



The Right Wing of the Pitch: English Football and the New Right

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Although romantic notions about the Olympian spirit inherent in all kinds of sports suggest otherwise, it has long been acknowledged that sporting competitions are more likely to divide than to unite people. George Orwell once quipped that “sport is an unfailing cause of ill-will” (2009: 195) and that it resembles “war minus the shooting” (198). Even without such openly militaristic comparisons, professional sports lends itself extremely well to nationalist sentiments as it “constitutes a charged interaction ritual” (King 2006: 251) which reaffirms the imagined communities of nations. Hence, it should be a likely target for the ideologies of the New Right, whose alarming increase in popularity rests to a large part on its ability to activate the ideological potential of nationalism.

That sports and the nation share a strong connection is somewhat obvious since most sports are frequently acted out in international competitions that invite national teams or athletes to playfully engage in a substitute battle between nations. Eric Hobsbawm has poignantly stated that “an imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people” (1990: 143), and extinguishing all complexities and contradictions of nations, athletes or national teams thus not only represent the nation, they *are* the nation in the eyes of many onlookers. Since, as Michael Billig has noted, we cannot escape from living in a world which constantly reminds us of our nationhood and in which we are hardly allowed to deny affiliation to (at least) one nation (1995: 1-3), all international sporting contests invite nationalists to project political ideologies onto the competition on the pitch.

Football, as the Western world’s most popular sport, is the figurehead for this intertwining of sports and nationalist ideology. While this link is obvious when it comes to national teams in international contests, as the riots between English and Russian supporters at the 2016 European Championship in Marseille attest to, I want to concentrate here on two examples with a focus on club football in order to explore the dissemination of the New Right’s neo-nationalist ideologies: one concentrates on the way that the UK Independence Party (UKIP) has latched onto criticism of the internationalisation of the English Premier League, and the other one draws attention to



the reappearance of an older generation of hooligans in alliance with new right-wing groups. In football's yearly schedule, international matches represent the extraordinary while club football is the routine that provides the core of most supporters' fan identities. For this reason, club football may be a less visible but potentially more 'game-changing' target for any ideological work within the world of football.

Football and the Right in the 20th Century

The right-wing exploitation of and attack on football crowds is nothing new: The Old Right, and especially the Far Old Right (or Old Far Right) identified English football as a perfect breeding ground or field for recruitment decades ago. Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists targeted young football supporters as potential members of their uniformed brigades as early as the 1930s (cf. Garland/Rowe 2001: 93), and in the 1950s the White Defence League's party newspaper was being sold at various London football grounds (cf. Frosdick/Marsh 2005: 140). The heyday of right-wing agitation came in the 1970s after hooliganism had already laid the groundwork for an atmosphere in which the militaristic appeal of the Right's recruitment strategies seemed attractive to an increasing number of young supporters. The National Front could fly its banners openly during matches, but the NF and other right-wing groups also subverted and infiltrated fan groups in order to invite and win new members. The National Front magazine *Bulldog* called for "hooligan groups to compete for the title of 'most racist ground in Britain'" (Frosdick/Marsh 2005: 140), and the NF logo was more or less discreetly printed on football memorabilia.

Even when refraining from a too bold form of social determinism, the logic for this recruitment at football grounds was plain: there was an abundance of white working-class youths with an imbued sense of lack in social status and privilege. These young men felt increasingly alienated from the rest of society and were sometimes easy targets because the group dynamics of many close-knit fan communities contributed to the appeal of right-wing ideas. Hooligan violence had started to appear on a frequent basis since the late 1960s, and this violent and rowdy climate of confrontation between different fan groups on the one hand, but between fan groups and the police authorities on the other, further ensured that right-wing sentiments often fell on fertile ground. Hooliganism also turned large parts of the grounds into lawless and unsupervised areas in which the state had at least temporarily yielded all control to the aggression of the disruptive subculture. This was especially true for 'football specials', i.e. the trains carrying away supporters to a match, or pubs taken over by hooligan groups before and after games. Moreover, many authorities rather tried to prevent violent riots around football matches for the sake of their own reputation and turned a blind eye to the less visible hate speeches of the Far Right, a process which continued well into the 1980s. National Front supporters among



football fans were always a minority, but nonetheless a very visible and intimidating one (cf. Buford 1992: 16).

Of course, football crowds were far from heterogeneous groups: in a port city like Liverpool, which as the most successful club in the country could afford to field black players like John Barnes in the late 1980s despite openly racist taunts from opposing fans, the appeal of the National Front was rather low. In comparison, the following of a club like Oldham Athletic, for geographical as well as for sporting reasons, seemed much easier prey for the Right. Birmingham City's main hooligan group, the Zulus, had a large number of black members, as had Cardiff City's leading firm, and for that reason there was more opposition to racism than at a neighbouring club like Swansea City. Nonetheless, the general atmosphere at football grounds in the 1970s was seldom immune to racism. West Bromwich Albion player Brendon Batson recalls: "We'd get off the coach at away matches and the National Front would be right there in your face. [...] It wasn't a new phenomenon to us. From when I came to England, I was familiar with people shouting at me from cars or on the Underground in London." (Rees 2014: 131) Racist incidents decreased significantly since the 1990s, but that does not mean that monkey noises or similar reactions have vanished completely from English football.

In the mid-1980s, the expectation of violence at football matches alarmed the authorities so much that Margaret Thatcher declared football a social pariah, and put cleaning up football's act at the top of her agenda. The *Sunday Times* even called football a "slum sport played in slum stadiums increasingly watched by slum people" (1985: 16a). Three horrible stadium catastrophes later, the government decided that something needed to be done and ordered a commission led by Lord Justice Taylor to make suggestions on how to improve football culture in general. Only one of these three catastrophes, the 1985 Heysel disaster in Brussels, was triggered by supporter violence, the other ones, a fire at Bradford's Valley Parade ground in 1985 and the catastrophe at Sheffield's Hillsborough stadium in April 1989, were caused by the derelict state of old British grounds and fatal misconceptions and mistakes on behalf of the police respectively. The Taylor Report, among others, suggested turning all grounds in the top divisions into all-seated venues and introducing CCTV in all grounds, and these measures succeeded in gradually driving violence out of the stadium. However, this in turn also led to creative schemes for refinancing the costly renovations (cf. Conn 2005: 55f) and baffling increases in ticket prices (cf. Bazell 2008: 136; Conn 2011), which also excluded many of the 'undesirable' elements of the football crowd a priori, assuming that there was a correlation between low social status and a propensity for violence. This 'purging' of fan demographics coincided with clubs' negotiations for a lucrative new television deal and the profit-driven breakaway of the English top division from the three other flights of the Football League in 1992. The outcome was the foundation of the English Premier League, which has become the richest and most expensive league in the world.



The Ambiguous Internationalism of the Premier League

While English club football thus stands at the top of football's economic and cultural hegemony, the national team has not in the slightest been able to keep pace. The World Cup victory of 1966 is now more than fifty years in the past and England have not made it to the semi-finals of a major tournament since 1996. Instead, embarrassing defeats at the feet of teams like Iceland have become much more commonplace. Several commentators have drawn a connection between the prosperity and popularity of the Premier League and the misfortunes of the national team because the sheer number of expensive foreign players, which clubs buy with their billions of television money, keep young English talent out of the first team. Consequently, these youngsters often lack the competitive experience necessary to bring the national team forward. Over the past few years, voices trying to exploit this misbalance for populist arguments against the influx of foreign skill have increased.

Very prominent among those voices was the UK Independence Party, UKIP. Although UKIP's political ideology has a very different basis than explicitly right-wing parties like the British Nationalist Party (BNP), a convergence of nationalist-populist arguments against the perceived threats of Europe and globalisation unites them (cf. Ford/Goodwin 2014: 7f). Several UKIP politicians declared their support for plans to introduce a quota on foreign football players in the Premier League in order to promote home-grown talent. The 2010 party manifesto stated that:

Ukip feels the [lack of success of British teams] is largely a legacy of many British teams having too few British players in the team, and teams like Arsenal have taken to the field in the recent past with none whatsoever [...]. Ukip would place a maximum of three foreign players in the starting line-up, as this would free up places for British players in the youth academies of these teams and spur the future development of home teams. (UKIP 2010)

UKIP candidates have tweeted similar positions, and Paul Nuttall, then party deputy leader, seconded, saying that "Leaving the EU would also smooth the development path for home-grown players" (UKIP 2016).

In the 2014/15 season an obscure Premier League table, quickly christened the UKIP table, circulated on the internet, where only goals scored by English players were counted.¹ Raising the question how a hypothetical argument about a sporting competition should inform a political decision as far-reaching as Brexit seems otiose, but this is certainly what these suggestions meant to trigger in the run-up to the referendum, and various internet forums have seen lengthy discussions of these matters.² The idea for a

¹ <<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/B1Q8v5kCUAAH9vv.jpg>>.

² To name but one example: <<https://forums.digitalspy.com/discussion/2061070/fa-to-adopt-ukip-policy>>.



quota on foreign players did not originate with UKIP, but the rules have been adapted repeatedly to encourage the nurturing of home-grown talent, and even an FA commission set up to reform the national team has suggested to rework the statutes about the number of non-EU (post-Brexit: foreign) players on teams (cf. Goldblatt 2014: 265; Football Association 2015). Read in conjunction with their general party line, UKIP's exploitation of this matter appears in a different light, since this argument is of course consistent with the party's populist strategy. The isolationist sentiments disseminated by UKIP oftentimes resonate with a traditional fan base dispossessed by the neoliberal reforms in football and larger contexts in society. Moreover, the tables might be starting to turn: after the Brexit referendum, Andy Burnham, former Labour Secretary of State for Culture, while running for Mayor of Greater Manchester publicly jumped onto the quota bandwagon, citing the chances of improving the England team via a quota system as possibly the best potential side effect of the referendum (cf. Ziegler 2016). And in the meantime, 'home-grown' has become a frequent and one of the most positively connoted adjectives used by official Premier League press releases to praise young footballers eligible to play for England.

Hooliganism and the New Right

Even further to the right, one can find another example for how the post-1990 social exclusion practised in English football has presented opportunities for the New Right and has brought about new radical movements. In 2009, a group of former Luton Town hooligans founded the English Defence League (EDL). In a mission statement on their website, the organisation claims that "The English Defence League has risen from the English working class to act, lead and inspire in the struggle against global Islamification" (English Defence League Committee 2016). Members of the EDL, now spread across all of England and Wales, regularly demonstrate against what they see as a threat to British values by the number of Muslims living in the United Kingdom. As many right-wing groups, the EDL claims to be a "human rights organisation" and to be "committed to non-violence" (2016), although the record of violent incidents around their rallies involving group members says something different. The tone of the group's statements is reminiscent of German organisation Pegida (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes) and its sister organisations. There are much more obvious parallels, though, to the group Hooligans gegen Salafisten (HoGeSa) which started to leave its mark in 2014 with violent demonstrations against the threat of Salafism in Germany and Europe, and which was inspired by the English Defence League (cf. Henkel 2014). In both instances, one can observe a closing of ranks between hooligans and active neo-Nazis, and a badly policed rally in Cologne, which turned into a large-scale riot, showed the violent potential of this partnership (cf. Henkel 2014).



Although at football matches, neither the English Defence League nor the HoGeSa have yet made a public appearance beyond the wearing of merchandise, the football connection is significant. Apart from occasional clashes at international matches, especially in Eastern Europe or on the margins of major tournaments, hooliganism both in England and in Germany was believed to be more or less dead by many observers. The state-led surveillance tactics and its concomitant effects in the English Premier League reduced violent incidents in the English top divisions to a minimum after 1990 (cf. Frosdick/Marsh 2005: 42). Apart from few exceptions, violence was often relegated to lower divisions with much less publicity. Moreover, the hooligans of the 1970s and 1980s grew older, and, interestingly enough, a trend started in the 1990s where former hooligans would instead engage in substitute battles in the form of hooligan memoirs, in which the glories of former fights were celebrated and rivalling groups were now attacked with the pen instead of the Stanley knife (cf. Dart 2008). In Germany, where ticket price rises have not been as immense as in England and working-class supporters have thus not been priced out in a similar way, hegemony on the terraces was nonetheless gradually yielded to the younger, and in many cases left-leaning *ultra* groups, which marked a generational shift. The reappearance of so many former hooligans in their forties and fifties at HoGeSa or EDL demonstrations thus needs to be seen as a symbolic statement that hooliganism is still alive and kicking, active and powerful, and more than just a residual element of a bygone age that modern football thought it had exorcised.

It is moreover also a statement about the interconnectedness between football and neoliberal global forces in general, which have shoved the dispossessed into various forms of precarity. Above all, the post-Taylor reforms have pushed the formerly dominant subculture of hooligans into a form of identity precarity. It is striking that, at the very beginning of their mission statement, the English Defence League define themselves as a working-class movement, and in conjunction with their origin in football fan cultures thus draw a connection between their exclusion from their original sphere of identification, i.e. modern football, and their relegation at the hands of state forces which allegedly prefer refugees and immigrants from Islamic countries over them. This sentiment rings true in Pegida or HoGeSa, in many Brexit or Trump voters, and is one of the core patterns underlying the various movements referred to as the New Right.

It seems like a clever move aligning many different and not always related causes in disseminating the ideology of the New Right: dispossession, which threatens the core forms of these groups' identity markers, becomes the essence of this rhetoric. It is also markedly different from the tactics of the remnants of the National Front, which are representative of the Old Right: browsing through the NF archives on their website, one finds small symbolic acts, like waving the National Front flag in public places, being hailed as a form of resistance. If the NF thus hoist their flag outside of Rochdale's Spotland ground before a fourth division tie, this is newsworthy in the eyes of the organisation



because they have made their presence known.³ However, these actions and the way that these are being reported only emphasise the NF's exclusive outlaw character, while the New Right tries to take on a much more inclusive rhetoric in order to make their statements heard.

Conclusion

That the New Right identifies the most popular pastime in the country as an ideal site of struggle seems only logical. The question remains why it seems so easy to latch onto the discontent of so many football supporters in the country. Neoliberalism's biggest fault or oversight was certainly that in its focus on consumer-friendly efficiency the system created an ideological void within football fan cultures, which the New Right is now increasingly trying to fill. On the surface level, the Premier League is a huge success story from a marketing point of view. In terms of fan cultures, however, the aforementioned changes dealt a tremendous blow, changing the demographics of the crowd, and consequently also the inherent hierarchies within the ground. It starts with foreign investment, which is positive for fans of the clubs that Roman Abramovich or Sheikh Mansour sponsor so unashamedly, but which is devastating for fans of Portsmouth F.C. or Wimbledon F.C. and dozens of others, whose clubs have been bankrupted by foreign mismanagement. It lies in the nature of nations and nationalism that in such instances the scapegoat's nationality is deemed essential. This discourse continues with the failure of the League to improve the national team and to fulfil fans' nostalgic dreams of "the fading core of a culture and a history that is confronting a loss of certainty about its own distinctive content" (Gilroy 2005: 88).

Michael Rustin has written in an instalment of the *Kilburn Manifesto* that the "excessively stratified reward system of the Football Premier League [...] now serves as a mirror for the entire society, as it symbolises and legitimises the displacement of spheres of intrinsic value by the esteem accorded to money alone" (2013: 9). This neoliberal impetus has foreclosed a number of tacit contracts within football: the breakaway of the profit-driven Premier League from the more egalitarian principles of the old Football League is an obvious example, as well as the commodification and sanitisation of the game for global television audiences. On top of that, the competition itself has come to mirror the distribution of capital. In an editorial for *When Saturday Comes*, Andy Lyons explains that Northern clubs have gradually fallen behind clubs from London, as this is where most capital accumulates. After 115 years, two London teams topped the table for the very first time in the 2003-04 season (Lyons 2014: 7), which indicates the increasing connection between capital investment and sporting success. It is no surprise then that discontent

³ <<http://www.britishnationalfront.net/heywoodoct.html>>.



with inequalities in society and inequalities in football are matched in order to strike a chord with the emotions that millions of supporters still invest into football.

For that matter, it seems vital that football attempts to counteract further developments in that direction. Discussions about a quota on non-UK players cannot be stopped, and they are not necessarily wrong; it is however important for bodies like the FA to tackle the matter carefully and proactively in order to prevent this argument from being taken over and turned around by ideologists on the Right. Moreover, club football needs to keep its footing in local fan bases instead of just pursuing global markets. The masses of fans who want to identify with a club are likely to do so not because of the attractiveness of the mediated product but because of passion for what a club stands for – however blurry and vague such notions might be. Recent plans for reforming international competitions, especially the UEFA Champions League, to improve financial viability will further fans' alienation from professional football because they will widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots, and they will widen the void for national identification that the New Right will readily try to fill.

Football should also not lose sight of the importance of fan projects and community schemes that have become so vital in targeting racism and other forms of discrimination since the 1990s. Pertaining to the sustenance of projects that advocate diversity and heterogeneity in football, the market-driven focus on top division clubs and the neglect of lower-division clubs needs to shift. The big clubs and national football associations can in many cases claim to have funded successful community schemes. As much as this should be lauded, this has concentrated on the top divisions because the marketability of these clubs rises and falls with their reputation as politically correct or incorrect. But what good are expensive initiatives at Borussia Dortmund or Manchester United, if Energie Cottbus, Leeds United or Oldham Athletic are left out of sight? Apologists of RB Leipzig praise the family-friendly atmosphere and the fact that a lack of tradition also means a lack of violent fans; but does this not increase the problems for local contenders Lokomotive and Sachsen? And is it not telling that it is fans of Luton Town, who have fallen down the ladder of English football in the past decades, who are at the core of the English Defence League? The opportunities that football offers the New Right are complex and manifold, and hypercommodification is not the only scapegoat for this development. But this makes interventions from a number of angles, whether it is academics, active fans or politicians, all the more important because one should never forget that the politics of football cannot be separated from the politics of politics.



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