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The Moral Economy of the Contemporary English Football Crowd

An ethnographic study of resistance among football fans in Manchester

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Abstract:

Since the creation of the Premier League in 1992, English football has become increasingly marketized and commercialised. In the past thirty years, the price of tickets has skyrocketed, football on television has been put behind a paywall, and a select few have made a fortune from what was once a game for the working class. In this thesis I explore the various forms of resistance in Manchester against the commercialisation of football and the motivations behind those forms of resistance. The fans have various ways of showing resistance, from loud and disruptive riots to quiet and subtle acts of protest. Regardless, the fans further the same critique. This thesis a journey through moral economy of English football, from the crowds standing at the terraces of lower league games, having decided not to attend Premier League matches anymore. We follow the rioting masses after the failed attempt at creating the European Super League, and how social media plays its part in the critique. We'll see how everyday forms of resistance are practiced out outside stadiums and in the streets. I argue that following this wave of protest, English football has arrived at a fork in road. There's a chance top flight football will continue as self-regulated as it always has been, but we're also now seeing the contours of a limit of how important money can be in a game that is proclaimed to be for the fans.

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Introduction: Approach to Modern English Football

Background and Research Question

In 1985, British Newspaper the Sunday Times described football as an "A slum sport played in slum stadiums, increasingly watched by slum people". The newspaper statement was issued after a fire at Bradford Stadium and the deaths of 56 supporters. Before the founding of the Premier League in 1992, English football was on a downward spiral and had been for quite some time. Game attendance had steadily declined since the World Cup triumph in 1966, and football was more known for hooliganism and fighting than super star players, athleticism and high wages. Today, almost 40 years later, the old perception of football couldn't be any more different.

On the final day of the season in 1989, Liverpool played Arsenal for the league title, but the kick-off had been delayed and by the time the game was over and Arsenal had clinched the title by the narrowest of margins, the evening news were already late. The BBC rushed through the trophy ceremony before getting right back to their regularly scheduled program. Today, a game like that would've been highly anticipated, broadcasters would do a number of specials on each team, and fill out more than enough time to see both the trophy lift and a lap of honour. The final and title-deciding game of the 88/89 season is therefore widely seen as one of the catalysts for the idea of a breakaway league, a league broadcasted on channels where football was to be their main selling point, instead of just another program on the TV schedule between the news and soap series Coronation Street. The football games in themselves would always be the main event, but the entertainment package around could be moulded into so much more. A product independent from the Football Association, the FA, and the English Football League, the EFL, that could be sold and distributed across and beyond the country, increase revenue and turn top-flight football into a lucrative industry. This idea became the Premier League.

At the time it was a controversial move, but also many, among them the FA and the British government, felt it was needed to give English football an overhaul. It's easy to fall into the trap of nostalgia, especially when talking about football in England, and how much it's changed in past decades, but a less commercialised and globalised league is not necessarily synonymous with a happier one. The '80s were coloured by the Heysel and Hillsborough

tragedies, in which the aftermaths also showed how the rest of English society felt about football and the fans and their antics. One of the aims of the overhaul was to make English football more spectator friendly and more acceptable for people beyond the hard-core football fan. One way to do this was to offer more to fans than just a game of football, be it food, merchandise, entertainment or VIPseats. In the process, clubs made more money and the game became more commercialised.

Additionally though, the new break away league held the enticing aspect to any club joining in that they didn't have to share the money made from broadcasting with all of the other 70 professional football teams in the EFL pyramid. The money would be shared only between the Premier League teams themselves, and be partially based on merit. And so the story goes, the broadcasting rights became more and more expensive, the price money for winning trophies got higher, clubs had more to spend, players got earned better wages and football agents demanded higher fees. There is nothing about top-flight football these days that can be labelled "slummy".

There has been a change in football in the past thirty years. Therefore, in this thesis, I will take a closer look at what this increased commercialisation has done to top-flight football in England and the effects it has had on the local fans.

Personally, I have loved football for as long as I can remember. The first videos I watched on YouTube were of Ronaldinho dribbling his way through any opposition teams, and all my afternoons were spent on the local football ground. Football is the most popular sport in the world, and over the years I have seen more and more scandals tied to it, be it corruption, human rights issues or club insolvencies. For me, this thesis is not only about writing about a topic I find interesting, but also about making sense of the things that I've seen happen with the sport I love so much, through no fault but their own.

The idea for this topic came at the beginning of the pandemic when I noticed how fans reacted to the actions of the owners regarding furloughing staff, community support and ticket refunds. There was a sense that clubs had to do their part in helping their local communities, and those who didn't, for example by putting non-playing staff on a furlough scheme, faced heavy backlash for putting money first. It made me wonder if there is a growing tension between fans and club's as the game has become more commercialised and clubs aim for profits, rather than being community assets.

I focused my research on football in Manchester, home to Premier League teams Manchester United and City, and a plethora of lower league or non-league clubs as well in and around the city. I chose Manchester in particular because of the contrast between the two major clubs in terms of current success, historical success, ownership and how they are commonly perceived. A club that has been accused of being more of an enterprise concerned with increasing revenue than sporting success is Manchester United, while on the flip side some will put *City's* sporting success as purely down to being "bought" through having wealthy owners rather than spending money made from thing such as ticket – , shirt – or player – sales.

My initial idea was to research the relationship between top-flight clubs and their fans and doing it in a city where football has been defining everyday life since the 1800s was a good place to start. However, my research quickly grew into involving lower league clubs and the people I met there as well.

When considering how commercialisation has impacted local fans, I will take a closer look at various forms of resistance, and despite the variety, how these forms are a part of the same critique against over.commercialisation of football. The thesis explores supporters who have stopped going to Premier League games in recent years and their motivations, the chaotic days of the European Super League in April 2021, the ways of showing opposition to the disembedding of football outside of the stadiums, and ends at the cross road football is finding itself at today.

Theoretical framework

The move to run football clubs like corporations, concerned with increasing their revenue rather than being community assets, have no doubt played a part in changing football from what it looked like in the '70s and '80s and to what it is today. Throughout the process of writing and researching it became evident that these two things would need to play a significant part in the theoretical framework, as they kept appearing as vital parts of why football is experienced so differently now.

In this thesis, I will turn to economic anthropology and in large parts draw on James Scott's and E. P Thompson's moral economy, as well as Scott's theory on Everyday Forms of Resistance. I will also turn to Karl Polanyi's Great Transformation and his concepts of

embedded- and disembeddedness to analyse how football clubs have been disembedded from their local communities, and the fight to draw them back.

The Great Transformation, according to Polanyi, was the shift into a market economy and a market society in the 1900s. A political economic shift where land, labour and money were turned into what he calls fictitious commodities, commodities that are not inherently made for being bought, sold or traded, but become so under market capitalism (Polanyi, 2001c). Largely, before the dawn of industrialised capitalism, and the 1900s, the conventional view in politics considered economic life and activities embedded in society. “The market” and market oriented activities such as trading existed, but in the periphery of society. The classic examples of this, discussed by Polanyi are the Kula and Potlatch, non-market oriented ways in which economic life was organised in the Trobriand Islands and North America respectively, before colonialism (Polanyi, 2001a, p. 52).

Today, however, in a market society where the market economy works, the *Economy* is treated as its own entity, something that lies above us and regulates itself almost as if it operates according to its own, separate logic. It is disembedded from society, meaning it is created to exist in a form that is more or less universal, it can be taken out of context and work just the same in another society. Polanyi criticises the way the economy is spoken of, as an entity on its own, standing above us as its own force of nature. While today there might be difficult to imagine an economy that does not boil down commodities, fictitious or not, being traded into currency, it is far from the only way to organize an economic system.

As the economy becomes more unregulated and disembedded, humans tame it back through laws and regulations, for example how the interest rate was regulated during the pandemic to stimulate the economy in a time where it would’ve gone under if the previous rate had been kept. It can be likened to a pendulum swinging back and forth, or a rubber band being stretched and eased as is explained in the introduction to the Great Transformation, between an economy fully disembedded from society and an embedded economy. This swinging back and forth is an act we’ve been in since the early 1900s (Polanyi, 2001c, p. 79).

The double-movement we can recognise in the football economy, as we shall see closer examples of in later chapters. Football has become increasingly commercialised in past decades, a major occurrence being the creation of the Premier League in 1992. Where before clubs gained most of their money from match day and the local crowds, today they get most of their income from broadcasting all over the world and selling merchandise to a global

audience. That is why in this thesis I will refer to the disembedding of football, meaning football clubs being lifted up and out of their local communities and becoming global brands, with owners and shareholders more concerned with profits than fan interests.

Thompson outlines his theory about the moral economy, drawing on instances of bread riots in 18th century England. During times of dearth, the price of bread went up, taking a larger chunk out of people's budget. The price of bread, however, wasn't really about whether or not people could afford bread. In fact, Thompson explains how more expensive bread did not necessarily mean that people stopped buying it, which would've taken the prices down again according to traditional supply/demand rules. But people made room in their budget by leaving out something else. There seemed to be a common implicit agreement on how much a miller, a baker, or middle men could allow themselves to profit off something so basic, a sense of morality was at play, meaning that there was more than just supply and demand that decided the prices (Thompson, 1971).

Thompson warns against seeing riots over prices of bread as spontaneous uprisings, sparked by increasing prices before dying down again. A critical part of his argument is that the riots that happened following increased prices weren't spasmic, or something that broke out as an immediate or violent reaction in desperation but grew out of a moral consensus.

One of his examples highlights how the poor didn't necessarily intend to gain bread for free either. During a riot, a group of women had the chance to take with them bread and grain from the baker, which in terms of *homo economicus* would've made sense, but instead, they threw it away. If bread was to be that expensive, then no one should have it. Such acts of resistance mirror events where fans walk out of the stadium in protest. When Liverpool's owners planned to increase ticket prices to £77 in 2016, a protest was staged where fans walked out of out the stadium at the 77th minute, regardless of the score, how much the team needed their cheers or if it was their first game or 1000th . If the tickets were to cost £77, they didn't want them. The plan to increase prices was scrapped shortly after.

Scott pushes the concept of the moral economy further. He maintains that the general consensus amongst the poor peasants was not to gain equality to the rich and wealthy, in neither social standing nor riches, but rather that regardless of socio economic power and standing there was a social right to subsistence (James C. Scott, 1976).

According to Thompson and Scott, the moral economy is about how much someone can allow themselves to profit off something, and it relies on more than supply/demand. To put it

simply, it is what people also think is okay to charge for something, rather than simply what one *can* charge because demand is high. This is for example seen where the Premier League has capped away ticket prices at £30, while it could've been sold for more, take into consideration the cost of travel for fans, the price is based not simply on supply and demand, but rather a conception of what is *morally* right to charge.

Where Thompson describes organised riots, Scott, in another article than the previous mentioned, describes what he calls Everyday Forms of Resistance. He understands these forms of resistance to be subtle and non-organised, small forms of resistance that alone might not make a difference or go noticed, but still done with intent (James C Scott, 1989, p. 34). As pointed out by Fiona Wright, resistance cannot be reduced to simply defiance by subordinate groups, because of what he calls Hidden Transcripts. "Offstage" criticism of the powerful, proved that everyday forms of resistance were a conscious choice of when to express discontent (Wright, 2016, p. 5). One of Scott's examples of an everyday form of resistance is poaching, where the action itself wasn't anything new, but it was new laws that turned poaching into something illegal (James C Scott, 1989, p. 37). We can draw a parallel to how football is available through television in England. Before 1992 and the Premier League was available for free on BBC or ITV, it was only after the establishment of the Premier League that households needed a satellite dish as well as a subscription to watch the top tier of the football pyramid. Today, however, football is easily streamed, illegally albeit for free, on a variety of websites. A welcome option for those unable to afford the price of a Sky Sports, BT Sports and Amazon subscription, who now share the Premier League broadcasting rights.

Thompson's and Scott's theories both encapsulate the various forms of resistance we will encounter throughout this thesis. The ESL protests were loud and organised affairs, a reaction to years of changes to football where the money had become the be-all-and-end-all, putting fans on the sidelines. What we'll also see are the everyday forms of resistance, the ones that don't create any headlines or cause any damage, but together can make a difference all the same.

In addition to the anthropologist I also draw upon football journalists such as well-known Anthony King and David Goldblatt, as well other journalist and their columns in newspapers published throughout the year of the European Super League.

Arrival in the City of Football

I arrived in England on a one-way ticket with ten days of AirBnB booked and knew no one in the entire country. Sitting at the airport before take-off I wondered if it would indeed be three months before I returned home or if I wouldn't find a place to stay and be on my way back after the ten days were up. A friend said to me the day before she couldn't believe I was actually just leaving. Neither could I.

Over the past four years of studying anthropology, I have read a lot about fieldwork, I've heard a lot about fieldwork, but beyond a short project during my first university term, I had never actually done anything like it. Reading about it is nice in the sense that it is always nice to know how things are in theory, but I now also believe you can read absolutely everything there is to know about going on fieldwork as an anthropologist, but in the end, there are thousands of things one can only learn by actually doing it. To truly learn the do's and don'ts, the strategies for getting in touch with people and the awareness to catch up on details, no book can properly convey all of that.

There *are* things that I wished that I knew before I left, but I don't think I would've truly learned them in an article or from hearing others' recollections, so fieldwork was a constant learning process as well as a place for data collection. It perhaps would have been better, more structured and efficient had I known when I arrived what I knew when I left, but wouldn't have known those things if I hadn't gone in the first place either, and so never known what I didn't. The best way to test your ability to swim is indeed to plunge straight into the deep end, and get better as you go.

An early morning in the beginning of September 2021 I hopped off a bus in the city centre of Manchester, looked around and thought to myself "now what?". It's a fitting, and a funny, coincidence, that for three months I hopped on and off buses at Shudehill Interchange in the centre of Manchester, never knowing one of the bread riots Thompson describes happened at the very same spot (Thompson, 1971, p. 105). I only realised after I left that I had walked past the remembrance plaque almost every day, and over 250 years after the "Shude-hill Fight", the discontent the rioters felt then, would be likened to the discontent felt by football fans in the very same city now.

Albeit not entirely sure what would give the best results, I had a fair few ideas and plans. I didn't know Manchester as a city, but I knew the world of football quite well. I was familiar with most of the football clubs in and around Manchester, not just the Premier League but

lower and non-league as well, I had done digital fieldwork before I left that had taught me many things and I was aware of how important football is to the city.

The language was no issue, through years spent on the football side of Twitter, watching Sky and BT for Premier League coverage rather than TV2 and following forums, my English had developed beyond the polished, official classroom English I learned at school. Instead, it had turned into a more everyday way of speaking, the innit's and bloody's merging themselves with my school taught vocabulary. "Bevvy" isn't exactly in the Oxford Dictionary, but I knew it meant a drink when people asked if I wanted one. The accents didn't faze me as much as they could've done, and when they did, I was kindly assured no one else understood what the guy was saying either.

My first week was more about getting familiar with the city, the public transport and finding a place to live, rather than observing or participating in anything. I did manage to find a place to stay, and so the weekend after I arrived I found myself moved into my home for the next three months. I looked out the window, saw the floodlights to a football ground only a few hundred meters away and started to walk in that direction. It was a good start as any.

My first meetings with The Two Faces of Modern English Football

Think of England and then think of football, chances are the thoughts immediately go to the Premier League, a silver trophy with a golden crown, Manchester United versus Liverpool, 50 000 seater stadiums and some of the best players in the world. Football in England is indeed all of that, but outside what is broadcasted on television across the world, football in England is also much more.

It's everything from the amateurs' Sunday League, through the semi-professional non-leagues to the fully professional League Two, One, Championship and Premier League. It's local pubs with signs on the door saying they got TV screens with Sky and BT Sports on them. It's supporters unions, fan clubs and break-away clubs. It's greasy minced meat pies munched down in the freezing rain at the terraces on a cold Saturday afternoon, far from the glory of the Etihad Stadium but filled with passion nonetheless. When I left for Manchester I initially thought I would only seek out the Premier League teams and their home grounds. Instead, I found myself discovering just how different the experiences of modern football in England could be.

The football stadiums of the top flight teams can more often than not be seen from far away. Massive constructions build to seat everything from 20 000 to 70 000 people, looming over their surroundings. Manchester City's home ground, the City of Manchester Stadium, or the Etihad as it is most commonly called, is one such place. Visible from long before you actually arrive there, or indeed if aren't arriving there at all. The twelve masts around the perimeter of the ground loom high above the rest of the area, easily recognisable to any football fan. The stadium itself and its surroundings, called Sports City, were originally built for the 2002 Common Wealth Games, and its fairly young age compared to other stadiums is reflected in its modern design and open spaces. Everywhere you turn your head, buildings are accented with sky blue, people walk around in sky blue home kits, and if not, with sky blue shopping bags from the club shop. There are constant reminders of exactly who's home turf you are on, long before you set a foot inside the stadium.

The first time I went there, the ticket cost me 46£, paid with the help of the internet a few days before, electronically saved on my phone, far away from the days you could just turn up and pay at the turnstiles. Football journalist Anthony King notes the difference in *The European Ritual* (2003), whereas once upon a time when reaching the turnstiles one's hand would go into a pocket looking for cash, however now, it goes into a pocket searching for a season ticket or a pre-bought, one one of the most noticeable changes the game has seen in later years.

Even before arriving, before even getting a ticket to a game, I found you could easily tell, regardless if you were going or not, when there was a home game on, for both Manchester City and United. People with shirts, hats, scarves or all three, in either blue or red, filled up the tram stops or lined up for the right bus. You are never alone in travelling to a Premier League game and the closer it got to kick-off time, the more noticeable the crowds. In fact, chances are you are so surrounded by people on the same mission that there is no need to check timetables or maps. On my first trip to the Etihad I was constantly staring at the maps app on my phone to tell me where to go, only to discover all I had to do when stepping off the bus was to look up and one, see the stadium right in front of me, and two, simply follow the crowd through the right gates.

I arrived a good 90 minutes before the 3pm kick-off for my first game at the Etihad, and the areas outside were already bustling with people, although very few were trickling towards the actual entrances of the stadium just yet. The turnstiles were surrounded by more stewards

than fans at that point, with people eating food from the various vendors outside, paying for kits or other merchandise at the club shop or watching the entertainment outside the stadium. The facility around the Etihad is so massive there are maps set up around the area to point you in the right direction of wherever you need to go.

On the inside, Etihad Stadium is an all-seater, three-tier stadium with a capacity of roughly 55 000 people. All you can see from the world outside the stands are the same masts that lead you in the right direction on the way there. The pitch is immaculate, with groundsmen walking around scouring for any imperfections, expertly avoiding the water spray. Stewards line the perimeter of the pitch all the way around, their backs to the game and facing the crowds. In one corner there's the HD screen showing the score and time, results of games with the same kick-off times, commercials, as well as replays and the results of VAR reviewed situations. The standards of the players on the pitch, in terms of what gear they wear, level of fitness, access to doctors, physios, nutrition, football ability and so on, are also one of the highest in the world.

I remember thinking, as I was leaving the stadium after a game, that it must be a right hassle to live there on match days. Some of the roads going past Sports City, the area Etihad Stadium is situated in, were closed for traffic, and people were spilling out of the sidewalks and onto the road. I couldn't see the end of the queue at the bus stop for the services back to the city centre and there was no room for any more people at the platform for the tram. A parade of people, therefore, started to trudge their way back by foot, every now and again being overtaken by buses with signs saying "Sorry, this bus is full" rather than what direction it is heading. Even far into the city centre, I could spot people that had walked around me a mile ago. I didn't need a map to find my way to the stadium, and it turned out I didn't need one to find the fasted route back either.

The experience of going to lower league games is quite different. For clarification purposes, by the lower league, I am here referring to League One or Two, the EFL's third and fourth-tiers. Non-league refers to those playing below EFL's three divisions. Sometimes you can see the stadium of these teams from far away as well if the floodlights are tall enough. If not then you have to trust google maps to take you in the right direction, or the trail of people going the same way once you get close enough. While match days for lower league sides might not be noticeable in the city centre like premier league games are, you don't need the top-flight level games to notice steady streams of people walking in the same direction close

to the ground. Buses change their routes to avoid the streets where people park their cars, and normally half-filled tram stops suddenly become much more popular.

Contrary to the maps standing around outside the Etihad, pointing you to the right entrance for your type of ticket, the lower and non-league games I attended had just one or two entrances to worry about. There was little room to get lost in an array of merchandise shops, music stages or food trucks when there were only a few or none of each, and everyone was headed more or less the same direction anyway. Finding your seat took a mere minute, and that is if you had a seat at all. In some places, when paying at the turnstiles, you just go and sit wherever there is room, or you can go stand on the terraces.

Tickets for these types of games for me cost somewhere between 10 and 15£, without the student discount, either bought online or often also paid in cash at the turnstiles upon arrival.

Money is one reason given as to why some people favour the lower leagues rather than the Premier League, citing that the current situation is pricing out the ones that made the game popular in the first place. Football journalist David Goldblatt mentions that now there aren't necessarily just middle-class people who can afford it or rich executives in the corporate boxes who attend football games, but rather working-class people who cut costs elsewhere to make it to their hallowed ground (David Goldblatt, 2019). It is similar to what Thompson mentions in his essay on moral economy, that expensive bread didn't necessarily stop people from buying bread, they made room in their budgets to keep affording it (Thompson, 1971). A very shallow understanding of self-regulation and supply/demand is that once the price hikes high enough the product will be in less demand and the prices will go down again. Thompson showed that isn't necessarily how supply/demand works, people will make do if they have to.

The players out on the pitch in non-league or lower league football are closer to the spectators in the stands in terms of yearly wages, or more or less the same. When attending Premier League games, I knew I was watching people who made more money in a week than most people do in a year, or indeed a lifetime. While the difference in between players can be significant, depending on club, position, skill, talent and calculated marked value, they all earn far above the average citizen, and then some. The economic gap between the ones on the pitch and the ones watching have never been bigger, being put forth as one reason why fans get alienated from the highest level. As one man mentioned to me, and as we shall get back to in chapter 2 "they earn too much and care too little".

At the very bottom of the football pyramid, most non-league clubs operate on a semi-professional basis, meaning the players have to work outside of football so they can earn enough money to sustain themselves. In order to prevent clubs from going bankrupt as a result of the pandemic, League One and Two clubs were put under a wage cap, the goal being to stop any overspending. As they are much more reliant on ticket sales and money coming in on match day than Premier League teams who make most of their money from TV deals, fans feared that several more Lower League sides would suffer the same fate as Bury FC and other clubs, going bankrupt after years of overspending. Clubs in League One can now spend 2.5 million pounds on wages per year, while League Two clubs can spend 1 million pounds. Put into perspective, they can spend less per season on all players combined than what many Premier League clubs do on wages for one single player alone.

What felt like a big difference between attending Premier League and non-league games and some for League Two, and was also the biggest surprise, was one detail that might've seemed trivial if you are used to it, namely the lack of scoreboards. The only way to know how many minutes had been played was to pay attention to at what time the referee had blown his whistle for kick-off, or wait until the fourth official held up a board for how many minutes of injury time. The local football ground where I grew up in Norway has a scoreboard hanging off a lamppost, more for timekeeping than anything else. Not a stadium, just a pitch and a clubhouse, no turnstiles or stands. Perhaps that is the reason I was as surprised as I was that there wasn't anything to keep track of the time in the lower and non-league stadiums, bar your own watch. Games happening in League One or Two have live results reported through Google, which was another option but requires a smartphone. Non-league results, however, are not, and so you are left guessing in the instance of forgetting to check the time at the first whistle.

However, for all the differences, the things that highlight the economic chasm between the Premier League and everyone else, there are similarities as well. The people, the passion, songs, chants, match programmes, £2 worth of glossy pages with teams news, commercial deals, interviews and a message from the manager were always available, no matter if it was Premier League or non-league.

("You haven't bought a programme?"

"No. Should I?"

"Here, you can have mine. I'll go get another")

The spaces and experiences are very different, but it wasn't as if the lower league and Premier league existed in two separate universes where people at one shunned the people at the other. The 3pm kick-off on Saturday's are illegal to broadcast in the UK, due to a rule made in the 80s, when a Burnley chairman feared televised 3pm kick-offs in the first division would discourage fans from attending lower league games happening at the same time. So it was common to sit in the stands of the lower league and at frequent intervals check the score and distribute the information of the Premier League games happening at the same time to people sitting around you. Similarly, while following a Manchester City game and discussing their lack of a striker, the man next to me asked if I had been to see the non-league team playing on a stadium only a few miles away. It was a great place for the days you felt like going to something closer to home than Manchester City, he promised. It made me wonder if wasn't so unusual to have two teams to support, one in the Premier League and one in the lower league tiers.

When I started this fieldwork I wanted to find out what happens with the relationship between fans and clubs when the big Premier League clubs, for so long important cornerstones in their communities, also become major global brands, recognisable far beyond the English border. When owners sit in another continent, revenue becomes just as important as success and it costs more and more to follow someone's team of choice, does the relationship stay the same based on loyalty, love and passion, or is it something there that changes? One of the suggestions I got from an informant before I left for Manchester was that more people would turn to lower league clubs. I did find that, but I also found several ways of resistance against the disembedding of football. This thesis explores those forms of resistance.

Chapter 1:
Method – A fieldwork divided

Fieldwork in two phases

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, I had to think about a plan A, B and C of what would be the best use of time during the fieldwork. While it did look bright in terms of travel to the UK in September of 2020, by December it was much bleaker, and planning for fieldwork became planning for how to change things quickly. From the beginning of 2021 and onwards vaccinations were rolled out throughout Europe and vaccination passports became a more and more frequently used tool in battling the pandemic. Especially for travelling, they were a vital part of entering countries, among them the UK. Due to this, I decided to put the ethnographic fieldwork on hold for a few months so I could get the vaccines, and conduct digital anthropology from Oslo instead. It was during this time I was told about fans potentially leaving the Premier League behind and going to the lower leagues instead, and became my main topic of interest once I could travel.

The fieldwork thus had to be divided into two parts, a more traditional one in the autumn of 2021, made of participant observation, Walk Alongs and informal interviews, but in the spring and over the summer most of my work had to happen online from Oslo. From April to August I worked with social media, interviews via video and following the occasional Livestream of significant events, such as a fan protest against club owners. From August until November I was able to travel to Manchester to attend football games and frequent bars and talk to the people I met there.

The best-case scenario had been having the opportunity to travel already in April 2021, but as it became difficult, it instead turned into a time where I could prepare more for what would meet me once I would be allowed to travel. The answers I got during the first phase in many ways gave me more questions to ask in Manchester. In retrospect, remote fieldwork felt in many ways like painting with broad brushstrokes, and ethnographic fieldwork became about filling in the finer details where they belonged.

Digital ethnography

Digital ethnography is "representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of the story" according to Underberg and Zorn

(Underberg & Zorn, 2013, p. 10) and involves all ethnography happening in the scope of the online world, which includes things such as following chat rooms or studying virtual realities. The most famous example is Boellstorff's fieldwork in the virtual world of Second Life, where he did ethnography among the avatars (Boellstorff, 2008).

Digital ethnography is flexible in a way traditional ethnographic participant observation is not. It was especially helpful in the days of the pandemic. Digital ethnographer Goralska noted that she suddenly found herself to be one of the few anthropologists able to do her research in March 2020, whereas many of her colleagues got travels and research projects postponed until further, and unpredictable, notice (Góralska, 2020).

In her article, published right after the outbreak of the pandemic, she outlines a few key aspects of digital ethnography and the challenges one can face. One of them, and one I recognized for myself, is the overabundance of data. There are thousands of relevant discussions about the commercialisation of football, Twitter posts, YouTube videos and livestreams to follow and capture screenshots of. My list of hyperlinks to relevant tweets grew quickly and learning how to best catalogue it all became in the beginning just as time-consuming as the actual collecting.

My digital fieldwork was comprised of observing Twitter conversations and trends, digital interviews, reading forums and occasionally following livestreams of events. As much as the overabundance of data can be a distraction, it also makes things very convenient, because so many football discussions happen online. Many fans express their opinions, frustrations and joys on Twitter or fan forums, use hashtags to show their displeasure, typically aimed at owners using for example #GlazersOut, a popular hashtag aimed at Manchester United's owners, and interact with the official accounts of clubs, players or broadcasters. How football fans for example use Twitter became evident on the announcement of the European Super League, when words like Sky Sports, Glazers, UEFA and European Super League all trended at the same time for several hours. Social media also becomes important in how it can be used to organise protests and movements among the fans, like the protest against the Glazer family 2nd of May 2021.

A challenge, however, that comes with the flexibility of digital ethnography, is just *how* flexible it is. When it can be done from everywhere with access to the internet, it can be hard to *not* do it, especially in a year where football has seen some major happenings, and I feared missing out on important points if I was not logged on all the time. The protests

outside Old Trafford on the 2nd of May were livestreamed by fan organisations, which I only found out as it was happening, resulting in me watching it on my phone in a park.

There is also the case of being aware of how social media functions to create the presumed best experience for their users, for example through algorithms. Social media, for all that it has the ability to give space to a number of voices, can also end up as echo chambers. The sites, being Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram, bring up posts for you that it assumes you want to see and blocks the ones you don't. When I have already looked at over one hundred tweets calling for the Manchester United owners to sell the club, Twitter will give me more of that, unless I actively search for something else myself, which can lead to a confirmation bias. Although I am confident the displeasure against the United owners is shared throughout most of the United fanbase, when one sentiment occurs seemingly more frequently than another, one can fall into the mindset that that is an opinion shared by all. For example every now and again, like during a transfer window, #FSGOut can trend on Twitter, as a protest against Liverpool's owners FSG, due to their modest spending on new players. However, for the rest of the year, it is difficult to find anyone who uses the hashtag for any other reasons than to mock those who use it seriously.

In this sense participant observation is a good way to find more nuance and to expose myself to voices that contradict what I found on social media. Tones tend to be less direct and angry face to face than they are online, and things such as sarcasm, irony, laughter and seriousness are easier conveyed through oral speech paired with facial expressions than through simple writing on a microblogging platform. To draw parallels between one of my ethnographic fieldsites, a football ground, and Twitter, we can think of them both as places where one opinion might dominate, but the difference is that at the football ground the others are more easily heard through their boos, disagreements and chants. They are also there whether you like it or not, no algorithm will systematically silence those you disagree with on a football stand.

I partially continued the digital ethnography into the second phase as well. While I didn't give it as much attention as I had before, precisely because it can be done from anywhere, I kept at it. For one, I could take topics of discussion I'd seen online into the real world, and compared the sentiments I met on the different platforms, mostly Twitter and fan forums. Sometimes discussions I followed on online platforms echoed themselves in conversations around me when standing at the terraces at a football ground. A popular one was for a time

the sacking of Ole Gunnar Solskjær, where I'd read about who people thought best suited as his successor on Twitter, before going out and hearing the question repeated amongst the crowd on football games, on the bus or in the pub.

The Formality of Zoom versus the Casualty of the Pub

Video calls have been around for many years already but became a bigger and more common part of people's lives when the pandemic first hit in 2020. In a way, I think people already being more used to talking to a web camera when I started my fieldwork helped them say yes to be interviewed. When perhaps before March 2020 it has felt tedious and different, the months of lockdown have made it seem more natural. The familiarity with the setting could perhaps lower the threshold for participating.

Still, however, interviews like this can be stilted and formal and leaves little to no room for small talk or anecdotes around the topics of conversation. You lose the lighter chit chat before you get started, and the digressions throughout. I had sent a list of my questions beforehand, already setting the agenda for the meeting.

Additionally, the price of the age of the internet is that we rely on it to work in order to get what we need to be done. Interviews on video are a great tool because of the convenience, no need for travel and distance does not matter, hence one can have more time for actual conversation rather than practicalities. However, when it does not work, it becomes a hassle. Interviews on an unstable internet connection that lags and stops and falls out are a nuisance at best, at worst it can end an interview altogether. It makes it difficult to hear answers, questions and leads to one or the other apologizing for the difficulties. I found myself planning interviews on days I could to them from home, where I know I have a stable connection, rather than other places where I don't have a reliable connection.

Interviews face to face were more casual. And when it's done in a pub with a football game on in the background, I never ran out of topics to talk about either. There's also the case of interviewing while having a pint, which for one helps with the casualness of it all, but also affects both me and the informant due to the alcohol. A pint relaxed people and myself both by its casualness and its content and I got more stories and anecdotes from the ones that were interviewed in an informal setting.

A pub is also a good place for an interview in order to avoid awkward pauses. If the conversations died out or I couldn’t think of any immediate follow-up questions, there was usually a game on in the background to turn our attention to in the meanwhile. More often than not it also only took a few minutes before someone committed a foul or the ref made a debatable decision, giving us more things to discuss.

In a Crowd of Thousands

Fieldwork aside, the opportunity to go and hang out in crowds after 18 months of doing the opposite was a real joy. During the second phase of the fieldwork, I attended football games or watched them in pubs, as just another face in the crowd.

These places are good for simply observing behaviour or overhearing conversations. What struck me was the familiarity so many had with each other, and how many short and nondescript conversations happened around me. Most of them I didn’t catch onto, those I did mostly boiled down to “how are you”s and “see you on Tuesday”s.

Being a part of the crowd is not just about standing there and looking at a game, however. It is participating in crowd behaviour. I didn’t experience any Mexican waves, and those coordinated movements have in later years become synonymous with crowds being bored, anyway. The crowd behaviour that is perhaps more telling is the unplanned and spontaneous, but still coordinated, ones. The ones that truly show emotions, such as standing up and cheering the very moment a goal goes in, showing displeasure when the team concede, shouting profanity at opposition players or referees and clapping the players as they run out. A person who is standing in the crowd but doesn’t show any reaction to what happens on the pitch is easily recognised as an outsider.

But more than observing though, football games are a good place to get to know people. As mentioned in the introduction, I travelled to Manchester knowing no one. The initial plan was to get in touch with someone online first, so I wouldn’t start straight from square one come September. As it happened though, it proved difficult and arrived with no network to work out from.

I figured that the best place to meet the people I was interested in talking to was to seek them out at the arenas they frequented, namely the football stadium or sports pubs. Being in the stands or sitting in the pub with a game on, everyone knows the others are there for the same

reasons, which helps with starting conversations. Half of the time it wasn't me who instigated them. I kept going to the same places and sat in the same seats, and made up a little network that way. It can be a little bit of a slow start, seeing as football games happen at most twice per week and not all of those are home games, but after a while, I got familiar enough to talk with them outside of football. The conversations covered everything from, of course, football to the weather to the history of Manchester and just why the rivalry with Liverpool, the city as a whole, not just the team, started in the first place.

I more or less relied on some presumptions about the people I might meet based on what others had told me before I left. The most frequent thing is that Mancunians, or people in the north of England in general, are a much more talkative bunch than what I'm used to from Norway. Whereas my instinct would be to sit apart from everyone else rather than in the thick of it, I had to learn to not shy away from the crowds, and conversing would become easier. It is an open and friendly type of people, not like the "coldness of London", as one man from Manchester described it as to me. Their openness gave me confidence that while making connections online might've been difficult, at least striking up conversations and making acquaintances in the physical realm was easier . Luckily for me, the presumptions were right.

The time frame did set some limitations on my research. Three months is not particularly long for ethnographic fieldwork, and I would've liked to have more time. Football games aren't something that happens every day, and so it took me some time to be perceived as someone who was supposed to be there every game, and not just a new face that would soon be gone. A longer stay would've made me more immersed in the field and more familiar with the other fans around me.

Access

Access to the online world is fairly easy as long as there is an internet connection. Sites such as Twitter, or YouTube for livestreams, don't require login information, bar what is age-restricted, but that wasn't a problem I encountered. The fan forums I frequented were also open for all. Only actually submitting a post or a video forces you to create an account. The more difficult thing is to define what should be considered public or private in terms of opinions and statements. One can always argue that anything that is posted online has the ability to be spread far beyond the original poster's intentions regardless if it requires login

information or not. But at the same time, that ability doesn't give me the inherent right to use data in whatever manner I see useful solely based on the potential a post has to travel far. Therefore, I set a distinction for myself to categorize what would be used and how. Anything I needed a login for would be categorized as private and would thus need to be anonymized, including usernames, handles and the site posted on.

The football games themselves are also fairly easy to get access to because it is simply a matter of buying a ticket and knowing where to show up. And as touched upon in the introduction, at some point knowing where to go is just a matter of following the crowds. What can become a challenge during games is gaining access to the crowd as a social group. It is more than just standing there, then someone might *look* like they belong from afar, but still, be a bit of an outsider to those around. Standing on the terraces of a non-league game for the first time I felt like I should start a conversation with someone, ask about the roadworks up the street, the weather, anything, just to look less out of place. Waving at a familiar face implied that this is a scene I had been at before, rather than standing hunched over my phone to avoid any eye contact.

I was lucky in that the first few games I attended at most stadiums I bumped into people who were happy to talk to me and were curious about my fieldwork. When I kept going back and stood in roughly the same places I got recognized from the previous times, and after a few weeks, I didn't feel so out of place anymore. I knew exactly what buses to catch, when to arrive, where to stand, and who to wave at in passing. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I arrived a bit later than normal only to be met with an "oh, there you are! I was wondering where you had gotten to" from one of the guys who used to stand beside me. To know my lack of presence was noteworthy enough to be mentioned when I arrived gave me a feeling of belonging, and as if I was now truly a part of the crowd.

Ethical Considerations

The first ethical consideration I had to take in April was when I decided to postpone travel until it was safer, and also easier. For someone with a Norwegian passport and an experience of crossing borders fairly easily before, the difficulty with travel was a new obstacle and one that could be avoided by waiting. Additionally, I had to take into consideration my own health, as getting vaccinated outside of the EU would be difficult. It was safer for my own sake to wait for the jabs in Norway before embarking on my journey. After all, I would be

actively seeking out crowds of people. Here, getting ill or passing it onto someone else, would be a lot easier than when sitting behind a computer screen at home.

Even after arrival, despite multiple negative tests and proof of vaccinations, I was very aware of the fact I was moving around in crowds of people after travelling through international airports, train stations and sitting in a packed coach for six hours. Not so much due to worry for my own sake, as for others. While getting COVID-19 myself would undeniably be a personal inconvenience, I would by all likelihood be alright in the long run. A more pressing matter is what it would've done to those around me. Accepting personal risk is one thing, accepting it on behalf of others is another. The people I rented a room with had no connections to my field and would solely get COVID-19 into their home from my endeavours, and I could also be in danger of spreading from one stadium to another.

I asked myself the question of how right is it to seek out big crowds after more than 18 months where the general rule had been to avoid it, as society opening up is not an equivalent to the end of the pandemic. The conclusion was to follow local rules and guidelines, both those for Manchester specifically, and the domestic rules from the British government. The Premier League and EFL issued do's and don'ts lists on attending games as well and seeing as fans *were* allowed and encouraged to go to games once they had been allowed back in, I deemed it alright to go.

Another consideration I faced was the case of anonymization. In big stadiums such as the Etihad or Old Trafford with 50 000 to 70 000 fans, it is easier to get lost in the crowd. Some lower league or non-league games I went to had down to 500 in attendance, at those times it becomes harder, also considering I am disclosing other things about them that can narrow it down significantly. Therefore, I have made the decision that when talking about League One, League Two or non-league games I will not specify teams, stadiums or places that can give away the locations.

Chapter 2:
"Earn too much, care too little" – Resistance inside the Stadiums

Turning away from the Premier League

Before I left for Manchester, I asked an informant what he thought would happen, if top-flight football continued to be the unregulated industry as it has always been, and continue to become increasingly marketized and commercialised in the years to come.

"I think we will see more fans going to League One or Two. If the clubs no longer represent their communities, they will find other clubs further down the system that will"

I travelled with a curiosity as to whether it was a worst-case scenario that local fans turned their backs on attending Premier League games or if it was a more common occurrence already, just less communicated to the average international fan. In my thesis the ethnographic field is Manchester, and I wanted to find out if there were any fans who used to attend Old Trafford or Etihad Stadium and then stopped. And if the latter was the case, what were the reasons ? Could only ownership be enough reason to stop going to top-flight games or could I find more compound reasons for it ?

I *did* find fans who had stopped attending Premier League games and only went to watch the lower leagues for various reasons, but I also found that this was only one form of critique by those who disliked the Premier League. The aim of this chapter is not to answer yes or no regarding if there's a movement among local fans to turn to lower league football, but rather to examine the motivations behind this critique, and how the critique is acted out.

In the case of Manchester United, fans turning away from the club has happened before, on an extreme scale. In 2005, when the Glazer family bought the club in a debt leveraged takeover, the protests from the fans were as loud as they were furious. The end result was a breakaway club, FC United of Manchester, FCUM, formed and owned by United fans who didn't want to see Manchester United playing under the Glazer family. It is one of the clearest examples of fans turning away from a club when they cannot connect to it any longer, and it is more extreme in the sense that they actively created something new, rather than going to support a local team further down the EFL pyramid. An informant I met through social media, Oliver, lamented that the Glazer takeover and subsequent creation of FCUM led to Manchester United losing a fair few of their most ardent supporters, supporters who would've been useful now in the still ongoing protest against the owners.

When I say turn away from the Premier League, however, it's far away from meaning to shun the league completely. While some fans stop attending games or buying merchandise, it is not synonymous with disregarding everything that got to do with the Premier League. Going to the lower league and non-league games, I noticed a tendency to still care about the results, have favourite players, discuss current managers and hate the traditional rivals. There was always one person updating the surrounding crowds of the Premier League scores, to unison cheers or groans. If Manchester United or City started their game at 1:30 pm, I often could spot hats, scarves and shirts with their crest on them at the 3pm kick-off in the lower league.

For some, the problem was the owner, as described above, for others it was about what football had become in general. Too globalised, too commercialised, not a reflection of their communities in the same way as in "the good old days" as one lady described them to me. It wasn't necessarily about where the fans left their money either, but about where they could go on a Saturday afternoon and experience what they didn't get from the Premier League.

I spent a lot of time going to the lower league and non-league games in the community around where I lived in Manchester, as it was cheaper and easier to get tickets than going to Premier League games every week. In the lower league, it was also easier to get the same seat and with fewer people in attendance, it was easier to meet the same people every time, and become an expected feature in the stands. Additionally, it was genuinely a lot of fun, and I found it was a good way to meet football fans, some who had to spend much of their life going to Old Trafford or the Etihad/Main Road but didn't anymore, some who had never had much interest in those teams and some who were still going to both the top tier and lower tiers.

When watching one of the teams I tried to frequent, I usually stood next to Tony, now a pensioner, born and raised in Greater Manchester. Our first conversation started with him tapping me on the shoulder and apologizing in advance for any and all profanity I might hear during the game. English could be a colourful language, he said.

Tony had been a Manchester United Supporter his entire life, but wasn't much impressed with the state of things in recent years. The first time I broached the topic of United he had seen me checking the results from the 1:30pm kick-off earlier that day, our game was due to start at 3pm, United had just lost at home after conceding only a few minutes before full-time.

“Laughing at the result, are you?” he asked

“Just a bit. D’you follow them?”

“Used to, yes. Don’t go to the games more, though”

“Why?”

He didn’t answer right away, busy shouting profanities in direction of the pitch in front of us. The home team wasn’t doing so well and he was letting them know. Colourful language indeed.

“Oh, you know. These days. They earn too much and care too little. It’s not right” he said and shook his head in exasperation before booing once more, this time at the ref.

There is, according to Thompson (1971, p. 79) a moral consensus that limits how much someone can profit from something before provoking a public reaction. He argues there isn’t simply supply and demand that decides the value of something, but also a common perception of how much one can allow themselves to earn from something needed by many. Thompson uses the bread riots in 18th century England as a historic example, and here we can look at football clubs in the same way. In 2021 the British parliament commissioned a fan led review of the state of football in England. The review, conducted by Tracy Crouch defined football clubs as “community assets” (Department for Digital Culture Media and Sports, 2021), regardless of the league tier they play in. When top-flight become increasingly commercialised, it effectively becomes a case of how much money can one potentially make from something that is defined by the government as something meant to benefit a whole community.

So, Tony’s view of modern top-flight football might make sense. At least in the “earning too much” part. Players making too much money for being the faces of a community asset, representing a brand with strong local roots but also doing it for the paychecks. From the 1984/1985 season where top division players earned roughly 2.5 times more than the average UK citizen annually, by the 2010/2011 season the figure had risen to roughly 34 times the average UK wage (Miller & Harris, 2011). And that is just averages. Bigger stars at bigger clubs earn bigger money, and at the moment of writing, Manchester United have Christiano Ronaldo, Raphael Varane and Jadon Sancho on as new signings of the season, putting them on the top of the wage spenders in the Premier League. When a new player like Sancho is reportedly paid up to 350 000 GBP per week simultaneously as he cannot replicate his good

form from his former club, one might forgive Tony for his strict assessment of the current batch of players. There is a small collection as well of players who spend most matches on the bench or in the stands, while also being on well-paid contracts discouraging them from leaving. The spending on players in relation to the effort they convey on the pitch is seemingly an important one.

The Premier League renewed its broadcasting deal worth £5.1Bn in 2020, the rights shared between Sky, BT, Amazon and BBC and including both live and non-live footage of the games. The deal was renewed rather than renegotiated due to the pandemic, the few months the league was put on hold broadcasters couldn't sell Premier League as a product to viewers, and so couldn't afford a price hike. However, the price is expected to again be on the rise in 2025, the next time broadcasting rights are put up for sale. 50% of the money is divided equally between the competing clubs, 25% is distributed based on meritocracy and the final 25% works as a facilities fee for televised matches. I was told by a representative for Football Supporters Europe, FSE, that Europe's top clubs now rely less and less on match day income and more on sponsorships and money from broadcasting. In other words, the clubs are well set even without fans attending and with the Premier League being the world's most viewed football league, the clubs didn't have to wait for fans to be allowed back into the stadiums before making money out of playing football games. People watching from their homes was enough.

An embedded economy, according to Polanyi, is when the economy is embedded with both economic and non-economic institutions, rather than being its own separate entity, independent from the society it resides over (Polanyi, 2001c). When football was being played but the stadiums were locked, pubs and chip shops in the neighbourhood also lost hungry and thirsty customers. The public transport had no one to shuttle to and from the games, and the employees at the club shop still could not return to work. The football games inside the stadiums meant little economically for the area around it, but no one wanted to void the season because of the economic repercussions it would have elsewhere.

Football as an institution is embedded in English society. The money that flows through the clubs, however, is disembedded from local society in the very literal sense that the great majority of it flows into the pockets of international owners and shareholders. As stated above top-flight clubs relied a lot more on money coming from outside the local communities through sponsorship and broadcasting, rather than ticket sales to the fans

physically attending the stadium. Money isn't being redistributed to other parts of the community but can be exchanged for other things such as players' wages, brand expansion in Asia or taken out as dividends by the owners. Over the past thirty years, fans have seen a development where clubs have become more like corporations, finically answerable to their shareholders, rather than only to the fans. In short, we can say commercialisation has made football clubs more disembedded from their communities. Fans show forms of resistance as a critique against that.

It should be said that international interest and income from broadcasting rights aren't bad things in themselves. Fans in England take pride in having one of the best leagues in the world and the ability to get the best players and coaches to be a part of it. Typical football cities like Manchester made good money from the tourist industry pre-pandemic, with streams of international fans coming to see their team play, maybe for the first time, and leaving important money in local businesses. A popular question I found while scouring forums during the digital part of the fieldwork was which pubs in Manchester were good for pre and post-match pints for tourists who wanted to meet up with local fans.

Tony wasn't the only one not going to Old Trafford anymore. At the lower league games, there were several like him, those who for different reasons stuck to checking the result on their phones, but were no longer live spectators. For some, it had simply gotten too expensive to follow them every game, and the £10 it cost to get into the lower league was then much more favourable. For others, not attending Premier League was about not connecting with it anymore. To quote one man, Robbie, always in the seat in the corner. "'S no magic no more, like".

It would've been easy to assume that it was down to results or lack of titles. After all, by the next time Manchester United have the hypothetical chance to win the Premier League, it will be ten years since they did it last time. But both Tony and Robbie, and in fact most of the people I met at lower league games, were old enough to remember Manchester United getting relegated in 1975, and they still went to games then. Tony asked me what my team was, I confessed it was FC Barcelona, preparing a follow-up joke about it being hard times for us as well after many years of success. But Tony didn't laugh.

"Oh, but that happens to them all, you know. It goes up and down"

So results had little to do with not going to games for people like Tony. I had a Manchester City fan sit in front of me every now and again when watching a non-league team, and if

attendance could be explained by good or bad results alone, he should've been at the Etihad every home game. And besides, Tony had already given me the beginning of an answer before. Earn too much, care too little.

Polanyi says that the price to pay for economic improvements, in the sense that it increases profits for the already wealthy, is social dislocation. He argues that during the industrial revolution improvements happened too quickly for the effects to be canalized in such a way that there we not destructive to the common people. What he calls protective countermovements against this self-destructive process results in his famed double movement (Polanyi, 2001b, p. 79). The increasing commercialisation of football has led to social dislocation for the fans. Since there have been so few regulations of how the clubs operate there haven't been many formalised counter-movements. The finical fair play rule, FFP, was supposed to stop richer clubs' overspending, but it is debated how effective the rule really is. Counter-moves more or less come from the fans, like the ones who create new clubs, fan unions or fan protests.

Actually, though, there is one event that made Tony still go back down to old pastures. On the anniversary of the Munich Air Disaster, a plane crash that happened on the 6th of February in 1958 killed 23 people, 8 of them players at Manchester United. Tony went back for the memorial service every year and is old enough to remember it happening.

The topic came up when I asked him how long he had followed Manchester United for.

"Oh, I've followed them since before Munich, me," he said, almost like it was a badge of honour. Maybe it is, because of how long ago it is, and how much has happened since then. Tony had stuck through everything from the highs of Matt Busby's days and their 1986 European Cup win, to the lows of the relegation season in 1975.

Tony didn't dislike Manchester United at all. He just didn't connect with it anymore. He attended what he did feel close to, such as the Munich memorial, and he followed the results eagerly on his phone. He shook his head in exasperation at their losses and smiled pleased at their wins.

"They're up 2-0 now," I said to him one Saturday, the weekend's live scores sending notifications to my phone at every goal and penalty.

"Are they really?"

“Bit surprising, eh?”

“It’s good, they need points now”

Many football fans will talk about a collective “we” when talking about their football team. It’s not uncommon to hear about “we won today” or hear staple songs such as “we’re champions of England, you’ll never sing that”. As far as I can remember, Tony never used “we” about United when I spoke to him. Either he never has, or he stopped when he also stopped attending games, another way to mark the distance between himself and the club. He didn’t necessarily stand in opposition to it, because of his interest in results and recurring visits to the memorial, at the same time as it didn’t give him anything to connect to.

I brought the movement up with another informant later on, what he thought were the reason people had that made them leave, if the continued support from afar could be tied to a foundational finical boycott.

“Not necessarily, no. Many English football clubs are reflections of their own communities. If fans no longer recognise what they see in the club then they will leave the club – it won’t have anything to do with a determined financial boycott” he explained. Perhaps that’s the lack of magic then that does it. Maybe the lacking magic Robbie mentioned is social dislocation.

Victor Turner (1969) writes about *communitas*, a sense of community happening between people going through or experiencing a feeling of common purpose and meaning, often used in the same line as liminal phases. During a football game, a fan can be said to be in a sort of liminal phase, a 90 minute period where everyone in the right sections of the stadium wishes for the same result, boos for the same refereeing decisions and cheer for the same challenges. It is far from uncommon for strangers to hug and cheer with each other for a late winner in football games because the results carry the same meaning to all. If the club is not something one can connect to anymore, and the buzz that once made a goal or a foul an important is gone, the common purpose and meaning would not be there. Then people turn away and find it somewhere else as Tony did in the lower leagues.

As outlined in the introduction, the differences between Premier League and the lower league are many and very visible. The lower leagues are by no means a relic of old, where time has stood still and there’s still just a pound in entrance fee, but it is more similar to the old school football in the sense that it is less globalised and commercialized. Match

attendance is important for the clubs' income, and many have also kept the old standing terraces, banned in the top flight after the 1989 Hillsborough Tragedy. There are still those stadiums where you can just turn up and pay at the turnstile like decades ago, and the mince pies are somewhat cheaper. For this reason, the lower league, while also very much touched by the modern age with social media accounts and ticket scanners, can simultaneously be perceived as more authentic and closer to the football before the Premier League era.

Also, we can add the case fans being there for a fairly similar reason. In a low or non-league team, there are little to no so-called glory hunters, fans who come only for the sake of supporting someone successful, like many fans of Premier League clubs are accused of being. The well-known "Prawn Sandwich Brigade", a term coined by former United captain Roy Keane in a post-match interview from 2003, is a derogatory term for people who attend football games in the executive boxes or VIP-seat, enjoying prawn sandwiches and cocktails, and cares less about what is happening on the pitch. Taking success as a guarantee, being quick to boo any mistakes and not paying attention to the game are some of their characteristics. The implications were that these aren't real fans or *as* real as the hard-core fans in the cheaper seats who come for the game instead of the sandwiches. The more expensive seats will give the club more income, but there is a different kind of support that is needed from the stands.

Although expressed in different ways, Tony's avoidance of Premier League games and Keane's post-match words, they're part of the same critique. James Scott described Everyday Forms of Resistance, as forms that are subtle, unorganised and non-explicit but still done with intent (James C Scott, 1989). Tony doesn't find going to Old Trafford the same as it used to be, and while I encountered several like him, it was never a part of an organised mass walk-out. Thus we can see his choice of not attending Premier League games has become as an Everyday form of resistance, a conscious choice he had made as a critique against the disembedding of football. Keane's comments about the prawn sandwich brigade are a part of the same critique. His comments go against a new type of fan that has been invited in, perhaps the type of fan that has replaced people like Tony.

There is of course also the case of costs. With the ticket prices increasing at a much more rapid speed than average monthly wage and skyrocketing even when taking inflation into account, some fans have simply been priced out, some for going to games altogether, some for following their team all season as one could for less money before.

Such was the reality for Mark, a man who happily bought cups of coffee and meat ‘n onion pies at the low league games, the price of which combined with a match ticket was still about only half he would’ve paid to get into the Etihad to watch his beloved Manchester City play. Mark didn’t show any annoyance towards it, however. He was also a man in his 80s, he had been a part of the blue side of Manchester since he was young and thus had experienced a less successful side of football in Manchester. Between the 95/96 and 01/02 seasons, City didn’t play in the Premier League at all. From personal experience, up until I was 13 years old, just referring to Manchester was enough to know someone meant United, as I had never heard of a Manchester City before 2010. There’s the famous quote from Barcelona fullback Dani Alves that he didn’t even know Manchester had two major clubs before City played their first Champions League game in 2011. Mark was more than pleased that new owners had come in and changed the balance.

City owners after 2008 have spent heavily on their stadium, which is rented from the local council, and the surrounding areas, such as their training facilities, and expanded what is the Manchester Sport City. They also own other clubs around the world through a different company called City Group, meaning their access to young talent is vast and almost inexhaustible. It is another example of how clubs have become disembedded from their local communities, whereas thirty years ago most young talents coming through and making it into the first team were local boys, now Manchester City have access to talented children from all over the world. Manchester City’s success is here to stay, and Mark loved it, the increased prices weren’t the fault of the owners anyway, he said. That’s just the way the Premier League is now, there are expensive tickets everywhere.

In *The Game of our Lives*, long-time football author David Goldblatt notes that season tickets, even at the cheaper end of the spectrum, have increased about 500 times in price since the mid-'80s, also allowing for inflation (David Goldblatt, 2015). This has never been directly encouraged by the Premier League, although they haven’t’ discouraged it either. Clubs have simply pushed their luck. It is a normal case of supply and demand, there are enough people vying for a Premier League ticket and so the clubs are in the position to turn up the prices for them, as well as add on other match day experiences with some of them, like seats with cushions or cupholders, or in the case of Manchester City, match tickets that gives one access to windows above the players tunnel to see the players when they walk on and off the pitch. Mark might have become part of the group that is now priced out, but he never moaned about it, it was a Premier League issue, not a club issue, and so he was

seemingly content at basking in the glory of being title favourites, unlike the United fans around him.

Mark’s refusal to criticise Manchester City’s owners for high ticket prices can be explained in the way the owners operate. Whereas Manchester United’s owners are perceived to only be there to extract wealth and will not sell until the club no longer makes them money, Manchester City has wealthy owners who are known to spend substantial sums every on new players, facilities, coaches and managers. I don’t have the room in this thesis for an extensive ethical discussion surrounding sportswashing, but the Abu Dhabi group, City’s owners, are not interested in owning a football team in order to make themselves richer. They are other priorities, ones that are made through having a successful football team.

In Thompson's article, the poor peasants are angry because farmers, millers and bakers earn more than what collective morality says is right. If Manchester City’s owners also extracted wealth in the same way Manchester United’s owners did, then perhaps Mark would’ve been more inclined to criticise them for the ticket prices. But as it happens, they don’t extract wealth in the same way. Manchester City fans pay for tickets and shirts and other merchandise, and in return, they see a team with some of the best training facilities in the world, that wins trophies every year and can buy the best players. In their case it’s not the owners getting rich, it’s the club they love. It does not necessarily mean the money paid for a ticket to a game goes directly back into the club, the Abu Dhabi Group has enough money to without it, and so the economy stays disembedded.

Other Forms of Critique

But then again, some stay. And it is not because they are obvious to the changes that have happened in top-flight football in the past decades. What it shows is that whereas not attending Premier League games is one form of critique against commercialisation, it is not the only form. While the warning before I left and the people I talked to at the lower leagues give the impression there is a movement of fans now turning away from the Premier League, many are still steadfastly going to see their team week in and week out. In 2019 Manchester United reported having somewhere around 100 000 people on the waiting list for a season ticket, about twice as many as are sold each season, where most of them are renewed from already season ticket holders. As the famous quote goes “you can change your job, you can change your wife, but you never change your football club” (Loach, 2009). It would be a

discussion of what one can define as changing club or not. I don't think Tony would accept that he changed his club as he is after all following them in a different way, but then there are those who say you should support the club through anything, even a league set up to be unrecognisable to some.

I asked Oliver whether it was a common consensus to hate the owners of Manchester United or if was just a rather loud minority. The protest that pops up outside Old Trafford can be loud and disruptive, but they aren't regular by any means. He claimed that the general feeling in the entire country was hostility, but general match goers tended to be more apathetic, and the intensity of the opposition also went through waves depending on what situations the club went through. After the signing of Christiano Ronaldo towards the end of last summer's transfer window, the general feeling was joy among the fans. I wasn't at Old Trafford on his first game back, but I was in the city and after spotting 3 Ronaldo shirts the moment I stepped outside, I thought it might be fun to count how many I could see on the way to the corner shop and back. The roughly 500 metres I walked contained 17 shirts with "Ronaldo, 7" on the back.

Oliver believed those who regularly went to the games eventually got tired out of the constant opposition and hatred towards the owners and after all went to cheer on a team, not stage a protest, something we shall come back to in chapter 3. As he pointed out, it is not long ago that one of the Glazer brothers attended a game at Old Trafford, and only a few fans sent some boos in his direction, there was no full-scale protest as seen post-Super League or when they took over in 2005. One weekend while I was still in Manchester, a picture started to circulate on Twitter that encouraged a new protest outside Old Trafford next Saturday. It gathered significantly less support than the one in May, and when I walked past there were more people exiting the club shop than protesting outside of it.

Oliver, who had studied social sciences at University a few years ago, likened the apathy to Yurchak's book *Everything was forever* on the fall of the Soviet Union, how Manchester United have steadily declined over the past few years, and people haven't noticed. The topic came up when I asked him if he feared United might be going down a similar path to Newcastle or Everton, many years ago big clubs almost guaranteed to win trophies every year, Newcastle in the '50s and Everton in the '70s and '80s, but now bouncing somewhere between the mid-table and the relegation zone. Oliver believed Manchester United were already well on its way towards the same disintegration.

Yurchak outlines how people were not necessarily either pro or anti-communist, they just existed in a space between and didn't' take much notice of the political battle going on around them. It was only when the Soviet Union actually did fall that the ones who had existed in between looked back and saw the steps leading up to it. As he writes, nobody saw the fall coming, but once it had happened nobody was that surprised either, like a slippery slope towards a brave new world (Yurchak, 2005).

Oliver saw much of the same happening now with the apathy among the match goers. The belief that their part of the "Big 6", the term for the Premier League's biggest clubs, Arsenal, Tottenham, Chelsea, Liverpool and both Manchester teams, is set to last forever. They will only realize the downfall once it is past the point of no return. And when that happened no one would be that surprised about it.

Oliver wasn't of the belief United needed owners like the Saudi-Arabian Public Investment Fund, PIF, who have recently bought 80 per cent of the shares in Newcastle United because United don't need heaps and heaps of money.

"Manchester United are a much bigger club than Newcastle" he explained, and as far back as in Newcastle's heyday in the 1950s.

United just needed owners that invested. While he absolutely didn't want to see his club relegated, that would at least mean the Glazer family would sell up, and the opportunity for better ownership opened up. Because, he said, if it continued down the same path as for the past ten years with constant changing of managers, big contracts, expensive players with little impact and internal discontent, it wouldn't be long until they really would just bob up and down between mid-table and relegation, like the Greats from years ago do now. After being knocked out of the Champions League and the FA Cup in the spring of 2022, United have for the first time since the '70s gone more than five years without a trophy. Oliver feared this was just the beginning.

It's on the face of it a bleak outlook on the future, as well as a strict assessment of fans who do attend the games. Before there have been icy fronts between match-going fans and those who vehemently rejected the Glazers' ownership. When the then very new MUFC played against Salford City in 2005, a fan ran along the pith waving a flag saying "traitors", and in the aftermath of the creation of the breakaway club, those who had left were branded as Judases. When the debate comes to this it seems to create an almost impossible paradox for supporters. Either stay and support United through thick and thin but at the same time enable

the system that one opposes, or leave and turn one's back on their club but also take a firm stand against something one thinks is wrong.

In his chapter in *Identity Destabilised: Living in an Overheated World*, Keir Martin writes about fans who have different perceptions on to what extent Manchester United are a club or a business, are supporters just that or also customers, do they have to accept the Glazer's presence in order to survive as a top-flight team (Martin, 2016). No local businessman has enough money to run United at the level fans expect.

As one fan says in his text "Am I happy the ticket prices are increasing? No, I am not. Will I still go? Probably". The finical side of football is vital to its continued development, and so to an extent clubs have to be businesses in order to stay afloat in the current football industry. Eric said to me didn't particularly like how much money meant in today's football either, but that wasn't going to stop him from supporting the team he had followed all his life.

Occasionally, Eric would show up at lower league games. He had a season ticket to Old Trafford and had bought one every season ever since the stadium opened after World War 2. He told me about going to Maine Road in the immediate post-war years, shared with Manchester City, before finally being able to move to Old Trafford in 1952. I rarely saw him at lower league games on Saturdays as he tended to be at Untied then, but he did sometimes turn up if United didn't have a Saturday kick-off.

Eric wasn't all that pleased about the direction top-flight football had taken in the last few years either, and especially didn't like the ownerships the likes of Newcastle and Manchester City had, which made football into a political tool. I asked him if didn't want to go down the same route as Tony, turning down his season ticket and going to low league instead. He shook his head at that.

"The only day I don't watch United is when I am ill".

Eric and Tony are roughly the same age and share similar stories in terms of what they remember from their times of following United. Both remember the Munich disaster and the relegation season, both remember Sir Alex Ferguson taking over in the late 80s and both remember Old Trafford being rebuilt after the war. Eric isn't that much more impressed with the players than Tony last I talked to him but is still inclined to believe they care about their club even if the results don't speak for it.

Tony and Eric's stance on the state of modern football is quite similar. Where Tony meant footballers were paid too much and cared too little, Eric once mentioned the money made the players believe they were better than they really were. And both agreed that football had changed far too much in the past years. Neither voiced a loud opinion on the Glazers either, Eric said he would hate to see owners like the PIF in Newcastle or Sheik Mansour and City Group coming to United, Tony shrugged his shoulders and pointed out that money has changed football too much anyway.

The difference between Eric and Tony was how they lived out their critique of disembedded football. Where Eric still went to Old Trafford to see the team he had always gone to see, Tony went to see connect with what he felt wasn't ruined by money just yet. Eric would mentioned often his dislike for both the ownership of Manchester City and Newcastle and how he disagreed with holding this year's World Cup in Qatar. Still, they both eagerly greeted each other when they met, and neither gave the other grief for their decision.

Where Tony's choice of not going to Old Trafford anymore is an Everyday form of resistance, Eric's words against sportswashing can be seen as the same, but also pushed further to Scott's concept of Hidden Transcripts (James C Scott, 1989, p. 59), off-stage criticisms from a subordinate group.

What is a Club, and Who Does It Belong To?

Football is for the fans, is a common phrase. Football without fans is nothing, is another. When the pandemic closed the stadiums for spectators for almost 18 months in total, and TV channels had to add fan noise to their broadcasts, we truly got to experience just how much the fans add to a game. For the first time, the oh so important famous home advantage was gone as there were no supporters there to cheer the players on.

Football being for and of the fans is true in several senses. Football wouldn't have been built up to be the worldwide global phenomenon it is today hadn't been for the fans that cared about it. As football has become increasingly more globalised and commercialised in the past decades, many fans feel the clubs are being wrenched away from their local communities and made into a brand that can be sold all over the world. Disembedded from the place it grew out of. But to what extent can a club situated in a town become removed, what even *is* the club, and how does that begin to explain who it belongs to? Not attending Premier League games or differentiating between supporting the team in person while

disliking the owners are forms of resistance against the disembedding of football clubs from their communities. When a club becomes too disembedded, the question of who it belongs to is interesting because it raises the issue of if it's starting to belong to the fans less than what was perceived before, and if there will be a reaction to embed it again.

Football clubs, many wants to say, are more than a business or a company. But as Martin (2016) notes in his text, the moment a club accepted a fee for a ticket to get to see a team play, it became a business. A football club is more than its stadium, its players, owners and training ground. Manchester United didn't disappear when Old Trafford was bombed during world war 2, or change to something else when they moved training ground from the Cliff to Carrington. It continued to exist in the same capacity, and even if the debt from the 2005 Glazer takeover changed many things. Manchester United still exist in the same capacity it has done for over a hundred years. Goldblatt asks the question of what is a football club but its name and the complex collection of memories, stories traditions and histories the name carries with it (David Goldblatt, 2015, pp. 30-31). Those aren't something that disappears with a stadium or players, to the contrary the comings and goings of players, moving of stadiums and change of owners just add to the stories associated with the club name and badge. The squads of the past become the stuff of legends associated with the club, and strengthen the history rather than weaken the company.

Upon the Glazer family's first visit to Old Trafford, roughly a month after the takeover, the protests were so volatile enough to barricade the new owners inside Old Trafford for several hours, before they were escorted through the crowds in a police van. A large part of their unpopularity so early on into their ownership was because of the debt they had put Manchester United in through the takeover. To trace back to Thompson once more, not only would they gain wealth, more than what local moral code dictated was right, but they had also plunged a club previously free of debt into a heap of it. Like the millers and bakers from the 1700s, selling bread at high prices, the poor also suspected them of mixing things such as acorns and beans into the grain (Thompson, 1971, p. 97). The Glazer family would go on to make a tidy profit from owning Manchester United while giving back a debt laden club to the fans, who also no longer win trophies on the regular like they used to.

In sociologist Chris Porter's own fieldnotes from the evening, he writes one fan shouted repeatedly "You can buy the bricks and mortar, but you can never buy the fans" (Porter, 2019) A 2021 review of football in England led by Tracey Crouch upon commission from

the British Parliament, states that “Any club owner is merely the latest in a long line; a temporary custodian of a community asset which hopefully will continue to exist for centuries after they have departed” (Department for Digital Culture Media and Sports, 2021). The implied meaning in both examples is that owners come and go with time, but football clubs, the community assets as they are described in the Review, hold more than can be sold or bought or owned, by anyone.

Yet, in a legal sense, the clubs don’t belong to the fans at all. They have little influence on the decision making, depending on the clubs’ cooperation with supporters' unions, and they own few or none of the shares. In recent years, the discussion for increased fan influence or fan ownership has come up in England, an attempt at ensuring clubs are a reflection of their communities. If we are to follow Goldblatt, what is a football club but the stories and traditions, and who do those stories and traditions stay with? Who passes the support and passion to new generations? Who teaches their children about the history of the club they hold so dear? The fans. Season tickets can be inherited through family lines, taking one's kids to their first football games is a milestone for British parents. In this sense, the clubs belong wholeheartedly to their supporters and local community, community assets as defined by the British government. A result of the globalisation and commercialisation that has happened since the inception of the Premier League is clubs are being disembedded from their communities. It is mentioned in the conclusion of the documentary *Fever Pitch,* that the popularity of English football, an unforeseen consequence of the creation of the Premier League, has made the clubs grow out of the communities that created them (Story Films & Studio 99, 2021).

Still, if we are to take a look at football as an industry, it is the money that means the most. Football has always operated as a largely unregulated market, and especially after the abolishment of the wage cap in 1961, the club also needs to a greater extent to cater to the players, as they stand free to negotiate better and better wages. Stories, traditions and rituals are things that bind people together in a common conception of “we”, but they are also non-tangible, and as such cannot be firmly held in possession of anyone and claim it gives the right to have a final say what happens to a club and not. When Egyptian billionaire and former owner of Hull City, Assem Allam, wanted to rebrand Hull City as Hull City Tigers in order to appeal more to a global audience, the fans wasted no time voicing their displeasure. However, Allam replied that it was his company, and he could do what he liked. For all that stories or slogans can be owned through branding or image rights, it doesn’t stop a father

from telling his children about a glorious cup final from his boyhood days, or an old shirt from a legendary season to pass through the generations. In this way at least, a club will always belong to the fans. In the end, the FA declined the application for a name change, and Hull City remained Hull City.

Oliver told me once that when fans no longer see a reflection of themselves in their clubs they will leave. But when is that? Is there a threshold where they will no longer recognise what they support and collectively turn away? After the Saudi-Arabian Public Investment Fund, PIF, took over Newcastle in October 2021, Eric told me he would hate that kind of ownership in Manchester United. To be owned by what is an extension of an authoritarian regime known for human rights violations and the murder of a journalist would be a shame, and while he could sympathise with Newcastle fans after the years with Mike Ashley as their owner, he did not see how something like PIF could be better, regardless of how much money might be poured into the club. But if we take a look at clubs such as Manchester City, state ownership has brought a completely opposite sentiment than what Eric feels. Manchester City's worldwide fanbase has increased massively since the Abu Dhabi Group's 2008 takeover, and the fans aren't necessarily displeased with the owners despite the allegations of sportswashing against them. Mark, the City fan I kept meeting at lower league games, didn't have a bad word to say about them.

As the popularity of football has grown, so has its ability to be a marketing tool. Using sports as a means to highlight one's own good sides and take attention away from other sides of politics is nothing new. Hitler did it with the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and Qatar will do it with the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup. And it's happening to club football as well. As noted above, Newcastle was recently bought by PIF, to some resistance from an organisation such as Amnesty International. There are the voices that call for keeping politics out of football, but truthfully that is near impossible. Football is embedded in society and as such cannot be separated from it. Strings of politics will always be tied to sports regardless, and especially at the top level. Roman Abramovich, Chelsea's previous owner and Russian oligarch, was forced to put the club up for sale due to his connections to Russian President Vladimir Putin following the war in Ukraine in 2022. Ever since his takeover in 2003, there has always been speculation over what his intentions with owning a football club are. While few doubt he has a genuine football interest, owning one of the most successful teams in the country and being a well-known name does come with certain protections against getting assets seized by the British government. That strategy worked until 2022, and what we're

seeing now however is how global politics can directly inflict a football club because of the owner, as Chelsea became prohibited from selling merchandise and tickets as a part of the sanctions against Roman Abramovich. This we will return to and look further into in chapter 4.

When we discussed who a club belongs to and how to reflect the community it was born out of, it seems like there are those examples were not so much reflect the fans. But still, they go and cheer their club on week in and week out, and even if there are those who turn away, there are more than enough who stay. Polanyi says that improvements come with social dislocation. However, if the rate of dislocation is slow and regulated so that the changes become bearable, communities will not succumb to it (Polanyi, 2001c). Maybe in the years since the creation of the Premier League commercialisation has moved slow enough for fans to get used to it, and the course of change has become less destructive, meaning social dislocation has been avoided.

However, in April 2021 the plans for a new type of league were announced that would've changed European football forever. The European Super League, free of promotion or relegation, would guarantee a spot for the same 15 clubs every year, and guarantee money for the same 15 clubs every year. As we shall take a closer look at in the next chapter, fans feared it would destroy football in Europe forever. And so they pushed back.

Chapter 3:
The Case of the European Super League

Introducing the new European Super League

On the 18th of April 2021, a bomb was dropped in the world of European football. 12 of Europe's biggest clubs had gone together to create a new, exclusive league, free of any promotion and relegation, bringing together the biggest names, clubs and stakes far more frequently than audiences had ever seen before, guaranteed every season. The proposal didn't go so well.

The announcement, reactions and aftermath of the proposed plan for the European Super League, ESL, make for an interesting case study in the community of football fandom. As Max Gluckman is quoted on "Clearly one good case can illuminate the working of a social system in a way that a series of morphological statements cannot achieve (Evens & Handelman, 2006, p. 16). The two days the ESL was alive brought a great many reactions, feelings, motivations and opinions to the surface, and also gave a rare, and temporary, time of unity between fans, federations, associations, broadcasters, players, managers and even royalty. In this chapter, we shall take a look at the circumstances and what happened 18th – 20th of April 2021, what drove the temporary unity between fans in fighting the proposed plans and resistance against disembedded contemporary football.

As seen in chapter 1, there is a movement happening in recent years, of fans who stop attending Premier League games and instead turn to the lower leagues to get their football fix. The people I talked to all cited the influence of money as the major issue, not that they couldn't afford the ticket necessarily, but there was too much money involved in general, for players, managers, owners and governing bodies. It is no secret that football has become increasingly more lucrative place to make money over the years, particularly in the last thirty since the creation of the Premier League. Manchester United was one of the first clubs to really capitalise on their growing international popularity. But even already in the '90s, some fans expressed discontent about where the club was heading. The announcement of the Super League is in many ways when years of increased commercializing finally came to a head.

The peasants in the bread riots Thompson wrote of felt the direct impact of dearth on the price of bread, like football fans feel the commercialization of football mostly on the prices for tickets. But there is little use in being angry at bread or a QR-code on a ticket scanned at

the turnstiles. The anger was directed at bakers, millers and middlemen profiting more than was morally right for bread. The anger from the super league was directed at football's governors, owners and chairman who make decisions the behalf of clubs. The Super League would've made the clubs and by extension the owners, more money than they currently do with the Champions League. What is the moral limit of what an owner can profit from a football club that is constantly preached as "belonging to the fans?"

The European Ritual by Anthony King, was published back in 2003, detailing football, everything from fan behaviour to clubs floating on the stock exchange, in the new Europe. At the time of publishing, the Premier League had just passed its first decade in existence and Manchester United was still at the peak of its domestic dominance. Football had at that point already changed drastically from what he calls "The old Europe", and now two decades later it is interesting to go back and realize how much has changed since then as well. For example on matters such as the European Super League. King actually gives a mention of the idea of an exclusive top-flight league, as a sort of continuation or entire replacement of the all familiar Champions League, and speculates what consequences it might trigger once it comes to fruition (King, 2003, p. 255). Correctly, he assumes a breakaway superleague isn't likely until sometime during the 2020's. However, when he notes that fans might even find such a competition meaningful, he could not have been more wrong.

On the 18th of April 2021, twelve founding clubs announced that a new tournament would be taking place from already the next season and onwards. Called the European Super League, the ESL, backed by bank JP Morgan and reportedly would guarantee more price money for being a founding member of the league, than for winning it. The founding clubs were Manchester United, Manchester City, Liverpool, Arsenal, Chelsea, Tottenham, Real Madrid, Atletico Madrid, FC Barcelona, Juventus, AC Milan and Inter Milan. The idea was to hold midweek games for the clubs involved, effectively replacing the UEFA Champions League, without any promotion or relegation for the 15 permanent, founders. Five extra spots would be given to other European clubs, based on the previous season's results. Exactly what those criteria would involve, however, remained unclear, but one can assume the extra spots would be going to clubs from Europe's top five ranked leagues, who already would be represented in the 15 permanent founders. Notably, only 12 of the hypothetical 15 were committed to the project. German giants Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund were invited but declined, as well as French heavyweights Paris Saint-German.

The idea of this type of league is nothing new. As far back as in the early 90s the then owner of AC Milan, Silvio Berlusconi, started talks of a league exclusive to Europe's top clubs. Ever since then speculations and rumours have been going around about whether or not someone is actually planning something, warning signs making appearances here and there. Because, if the first division in England could break away and create the Premier League in 1992, separate from the English Football League, EFL, why could not the best in Europe do something similar now?

Projects and plans like the ESL have always been simmering right beneath the surface, a vague threat from the big clubs in Europe to UEFA, Union of European Football Associations, that if they aren't happy with the conditions they play international football on, they could break away to create something of their own. This is visible in the way that UEFA club competitions are constantly changing their formats to accommodate the biggest, most famous clubs and leagues, for example, the different conditions for qualification depending on the domestic leagues a team plays in.

But not many people ever expected the ESL to actually come into being just yet, at least not at the current moment, when the pandemic had left many clubs grappling for money, and the opposition to such as league was still so strong. No less than two weeks before the announcement was made, I interviewed a Liverpool fan who feared it might become a real possibility sometime in the next decade, but as of now, it was still years and years away. I talked to him again a few days after the ESL had both been announced and put on hold, he described the 48 hours the plans were alive as "shocking", and surprising they had come so far without anyone knowing or any news leaking to the press.

While the announcement did come as a surprise, the "symptoms", had been there for years already. The big clubs are constantly fighting for more influence and money from the competitions, using their status as the blockbuster clubs who draw in the most money anyway as a reason for also earning more. Well-known football writer David Goldblatt noted in his Guardian column in the ESL aftermath that "Like many of the world's ultra-rich, they cannot accept that the way to solve the problems created by extreme inequality is simply to reduce inequality, rather than seal yourself in a protected bubble with your plutocratic peers" (David Goldblatt, 2021).

The people behind the plans had several motivations. President of Real Madrid, and what would be ESL chairman, Florentino Perez called the Super League an attempt to "save

football”. He cited fewer broadcast viewers, an increasingly older fanbase, financial trouble and a lack of ability to catch young people’s attention as reasons top-flight football needed an overhaul (Kirkland & Faez, 2021).

No games being played, at the same time as they had to continue paying players wages, ensured Europe’s top clubs did feel the impact of the pandemic. Especially FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, the two major Spanish teams that secure much of the international interest for La Liga, have high debts. However, their debt has been accumulated over many years from finical mismanagement also before COVID-19. The people behind the ESL promised the money would be trickling down to clubs not partaking in the league as well, but based on the distribution of money since the Premier League and Champions League saw their birth, not many believe it. There is another point to be made that while the top clubs might claim to be in finical situations that leave them unable to compete at the top level, their spending power is far above the teams facing administration or liquidation further down the league systems across Europe. To take a look back at what Goldblatt wrote above, their solution is not to even out the differences, attempt to close the chasm or level the other clubs up. It is to create an own bubble where the big money could play alone without the disturbance of the ones beneath them.

As disembedded top-flight clubs have become from their communities, the ESL would disembedded the clubs involved further. For one, they were disembedding themselves from the rest of international club football, creating their own sphere where themselves and their money would largely remain. In Thompson’s article, he points to a claim that the big farmers together decide on a fixed price for the year’s crop, leaving them to earn more as they can sell to millers. Small farmers are left outside the loop, like the big clubs tried to create a system that would further enable themselves, leaving out the smaller ones (Thompson, 1971, p. 86)

The announcement came with the promise of delivering the best matches more often, to cater to a wider audience, and the increased interest would save football from losing appeal among the average follower. A less promoted, but equally important, part of why a league without promotion and relegation was a good idea to the owners is the minimization of risk. The further a team goes in the champions league the more money they make. The further up on the league table they end up, the more money they make. The guarantee of a spot in the Super League regardless of on-pitch performance meant less risk of economic losses because

a founding member would've been guaranteed a spot in the competition every year, consequently guaranteed money. American owners of Manchester United, Liverpool and Arsenal were said to be heavy driving forces behind the idea, all are involved in ownerships over sports teams in the US, where closed leagues are the norm. The notion that economic gain for the owners was put above sporting integrity angered fans across England and was put forth as one of many things wrong with the proposal. No promotion and relegation, which is the way American sporting leagues operate, increased the fury among the fans, as it went against a key feature in European football, and in some ways highlighted the unwanted influence of American owners in the Premier League as we shall take a closer look at further down.

Additionally, throughout the pandemic, many clubs in the lower leagues had struggled financially, for reasons such as less lucrative sponsor deals and being more dependent on money made from fans on match day. With games being played behind closed doors, Premier League teams had the money from broadcasting rights, their primary source of income anyway, to tie them over in the absence of fans, while clubs further down the pyramid had no such luxury to fall back on. Fans bought season tickets that would remain unused, donated money or helped to fundraise to help their clubs stay afloat. The plans of an own league for Europe's top teams, no matter how hypothetical, have been unpopular amongst fans already, the timing of it made it intolerable.

The proposal of a Super League, therefore, seemed even worse than what it would have done in times without a pandemic. For supporters and commentators, it showed just how big the chasm between the people at the top and the people at the bottom was, and the subsequent massive difference in priorities. Where many fans were simply desperate to see their clubs survive, the owners and chairmen at the top clubs needed to figure out how to make the sport yet even more lucrative, hoping to expand football beyond what seemingly was believed to be a follower base already spending as much money as they could. Great farmers in the 1700s were reluctant to sell their grain at the market directly to the poor, seeing as they could get a better price selling in larger quantities to millers or middlemen elsewhere (Thompson, 1971). It echoes the same motivations for taking clubs into a new competition that could make them more money than the locals could alone.

Carl Anka, a writer for The Athletic, went on Twitter to explain exactly why the timing of the ESL announcement made it even worse. Ever since the pandemic broke out, the narrative

created by clubs had been about everyone was in it for the communities. The players played games to give people at home something else to think about, clubs helped out food banks for struggling families and kept paying non-playing staff instead of putting them on the government's furlough scheme. To use one of Polanyi's terms, the clubs as institutions were embedded in their communities, participating in the teamwork needed to keep the economy rolling and people's head above water. But then, as Anka says, *"a bunch of boring suited men have turned around and gone "No it's about money""*(Anka, 2021). The Super League highlighted just how differently football is viewed by the fans who follow a team, and the owners and chairman in the top clubs who are running a business.

Additionally, it showed just how ingrained the league system, promotion, relegation, open competition and the ability for a team to rise through the tiers, are in Europe. Further down we shall take a look at the differences in the way American and European football is organized, and how it works in its respective countries. In the case of the Super League, a deeply embedded part of American leagues, being closed for new teams, was implanted into a sport where promotion and relegation are at the domestic leagues' very core. While money and unequal distribution of wealth in the Premier League often keep the big clubs winning titles year after year, all teams have the theoretical ability to rise through the tier system and become champions, Leicester City often being the fairy-tale story many are hoping to copy. As commented by Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola when asked what he thought about the ESL, it is not a sport "if success is guaranteed" (Welton, 2021)

So while the announcement of the Super League came as a surprise to many, it also felt like a final breaking point. Over many years, maybe especially since the early 90's when top English clubs decided to found the Premier League to earn money from broadcasting that didn't have to be shared across 70 clubs, several other changes have happened to ensure more money stays with the biggest teams in the biggest leagues. Every now and again the format of the Champions League has been discussed in order to make room, and guarantee room, for Europe's biggest names, and the controversial 39th game has been brought up several times as money-making measure. The idea is to play one more Premier League game overseas in addition to the 38 they are already playing in the league in England, but so far it has yet to see the light of day. It is more than twelve years ago Arsene Wenger, Arsenal's former manager, warned about a Super League could be closer than what people believed (Hytner, 2009). In 2021, football had finally reached the point where the threat became real.

As it Happened

To give a brief timeline of the events, I shall quickly go through a few key moments. The league was only alive in its initial form for around 48 hours, when the first clubs started to pull out. It was early afternoon on the 18th of April the first reports of the breakaway league actually happening were coming through. Even before the clubs involved went public with statements confirming their participation, the UK government expressed their displeasure, with Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden saying the government was ready to implement a wide range of measures in order to stop the English big 6 from joining the ESL (Walker, 2021).

Later on in the evening the clubs, from England Tottenham, Arsenal, Manchester United, Manchester City, Liverpool and Chelsea, the Big 6, all confirmed their part as founding members, sparking further fury among the respective fanbases. Financial backing was reported to be secured through bank JP Morgan, a former employer of Manchester United chairman, Ed Woodward, and Real Madrid Florentino Perez claimed they had taken all legal precautions, to ensure UEFA, FIFA or the domestic league and associations could not refuse the project to happen. The narrative created by the founders was that the plans were set firmly in stone.

The following Monday representatives from the clubs withdrew from the European Clubs Association (ECA), an association representing all European clubs and the only UEFA recognises. ECA was created in 2008 in order to give clubs more influence in decisions made by UEFA, and therefore representatives leaving sent a clear signal that the clubs mentioned were no longer committed to UEFA. The supporter unions of the respective clubs all put out statements condemning the plans heavily and expressed disappointment in their owners and board. UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin labelled it as “disgraceful”, and added that no player playing for the clubs involved would be eligible to compete in any European competition in the future, including international tournaments, which was significant considering the European Champions was coming up that summer. The UK government reaffirmed their stance saying they supported any action that would be taken in order to prevent the ESL from happening. It is significant, as the UK government tends to leave the Premier League and its clubs largely to their own devices. It proves that football is more than just any other commodity the UK exports, as they’re willing to protect it through regulations should the need arise. More condemnations followed the rest of the evening, at

the same time as Perez appeared on Spanish television saying the ESL has come to save football.

The next morning the other PL clubs drafted statements, also condemning the plans, but almost didn't have time to publish them before the first rumours of the pieces started to fall was coming through. The announcement of Chelsea FC's withdrawal from the plans arrived just as the fans were protesting outside the Stamford Bridge, where Chelsea was set to play against Brighton Hove Albion. As this happened in 2021, games were still being played behind closed doors due to the pandemic. Therefore the protests had to happen outside the stadiums rather than inside them. It was a fitting coincidence, considering how fans felt they were being closed off from football altogether.

Throughout the night, all the big 6 English clubs pulled out of the ESL, as well as one Spanish and two Italian teams. The ESL issued a statement that they were halting the process in order to reshape the project, but the plans were in no form abandoned and no clubs were in any position to pull out without economic consequences. It was an interesting change of rhetoric when on the 18th all statements made it sound like the plans were set to happen regardless. When clubs pulled out their wording insinuated the ESL was only in an early planning phase. The ESL's reaction made it clear no one could leave without consequence.

The proposal was alive for just over 48 hours and saw a massive backlash. In England, the protests were heavily targeted at the owners, and especially the American owners of Liverpool, Manchester United and Arsenal. Soon after the plans were dead, fans started to ask themselves what was happening now. It had become evident for many that football was no longer in a position to be trusted to be governing itself in a way that benefitted all, but how to regulate a transnational sport, with a European association, that being UEFA, not many trusts either. Fans in England created a petition for the government to implement a regulation similar to Germany's 50 + 1 rule, a rule stating that fans must always hold fifty plus one per cent of a club's shares. After being debated in parliament, the result was to commission a fan led review, to comprehensively examine the English football system. We shall come back to later what this review finally led to. But before we consider what can be done going forward, we need to take a closer look at how we got to this point in the first place.

American Ideas in a European Format

A key point to be aware of in the protest against the ESL is the differences between how American and European sporting leagues are run. However, it must also be clear the Super League was not at all an idea coming solely from the American owners in the Premier League, and foreign ownership is not by default disliked by fans. As mentioned before, the idea of something like the ESL had been talked about as far back as the '90s by Berlusconi and Spaniard Florentino Perez who spearheaded the project. In fact, two of the clubs still officially committed to the ESL, Barcelona and Real Madrid, are owned by *socios,* their own members, not American businessmen.

On the flip side, though, Arsenal's, Manchester United's and Liverpool's American owners were all rumoured to be heavily involved in the project, particularly a photo from a dinner with all of them in 2019 was spread across the internet rapidly. The photo reinforced the idea that the plans had been long in the making, and they were more business partners, seeking ways to increase the popularity of their clubs, rather than rival owners. Two of the other English clubs, Manchester City and Chelsea, were reported to be the last, and most doubtful, to sign on to the project.

American and European sports have developed down two widely different paths since they became professionalised. American sports have never shied away from partially being about entertainment. With games being played in accordance with commercial breaks, half-time shows and cheerleaders to entertain in the meantime for the attending fans. An example is the Chicago White Sox, who in 2006 signed a contract to move their kick-off time to eleven minutes past seven in the evening for the next three seasons, following a sponsorship deal with convenience store 7-Eleven (Sandomir, 2006). In England there's a football blackout between 14:45 and 17:15 on Saturdays, meaning the 3pm kick-off isn't permitted to be televised, in order to encourage fans to go and support, both morally and economically, their local teams playing at 3pm instead. A consequence is that the 5pm kick-off in Spanish La Liga is only viewable after the 15th-minute mark. Many fans are already unhappy with broadcasters scheduling games late in the evening on weekdays, due to the subsequent complex travel arrangement it leads to for the away fans. The act of changing kick-off times to a few minutes to compensate for a brand deal would not be welcomed. In a way, it boils down to a question of who a football club should be most concerned with catering towards. The fans and making it convenient for them to travel to and from the games. Or a commercial deal that will make the club and their brand partner more money.

Football clubs and fans' affiliation to one can be crucial identity markers for fans. Like Eric, who I saw sparsely at lower league games because he usually was at Old Trafford, let most weekends be dictated when and where United played. Tony hadn't been to a United game in years, but still held onto old collectable cards of previous players, and attended the Munich Memorial every year. Hylland Eriksen notes that a part of identity politics is the competition of scarce resources, one such resource is the recognition of others (Eriksen, 2005). In the case of kick-off times, money and catering towards whom, we can see fans competing with commercialisation over the resource of being recognised as an important part of football. At the time of writing, Liverpool and Manchester City are soon to meet in the FA Cup semi-final, at Wembley stadium as per tradition. However, due to planned railway work, there will be no trains between England's northwest and London on the day of the game. The fan unions of both clubs made a joint request to the Football Association to hold the game on a neutral stadium in Manchester, closer for fans to travel to, in order to make it easier for as many fans as possible to attend. The joint statement encouraged the FA to "for once, to put the fans at the forefront of their thinking" (Spirit of Shankly, 2022). The semi-final was not moved, and the FA was accused of being more concerned with paying back the loan they took to build the new Wembley twenty years ago, than the supporters who would fill the stands. Profit was recognised as more important than fans.

By hosting the semi-final at a neutral venue in the northwestern part of England, Old Trafford being mentioned as an option, the FA wouldn't have been able to cash in on ticket sales as they would've at Wembley, but rather sent a message about looking out for fans' interests. Figurately speaking, the FA took a game between two teams in one region of England, disembedded it from that region and carried it down south to London, far away and hard to reach for fans. Again looking to Thompson's use of morality, The FA hosting semi-finals at Wembley for the ticket sales not only raises the issue of fans being recognised as an important part of football but also how much the FA are morally entitled to earn from a single game, happening at a time the FA had been warned would the difficult for travel. Simultaneously also forcing fans to pay travel and possibly accommodation expenses for a game that could've happened closer to home.

American sports are also, in some ways, more focused on the individual player rather than on a whole team. New players are drafted in from University sports to the teams in the top leagues, the best players tending to be picked first by the team that finished last. If a player doesn't live up to their expectations, they are traded down to teams in the tiers further below,

sometimes to a club also owned by the same people who owned the team he came from. A team is always guaranteed a spot in the highest league if they're already there because American sports don't employ promotion or relegation. Therefore, it is the players that have the ability to make it to the top leagues through trading or drafts. Not the clubs like the system is in European football.

The upside of the US system is that it doesn't create a big 6 such as the one we see in the Premier League, money is more equal between the teams, and the owners of the various clubs regard themselves more or less as a business partner, as McTague explains in the Atlantic (McTague, 2019). This echoes the way the photograph of three of the ESL founders was perceived as if this was something they had planned together to increase revenue. Lack of promotion and relegation guarantees TV rights and high revenue each season, regardless of sporting success. The Super League was put together similarly. A guaranteed spot for the founders would take away the economic risk of maybe not qualifying for the Champions League, and owners, chairmen and club presidents would be free to act more like business partners than rivals.

Because as long as they are working together, it is in everyone's interest to keep all teams in the same league, so all can increase revenue. Here we can back to Thompson's moral economy, in considering just why this would provoke a reaction from the supporters. The bread riots of the 17th century weren't just about the price of bread being too high, it was also a question of how much could someone allow themselves to earn on something so many craved. Removing meritocracy, a core part of European football, to be guaranteed price money every year was beyond what the moral consensus of fans believed they could allow themselves.

Football in England developed differently. Teams were founded to represent minority groups, towns, regions, religions or even workers. Manchester United began as Newton Heath LYR Football Club, a club for railroad workers in Yorkshire and Lancashire. Football didn't begin in the late 1800s to form an entertainment industry, it was tribalism and bragging rights, the ability to beat the neighbours. The professionalisation of the various leagues around the country happened at different times and was subsequently merged together into a tiered league system as more and more leagues turned professional. The clubs were competitors in all senses, and relegation into the lower divisions stopped teams from not trying if they fell behind in a title race, it ensured competition in all parts of the league

table, and for fans of teams on the bottom of the table, a relegation battle can be more exciting to follow than the race for the title or a top-four finish.

In general, the words "Americans owners" are not very welcome ones in English football. I asked an informant what made the Glazer family interested in buying Manchester United in the first place, and what would need to happen for them to eventually sell up and leave like the many fans wanted.

"They're only here to extract wealth, and so they'll only sell up when the club stops earning them money"

Thompson notes that millers and bakers in the 18th century weren't just considered as someone working to earn money, they were also seen as servants to the community. They shouldn't work for profit, but rather for a fail allowance for the service they provided to their village or town (Thompson, 1971, p. 83). The sentiment I encountered in Manchester was that the same should be said for football clubs.

Much of the consensus found on the football side of Twitter, for example, will show that American owners are largely unpopular and perceived to be out of touch, unconnected and only in it for the money. The prime example often used, and used previously in this thesis as well, is the Glazer family's ownership of Manchester United. The debt-leveraged takeover in 2005 sparked outrage among the fans and already on the three brothers' first visit to Old Trafford the fans loudly expressed their displeasure (Fifield, Pratley, & Scott, 2005). Similarly, Liverpool fans protested against former owners Hicks and Gillet on several occasions, memorably one where the fans stayed behind inside Anfield after the final whistle to sing songs and wave banners, among them "build by Shanks, broken by Yanks", signalling to the owners to get out of the club. As of April 2022 Chelsea FC is up for sale, with fans already being distrustful of American bidders. American owners tend to be perceived as people who look to English football for a brand that can make them money, with less regard for sporting success on the field. Before previous Manchester United manager, Solskjær, lost his job, the speculations said the only thing that would see him sacked was when United could no longer finish top four in the league. In other words, not playing in the Champions League next season, subsequently not getting any of the champions league money. The Super League would've taken away that economic risk for the owners. With no promotion or relegation, the money would always be guaranteed, like in the Major League Soccer, MLS, the American top football division.

To begin to explain parts of the reason behind this hostility one can return to Hylland Eriksen and what he writes on identity politics. In his article, using the term *Glocalisation* from Roland Robertson, he argues for seven features that seem to be in common with glocal identity movements, one of them being that the first-comers tend to be contrasted with invaders (Eriksen, 2005). While, as he points out, it's not always a universal feature, it seems to be invoked whenever possible, and first-comers against invaders is a dichotomy that can be seen in football fans. The local fans who are perceived to have been there from the beginning, grew up close to the stadium and have it "in their blood" so to speak, versus the "invaders".

And what in this context could be described as an invader can be a great many things. In this instance, we can first consider foreign owners and primarily American ones at that. While the ownership of Chelsea FC and Manchester City is also foreign and has been put under scrutiny for breach of transfer rules or spending, they are looked upon with more favour thanks to their sporting investments. As stated above by one of my informants regarding Manchester United, American owners are seen as invaders because they use the club for the sake of making money, not ensuring sporting success. When the reason perceived for their interest in football differs so clearly from the "original" reason as to why it has become such a big thing in the first place, their interest can be said to come across as "inauthentic" to the first-comers, because it is not in line with their original ideas. When my informant said "they're only here to extract wealth", the operative word in the explanation is *"only",* as in being in it for the money is not good enough. You have to care about success, the rivalries, and its part in the local community as well. The feeling of owners only being in it for the money creates an Us versus Them dynamic, with hostile fronts with little trust even though they share clubs.

In another turn, one can consider invaders in the sense of newer groups of fans, either groups who are pitted against each other through a set of circumstances, or some groups of fans contrasting themselves to others. In the proposal for the Super League, the founders differentiated between what was called "Legacy Fans" and "Fans of the Future". Legacy fans are those who have followed football for a long time, typically local supporters of the clubs involved, and cynically, suspected to be viewed as a group who will not spend more money on football than what they're already doing. Fans of the future refer to the market they want to reach. The key to what is first-comers and invaders in this dichotomy is self-explanatory. Fans of the future are not necessarily English, or even European in the case of the Spanish

and Italian clubs involved, but live in Asia, North America and the Middle East, markets football authorities are eager to expand into, and as ESL frontrunner Perez said: “Take football to its rightful place in the world”. The friction begins when local fans of Manchester United see their clubs pay as much attention to the fans on the other side of the globe as the ones in their own community, pricing out the working classes that used to go to make room for executives or tourists. When I asked my informant about going to lower league teams rather than Manchester United games, he said many more might do it in the coming years, because: “your local club needs supporters, and will also give back more to the community than United at this rate”.

“Fans of the future” is a theoretical collection of fans created for the ESL and its very origin can be argued to be a reason as to why the “legacy” fans would be so hostile to it. In a way, one can look at it as a double threat, in the sense that it is one powerful invader with an unfavourable reason for trespassing, at the same time taking with them other invaders, their own preferred group to replace the first-comers. Fans of the future replacing the legacy fans as the prominent fanbase and majority.

Collective effort v the Super League

The manager of Norway’s men’s national team Ståle Solbakken sarcastically congratulated the founders of the ESL on making UEFA and FIFA look like saints, upon being asked what he thought of the situation the day after the news broke. Over many years, both associations have received criticism on various fronts, everything from corruption cases and accusations of caring about money more than football. Especially their changing of competition formats in order to increase the number of games with seemingly little regard to the health of the players become a big talking point in the last few years (Price, 2018). The general consensus in football is that neither UEFA nor FIFA are particularly saint-like, on the contrary, for many they are a key part of the problems football is now facing, with commercialisation, corruption, sports-washing and unsustainability.

This section talks of football fans’ reaction to the ESL and how for a few days the lines between clubs became less solid in the collective effort to oppose the plans. While this happened all over Europe, I am focusing on the protest and blurring of boundaries between club loyalties that occurred in England during the days the ESL was alive and its aftermath,

and what drove the temporary unity between fans that ultimately shut down the league so fast.

Football fans are rarely a group to be united over anything. “An enemy of an enemy is a friend” is not necessarily true when it comes to the London trio, Arsenal, Tottenham and Chelsea, and Manchester City fans are little likely to support Manchester United in games against Liverpool on the basis that it’s one city against another. There is little use in drawing lines between clubs, who are rivals, neutrals or just downright enemies and expect someone to lowkey support someone else based on that alone.

In discussing the Super League on Monday the 19th, football pundit and ex-player Jamie Carragher said “we have tribalism in this country” when describing fanbases up and down England. And so, to borrow from someone else who dealt with tribes, we can for a moment turn to Evans-Pritchard, look at grouping and oppositions, and how some of his work can be applied to fanbases of football clubs in England, in the two days the ESL was alive.

In any opposition between parties A and B, all those more closely related to A than B will stand with A against B and vice versa, as he writes in his book about the Nuer tribes. (Evans-Pritchard, 2004). Marshall Sahlins builds on what Evans-Pritchard wrote in his book from 1961, writing that complementary opposition is not peculiar to the Nuer and the Tiv, it occurs to a greater or lesser extent elsewhere also. Sahlins quotes Evans-Pritchard’s example of an Englishman meeting a man from Germany, and how their nationalities dictate how they reference the place they come from, they say England and Germany. If the Englishman were to be asked by a Londoner where he is from, however, he will name the county, not the country. And so on and so forth until he might just answer with his address so a local. (Sahlins, 1961).

In football, this cannot necessarily be translated into geographical lines drawn between countries, no more than cities. Manchester United fans wouldn’t want Liverpool to win a Champions League final against, say, Bayern Munich, just because one team is from England and one is from Germany. It would never be even close to similar to England’s 2-0 win over Germany in the Round of 16 in the 2020 Euro’s championship. And even for the national teams, club affiliations aren’t forgotten. England’s famous golden generation in the early 2000’s never won anything, often attributed to club rivalries within the national team. Today, some fans see being knocked out of international tournaments as a good thing, meaning their players get more rest before club football starts up again.

An example of unusual solidarity is a cardboard sign that was held up at the protest against Arsenal's owner Stan Kroenke in the aftermath of the Super League. Arsenal and Tottenham share North London as their geographical location and there is little love lost in between them, each making up one half of the North London Derby. However, on the 23rd of April of 2021, when fans gathered to protest against their owners and their part in creating the ESL, a homemade cardboard sign reading "Kroenke, I Wouldn't Even Wish You On Spurs" highlighted just how much a common enemy had temporarily united the two bitter rivals. On a normal day, Arsenal supporters have a chant that starts with "and we hate Tottenham - ", Tottenham in return has a chant that says "We hate Arsenal" on repeat. The homemade sign addressed to their owner, held up in between red flares and banners, was almost as if it said: "Look how much you messed up and made us hate you. Now we're siding with our worst enemy".

Where to now

In many ways, the creation of the ESL was like the final drop. The rumours had been there for many years, and slowly the glass had already been filled up with decisions and changes made to work in favour of the big clubs and generate more money for owners and the federations. That some clubs finally said goodbye to UEFA and made a league with guaranteed participation and more money was a bomb that was only surprising because of the timing, not for the idea in itself. And for football fans, it was the breaking point in what they could tolerate. Even adjusted to inflation the ticket prices have soared beyond what anyone would've believed at the creation of the Premier League in 1992. The standing places are gone and have been for some time. In fact, for so long it looks like they might return soon, but in a new format, "safe standing", with minimal opportunity for the crowd to move about.

A lot has changed in football since the '50s, as it should because a lot of things will change in 70 years. A lot of things will change in the span of 20. It is the speed of which the changes have happened, and how they have slowly, bit by bit, seemingly removed football little by little away from what football fans believe it to be that has created discontent. As said by Jim White in the documentary Fever Pitch, one of the great unforeseen consequences of the Premier League was that it removed the clubs from the communities in which they were born and loved (Story Films & Studio 99, 2021), and the speed it is removed, moulded and changed is always increasing. In the 90s Manchester United was in a unique position in

terms of their branding and familiarity overseas, their popularity in Asia seemingly unmatched. Now all major clubs look to all parts of the world to gather fans, and the Super League was a part of that. For now, the plans are temporarily on the backburner, but the common belief is that the ESL will return in some changed form sooner rather than later, either from the same source or UEFA themselves. For instance, UEFA is not far away from approving a new, revised version of the Champions League format, with two spots being allocated to clubs based on "historic merit".

The ESL proposal was no typical case in the world of football, but it did showcase a clear cross-section of the feelings and motivations simmering beneath the surface in both owners and fans. It highlighted how far down the road football had come in commercialisation, all the small changes happening in the past thirty years had eventually led to this, and was the final drop that made fans say stop. The question now is what comes next, how did the resistance showed during the days of the ESL impact football, or did it impact it all?

The protests during the ESL were the eruption of fury that had been simmering for a long time. In the case of clubs in England, fans looked to the German ownership model, where 50+1 of the shares in the club are owned by fans. . Kevin Miles of the Football Supporters Association wrote that fans now need to be embedded in the decision-making process in football, lest the people now in charge tear the game apart by the seams (Miles, 2021). The Super League as an isolated case saw the traditional actors in European football, everything from the individual fans, pundits, players, to managers, clubs, broadcasters and associations coming together in opposition to the ESL. However, more often than not, there is a boundary between the grassroots and the top flight, where the richer get richer and the rest get less.

Parts of this chapter is about fans seeking out lower league clubs for something they connect more with than the Premier League teams in an increasingly globalised and commercialised sport. It can seem like some maybe are just leaving their old club behind easily, but the ESL and the reaction it caused proved that football fans are protective over what they feel belongs to them, and aren't likely to give it up.

Chapter 4:
Everyday forms of resistance outside of the stadiums

As the dust settled after the rise and fall of the ESL and the subsequent protests, the temporary unified front between the associations, broadcasters, fans and governments began to crack. Whereas they had stood together in the same proverbial mob against the twelve ESL founders, it didn't take long after the ESL for fans to act out forms of resistance against broadcasters and associations, who we can call the Establishment.

In the previous chapters, I have written about the everyday forms of resistance *inside* of the stadiums, and the loud protests that happened when the ESL turned simmering discontent at increasingly disembedded football into boiling fury. In this chapter, I'll explore other forms of everyday resistance outside of the stadiums and how it is a part of the same critique against the establishment.

Resistance Against the Broadcasters

In 1992, Sky Sports were the ones to put top-flight football in England behind a paywall for the first time. Up until then, football had been broadcasted on either BBC or ITV for free, but with the emergence of the Premier League, also came the necessity of paying for a Sky subscription and buying a satellite dish in order to access it. Thirty years later the price for access has not gotten any cheaper. As of May 2022, the rights to broadcast the Premier League in England is divided between Sky Sports, BT Sports and Amazon Sport Prime, meaning on subscription is not enough these days. In May of 2021, the price of a Sky + BT Bundle that gives you access to *almost* all Premier League games was £58 per month, with a minimum subscription time of 18 months, equalling £1044 for the whole duration.

In addition to this, however, for a while in 2020 the Premier League also had a Pay-Per-View scheme, where in addition to the subscription already paid, fans could also pay £14,95 to watch individual games that wouldn't normally be televised. It came after about 6 months of these games having been broadcasted as any others, in order to give fans easier access to games when they weren't allowed into the stadiums due to the pandemic. However, at the beginning of the 2020/2021 season, a set number of tickets, albeit far away from enough to fill a stadium, were allowed to be sold so fans could once again make their way back into the

stands. Subsequently, pay-per-view replaced games that had previously been broadcasted for "free". Not entirely for free, it must be noted, as a Sky and BT subscription was still needed.

The pay-per-view scheme was an unpopular one. Sky, BT and Amazon already charge steep prices for their football content, and in this scenario demanded another £14,95 for their services. The scheme came under intense criticism, and while some did pay for the odd extra game, another movement started. Instead of paying almost £15 for one single game, fans donated the same sum to foodbanks or other charitable causes.

The heart of the issue was thus not really about having to give away £14,95 in order to watch a football game, it was about companies that already charged steep prices and had high revenue would earn themselves even more. The Premier League, Sky and BT Sports arguably already profit more from football than what common moral consensus, like Thompson describes, would deem fair, and in this instance, they demanded even more. Instead of the riots in the streets like the ESL, fans now took to the online world to organise the protest.

The act of donating to a charity rather than paying to a corporation was a form of resistance, although it cannot be classified it as an everyday form of resistance. Instead, I would liken it more to the protests during the ESL, not for the disruption and loudness because those aspects weren't similar at all, but because it was a specific reaction against a specific issue, gathered under its own hashtag, #CharitynotPPV. Still, though, it is a part of the same critique against the disembedding of football as not attending Premier League games. One could also argue that it was a way of fighting against the disembedding of football, because rather than paying money to a multinational corporation in order to watch a football game, the money remained embedded in the local society by donating to local charities.

During the two days the ESL was alive, broadcasting channels like Sky Sports stood firmly on the side of those against the breakaway league. On the 19th of April 2021, they put out a statement condemning the plans and cementing their loyalty to the English football pyramid. However, as can be seen in the comment section online of their statement, fans did not take the condemning statement at face value. Many were old enough to remember Sky being the ones to outbid ITV and BBC for the new Premier League, effectively barring households who could not afford it from watching the new first tier of the English Football Pyramid. The comments implied that the only reason Sky would be against the European Super League, was because it would lose them money if the plans went through as they were meant to.

In a way it was almost as if saying: you can profit as much as possible, but only if we're there to do it with you. Sky Sports, with some of their most highly acclaimed football pundits at the front, took a firm stand against the Super League and the clubs involved. Their statement mentioned above is one example of that, an entire episode of Monday Night Football dedicated to the faults of the ESL and its creators is another. However, Sky Sports were the ones who put English football on a channel that needed to be paid for in order to watch it in the first place. One can therefore ask the question if Sky had the means to gain the broadcasting rights to a league that would generate more income, who can guarantee they wouldn't take it.

What *is* an everyday form of resistance, however, as opposed to the #CharitynotPPV movement, is streaming. One of Real Madrid president Florentino Perez's arguments for the ESL was that young fans did not watch football on television anymore, and the ESL would, with its famous teams and star players, make it interesting for young fans once more. The counterargument is tied to the prices mentioned above, for some it is simply too expensive to watch top-flight football from home. The alternative to paying for a subscription from a channel broadcasting the Premier League is streaming. Albeit illegal, it is a common choice and based on the people I met in Manchester, particularly amongst the young. There are a plethora of sites where one can watch for example Sky Sports as if paying for the real thing.

Streaming is not necessarily about boycotting the broadcasters, it is about getting around paying the fees and still having access to watch football. It is an individual, conscious choice, made by many, but not organised. Although it is common practice it is also subtle, and as in the example of poachers mentioned by Scott, there are too many people using streaming as a form of resistance that the ones being "stolen" from, that is the broadcaster who is getting their content streamed illegally, can do much about it. Additionally, we can argue that the act of seeing top-flight football being watched for free is nothing new. Like Scott's poaching example (1989, p. 34), it is the playing rules that have made the act illegal. Not the act itself.

Resistance Against the Associations

The unprecedented unity between fans, broadcasters, associations and governments during the days of the ESL is not likely to be seen again. The European Super League was the last of many symptoms of how the rich and powerful in football had over the years become even

more rich and powerful, causing a chasm between the very top of the top flight and those below. The biggest difference between this symptom, however, and previous ones such as the abolishment of wage caps, creation of the Premier League and the Championship and expansion of the Champions League, was the ESL didn't come from the Premier League or UEFA or IFAB, the board that decides game rules. It came from the clubs themselves, independently from the international governing bodies and their respective domestic football associations.

There are examples of fans coming together in opposition to the governing bodies, albeit rarely as disruptive and loud as when fans march on a stadium with flares and banners. However, social media provides a platform for resistance. For example, fans' reaction to UEFA not allowing Germany to light up the Allianze arena in rainbow colours was to tweet a picture of just that at them, when UEFA's official Twitter account asked users for their favourite Euro 2020 stadium. Twitter campaigns aren't as disruptive or explosive as the physical protests I have written about before, but I would put them in the same bracket all the same due to their ability to garner attention and provoke a reaction. UEFA was forced to put out a statement defending their decisions of not lighting up the Allianze, and also like the Pay-Per-View scheme that happened online and was scrapped.

As briefly touched upon in the previous chapter, UEFA is not someone typically associated with being on the fans' side. As recent as May 2022, they're facing unhappy fans after only allocating 40 000 out of 75 000 Champions League final tickets to Liverpool and Real Madrid fans. 23 000, more than what each club can sell to fans, are allocated to UEFA, national associations, commercial partners and executives (Bantock, 2022). Once again there is a sense of disembedding of football, where the game is becoming less available to the team's respective fans and more about catering to those with an economic interest. Additionally to the ticket controversy, UEFA received wide criticism from fans for delaying postponing the European Championship in 2020 due to COVID-19. Managers have criticised them for adding more games into their tournaments with no regard for players' welfare. In November 2021 former UEFA president Michel Platini was charged by Swiss police suspected of fraud whilst in in charge of UEFA, and conspiring with then FIFA president Sepp Blatter. The sum of it all is the trust between grassroots and football's governing bodies is worn thin to the point of non-existence.

For example, the format of the Champions League, UEFA's flagship competition, undergoes changes about every five years , usually changing how teams from the different leagues qualify. Come UEFA's annual general meeting in May 2022, they will vote on the new Swiss Model for the Champions League, which will be one of the most significant reconstructions of the tournament's format in years, a change fans are highly critical of, calling it a "European Super League Light". If the suggested changes are voted through, as they are suspected to be, the Champions League will go from having 32 to 36 teams competing, with two slots allocated to teams based on the last ten years' worth of results in Europe. Effectively meaning teams such as Manchester United can in theory come fifth in the Premier League next season, a spot that today qualifies for Europa League, UEFA second tier of European tournaments, but still get into the Champions League, due to their results all the way back to 2013.

The aim of the ESL was to take away the risk of not qualifying for the Champions League and losing out on broadcasting revenue and prize money. Clubs like Arsenal have missed out on the Champions League in the past few seasons, after going on a 17 years streak of qualifying for it. So while spots allocated based on historic merit is in theory a meritocracy, it will also ensure the current top clubs have a higher chance of remaining that way, because they can also rely on previous seasons' results, not just the current one. It will benefit the same twelve who founded the Super League because they all have a history of good results in Europe and will disregard their potential and more recent poor performances in their domestic league.

Partially, the reconstruction of the Champions League is seen as an act to appease the bigger clubs post-ESL and keep them happy to stay with UEFA and their tournaments, partially it was expected to come at some point anyway. As outlined earlier, the symptoms leading up to the creation of the ESL have been there for decades already. In England specifically, it can be traced back to 1961 and the abolishment of the wage cap for professional players . The difference for UEFA in changing the Champions League now is that they are the ones behind it, thus also the ones profiting from them. Where the ESL would've shaken the order of European football beyond recognition, keeping similar models in the Champions League helps them retain the status quo, and get the money.

If the Swiss Model is voted through and the Champions League is reorganised, it is expected that UEFA will earn an additional 40 per cent of the broadcasting revenue they're already

making from today’s deal, because of aspects like more games to broadcast, and more famous clubs will compete. As of April 2022, Manchester United don’t look likely to make it into the top four in the Premier League, the spots that directly qualify for the Champions League, but if the Swiss Model is accepted it is enough for them to get fifth, where they currently are. And so therefore, while the ESL failed spectacularly, it didn’t make a lasting impact on the clubs that created it. It proved that a breakaway league was more than a threat used as a bargaining chip, it was a real possibility clubs could follow through with, and face little lasting consequences, and a year on since the news broke, it has so far only made them stronger.

Here we can see how UEFA and the biggest club enable each other to earn more money. Clubs like Liverpool, Manchester United and Chelsea are big blockbuster names UEFA wants in their competition, and as the ESL proved, fans aren’t just going to accept a competition made by a select few clubs without backing from an association. By finding a compromise in the new Swiss Model, actually planned *before* the ESL announcement, in hopes to keep the big club happy and from leaving in the first place, the biggest clubs have less risk of missing out on the Champions League, and UEFA gets more games to sell. Thompson quotes a letter from 1772, where it is claimed that farmers get together to decide a price for grain, a price only the millers can afford (Thompson, 1971, p. 86), and thus leaves the poor required to buy from the miller instead, at the mercy to his terms. The farmer and miller fixed the market in such a way that they were both guaranteed to earn a profit from the year’s crop, in the same way, UEFA and clubs enable each other to both earn as much as possible from the current season.

Resistance Against the Owners

In a news article from 2016 football journalist, Richard Foster of The Guardian called fan protest the “new normal”, detailing just a few of the number of protests staged against club owners across England and across all the tiers of the pyramid. Throughout English football’s over 100 years long history, dissatisfaction with whoever’s in charge of a club is nothing new at all, but it has also never happened at the same frequency as today. Anti-owner protests against different clubs can seem isolated from each other because it is a club’s respective fans protesting against its respective owners. Quite often for similar reasons, things that fans feel directly, such as lack of investment in a squad leading to relegation or

increased ticket prices. Thompson warns against seeing riots in the 1700s as spasmic occurrences, popping up and dying down with peasants either anger or satisfaction. He argues they were the results of prolonged exploitation and anger, the riots might be isolated incidents in themselves, but together they make up a common story of dissatisfaction and disruption (Thompson, 1971, p. 78). Protests against club owners are similar. The protests outside different stadiums of different teams might seem isolated from each other, but they come from the same sense of unfairness.

During my time in Manchester, there were no fan protests against the owners of Manchester United in the same way as on May the 2nd 2021, United's first home game after the rise and fall of the ESL, a northwest derby against Liverpool. There was one planned however, shared through Twitter posts in the week leading up to it, but when the day came, only a handful of fans showed up, in fact, more people went in and out of the club shop at Old Trafford than protesting in front of it. The protests came as a reaction to a series of poor performances from the first team, a 0-5 loss to Liverpool at home that had fans walk out of the stadium at halftime, and a sobering loss again against a relegation-threatened Watford the week after. Fans were starting to question how long the manager, Ole Gunnar Solskjær, had left before he got sacked.

A week after I again found myself at a lower league game, sitting next to a young man, a Manchester United fan, but also one of those who stopped attending the games. He explained to me why the protest had failed, whereas the previous one tended to draw large crowds. He hadn't been to this one either.

"It wasn't just about the owners or the chairman this time, like. The ones making money, you know. It was a reaction against the team, the players, the manager"

He shook his head.

"And yes, as shite as they are right now, you don't do that. You stand by the team and tell the owners to fuck off. Protesting after some shite games won't be seen as protesting against the Glazers alone, it would be the Glazer and the team. S'not right, like"

So effectively, fans' anger at the Glazers for investing too little, putting the club in debt and earning too much off Manchester United were legitimate reasons for protesting, because it broke with the moral consensus of how much someone could profit from football. When

anger at players and the manager for poor performances were not legitimate a reason for protesting, it broke with the idea to stick with the team through thick and thin.

This shows how protests didn't happen simply for the sake of protesting, especially not when results on the field were below fans' expectations. Like Thompson reminds us, the crowd is conscious of how and when it is protesting, against who and for what cause. Protests aren't spasmic reactions, but a constant simmering feeling of discontent that comes to a boil. The protest that was planned when I was in Manchester came after some heavy losses, and with that carried the message it was against the team as well as the owners. Anger against the players is not a part of the constant simmering anger against the Glazers.

Boycotts and Twitter campaigns are forms of what James Scott calls "everyday forms of resistance" – forms of resistance that aren't organised or particularly loud. They are subtle, deliberate acts of defiance that might go unnoticed on their own (James C Scott, 1989, p. 33), but as the pay-per-view failure showed when there are enough people it accumulates to be bigger than the sum of its parts. It shows that the loud, organised protests that do happen occasionally, aren't spasmic reactions to one instance alone, just like Thompson argues, before the fury dwindles.

One fan I met in a pub, Frank, told me he had never owned an "authentic" football shirt. He was a man in his 40's and grew up in a time when having shirts or other merchandise wasn't as common as it is today. When I was younger, I remember the only type of shirt that was socially accepted amongst my elementary school peers to buy was the authentic ones, often acquired on holiday in a city of a major football team. A classmate asked once if I bought the new home kit every season. I said no and was subsequently told in no uncertain terms I had to if I was to be a real fan.

This man, however, had never wanted one and seemed to be a part of a large majority of the people I met in Manchester. Especially United fans, I got the feeling replica shirts were just as alright as authentic ones, and the difference didn't really matter either way. Why spend so much money on a shirt when you can get an almost exact similar one for a fraction of the price somewhere else. When Manchester United launches a new shirt, there are always people on Twitter encouraging fans not to buy it, as a form of boycott of the club shop and the Glazer family.

"Don't give them more money" people write.

"Show the glazer we will not enable their money-making any longer"

Frank felt the same way about tickets as he did about football shirts, in that he didn't buy them from the club. He never went to any home games anymore, because the money from those tickets would go back to the owners. Away games, however, he did go to, albeit that too was rarely.

"But at least then the money I spend on the ticket doesn't go to the owner, like"

Same as choosing not to pay the monthly £58 for a combined subscription of BT and Sky Sports and rather watch football through illegal streaming services, choosing not to pay for a shirt can be seen as another everyday act of resistance. While there are those on social media that advocate for a boycott of any new shirts, it's not an organised boycott throughout Manchester United's fanbase. Scott calls these everyday acts of resistance and argues for they prove that "subordinate" groups are indeed conscious of their resistance and how it's done, even if it's not organised.

Furthermore, it is not just the amount of money possible to spend during a football game that has changed, but where the money goes. England has never had the same tradition for fan ownership as for example Germany, but whereas in the early 80s and before the owners were largely local businessmen, often interested in investing back into the community, in the current Premier League season 15 out of 20 clubs are owned partially or entirely owned by foreigners. As mentioned above, a fan noted owners are more interested in the fans that will spend money on more than just the match tickets. Someone who would do that is tourists, shirts are not just shirts but souvenirs, and like my own childhood experiences, the authentic football shirts were bought on holiday and proudly worn upon return home. Hence the focus is on expanding club brands in other parts of the world. It's done for example by building official club shops in different parts of the world or playing games abroad.

Through this process, the club and its economy become disembedded from the community it has traditionally been situated in. Fans pay for match tickets and merchandise, but don't always see it be funnelled back into the club or local community in ways that impact them, creating the boundary between the paying fans in the stands and the decision-makers in the boardrooms.

Premier League clubs, especially Tottenham, Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City, United and Liverpool, commonly known as the "big 6", sell tickets and merchandise worldwide. United

was one of the first ones to capitalize on their international popularity, and what was once a source of pride, having fans far beyond their own geographical scope became in the ’90s a thing to scoff at. Fans in and around Manchester, although there are many of them, it’s not an inexhaustible source, and could only spend so much money on brand merchandise. The owners then turned to international fans to sell merchandise and build up their status on the other side of the world.

The owners’ focus on international audiences is similar to one of the things that angered the crowds during the 1700s bread riots, where during times of dearth, rather than grain being sold cheaper in the local areas it was sold on to for example France, where they could make more money from it. Where local working-class fans are not likely to spend any more money than on a match ticket alone due to prices, clubs turn to middle-class fans with more purchasing power and international fans who either buy merchandise online, or are likely to buy it when attending a game, or a stadium tour. Moral economy is thus not about how much money something will cost someone, and for fans is not about how they are feeling the effects of commercialisation. But rather how much someone *gains* regardless from who and how making football more commercialised has benefitted them at the cost of the grassroots. Profiting from somewhere else becomes almost a cop-out of dealing with the problems faced at home (Thompson, 1971, p. 100)

The increased impact commercialisation has had on fans in later years, and their dissatisfaction with it can be seen in the increase of fan protests since the ‘90s. A significant time was when United fans blocked Rupert Murdoch’s bid to take over Manchester United in 1999, where a coordinated effort from fans prevented the takeover to go through. In 2005 the protests against the Glazer family’s takeover weren’t successful, though they weren’t any less loud than the ones that had happened 6 years before, and are still happening. The Super League of course saw two days of protesting before it collapsed and in the days following there was no shortage of protests against the owners of the clubs involved. When angry Manchester United fans forced their way into Old Trafford during a protest in May 2021, while most peaceful, a handful took to destroying cameras from Sky Sports. Cameras that would’ve been used to film the game between United and Liverpool that was supposed to happen that day. It was almost fitting, local fans ruining something that symbolises the processes that have taken their team and game further away from them.

Resistance against the Establishment

UEFA are normally perceived as someone too concerned with money. But in this instance they were put into a bracket that fans often find themselves in, namely not being taken into consideration. In the eyes of UEFA, and also the Premier League, arguably, it was about how much the owners of the clubs involved allowed themselves to profit without it having to go through UEFA and how much UEFA could miss out on. It was the collective break away from the EFL that made Premier League what it was in 1992, the clubs involved, plus the broadcaster Sky, would earn more money, share it with less clubs and could do it without the rest of the English football pyramid. UEFA is hosting the Champions League. The clubs earn substantial amounts from competing in these competitions, and Premier League and UEFA depend on the clubs competing in them to keep the tournaments interesting. When the twelve decided to break away and create something that would generate greater income, apart from UEFA and the Premier League that had enabled their income so far, UEFA and and the Premier Leauge were not about to let it pass silently.

In Thompson's example, it wasn't just millers, or just bakers, or just farmers or just the middlemen who had to face the wrath of rioting crowds over the price of bread, it was all of them . I asked one fan I interviewed what he believed needed to happen to make football less about money. He took a long pause before answering.

"Well. It needs a total overhaul, at all levels in most countries. FIFA, UEFA, the FA need to change. An independent regulator for the Premier League. A wage cap for the players maybe. Definingly a cap on agent fees. The blame is so widespread there's no concrete place just to point to and say, yeah that's it".

Everyone, seemingly, is to blame. The way football so far has been governed has enabled those who seek to earn profit to make their way into positions of power, and the result is a divide between the ones at the top and the grassroots.

Based on what is written above, we can argue the unity between fans of different wasn't the only unusual thing about the collective effort against the ESL. Fans rarely argue so cohesively for the same cause as football's governing bodies, other club owners and broadcasters. More often than not they stand in opposition to one another, with conflicting interests in how the game should be governed. the

In reading and writing about football today versus football as it was pre the 1980s, it can sometimes seem like being motivated by making money from football is a rather new

invention, again remembering the trap of nostalgia. But it isn't anything new at all. Football became professionalised in England in 1885, which obviously subsequently introduced more money into the sport, but even before that as well, some players and managers had been paid under the table in exchange for their services. What is new, with this era of commercialisation, is how money has had an increased impact on fans' experience and fan culture (Dubal, 2010).

Rising ticket prices are one concrete issue that frequently comes up, and also the rising number of tickets that are expensive. In *theory* there are tickets to matches available for less than £30, but there are more available for closer to £50. As said before, even adjusted to inflation, the prices for match tickets have skyrocketed, and it is felt by the fans. Some are priced out and some cut out other things to make room in their budget. Because of that, ticket prices are not just a case of supply and demand, because for some going to football games is such an important part of their life, and so the demand will not go down just because the price goes up. Thompson points out that when the price of bread went up, it didn't stop people from buying. Instead, it stopped them from buying other types of food and ended basing more of their diet on bread (Thompson, 1971, p. 91). If a commodity is deemed necessary enough, the threshold for what is a too high price to pay would be tall. How much it takes out of fans' weekly budget is one issue, and how much someone profits from it is another.

There are also all the various ways of how and where you can spend money at a game. As described in the introduction, one of the differences between attending a Premier League game and a lower league game, was the potential for spending money on other things than the entrance fee. Not only were the tickets to the games in vastly different price ranges, but also the amount of how much money it was *possible* to spend there was vastly different as well.

An adult-sized "authentic" football shirt, with a neat little badge to prove it, from a club shop will set you back roughly 50 pounds. Then there are the key rings, footballs, coffee cups, miniature stadiums, baby clothes, backpacks, hats, notebooks, calendars and various other clothes and paper-weights available, plus the option of getting your own name printed on the back of a shirt for an additional sum. Outside the Etihad stadium, food trucks lined the perimeter of the area around it, and there was no shortage of food inside either. Dubal quotes an informant of his who says the owners aren't interested in the average working-class fan

anymore because they will pay for the ticket but not much else. The richer middle-class fans, or tourists coming to see their team play can go to a game and spend over 100 pounds on meals and merchandise. Or buy the expensive seats with included benefits.

The lower league experience was very different. Just the one or two turnstiles, sometimes food trucks, sometimes a table filled with Haribo's and fizzy drinks, sometimes a hole-in-the-wall place for pies and tea. A tucked-away stand or room where they sold kits and flags, but no mega stores selling mini-stadium replicas.

I picked up a match day program on my way to my seat one time at a lower league game, intending to read up a bit before kick-off. On the back, they advertised the little shop right outside the entrance selling a bit of merchandise.

"Pop by to get your scarves or badges" it read in bold letters. And right underneath it:

"Or if you simply want to say hello"

I found the implication that it was not just money from shirt sales they were interested in, but also *who* was spending that money to be quite welcoming. It was on one of my first visits as well that I noticed the advert, and being still a bit out of place it was a nice way of being told I was welcome.

In Eriksen's article on glocalism, he mentions seven aspects of identity politics in a globalised world. Some I have mentioned in other chapters. One of them is globalisation actualize difference and triggers conflict (Eriksen, 2005). To borrow a term for current football fans from the creators of the ESL, namely Legacy Fans, we can argue that the globalisation and commercialisation of football have triggered a conflict between these Legacy Fans and the governing bodies, club owners and broadcasters, in this context we might call them The Establishment.

What highlights the difference between Legacy fans and the establishment is motivations and priorities. When these two groups have come together in football it triggers conflict because of the different interests, interests that come from different perceptions of what the game should be about and for. Whereas some owners can see their club as a company, existing to make money, for fans it is a community asset. In the 2021 government report based on the fan led review of football governance, a contributor noted that "[…] They (football clubs) are integral to many families and to cities and towns in a way that's not replicated in other businesses" (Department for Digital Culture Media and Sports, 2021, p.

12). This difference is what I would argue is the biggest battle line in contemporary European football and the commercialisation of the game with little to no regulations has made the fronts staler, and given way to the common sentiment “created by the poor, stolen by the rich”.

When these two interests clash, it creates what I mentioned above as a boundary within contemporary European football, a much more common boundary than what we saw during the two days of the ESL. The acts of not attending Premier League games and rather going to the lower leagues, as we saw in the first chapter, can also be seen as everyday forms of resistance, just like boycotting shirt sales or pay-per-view. Sandwiched between these two more subtly ways of showing resistance are the ESL protests, very much *not* an everyday form of resistance. However, they’re all critiquing the same thing, the continuing disembedding of modern football.

The Pay-off for Resistance

Roman Abramovich was the first ultra-wealthy to become an owner of a Premier League club, back in 2003. Before his investment in the club, Chelsea was far away from the global brand that it is now. Where his money had been made was not so much a question at the time, or even since, at least not until the war in Ukraine. He had money to invest heavily into English football, and as much as one can debate the ethics of how he got his wealth in the first place, it has been put into Chelsea FC in such a way that it has created talented footballers who have important for the English game. Now that Chelsea is again up for sale due to British sanctions against oligarchs following the war in Ukraine, it can be argued that by accepting Abramovich’s bid for Chelsea, the Premier League also inadvertently accepted the risk of what might happen should there be any political issues between Russia and the west. It opens up the issue of whether or not the Premier League should be more careful with getting too involved with nation-states owning shares in professional clubs, like the Saudi-Arabian Public Investment Fund’s, PIF’s, 80 per cent ownership in Newcastle United.

Abramovich's entrance into the Premier League was a catalyst for several other takeovers from foreign owners. Four years after his takeover of Chelsea FC, five other clubs had also changed hands into foreign ownership, with varying degrees of success, and all had to pass the fit-and-proper test to be allowed to be in charge of a club.

The test is mandated by the Premier League, the Football League, the National League and the Scottish Premier League. It applies to anyone who bids for a takeover, runs a club or owns more than 30 per cent of the shares in a club. The rules are generally tighter for the Premier League than the lower tiers, given the need for bigger economic assets from whoever is entering into the ownership structure. The two major aspects of the test that will get someone disqualified are whether or not there's any conflict of interest with other competing football clubs in the league and whether or not there are any files for bankruptcy or history of insolvency to clubs where they have been previously connected.

However, and despite the criteria one has to go through, clubs, unfortunately, face bankruptcy and insolvency regardless. It is most common in the lower tiers of the football pyramid, where the rules aren't as strict, but financial mismanagement leads more often than not to relegation and from there it is more or less impossible to get back up to the previous level. Like former Premier League champions Blackburn Rovers who last season came 15th in the Championship, the second tier of the English pyramid, and as recent as the 17/18 season played in League One, the third tier.

The test was implemented to ensure that all those who entered into the role of director or owner of a club had the finical means to sustain it for many years to come. But as the fates of also Oldham Athletic, Bury FC, Derby County and Coventry are just a few examples of, sometimes it is not enough. The blame lies with the owners for spending beyond their finical capabilities, but ultimately it is the fans who pay the price when a club gets points deductions or is put up for administration.

A fully disembedded economy is a utopian dream by economists, but impossible to achieve says Polanyi, because fictitious commodities such as labour, land and money can never be fully disembedded. In the introduction to the Great Transformation, Fred Block thus likens the process of the disembedding economy to stretching an elastic band further and further, creating greater and greater tension. At one point the band either snaps, representing social disintegration, or one has to release the pressure and return to a more embedded economy.

Up until now, football in England has been more or less regulating itself. When there's talk about *the Premier League,* in phrases such as "The Premier League has voted against it…" or "the Premier League backs the suggestion…", it's not referring to an organisation or federation. It's referring to a group of representatives from each individual club competing in the Premier League that season, specifically tasked with governing themselves. It can lead to

tensions, as clubs tend to vote for their own interests, and not what would benefit football as a whole. In the aftermath of the ESL, there were strong calls from fans and pundits for an independent regulator in England, but the Premier League argued they were fit to govern themselves. On the 25th of April 2022, the British government announced plans for a major reform of football in England, including the introduction of an independent regulator to oversee the running of clubs. The Premier League responded issued a statement the same day, saying:

> "We welcome the clarity from the Government about their position, and are committed to working with them during this next phase of consultation, although we will continue to maintain that it is not necessary for there to be a statutory-backed regulator" (Premier League, 2022)

In England, politicians have been reluctant to place too many restrictions on how the game should be governed. Football as we know it originated in England, and the lack of domination from the national teams on the world stage has always been a sore point. In the last three seasons English clubs have been the dominant sides in European club football, but Spain and Italy's reign lasted longer, and the only international trophy as a nation comes from the 1966 World Cup. Imposing wage caps, stricter ownership rules or limits on international players might lower the level of the Premier League and English players, and make their teams less competitive in Europe. The clubs, and by extension the Premier League are in agreement, and therefore not likely to self-impose any major governing changes unless they are pushed to, as they have been now.

Now, we can argue that the proverbial rubber band Block wrote about is contemporary European football, and it has been almost stretched to its limit. Sooner rather than later the rubber band's tension needs to be eased, in order to avoid social disintegration. Polanyi's Great Transformation, the pendulum that swings between a disembedded and an embedded economy, has been swinging closer and closer towards disembedded in recent years. But as Polanyi argues, a truly disembedded economy is a utopian dream of economists, which can never be truly achieved. What has happened in football for the past year, fan protests, independent regulator, and a Golden Share to ensure fans are heard in matters concerning their clubs, can be seen as signs to the pendulum is starting to swing back towards embeddedness.

The work of Supporters Direct, an organisation for supporters trusts in England, and FSA's, Football Supporters Association, along with fan protests, are examples of how fans have started to try and pull the football economy towards a more embedded version, away from what has been increasingly been the case since the mid-eighties. The new independent regulator and government reforms show that the resistance, be it through loud, disruptive protests or under-the-radar everyday acts of resistance, is starting to show results.

It has elsewhere been said that the biggest unforeseen consequence of the creation of the Premier League is the ways in which clubs have been taken away from their communities and now reside in the global world. Who would've thought that enabling the few to gain more money through disembedding the economy would mean disembedding the club as well?

Conclusion:
Football's fork in the road.

Disembedded football and its discontent

"Whether you're cheering on at home or away, this government will ensure fans are once again at the heart of the game," said English Prime Minister Boris Johnson, when the British government on the Monday the 25th of April announced a new independent regulator to be introduced. His words imply that there indeed has been a change in who football has been catering for in the past decades, and now new reforms will seek to change that, and take football back to the fans. While the time frame for when the regulator will be fully in place is still uncertain, the days where the Premier League, the FA and the English Football League regulate themselves are numbered.

In a 2021 Football Review, the British government defines football clubs as community assets. It effectively means that while they are business in the sense that they take the money and in return give fans an entry ticket , it places them in a very different position than other businesses. They do not solely exist for the purpose of providing a service for the sake of the profits for it, they're there to serve the community. Same as Thompson notes that millers and bakers to a degree were considered servants of the community, working not for profit but for fair allowance (Thompson, 1971, p. 83). Fans aren't blind to the fact that football needs money, otherwise, the leagues would've been amateur leagues, but there's where the *fair* bit comes in. There is a threshold where the money made stops being a fair allowance and grows into the exploitation of a service important to the locals. Exceed those limits too much for too long and feel the wrath of the crowds.

Tony told me the United players earned too much and cared too little, it belongs in the same line of thinking. Football players have the potential to become icons for their clubs or legends, shirts are sold with their names on the back and posters of them line the walls of children's bedrooms across the world. They become community assets in the way they inspire others, but to then earn so much while not assisting the community and club by giving it their all on the pitch makes them also a thing that profits too greatly for what is commonly accepted.

When writing about football and the changes the sport has gone through in recent years, one can easily fall into the trap of nostalgia, with rose-tinted glasses only remembering the good things from before. Football was a much less commercialised and globalised sport forty and more years ago, with cheaper tickets and thus available to more, closer to the roots perhaps, more local players and passion meant as much as the wages. But football in England in the 70s and 80s was tainted with hooliganism and fighting, game attendance was on the decline, and players were famous for playing football in the day and drinking themselves into a stupor in the evenings. A part of the rebranding that happened with the creation of the Premier League was becoming more spectator-friendly, and the spectator in mind was not the same as the spectator associated with football already at the time. Based on the ticket prices and the additional merchandise or food available, the spectator football was made friendly for is the middle-class man rather than the working class one.

There's a disconnect between the grassroots and the establishment, and what each party expects the other to care about. Fans will always hail success and winning trophies, but Chelsea's 2020/2021 Champions League triumph wasn't big enough to overshadow the price increase for season tickets at Stamford Bridge, Chelsea's home ground, the following season.

As we've seen, some fans have decided to not attend Premier League games altogether, and instead seek out the same feeling of standing in the crowd elsewhere, in the lower leagues. It is perhaps easy to accept the movement from the Premier League to the lower league as a smaller one, as the numbers still going to Premier League is huge, the absence of those missing isn't felt as long as there are other fans to fill their seats.

But the Super League showed that the hatred towards what football is starting to become is vast in England. The common notions of right and wrong Thompson describes are simmering just beneath the surface, and thus legitimise the riots when they do erupt. Two days' worth of protests, first against the plans, and then against the owners, highlighted the disconnect between owners and fans. Perhaps it also fully cemented have far down the road of profit-seeking football had actually come.

Commercialisation has made football more disembedded from the communities clubs are situated in. It started with the creation of the Premier League and its position as the world's most-watched football league it gained throughout the '90s. Manchester United was one of the first ones to truly cash in on their overseas popularity, and soon other clubs have

followed, leading to an increased interest in brand building, particularly in Asia. This leads to a shift in the relationship between local fans and clubs, and also between fans and entities that enabled such a process to happen, such as UEFA, the FA, broadcasters and the Premier League as a whole. Each chapter has taken a look at different ways in which disembeddedness has affected fans and their ways of showing resistance towards it.

Where football got it wrong

There are a plethora of examples from recent years where profits have weighted more than the fan, or indeed human rights, concerns. The most prominent one is the upcoming 2022 World Cup. It was awarded to Qatar in December 2010, to the surprise of many. At the time the country didn't have the infrastructure nor the history and beat favourites United-States to host the competition. With summer temperatures around 40° C, playing football there in June/July, the traditional months for international tournaments, was deemed too hazardous and for the first time, a World Cup will be held in November/December. Current FIFA president Gianni Infantino, although not FIFA president that awarded them the World Cup, has now moved to Qatar ahead of the tournament, relocating from Switzerland where all other FIFA presidents have resided before him. Despite issues such as reports of working conditions of immigrant workers, and lack of safety guarantee for any LGBT fans who want to go to Qatar , he continues to praise it as a World Cup like no other, in fact, one of the best there'll ever be.

The so-called practice of sportswashing in football doesn't stop with Qatar. PIF's recent takeover of Newcastle United was strongly criticised by, among others, Amnesty International and the widow of murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The deal initial failed in 2020 due to disputes over broadcasting rights, again, because of issues surrounding money, but after being resolved in October 2021, the takeover only took days to finalize.

Despite the strong criticism of the Super League format, UEFA is in the process of voting over a new model for the Champions League that is erring on the side of non-meritocracy as well. If the changes go through the way UEFA desires, there'll be about one hundred more Champions League games to be played , and bigger club names to participate in them. Because UEFA's policy dictates that any channel with the broadcasting rights also have to broadcast all matches played, and not cherry-pick the biggest and most important ones, the

increase in profits is estimated to be about 40 per cent of what the Champions League is currently bringing in.

We should remember, however, that since the 80s football becoming more disembedded, more based around neoliberal economic models and enabling a system where the rich clubs get richer, is not a movement that is isolated to football alone. The shift in football also reflects the many industries and countries that are also organising their economic systems. In England, several previous government-owned companies have become privatised, such as Royal Mail and parts of the NHS, where what is undeniably assets to the communities have turned into a subject cutting costs and making money. Companies outsource jobs to countries where labour is cheaper, further disembedding the economy from the community it has formerly resided in. We can follow the New York stock exchange as if it is its own force of nature. When the price of electricity in Norway rose to unprecedented levels in February 2022, the blame was on the "market", this entity that lives disembedded from us, best left to regulate itself. All football has done is follow a worldwide trend. There are developments such as the Independent Regulator in England being introduced in order to regulate football better. But one can argue it might be impossible to turn the Premier League and its clubs, with an annual turnover of around £10 billion, into entities that will always put fans first, when the global trend does not move in the same direction.

Where football can get it right

I travelled to Manchester with a hunch that top-flight football clubs had become disembedded from their local communities and this had caused a rift between them and the local fans. What I found were the various ways fans had of resisting the club's disembeddedness sometimes through loud and organised protests, other times through more quiet and unorganised boycotts. To say that there's a rift between top-flight clubs and local fans would therefore be too simplified, the criticism is too complex and layered. On the terraces of a lower league game, I spoke to people who hadn't been to Old Trafford in years, but would never speak ill of Manchester United, and always support them from afar. Tony wasn't opposed to going back to Old Trafford should the high wages ever drop. Attending lower league games rather than Premier League became a way of saying "no, thank you" to what English top-flight football had become – the everyday acts of resistance, as Scott describes them (James C Scott, p. 33)

There are instances where we can see the forms of resistance from the previous chapters having an effect on the football industry. Like the elastic band (Polanyi, 2001a, p. 25) from Polanyi's Great Transformation easing back on the tension. There are more critical voices over club takeovers, not just about finances as the fit-and-proper test mainly focuses on, but whether or not some owners are the types of people fans want to be associated with their football club, and if there are unforeseen consequences down the road. The war in Ukraine and Roman Abramovich's subsequent forced sale of Chelsea FC has opened up the question of what should happen to Newcastle FC or Manchester City, should there ever be political unrest in Saudi Arabia or the United Emirates respectively.

The new independent regulator in England is a major reform in again embedding football clubs in their communities, where their roles as community assets again are meant to be brought to the forefront. Shadow Culture Secretary Lucy Powell said that "We need to urgently bring in new laws to stop any more clubs going bust or being used as a plaything for the wealthy". Her comment implies the perceived reason for potential owners of seeking out Premier League clubs, and why it is wrong.

Especially since the creation of the Premier League, there have been symptoms pointing to football becoming more disembedded, but the argument that football is best left to regulate itself has left out any major countermovements. In the past two years however, the critical voices have gotten louder. The Norwegian FA president Lise Klavenes spent six minutes berating FIFA and Qatar on their handling of the 2022 world cup at the federation's general meeting in April, players have held up banners for protecting human rights before kick-off, and a fan-led review was held in 2021 following the ESL and economic collapse of Bury FC, leading to the new independent regulator in England. According to a representative from Football Supporters Europe UEFA are now more willing to listen to fans' perspectives' than before.

This is why I would argue football is now finding itself at a fork in the road. A pandemic seemed like a poor time to do fieldwork initially, but as far as timing goes, 2021-2022 were good years to study football after all. All the things that have happened, from the ESL to Chelsea FC's sale, have opened up cans of worms that have for long remained closed. The argument that politics should be kept out of football, effectively shutting down questions regarding the Saudi-Arabian PIF or the Abu Dhabi Group, does no longer hold because we've seen what happened with Chelsea FC when the international political landscape

changed drastically in just a single day. A breakaway league for the big teams only is no longer a rumour, it's a real threat that fans have shown massive opposition to. First with protests, now, in England, with an independent regulator. FIFA has experience they cannot award the World Cup to anyone without receiving critical questions from their own members.

However, there is the possibility top-flight football in England continues in a similar vein as it has since the late '80s. There is no guarantee an independent regulator will work to its intended purpose, and UEFA is likely to vote the Swiss model through, regardless of fan opposition. When the lights go out after the Qatar World Cup, it's not certain that the fight for human rights for immigrant workers will be as prominent as it has been leading up to the tournament.

There's a popular saying amongst football fans, "Created by the poor, Stolen by the rich". Originally coined by fans of Club Africain for a friendly game against PSG in 2017 (Ferenczi, 2021), the sentiment resonated with a vast number of football fans, and became a slogan during the games of the ESL. In a lot of ways, it fits with the idea of embedding and disembedding football I have talked about in this thesis. Football was for a long time a sport for the working-class and clubs were embedded in the local communities, became community assets and were more than just businesses. In the past few decades, football has become increasingly about maximising profits, rather than fan interests, and so the clubs have become increasingly disembedded from the communities in which they were born, stolen away by the "rich", who not only has stolen it but profits substantially in the process. The forms of resistance I have written about in this thesis might just be the beginning of fans taking it back.

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