

**Towards an ‘everyday’ cultural political economy of English football:
conceptualising the futures of Wembley Stadium and the grassroots
game**

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Towards an ‘everyday’ cultural political economy of English football: conceptualising the futures of Wembley Stadium and the grassroots game

The proposed sale of Wembley Stadium in 2018 raised the possibility of a windfall that could be reinvested into the grassroots tier of English football. This bid was ultimately withdrawn but, as this article demonstrates, the episode highlighted the co-constitutive relationship between the everyday cultural base of English football, and those political and economic discourses, strategies, and trajectories that have been pursued within the sport and wider society. Developing a theoretical approach conceptualised here as ‘everyday’ cultural political economy, this article considers the cultural histories, objects, spaces and practices whose futures were both at stake in this transaction – namely, Wembley and the grassroots game – and the material effects that austerity and a skewed distribution of wealth have had upon the everyday cultural production of English football. The proposed sale of Wembley, it is argued here, failed to sufficiently account for and mitigate the impact that these political and economic effects have had upon the ‘everyday culture’ of grassroots football. The concluding remarks of this article call for a strategy that foregrounds the cultural base of English football and those quotidian practices that have come to be recast by the unequal power relations extant to the contemporary game.

Keywords: everyday cultural political economy; the Football Association; Wembley Stadium; grassroots football; austerity; inequality

In the spring of 2018, Shahid Khan, the billionaire sports magnate, tabled a bid believed to be worth at least £600m to acquire Wembley Stadium, the ‘stately home of English football’, from its current owners, the ruling body of the English game, the Football Association (hereafter, the FA). While controversial, the most appealing aspect of Khan’s bid was the possibility it raised for the FA to invest the proceeds of the sale of into grassroots football. Years of under-spending had left the community game the poor relation of an otherwise prosperous sport, and the then chair of the FA, Martin Glenn, argued strongly that this ‘once-in-a-lifetime-investment’ could provide the shot-in-the-arm that grassroots football so desperately needed. Yet while Glenn’s argument appeared enough to convince his fellow board members to agree to the sale the following September, within a month, the deal was dead in the water. When it became clear to Khan that his bid would not be met with the unanimous support of the all-powerful FA Council, he withdrew his offer. For the time being at least then, the FA still held the keys to the famous ground, and England’s national sides still had a permanent home underneath the Wembley Arch.

This article seeks to offer not simply a commentary of this particular episode but rather demonstrate the significance of the ‘everyday culture’ that is frequently overlooked in the political economy of such strategies. Locating my analysis within the limited literature concerning the political economy of football (Lee 1998, Milanovic 2005, Grant 2007, Kennedy and Kennedy 2010, 2017, Webber 2017, 2018), this article takes as its theoretical departure, the ‘critical’ and cultural accounts of political economy (or CPE). Rather than privileging or reifying the political and the economic dimensions of social life, CPE seeks to ‘rediscover the cultural component of political economy’ (Best and Paterson 2010, p. 3). In doing so, I seek to combine critical insights from the work of scholars such as Best and Paterson, but also Jessop, Sum and others in treating those

objects, practices and processes, typically understood to be ‘political’ and ‘economic’ in character to be socially constructed, historically specific, and embedded in much wider social networks and institutional ensembles (Jessop 2004, Jessop and Sum 2010, Sum and Jessop 2013). This variant of CPE – located here in ‘the everyday’ – I argue, opens up the possibility to offer a richer account of the complex, contingent and constitutive political economy of English football. For all the economic wealth that exists at the elite level of the English game and its various power relations, it is its historic, institutionalised and multi-scalar social and semiotic production which continues to embed the sport in everyday life, affording it a pre-eminence as a cultural form. Given this cultural significance, I argue that it is inadequate to frame policy decisions and strategies (such as, in this instance, the sale of Wembley and concomitant redistribution of funds to the grassroots game) along political and economic lines alone. By foregrounding and taking seriously this ‘everyday culture’, this approach to CPE provides useful theoretical leverage to examine the co-constitutive place and significance of cultural objects, artefacts, rituals and practices, which are frequently overlooked but nevertheless integral to the political and economic strategies such as those discussed here.

Locating my analysis within the theoretical approaches of ‘everyday’ and ‘cultural’ forms of political economy, this article proceeds by exploring the global political economy of the Premier League, and its own significance as a cultural form; one performed in very ordinary ways on a daily basis. With this everyday culture in mind, the section that follows seeks to apply this framework of ‘everyday CPE’ specifically to the proposed sale of Wembley Stadium in the summer of 2018. My analysis here is formed of three parts. The first of these concerns Wembley itself, and the repertoire of cultural histories that have granted the stadium its central place in the English football nation. The second addresses one of the everyday cultural forms that Wembley requires in order to

reproduce its privileged place and intersubjective meanings; namely, the grassroots game. Here, this everyday culture is clearly significant. Given that the proposed sale of Wembley would have seen tens of thousands of amateur players, coaches, referees and administrators benefit from a much-needed financial windfall in order to address its current crisis, there is a clear symbiosis between these two sites of the English game.

Yet, as the third and final part of my analysis demonstrates, Khan's bid to buy the stadium revealed a number of political and economic fault-lines that have had very material outcomes in terms of the everyday cultural practice of English football. Here, the extraordinary wealth that exists at the elite level contrasts sharply with the crisis faced by the grassroots game. Revealing the mutually constitutive relationship between these political, economic and cultural spaces, my analysis here reveals the limits of selling Wembley, and calls instead for a more culturally embedded strategy. This, I suggest, would safeguard the cultural value of both Wembley Stadium *and* community football as an everyday practice whilst, at the same time, addressing the highly skewed distribution of elite wealth and power that currently prevails in the English game.

Locating Culture in the Everyday

The focus of this study upon 'the everyday', and 'the cultural' leads me to examine some of the ways in which the English game in particular is constituted and bound up by a variegation of daily practices enacted on an increasingly global scale. In this respect, this article follows a number of scholars including Lefebvre (2004 [1992], 2014 [1958, 1961, 1981]), de Certeau (2011 [1984]), Davies and Niemann (2002), Davies (2006, 2016), Hobson and Seabrooke (2007), Langley (2008), Le Baron (2010), Enloe (2011), and Guillaume and Huysmans (2019), all of whom have, in their own respective work, critically explored the significance what Davies (2016, p. 24) describes as 'the givenness

and taken-for-grantedness of everyday life'. Although diverse in their empirical focus, this body of literature holds in common a broad theoretical commitment to make visible those sites where otherwise abstracted global-scale processes, understood usually to be managed by elites, are enacted instead at the micro level in the daily lives of ordinary, or 'common people' (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019).

The basis of this 'everyday' literature is, I argue, entirely coterminous with the approach designated more broadly as cultural political economy (Sayer 2001, Jessop 2004, Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008, Konings 2009, Best and Paterson 2010, Jessop and Sum 2010, van Heur 2010, Sum and Jessop 2013, Su *et al.* 2018). Combining an analysis of sense- and meaning-making within the social embedding of instituted economic and political relations, CPE seeks to address the inadequacies of more orthodox accounts of political economy, which tend to overlook the socially constructed character of their theoretical objects. CPE instead argues that the cognition, production, enactment and consumption of cultural and semiotic practices, symbols, relations and meanings all play an important part in constituting and defining those material objects, subjects, practices and institutions which are themselves often imagined as being wholly 'political' and/or 'economic'. Yet, rather than subsuming these political and economic categories under a broader cultural analysis, a 'critical CPE' (Sayer 2001, Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008, Sum and Jessop 2013) treats culture itself as being distinctly and directly *constitutive* of political economy (Best and Paterson 2010).

The combination of insights drawn from these two approaches clears the ground to explore the wider and interconnected conditions of cultural, political and economic life in the everyday. In doing so, it enriches our understanding of power structures, institutions, markets and societies by revealing those ways in which individuals and their quotidian practices are shaped by different modes and regimes of economic and political

power. Culture is not simply ‘out there’ or separate from the everyday practices of the individual but, rather, a continual and repetitive theme of daily life itself (Lefebvre 2004 [1992]). By foregrounding the cultural constitution of these everyday forms of political economy, it becomes clear that neither the ‘system’ or ‘lifeworld’ (Sayer 2001) which English football consists of and inhabits – that is, its regimes of power or social frameworks – can be fully understood in ‘political’ or ‘economic’ terms alone.

Insofar as my analysis here is concerned, although the sale of Wembley did not materialise, it remains useful as a case study for it captures well the cultural embeddedness of those political and economic transactions enacted in English football. Indeed, the approach of everyday CPE deployed here enables me to explore the culturally “‘embedded” nature of economic activities’ identified by Sayer (2001, p. 697). Here, the material and institutional significance of Wembley itself, the grassroots game, and English football as a whole – all of which, of course, the FA regulates and *is* politically and economically responsible for – rests solely upon the highly networked, social production of football, and the profound cultural importance afforded to it by millions of individuals, communities and the nation at large on a daily basis. Although frequently taken for granted, it is nevertheless the presence of this everyday culture that mediates the power relations between English football’s ensemble of different actors and institutions.

In order to begin to map out more broadly the significance of this specific set of cultural practices and social relations, I now turn to the ‘ordinary’, everyday culture of English football, and specifically the Premier League. Since its creation in the early 1990s, the League has transformed the performance and practice of this culture, with clear consequences for the wider social fabric of the English game.

‘Ordinary’ Everyday Culture and the Global Political Economy of the English Premier League

If, according to Raymond Williams (1958) – someone for whom cultural political economy was, according to Kenny and Stevenson (1998, p. 250), implicit in his thinking – culture is ‘ordinary’, then football and its popularity reproduced on a daily, if not hourly basis, represents undoubtedly one of the clearest forms of this ‘ordinary culture’. English football’s own culture is richly variegated and multi-scalar; a visceral assemblage of emotions, passion, meanings and identities reproduced by millions of followers across the globe. Yet in order to understand the cultural significance of football to its fans across these multiple and highly differentiated contexts, the point made by Sum and Jessop (2013, pp. 5–6) is crucial. Culture must be situated within its own specific *historical* place. If therefore, history matters in shaping the material formation of culture (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008, p. 1156), any account of English football’s rich and storied culture must first take into account its own historical production.

Over the course of its long century, from the late 1800s right up to the present day, football has left little of the English nation untouched (Russell 1997, Taylor 2013, Goldblatt 2014). From the banks of the River Mersey, along the Pennines and winding its way up to the North East; across the Midlands’ post-industrial conurbations; throughout London’s inner-city communities; and in the former shipbuilding and port cities dotted along England’s south coast, football remains a form of ‘deep play’ (Geertz 1973). For its millions of followers and participants, football forms the basis of the stories that people ‘tell about themselves’. Throughout these urban and suburban lifeworlds, the game is imagined, experienced and reproduced in ‘the everyday’ through the celebration of century-old institutions and regular performance of still highly masculinised social rituals, cultural ties and practices (Stone 2007). While the rich pageantry of historically

fixed colours, badges, flags, banners and scarfs provide the most visible of these performative elements, each one defining and differentiating one club from the other, collectively they come together to ritualise a highly specific cultural (re)enactment distinct to English football at all levels of the game.

In recent years, such cultural performances at the top level of English football, have become more global in their reach (Cleland 2017, Goldblatt 2019, Ludvigsen 2019, Penn and Penn 2020). Central to this has been the transformation from a largely provincial and crisis-ridden sport in the late twentieth century to the global, billion-pound industry it is today (King 2002, Millward 2011, Webber 2017, Turner 2020). During this post-industrial, multinational period of capital (Mandel 1972, Jameson 1991), leading clubs from the English Premier League (hereafter, EPL) have redoubled their pursuit of growth and material self-enhancement. This market mentality has been underpinned not simply by a rise in matchday revenue and an increasingly global suite of commercial partners but, crucially, a series of highly lucrative television deals struck with both British and overseas-based broadcasters. If the initial £305m, five-year arrangement with BSkyB promised to deliver ‘a whole new ball game’ for English football (Millward 2017), the ensuing thirty years must have surely eclipsed even the League’s wildest expectations. Carved up between Sky, BT, and newcomers Amazon, the 2019-22 deal was sold for a little under £5bn. Yet if the EPL is a national success story, the biggest game-changer has undoubtedly been its globalisation. Today, seventy different broadcasters in more than a hundred countries around the world have television deals in place with the EPL worth a combined £4.35bn. For the most successful of England’s clubs, the rewards are greater still with a top-four domestic finish assuring entry into the lucrative UEFA Champions League the following season, and a significant share of an increasing pot of money for contesting the biggest prize in club football.

Endowed with this wealth, England's leading clubs have themselves become distinctly global 'brands' in their own right, overwhelming the priorities of the national game. The EPL has become hegemonic in the Gramscian sense that its biggest clubs now, in effect, control the commercial interests of English football by maintaining its status of 'the most watched' and therefore, by general consent, 'the best league in the world'. This untrammelled global expansion has had consequences for the everyday cultural constitution of English football. Reflecting the post-Keynesian competition state in which it sits (Jessop 2002, Brenner 2004), the EPL has similarly prioritised the goals of economic growth and territorial competition over redistribution and territorial cohesion (Dannestam 2008, p. 360). Indeed, for all the wealth at the top of the English game, there has been no 'trickle-down' effect. This cash has instead been spent principally on maintaining the pre-eminent place of the EPL. The League's extensive distribution network of overseas broadcasting rights, combined with the proliferation of satellite television, online technologies and social media, has both sustained this spatio-temporal fix (Harvey 2003) and enabled the EPL to 'colonise' everyday life (Lefebvre 2014) in England and across the globe.

The rapid evolution of mobile technology since the early 2000s and contemporary processes of deterritorialization and digitisation has accelerated the speed and spread of English football culture (Redhead 2015). Taking English football beyond its traditional provincial boundaries, its culture has been reproduced and redrawn across various media channels, online interactions, personal conversations, and digitised patterns of consumption (Gibbons and Dixon 2010, David and Millward 2012, Lawrence and Crawford 2019). This mobile technology, and the 'social-mediafication' of fan culture have been accompanied by an unprecedented expansion of online gambling markets. Of course, football's relationship with gambling is nothing new (Sharpe 1997, Huggins

2017) but despite concerns over addiction and the risks to public health (McGee 2020, Sharman 2020), there has been a clear shift in this association. From shirt and league sponsorships to a proliferation of ‘spot’ advertisements before and during televised matches, gambling is now a key node of consumption in the modern game (Djohari, et al. 2019, Jones, et al. 2019) and a highly visible element of English football’s everyday culture. For the clubs themselves, the centrality of gambling in everyday life in Asia (McMillen 2006, p. 4) provides a useful entry point to penetrate lucrative overseas markets, and another way in which a transnational EPL can be ‘lived out’ and performed by billions of followers across the world.

If the global transformation of this everyday culture has served to modernise English football, it also presents a paradox in terms of its historic culture, and the extensive efforts that have been made to distance the game from its unruly and crisis-ridden past. For all the financial wealth accumulated by the EPL, most of its clubs remain embedded in self-same and predominately low-income neighbourhoods that historically sustained them. Rather than de-coupling the modern, heavily marketized game from this cultural base, however, these clubs, their commercial partners, and broadcasters have consolidated football’s dominant place in English working-class culture and everyday life by fundamentally reconstituting the *content* of this working-class culture. Just as Su *et al.* (2018, p. 34) note that ‘legacy tourism’ has valorised historic culture for its *exchange* rather than use value, so too, under the conditions of its own highly specific form of global capitalism, have the cultural icons, stadiums, stories, institutions, rivalries, and traditions historically associated with English football become integral to the global ‘economic’ object of the EPL (Kennedy and Kennedy 2017).

These objects, with their aesthetic and semiotic qualities, have been strategically and selectively mined before being ‘fictitiously’ commodified by the new elites of

English football (see Polanyi 2001 [1944]). Inscribing these objects with authenticity, broadcasters, sponsors and clubs themselves integrated this culture into the accumulation strategies designed to appeal to new and more lucrative audiences across the globe. Yet, as Polanyi reminds us, these artefacts were never originally produced 'for sale'. Rather, these fictitious commodities remain embedded in those social relations constructed and reproduced amongst fans to provide their own meaning, identity and collective purpose. In this respect then, 'the cultural turn' clearly matters. For while it may well appear that the chrematistic logics of revenue maximisation and profitability have triumphed in the EPL era, in reality, English football's new market economy is not, and never can be, culture-free (Best and Paterson 2010, p. 3). Instead, the appeal of the EPL remains contingent upon the reproduction of its own 'ordinary' everyday culture. For the League to continue to thrive financially and maintain its increasingly transnational set of fans and investors, it has been necessary to continually repair, re-embed and authenticate the modern game within its own extant cultural base.

It is upon this self-same cultural base that Wembley Stadium itself is situated. Although distinct from the everyday performances of the EPL, Wembley nevertheless occupies an elevated place in the wider cultural imagination of English football and nation as a whole. Its rich history too has been fictitiously commodified by its owners, the FA. Wembley's social and cultural meaning, its iconic place in the game, and indeed the sporting and cultural life of the nation were never designed to be produced for sale on the market. Yet that is precisely what the custodians of the stadium, through this sale, sought to do. The co-constitutive cultural, political and economic interpellation of the EPL, Wembley and the grassroots game is therefore significant. Having discussed in broad terms the 'everyday' cultural political economy of an increasingly global EPL, my

attention now turns to Wembley and the unique place that the stadium inhabits in the English football nation.

True Faith: Locating Wembley in the Sporting and Cultural Imagination of the English Football Nation

As one of the largest and most architecturally striking arenas in the world, it is not difficult to see why the billionaire sports magnate, Shahid Khan, was interested in acquiring Wembley Stadium. Yet beyond its 90,000-seated capacity and sleek, modern design, the ‘home of English football’ continues to possess for fans and players alike, a sacred, almost ethereal quality. Indeed, as Bale (1993) suggests, Wembley has never been *just* a football ground. Both the ‘old’ Wembley, designed by Sir John Simpson and Maxwell Ayrton, and which stood, replete with its iconic twin towers, between 1923 and 2000, and the ‘new’, post-2007 stadium envisioned by Sir Norman Foster, crowned by its famous 440ft/133m arch, maintain a sense of what Tuan (1974) and Bale (1993) describe as ‘topophilia’, or love for a particular place. Standing today as an example of the ‘postmodern’ stadium (Paramio, Buraimo and Campos 2008), Wembley’s affective bond continues to embed both the ‘old’ and ‘new’ stadiums in the cultural imagination of the English football nation (Hill and Varrasi 1997). Indeed, so powerful is this topophilia that Wembley is frequently narrated along spiritual lines. If, in this secular age, football has replaced religion as what Marx (1976 [1844]) famously referred to as ‘the opiate of the people’, then Wembley represents the material site at which the collective soul of English football rests.

Many of football’s own folk-heroes have themselves acknowledged the quasi-religious status of Wembley. More an apostle than mere disciple of the people’s game, the Brazilian striker, Pelé, once christened it the ‘cathedral of football’. England’s own

World Cup-winning captain, Bobby Moore, meanwhile, described it as the ‘Mecca of stadiums’, and the ultimate goal (Inglis 1984). If England’s club grounds represent local places of worship to which devotees of the game flock to and congregate on a weekly basis, Wembley embodies a hallowed footballing paradise. Sustained by this faith, ‘Wem-ber-lee’ itself has become central to the everyday language and practice of fans. From playground games of ‘Wembley doubles’ to terrace chants, the stadium is central to the invented traditions of English football.

Yet, as Best and Paterson (2010, p. 9) remind us, culture is not purely about meaning or language. It is also sedimented in routines and rituals and embodied in living practices. The scene of glory and despair, Wembley witnessed Scotland’s thrashing of the ‘Auld Enemy’ in 1928 and England’s chastening defeat at the hands of Hungary’s ‘Magic Magyars’ twenty-five years later. Of course, however, the stadium also staged English football’s greatest moment to date: Geoff Hurst’s famous hat-trick and the nation’s first, and so far, only World Cup victory; a 4-2 win over West Germany in 1966 (Hughson 2016). Thirty years later, Wembley was again central to England’s ‘glorious failure’ at Euro ’96 to all but seal the game’s cultural renaissance. As well as being the home for the England’s national teams, Wembley has staged the final of the European Cup and Champions League on seven separate occasions – more than any other stadium – and witnessed England’s two most decorated sides, Liverpool and Manchester United, lift the most prestigious prize in European club football.

Each year, the stadium is the final destination for clubs competing in a number of domestic cup competitions and divisional play-offs across English football.¹ Despite losing some of its traditional allure in recent years, the most famous of these domestic cup competitions remains the FA Cup. Notwithstanding a six-year sojourn in the early 2000s at Cardiff’s Millennium Stadium while Wembley was being rebuilt, the stadium

has been home to and synonymous with what is simply referred to as ‘the cup final’ for almost a century. From the first FA Cup final in 1923 – the ‘White Horse final’ between Bolton Wanderers and West Ham United (Hill 2004) – to the ‘Stanley Matthews final’ some thirty years later (Johnes and Mellor 2006); Wembley has provided the backdrop for a litany of iconic images, invoked as the ‘magic of the cup’, and now woven into the fabric of the world’s oldest football tournament.

Wembley also features prominently in the recent growth of women’s football in England. Historically, the Women’s FA Cup final had previously been played at provincial grounds in front of crowds of no more than 25,000. The decision, however, to host all finals from 2015 at Wembley, however, signalled a sea-change in both ambition and attitudes. Four years later, a record-breaking 77,768 spectators watched England’s national woman’s team, the Lionesses, host their German counterparts underneath the Arch. These watershed moments represented the opening up of a cultural site traditionally occupied only by men. Although the men’s game remains the dominant form, and gendered inequalities persist in terms of coverage, finance and infrastructure, the use of Wembley as the designated ‘home’ of the Lionesses, as well as the venue for its most prestigious domestic cup competition, have come to symbolise the growing stature of women’s football. It also serves as a reminder of the powerful hold that Wembley itself retains over the English football nation as a whole, and how playing at the stadium remains *the* defining moment in any player’s career.

As well as continuing to lay considerable claim as the stately or spiritual ‘home of football’, Wembley has, however, also hosted a number of other sporting and non-sporting events. Indeed, when the stadium was opened in 1923 as the Empire Stadium, its chief purpose was to host an eighteen-month festival intended to celebrate Britain’s colonial power (Geppert 2010, Jackson 2013). In 1948, the stadium became the

centrepiece of the first summer Olympic Games to take place following the Second World War (Jefferys 2012, Penrose 2012), and although a new stadium was built in East London for the 2012 Games, Wembley still hosted several matches, including the final for both the men's and women's football tournaments. Both the 'old' and 'new' stadiums have hosted sports ranging from American football (Maguire 1990) to boxing, speedway to greyhound racing (Inglis 1984, Cronin 2002), as well as both codes of rugby (Collins 2005).

Alongside these sporting events, a number of other landmark cultural events have also taken place at Wembley. Arguably the most famous of these was Live Aid in July 1985, when a transatlantic concert took place beneath the twin towers to raise money for the famine relief effort underway in Ethiopia (Hillmore 1985). As with football, the stadium has assumed an almost mythological place in popular music culture since the late 1960s, signifying *the* pinnacle moment of stardom for the headlining act. Alongside these concerts, and in keeping with the religious imagery that Wembley itself has invoked amongst football fans, the stadium has also staged vast Christian events. During the 1950s and 1960s, the missions undertaken by the late American evangelist, Billy Graham drew hundreds of thousands of people to the stadium, while in 1982, Pope John Paul II celebrated mass with 80,000 worshippers.

Wembley, therefore, continues to occupy a unique and widely celebrated place in the sporting, cultural, and spiritual life of the nation. In retaining this elevated place, however, it also requires other, more 'everyday' sites of culture to embed and continually reproduce its traditions and web of meanings. Such sites include England's football grounds, the turnstiles of which hundreds of thousands of fans file through on a weekly basis. Even more common than these, however, are the countless pitches dotted around every town and city across the country upon which thousands of amateur footballers turn

out, either for a kickabout with friends or as part of a team competing in a particular league. The proposed sale of Wembley would, it was argued, enable this everyday culture to flourish. It is to the grassroots game that I now turn my attention, and its place in the daily enactment of English football.

For the Love of the Game: The Everyday Cultural Political Economy of Grassroots

Football

The important point about all this football, varying so much in quality and effort, is simply that it is being played. Among these little clubs there can be found the devotion to football, and that abiding ambition in it, which I have said before is central to British industrial life.

(Hopcraft 2013 [1968], pp. 203–4)

Some fifty years after Arthur Hopcraft's observation of the ordinary place in everyday life afforded to football in post-war Britain, the FA published its own assessment of the grassroots game, and its importance to the nation's economy and wellbeing. The regular playing of football by adults was found to be worth nearly £11bn each year, with a direct economic value of just over £2bn, and a social value of around £9bn (*The FA* 2019, p. 18). Moreover, whilst earning the Treasury £410m each year, the grassroots game produces annual cost savings to the NHS worth £43.5 million (*ibid.*, p. 15). It is not, however, simply in terms of their physical health that grassroots players benefit. Many participants, particularly women and those from low-income groups, also reported significantly higher levels of physical and mental wellbeing compared with those who play either other sports or no sport at all (*ibid.*, pp. 14, 43).

Beyond the transnational spaces inhabited by the EPL and other professionalised forms of the game, simply *playing* football is an act of clear social and cultural importance

(Kennedy and Kennedy 2015, Tucker 2019), bringing with it a number of benefits across society. While the elite level of the English game has undergone a period of profound transformation, the football played in its communities is one area of everyday life that remains more or less the same, embedded as it is in the daily lives of individuals of all ages and abilities (Walvin 2000). Undergirding familial bonds, childhoods and social kinships, the simple practice of kicking a tattered ball around an invented pitch with a group of friends, a game of five-a-side after work, or a formal league or cup match on a Sunday morning, the grassroots game continues to provide the basis of an identity-shaping series of rituals, social exchanges, and life stories (Reckwitz 2002). Today, non-elite and non-professional football includes schools and youth football, women's football, five-a-side, futsal, disability football, football for veterans, and walking football (O'Gorman *et al.* 2018).

Yet despite its clear significance to the 'everyday' reproduction of football culture, as well as the social and health benefits that it affords participants, the grassroots game in England faces an increasingly complex set of political and economic challenges. The soaring popularity of the professional men's game, and in particular the EPL, continues to mask perennial issues surrounding the participation of women and girls in football in particular (Clark and Paechter 2007, Jeanes 2011), and high drop-out levels amongst young people more broadly (Temple and Crane 2016). The creation of the Women's Super League in 2010 (Dunn and Welford 2014), the continued success of the Lionesses at international tournaments (Bowes 2017, Dunn 2019), as well as the showcasing of women's football at Wembley itself discussed earlier, has all helped address the former, but turning spectators into players remains an intractable issue amongst the wider population.

Efforts to boost participation have undoubtedly been stymied by the economic state of the grassroots game (O’Gorman *et al.* 2018, Parnell *et al.* 2019) and, specifically, the austerity first enacted by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010 (King 2014, Widdop *et al.* 2018). The attempts made by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, to ‘balance the books’ of the nation through a series of swingeing cuts and welfare reforms have forced local government authorities to shuffle their spending priorities (Streeck and Mertens 2013, Donald *et al.* 2014, Hastings *et al.* 2017). With less cash available from the Treasury, councils have hollowed out more discretionary forms of spending – typically, collective public amenities such as libraries, leisure facilities and parks – in order to protect and maintain the provision of other locally delivered services such as education, health and social care (Gray and Barford 2018). With the social and physical infrastructure of a local community the most common targets of these cuts, the council-owned football pitches essential to the grassroots game have seen an exponential rise in the cost of their maintenance and hire but concomitant decline in their overall quality (Parnell *et al.* 2019).

Yet while these spending cuts have been managed by local authorities, austerity also appears as a deeply personal and social condition, cutting across the daily relationships and cultural practices of individuals (Hall 2019). Indeed, more than half of grassroots players are drawn from precisely the same lower middle-class, skilled and unskilled working-class households (*The FA* 2019, pp. 25–26) as those most affected by the stagnant wages and welfare retrenchment compounded by this public austerity (Atkinson *et al.* 2013, Bramall 2013, Green and Lavery 2015). As in other areas of everyday life, these spending cuts have left individuals to navigate the same spaces of economic crisis and austerity in their own personal lives. With the average cost of participation calculated to be between £270 and £440 every year (*The FA* 2019, p. 11) –

and rising (Ramchandani *et al.* 2018), this outlay has forced footballers across the country to continually (re)consider whether they can afford to play. Evidence abounds across England's grassroots community that a combination of austerity and the financial pressures faced by players is having deleterious effects upon levels of participation and the social and cultural practice of football in the local community (APSE 2012, Parnell and Widdop 2015, Widdop *et al.* 2018). Unable to fulfil their fixtures due to a lack of players, many sides have been forced to withdraw from their respective leagues or, in some instances, fold altogether.

More recently, the coronavirus pandemic has merely compounded these challenges. Although elite football has continued, albeit behind closed doors, lockdown has forced the curtailment of grassroots sport (Grix *et al.* 2020). With now no option but to become armchair spectators rather than active participants, England's amateur footballers face a further set of significant challenges as the country grapples with the exigencies of COVID-19. Yet while elite clubs are undoubtedly facing financial challenges of their own due to a decline in matchday revenue (Deloitte 2021), their current broadcasting deals and commercial arrangements will enable the EPL to withstand this turbulence. Indeed, in the midst of a global pandemic and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, the revenues of the leading EPL clubs have only fallen to 2018 levels, and as a league, more than a billion pounds was spent by clubs in the summer transfer market acquiring new players.

The private feast then that the EPL continues to enjoy has coincided with a period of worsening public famine in the grassroots game. Even before the pandemic struck, Martin Glenn appeared to recognise at least this crisis. Welcoming Shahid Khan's bid to acquire Wembley, the FA chair argued that the financial windfall raised by selling the national stadium could be reinvested in a reboot of grassroots football. With this argument

in mind, the final part of this analysis offers an everyday CPE of this proposed sale, and the prospects of securing a more sustainable future for the grassroots tier of English football.

Selling Wembley to Save the Grassroots Game?

Faced with this funding crisis, the sale of Wembley – the FA’s single most valuable capital, if not cultural asset – appeared to offer, as Glenn himself described it, ‘a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity’ to invest in the long-term financial future of the grassroots game. Cast in these economic terms, there was a clear appeal of such a sale, even if it meant commodifying and cashing in on Wembley’s rich cultural history.

Even in the midst of this funding crisis, however, predicating any funding for the grassroots football upon the merits or otherwise of selling Wembley remains highly problematic – not least because it obfuscates the broader cultural, political and economic landscape within which English football is embedded. While, clearly, in economic terms, the £600m dividend that Glenn had earmarked for the community game may have alleviated some of the pressures faced at the grassroots, it would have nevertheless remained a short-term fix to a long-term problem. Without a sustainable strategy in place, it was far from clear what would happen once the proceeds of this sale had been apportioned and spent.

Yet with EPL clubs continuing – even in the midst of the pandemic – accruing some of the largest revenues in world football (Deloitte 2020, 2021), the issue facing the FA and the EPL is clearly not the amount of cash actually in English football, but rather how little of this has filtered through to the grassroots. At one level, given that it is at the grassroots where the homegrown talent at England’s clubs first formally plays the game, these pitches and facilities are essential for the future development of elite professional

football. It is clear, however, that grassroots football also possesses a profound cultural ‘use’ value, a purpose beyond simply the monetised reproduction of the professional game. It is at the grassroots where the ‘ordinary’ everyday practice of football routinely takes place, and the social lives and relations of the game’s millions of followers are mediated. It is upon these often-rudimentary pitches here as well, however, where the cultural production of Wembley and its place in the imagination of the English football nation itself is (re)enacted through this ordinary and everyday practice.

For all the recent efforts to reprioritise and repurpose grassroots football however, as evidenced in both this proposed sale and subsequent FA report (2019), to simply sell off the stadium as a solution is to lapse into the hard economism. This is problematic on at least two counts. Firstly, it discounts the cultural significance, or ‘webs of meaning’ ascribed to Wembley itself, and the social value of such sites. Secondly, in more strategic terms, it dismisses all too readily the prospects of redistributing a far larger dividend of the global wealth accumulated by England’s leading clubs towards the grassroots game. Having voiced publicly its concern at the precarious state of grassroots football, the FA must now recognise the constitutive place of football’s own culture in its political economy (Best and Paterson 2010, p. 14). Taking seriously this culture, it is necessary for the FA to work far more closely with the EPL in particular but also other agencies and stakeholders such as the Football League, Sport England, the Sport and Recreation Alliance, as well as the government, to design and deliver a sustainable, long-term strategy to safeguard a more sustainable future for the grassroots game. Drawing upon Gramsci’s (1971) work, this type of ‘institutional innovation’, identified by Jessop (2004, p. 166) is required to reorganise ‘the entire social formation’ and exercise a new kind of ‘political, intellectual, and moral leadership’. In this context, the FA needs to bring into play those acculturated ‘organic intellectuals’ – namely, the players, coaches, referees, and

administrators – whose dedication to and *knowledge* of the sport have, for too long, been taken for granted, but whose social experiences are necessary in order to identify the challenges that exist, and the key strategic priorities for investment.

Despite the FA's status as a 'special shareholder' of the EPL, the two organisations have endured rather than enjoyed a close working relationship (Ward and Williams 2009). The political responsibility of the FA for all levels of the game, both professional and amateur, is contrasted with the EPL's principally economic concern simply for its twenty member clubs. Indeed, the EPL has given rather short shrift to the idea that it should contribute more of its riches to the grassroots game. Yet its clubs do nevertheless retain a collective responsibility to collectively support the grassroots game. When the Football Task Force agreed on behalf of the government to back the right of the EPL to sell its broadcast rights collectively, the League pledged five per cent of its television income to the grassroots game from the 2001-02 season onwards (*Football Task Force* 1999). Some twenty years on, the EPL enjoys broadcasting revenues of more than £9bn, as well, of course, the continued political support of the government in reaching these collective deals. The League, however, remains nowhere near meeting this target, and grassroots football remains in a state of decay.

Yet while the EPL needs to step up, more cash will not be enough to address the structural problems facing the grassroots game. A decade of austerity has had severe consequences for England's everyday football culture, unravelling the increasingly threadbare infrastructure of the grassroots game. The government's austerity experiment has damaged the social as well as economic fabric of the nation's communities, decimating local leisure services as well as leaving many households struggling to make ends meet. While for many, the social and cultural practice of football provides an escape from the economic pressures faced in their day-to-day lives, government cuts have left

the grassroots game in a similar state of financial distress. COVID-19 has merely deepened this crisis, making the demands for investment and support across all aspects of community life, including grassroots sport, all the more urgent.

Ultimately, other than provide a short-term cash windfall, the sale of Wembley would have done little to solve these systemic fault-lines. Without an agreed political framework amongst its main policy actors and a clear strategy to safeguard its cultural value, it is likely that this money would have been frittered away on other spending priorities. A joined-up strategy, allied with an altogether more progressive distribution of the wealth that exists at the top of English football would, on the other hand, represent a far more effective way of addressing the under-development and financial crisis that the grassroots game currently faces. With such a framework in place, it would be entirely feasible for Wembley, replete with its grand traditions and historic place in the everyday culture of English football, to remain in the public hands of those with a direct responsibility for the development of the grassroots game – rather than becoming just another fictitiously commodified, privately owned capital asset.

Conclusions

The proposed sale of Wembley Stadium to Shahid Khan by the FA represented far more than a failed power grab by a member of English football's transnational capitalist class. Indeed, it brought to the fore two concerns that this study has sought to theorise in further detail. Firstly, and in quite an obvious way, Khan's bid to acquire (and indeed, Martin Glenn's enthusiasm to sell) the national stadium revealed the structural inequalities present in English football, and the economic gains of redistributing any windfall from this sale to ameliorate the worst of these inequalities as experienced in the grassroots game. Yet whilst these matters of (in)equality might typically be a concern of more

orthodox accounts of political economy, the emphasis I have placed here upon ‘everyday CPE’ also foregrounds the *cultural* significance of two key sites of English football, namely Wembley Stadium and the grassroots game, and how, replete with their own histories, rituals and practices, these are imagined and enacted on a daily basis. This theoretical current of CPE has opened up the possibility to present a more critical, more culturally attuned understanding of English football, alongside its economic and political dynamics.

By recognising the co-constitutive nature of, in the first instance, culture and economy, it is possible to offer a much deeper interrogation of the cultural implications of the financial inequality that exists in the contemporary game, most notably between the globally derived wealth at the elite level of English football, and the impoverished grassroots game. As I have argued here, the latter is significant since it was precisely these conditions that prompted the FA to consider the sale of Wembley itself. Yet while this investment might, intuitively, have gone *some* way in addressing the financial crisis facing the grassroots game, it would have been but a temporal fix, and would have valorised, with only short-term gains, a highly symbolic, socially constructed cultural monument. Such cultural monuments and artefacts, as I have argued here, are defined by their historically significant ‘moments’, and cannot – or perhaps, *should* not – be fictitiously commodified. ‘Hallowed’ spaces like Wembley derive their intrinsic value not from any economic exchange but the semiosis of their rich cultural heritage and imagined place in the social construction of English football.

Clearly, however, such a cultural reading does little to address the material conditions of crisis actually faced by the grassroots game. Yet it is precisely this point that emphasises the need for a ‘critical’ CPE (Sayer 2001, Sum and Jessop 2013). Rather than losing sight of the economic and political materialities at stake in what might

otherwise be a ‘thick’ cultural analysis or ‘soft economic sociology’ (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008), it is necessary to recognise instead their interpellated nature. Linking the proposed sale of Wembley to the rising levels of wealth accrued by England’s leading clubs during the EPL’s own multinational period of capital, I have outlined here an alternative, altogether more redistributive strategy for financing the future development of the grassroots game. One that would not only forego the need to sell Wembley (and, concomitantly, its own cultural heritage) but would recognise and safeguard the everyday social practices and cultural ties embedded in grassroots football.

Such a strategy, however, would require its own revitalised political framework, one that departs from the arrangements currently in place. Reasserting the significance (if not the primacy) of ‘politics’ in CPE, my analysis has highlighted the frequently conflicting interests and ideologies at play in English football. Here, the FA’s commitment to the development of grassroots football sits in stark contrast with the heavily commercialised global ambitions of the EPL and its member clubs. The globalisation of the EPL has not simply skewed the distribution of economic wealth towards the elite level of the game, it has done so at precisely the same time that grassroots football has faced a severe financial crisis, compounded in more recent times by the coronavirus pandemic. The EPL and the FA must work far more closely together to deliver a sustainable model for grassroots football. Yet that is not all. The austerity faced by local communities has, as I have demonstrated here, disrupted the social and cultural practices associated with community football. These cuts must also be reversed, and the post-crisis politics of the broader social landscape incorporated in any future strategy for the grassroots game for any new or redistributed funding to be effective.

While this is but an outline of an alternative strategy to the ‘perfect storm’ currently faced at the grassroots of English football, it is underpinned by an explicit

emphasis upon CPE. By including everyday culture in this and other political–economic debates, a far richer account of political economy emerges; one that takes seriously those social practices, enacted on a daily basis, that more regulatory accounts of political economy tend to take for granted. Insofar as the study of English football itself is concerned, this approach also adds to our understanding of its own highly contested political economy, specifically, the nature and distribution of its wealth, its inequalities, and power relations that govern each level of the game.

Notes

1. The designation of ‘English football’ is slightly misleading here. Welsh clubs, including Cardiff City, Newport County, Swansea City and Wrexham, all playing in English divisions and participating in English cup competitions, have also appeared at Wembley.

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