

The moral economy of the English football crowd: The European Super League and the contingency of football fan activism

Capital & Class

1–21

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DOI: 10.1177/03098168241232375

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Abstract

On 18 April 2021, six of the most storied clubs in English football – Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City, Liverpool, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur – announced they would be joining a new breakaway European Super League. These proposals triggered vehement opposition from football fans, which catalysed the intervention of the UK government in the form of a fan-led review of football governance. The reaction to the European Super League – which collapsed within 48 hours – demonstrates that the commodification and globalisation of football is contested. This article applies the lens of moral economy to analyse the contemporary mobilisations of football fans in England counter to these processes. The novel application of a moral economy framework provides a fresh perspective within the extant literature on football fan activism. This article represents the first systematic application of a moral economy approach to the political sociology of contemporary sport and its fandom. Employing an expanded understanding of moral economy, the article extends its application beyond the analysis of pre-modern food riots popularised by E.P. Thompson, incorporating the insights of Karl Polanyi and Andrew Sayer. Adopting this broader meaning, the concept of moral economy enables us to explore emergent and dynamic forms of fan activism, which seek to contest the commodification of football. The supporter mobilisations against the European Super League are examined to illuminate this perspective. Through an exploration of the contingency of the moral economy of football fandom, this article expands, in conceptual terms, the literature on football-based social movements, connecting it to the wider commodification

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and financialisation of football (as an important aspect of everyday life) and the internal contradictions and crisis of advanced capitalism.

Keywords

commodification, English premier league, European super league, football, lay morality, moral economy, sport

Introduction

It is well established that sport can provide a space for resistance (Lavalette 2013). Such expressions of resistance are not limited to intra-sport matters nor professional athletes, but increasingly involve fans, as reflexive agents, seeking to effect change both ‘in’ and ‘through’ sport (Numerato 2018). While evident in most sports, football has provided particularly fertile ground for fan mobilisation. Implying a general shift from default passivity and deference to a more critical activist disposition among football supporters (in England and elsewhere), the existing literature has demonstrated how football fans have sought to resist the encroachments of neoliberalism (Numerato 2015), globalisation (Rookwood & Chan 2011), securitisation (Ludvigsen 2023), financialisation and indebtedness (Millward & Poulton 2014) on fan cultures, traditions and rights, while simultaneously advocating for independent regulatory oversight (Brown 2000), a more ‘authentic’ fan experience (Turner 2023) and stronger democratic representation of fans (Fitzpatrick 2016). In exercising resistant agency, English supporters (in both national and transnational movements) have increasingly drawn on a varied repertoire of contention, employing digital activism through social media, podcasts, e-petitions and micro-blogging, as well as more conventional methods of banners, chants, demonstrations, fanzines, boycotts, ‘sit-ins’ and occupations (Lawrence & Crawford 2022). The apogee of fan resistance in football may have been reached in April 2021.

On 18 April 2021, six of the most storied clubs in English football – Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City, Liverpool, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur – announced they would be joining a new breakaway European Super League (ESL). Within hours of the leaked announcement, football supporters mobilised – via street protests, media campaigns and political lobbying – to resist the proposals. This sudden and intense mobilisation proved decisive: within 48 hours, the ESL project had collapsed. Turner and Millward (2023) characterise the anti-ESL protests as a critical juncture in the 40-year fan movement against neoliberal forces within English football: it cemented the idea (in the minds of the wider fanbase, the media and crucially, the UK government) that English football is ‘more than just another commodifiable form of entertainment’ (MacInnes 2021) and bolstered a determination to protect the heritage of its unique pyramid structure through statutory legislation. The announcement of a new independent regulator for football (IREF) in November 2023, following the establishment of the fan-led review (FLR) and subsequent Government White Paper into Football Governance, represents a watershed moment for the national game. Yet, despite these important institutional developments, the neoliberalisation of the game has continued

largely unabated since April 2021. Moreover, despite the ‘success’ of the anti-ESL protests, we have not witnessed a sea-change in the nature of fan activism and attitudes. Akin to the last 40 years, post-ESL, most English football fans have continued to acquiesce to the neoliberal commercialisation pervading the sport. Herein lies the puzzle at the centre of this article: when and why do football fans protest?

Given the focus on collective action, rational-choice theory seems to offer a parsimonious answer: self-interest. Indeed, as football fan activism is characterised by a small number of committed activists among a wider population of ‘free riders’, rational choice may seem the most obvious choice to explain this phenomenon. Crawford (2004) highlights that most fan activism is motivated by a desire to enhance their own interests as consumers, such as more affordable pricing or a ‘better’ fan experience. More recently, rational-choice reasoning is invoked in explanations for why fans mobilised against the ESL but not, for example, Saudi Arabia’s takeover of Newcastle United via a sovereign wealth fund. The argument goes that the outrage of fans against the ESL was ‘an act of self-interest’, whereas the (indirect) ownership of a club by a state that ‘imprisons human rights activists, persecutes gay people, denies women’s rights and dismembers journalists’ is met with either gleeful welcome or fatalistic acceptance (MacInnes 2021). Putting aside the fact that there have been several (albeit small) protests and acts of resistance against the Newcastle takeover (Bailey 2023), orthodox economic theory provides little explanatory weight as a general framework for understanding football fandom. As relational sociologists (Cleland et al. 2018) have highlighted, a rational, economic picture of fan activism crucially neglects the role of collective identity.

The relational study of supporter activism sensitises us to the various features of football fandom and how they can facilitate collective action: a ready-made network of actors with a shared collective identity; emotional, affective commitment; its sociability and provision of established spaces for communal gathering and the exchange of ideas and experiences; common aims; and often an agreed upon ‘villain’. As Lestrelin (2012) observes, ‘Far from being reduced to the consumption of a spectacle, supporting means organizing, mobilizing, and socializing’ (p. 509). However, as Fitzpatrick and Hoey (2022) outline, this relational sociology of football fan activism only takes us so far. While not fixed, the relational qualities of football fandom are not new. What is lacking from the current literature on football fan activism is a theory of change that can account for fluctuations in the pattern of activism and resistance – in other words, its contingency.

The existing research tends to offer synchronic ‘snapshot’ empirical analyses of fan activism from the perspective of a single club (Fitzpatrick 2013; Olesen 2018) or campaign issue (Ludvigsen 2023; Thomas 2011; Turner 2023). This reinforces the view that football fan activism and protest is sporadic and parochial. This synchronic perspective is counterbalanced by the general supposition that football fans have gradually become more politicised over time (Fitzpatrick 2016). Currently, the existing literature does not reconcile this apparent paradox: the view of football fan activism as episodic, uneven, and sometimes contradictory with the assumption that football fans, as a social group, have become more activist and politicised over the last four decades in a broadly linear fashion. Can we account for the puzzle of football fan activism, which appears both

punctuated and incremental? The existing literature does not explain the contingency of fan activism with an adequate sensitivity to temporality nor individual agency.

Through the application of a moral economy framework to conceptualise this contingent and dynamic process, this article extends the literature on fan activism in three key respects. First, the article elucidates how fan resistance to commodification, animated at specific punctuated points in time, is premised on 'legitimizing notions' that are drawn from a wider popular moral consensus that has developed gradually (Thompson 1971: 78). Second, it illuminates the dilemmas encountered by fans in negotiating the commodification of football in the era of late capitalism, enabling us to make sense of what Kennedy and Kennedy call the 'double fiction' of football fandom that is simultaneously 'both resistant towards, and compliant with, the neoliberal . . . free-market hegemony . . . at the top of the football pyramid' (Turner & Millward 2023: 7). Finally, it highlights the significance of football fandom as a source of collective identity and site of grassroots political agitation that contributes not only to the future trajectory of the world's most popular cultural phenomena, but also wider social and political change. Together, these approaches provide an analytical scaffold for analysing the evolution of football fan activism over recent decades and help to illuminate the episodic nature of the phenomenon in the context of football's dynamic political economy. This theorising is grounded by a documentary and archival analysis of different sources of evidence of football fan activism over the last 40 years, incorporating: conventional media (newspaper, radio, television); online (such as blogs, podcasts, Fan TV channels, e-zines and social media content) and offline (fanzines) spaces of fandom (Woods & Lee-Ludvigsen 2021); and official grey literature. Central to the study is the analysis of the football fanzine archive housed at the British Library. In providing a democratic forum to discuss, develop and disseminate ideas, fanzines have developed a critical, reflective commentary on the political economy of modern football (Atton 2006). As such, fanzines are a rich research resource, providing a crucial insight into the cultural memory of football fans and their activism (Breen & Hoey 2022).

The article is organised into five sections. The first unpacks the moral economy framework, explaining how it can theorise the contingent nature of resistance and protest. It applies two distinct but related conceptions of moral economy: E.P. Thompson's (1971) historically embedded, contextualised, descriptive approach; and the broader, more normative, understanding of 'lay morality' (Sayer 2007a, 2007b) that underpin and inform market economies. Uniting what I term the 'descriptive-contextual' and 'normative-general' conceptions of moral economy is a recognition that in the process of capitalist consumption people draw consciously and unconsciously upon historically established customs, conventional practices and ethics (Bolton & Laaser 2013). Protest, activism, and resistance are dependent upon a range of factors; a significant driver is the degree to which the changes to the status quo are seen to contravene the prevailing moral economy. The second section contextualises the commodification of English football, drawing on Polanyi's theory of the 'double-movement'. This section discusses how football provides an instructive example of globalised capitalism and why it invokes both resistance and acquiescence; these antinomies are captured by Kennedy and Kennedy's (2010) concept of 'double fiction'. The third section provides a 'thick description' of the anti-ESL fan protests in April 2021. It emphasises the contingent nature of both the ESL

and the counter-response of English fans to the proposed breakaway. I do not seek to demonstrate any causality between the two: the extent to which the fan protests ultimately thwarted the realisation of the ESL is a moot point (Levy 2021). The goal is to analyse the contingent nature of fan activism and why the 'moral shock' (Jasper 2008, 2011) of the ESL provoked unprecedented fan mobilisations. Employing the conceptual lens provided by Thompson, the fourth section discusses how fan protests in opposition to the commodification and globalisation of football can be seen as a rear-guard defence of perceived customary entitlements – or the moral economy of the English football crowd. The final concluding section highlights the opportunities for using the moral economy frame for analysing fan activism both 'in' and 'through' football (Numerato 2018). Attention is drawn to the need for scholarly engagement with social and political activism through football¹ to understand how the latent 'lay morality' of football fan communities are attempts to 're-moralize' the wider economy.

Moral economy: a brief conceptual history

For the purposes of this article, moral economy is understood according to two distinct, but interrelated, meanings. In the first, more general, sense of the term, moral economy is employed as an antonym to the rational-choice logic of neoclassical liberal political economy. At its broadest, moral economy represents a shared 'set of socially-held values and norms around the way the economy *should* function' (Fouksman 2020: 2, emphasis added). Charles Tilly (cited in Thompson 1991: 338) offers a neat definition:

The term 'moral economy' makes sense when claimants to a commodity can invoke non-monetary rights to that commodity, and third parties will act to support these claims – when, for example, community membership supersedes price as a basis of entitlement.

At the core of moral economy is a concern for the inherent relationship between the social and economic. Put simply, it seeks to retrieve 'the moral' in an economic environment detached from ethical reasoning and highlights how the economy continues to be inextricably embedded in society. It is the reconciliation of these three spheres of human action – the moral, the social and the economy – that advocates of the concept have sought to achieve (Götz 2015: 148). This 'general theory of moral economy' – depicted as the natural order displaced by the ideology of the free market – is invoked in a broad range of anti-capitalist critique and has a long lineage, if not universal resonance (Boyd 2018).

Andrew Sayer's work critically engages with the 'normative character of everyday experience' (Sayer 2007a: 101). For Sayer, we are reflexive beings who make daily value judgements on the well-being of society, the environment, our families and ourselves. This is what Sayer calls 'lay morality'. While such normative concerns, decisions and justifications are shaped by our 'social position and influences, discourses, cultural norms, or indeed habitus', they should not be reduced to such external explanations (Sayer 2007a: 101). The identification that many football fans have with their club is an example of this everyday lay morality (Stone 2007). The benefit of Sayer's notion of lay morality for the study of football fan activism is two-fold: first, it alerts us to the need to recognise the reflexivity of fans who are confronted with day-to-day ethical dilemmas

about the support of their club in the context of football's commodification (which cannot be easily read from a 'cultural script' Sayer 2007a: 102)); and second, it sensitises us to the importance of the subjective interpretations of well-being and wider social values by individuals.

A more delineated usage of moral economy was formulated by the Marxist historian, E.P. Thompson. In his seminal 1971 article, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the Eighteenth Century', Thompson bound the concept to specific historical context: the 18th century English bread riots. For Thompson, moral economy was an umbrella term for the customary entitlements and practices of the 'English crowd' in the traditional agrarian society rendered obsolete by the great leap forward to the modern market economy (Götz 2015). At the centre of Thompson's conception is the contention that the 18th century bread riots should not be interpreted as a simple economic and utilitarian response – so-called 'rebellions of the belly' (Thompson 1971: 77). Rather than spasmodic, violent reactions to increased prices, for Thompson (1991: 188), the bread riots constituted collective actions to defend traditional rights that were supported by the 'wider moral consensus of the community' (188). This moral consensus was premised on an established set of internalised customary rights to a 'just price'. The protests, according to Thompson, were the result of a perceived violation of the 'particular equilibrium' of expected customs of reciprocity between the 'paternalist authority and the crowd' in economic exchange (Thompson 1971: 129). The belief in the defence of such traditional rights or customs (supported by the wider consensus of the community) provided the 'legitimising notion' of the protesting crowd (Thompson 1991: 188). In the context of the bread riots, it is the perceived violation of the established custom of 'just price' or adulterations to the traditional 'bread mix' that provided the legitimisation for the 18th century protests. From Thompson's perspective, moral economy is about the protection of traditional rights rather than progressive change: a rear-guard defence of the old residual entitlements rather than the demand for brighter, alternative futures.

The two conceptualisations of moral economy are distinct, but intertwined. Both seek to challenge the notion of economics as a non-normative object of study, with an objective mechanism independent of moral imperatives (Thompson 1991). However, Thompson sought to limit the application of the term to a contextualised set of moral entitlements. He guarded against the designation of moral economy for general situations where tradition, customs, and values are found in market economies, for fear of concept stretching (Thompson 1991). The Thompsonian notion of moral economy is situated, both spatially and temporally. The customary entitlements internalised by the English crowd are specific to the 'particular historical formation' of 18th century English society (Thompson 1991: 340). The other distinction is between the descriptive and normative. The general notion of moral economy suggests (either implicitly or explicitly) that neo-classical understandings of the market 'crowd out' more pro-social, moral behaviour through creation of perverse incentives (Sandel 2012). In Thompson's analysis, however, the use of the term 'moral' is descriptive rather than prescriptive; he is not seeking to designate values and customs of 'the poor' as ethically superior to the new market economy (Carrier 2018).

This opposition between the descriptive-contextual and normative-general conception of moral economy is faulty. The notion of moral economy can be released from the

historical context of pre-industrial English society, without losing its conceptual force (Kohli 1987; Swenson 1989). In this article, I conceive these twin concepts of moral economy (the normative/general and the descriptive/contextual) as a dualism rather than a duality. There is a generalised, universal 'lay' concept of moral economy that captures the traditions, customs, values that inevitably feature in all types of systems of trade and exchange to some degree. In addition, we can detect specific sets of customary rights and entitlements internalised by social groups in particular socio-economic contexts. Both conceptions are employed below to illuminate the nature of football fan activism in the contemporary period.

The global mediated spectacle of football in the 21st century is both a mirror to the dominant economic agenda and the catalyst for anti-neoliberal resistance from football fans, first, within the sport, and second, in the wider economy (Numerato 2018). In this context, I employ the concept of moral economy to examine how football fan activism is 'motivated by ideational, rather than material, expectations of personal gain' (Götz 2015: 148). Hitherto, the notion of moral economy has only been alluded to in the literature on football's contemporary political economy. For example, Kennedy and Kennedy (2010) argue that fans claim 'a sense of "moral ownership" of their football clubs' (p. 182). This sentiment was once broadly shared by the economic owners of the club; the divergence of this economic and moral ownership, for Kennedy and Kennedy (2010), is the source of the tension in 'modern' football.² Similarly, Fitzpatrick (2013, 2016) analyses how commercialisation has eroded the legitimising notion (in the eyes of fans, the media and politicians) that club owners and the governing bodies in football are the 'moral guardians' of the game. Elsewhere, both Testa (2009) and Numerato (2015) have observed how the emotional dynamics among football supporters (such as group solidarity and collective identity) imbue fan movements with a sense of moral legitimacy and even superiority. Most recently, Turner and Millward (2023) invoke the 'moral economy of the contemporary English football crowd' in connection to the ESL. However, in each case, the discussion of moral economy does not move beyond intimations to the phrase as a catch-all term for the social relationships, identities, values and emotions bound up with football fandom. As a corrective, the next section connects the generalised concept of moral economy to the contemporary political economy of professional football and the countermovement of fan activism (in an English context). It achieves this via a discussion of Karl Polanyi's analysis of the embeddedness of economic institutions in the social relations of reciprocity and redistribution.

The double-movement and double fiction of football fandom

In the United Kingdom, the growing neoliberal logic of football, involving the incremental decoupling of clubs from their traditional supporter base and communities, has provided the impetus for an increase in football fan activism since the 1980s (García & Welford 2015). Polanyi's concept of the 'double-movement' has been employed to theorise the countervailing mobilisations of supporters to resist football's gentrification (Webber 2017). Polanyi's concept of the double-movement shares several commonalities with the notion of moral economy. Foremost is the rejection of a dichotomy between the moral and social, on one side, and the economic and market, on the other. In his seminal

work, *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi (2001 [1944]) examines the social and political changes and continuities in the shift to a market society. A key change was the political institutionalisation of the market. This included the creation of ‘fictitious commodities’, in which commodities (particularly land, labour and money) that are not inherently made for being bought, sold or traded, become so under market capitalism (Polanyi 2001 [1944]). Contra to orthodox economics, Polanyi argues that economic activity is ‘embedded’ within a social context. In Polanyi’s perspective, the notion of the self-regulating market is ‘Utopian’ and always needs to be underpinned by a social, political and moral sphere (Block 2001: xxiv). It is this ‘embeddedness’, characterised by reciprocal and redistributive relations, that enables economies to function (Bolton & Laaser 2013: 511). The social embeddedness of the football economy in England is remarked upon by Welsh (2022), who claims:

. . . these clubs have accumulated huge surpluses out of value that is actually produced from the wider society around football, by the innumerable participants, players, supporters, crowds, schools, parks, groundskeepers, teachers, pubs, local businesses, municipal authorities, players’ families and friends, volunteer officials, even St John’s Ambulance people, not to mention the small army of clubs’ staff and personnel that keep the show on the road. (p. 179)

Polanyi argues that as the forces of economic liberalism take root, the economy becomes more unregulated and ‘disembedded’, and society suffers from the attendant effects of anomie and dislocation. In response, a countermovement emerges that seeks to provide greater social protection, via statutory laws and regulation that tame the market or remedial action through social welfare (Block 2001). The double-movement captures this ongoing dialectic between the disembedding and reembedding forces of market societies. Drawing on Polanyi, authors have sought to illuminate a similar dialectic in football: where clubs have been disembedded from their local communities and the countermovement by fans re-embed them back in the line with the wider social values and traditions (Webber 2017).

Notwithstanding the growing level of resistance to the commodification of top-level English football, most football fans have remained passive and largely acquiescent. Contrary to the image of the politicised, activist supporter, most fans can be characterised as ‘market realists’: there is a pragmatic, if at times reluctant, acceptance of the commercial reality underpinning the neoliberal logic of contemporary football (Kennedy & Kennedy 2010). Such a fatalist perspective of contemporary football fandom is captured by Rowe et al. (2010) who observe that:

A common and often pleasurable way of dealing with the contradiction between the imagined innocence of a ‘golden era’ of football fandom and the advanced, rationalized commercialism of contemporary sport is to complain. Fan complaints can take many forms. Perhaps the most familiar is to bemoan the state of football, the primacy of money, the power of television and so on, but within a framework of practical consciousness that submits to the feasible and, probably, the inevitable prospect that there is little alternative.

This begrudging accommodation has been gradual: Kennedy and Kennedy (2010) claim that over time, a critical mass of fans has ‘come to terms’ with the creeping

commodification of football and even chastise other supporters for their wilful nostalgia, idealism, or ‘cloying sentimentality’ (p. 189). Adapting Polanyi’s notion of ‘fictitious commodities’, Kennedy and Kennedy (2010) argue that the non-market notions of footballing ‘tradition’ and ‘community’ are equally constructed (p. 186). In this ‘double fiction’ (Kennedy & Kennedy 2010: 185) fans have become more cynical about the putative traditions of identity and community and a growing recognition that football clubs operate in a commercially sensitive market environment. Turner and Millward (2023) allude to this ‘double fiction’ of the ‘relational culture of contestation’ among English football fans, which is simultaneously ‘both resistant towards, and compliant with, the neoliberal . . . free-market hegemony . . . at the top of the football pyramid’ (p. 7). The concept of ‘double fiction’ sensitises us to ‘the struggles and compromises of football supporters as they wrestle with the possibilities of football as both an economic and community asset’ (Kennedy & Kennedy 2010: 187).

The dilemmas faced by fans in negotiating the commodification of football, encompassing the twin fictions of the free-market and the needs of the ‘traditional community’, is aligned with the moral economy framework. While acknowledging that most football fans tacitly accept the basic structure of the football economy, there are underpinning moral sentiments that shape and inflect their response at given moments in time. The agency of the grassroots to resist the incursion of market forces is captured by Thompson’s seminal historical-anthropological approach, which foregrounds ‘the crowd’ as the bearers of traditional customs and moral evaluations of their community to oppose economic practices that are perceived to be unfair and destructive in times of emergency. That these customary rights may exist in the realm of mythical traditions does not denude them of their potency. In the section below, I describe the anti-ESL protests in April 2021, locating them in their historical and political context. I employ these mobilisations as a case study to understand how the moral economy framework can provide an explanatory account of the contingent nature of fan activism in English football.

The ‘moral shock’ of the European super league

The proposed breakaway of the ESL threatened to unravel the cultural heritage and financial sustainability of English football.³ While there is not the space here to reprise the full proposals, three key features are worth stating. First, their self-appointed inclusion was based on a combination of brand prestige and revenue share rather than sporting merit: while not the most historically successful clubs on the pitch (in terms of domestic and European honours won), the 12 clubs constituted the ‘European elite’ in terms of revenue valuation, occupying eleven of the top fifteen positions in the league table of ‘Enterprise Value’ (KPMG 2020). Second, several of these clubs, despite their significant revenue accumulation, were also some of the most indebted in Europe. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on football revenues and profit, due to a loss of matchday income and a reduction in broadcasting income, created an acute financial imperative for some clubs (namely Barcelona, Real Madrid and Juventus) who had laden themselves with debt to compete with the economic dominance of the English Premier League (EPL) and the state-powered oil riches of nouveau-riche Paris Saint Germain and Manchester City (Lowe 2021; Maguire 2021). A ‘golden hello’ of up to €350 million,

plus another guaranteed €178 million annually for merely participating, was designed to ease these financial pressures in the short and long term. Third, and most crucially, the ESL represented a closed shop, which eliminated the prospect of relegation from the ESL for any of the founder clubs. The ESL followed the logic of one of its pioneers, Silvio Berlusconi (the Italian media tycoon, AC Milan owner and politician), who derided the old knock-out format as ‘not modern thinking’ as it entailed ‘the risk of many hazards: rain, bad refereeing, bad luck and the risk of first round elimination’ (cited in Flynn et al. 1989: 165). Together, these factors represented the establishment of an oligarchic cartel in European football, funded by JP Morgan, which was anticompetitive in both the economic and sporting sense. In short, it sought ‘to transform English (and European) football into a more secure monopoly power over [capital] accumulation’ (Welsh 2022: 178). In doing so, the ESL threatened to further ‘disembed’ football clubs from their traditional competitions and communities, directly contravening the moral economy of the English football crowd.

The ESL was the realisation of an idea that had been discussed behind the closed doors of European football’s elite since the early 1970s (Macedo et al. 2022). Once described as the ‘abominable snowman’ of football – ‘Everyone has heard of it, but no-one knows what it looks like’ – the threat of a breakaway has lurked in the shadows of successive reforms to European and domestic competitions (When Saturday Comes (WSC) 1991: 4). Yet, despite decades in planning, the project that was ostensibly created ‘to save football’, collapsed within a mere 48 hours. Within hours of the rumoured breakaway, supporter groups of the six English clubs directly involved coordinated to publicly denounce the ESL plans on social media, expressing their disgust, ‘betrayal’ and ‘embarrassment’ at the association of their club with the ‘opportunistic greed’ of the ESL, which they claimed, ‘represents the death of everything that football should be about’ (Sky Sports 2021). Disquiet quickly transformed into organised protest, as fans of rival clubs, coordinated via independent football supporters’ networks and the national Football Supporters Association (FSA), started to coalesce into a cohesive anti-ESL movement (Turner & Millward 2023). This movement utilised both online and offline tactics, combining (social and mainstream) media campaigns and street protest. Appealing to a wider moral consensus, based on the tradition of the English football pyramid and the meritocratic principle of sport, the ESL was unique in the way it managed to unite elected politicians across the spectrum, Prince William, as well as professional football managers and players, all of whom publicly expressed the same outrage as supporters.

The UK government intervened, with the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, threatening to drop a ‘legislative bomb’ on the project. During these tumultuous two days, a domino effect took hold, as the six English clubs, one by one, quickly reneged on their plan to join the ESL. By the evening of Tuesday 20 April, the owners and executives of the six English clubs were making public *mea culpas*, ‘pleading for forgiveness’ and offering ‘grovelling apologies to fans’ for failing to respect the ‘deep rooted traditions’ of the English game (Jackson et al. 2021). The debacle prompted the UK government to launch the FLR into the governance of football. A central plank of this review was a determination to prevent the break-up of the English football pyramid by similar ventures in the future (an aim set to be operationalised through the introduction of an

independent regulator). In Polanyian terms, the attempt to further entrench the disembedded nature of commodified European football stimulated a countermovement of English fans, whose resistance catalysed state intervention to re-embed the national game in pre-existing sets of social values and traditions.

This succession of events was contingent rather than inevitable. Nevertheless, the ESL was not an aberration, but merely the ‘most recent instance in a long series of movement towards monopoly in corporate football’ (Welsh 2022: 178). The deregulation of football governance, begun in earnest in the early 1980s, steadily weakened the bonds of sporting solidarity that had bound the 92 clubs of the Football League, reflecting the wider liberalisation of the UK economy in the Thatcherite era (Fitzpatrick 2016). Taken together, this incremental liberalisation was an important precursor to the advent of the EPL. In seeking to maximise broadcasting income in the face of falling revenues, the EPL set a precedent for the ESL (Welsh 2022). In the immediate aftermath of the ESL announcement, a Tottenham Hotspur supporter and podcaster (Machin 2021, 00:05:30) said:

I'm grateful for Sky Sports and the Premier League being on the right side of the fight for once, but they are part of the problem . . . let's not forget that. The Premier league was a breakaway league . . . The five clubs involved . . . engineered a greater take of the football income . . . That has laid the foundations for what is happening now . . . But it doesn't mean it's less palatable when it happens. Its horrible . . . If you need proof that the fans don't matter, that the players don't really matter, and only the owners matter, then this is it.

The trend towards monopoly and capital centralisation – the ‘immanent laws of capitalist production’ (Marx 1990: 763) – has been noted by media commentators (Wilson 2021) and the key architects of the ESL (Noble & Agini 2023). Fan media alludes to the sense of path-dependency, if not inevitability, of the ESL: the notion that the concentration of power and wealth on a domestic scale would inexorably lead to an oligopoly on a European level. Indeed, it is instructive to note that the official branding is ‘The Super League’, lacking the prefix ‘European’, thus leaving the door open to further global expansion.

The shape-shifting spectre of the ‘Superleague’ has haunted English football since the 1980s. Akin to the project itself, the protests against the ESL represented the culmination of over three decades of fan resistance to the commercialisation and marketisation of English football. The anti-ESL movement that sprang into action between 18 and 20 April did not occur in a vacuum: the fan mobilisations reflected the contestation and resistance of the neoliberal, deregulatory trends of European football’s political economy over recent decades (Fitzpatrick & Hoey 2022). However, the anti-ESL protests (especially at the scale witnessed) were not an inevitable outcome. The economic inequality, social exclusion and misgovernance of English football in the era of late capitalism have not provoked consistent and coherent fan resistance. Moreover, the reaction among the supporters of the other six non-English founding clubs was much more acquiescent, if not supportive, to the ESL proposals (Aarons 2021). A survey found that English fans were the strongest in their opposition to the ESL proposals, whereas Spanish footballer supporters offered a more favourable audience (Page & Millward 2021). The divergence

of attitudes towards the ESL across different European fanbases has an established lineage. In 1998, WSC remarked that in Italy, where (despite being the birthplace of the Ultras movement) there is 'little culture of [popular] protest', 'Most fans regard the arrival of a European league as only a matter of time. The signs are they will shrug and accept it' (Mason 1998: 21).

The contingent nature of the anti-ESL protests is illuminated by the concept of 'moral shock' (Jasper 2008): that is, an event so emotionally moving or morally reprehensible that people are motivated to articulate their moral intuitions and mobilised to seek solutions (Wisneski & Skitka 2017: 1). Characterising the ESL as a 'moral shock', Turner and Millward (2023) examine how it triggered the networked online activism and street-based protests of supporters. The ESL proposals were described in explicitly moralistic language: the narrative was one of outrage and betrayal at the 'avaricious architects' of a 'grotesque project' (Northcroft 2021; Panja & Smith 2021). David Dein, the former Arsenal chairman and one of the key architects of the EPL, described the failed attempt to set up an ESL as 'immoral and abhorrent' (BBC 2021). In a House of Lords debate, Conservative Peer Baroness Barran quoted Stephen Fry's (comedian, broadcaster and former Norwich City director) words on how the ESL: 'brought together the whole divided nation . . . everyone united in disgust and revulsion at such greed and stupidity' (HL Deb 20 April 2021). Observing the dilemmas faced by football fans and capturing the 'moral shock' of the ESL, a Manchester City supporter (Machin 2021, 9.00) observed:

I am aware that fans were relatively hypocritical, we did sit there, and we enjoyed the Premier League [but] we are inherently human . . . I think there comes a moment . . . there's a line and I think we have realised just how far the game has been drifting away from us as fans and how long we've sat and thought 'you know it's alright, we get the entertainment and all that kind of stuff' and I'm guilty of this . . . of just kind of going along with it. But sometimes the curtain is pulled back and we see behind the scenes and it's fucking ugly. It's absolutely disgusting, and you realise quite quickly how little we really matter . . . nothing more than customer 1206789 or whatever . . . I am disappointed in my club, but not remotely surprised. But I am sad, I am offended, and I am heartbroken, because once again you hold onto this idea that there is some emotional connection there still and they do care about you.

The moral shock of the ESL mobilised more football fans across a bigger range of clubs in a shorter space of time than ever before (Turner & Millward 2023). The EPL, which along with the UEFA Champions League in 1992 can be seen as antecedents to the ESL, did not provoke the same level of resistance. The parallels between the two breakaway leagues are clear: emerging first as negotiating tactic to secure more money and power over 'lesser' clubs, both EPL and ESL utilised crises (in the form of the Hillsborough disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively) to secure a bigger share of the wealth. Notwithstanding the open nature of the EPL (which allowed promotion and relegation to the rest of the Football League), the other key difference is that the EPL was ultimately realised. While critical commentary of the breakaway EPL abounded within fanzines, a distinct lack of belief in the capacity of fans to mobilise against it was evident. There were explicit calls on those in authority, such as the club chairmen excluded from the breakaway league and the Professional Footballers Association, to

make the case against it, 'as the vanguard of protest', on behalf of fans. Fans bemoaned 'the lack of numbers, the credibility, the will and the desire to organise' among fan groups (Horton 1991: 8). Fanzine contributors observed the muted response to the EPL, arguing that the 'splutters of outrage' quickly subsided and criticised the lack of 'debate on this subject in the papers' (Lyons & Brewster 1991: 7).

This presents a puzzle: why did the ESL elicit such large scale, unified protests when other similar commercial innovations (namely the establishment of the EPL) did not? In other words, why was there a moral shock? The mobilisations of English fans to the ESL were contingent not inevitable. They can be explained by the widely held perception that the proposals contravened their set of customary rights as supporters – or the 'moral economy of the English football crowd'.

The moral economy of fan activism in football

The anti-ESL protests were motivated by moral conceptions of perceived entitlements and customs. The contingency of the anti-ESL protests hinged on the moral economy of the English football crowd, in both the contextual and general sense.

From the Thompsonian perspective, the anti-ESL protests were the result of a specific, contextualised moral economy: a counter-response from a residual moral economy of the 'crowd' at a time of perceived emergency. The anti-ESL protests were not premised on a rational calculation of price, affordability or access. In fact, as Houben et al. (2022) state, according to orthodox economic theory the ESL should have enjoyed support rather than resistance fans as it offered: 'an additional football-related product, on top of the available products' for fans, as consumers of professional football, to enjoy should they so wish' (p. 207). The anti-ESL mobilisations were premised on the perceived violation of established traditions or customs. These traditions and customary entitlements included a perceived shared national heritage of the English football pyramid (entailing relegation and promotion) and historically imagined constructions of a (implicitly white) working-class identity and authenticity (Turner & Millward 2023: 3). They were framed as 'protecting' the English game.

Like the 18th century bread riots, the flashpoint of the ESL protests drew on a longer-held popular moral consensus; what Scott (1977: 3) calls a 'moral heritage'. Akin to the pre-market society of the 18th century, the customary order of football was disturbed by emerging market forces from the mid-1980s onwards (such as stock market flotation and the regressive redistribution of home/away gate receipts). The application of an 'abstract market mechanism that was opaque to the people' (Götz 2015: 152) initiated the processes of commercialisation and commodification that led to the sense of football 'losing its soul' (Conn 2010) and a growing disconnect between clubs and fans. The conventional benefactor model of English football clubs, analogous to the paternalist gentry of the 18th century, was replaced by a new breed of owners and directors in the 1980s and 1990s (King 1997). In football, the drive to commercialise and commodify (increasingly for-profit accumulation and extraction, as well as investment in sporting success) became the standard. Over the ensuing decades, fan activists have assumed the role of the 'rebellious plebs' who have developed a popular moral consensus to (episodically) resist the

new political economy of modern football. While on the surface appearing like rational utilitarian responses to ticket price hikes, fan campaigns on affordability⁴ can be interpreted as ethical responses according to the moral consensus among fans on ‘just price’. The point here is not that fans have any legal rights regarding the pricing of tickets or other obligations of clubs vis-à-vis their supporters, but that among football fans there continues to exist the widely held perception, despite the three decades of commodification, that they have a moral claim. Similar to the English crowd in the 18th century, for many fans the old paternalistic model retains ‘an ideal existence, and also a fragmentary real existence’ (Thompson 1971: 88). The ethical imperatives of this popular moral economy, representing the vestige of the old system of customary entitlements, can be appealed to in emergency situations (cf. Götz 2015: 152). The announcement of the ESL in April 2021 represented such an emergency: an external shock to the moral economy of the English football crowd.

The activism in football is invariably pitted against change to the established order. The prevailing moral economy in football seeks to defend the status quo or return to the old order – what Numerato (2018) refers to as a ‘better past’. Although the ESL followed the trend towards the monopolisation of power and capital in contemporary football, it was contingent on several factors and events (notably the pandemic) rather than inevitable. The counter-response of fans was similarly contingent. First, it was spatially contingent: the collective action of English fans reflected the unique situation and history of English football. The anti-ESL mobilisations rested on ‘communal notions of legitimacy’ (Arnold 2001: 92) particular to English football. Second, it was temporally contingent. Critically, the wider moral economy of the post-2008 era meant that ‘the hegemonic hold of neoliberalism as a doctrine of the supremacy of the market in arranging and ordering all aspects of social relations’ was in decline (Kennedy & Kennedy 2010: 196). Earlier transformations, such as the advent of the EPL, were steadied and supported by a more sure-footed doctrine of market supremacy. As structural instabilities in the political economy of football (as well as the wider capitalist economy) have become more evident, the fictitious commodity of the football ‘product’ has become more open to moral contestation. The anti-ESL protests were motivated by an enhanced sense of ‘moral ownership’ by fans of their football clubs, as well as a sense of guilt over their complicity with the post-1992 commodification. Steven McInerney, the Manchester City fan, commented that:

We’re all kind of complicit in this . . . in the last ten years I don’t think there’s anyone who has had to defend their club more than I have . . . there’s obvious moral and ethical reasons . . . I am not an economist, I’m not an expert in geopolitical affairs . . . I am just a Manchester City fan . . . I understand the fact that we are complicit, but we are just literally football fans . . . Yes, we are complicit, but we are not the villains. Those two things are very different.

These emotions of anger, guilt and sadness combined to fuel the anti-ESL protests in a reflexive fashion.

Sayer’s concept of ‘lay morality’ enables us to recast football fans as morally reflexive agents. This view of football fans as moral, prosocial, evaluative agents challenges the more typical perception of them as an inherent ‘social menace’. Portrayed as the ‘English

disease' (Pearson 1998) and 'the enemy within' (Campbell 2023), football supporters have been at the centre of several recurring 'moral panics' in the United Kingdom (Taylor 1982). The accepted conventional wisdom portrayed football fans as a 'yob class': a 'mob' of questionable moral character who acted as an 'intimidating crowd' and represented 'collective public order problem' (Waiton 2014: 211). In this version of history, football, in 'a grim era of recession, hooliganism, dwindling attendances and a European club ban', was saved by the advent of satellite television and the huge injection of capital by Rupert Murdoch's BSkyb (Lewis 2015).

Fast forward nearly 40 years and the narrative has been flipped: in the current 'crisis', it is fans who are depicted as the moral saviours of the sport from the rapacious greed of 'snakes and liars' (Panja & Smith 2021). Tellingly, the terms 'mob' and 'riot' were absent in the media and political commentary on the ESL protests (despite defying COVID-19 lockdown restrictions), echoing Thompson's (1971: 76) warning about the accuracy of such labels in relation to the 18th century crowd. Conversely, the contemporaneous Black Lives Matter protests were described as 'hooliganism and thuggery' by then Home Secretary Priti Patel (Cook 2020).

As reflexive and evaluative beings, the lay morality of some football fans has extended beyond the parameters of the sport and its governance to challenge and transform wider policies, practices and political culture (Fitzpatrick & Hoey 2022). A gradual shift to a more anti-consumerist stance can be witnessed (Fitzpatrick & Hoey 2022), with football-based social movements considered part of the wider 're-emergence of social criticism of capitalism' and an 'appeal for solidarity . . . juxtaposed to an unjust and inefficient neoliberal ideology' (Della Porta 2015: 215–216). We can see evidence of fans using their agency to become moral entrepreneurs who seek to reframe 'the football industry as a prism of class struggle' (Kennedy & Kennedy 2010: 182). Emerging research has begun to analyse the relationships and formations between sport and broader social change and how fan activists are seeking to challenge wider social inequalities through football (Numerato 2018).

Conclusion

This article has centred on the following key question: how can we explain the contingent nature of football fan activism? The concept of moral economy offers an analytical framework through which we can address this question. It sensitises us to a constructed body of customary rights and entitlements held by fans. The perceived infringement of these customs and traditional entitlements (over the 'just price' of tickets or the integrity of sporting competition) has provided the 'legitimizing notion' for fan activism and protest. This moral economy of the English football crowd in the 21st century is contextual. The nature of the English fans' response to the ESL proposals in 2021 can be contrasted to the relative acquiescence of Italian and Spanish fans. Further research should explore this comparative puzzle, examining how fan cultures both reflect and shape wider patterns of capitalist contestation and resistance in Europe and beyond.


The anti-ESL protests can be analysed according to a Thompsonian version of moral economy: a spatially and temporally specific protest premised on ideational, rather than material, opposition to the infringement of established customs by those in authority.

Via a theoretical appreciation for contingency, the moral economy approach advances existing research, in two key respects. First, moral economy allows us to integrate and analyse instances of marketisation and commodification that have not resulted in ‘politically significant moral indignation’ (Arnold 2001: 85). Using this approach, we can theorise the ‘double fiction’ (Kennedy & Kennedy 2010) of football fandom, which can be both resistant and compliant to commodification. Second, it enables us to relate the specific episode of collective action to the popular moral consensus among football fans, as a social group and wider society.

Akin to grain in Thompson’s analysis of the 18th century bread riots, football is seen (rightly or wrongly) to be ‘too important to be left to the market’. This affords football a quasi-public utility function in society that demands social protection. This public utility perspective of football has been strongly reinforced by the anti-ESL protests. The fan protests directly contributed to the establishment of the FLR by the UK government. The FLR sought to institutionalise the moral economy of the English football crowd. Its key recommendation – the establishment of an independent regulator – is designed to act as a bulwark against further monopoly and capital accumulation that transgresses the moral consensus. This will be the first (legally enshrined) public body of its type in the world and has the potential to change the political landscape of English football. The popular moral consensus of the English football crowd has developed into a political (cross-party) consensus (FSA, 2021).

Finally, the contextual moral economy of ‘the crowd’ in English football is related to the more general ‘lay morality’ of society in the era of late capitalism. The apparent internal contradictions of capitalism in the post-2008 period have created a ‘new Polanyian moment’ (Munnich 2017), in which a range of grassroots, social movements (such as Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Gilets Jaunes) and broadly populist movement parties (Momentum in the United Kingdom, 5 Star in Italy and Podemos in Spain) have challenged the outcomes of the financial crisis (such as austerity) and the neoliberal continuities of advanced democracies in the contemporary era (Ibrahim et al. 2023). Football-based social movements reflect this structural environment. However, they should also be seen as actors with reflexive capacity who possess agency to shape the future of football’s governance and political economy, as well as other political and social outcomes. Increasingly football-based social movements have channelled their activism towards wider social change beyond sport (Fitzpatrick & Hoey 2022). This activism through football (Numerato 2018) is animated by more explicitly normative understandings of moral economy. By utilising the moral economy approach, future research can examine how football fans negotiate the outcomes of deindustrialisation on both English football (the recent administrations of Wigan Athletic, Bury FC and Macclesfield Town offer rich case studies) and their wider social and economic lives.

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Notes

1. For example, Fitzpatrick and Hoey (2022) discuss the nationwide fan movement to tackle food poverty in the United Kingdom.

2. The prefix of 'modern' football in this context draws on its everyday, lay usage rather than its more formal epochal meaning. In the contemporary football fan scene, 'modern' football is employed as a catch-all label for the increasingly neoliberal and globalised nature of the sport, which is deeply entrenched within the media/sports production complex (Numerato 2015).
3. The six English clubs included: Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City, Liverpool, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur. The six other European clubs included: Real Madrid, Barcelona, Atletico Madrid, Juventus, AC Milan, Internazionale. Together, the 12 clubs founding the ESL were drawn from three of the 'Big Five' leagues of Europe. The other powerhouses of European football (such as Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund bound by the 50 + 1 rule of the German Bundesliga) and PSG (the Qatari backed disrupters) were notable absences. The ESL would be a midweek competition, rivalling (and effectively rendering obsolete) the UEFA Champions League competition, with the clubs expecting to remain within their domestic league associations.
4. There have been various examples of such fan campaigns in English football during the post-Hillsborough era, including 'Stuff the Bond' (Lovejoy 1992), 'twenty's plenty' (Numerato 2018) and '#walkouton77' (Olesen 2018).

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