

A 90-minute space in the week that was truly theirs: English football fans and the European Super League

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Abstract

The phrase ‘created by the poor, stolen by the rich’, could be used about many aspects of capitalism, but in summer 2020, it featured heavily on the banners held up by UK football fans protesting the creation of a European Super League. The nature of this (at least temporarily) successful popular uprising has not been given its full political due. Perhaps because whether elite football teams play in a nationally organised, highly commodified global league, or in an internationally organised one, may seem to make little difference. But I want to argue that this moment can provide an instructive way of thinking about the notion of what counts as foundational in cultural terms. What was at stake here was not just a sense of local identity, and not just a sense of class identity – though that was certainly present – but the pride that people took in the historical making of these clubs, created by working-class people in particular locales. To have them internationally owned or recognised is one thing; to have them removed from place altogether is quite another. A democratised version of arts and culture has to pay attention to what people value and what they are willing to fight for, whether it is local libraries or local football clubs. It has to re-localise culture without parochialism. And it has to make room for the spectacular as well as the everyday. The European Super League may seem an unlikely starting point, but the campaign against it offers rich material for precisely that re-examination.

Keywords

Class, commodification, football, football clubs, global

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Introduction

Sunday April 18, 2021, was a strange time to be a football fan in Europe. While much of the continent was still in various forms of COVID lockdown, fans in the United Kingdom, having little else to do, were settling down to watch Arsenal play Fulham. It was broadcast, as much football is, on the pay-tv channel, Sky Sports. Before the game kicked off, the news broke that a European Super league (ESL) was to be formed that would not only mean that games like Arsenal/Fulham would no longer be a regular feature, but that professional football, as many fans experience it, would cease to be. Decades in the making¹ the proposed ESL would have seen 12 of Europe's 'top clubs', including six English clubs,² form a break away league, alongside clubs from Spain and Italy, as well as (eventually) other European countries. The League would have operated a 'semi closed' roster of 20 teams, with 15 'permanent' or founding members who – crucially – were not to be subject to promotion or relegation, and only five 'qualifying' teams, who would be promoted on the basis of national performance and could be relegated. The protection of elite clubs from competition in this way was perhaps the most controversial aspect of the proposal.

This would move the focus of the game from a largely national-league based game, with international club competitions such as the Champions and Europa leagues, to one in which a selection of elite European clubs would pay each other regularly. This was not a new idea and had been around in various ways since the 1960s (Macedo et al., 2022), but the precarious finances of football clubs, particularly the biggest European club of them all – Real Madrid – had led to a renewed push. While European football appears to be awash with cash, it is, like much in our society, over-leveraged, and from that perspective Manchester United paying Sheffield United is simply a failure to maximise revenue generation. The COVID pandemic, which briefly made football a televised-only event with teams playing in empty stadiums, may have sharpened this perception. Why should highly indebted Barcelona travel to Villarreal (stadium capacity 23,000), when they could play Manchester United in front of global audience of millions?

What followed in the next 72 hours, as a wave of fan protests were joined by many ex- and current players, and even media pundits (who generally hold themselves aloft from criticising the ownership of the game) was gripping for football fans. The proposed Super League has been covered quite extensively in the sports literature, but generally the focus has been on governance issues, internationalisation, broadcasting rights, and regulatory issues (see Macedo et al., 2022, for a literature review). There has been some coverage of the protests (Meier et al., 2024; Wagner et al., 2021), particularly as an issue for political communication scholars. But my focus in this paper is somewhat different.

The phrase 'created by the poor, stolen by the rich', could be used about many aspects of capitalism, but in summer 2020, it featured heavily on the banners held up by UK football fans protesting the ESL. The nature of this (temporarily) successful popular uprising has not been given its full political due, probably because whether elite football teams play in a nationally organised, highly commodified global league, or in an internationally organised one, may seem to make little difference to many observers. But I want to argue that this moment can provide an instructive way of thinking about the notions of both the foundational economy and that of communal luxury. What was at stake here was not just a sense of local identity, and not just a sense

of class identity – though that was certainly present – but the pride that people took in the historical making of these clubs, created by working-class people in particular locales. To have them internationally owned or recognised is one thing, but to have them removed from place altogether is quite another.

Although three European countries – Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom – had clubs that were announced as founding members of the ESL, large-scale protests were largely confined to the United Kingdom and in fact to England, as no Scottish, Welsh, or Northern Irish clubs were involved. There are several reasons for this. Six of the 12 clubs were England-based, so a much larger number of fans were involved. The English Premier League (EPL) is the richest in Europe, with revenues in the last completed season up 12% at £5.5 billion, some way above La Liga in Spain or the German Bundesliga. While broadcast rights and commercial sponsorship make up the bulk of this revenue in all of those leagues, ticket sales accounted for a larger part of the EPL revenue, in part because ticket prices are expensive, but also because attendance is higher – at over 15 million – than in any other league. Unlike Germany, where rules on ownership act as a barrier to foreign ownership (Wagner et al., 2021), English fans have long witnessed the brutal commercialisation of their clubs. As Goldblatt (2020) has argued, fans globally have been increasingly ‘challenging malign owners, intrusive policing and shameless profiteering’ (p. 28) in recent years. The proposed Super League catalysed something that had been brewing for a while.

At the time of writing, revised plans for the Super League have been published. The 2021 attempt eventually failed when two of the sport governing bodies, Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) blocked it, essentially by declaring heavy sanctions on clubs and players who took part in the breakaway league. This could have included banning players from representing their countries in global competitions such as the World Cup – often a career highlight for the small number of players who get to do it. But just before Christmas 2023, the European Court of Justice ruled that FIFA and UEFA had broken European law in their action against the ESL. A revised form of ESL has now been proposed, that takes some account of the fan concerns in 2021, and while UEFA, the UK Premier League and many large clubs still oppose a super league, the finances of football and its ongoing globalisation may mean that such a thing will one day come to pass.

If it does, may football fans will adjust, many newer ones will be created, and the growth of the most popular of popular sports may well continue. But for those who protested most vigorously in April 2021, something important will have been lost. What that is, how we might think about it as political question, and how the campaign unfolded, is the subject of this paper.³

‘We want our cold nights in Stoke’ – the campaign against the ESL

When news of the proposed ESL was announced to a locked-in football watching population, it was immediately apparent that the response from fans would be a forceful one. As is often the case, the Sunday afternoon football show on Sky featured two ex-players, Liverpool’s Jamie Carragher and Manchester United’s Gary Neville, both of whose

former clubs were involved in the putative ESL. Although both might be seen as being at the more ‘political’ end of football punditry – both are declared supporters of the Labour Party for example – they generally observed the *omerta* that surrounds corporate football; they make broad liberal statements about anti-racism, for example, but do not question the ownership and control of the game itself. Indeed, as front men for Sky Sports, the company that had been Rupert Murdoch’s battering ram into the UK TV landscape in the 1990s (he sold his stake in 2018), they were often seen as part of the corporatisation of football that was here on full display.

When asked what their reaction to the notion of the ESL was, what followed was an unusually politicised series of pronouncements and debates that helped to set the media tone for coverage over the next few days. Gary Neville, interviewed pitch-side, declared himself disgusted with his own former club although with Liverpool in particular, describing Manchester United as, *‘born out of workers round here’*, now victims of the greed of its ownership. The owners of these clubs were, he argued, *‘nothing to do with football’*, which was in fact *‘100-odd years of history from fans who have lived and loved these clubs’*, and who now need protecting from the ‘criminal act’ that was being perpetrated against them (Sky Sports, April 18, 2021). As other commentators did, he also drew attention to the particular situation of the time, the midst of a pandemic and an economic crisis, a time when football clubs in the lower leagues were going bust and having to furlough players, *‘and these lot are having Zoom calls about breaking away and basically creating more greed,’* (Neville, Sky Sports April 18, 2021).

As broadcasters and ex-players were taking to the airwaves, fans were taking to both the streets and to social media. In defiance of COVID restrictions against gatherings, on Monday night thousands of supporters gathered outside Chelsea’s stadium Stamford Bridge, prior to the match against Brighton. There were also supporter protests in Manchester at Old Trafford, at Liverpool’s ground in Anfield and at Arsenal, where fans also called for the removal of the owner Stan Kroenke. A protest at Manchester United’s training ground, which some fans managed to breach security and enter, also featured demands for the Glazer family to lose control of the club.

What was notable both about the street demonstrations and those on social media was the consistency of fan messages – a focus on money and greed as motivations and a clear insistence that the game was being ‘stolen’ (Fitzpatrick, 2025). An analysis of Twitter fan responses (Meier et al., 2024) revealed that concerns about club ownership and the idea of the ESL were popularly linked to the idea of ‘privatisation’, and loss of common goods,

The anger people feel about the #Super League & Billionaires selling out working class people, is how many of us feel about privatisation of water, trains, the Royal Mail, greedy employers like Bezos and Uber, oil companies, big pharma and Tory austerity. It’s all the same thing. (quoted in Meier et al., 2024: 21)

said one tweet, re-tweeted over 1000 times.

On Monday 19 April, the day after the announcement, the game between Liverpool and Leeds played at Leeds’ Elland Rd ground, and saw Leeds players take to the pitch for the pre-match run around in T-shirts bearing the slogan, ‘Football is for their Fans’. This

was to the evident anger of Liverpool players who made clear that they had not been consulted about the ESL announcement, while Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp repeated his opposition. At the same time, many protesting Liverpool fans found themselves making common cause with their opponents that night.

And thus for an unusual moment, football media discourse, articulated by (self-acknowledged) wealthy ex-players and current players, chimed with that of fans, managers, player representatives, and sports writers. Football's sometimes moribund but still resilient communitarian influences were on full display (Fitzpatrick, 2025). Two of the English game's most prominent managers – Jurgen Klopp of Liverpool and Pep Guardiola of Manchester City – expressed disquiet about the move, though this was generally couched in terms of the closed shop-like nature of the proposed ESL. As Guardiola put it, *'It's not a sport where it doesn't matter when you lose'*, (Sky Sports 20 April 2021). TV sport, so long the agent of football commercialisation, found itself having to reflect the anger at the proposal, in a language that was somewhat more political than is usually the case.

By Monday night, footballers Carragher and Neville, perhaps sensing the strength of feeling and the possibility that the move could be halted, were in reflective mood and the sense of potential loss was prominent in the conversation. Carragher was quick to distinguish between the football clubs themselves, institutions with histories, fan bases, and enormous cultural and social weight, and their owners – the Glazers, the Levys, the Abramovich's etc – whom he listed. As he pointed out, Liverpool (his own club) has won one League title and one European title under its present management, but its consideration for membership of a Super League was based on decades of success (as it was for all of the other clubs).

As he put it,

So they used what Liverpool has done in their history, going back to Bill Shankly – even before that – to get into some League. To line their own pockets. (Sky Sports, April 19 2021)

Neville admitted that he had kept 'pretty quiet' about the ownership of his own club, Manchester United by the Glazer family, something that now made him feel 'complicit'. While this was perhaps surprising enough – particularly as he referenced being a Sky sports presenter as one of the things he felt 'complicit' about – what followed next captured what many fans felt and feel about their relationship with local teams that are also global brands.

I've stayed quiet on the basis that it is still Manchester United. I can still go and watch the lads play. I can be happy and I can be sad. I'm still watching football in this country. If they take dividends out, alright . . . I can live with it slightly, but what I can't live with is them attacking every single football fan in this county. (Sky Sports, April 19 2021)

Neville's view of the English game as having integrity and honesty would not bear much scrutiny, and his insistence on 'this country', besieged by foreign ownership, set a nationalistic tone that was at odds with the fact that the players and managers from across the global that make up the professional game in the United Kingdom were generally equally

opposed to the ESL. But the rhythm and routine of watching the lads or lasses play, a place to go where you could be happy and sad, and which tapped into personal and collective history and sense of place that can sustain people, captured a widespread emotion.

By Tuesday 20 April, it was becoming apparent that the strength of fan feeling had taken club owners by surprise. The Professional Footballers Associations (PFA), in essence the players' union, came out against the ESL and there was continuing opposition from UEFA, the UK Football Association (FA) and the Premier League. Such was the strength of feeling in England in particular, that then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson threaten a 'legislative bomb' to stop English clubs taking part. How this would have worked never became clear, because by the end of that day all English clubs has announced their withdrawal from the ESL. This was followed by an odd series of *mea culpas*, as one by one the billionaire owners issued statements or came on TV to apologise to fans for ever assuming that they might be keen on such an idea. In a masterpiece of understatement that summarised these apologies, owner Joel Glazer noted of Manchester United that '*we failed to show enough respect for its deep-rooted traditions (BBC, 2021)*'.

'Fans not customers' – the social infrastructure of football

Had Glazer paid more attention to football as a cultural practice, he may have realised that, as Goldblatt (2014) wrote, '*The raw material out of which the media-football complex constructs the spectacle remains intensely local*' (p. 38). Underlying the relationship of many fans even with the most globalised of football clubs, is a regular, place-based set of practices that are largely local.

In 2022, there were 33 million visits to a professional football club in England and 15m people attended a Premier League match, just ahead of the German Bundesliga. Average attendance is 35,000 for a Premier League game and more strikingly, 17,000 to 18,000 outside the Premier League. Scotland, where I live, has the highest per capita attendance at professional football in Europe. With a population of 5.5m million, there were 4 million visit to football clubs in 2022 and the nation supports four different professional divisions and some 42 teams.

Unlike the United States, which also features 'closed' leagues of the type envisaged by the ESL, football clubs in the United Kingdom very rarely move out of the area with which they are identified (Webber, 2021). In recent years, teams like Manchester City, Tottenham Hotspur and West Ham have acquired new grounds (often at great public expense), but they have not moved from one city to another, or in the case of London teams, from one borough to another. The current Tottenham Hotspur stadium was built essentially on the site of the previous stadium, White Hart Lane; the city of Manchester stadium is three and half miles from the old Maine Road, and West Ham's current stadium is a similar distance from its old one.

This matters, because as Goldblatt has observed, in recent decades even while ticket prices have risen and many fans have been priced out, the stadiums themselves continue to function as community spaces. Alongside the corporate mega stores with their over-priced replica kits, they have acquired public art in the form of memorial gates, club

museums, statues of ex-players, managers, and in some cases, random celebrities.⁴ After the Hillsborough disaster in 1989, when 97 Liverpool fans died as result of overcrowding and catastrophic policing, Anfield become a site for religious services of mourning and commemoration, and similar annual events are held annually at Ibrox,⁵ Old Trafford,⁶ and Bradford.⁷ This might not seem surprising, as what are being mourned here are football-related events, but football grounds also provide a focal point for unrelated mourning, as in the seemingly large number of minute's silences held at football grounds. These mark the death of people often unrelated to football, with 2004 seeing something of a high water mark here, when all UK matches marked the death of kidnapped civil engineer Ken Bigley in Baghdad and that of DJ and music industry figure John Peel in Peru (Goldblatt, 2014). While having your ashes scattered at football grounds⁸ is generally not possible any longer because of the sheer number of requests, clubs such as Everton, Leicester City, and Manchester City all have memorial gardens inside or near the stadium where ashes can be scattered. Others such as Celtic or Chelsea have memorial walls for fans, while Queens Park Rangers notes that ashes scattering is still possible pitch-side, though 'you'll need to discuss things with the club chaplain', (urnsforashes.co.uk, 2024).

Built upon this relationship of place, and amplifying it, are thousands of other ways in which football is inscribed in wider culture: in websites and magazines, print and social media, comedy shows and pop songs. Although other sports have significant audiences, particularly at certain times of the year (e.g. tennis opens, the Superbowl, the India Premier League), what is distinctive about football is its overwhelming presence in wider culture year round.

It is the subject of plays at the National Theatre (e.g. James Graham's work on England manager Gareth Southgate), of literary novels (David Peace has written novel-length treatments of football managers Bill Shankly and Brian Clough), of poetry collections (Don Paterson's *Nil Nil*, a set text for Scottish school children) and of films, from the art-house nature of *Zidane* (Philippe Pareno and Douglas Gordon), or Ken Loach's *Looking for Eric* (featuring Eric Cantona) to Gurinder Chadha's huge hit, *Bend it Like Beckham*. And these are just the good ones; there is a whole host of terrible football movies.

There is of course specialist sports media, though the United Kingdom has nothing to rival Italy's *Gazzetta dello Sport*, in print since the 1890s, and still one of Italy most read newspapers, or France's *L'Equipe*. At one time there were regional sports papers. Liverpool had a Saturday evening *Football Echo* (popularly known as the pink *Echo*), while Glasgow had three evening newspapers, the *Evening News*, the *Evening Citizen* and the *Evening Times*, much of which was devoted to football coverage (Boyle, 2006). The United Kingdom has a strong, if fairly recent, tradition of football magazines and fanzines including, since the 1980s, *When Saturday Comes*, which started as a fanzine and pioneered exactly the kind of knowledgeable, often humorous, and occasionally political writing about football which has influenced, at least in part, the tone of the national conversation on the sport (Richards, 2021). The magazine consciously set out to be a voice for football fans, rather than sports journalists,⁹ and as such has helped develop a sports media that, in general, treats fans seriously, as connoisseurs, rather than as consumers. This is true even of that staple of the football media experience, the post-match

football phone-in, which first aired on local radio in the late 1970s. In cultural terms the relationship between the media and football fans is more akin to that of the popular music press and readers in its heyday, than it is of, say, theatre, film or even TV critics and the audiences for those cultural forms.

A well-known comedy sketch entitled 'Watch the Football' features British comedian David Mitchell mocking the national obsession, and for non-fans its sheer ubiquity is often an irritant. The name checking of football teams by politicians, the need for members of the Royal family to adopt a team and turn up for games, the constant references to 'league tables' that rank public services from hospitals to universities (Feldman and Sandoval, 2018), not to mention the media obsession with the England teams, both men and, more recently, women in the shape of the 'Lionesses'.

But the attempt to harness the national game for a purely 'national', establishment politics continuously runs into problems, and not just the loud booing of the national anthem by Liverpool fans at Anfield or Scotland fans at Wembley. From the mid 1980s, when the Football Supporters Association was founded, fans have developed a more politicised voice than that of the supporters' clubs that preceded them (Fitzpatrick and Hoey, 2022; McGill and Raison, 2022).

Much of this has been concerned with particular ownership battles and specific clubs (Cleland, 2010), such as the protests against the bond schemes at Arsenal and West Ham¹⁰ in the early 1990s and the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association (IMUSA) fight against the Rupert Murdoch-led BSkyB takeover bid in the late 1990s. This latter fight had something in common with the ESL moment, in that it brought together ordinary Manchester United fans with the somewhat more establishment-sounding 'Shareholders United against Murdoch', (SUAM). SUAM was led by well-known British journalist Michael Crick¹¹ and featured ex-Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill, later to become part of a subsequent failed takeover bid for the club. The campaign thus had a media presence and a degree of financial and business organisation that fans of other clubs had not yet matched or would never be able to afford. But it also built on years of fan organising at Old Trafford, beginning in the early 1990s when the club doubled the price of tickets to pay for the redevelopment of the ground (Fitzpatrick and Hoey, 2022).

Similar battles have been waged against takeovers at Chelsea and at Arsenal and, away from the big money of the Premier League, fans have fought simply to keep their clubs going, often forming Supporters Trusts in the process (Cleland et al., 2018). Consistent with the place-based nature of many of these attachments, one well-known campaign saw Charlton Athletic fans fight a successful seven-year battle to bring their club 'back' to its original Valley ground – even forming a short-lived political party to that end (Everitt, 2014).

But as Fitzpatrick and Hoey (2022) have argued, we have also seen a shift in football fan activism in recent years to include broader political campaigns, some in concert with other political and social organisations. The 1989 Hillsborough disaster and the subsequent campaigns for justice brought to the fore questions of policing, but also of the media. When the Murdoch-owned *Sun* newspaper blamed Liverpool fans for the catastrophe, there was a call to boycott the best-selling tabloid, and an almost immediate and significant drop in sales in the city. The campaign continues to this day and has seen both

Liverpool clubs refuse entry to their grounds to *Sun* journalists. More recently, organisations such as Fans Supporting Foodbanks (FSF), which was formed to both raise money for foodbanks and campaign against the need for them, have run campaigns against benefit cuts and wider welfare policy. Campaigns like this have often received support from elite players themselves in ways that draw attention to the shared class backgrounds and experiences of fans and players. Manchester United player Marcus Rashford's anti-poverty campaigns, for example, have drawn explicitly on his receipt of free-school meals when growing up.

Fan activism, in support of progressive causes or simply in support of one's tea, exists, of course, alongside a majority of fans who take no part in such actions. While football does, as Cleland et al. (2018) argue, offer great potential for collective action, with its network of actors having a shared, collective identity, its level of emotional and affective commitment, and the conviviality and history of its meeting places, these are also resources for tribalism, hostility and violence. But what is missing in critiques of modern football, which concentrate on the wealth and power of the game and its embedding in networks of global capital and state power, is its equal embedding in everyday life (Webber, 2021). This sometimes intense, place-based significance, and all that flows from that in terms of football's social production, is something of which the global TV-watching audience is often oblivious, or only dimly aware, and critiques of modern football often reflect this blind spot.

The philosopher Simon Critchley (2017) captures the paradox of contemporary football well in his book on the subject,

If football gives us an image of our age, then we see it as its worst, at its most gaudy, in its displays of wealth and financial power. (p. 166)

but alongside that he describes the regular, seasonal patterns of attendance and spectatorship, the 'association', from which football gets its name, and the sense of community that this provides. This we might describe as the foundational aspects of football. But there is something more here too; beauty, grace, drama, 'the attainment of what we might call splendour', (Critchley, 2017: 167) – the communal luxury of elite sport.

Final section – discussion

The travails of the ESL and elite football may seem very far from the foundational economy and the need to relocate art and culture as part of the public good, alongside health, education, social services and basic infrastructure. It seems an unlikely part of the *basic* infrastructure of any imaginable society – though some access to sport seems essential. But as I have argued here, any desirable society also has to make room for what matters to people, and sport matters to people a great deal (Miller, 2024). The ESL is a story of professional sport at its most egregious and grasping, but it's also a story about great sport, a practice at the highest level with roots that are deep as well as extensive.

In his essay on the future for popular culture in a 'de-grown' and more environmentally sustainable world, Mark Banks speculated on what might happen to elite sports people such as footballer Lionel Messi. How, he asks, in a world of restricted travel and

de-globalised sport, would a player such as Messi even come to exist? And if they did, how would we know about them? (Banks, 2022: 23). Without global capitalism and the socio-technical systems that it supports – what would happen to elite sports and elite sports people? These questions and the questions that animate this paper may seem odd or irrelevant to many readers. The world is, after all, facing far bigger questions of survival, of justice and of democracy than what should happen to elite football. But any imaginable future needs to make room for the sublime as well as the mundane, the spectacular as well as the everyday.

As Banks (2022) notes, ‘for many millions of people, global professional football is meaningful, affirmative and “spiritual” – in the secular sense of invoking shared feelings of conviviality, community, collective belief and emotional pleasure (p. 24)’. Many of these feelings can of course be attained in other ways – conviviality and community can be found in Sunday morning five a side football, as well as at the Bernabau stadium. But what is harder to replace about elite sports pleasure is the quality of the cultural object itself – in this case football.

Even critics of the contemporary game are generally willing to concede that the *standard* of professional football is very high. Players are fitter, faster and in many ways more skilful than in the past, and the systems of training, of club-based academies and talent spotting, of better pitches and better diets, helps ensure that there is a huge global pool of talented players to pick from – hence standards are kept high. None of this is without cost, not least in terms of pressure and isolation from peers for a young, talented kid. But if we focus on the content, or the object, the 90- (or these days more likely 100-) minute game, played at the top level, there can be little doubt that it offers an aesthetic richness, not available in the game at every level. There will always be debates about whether top-flight football is ‘better’ than in the past, as there are with other sports. For many cricket fans, for example, the athleticism and brio of the modern game is a poor replacement for the range of skills – including slowing the game down to a barely moving pace – displayed in the past. But while camaraderie and identity, athleticism and joy can be found in all forms of all sports, an activity performed at the highest level offers something that is not easily replaced.

That ‘something’ was – in a sense – what the promoters of the ESL offered to fans. Just the best teams, the best players, the best games. But what this entirely missed was the deep connection between the ‘everyday’ footballing worlds and its elite. Top-flight football is not simply ‘out there’, floating free from daily life, but as Webber (2021) puts it, it

rests solely upon the highly networked, social production of football, and the profound cultural importance afforded to it by millions of individuals, communities and the nation at large on a daily basis. (p. 7)

When Gary Neville spoke of ‘scavengers’, he was referring to particular ownership of particular clubs, but the point could be made more widely. The global mega-game, of which the ESL is representative, is dependent on the collective culture, memories, stories and shared meanings created by fans over many decades. That memory is kept more actively alive in football – oddly enough – than perhaps in other areas of life. The class

profile of players, the retention of football grounds in their old areas, the high-profile nature of particular campaigns such as Hillsborough or the campaigns against the Glazers or Stan Kroenke – all this helps. But it is also necessary to acknowledge that top-flight sport is often very good indeed. The writer Cory Doctorow (2023) has coined the term ‘enshittification’ to describe a pattern of decreasing quality in online services and products, an experience so familiar to many of us that the term has been enthusiastically adopted, at least on those same online platforms of decreasing quality. For different reasons and with very different histories, citizens are similarly confronted with decreasing quality in public services, from polluted rivers, to waiting lists for health treatment. Very little seems to reward our efforts. But campaigners against the ESL in April 2021 were fighting for something they loved that still seems to offer beauty and pleasure – splendour even – along with the associational and collective pleasures also offered by public parks and local libraries, by non-league football and park runs.

The excesses of state and oligarch ownership (Goulding et al., 2022), the continual messing with formats in search of increased profits, and the obvious neglect of the grass-roots of the game (celebrity ownership of small clubs aside), has produced a general demand for re-regulation. At time of writing, the UK’s Football Governance Bill, introduced in part in response to the ESL protests, is making its way through Parliament. Its primary concerns are to keep clubs solvent and ensure some flow of money throughout football’s much-abused ‘pyramid’ – which links hundreds of lower-league football teams to (eventually) the top of the Premier League. Although it stops short of requiring fan representation at board level, as happens in Germany, it requires clubs to ‘engage’ with fans, particularly where the club’s ‘heritage’ is involved, as in home stadia, club colours or even the club crest. At the same time, and in part to perhaps ward off tighter regulation, the Premier League itself, alongside bodies such as UEFA, has been ‘cracking down’ on football’s financial abuses with a range of suggested salary caps¹² or points deductions for clubs such as Everton, designed to stop loss making clubs spending money they don’t have.

It seems unlikely that this flurry of regulatory activity can halt the tide of hyper-globalised competition and concentrated wealth that modern football has become. As Banks (2022) argues, we may in the future have to accept the significant aesthetic losses involved in giving up globalised elite sport, such are the environmental costs of such practices. This is presumably true of art biennales and film festivals, of the global opera circuit and events such as Glastonbury. But while we can imagine a world that involves films, but not film festivals, it will be much harder to ‘degrow’ professional sport. Television is a good substitute for attending live sport, but televised sports with no attendance are dismal, as the pandemic period demonstrated. Limiting rather than continuously adding to the numamount of elite sports events would be one way to go, and there is appetite for that even among fans, though it is completely counter to the ‘business model’ of almost all sports.

Perhaps then the best we can do it recognise the scale of loss involved if such a thing were to happen. There is a tendency in parts of the environmental movement to dismiss popular cultural pleasures as part of the problem of consumer capitalism, restless, unsatisfiable desires than need to be replaced by more sober or even ‘spiritual’ pleasures (Soper, 2020). But this fails to recognise the depth of the loss involved. It

trivialises people's connection to pastimes and pleasures, (in this case football, but also things like fashion), as something that not only can be easily cast off, but will be, in order to produce a saner, better-balanced human. The term 'sostalgia' is generally used for the mental distress caused by environmental changes, such as biodiversity loss, pollution or deforestation (Galway et al., 2019), and there can be little doubt that such changes do indeed bring mental suffering, quite aside from the material consequences for peoples' lives. But the loss of modern, urban, globalised pleasures will also cause feelings of distress. Summer and winter Olympics, 'European nights' in packed floodlit stadiums, huge screens and fan zone in city centres and yes, even Saturday night football (SNF), Sunday night football (SNF2) and Monday night football (NMF). All would be missed.

But before that happens, it seems to me that it is worth recognising what is being lost. Gilbert (2023) talks about neoliberalism as an, 'attack on all forms of social solidarity and all solidarity social relations (p. 23)', seeking to break down, criminalise or simply buy out the ties that bind us together. Digital technologies drive us back into the privatised, domestic sphere, while television seeks to place competitive relations, in every aspect of life, but particularly in areas once regarded as mundane as cooking, decorating, or hobbies. For Gilbert, the antidote to this neoliberal onslaught was to be found in the 1990s explosion of dance, club and rave cultures, a form of joyful collectivity where the hyper-individualism being celebrated elsewhere in the culture, melted away into an experience of solidarity or *communitas*. Again, this seems along way from crowds, often in replica shirts, paying inflated prices to be spectators. Professional football is competitive, tribal, and commodified – almost designed to work against solidarity. But it is also rooted, place-based, porous, and culturally embedded to an extraordinary extent, and if the fan protests of April 2021 achieved nothing else, they may at least have reminded us of that.

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Notes

1. Those interested in the detail and the personalities involved are directed to the Apple documentary 'Super League: The War for Football', first broadcast in January 2023.
2. Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur.
3. See also Fitzpatrick (2025) which was published during the writing of this paper and covers some of the same ground from the standpoint of moral economy.
4. Fulham's home ground of Craven Cottage in London was, for a while, home to a statue of the singer Michael Jackson.
5. In January 1971, 66 people died in a crush at Ibrox stadium.
6. In memory this time of players rather than fans, the young Manchester United team who died in a plane crash in Munich in February 1958.
7. Fifty-six fans were killed in a fire at Bradford's ground in May 1985.
8. As my mother's were in 1993, at Anfield.
9. Although may well-known sports journalists have written for it (see *When Saturday Comes*| The half decent football magazine (wsc.co.uk))
10. Both clubs attempted to get supporter to buy bonds to pay for legally required ground refurbishments, but the schemes were expensive and unpopular and later withdrawn.
11. Author of the not-accidentally titled *Manchester United: The Betrayal of a Legend* (with Crick & Smith, 1989).
12. UEFS's new Club Licencing and Financial Sustainability Regulations (FSR) have introduced a measure of 'cost control' designed to reduce the seemingly endless spiral of wage inflation at the top of the game.

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Biographical note

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