

An Analysis of the role Globalisation has had on the Political Economy of the English Premier League & it's subsequent Fan Culture

The English Premier League is the most financially successful domestic league competition in the world. It generates the largest viewership of any league and also boasts of a global audience which has ultimately led to it's respective clubs becoming richer due to increased sales of merchandise and increased demand to watch games. This has led to an exponential growth in the leagues television rights deal as more broadcasters compete with one another. This influx of capital and the global avenues it has subsequently opened up, has made the league more attractive for foreign investors hoping to capitalise on these elements. However, the growth of the league due to the aforementioned characteristics has created a shift in clubs' priorities, with many arguably focussing more on their *brand* than their performance on the pitch. There is little doubt that English football clubs, particularly the 'Big Six,' have become multi-national companies in recent years, much to the traditional match-day-going fans disapproval for reasons this essay will later explore. But how has capitalism infiltrated a sport once founded on socialism?

It is necessary to note that the major catalyst of the Premier League fans consume today occurred in the early 1990s. Firstly, the *Football Licensing Authority* were tasked with modernising stadia from standing terraces to all-seater in *Division 1* in order to combat the hooliganism experienced in the decades prior.¹ There was an urge to make the match-day-going experience more family-orientated. Secondly, the clubs in England's most prestigious league *Division 1*, departed the traditional league pyramid system in England, run by the *Football Association* (FA) to form the *Premiership* (*Premier League* today), in order to gain more commercial independence. Then the *Premiership* would sell their television rights exclusively to *BSkyB* (*Sky* today) in what would be the inception of a new era of sports broadcasting by introducing a subscription-based model that has proven instrumental in the economic benefits experienced by English football's top clubs.

The sudden influx of new revenue meant clubs' abilities to spend more on player wages and transfers led to increased competition between one another to secure players. Clubs' need to compete to stay in the division meant there was an added desperation to remain in the league as

¹ Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Operational Selection Policy*, (London: DCMS, 2017), p.28., available at: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/dcms-operational-selection-procedure-1992-2016-draft.pdf>, [accessed 3 February 2021].



(Image from *Football And Socialism: A Game Of Two Halves*.)²

being relegated would mean loss of *Premier League* television revenue. This desperation for increased income led to clubs exploiting their respective fanbase's loyalties by raising ticket prices and merchandising. Thirdly sponsorship deals also became more lucrative as clubs agreed to long term multi-million pound deals with sponsors, showcased throughout their respective stadia and kits. According to Pierre Bourdieu in his theory of the industrialisation of the production of sports,³ this was the juncture where football pivoted from being solely a sport to a form of business.

Although, no matter how industrialised English football may be, it has deep roots in English nationalism. English clubs were founded by the working class in the late 1800s and acted as a form of social club for their respective communities.⁴ When the English national team won the FIFA World Cup in 1996 by beating West Germany in the final it was viewed through the lens of the second World-War, coupled with the iconography of hosting the World Cup that year.⁵ This event was broadcasted by the BBC which as national broadcaster upheld what it meant to be 'English' in

² Beville, Jack, World Football Index: *Football And Socialism: A Game Of Two Halves*, (2020), available at: <https://worldfootballindex.com/2020/06/football-and-socialism-left-wing-football-clubs-politics/>, [accessed 18 April 2020].

³ Bourdieu, Pierre, *On Television*, trans. by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 80-81.

⁴ Beville, Jack, World Football Index: *Football And Socialism: A Game Of Two Halves*, (2020), available at: <https://worldfootballindex.com/2020/06/football-and-socialism-left-wing-football-clubs-politics/>, [accessed 18 April 2020].

⁵ Goldblatt, David, The Guardian: *How the England football team came to embody Englishness*, (2014), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2014/oct/23/-sp-how-england-football-team-came-embod-englishness>, [accessed 7 March 2021].

the eyes of its viewership.⁶ However, English nationalism experienced an alteration due to the hooliganism that occurred throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Some much so, that the ‘hooligan’ stereotype of ‘aggressive masculinity,’⁷ became known as English patriotism, especially evident in supporters of international England games.⁸ Thus creating a post-modern “imagined community” of football fans throughout the country, although much less prevalent is still “re-presented” through the media today.⁹ This is due to the commercialisation and subsequent dilution of this community as a Thatcherite broadcasting policy would promote a free market and privatisation, in the form of Rupert Murdoch’s BSkyB.¹⁰ This policy relied on third-party investment which required a much more mellow and inclusive atmosphere in the terraces.

Globalisation

Sky’s multi-million pound deal in 1992, would see a massive influx of capital within the league, coupled with the EU’s Freedom of Movement law,¹¹ meant English clubs could now afford to sign the best players from around the world. This not only improved the quality of the league but simultaneously marketed it to a global audience as foreign countries demanded to watch their best players play in the Premier League. In addition, their ability to broadcast the league globally transformed the English Premier League into a supra-national league whilst transcending international boundaries.

⁶ Whannel, Garry, *Fields in vision: Television sport and cultural transformation*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 20.

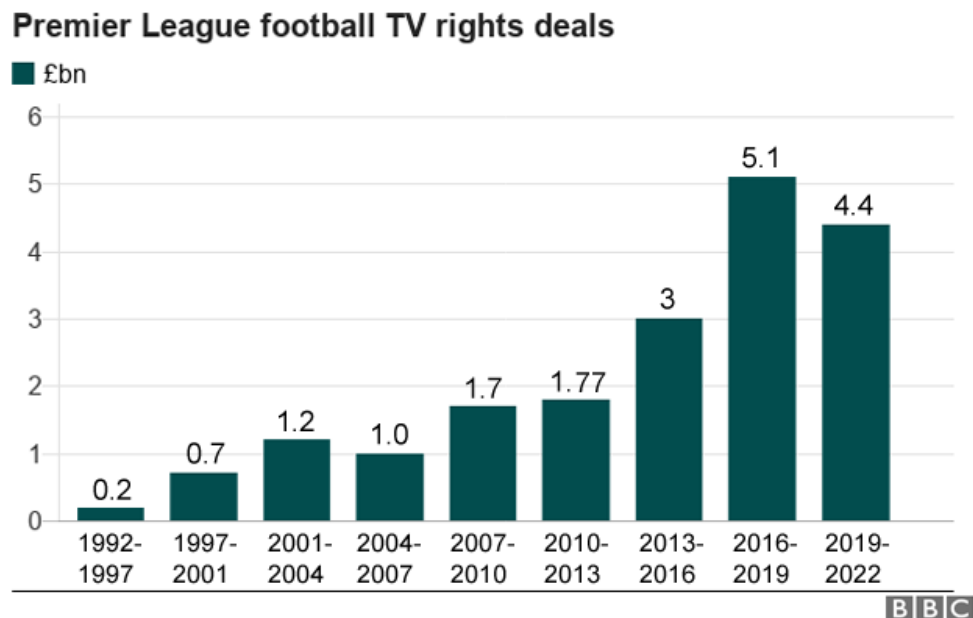
⁷ Dunning, Eric, et al. *Spectator Violence at Football Matches*, (1986), p. 232., available at: www.jstor.org/stable/590355, [accessed 3 March 2021].

⁸ Abell, Jackie & Condor, Susan & Lowe, Robert & Gibson, Stephen & Stevenson, Clifford, *Nations and Nationalism: Who ate all the pride? Patriotic sentiment and English national football support*. (2007), p. 99, available at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.864.4030&rep=rep1&type=pdf>, [accessed 16 February 2021].

⁹ ⁹ Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 24-25., available at: https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2016/SOC757/um/61816961/Benedict_Anderson_Imagined_Communities.pdf, [accessed 3 March 2021].

¹⁰ King, Anthony, *Media, Culture & Society: Thatcherism and the emergence of Sky television*, 20(2), (1998), p.281.

¹¹ European Commission, *Free movement - EU nationals*, (2021), <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=457>, [accessed 14 March 2021].



(Fig 2, from BBC.)¹²

Sky's creation of its own football 'vortex' was a revolutionary decision in extending football discussions between the public from a weekend tradition to the daily consumption of content,¹³ with the introduction of *Sky Sports News*, pre-match and post-match analysis, extended highlights shows and general discussions of the daily ongoings in English football through television, podcasts and social media as a way of media convergence. The subsequent interest generated through the globalisation of the league has alerted international sponsors who further increase capital within the league, and ultimately completely reinvent how the Premier League's political economy functions.

The Premier League is funded by independent broadcasters purchasing their television rights, through sponsors who fund individual clubs and purchase naming rights to competitions and stadia. In return the media gain massive viewership, whilst sponsors are being advertised to potential consumers worldwide. In addition to this both the media and sponsors have a relationship too, with the media selling advertising slots to sponsors for further exposure to audiences. However this funding from external forces has altered the actual product itself. As games are now scheduled to satisfy broadcasters' programming in order to maximise viewership. There has also been an increase

¹² BBC, *Premier League raises less from TV rights auction*, (2018), available at: <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.bbc.com/news/uk-43052024.amp>, [accessed 17 February 2021].

¹³ Whannel, Gerry, *Culture, Politics and Sport Blowing the Whistle, Revisited*, (Routledge: London, 2008), p. 189.

of sponsorship on jerseys, the introduction of electronic advertising boards surrounding the pitches and stadia naming rights. This process of commercialisation on a global scale has created the richest football league in the world.¹⁴

The influx of foreign billionaires that have been purchasing Premier League clubs are doing so with little intention of making a profit.¹⁵ They do so in order to capitalise on their respective clubs revenue and marketing streams overseas, by accumulating more sponsors and broadening both the clubs brand and often the owners' own brand or organisation. The majority of foreign Premier League owners own more than one sports team, Stan Kroenke is the major shareholder of Arsenal and owns the LA Rams. This allows him to cross-market both brands to their different international audiences, leading to increased merchandise sales and international interest. The Premier leagues development of a transnational audience is far superior to its national audience in numbers and has ultimately led to tension, as local fans feel the influx of new ownerships and the increase of cost to follow their club has left them feeling alienated by what they see as nothing more than capitalistic gain.

Fan Culture

There are two predominant genres of fans of the Premier League: local and global. They are both in some degree formed by the "identities and practices arising out of the transformation of production in mediated discourses" they have been subjected to.¹⁶ Both types operate through different cultural behaviours to illustrate their support, or what Pierre Bordieu calls their own habitus'.¹⁷ These separate habitus', consist of opposing cultural capital.¹⁸ A local fan gains cultural capital by being unconditionally loyal to one club, often through their frugality in terms of consumption of goods like merchandising, as they see it as a de-sacralising characteristic to their sub-culture. Local fans'

¹⁴ Lange, David, Statista, *Revenue of the biggest (Big Five*) European soccer leagues from 1996/97 to 2020/21*, (2020), available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/261218/big-five-european-soccer-leagues-revenue/>, [accessed 18 February 2021].

¹⁵ Yueh, Linda. BBC, *Why on earth buy a football club?*, (2014), available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-26365955>, [accessed 8 March 2021].

¹⁶ Jenkins, Henry, *The Future of Fandom: "Fandom Identities and Communities in a Mediated World"*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007), p.162.

¹⁷ Huang, Xiaowei, Review of European Studies: *Understanding Bourdieu - Cultural Capital and Habitus*, (2019), p. 47., available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335024564_Understanding_Bourdieu_-_Cultural_Capital_and_Habitus, [accessed 3 March 2021].

¹⁸ Huang, pp 45-46.

cultural capital is earned through their ability to persevere with the team in difficult times. They would agree with Jean Baudrillard's theory that English football today has lost its "semantic substance" it was founded upon.¹⁹ On the contrary, 'casual fans' cultural capital often consists of supporting more than one team, as they may have only initially gained interest through one celebrity like player, they often support the most successful clubs and they may rely on highlights packages more often as watching football live is not as important to them as the local fan. Premier League clubs favour the "casual" fan as their willingness to partake in commodity fetishism is what their habitus is founded on.²⁰ Compared to the local fans which is much more nuanced and less profitable as focus is on creating hostile atmosphere in the terraces through tribal chanting, which often consists of derogatory or offensive lyrics which harms the League's aim for inclusivity and the clubs ability to market themselves.

Conclusion

As the PL continues to broaden its horizons with further commercialisation it runs the risk of implementing a North American style of sports industry, encapsulated by Guy Debord's theory of society and the spectacle,²¹ whereby sport is viewed as a commodity and fans as consumers. This is in stark contrast to England's perspective of football as a product of community. Should the consumer culture of the league continue, further class alienation of local fans is inevitable with rise in prices of television subscriptions and tickets prices. This in turn has priced many people out from being able to support their club. This process also makes cultural homogenisation of fans more likely as only fans from certain social classes will be able to afford to support their team.

After the collapse of the hyper-commercialised European Super League (ESL) in mid April 2021, it could be argued that rather than the owners having a moral epiphany in abandoning their projected, it is possible that due to the unrest caused by fans to clubs' reputations. Potential broadcasters and sponsors were likely repelled, as associating themselves alongside the league and the animosity surrounding it would have proven detrimental to their own respective brand's public image.

¹⁹ Baudrillard, Jean, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structure, Revised Edition*, (London: Theory, Culture & Society, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2017), p. 188.

²⁰ Lewin, Haskell, and Morris, Jacob, *Science & Society: Marx's Concept of Fetishism*, vol. 41, no. 2, (1977), p. 172, available at: www.jstor.org/stable/40402012, [Accessed 13 Apr. 2021].

²¹ Trier, James, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy: Guy Debord's 'The Society of the Spectacle'*, vol. 51, no. 1, (2007), pp. 68-70., available at: www.jstor.org/stable/40015547, [Accessed 2 Apr. 2021].

Especially considering the recent pivot of brands globally in the promotion of inclusivity, partnering with the ESL and its elitist exclusivity would contradict any brands' reputation. It is clear to see the due to the economic success in the past decade of the Premier League, coupled with the influx of foreign owners that football in England may need saving from itself as bold capitalistic endeavours akin to the North American business model are now seeming inevitable. However, judging from the global agitation caused in appealing any ESL formation from fans, through physical and online protests, it could be argued that the failure by the elite clubs could act as a 'watershed moment' for English football. Perhaps the commercialisation and commodification of the English Premier League has reached its zenith and although reverting to a socialist approach is unlikely, with calls for an independent regulator of English clubs to place more power for the fans are now approaching.²²

²² Hughes, David, Independent: *Government consider new regulator for football in light of European Super League debacle*, (2021), available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/super-league-new-regulator-government-b1836264.html>, [accessed 23 April 2021].

Reflections on Project:

Whilst this project progressed there were very relevant discussions regarding the formation of a European Super League. However, in October of 2020 '*Project Big Picture*' was unveiled which looked at the possibility of an amalgamation of both elite clubs' capitalistic ideas whilst attempting to maintain tradition that would still appease the traditional match-day-going/local fan. This ultimately never really progressed as rumours continued about elite clubs breaking away, like they did in 1992. This idea of history possibly repeating itself was where the intrigue was first established in the ideation process of this project. The project initially centred around solely the globalisation and commercialisation of the *English Premier League* as an industry via the media, although with further analysis it became clear that the subsequent change in the political economy of fans due to the League's economic success was of significant interest. This opened up avenues such as Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, the application of a marxist view on the consumption of the Premier League and fortunately due to recent proceedings a concrete example of both global capitalist and local socialist ideologies of English football colliding.

The physical project itself was constructed to serve as an overview of the topic discussed here. Restraining itself from specific in-depth detail in favour of the screencasts flow and entertainment value. The ideation behind the project was inspired by the YouTube channel *Tifo Football*, due to clear concise methods of illustrating their message through animation. The goal was to provide an overview of this essay in a succinct style. The process of forming the video was complicated, especially when learning basic animation to describe Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, however, it was necessary in maintaining the tone of the video, which aimed to be educational whilst digestible.

The critical essay proved intriguing in its formation as it required further reading into fields of sociology, media industry, economics and ultimately led to the realisation that the Premier League is much more than just a football league. Its impact around the world through the aforementioned elements was interesting and somewhat disturbing in the sense that the average fan arguably has no inclination of the extreme capitalist ideologies that drive the sport that is ironically known as '*The People's Game*.' Although, without the capital gained through such ideologies it may never reach such a global audience, which would result in a more 'socialist' traditional game in England but ultimately the game itself would be of a much lower quality in skill, understanding and production. This dilemma of whether capitalism was 'good' for English football is highly debated, however

with the recent threats of an exclusively elitist league, it begs the question has English football completely lost its way? Or will this now be a catalyst for change in rejecting an updated consumeristic approach to fans?

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Student Name: Darragh Scott

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