First, in the UK (in 1994) following the 1989 Hillsborough stadium disaster, and later (in 1998) in all UEFA’s European and FIFA’s international competitions. Described as the catalyst of both the social control of supporters inside the stadia (Turner 2023a) and the wider securitization of football (Numerato 2018), this newfound regulatory mechanism reconfigured football’s primary space and prescribed a certain code of controlled stadium behaviour based on commercialism (Kennedy and Kennedy 2017). This contrasted the spontaneous, ritualistic practices that had been associated with standing terraces (see Turner 2023a, 2023b; Webber and Turner 2024). In this respect, the conclusions of the Taylor Report from 1990 – after the Hillsborough tragedy – accelerated processes already underway and had implications beyond the UK. The report’s recommendations regarding stadium safety and modernizations, and particularly the conversion of standing terraces into all-seater stadiums in English football’s top two divisions, also became a justification for the commodification of football.

Whilst bans on standing sections were not enforced in all domestic leagues, such as Germany, German clubs participating in European competitions (e.g. Champions League or Europa League) would still be required to convert standing terraces into seated areas for European fixtures (Turner and Lee Ludvigsen 2023; Turner 2023b). Notwithstanding, the case of Germany was largely ‘atypical’; across other parts of Europe, the all-seater stadia became one of the ‘critical hallmarks’ of football’s disciplinary society (Turner 2023b). As King (2010a, 2010b, 23) writes, while seats did not represent ‘obvious method’ of social

control, football clubs, UEFA and FIFA considered seats to serve a ‘pacifying function’. Beyond reducing the risk of over-crowding and enabling easier isolation or identification of potential offenders, it could be argued that seats came to symbolize a vision of ordered or tamed spaces, although it remains impractical to determine the precise effect of seats on the reduction of disorder at football fixtures. Indeed, while seats isolated, restricted and disciplined supporters, the top-down normalization of all-seated stadiums in European competitions also served commercial purposes. The associated modernization of many European football grounds in the 1990s and 2000s – often in relation to countries’ staging of mega-events – helped attracting new consumers and capital. As King (2010a: 24) writes:

Seats are not simply about control, however. Football’s audience was severely restricted in the 1970s and 1980s substantially due to the intimidating atmosphere and the threat of crowd violence in the grounds, especially in Germany and England. Seats, therefore, represent a second reform programme which was intimately related to the disciplinary element: commercialization. Seats have been a means of widening the market for football by appealing to new consumers and increasing revenue by raising ticket prices (King 2010a: 24).

By tying these overlapping market and public safety interests together, for European football authorities and many clubs, an answer to the overarching question posed by the 1980s, on how to ensure law, order and economic growth, was the creation of what Foucault (2008) called *milieus* of security. As mentioned, UEFA, confronted by breakaway threats from some of Europe’s most powerful clubs had, in the years leading up to 1998, rebranded the Champions League (in 1992) (King 2003). In the attempt to ensure that this new competition became the ‘prime football product’ of Europe (Ziesche 2023) – illustrated presently by the increased value of the Champions League’s broadcasting and commercial rights (€3.2 billion in 2022/23, see Statista (2024))¹ – it may be contended that the all-seater policy demonstrated how the political economy informed new strategies of action (Foucault 2008) as the consumption of European football were increasingly characterized by a new ‘middle-class habitus’ (Dubal 2010).

However, while the all-seated stadia can be easily read as a neoliberal disciplinary technology that partitioned and ensured – quite literally – that ‘[e]ach individual has its own place’ (Foucault 1977, 143), a closer reading reveals the blurred boundaries between discipline and security; implying a concern for both micro-terrains and macro-features (Togman 2018). Alongside other restrictions seeking to control supporters’ mode of consumption, the all-seated stadium is concurrently an example of accepting reality, and thus attempting to keep football crowd disorder and violence ‘within socially and economically acceptable limits and around an average that will be considered optimal for a given social functioning’ (Foucault 2008, 5). This becomes apparent because, while targeting the ‘potential troublemaker’ (individual), the all-seated stadium also govern at a population level by facilitating ‘good’ circulations in form of more affluent, middle-class spectators; and then utilizing the market to justify higher admission prices that, in itself, exclude or at least minimize ‘bad circulations’.

Beyond the all-seater policy, European football’s spaces of commercial and social control have also been underpinned by other, regulatory techniques that uphold these standardized *milieus* of security. In this milieu, stadiums are dressed in UEFA branding and symbols denoting the prestige and tradition of European competitions (King 2004). Moreover, in UEFA competitions (until 2018), this included bans on the sale of alcohol, although executive sections were exempted from this, and while alcohol bans’ effectiveness in reducing football-related disorder remains contested (Pearson and Sale 2011). UEFA’s (2024: Article

73) regulations for the Champions League also maintain a ‘clean stadium’ policy that qualifying clubs must observe. This policy aims, again, to create spaces of commercial exclusivity for authorized partners and similar and longstanding policies remain typical for other UEFA competitions, like the European Championships. Here, the ‘clean site’ policy might even extend beyond the stadium and into other event-sites, facilitating for a ‘temporary reconfiguration of urban public space [...] related not only to security purposes but also to branding interests’ (Klauser 2011, 154).

Importantly, these regulatory attempts reveal the dynamic interplay between football’s securitization and commercialization. Seeking to assist the instillation of a new, dominant and commercially oriented mode of football spectatorship, these mandatory conditions which qualified clubs (or host countries) must adhere to, may be analysed as expressions of the power to socio-spatially sanitize European football’s spaces of control. Whilst different to all-seated stadiums, the Foucauldian thinking may be borrowed to explain how they aim to maximise positive elements in form of corporate interest and consumption circuits, whilst minimizing the circulation of diverse and undesirable risks like rival or unofficial brands, vendors, political messaging, ‘disruptive’ fan choreographies² or what Bauman (2005) called ‘flawed consumers’. These are subjected to concentrated control, administration and regulation (consider, for example, Article 44 of UEFA (2019) that prohibits any political messages ‘inside or in the immediate vicinity of the stadium’). Taken together, these sets of internalized regulations are ‘clearly aimed at presenting a “cleansed” product, an unhindered and undisturbed football event, thereby favouring the output demands of stakeholders such as the media and broadcasters over those of supporters’ (Ziesche 2023, 556).

Therefore, besides, on the one hand, the specific policing and surveillance strategies that have evolved in European football in line with wider security developments (Spaaij 2013; Tsoukala 2009), and, on the other, the corporate and entrepreneurial strategies of broadcasters, club directors and football’s governing bodies (Kennedy and Kennedy 2017; King 2003, 2004), the transformation of European football reveals the blurring of strategies that cater to both commercial and security interests. Whilst the existence of these overlapping interests appears in earlier work, this section joins them together more precisely. It shows *how* these interests overlap, and under *what conditions* they are pursued. Situated at a juncture that can be approached as either ‘post-Heysel’ (Tsoukala 2009a), ‘(post-)Euroclerosis’ (King 2003), or ‘post-Hillsborough’ (Turner 2023a), a highly complex (re-)programming of *spaces of control* inside and increasingly also immediately outside European football stadia commenced. A characterizing feature here was the intertwining of economic and security priorities, including the attempts to enhance European football’s brand; keeping powerful, breakaway-threatening clubs at bay; conditioning corporate interests and responding to concerns *vis-à-vis* violent or deviant fandom in Europe. Importantly, however, this reveals the advantages of drawing together the two discussed trajectories emphasizing (1) the pursuit of profits (see King 2003), (2) security and social control (see Tsoukala 2009). When drawn closer together, we obtain an even clearer picture of European football’s transformation. By capitalizing on the emerging culture of profitability that gained a momentum in the late 1980s, a combination of disciplinary and security techniques employed in European football have instilled a dominant, highly controlled version of football supporter behaviour. The all-seated stadium was particularly integral to this process but must be understood in connection with the cluster of restrictions placed on supporters’ their expressions, consumption and movements.

Notwithstanding, the programming of spaces of control in European football is not solely historically and sociologically important for analyses of commercial or security practices *per se*. Above all, we see here how a wider European social order was transformed throughout the twenty-first century, involving the re-negotiation of the lines of race, class, gender and ethnicity (King 2010a). Hence, these social changes did not merely marginalize supporters' rights nor reduce 'supporters' to 'consumers'. The 'new' European football stadium and its spaces powerfully demonstrated the prioritization of the affluent, respectable consumer over the mass masculine crowd of the twentieth century (King 2010a). However, despite occurring at a different tempo and strength across different national leagues, these neoliberal developments commonly regarded to encapsulate 'modern football' have remained contentious. The next section therefore unpacks further how a recent tendency of football and political authorities' conceding or giving in to 'customer' demands (Turner 2021) and thereby, seemingly, loosening up the spaces of control reveal another stage of overlapping business, political and security interests whereby fans' viewpoints may be colonized (Numerato 2018).

Receding regimes of control or strategic appropriation?

A quick glance on key developments in European football after 2010 – and not only the short-lived European Super League breakaway in 2021 – may suggest that, at different times, political and football authorities' regimes of social and commercial control have been challenged or receded. In 2012, in a decision framed in terms of empowering supporters, UEFA amended its licencing regulations so that Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs) – intended to act as a bridge between clubs, football authorities and the police – became a mandatory feature of European clubs (Numerato 2018). In 2016, the updated Council of Europe convention relating to football matches institutionalized the prioritization of supporter dialogue over repressive mechanisms (Lee Ludvigsen 2025). In 2018, UEFA lifted its ban on alcohol, allowing for stadium alcohol sale in European competitions, subject to local and national laws (FSA 2018). In 2022, UEFA's Executive Committee approved the use of so-called 'safe standing' sections for UEFA competition fixtures in Germany, France and England, partly in a response to supporters that 'have expressed increasing interest for UEFA to consider standing facilities at European matches' (UEFA 2022; see also Turner 2023a, 2023b). Encouraged by the initial trials, UEFA extended this programme in May 2024 to cover European fixtures in Netherlands, Belgium, Scotland, Portugal and Austria (FSE 2024). *Prima facie*, this outwardly transmits signals of a more de-securitized, fan-centred variant of European football.

It remains possible to question, however, what lies beneath these receding regimes of control. Whilst the discursive emphasis on supporter engagement, and the impact of supporter activists' campaigning and lobbying on these issues certainly should not be downplayed, it can also be argued that these trends – of seemingly *giving in* to 'customer' demand (Turner 2021) – could be understood as strategies by football and political authorities for extending their power and control further (Numerato 2018). Numerato (2018, 131) asserts that, '[o]n many occasions, authorities play the game of dialogue rather than truly being engaged in dialogue'. This, he conceptualizes as strategic appropriation, whereby football or political authorities might positively reply to supporters' discontent or calls for change by adopting or co-opting supporters' suggestions. The motivation behind this colonization of supporters' reflexivity, however, is the 'promot[ion] of their own power, political aims

and business interests' (p. 81). One potential implication of this upon the discussed spaces of control, both in national leagues and European competitions, is that these spaces acquire new layers of control.

The implementation of the SLO, for example, has been marked by inconsistency across European countries. In certain contexts, the policy has solely reinforced the very ideas that supporters' contest – namely, the notions of supporters as *either* passive consumers *or* problem-makers (Numerato 2015). In Czech and English football, for example, SLOs have often been positioned within clubs marketing departments, and different top-down interpretations of the role have seen SLOs dealing with ticketing, marketing and merchandise matters (Numerato 2015; Stott et al. 2020). In other cases, SLOs have been viewed by supporter groups as overly bureaucratic actors, that extend the power and interests of clubs or even the police, while enabling football's authorities to stress that they listened to supporters' demand (Numerato 2015). In turn, these patterns of co-option reveal how the adoption of supporter groups' discourses effectively 'undermines its subversive potential and the challenger's status as a platform for critique and protests' (Holdo 2019, 450).

Building upon Numerato (2018), a similar logic could be extracted from the decision to permit alcohol sale and standing sections in UEFA competitions on a country-by-country basis. For example, it could be argued that the strategic appropriation of 'safe standing' is revealed by how such sections may be characterized by additional related or unrelated disciplinary techniques outside and inside the stadiums (Turner 2023b). Outside the stadium, or occasionally situated on the inside/outside stadium border, many European football contexts have been impacted by the wider turn towards biometric mass surveillance. In countries like Denmark, France, England and Spain, these have been employed for public order or crowd management purposes, but also ticket verification or cashless payments (FSE 2022). Inside the stadium, meanwhile, the implementation of 'safe standing' in the UK meant that designated 'licensed safe standing' sections had to meet strict criteria, including enhanced CCTV use and improved steward training (Turner 2023b; Turner and Lee Ludvigsen 2023, 2024). While it remains to be seen whether similar patterns will surface in other European countries, standing sections, like the SLO policy, which have been a source of contention and supporters' campaigning for decades, could be analysed as an area that is characterized by the very continued expression, rather than the retreat of, power. Thus, as Webber and Turner (2024, 392, emphasis added) write,

Standing, even if it is permitted within these 'safe standing' or rail seating areas, *remains a constrained leisure practice, offering little more than a slightly different mode of consumption rather than active citizenship or democratic participation. Under these conditions, 'safe standing' is but a fictitious experience.* Constrained by the demands of the state, standing will be permitted only if certain conditions around 'safety' and 'security' are met.

As such, while the last fifteen years' regulatory transformations and discursive exercises undoubtedly reveal several 'policy-victories' on the European level, they are also significant because they open up new chapters in the commercial and social control of spaces that can now be framed more easily as *end-products* of consultations and negotiations with fans (Turner and Lee Ludvigsen 2024). Accordingly, should any renewed discontent or concerns with these 'new' spaces of control arise, they might not just be countered by arguments in favour of public safety (Numerato 2018); but framed in terms of co-production and with the undisputable trump card of 'you asked, we listened'.

Moreover, and far from untouched by European football's longstanding political economic rationalities, the selective loosening of these contested restrictions upon supporter dialogue, standing and alcohol consumption may also be explained by the fact that the *product* of European competitions – and their 'eventization' (Ziesche 2023) – relies on carnivalesque yet controlled stadium *atmospheres* and *images* generated by the crowds which make up the product capitalized on by broadcasters, sponsors, clubs and UEFA.

One case in point here is UEFA's own magazine *Champions Journal* which, after the approval of standing facilities, described how 'the rest of Europe' finally could appreciate the 'full effect' of *Westfalenstadion*'s (Borussia Dortmund) famous 'Yellow Wall' section, including its 'audio and visual spectacle' and the 'exultant roar' of 25,000 people on the biggest single terrace section in Europe (Poole 2025). While these images of a rather controlled, legitimized spectacle emanating from supporters' visual performances seemingly are utilized to enhance the Champions League's attraction and 'brand identity' (Ziesche 2023), the contentious politics of football's spaces of control are illustrated by reports about Borussia Dortmund facing action from UEFA over anti-UEFA banners on the same 'Yellow Wall' during a Champions League fixture in October 2024 (Fretton 2024).

Returning to the Foucauldian logic, the 'opening up' of the stadium (to conditional standing) caters the neoliberal purpose of commercial exchange and strategies, but within this milieu, undesirable or bad flows be kept within socially and economically 'acceptable limits' (cf. Foucault 2008). In many ways, this demonstrates the section's primary argument: the recent tendency and appearance of giving in to supporter demands, thereby loosening up the spaces of control may occur alongside two processes. First, it may occur alongside the amplification of existing disciplinary techniques, or the substitution of old techniques with new ones. Second, it can serve as a mean to mute or colonize supporters' discontent and ensure that supporters' discontent 'against modern football' acquires a level of co-production or complicity, by virtue of being 'embedded within the *neoliberalization of modern football*' (Turner 2021, 975, original emphasis).

Conclusion

It has become commonplace to speak of European football's transformation. By focusing primarily on the period after 1985, this article has explored the interplay and overlaps between economic and security priorities in the case of European football. Whereas attention has been paid to the connection between the two in *national* football contexts, at different stages (Alpan and Tanil 2023; Antonowicz and Grodecki 2018; Dubal 2010; Giulianotti 2011), the premise of this article is that these powerful forces are yet to be analysed in the context of European-wide competitions. This, despite European football's historical and current status as an important site of global sport, that attracts millions of spectators every season and has recently restructured the Champions League and introduced the new UEFA Conference League which translates into more annual fixtures. As contended, the interplay between commercial and security-related interests represents a central and characterizing feature of European football's on-going transformation. Such contention leans upon the following three sub-arguments.

First, the Heysel disaster's aftermath accelerated European football's securitization and commercialization. However, the acceleration of these parallel processes was not only directed by the discontent among powerful clubs concerning European football's regulation and validity, but macro-structural trends of that time; most notably the take-off of

neoliberal free-market policies (King 2003) and the politicization of security in Europe in the 1980s and early 1990s (Tsoukala 2009). The post-Heysel period, accordingly, permitted the view of football-related violence and disorder as not merely legal and social issues, but economic ones. Second, this enabled a key imperative from the top-down speaking to the creation of spaces of control (most notably epitomized by *the stadium*) and a more socio-economically progressive version of football. Across Europe, the football stadium therefore came to symbolize a locus of UEFA's and clubs' commercial and disciplinary power, contributing to a three-levelled marginalization – cultural, economic and legal – of football supporters.

Third, whilst certain developments throughout the 2010s and 2020s may suggest that these spaces of commercial and social control are receding in line with supporter, or customer demands, this may paradoxically extend further the power of political and football authorities, clubs and their partners. Rather than revealing the patterns of de-securitization, the strategic appropriation of fans' calls for change (cf. Numerato 2018) might contribute to a scenario where 'the challengers' – in this case, critical supporters – 'now have an interest in defending the position of the elites' (Holdo 2019, 450).

Overall, while this article cannot tell the full story of European football's transformation, nor that of its many national contexts, it utilizes insights from Foucault to demonstrate, first, how the European ritual which King (2003) observed was indeed an economically deregulated but legally regulated ritual. Second, how the European 'counter-hooligan' policies that Tsoukala (2009) analyses were implemented against the backdrop of a crisis within European football, where marketization and the shifting power structures of European super clubs and UEFA pushed European football and its competition towards a new and more market-oriented era that relied on order. When speaking of *European football's transformation*, therefore, the two complementary insights emphasizing political economic forces (King 2003, 2004, 2010b), and the impact of security and risk policies (Tsoukala 2007, 2009) do not just coalesce around a similar key site, and turning points; but they mutually reinforce each other, as this contribution emphasizes.

Beyond showcasing the compatibility between two positions on social, political and economic changes in the literature on European football, this article's arguments remain important because they illuminate how neoliberal and security policies are fine-tuned, work in tandem and serve common interests speaking to the extension of power and markets, and maintenance of a social and public order – as alluded to in the quote opening this paper. As contended here, this article therefore contributes towards an understanding of how securitizing and commercializing logics, as expressed on the European level, devised frameworks that came to co-exist, and interacted with trends on the national level. The insights from the analysis of the European level, hence, helps us contextualize the mentioned national level case studies, and position these national transformations as interactive with transnational frameworks.

Finally, this paper not only brings closer social scientific analyses of European football. Building on King, who highlighted in the preface of *The European Ritual* King (2003: x) that analyses of European football should ambitiously aim to develop 'a more general understanding of Europe' and its societies, this article underlines how European football represents an important case for rethinking how developments in economic and security fields influence the ways in which social and cultural spaces of consumption have been transformed by a set of public, private, national and supranational actors; and its users subjected to new social orders and norms.

Notes

1. For comparison, in 2003/04 this number was \$569 million (Statista 2024).
2. Indeed, this may be a source of contention between UEFA and clubs. In 2025, the Court of Arbitration for Sports ruled that UEFA should not have punished Norwegian club SK Brann after their fans displayed 'provocative' banners during a women's Champions League fixture (The Guardian 2025).

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