

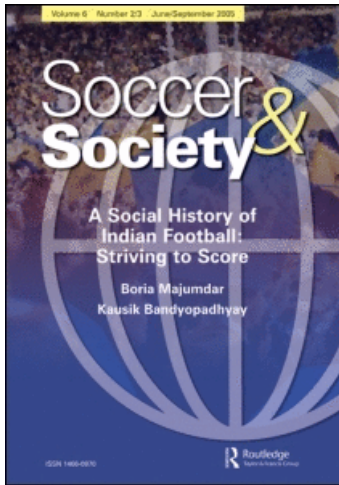
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'Not For Sale'? The Destruction and Reformation of Football Communities in the Glazer Takeover of Manchester United

Adam Brown

This paper explores the background, fan culture and scope of the oppositional stance taken by many Manchester United fans to the corporate takeover of their club by the US-based Glazer family. The paper will situate the takeover battle within a number of trends within United's fandom, namely: the reassertion of locality among United's Mancunian fan base; the formations of fan groups at Manchester United; [1] the nature of fan communities. The paper will explore the failure of highly politicized and radicalized fan organizations to stop the takeover and the destruction of community that this entailed. It will conclude by exploring the formation of a new, fan-owned football club – FC United of Manchester, established by disaffected and disillusioned Manchester United fans – and begin to situate this within different theoretical approaches to 'community'.

The Denouement

It was around 5 p.m. on 29 June that the text message arrived at hundreds of mobile phones in Manchester: 'Joel Glazer is at OT now – spotted arriving in blacked out car behind Gill and Edwards – get everyone down there as soon as possible.' The message referred to the son of the new American tycoon owner of Manchester United who was paying his first, heavily guarded, visit to the Old Trafford ground, along with his two bothers. That he was accompanied by the despised former Chief Executive of the club, Martin Edwards, and the current incumbent, David Gill, who had previously publicly opposed the Glazer's takeover, made it even more bitter for fans to take. Supporters had waged a sophisticated and vitriolic battle against the takeover for the previous 18 months: now was its denouement.

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They gathered outside the ground, as they had done on numerous occasions before to, 'let them know exactly how unwelcome they are'. Kept out of the stadium by locked gates, the Greater Manchester Police and the Glazer's own private security, the fans decided to 'make life as hard as possible for them all',^[2] by turning the tables on the security and barricading the Glazers in. Risking criminal conviction, gates were glued and locked with chains, and barricades were erected on the all access roads to the ground.

At one bitterly ironic moment, supporters were moving steel girders intended for the ongoing expansion of the stadium onto the barricades. Inside, recordings of their voices, singing and chanting from previous matches were played through the PA system to show the Glazers the Old Trafford 'atmosphere'. This atmosphere had become a 'product', a commodity to be bought, with the same fans that created it, furiously facing the forces of the state, locked outside. It summed up a defeat of a particular brand of English football supporter culture to a corporate sports capitalism that now dominates elite English football.

As fans frantically moved from one exit route to another to block the Glazers, the riot police arrived in force at around 9 p.m. Around an hour later, Police Tactical Aid Units drove at speed toward the barricades at the rear of Old Trafford. Faced by fans sat in the road in front of them, these riot police attacked with batons and dogs, hitting those on the ground and those running away, setting their dogs onto fans.

Two riot vans with the Glazers cowering in the back, emerged from the tunnel at Old Trafford and sped through the now cleared road, as supporters screamed abuse, rained missiles then fled, their lives in danger, out of the way of speeding vans. Brutal riot police chased fans, forming a line across a car park, their dogs straining at the leash, and ran at the supporters, to disperse them. After a few more skirmishes, supporters trooped home, tired, bloodied and bruised, many vowing that they would never set foot in the ground again, with the Glazers in control. The power of global sports capital, backed by the full force of the state, had won the day, killing for many a particular form of football as popular culture.

Introduction

On 12 May, following months of speculation, US millionaire Malcolm Glazer, owner of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers American Football team, bought a controlling stake in Manchester United Plc, the parent company of Manchester United Football Club. This was soon followed by a complete takeover of the company in which fan-shareholders were forced to sell their shares leaving the club entirely in the hands of a businessman who had no record of involvement in, or care for, Manchester United.

This paper will explore the background, fan culture and opposition of Manchester United fans to the corporate takeover of their club, as well as the fallout of their defeat. The failure of the campaigners against the takeover has involved many loyal and 'hardcore' fans, particularly those based in Manchester, turning their back on the club by refusing to attend and forming an entirely new club, Football Club United of Manchester (FCUM). The paper will situate this ideological/cultural/economic battle

for the control of Manchester United within a number of trends within United's fandom, namely: the reassertion of locality among United's Mancunian fan base; the formations of fan groups at Manchester United; and the assertion, destruction and renewal of fan 'community' in contemporary English football.

The events discussed here focus around initiatives and processes which have been propagated and intensified, initially at least, by a specific group of Mancunian Manchester United fans. These are predominantly male (though not all[3]), aged 20–50, and mostly living and working locally. They 'congregate' around particular organizations – the three long-established United fanzines (*Red Issue*, *United We Stand* and *Red News*); the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association (IMUSA); and small shareholders organization, Shareholders United (SU). They include some of those identified by King as 'The Lads' and fall into a category which Giulianotti might (problematically) call 'traditional/hot' supporters, with significant independence from the club. The author has had unparalleled and extremely privileged access to the main events and organizations discussed here. This has given easy 'entrée' to the very heart of fan formations and discussions.[4]

Historical Background

Manchester United, like most clubs in England,[5] has historically been a Limited Company, privately owned but not traded on the open stock market. Although England has never had regulations such as those in Germany, Spain and Portugal which underpin *fan* ownership,[6] Football Association (FA) rules historically prevented clubs being a source of private profit. By the 1990s the rules had been circumvented or forgotten.[7] Manchester United had a series of private owners in the twentieth century as the club moved from relative obscurity to becoming an international 'super club' following the 1958 Munich Air Disaster which all but obliterated the club's then most successful team.[8] From the late 1950s to 1991, the club was owned and controlled by one family, the Edwards.

The Edwards era was not any kind of 'golden age' absent from protest or criticism of the regime, Crick describing it as the 'betrayal of a legend' and son Martin Edwards (in control from 1980) was a hated figure.[9] By 1989 there were three oppositional fanzines (fan produced magazines) – *Red News*, *Red Issue* and *United We Stand*. They, unknowingly, began a process of fan organization and an ideological/cultural politicization at Manchester United which culminated in the battle against Glazer.

At this time there was considerable politicization of football support in England, generally in response to the formation of the FA Premier League (FAPL) in 1992, its TV deal with BSkyB and the Taylor Report into the Hillsborough tragedy which imposed all-seat stadia on the top English clubs. The formation of the Football Supporters Association (FSA) in 1985, the launch of the first football fanzines, a 'culture of dissent' and the formation of the first campaigning independent supporters organizations at clubs all contributed to this.[10]

Although criticized in some quarters,[11] in most cases fan protests were serious responses expressing *fundamental contradictions* between a game reliant on collective

communities of football fans, and football's new, global free market approach. From 1991 onwards a number of clubs, led by Manchester United, floated on the Stock Exchange as public limited companies. The effect was to usher in a new, free market governance of football which increasingly replaced older, associational and non-profit-making forms of governance. Fans faced the imposition of all-seater stadia when many still wanted to stand, all-ticket matches as well as huge increases in the cost of tickets.[12]

In 1995, following previous failures, the three United fanzines were instrumental in establishing the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association (IMUSA). From its earliest days, IMUSA's objective was to 'roll back the Plc' and launched campaigns in favour of standing, against further price increases and for supporters to gain democratic ownership of the club.[13]

IMUSA's mid-1990s 'share club' was the precursor to later attempts at creating a collective holding of shares to challenge the Plc board at its annual general meeting. But it also exposed the difficulties in creating a significant stake for supporters at a club valued in excess of £600m by 1998 (£800m by 2005). The difficulties of creating a 'shareholding democracy' at such large companies began to be exposed by IMUSA's experiment and was a lesson which would echo loudly in 2005. Developing 'supporter shareholder trusts' has received widespread support in recent years,[14] with the Labour government-funded agency, Supporters Direct, having notable successes in smaller clubs. But the model and 'third way/enabling' approach has totally failed to demonstrate how it can work in a company of the size of Manchester United, where major corporate finance is needed to create a meaningful stake.

Evidence of this long standing opposition by United fans to the Plc is important to recognize in light of significant criticism at the time of the Glazer takeover of the Manchester United supporters' campaign, based around the slogan 'Not For Sale'. Such criticism suggested that United fans had been content with the Plc as long as it delivered success on the field. This is not only unfounded but is historically inaccurate given IMUSA's and other's long standing opposition to the Plc. It also demonstrates a complete lack of knowledge of supporter protest and fan culture toward the Plc at the club, something very evident in both campaign materials and supporter songs: 'No surrender, no surrender, no surrender to the Plc' (Manchester United fans' song, Old Trafford 2001).

It should be noted that this level of opposition to the Plc was at a time of unprecedented success for the football club, who won 8 out of 11 Premiership titles between 1993 and 2003, making the protests all the more significant.[15] However, such opposition was always partial:

'Resistance' within the fans' pleasure seeking is, as Fiske (1989), Hall and Jefferson (1976) and King (1998) all identify, neither simplistic nor totalistic. King talks of the compromise made by 'the lads' and the 'imaginary incision between club and team' made by many Manchester United supporters who declare that they 'love the team, hate the club'. These fans' support then, is both resistant and compliant at the same time.[16]

What is notable is that this 'compromise' became untenable for many after the Glazer takeover, whilst it continues with thousands of others.

The Failed Sky TV Takeover and its Aftermath

IMUSA's 'high point' came with the defeat of the first takeover attempt of Manchester United Plc, that by BSkyB in 1998–99. Supporters mounted a campaign largely focused on persuading the British government that the takeover would be bad for British football as well as the nascent satellite TV market. This was eventually achieved through the UK Monopolies and Mergers Commission – a sub-governmental body which regulates competition law – who ruled against the merger.[17]

That campaign was largely focused around political lobbying and was never a mass protest of the kind we have seen in 2004–05. However, it represented a huge victory for United fans, preventing the sale of the club and stopping a corporation owned by Rupert Murdoch, resulting in a shift in the balance of power at the club. That campaign also represented a significant politicization of United's fan base, involving governmental lobbying and competition law issues.[18] In terms of concerns with wider football agendas, and the depth of political understandings of IMUSA, United's fan formations were as ideologically motivated around issues of football's governance, as any in Britain and arguably Europe.

IMUSA had been joined by a new group – Shareholders United (SU)[19] – in the Sky campaign. Their principal purpose after the 1999 victory was to establish a collective fan shareholding large enough to prevent another takeover attempt. This saw the first moves to create a Manchester United supporters trust – a form of fan organization supported through Supporters Direct – but something which never materialized in time.

It was notable that both organizations now enjoyed much improved relations with the Plc, with new chief executive, Peter Kenyon, talking about healing the rifts between the fans and the club under a banner of 'One United'. [20] This turned out to be little more than marketing rhetoric but did not hide the fact that there had been concessions won by fans. A Fans Consultative Forum was established with IMUSA and SU given dedicated places; SU had regular meetings with the Plc; and a 'Fan Zone' was created in the new upper tier of the West Stand (formerly the Stretford End). This created space for fans' own displays to express a resurgent local identity and anti-takeover sentiments.

However, these were very partial concessions. Calls to have a democratic Forum were refused amid Kenyon's fears that this 'would allow certain groups [IMUSA] to dominate'. [21] We observed the Fans Forum meetings regularly and found them to be arenas for broad discussion but not for implementing fans' wishes and certainly not for giving supporters any decision-making power.

The failure of SU to create a significant enough shareholding for fans, or for either organization to achieve real decision making power within the club, was to be pivotal in 2005 as SU tried to woo the board away from accepting Glazer's offer. The conciliatory approach of SU dates from their increasing incorporation into club structures, suggesting an assimilation that prevented it from taking a more radical stance. Alongside this, some cracks began to appear in the unity between IMUSA and SU between 2000 and 2002.[22] Lines became blurred between SU's 'shareholder' role and IMUSA's 'street' campaigning role.

This 'division' also represented different fan cultures and fan communities. In very general terms, SU represented a more middle class, and southern supporter base; whilst IMUSA, once famously referred to as the 'Stretford lads club', was a significantly more Mancunian and working-class organization. Whilst these are very broad generalizations they were meaningful discourses within each organization and the fan base in general, reflecting a difference in approach that was to harm the fans' campaign in 2005.

Local Fan Culture

Underpinning these developments was a resurgence of a distinctly Mancunian identity among a section of United's support. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the fan formations, organizations, conflicts and response to both the takeover threat and defeat, without regard to this.

Manchester United fans, as supporters of the world's richest club, are often stereotyped by rival fans (especially Manchester City) *and* in the UK's popular consciousness as 'inauthentic'. This set of characteristics contrasts United fans to their rivals around a series of 'distinctions'. City are portrayed as working class, loyal, passionate and participatory, anti-commercial and belonging to a 'real club'. United fans as middle class, fickle and 'new', quiet unless winning and as 'customers' not 'fans'. However, it is City fans' construction of themselves as local and United as not from Manchester that is the principal area for contestation.

During the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, some Manchester-based Manchester United fans responded to such claims by re-emphasizing their local identity, and their rivalry with Manchester City. In part this was a response to attacks on their 'authenticity' as fans. However, in part it was also an uneasiness growing to outright opposition to the globalization of the club – and therefore the policies of the Plc. It is this clash between a politicized local fan culture and the forces of global sports capitalism that underpin the protests against Glazer.

This reinvigoration of local football identity included old and new songs and chants against City; publicity stunts around the 25th anniversary of City's last major trophy; banners in the Stretford End – 'The Flowers of Manchester' (a reference to the Munich victims) and 'Republik of Mancunia' in appropriate Russian-styled lettering; and hundreds of fanzine articles and letters.[23]

We see here a multi-faceted strategy in which United fans attempt to combat both the negative characterizations of them made by Manchester City fans (and others), *as well as* the Plc as undermining their local football identities. Of course such categorizations are riddled with contradictions and are fluid, contingent and employ very problematic notions of authenticity. However, this symbolic battle waged by some United fans is also in part a rejection of the commercial development of United, including calls to prioritize local fans in ticketing policies. Numerous fanzine articles promoted attachments to the city of Manchester and its popular culture, stressing the importance of United to the locality and criticizing the strategic direction of the Plc which sought to 'monetise the global fan base' and develop the club as a 'global leisure brand'. [24] Given the globalization of United, we can see here a rejection of dominant discourses

about and by the club through a (re)emergence or (re)construction of imagined fan communities based around locality.[25]

I am not inferring here that all Manchester United fans or all Mancunian ones were part of this development. Further, there is a danger of over-essentializing the identities of the fans under question and such positionings can be riddled with paradoxes. However, there was a clear and freely expressed resentment among many fans that the commercially globalizing policies of the Plc were undermining their attempts to reassert the local identity of the club and its fans. Rather than the anti-Glazer campaign being 'anti-American' and even 'xenophobic' as his adviser Bob Leffler claimed,[26] it is this reassertion of what fans saw as 'authentic' that is significant. In this context, any international corporate tycoon, let alone one who brought with him huge debt and no role for fans, was hardly likely to win support.

Such formations of fans might be seen as an expression of what Anderson has called 'imagined' communities. Yet these are very different notions of community to official ones, those referred to in policy documents[27] or within official club 'community schemes'. However 'imagined', contingent or transitory these communities may be, they are ones football business has felt the need to engage with – something implicitly recognized as *commercially* important in Kenyon's lacklustre 'One United' policy. What is important to understand here is that these communities were *implicitly and explicitly* critical of the corporate and global development of the club, feeding directly into opposition to the Plc and to any notion of a corporate takeover predicated on global expansion. These fan communities created an organic link between the football identities of many fans and the political fan campaign against Glazer – a cultural as well as ideological contest.

Intensification: The Takeover battles

On the back of the 'dot-com' market boom, by 2000 Manchester United Plc's share value was £1bn. With a crash in that market, by 2004 the club was relatively cheap and also both cash rich and debt-free.[28] It was always likely that there would be another attempt to buy the club, especially as SU failed to build a significant share stake for fans – in fact it never rose above 2 per cent, despite gaining 31,000 members. This left the club in a precarious position.

Coolmore: The Phoney War

The first perceived 'threat' came from two former friends of Sir Alex Ferguson, Irish race horse owners John Magnier and J.P. McManus, collectively known as the 'Coolmore' after the location of their horse breeding farm. Ferguson introduced the pair to the club in 2003 and they invested in it through their 'Cubic Expression' company. However, Ferguson and Magnier were soon in dispute over the amount of money Ferguson was to receive from Coolmore for stud rights on a horse they jointly owned.

At precisely the time that this dispute intensified, Cubic increased their holding in the club to 29 per cent, just short of the 30 per cent threshold at which, under London

Stock Market rules, they would have to offer to take over the company. This immediately heightened tensions at the club and among fans. New Chief Executive David Gill talked of 'Irish tanks on the lawn' but the response of fans was an intense opposition to Coolmore with expressions of popular opposition at vitriolic levels.

What motivated fans predominantly was the fear that this was a prelude to a full takeover and one that would see the removal of Ferguson. However it was also partly a response to Coolmore using their financial might to put pressure on the club and manager Ferguson in particular. Unlike the Sky takeover in which fans lobbied the British government, there was no possible political route to blocking a takeover from the Irish or subsequently, Glazer. At Old Trafford fans hung banners abusing Magnier and McManus; and IMUSA and SU launched campaigns to protest at their disruptive involvement. For the first time fans began campaigns of direct action against the pair, a tactic that was to resurface later that year against Glazer.

This approach saw the emergence of a third party in the campaign, the secretive Manchester Education Committee (MEC), referred to as the 'guerrilla wing' of the fans' movement. A loose collection of some of United's more hardline support, the MEC burst onto the scene in March 2004 bringing a horse racing event at Hereford – when Coolmore's horse, 'Moonbeam' was running – to a standstill. The MEC were able to engage in tactics which, because of their illegality, IMUSA and SU were more reluctant to be involved in. Coolmore's partners were picketed, their computer server was targeted, staff and families were bombarded with hostile emails and one of their houses was daubed in red paint.

No Irish takeover ever materialized, but this 'phoney war' galvanized IMUSA, SU and the fanzines into the Not For Sale Coalition to fight any corporate predator. It also raised the interest of Malcolm Glazer to the possibility that United could be bought and he quickly acquired a 17 per cent stake in the company by mid-2004.

The Glazer Takeover

By early autumn 2004, the ownership of the club stood as follows: Magnier and McManus' Cubic Expression owned 28.9 per cent; Glazer owned 28.1 per cent; mining businessman Harry Dobson, 6 per cent; owner of Celtic FC, Dermot Desmond just under 1 per cent; a number of corporate investors held 18 per cent; and 18 per cent was in the hands of small shareholders, mostly fans, of which SU controlled under 2 per cent – a precarious and unstable situation.

Glazer finally made his move at this time, making initial inquiries with outline plans of a takeover package put to the Plc board. The bid was based on an enormous amount of borrowing by Glazer. The board, aware both that this would place somewhere in the region of £500m of debt on the club should Glazer be able to make it his private company, and of the fans' increasing hostility, rejected the bid. Glazer was incensed and retaliated, removing three directors from the Plc board at the company Annual General Meeting in October 2004.

However, Glazer returned in February – to the outrage of fans on the anniversary of the Munich Air Disaster – to put forward 'detailed proposals'.^[29] With the board

remaining opposed, speculation ebbed and flowed that a hostile takeover was imminent. The decisive move came on 12 May 2005 when Glazer's advisers announced that he had bought the 29 per cent stake held by the Magnier's Cubic Expression for £3 a share, giving him a controlling stake in the company. He then launched an offer through his investment vehicle 'Red Football' to all other shareholders to take over the company.

SU's attempts to unite fans and small shareholders spectacularly failed in a few short days, as Glazer passed the 75 per cent needed to prevent Glazer removing it from the Stock Market. Soon after, with well over 90 per cent of the shareholding, Malcolm Glazer made Manchester United his own private property and compulsorily purchased the remaining shares from fans.

It is important to recognize the difference that this made to chances for fan influence at the club. Despite severe criticism of the structure, the Plc at least offered a scrutiny of the club's accounts, regulations on what directors could do and a degree of influence for organizations such as SU and IMUSA. With Glazer in total control, none of that was now possible and SU and IMSUA were rapidly removed from the by now discredited Fans Forum. The possibility that fans could increase their stake sufficiently proved to be a distant one and graphically illustrated that under English law a share-owning democracy is a democracy of shares held, not of individual shareholders.

Manchester Un-tied: The Failure of Fan Opposition

During this final 18 months of Manchester United Plc, opposition to the takeover grew dramatically to such an extent that one survey found nearly 97 per cent of fans were opposed to the takeover.[30] The spectrum of opposition and actions in protest was indeed impressive, reflecting a unity of purpose in United's fan communities, but it also reflected the heterogeneity, and at times conflict, within modern football fandom and Manchester United in particular.

The Not For Sale coalition of SU, IMUSA and fanzines was a powerful vehicle which could claim to represent around 40,000 fans; and added to that were the increasingly radical activities of the MEC. Each element represented very different approaches, which at times worked in harmony, but also exposed divisions and tactical mistakes in the fan opposition.

Unlike 1999, it was SU and not IMSUA who appeared to have the highest public profile and certainly had the most members. This was partly because they pursued an aggressive media policy which at times caused significant hostility within the fan movement from other partners. It was also partly because the principal way in which the takeover could be stopped was by fans being able to build a shareholding sufficiently large to either block it outright (50 per cent + 1 share), or to prevent Glazer taking the club private (75 per cent + 1 share) or to stop him being able to compel fans to sell their stake (90 per cent + 1 share) – all way above anything SU managed to muster.

SU's target of building mass membership (including giving free memberships), rather than maximizing the numbers of shares they could count on, was fatally flawed. They would have required fans to invest £250 million merely in order to keep the club

on the Stock Market: in other words over £8,000 per SU member, something which was never realistic. This exposes a weakness in the supporter trust model, yet to be fully accepted by SU.[31]

There were only three ways SU could have blocked Glazer. One, if they had persuaded the existing 18 per cent of small shareholders to side with them (in fact they sold as soon as the Glazer offer was made). Two, if a deal had been struck with a bank to loan the organization the money to buy the stake (several offers of help from corporate investors were never acted upon in time). Three, if they had orchestrated a consortium of local businessmen to raise the finance and pledge to the fans' cause (again, never undertaken). Indeed, by prioritizing membership numbers – at one point in the vain and utterly hopeless notion that this might lead to a judicial review – SU hampered their own ability to act. By 2005 they not only had an enormous membership to service, taking vital energy and resources, but they also began to seek to protect this membership level which meant not making statements or taking positions which might alienate more moderate elements.

The other principal tactic which could have undermined the Glazer project was action to prevent the club earning revenue – a boycott of the club and its sponsors. Given Glazer's level of borrowing, this was a valid tactic and revolved around protests to the club's main sponsors, Vodafone and Nike; threats to boycott them if a takeover happened to force them to remove their sponsorship; and the ultimate threat of boycotting season and other ticket sales – that is, removing support for the club.

Prior to the takeover this seemed to be having an effect. Inspired by actions of avant garde internet artists and situationist tactics organized on the internet, fans 'flash-mobbed' Nike and Vodafone stores in Manchester city centre. This involved hundreds of fans entering the stores and preventing them doing any business, leading to the shops' closures. Promises that there would be 'no customers and no profit' if Glazer took over, however, failed to materialize as SU failed to commit to a full boycott of the club and talked of members making 'individual choices' in exercising 'market power'. SU's moderate stance was now underpinned by a desire not to alienate some sections of its extensive membership, which resulted in a lack of leadership and a tendency to rely on the lowest common denominator, and most moderate, position.

A number of public demonstrations were also held, organized by IMUSA, the most populous and vociferous occurring on 15 February, on the night of the club's Champions League clash with AC Milan. The other principal tactic, inspired by the MEC actions against Coolmore, was to make life unbearable for anyone who collaborated with the Glazers, such as Brunswick PR and Deutsche Bank. At the end of 2004 the former was inundated with unwanted pizza's, phone calls, black faxes and emails jamming their systems. A skip was delivered outside their offices in London and their chief representative was reported as having up to 200 hostile calls to his personal mobile in a day. Organized largely on chat rooms and internet sites, such actions demonstrated the resourcefulness and the extent of the United fan base, a potential which was curiously never exercised after the takeover. Even Glazer's business's Christmas party in North America was cancelled after threats of disruption.

The MEC undertook a number of covert ‘operations’ in an increasingly militaristic manner. On a quiet night in October 2004 in Altrincham, the MEC gathered in a pub near to that Manchester suburb’s football ground, where United’s reserves were playing a match televised live on the club’s MUTV channel. Wearing balaclavas and hoods, they invaded the pitch, attempted to burn an American flag and carried a banner reading ‘Not For Sale’. With police and stewards utterly outflanked, their message was beamed to the live audience, in an echo of previous uses of TV coverage for fan protest.[32] ‘Operation Havana’ warned that:

in the event of the wishes of Manchester United supporters being ignored in any takeover situation, we intend to initiate a civil war effectively setting the football club – the supporters – against the company. In such a situation it is our intention to render the club ungovernable.[33]

By April 2005, the MEC were preparing for what seemed like the inevitable takeover and promised further action against those involved:

It is our club and we will be ruthless in protecting it. Our previous symbolic actions have been disregarded. We have no choice now but to act with our full capabilities. Collaborators will be treated as such.[34]

However, there have been only two actions since the takeover which might be considered within this context: the first described at the start of this paper; and the second in disrupting a meeting of the UEFA executive committee at Manchester City’s stadium. The MEC never lived up to its brave words. As 2005 progressed, significant cracks began to appear in the coalition which highlighted the different approaches of the component organizations, and the different fan communities they served. Whilst partly a result of (at times bitter) personality clashes, the underlying causes were the broad differences between the more moderate, middle class, assimilationist shareholders’ organization and the ‘street’, direct action, campaigning Mancunian fan communities.

Realistically, the only way the takeover could have been undermined was by a boycott by fans, something which neither SU, nor IMUSA fully embraced at the crucial moment.

Corporate Destruction of Football Communities

Following the takeover, the Not For Sale coalition held a number of public meetings, but divisions in approach meant that there was no agreed, unified strategy of what to do and little leadership given. This was exacerbated by a number of factors.

The manager and players remained entirely silent, until Ferguson appeared in a cosy, staged TV appearance with the Glazer sons; followed in 2006 by statements which ran entirely contrary to both his socialist past and previous support for fan ownership. Gill had previously ‘considered donating money to fund supporters in their struggle’ and had told fans leaders ‘you know that if I wasn’t in the position I’m in now, I would be behind the barricades with you’.[35] Given that there were *real* barricades outside Old Trafford in June 2005, and that he subsequently was the key player in helping the Glazers, this was a level of hypocrisy rare even in English football. Gill actively

promoted division within fans by condemning protestors and then removed SU and IMUSA from the Fans Forum: ‘the Club fails to see how you could make a positive contribution to any discussion’.[36]

Further, the British government and football establishment soon closed ranks to protect the Glazer purchase. The Sports Minister, Richard Cabourn, the Premier League’s CEO Richard Scudamore and FA executives all met the Glazer brothers, declared that they were happy with their intentions and that ‘there is a great deal of common ground between us’.[37] This is despite the threat Glazer still posed to the Premier League’s collective TV contract.[38] The timing of the takeover was also significant, just a day before the final game of the 2004–05 season and after many fans had already paid for their 2005–06 season ticket. Although IMUSA called for fans to boycott Season Ticket sales, this was not supported by SU who ‘feared that [they] would lose half their membership’[39] with such a stance, resulting in further fan division.

On one side were those who argued that they could not bring themselves to stop attending matches (‘love the team’) and would ‘fight from within’ (‘hate the club’) – although this ‘fight’ has not happened to date. On the other were those for whom the takeover represented ‘a final straw’ in a long process of the erosion of their match day experience and fan culture by the corporate governance and ownership of football. For these, the contradictions inherent in King’s ‘compromise’ were too much and they have stopped going to Manchester United, unable to support the team when that team’s failure would have the desired effect of hurting the owners. For some this is a rationale of continued opposition: if enough fans stop going, Glazer’s business plan will fail, whilst for others it is a more personal choice.

However, it is clear that for both approaches, the Glazer takeover represents another significant step in the destruction of their fan culture and the corporate destruction of fan communities.

It’s much too simplistic to blame it all on Glazer. It was happening long before he came along. For years now, there has been an inexorable movement towards this summer, towards a situation which would eventually attract someone like Glazer. This summer has been one of the saddest times of my life. I feel I have witnessed the final nails in the coffin of ‘my’ Manchester United. I’m sure that the Club will continue, even if Glazer does his worst, but ‘my’ Manchester United is no more and can never return ... my heart isn’t in it.[40]

The division between those who carried on attending matches and those who left became particularly bitter as the 2005–06 season began, as this exchange shows, with issues of locality, and authenticity, still important.

– After over fifty years of TOTAL dedication I will be priced out next season and I will NOT be alone – yet people are doing f**k all to prevent that. It is an obscenity. The ‘day-trippers’, with their ‘I’m-alright’ and ‘I-only-come-twice-a-year-and-will-pay-£60-per-match’ mentality make me sick. Sick to my stomach. They are total and utter bastards.

– Well I don’t live in England and make it over about 3 times a season and to a Euro away too. Doesn’t take away the fact that I am a proper red (good times and bad) and

certainly not a 'bast*rd' as you put it. Your problem is with the Glazers and certainly not against fellow Reds you clown.[41]

Some dissenters went as far as to call others at Old Trafford 'Vichy Reds'.[42] In some ways this represents the limits and destruction of fan communities which had developed at Manchester United, in the face of the corporate commercialization of the club over the previous 15 years. The strains put on it by the takeover were simply too much to retain any sense of unity and, when the ability to celebrate or express that community is no longer possible at match day, it withers. This process of division was actively encouraged and supported in a concerted effort by the club to discredit the campaigners. Gill encouraged a public image of protestors as 'a small minority' and other Glazer apologists – such as former journalist David Meek who was employed by the club – have gone further, branding fans 'extremists' after the protests at the Glazer's first visit: 'I don't blame the police ... But they [the fans] have gone down this road of confrontation and when you get confrontation you get extremists and you get trouble.'[43]

Certainly, the victory of the Glazers appeared assured, although the question of how to repay the enormous debt remains to date. The dismay at this collapse of unity has left some fans bereft:

The absence of even one anti-Glazer (and his bastard spawn) chant has sickened me more than words could ever say. Perhaps it shows that we are less 'united' than I ever thought possible.[44]

FC United of Manchester: The Rebirth of Football Communities

In February 2005 *Red Issue* first raised the idea of forming a new, fan-owned football club, 'FC United', in the face of a Glazer takeover. The idea was inspired by the formation of AFC Wimbledon who entered non-league football when their former club (Wimbledon FC) moved from London to Milton Keynes as Milton Keynes Dons.

In the aftermath of Glazer's victory, and with many fans vowing not to attend matches at Old Trafford, the idea quickly grew in credibility and support. A Steering Committee, including many of those who had led the campaigns against Glazer, was formed in June 2005 and the process began of establishing an entirely new football club. There is not space to explore this process fully here, but by July 2005 the club had been admitted to the semi-professional North West Counties League Division Two, nine divisions and five leagues below the FAPL in the football 'pyramid', had a ground sharing agreement with League Division Two team Bury FC, a board, a team and a manager.

FC United of Manchester was established as an Industrial and Provident Society (a mutually owned, not for profit, cooperative structure) based on the following principles:

1. The Board will be democratically elected by its members.
2. Decisions taken by the membership will be decided on a one member, one vote basis.

3. The club will develop strong links with the local community and strive to be accessible to all, discriminating against none.
4. The club will endeavour to make admission prices as affordable as possible, to as wide a constituency as possible.
5. The club will encourage young, local participation – playing and supporting – whenever possible.
6. The Board will strive wherever possible to avoid outright commercialism.
7. The club will remain a non-profit organization.[45]

Organized initially primarily through the internet, the name FCUM,[46] its badge and its board members were voted on by members. Membership quickly rose to 3,500 and the club raised over £150,000 from individual donations through an appeal on the website. Despite being in a league where average match attendances are under 100, FCUM, with crowds averaging 3,500 in 2005/06 and a high of 6,023,[47] are in the ironic position of being the richest, most popular club at that level.

However, that is where similarities with ‘Big United’ (as it is has colloquially become known) end. FCUM’s agenda was multi faceted: to give fans who had given up Old Trafford ‘somewhere to go’; to ‘maintain or re-establish the community’ of fans which had left Manchester United; and to ‘be an example of how to bring football back to ordinary people’.[48] The club was also structured in such a way as to ensure that fans were integral to the club, with no separation between the two. Although it is probably too early to tell what the long term significance of FC United is, it already has vibrant fan communities, significantly influenced by previous Manchester United fan culture. There are numerous supporter branches, an independent fans’ website,[49] a host of new songs, and a fanzine, *Under The Boardwalk*, named after the famous soul song which, bizarrely, has become the fans’ anthem:

Under the boardwalk
Watching FC
There’s no knob heads in jester hats
Or Sky TV

Other songs decry the greed of modern footballers, this in light of Rio Ferdinand’s then ongoing contract negotiations at Old Trafford, and even one-time hero Ferguson who advised one dissenter to ‘go and watch Chelsea instead’:

We don’t care about Rio
He don’t care about me
All we care about
Is watching FC
And Fergie said
‘Go and watch Chelsea’
Are you having a laugh?
We’ll be watching FC

For many fans, it has been a welcome change from being in opposition to creating something new and has been a rebirth of a football ‘community’ that faced division and alienation from the game, and for some a new ‘normality’.

Well, I suppose the novelty has worn off, because following FCUM, home or away, seems like the most natural thing in the world. Before the start of the season, I was somewhat apprehensive of just how easy it would be to change the habits of a lifetime, but already I feel more a part of this club than I ever could have imagined. This is already something very special we have here, but with every game that passes, this club grows more and more.[50]

Within this process, fans' own notions authenticity of what the match experience should be which predates the all-seater, corporate era; nostalgia for an 'imagined' past which also influences fans too young to remember pre-1990; and the reformation of micro communities of family and friends around match day – such as gatherings in the pub, locations of groups within the stadium – are all at play.

As we have argued elsewhere,[51] it is important to recognize the role football clubs can play in helping 'to preserve a version of Tönnies' (1974) pre-modern *Gemeinschaft* emotional community bonds amongst people who otherwise only encountered modern *Gesellschaft* type connections'. However, it is also possible to regard these fan communities as examples of Anthony Cohen's (1985) conception of 'symbolic community' in which people enact rituals around or through symbols and thereby define their belonging to different community groups. In this case, although Cohen is right to argue that such communities are constantly being reinterpreted and re-negotiated, there was a remarkable degree of stability and unity in the first few months of the new club. This is partly because of the 'crisis' that particular communities of Manchester United fans found themselves in the summer of 2005, something which bound many people together and which has been carried over to FC United. As such this suggests that FC United is a *re-formation* of a football community rather than a 'new' one. Also in this case, the symbolism of FCUM for fans is not merely cultural or representative, but also 'political' in terms of the oppositional stance of the club and its fans to many aspects of modern football. One of the most popular FC United t-shirts combines this sense of togetherness and ownership with a fiercely independent stance: 'FC United: Our Club Our Rules'.[52]

It is important not to over-simplify notions of 'community', however. The takeover and fan responses at Manchester United divided supporter communities and it must be recognized that the FCUM fan communities remain contested, especially from those who have remained with Manchester United. As such the formation of FC United has not occurred without significant hostility and suspicion from some of those still going to Old Trafford.

However, even for some of those initially resistant to FC United, the attractions of a non-corporate experience in which players, fans and board are together, resonates with their own connotations of what a match day experience and what fan communities should be:

[We] headed off to the area behind the goal where my friend insisted we stood on the 'left side'. And along with us came the players who had been in the bar. They spent the game on the terracing, with the fans, singing and chanting along with the rest of us ... The buzz in the pub was excellent but then it went up several notches when all the players, the coaches, the kitman and the manager turned up! ... And the players don't just sing along with the fans – they lead the singing, they chant about each other, they request their own songs over and over again. And that goes a little way towards

describing a buzz which is still with me today. I made a hundred new mates yesterday and came home hoarse and exhausted but with the biggest smile on my face I've had for ages. And when I asked whether this was a special day, I was told no – it happens like this every week!! So where does this leave me now? Well it certainly leaves me wanting more! And it leaves me more positive about football than I have been for a long, long time. And it wasn't just the session in the pub, the whole experience was a refreshing change from the modern Premiership experience. The crowd was a wonderful mix of men, women and children of all ages, all getting behind the team. There was no aggro and no heavy policing or stewarding. There were lots of colours but no jester hats! ... And all this at 3pm on a Saturday, for the princely sum of £6! [53]

A debate which was very current in English football at the time of writing focused on whether a lack of competition in the Premier League and 'boring' tactics are responsible for a decline in attendances. [54] Elsewhere in this journal is a debate on the decline of attendances in Portugal. However, what this example seems to suggest is that it is not the excitement *on the pitch*, but that *off it*, which is attractive to supporters. Further, the close communion between fans, players and club officials which is evident at FCUM, is part and parcel of the match day experience, the culture of the club, and part of the 'entertainment'. The failure of both English football's governors and most commentators to understand this, reflects a lack of understanding of fan culture and experiences, which the Glazer takeover has emphasized.

We have said elsewhere [55] that it is important to note Victor Turner's (1969) work on *communitas* and liminality. Turner analysed 'those "between" moments such as carnivals, pilgrimages, rites of passage or rituals in which normality is suspended'. [56] Turner's work is important in understanding the role of these moments in producing 'communitas', or the symbolic renewal of collective identity for particular groups. Turner contended that it is a special 'out of time' and anti-structural type of bonding that temporarily obliterates differences between people around specific cultural practices or events – such as football matches. What has bound many FC United fans together is that they have found a space in which 'their' football matches can – once again and away from the sanitised, individualized Premier League – perform this function.

However, as we also suggest elsewhere '[Turner's] assertion that *communitas* bonding can only take place in opposition to everyday, real existence is not particularly helpful in explaining some of the types of supporter communities'. For many FC United fans – now in a position of joint ownership of their club, forming supporter branches, volunteering and taking positions of responsibility in the club – being a member of this club's supporter community is not *only* a liminal or marginal experience. For many of these, being an FC United supporter is a key part of their 'real' lives and a regular, *structuring* part of their existence. This enables them to reform a sense of belonging in the aftermath of a crisis in which their previous formations of *communitas* were becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

Conclusion

Malcolm Glazer has placed up to £500m debt on to Manchester United, making it easily the most debt ridden in England, possibly Europe. This has happened against the

clear wishes of the vast majority of supporters, and in doing so he alienated a significant minority to the extent that they have taken the ‘ultimate’ step of forming a new club, FC United. We will now turn briefly to consider what lessons can be learned from this experience.

Regulation

First, it suggests an absence of regulation about the ownership of English clubs. Long held rules to protect the game from the full effects of a free market were either sidelined or abolished. This has resulted in both a concentration of wealth, reducing competition in football, and a situation where the future of England’s top clubs is bound up in international corporate power struggles, something which contrasts with much of European football.[57]

In contrast to most European nations there are no regulations within English football’s governance or the law to which Manchester United supporters could turn to protect their club from Glazer’s ownership. This is also contrary to current UEFA policy which says it favours a ‘democratic’ model involving supporter ownership.[58] The failure of the British government to ensure effective regulation of English football comes despite repeated calls for reform and the creation of a completely ineffective Independent Football Commission.[59]

This stands in contrast to the relative success of government backing for supporter ownership through the Supporters Direct body. However, this model proved ineffective in the Glazer case as it would have required fans to raise an unrealistic level of shareholding – £250 million for a 25 per cent ‘blocking’ stake. This suggests that the government are reluctant to regulate effectively in the big business of English football. Both the government’s and English football’s governing bodies’ continued *laissez faire* approach to the issue of club ownership is responsible for the undemocratic developments and the destruction of fan communities of the Glazer takeover. Securing a majority stake in football clubs for fans through independent regulation or legislation must now be a priority.

Fans

The rejection of the Glazer regime has illustrated the limits of the ‘love the team, hate the club’ distinction or compromise for some fans, whilst also proving its durability for others. Likewise, the influence of a strong local fan culture on the pre-takeover fan groups and campaigns spurred some fans to form their own new locally-focused, anti-free market football club, FCUM. Others have cited a similar loyalty to their locality and their club as a reason to continue attending Old Trafford, suggesting much more contested and divided fan communities than that preceding Glazer’s takeover.

The experience further complicates previous assumptions about fan-club and fan-fan relations, particularly in relation to Giulianotti’s categorizations of the ‘hot/traditional’ supporter who is loyal, travelling, with a ‘long term personal investment in the

club', and those which King terms 'the Lads'.^[60] In fact, under the force of a takeover a 'traditional/hot' fan community became divided.

This suggests perhaps a need for a refinement of such categories, which take into account fan-fan identity relations as well as fan-club as well as different notions of fan communities (such as 'crisis' and 'virtual').^[61] Certainly the unity of many fans communities have been shaken, with long term outcomes unclear. At the very least it suggests that any attempts to define communities or groups of fans and explain their actions, must be based on an understanding of their relations with each other as well as their relationship with the club. It also signifies the end, for some fans, of the compromise many fans make, which King has identified. It was simply not tenable for some after the takeover, whether fuelled by a desire for a more liminal match going experience or more ideological beliefs about how football should be run.

Renewal of Community

The establishment of FC United of Manchester illustrates that within this fracturing of fan communities, renewed community formations emerge. This fluidity of community has been referred to elsewhere, yet the speed and extent of the renewal, its creativity and flair, has been commented on widely.^[62] The structure, culture and ideology of the club have contributed to rethinking definitions of fans or fan communities. Here fans are also owners of the club, as well as being players or board members, its season ticket holders and members, and part of the collective they themselves have come to produce and consume. The fans of FC United are, in the parlance of the modern corporate club, its 'customer base'; the producers of the match day spectacle, the football 'commodity'; and also its owners/shareholders. Yet such terms are inadequate to describe the burgeoning cultural democracy of FC United. This, enshrined in its constitution, seems to both protect the fledgling club from undue market influence and encourage these renewed fan communities.

Notes

- [1] Nash, 2001; Brown, 'United We Stand: Some problems with fan democracy'.
- [2] Quotes are from fans on the day.
- [3] Interview with United fan. She referred to her female friends as 'United's Boot Girls'.
- [4] King, *End of Terraces*, 148. 'Lads' is an informal term for a group of young men, in this case overtly displaying their distinction through fashion and an oppositional stance to the mainstream. Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flaneurs', 31; Giulianotti, 'Participant Observation and Research into Football Hooliganism'. The author has engaged with these events as a fan since the 1970s, as a researcher, a (now former) MUFC season ticket holder, fanzine writer, supporters' representative, and now an elected director of FCUM. As such he has had unparalleled and extremely privileged access to the main events and organizations discussed here. Research has been ongoing since the early 1990s (PhD research) and more recently through funded research: ESRC, *Sport, the City and Governance*; Brown, Crabbe and Mellor, 'English Professional Football and its Communities'.
- [5] Walvin, *The Peoples' Game*, 87; Giulianotti, *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game*, 5.
- [6] Brown and Walsh, *Not For Sale*.

- [7] See Conn, *The Football Business*.
- [8] Mellor, 'The Genesis of Manchester United'; Mellor, 'We Hate the Manchester Club like Poison'; Green, *There's Only One United: The Official Centenary History of Manchester United*; Crick and Smith, *Manchester United: The Betrayal of a Legend*. Manchester United's team, known as the 'Busby Babes', were decimated in an air crash whilst returning from a European Cup tie against Red Star Belgrade. Eight players died.
- [9] Crick and Smith, *Betrayal of a Legend*. His background and interest in rugby, regarded as a middle-class sport, contrasted with many fans' notion of what makes an 'authentic' fan which, however problematic (Crabbe and Brown, 'You're not Welcome Anymore: The Football Crowd, Class and Social Exclusion'), is important in understanding fans' hostility.
- [10] Redhead, 'Sing When You're Winning'; Haynes, *The Football Imagination*; Brown 'United We Stand'; Nash, 'English Football fan Groups in the 1990s'.
- [11] Taylor, 'English Football in the 1990s', 14–15.
- [12] Conn, *The Football Business*, 127–48; Lee, 'Grey Shirts to Grey Suits'; Hamil *et al.* *A Game of Two Halves*; Football Task Force, *Final Report*, 19. For issues around this, see www.safestanding.com.
- [13] Brown, 'United We Stand'; IMUSA, *Redprint For Change*.
- [14] Hamil *et al.*, *The Changing Face of Football*.
- [15] Brown, "'Manchester Is Red?'" , 60–1.
- [16] Crabbe and Brown, 'You're not Welcome Anymore', 43.
- [17] Brown and Walsh, *Not for Sale*; Bose, *Manchester Unlimited*; Monopoly and Mergers Commission (MMC), *Report into the Merger Between British Sky Broadcasting Plc and Manchester United Plc*.
- [18] IMUSA, *Submission to the Monopoly and Mergers Commission*; Shareholders United Against Murdoch, *Submission to the Monopoly and Mergers Commission*; Brown and Walsh, *Not For Sale*.
- [19] Originally called Shareholders United Against Murdoch (SUAM); now Manchester Untied Supporters Trust (MUST)
- [20] Interview with author, 2001.
- [21] Interview with author, 2001.
- [22] Brown, 'Towards a Common Goal'.
- [23] For a fuller discussion of this, see Brown, "'Manchester Is Red?'" , 175–89.
- [24] Peter Kenyon, interview with author, 2001.
- [25] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.
- [26] 'Glazer Spokesman Accuses Fans', *Guardian*, 10 December 2004, http://football.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/0,,1370822,00.html
- [27] Collins *et al.*, *Research Report*.
- [28] Manchester United, *Annual Report 2004*.
- [29] *United Shareholder 2005*.
- [30] *Ibid.*, 3.
- [31] A membership renewal email in September 2005 said they hoped to achieve 60,000 members.
- [32] Brown, 'United We Stand', 56.
- [33] MEC statement, October 2004.
- [34] MEC statement, 9 February 2005.
- [35] 'Gill in Offer to Aid Glazer Protests', *Guardian*, 3 August 2005, http://football.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/0,,1541494,00.html
- [36] Email to Nick Towle, Chair SU, 4 August 2005.
- [37] Fox News, 29 June 2005.
- [38] It is widely thought that the only way Glazer can pay back the loans is by MUFC doing their own TV deals.
- [39] SU representative, conversation with author, May 2005.
- [40] 'Salford lass' (2005), Red11, <http://www.red11.org/mufc/devilsadvocate/articles/FCUnited.htm>.

- [41] Email exchange, IMUSA Email Digest 1379, 24 September 2005.
- [42] 'Vichy' refers to the collaborationist regime in France during the Second World War. IMUSA Email Digest, 18 May 2005.
- [43] David Meek, BBC Radio 5 Live, 30 June 2005.
- [44] PH, fan, private email to author, 23 September 2005.
- [45] *FC United of Manchester Manifesto*, July 2005, www.fc-utd.co.uk/manifesto.
- [46] This acronym is not a coincidence: when pronounced quickly it sounds like 'fuck 'em'. See www.fc-utd.co.uk for further information on FCUM.
- [47] FCUM were the 86th best supported team in England in 2005–06, <http://www.tonykempster.btinternet.co.uk/attcomp.htm>.
- [48] All quotes are from other Steering Group members.
- [49] www.fcunitedofmanchester.co.uk.
- [50] Email on www.fcunitedofmanchester.co.uk, 24 September 2005.
- [51] Brown, Crabbe and Mellor, 'English Professional Football and its Communities'.
- [52] www.t-shirtsunited.co.uk
- [53] 'Left side' is a reference to a playful rivalry which existed on Manchester United's still terraced Stretford End in the 1980s. 'Salford lass' (2005) Red11, <http://www.red11.org/mufc/devilsadvocate/articles/FCUnited.htm>
- [54] <http://football.guardian.co.uk/news/thewayyouseeit/0,9206,1555466,00.html>.
- [55] Brown, Crabbe and Mellor, 'English Professional Football and its Communities'.
- [56] Delanty, *Community*, quoted in Brown, Crabbe and Mellor, *ibid*, 170.
- [57] Bruce Buck, Roman Abramovich's lawyer and Chelsea's chairman, said English football will see more foreign investors. "It's difficult to buy European clubs as lots are community-owned", he said ... Meaning: ours are not mutual or membership clubs but limited companies and plcs'. David Conn, 'The problem at Hearts is the trouble with British football', *Guardian*, 9 November 2005, http://football.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/0,1563,1637263,00.html.
- [58] Alex Phillips, UEFA, Supporters Direct Conference, London. 30 September 2005.
- [59] FTF Final Report; Lord Burns, *FA Structural Review*, www.thefa.com/TheFA/StructuralReview/; www.ifc.org.uk.
- [60] Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flaneurs'.
- [61] Brown, Crabbe and Mellor, 'Football and its Communities'.
- [62] 'Is There Only One United?', *Independent*, 20 August 2005, <http://sport.independent.co.uk/football/news/article307191.ece>.

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