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Towards a Marxist political economy of football supporters

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Abstract

In recent studies of football supporters, a specifically Marxist understanding of commodification has been left out of the equation, producing analysis that tends to superimpose commodification and ignore the wider relations of production out of which the dialectical contradictions of commodification arise. This paper aims to demonstrate the practical import of a Marxist political economy of football support through a case study of Everton supporters as they contest Everton Football Club's proposed ground move. The aim is not so much to reveal class struggles or fan revolts, but rather to offer a snapshot of the daily uncertainties and dilemmas of fans, embroiled in resisting and responding to commodity fetishism in the context of an industry exhibiting a highly unstable commodity structure.

Keywords

To follow

Introduction

Football supporters have become the subject of intense academic interest in recent years, an interest fuelled by concerns over the increasingly commercialised and commodified nature of professional football (Nash, 2000; Hudson, 2001; Crolley and Hand, 2002; Giulianotti, 2005; Robinson, 2008). A central area of investigation is the extent to which supporters are succumbing to commodification, defined as 'that process by which an object or social practice acquires an exchange value or market-centered meaning … involving the gradual entry of market logic to the various elements that constitute the

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object or social practice under consideration' (Giulianotti, 2002: 26), and/or whether supporters are retaining traditional forms of affiliation. Although supporters at all levels have been a source of interest, much of the research focus has been on the attitude of supporters of elite clubs, where commercial pressures and the forces of commodification have had most impact.

Research to date has highlighted that, traditionally, supporters share strong bonds, a common identity and sense of 'moral ownership' of their football clubs; but that, increasingly, football supporters are also 'market realists' when it comes to recognising the financial exigencies of the clubs they support. Fans appear to be increasingly commercially savvy, with entrepreneurial sentiments towards the corporate affairs of their club developing in tension with longstanding traditional sentiments of 'moral ownership'. Overall, the ascendant view within this literature would appear to suggest that the relationship between football clubs and their supporters is becoming more narrowly defined in terms of producer and consumer (Nash, 2000; Tapp and Clowes, 2000; Tapp, 2004; Adamson, Jones and Tapp, 2005; Giulianotti, 2005)[1], within an overarching trend towards commodification.

While there is a thriving research field focusing on the commodification of football and how this may be contested amongst fans, Marxism rarely plays any central place, which is somewhat surprising given the focus on commodification. Indeed, a Marxist political economy of football supporters is conspicuously absent from the literature. The absence of Marxism means that any recognition of the fundamental dialectic between market processes and capitalist production relations is also absent from existing research into the dynamics of commodification. The theoretical origins of the existing literature are mostly drawn from a synthesis of Marx, Durkheim and Weber, under the rubric of 'classical sociological tradition'. Yet it is worth stressing that the defining feature of this synthesis is its *evasion* of Marx's central problematic—capitalist relations of production and the class struggle—in favour of placing priority on the forces of instrumental rationality as a means of understanding the dynamics of commodification (Radin, 1996; Armstrong, 1998; Greenfield and Osborne, 2001; Giulionotti, 2005). Contrary to this synthesis, the market as the basis of understanding social relations is problematic because at the level of the market, the inner connections between things are difficult to grasp because they are necessarily fragmented (Marx, 1954 [1867]). Present research into the commodification of football and football supporters accepts this fragmentation, whereby the football industry as a prism of class struggle is ignored in favour of descriptions and classifications of 'traditional' and 'gentrified' fans; where issues surrounding the extent to which the law of value actually operates in the football industry are at best marginalised by discussions about how exchange-value criteria (prices, costs, profits, merchandising, etc.) are influencing the game; and where commodification is ultimately understood in terms of the market.

Of course, there is recognition within the existing literature of the central tensions in football; for example, that football is increasingly defined in terms of producer–consumer relations, while also remaining very much 'more than a business'. However, the *exact nature* of what this 'more than' means is never fully examined or explained. Explanation is pitched in terms of a conceptual shift back and forth between the binary oppositions of 'tradition'/'decommodification' versus 'commercialisation'/'commodific ation', to the point where the blanket use of the concept of commodification 'blunts its

usefulness as a descriptive and analytical tool, and may in fact serve as an obstacle to a more nuanced and contextual understanding of the ways in which markets and market logic are introduced into the game' (Moor, 2007: 132). Even when analysis is couched within a *cultural economy* approach, the articulation of *culture and economy* assumes a synthesis with the commodification of football as the end result. This is so despite the recognition by major theorists in this area (du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Warde, 2002) that there are 'two alternative causal claims' concerning trends in the relationship between culture and economy. The first of these is *culturalisation* of the economy (where aesthetic orientations and symbolic meanings are increasingly integral to the 'economic' object). The second is that culture is becoming increasingly *commodified* (where instrumental–rational, calculative motivations are invading cultural practices). However, when it comes to applying this twin causal chain to football, the two alternative causes appear to be ignored in favour of the one logic: commodification, with the sole caveat that the expansion of commercialisation, and the attendant marketing and merchandising of all aspects of the game (which form the basis of commodification), depends less on economic calculus of costs to value than it does on the symbolic and iconic meanings attached to 'the consumption of football'. In other words, tradition and community, in that there is an attempt to transform them into social capital (an issue we address later), serve as vehicles of commodification. The crucial point here is that the 'cultural' and the 'economic' are viewed essentially as being mutually constitutive of each other in developing commodification, within an overall theoretical framework in which market rationalisation imperatives take the place of class struggle.

The challenge for Marxist political economy, which we take up in the next section, is not so much the challenge of ignoring these conceptual dichotomies, as they add up to an understanding of football supporter attitudes, but in providing a dialectical, open-ended analysis of the fictitious and highly nuanced nature of both commodification and supporter references to community and tradition as vehicles of non-market sentiment, in opposition to commodification.

Towards a Marxist political economy of football's fragile commodity structure

Marxist political economies of the sports industry fell out of fashion by the end of the 1980s, due in part to the influence of different academic paradigms such as post-structuralism, and in part to its perceived reductionism. When Marxism was influencial in sports and football research, it tended to treat these industries simply as part of capital engaged in producing a commodity for profit (if not directly, then indirectly as an asset to be exploited for profit via media and advertising), and also as a means of ideological control over the working class (by inculcating capitalist values of consumerism, competition and the celebration of iconic footballer brands), in much the same way as any other commodity reproduces this domination (Brohm, 1978; Wheeler, 1978; Beamish, 1982; Gruneau and Cantelon, 1982; Gruneau, 1983). This treatment certainly has resonance with the work of Marx. Marx and Engels wrote in *Capital* of laws as tendencies acting with iron necessity (Marx and Engels, 1954 [1867]: 18) and in *The Communist Manifesto* (1998 [1848]), they were confident that the laws of capital accumulation would penetrate

all industry. Nevertheless, their emphasis on the struggle over the working day would also suggest that law-like tendencies remain just that: *tendencies open to struggle* and transformation, in which case the outcome is never certain. Moreover, when Marx wrote on commodity fetishism (the category underpinning commodification—rarely mentioned in current literature), he was very much aware of how situations in which 'the social relations between men appear to them as an object' (Marx and Engels, 1954: 77) were never fixed states or categorical imperatives, but rather points of intense *collective and individual struggles*. Taylor (1984) appears to endorse this more open-ended view when it comes to the football industry, arguing against any 'capital logic reading of football' by pointing out that it is not an area of capital accumulation, but more a utility-maximising capital absorber that is best seen as the institutionalisation of working-class and bourgeois social relations around a form of weekend entertainment. Yet having noted this economic peculiarity, Taylor never once questions the commodity structure of the football industry.

For Marx, the inability of capital to penetrate an industry must influence the commodity structure. Commodities are capital manifest, and capital is class struggle manifest. Commodities are also manifest use values and social needs, which are also products of class struggle. Capital accumulation provides the motive force to ensure that exchange value dominates over use value: generally, the greater the scope for accumulation the more powerful are processes of commodification; and where accumulation is weak or non-existent, commodification motives lose power relative to use value and social need, which may or may not then become dominant motive forces within the particular industry in which this occurs. Following Marx, one can say that in capitalist society, objects, practices and relations (such as in the field of football) are always in motion; always *becoming* commodities, but never fully commodified, because they are also *becoming* use values. Likewise, they are *becoming* use values but rarely develop their full capacity as use values, because they are also *becoming* commodities designed for exchange and with profit in mind. The governing motive force from the side of capitalists is the capacity for capital accumulation in any given industry; if this is weak, the commodity structure will tend to be unstable relative to industries in which it is strong.

Following the above lines of thought, in our view, a Marxist political economy of the football business has the potential to provide a dialectic account of football more aware that its relations of production and consumption have *never fully developed to the point at which they are commodified*. The football industry is one in which the dominance of capital is still relatively weak and where, as a consequence, the commodity structure is highly unstable and so open to interpretation, manipulation and on occasion, outright challenge (an argument we extend below). We tend not to read too much about this sort of Marxist view of the commodity structure of industries because it continues to be marginalised by approaches that treat capitalist relations and categories as fully formed entities. Yet what Marx stated about the commodity structure, picked up by Polanyi's (1957) observations concerning the 'fictitious' nature of some commodities, can add to a Marxist political economy of the dialectics, dynamics and tensions of the football business (Jessop, 2000; Block, 2003). Polanyi understood the limits to economic rationality underpinning the commodity structure of the economy, arguing 'that the most basic human characteristic—the need to relate to other humans, to feel part of a larger community' (McQuaig, 2005: 2) offers natural limits to commodification. He was the

first to use the concept of 'fictitious commodity' with reference to labour, money and education. The concept refers to a struggle between economy and society in capitalism, and specifically to the stripping away of a community asset, or community need, from its wider social relations and its reinsertion within a market-mediated activity where business motives dominate, corrupt and distort the community asset (Karl Polanyi, 1957). For example, people's labour power is the classic example of a 'fictitious commodity', because labour activity has a wider social meaning that becomes narrowed into an economic category—wage-labour—which inscribes labour's commodity form of existence in capitalist society and negates its direct social usefulness.

The idea of 'fiction' arises as a way of explaining that labour power is never commodified but always in the process of *becoming* commodified, while at the same time also *becoming* something entirely different: an activity for its own intrinsic usefulness to the individual and society. This implies a capitalism-embracing economy–society dialectic close to Marx's original meaning, where the commodity structure is permanently in existential doubt, although the circuit of capital accumulation is sustained by powerful social forces that assist in maintaining its dominance, both materially and ideologically, through money capital. Moreover, reflecting on Polanyi's account of the fictitious commodity and reinterpreting this through his reference to a 'double movement' in capitalism enables us to forge a Marxist political economy applicable to illuminating the dialectics of football supporter attitudes.

Polanyi argues that historical transformations in market capitalism take the form of a *double movement*, in which market relations become dis-embedded from society, producing anomie and dislocation, and then re-embedded, in which case market imperatives are subordinated or harmonised with wider social values and traditions related to production, consumption and distribution. The embedding and dis-embedding is viewed broadly by Polanyi, and in dialectical rather than linear terms. However, the dialectics of dis-embedding and re-embedding can also be understood as a daily occurrence in describing *micro processes* of containment and resistance to commodity fetishism. Doing so allows us to relate the latter to the construction of 'fictitious commodities' and related non-market 'fictions' based on tradition and community.

Firstly, 'fiction' equates with the social construction or reconfiguration of natural resources, manufactured/useful objects and social needs into commodities or exchange values. Secondly, implicit to the double movement is another fiction usually treated as 'fact' by Polanyi and followers: the fiction of re-embedding or subordinating market relations to 'social needs' and 'traditions'. The latter are fictions because, as Marxists point out, social needs and traditions remain framed by the overarching power of capital, no matter how we 'embed' them in market relations. Polanyi and his latter-day followers tend to play down or else ignore this 'double fiction' emerging from market and non-market relations, largely due to their commitment, whether explicitly or implicitly formulated, to restoring capitalism through either regulation or reform of liberal and neoliberal forms of capitalism, respectively.

This idea of a 'double fiction' highlights the fragility of commodity fetishism and the 'fictional' or constructed nature of non-market alternatives of 'community' and 'traditions' (which are nevertheless hidebound by the market), and is, therefore, particularly apt in understanding the football industry and football supporter attitudes. One can argue, as we will below, that the tensions and contradictions emerging from this 'double fiction' are particularly acute in industries such as football, where the profit motive is weak or

non-existent, and so the power of capital over the commodity structure of the industry is correspondingly weaker and open to contestation. With respect to this latter point, football clubs (even English Premiership League [EPL] clubs, where most of the capital is concentrated) appear to be guided much more by the dictates of moral rather than economic ownership and capital accumulation as, urged on by fans they pursue top players and success on the pitch. EPL clubs rarely make a profit and even more rarely go out of business, but remain for the most part in debt. Hence it is an industry in which capital accumulation as the principle motive force and so the rule of capital over the commodity structure is weak: over the ten-year period covering 1998–99–2005–06, only Liverpool FC, Manchester United FC and Arsenal FC achieved pre-tax profits for more than four of those years, while the majority of Premiership clubs earned pre-tax profits on average in only two out of the ten years (The Political Economy of Football, 2008).

What the above indicates is that football is 'more than a business', and this implies that the usual rules of producer-consumer relations do not apply so strictly. Football supporters continue to be part-producers, while they have much more than a consuming role to play in the overall functioning of the club. Supporters help 'produce' football, not only by adding to the match-day atmosphere and so exerting an influence on the game itself, but also by extending the role and importance of football to the local community through after-match dialogue and debate, taken up and disseminated through the internet and the local media. Moreover, supporters continue to 'consume' football even when the 'commodity' proves to be an 'unsatisfactory' or unsuccessful one. The nature of production is both less than and more than the roles narrowly depicted in economic literature. The boundaries between production and consumption of economic and community assets when it comes to football are broad and porous, as are the identities and attitudes shaping supporters' beliefs (a claim we elaborate on in the sections that follow).

For all the above reasons, the perspective of viewing football as an enterprise in the production and consumption of 'fictitious commodities' (as a form of containment within and resistant to commodity fetishism and so the rule of capital) presents one with a more realistic, open and dialectic appraisal of the situation. Under the conceptual rubric of fictitious commodity, the 'present tense' of the football business as it becomes the subject of increasing commercialisation is one characterised as *possibility* rather than fact: it is a possible economic asset and possible community asset, without fully realising either. More to the point, it is not simply that one 'asset' corrupts the other, but that the one provides the necessary ground for the other to flourish, *while also simultaneously providing the ground from which the corruption of both possibilities occur*. In this sense, football offers supporters a double fiction—unrealisable commodification and mythical tradition.

This 'present tense' double fiction or dialectic of corruption is recognised, if perhaps not fully understood, by recent Labour government interventions into the football business, with the setting up of the Football Taskforce (1999b), out of which came Supporters Direct, a government-sponsored supporters' agency that attempts to harness both possibilities (Supporters Direct, 2001). Brown points out that the Taskforce 'steadfastly refused to intervene against the interests of business by supporting the much bolder vision of new regulatory bodies with statutory powers (Brown, 2002). The fact that the Taskforce, out of which Supporters Direct emerged, was a compromise favouring football as an economic asset bears testimony to our argument that the possibilities of

realising football as a community asset are inextricably linked with the continuing commercialisation of football as an economic asset; a 'present tense' making for difficult compromises from Supporters Direct and the supporter trust movement. It is this 'present tense' dialectic that makes possible a fuller appreciation of not only 'mutualism' as a 'solution' (Michie, 1999) underpinning the political economy of Supporters Direct (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2007), but more pertinently, of the struggles and compromises of football supporters as they wrestle with the possibilities of football as both economic and community asset; where the basis of accumulation is weak in favour of speculative profits and where, therefore, the grounds for realising both are weak, and for corrupting both are stronger.

Further insights into this 'present tense' dialectic and so the fragility of commodity fetishism in football obviously requires an in-depth study of the relationship between club and supporters and supporter attitudes. Such a study is outside the scope of this paper's main aim to set the theoretical agenda by offering conceptual insights for further enquiry. However, by way of example of how a Marxist political economy can illuminate supporter attitudes, below we provide an overview of our larger ongoing empirical study in relation to Everton supporters in their debate with Everton Football Club over a proposed ground move. Everton FC provides a useful snapshot of the contradictory nature of football. It is a club that has never been out of the English Premier League and which has experienced the lows of relegation battles and the challenge of entry to the European league, without actually winning any cup. It is a club with considerable commercial pretensions and a large core of expectant supporters, but which also wary of financial overstretching itself. The case of Everton supporters offers interesting insights into the highly unstable commodity structure of football at the top level. We briefly examine how the concept of 'fictitious commodity' can be usefully extended to illuminate the tensions that have been thrown up between supporters by the Everton stadium debate. The next section provides background information concerning the Everton board's decision to seek a new stadium, highlighting the motives for the board's plan of action in the context of its overall strategy for the club. The following section allows for the articulation of the views of Everton supporters on the proposed stadium move. Quotations are taken from Everton internet fan forums in order to convey the complexity of the debate amongst supporters both for and against the move. A summary and concluding section then follows, evaluating the evidence in terms of the commodity structure of the football business, and addressing what the evidence infers about the fragility of commodity fetishism throughout the football industry.

Background to the case study

In December 2006, the board of directors at Everton Football Club declared its intention to explore the possibility of moving from Goodison Park, Everton's home since 1892, and relocating to a new stadium in Kirkby in the nearby borough of Knowsley. The club entered into an exclusivity period, incorporating a nine-month feasibility study, with Knowsley Borough Council and Tesco Plc, Everton FC's would-be partners on the Kirkby stadium project. In the months that followed plans were announced to build a 50,000-seat stadium as part of a £400m development aimed at the regeneration of Kirkby town centre. The Tesco-driven scheme would also see the building of a 24-hour

Tesco Extra supermarket, fifty additional retail units, new bars, restaurants and a hotel and leisure development (EFC, 2007).

In explaining its case to supporters, the board's main justifications were that a) Goodison Park requires major renovation work that must be carried out if the ground is even to continue to adhere to existing health and safety laws;[2] b) that to stay competitive with other Premiership clubs, Everton needs an increase in stadium capacity—something apparently impossible to achieve on Goodison's existing footprint; and c) that a new stadium in Kirkby is the best financial deal on offer that can secure the club's future in the long term.

To gauge the attitude of Everton supporters concerning the proposed stadium move, we observed the flow of debate on fan websites, and most of the fan input below was collected in the period during and just after the ballot conducted in August 2007. Websites are the premier source of commentary and discussion of the club's Kirkby ambitions, with forums, mailbags and fan articles hosting the different voices of Everton supporters on the stadium issue. In order to achieve as authentic a representation as possible of Everton supporters' views on the issue, we chose to discount the use of the official Everton website, www.evertonfc.com. This website has its own fan forum, the Blue Room, which is administrated by club employees. Instead, we chose a number of unofficial fan forums selected in order to ensure that as wide a range of views as possible were canvassed. Particular emphasis was given to the most active and well-established websites: www.toffeeweb.com, www.bluekipper.com and The People's Forum (http://members.boardhost.com/peoples-forum). In the case of Toffeeweb and Blue Kipper, the decision to select them was based on the volume of supporter usage of these sites: with the exception of the club's official website, they are far and away the most heavily frequented Everton-related websites. The Toffeeweb site has been around in one form or another since 1994, a full two years before the club's official website was created, and it is the premier source for commentary and discussion of the club's fortunes on the internet, with its own forum, mailbag and fan articles**.** Blue Kipper was created in 2000, and its forums have the most registered users outside of the club's own Blue Room forum; while The People's Forum, created in 1997 as Blue View, is the longest standing Everton net-based fan forum.

Everton supporter attitudes

Based on what we read in the forums, a number of commonalities emerge amongst the variety of opinions and motivations fans have regarding the proposed move to Kirkby. The evidence reveals, on the one hand, a body of fans broadly in favour of the move that includes within it both a cautious embrace of *and* skepticism for the commercial case for Kirkby; and, on the other hand, a body of fans against the move, who view it as a fundamental threat to the 'soul' of the club, yet tend to express their case in terminology heavily influenced by business rhetoric. We believe that these tensions and skepticism deployed through market rhetoric are suggestive of a football industry with a political economy based on the production of a fictitious commodity and the aforementioned 'double fiction'.

Looking at fans broadly in favour of the move, there is widespread acceptance amongst them that a new stadium is essential for increasing club revenues, and that the Everton board is acting in the club's best interests by seeking a partnership with Tesco. As one supporter commented:

> Why would the club plump for an option as unattractive as Kirkby if Tesco were not offering huge incentives … There must be a significant contribution from 'our favourite supermarket' to make it an option worth going for otherwise there'd be no point even considering it. (Supporter A)

While revealing a degree of cynicism towards corporate involvement, this response nevertheless demonstrates *market realism* with respect to possible financial benefits accruing to Everton Football Club as a result of the club's partnership with Tesco. In other words, their standpoint is taken less out of principle and more out of a pragmatic or realist attitude concerning what the club may get out of a move financially (even though it is conceded on many occasions that this may have aesthetic repercussions for fans with respect to the quality of the build of the new stadium). Also common to those in favour of a move away from Walton to Kirkby is the claim that the move is a once-in-a-lifetime offer set against the 'inevitable decline' of the Goodison Park 'money pit'. Again, though, it is the language of realism and pragmatism rather than market principle that dominates the discourse, as the following statement indicates:

> Will Knowsley Council and/or Tesco seek a share of the stadium revenue in return for their contribution to the scheme? Of course Tesco will want their cut, what do you think they are … Some f**kin' charity case like Bestway? (Supporter B)

Overall, there is a kind of trust that underpins this market realism: a tendency to defer to the the Everton board as responsible, almost paternal custodians. For example, the view that the 'deal' has 'many costs' but that Bill [Kenwright] can surely be trusted to exact financial sweeteners to negate such costs. This trust in the board, and in the chairman in particular, is enough to offset any concerns about the loss of tradition and identity that the move will potentially bring about.

However, what can be described as a *post-traditional* standpoint is also evident amongst some pro-Kirkby supporters and the rhetoric of commercialism is much more to the fore. Here there is little or no sympathy for arguments against the shift to Kirkby that put forward the case for historical traditions, as represented by Goodison Park. Rather, there is a tendency to rationalise the necessity to move from Goodison for reasons solely based on economic considerations. The view that Goodison is central to Everton's identity and tradition—part of what it means to be Everton and to be Evertonians—is either ignored, marginalised or judged by these supporters to be cloying sentimentality:

> If we continue with this ridiculous 'emotional' reluctance to embrace the future (a problem that was one of the major causes of our great city's overall decline in the 70's and 80's) then we risk seeing our club having to scrap for its survival—and being even further away from the vague possibility of recapturing the glory years. (Supporter C)

And even when Goodison Park *is* recognised as a special place with a history and atmosphere all of its own, this pales into relative insignificance when the needs of the the 'customer' and financial constraints which Goodison is argued to epitomise—and Kirkby, apparently, promises to break through—are considered:

> Goodison was magical. It has hosted wonderful night games, and produces an incredible atmosphere … [but] Goodison is old, with too many restricted views. Even if you have a good view, watching the match can be uncomfortable on wooden seats with cramped leg and arse room. And the obvious lack of corporate facilities (where the real money is to be made) is strangling the club. (Supporter D)

Besides the pragmatic approach of market realists and post-traditionalists, it has to be noted that many supporters in favour of moving to Kirkby simply eschew all arguments concerning finance. Supporters who prioritise memory and narrative over place and locality occupy this space. The former approach is obviously inherently more mobile than the latter. The view that you can take the club's history and identity and transplant it wherever the new ground is constructed is typical:

> I go to watch Everton because they are my team, not because they play at Goodison. I have some fantastic memories of GP and still get the hair standing up on my neck every week walking to the ground. But, like players that come and go, so at some point must Goodison. (Supporter E)

Overall, the rhetoric of those in favour of a move to Kirkby is a pragmatic, and at times cynical, acceptance of the commercial realities underpinning the logic of the move away from Goodison Park. For the most part, there is a reluctant acceptance that there is little or no alternative to relocation. This dominating tendency, though, is underpinned by deference to the Everton board of directors and trust in its stewardship of the club to 'get the best deal'. Therefore, in so far as Everton supporters broadly in favour of a ground move are concerned, it appears to us that there is more of an *accommodation* with the governance of their club rather than their wholesale buying into a business model and viewing their relationship to the club as customer/consumer.

As we know, the club's proposal to relocate outside of Liverpool provoked substantial dissent amongst Everton supporters. A considerable degree of suspicion exists regarding the commercial motives of those both inside and outside the club who are proposing the go-ahead for a stadium in Kirkby.

Amongst these supporters, there is deep hostility to Everton's board of directors over the issue. Not the least of their concerns are the possible financial benefits accruing to the sitting directors from the proposed stadium relocation (perceived as personal gain, at the expense of the club's losing its identity as a city-based cultural icon). Some supporters resisting the move are adamant that the board is self-serving and driven by market imperatives over and above the needs of Everton FC:

> the board needs to be challenged as it cannot be correct; for two reasons; firstly, Everton FC … from an investment point of view, is a permanent fixture in the top flight with one of the most consistent and loyal supports, irrespective of form … Secondly, and this is by far a more salient point, Everton FC are currently 18th on the Deloitte Football Money League, which is the most reputable assessment of the wealth of football clubs globally … If he [Bill Kenwright] can sell the club whilst we are residing in a new 50,000 seater stadium in Kirkby, then he is set to walk away with substantially more money than he would if we sold now, as the value of the clubs' assets would be far greater … Can we trust this businessman? (Supporter F)

This viewpoint, which can broadly be termed as *market sceptic*, touches upon what appears to be a strongly held suspicion commonplace amongst sections of the Everton fanbase: that during a period in which the takeover of most English Premiership clubs has taken place, the current owners of the club have blocked this path, preferring to retain ownership in order to maximise the value of their shares in a future sell off. It is a charge to which the Everton board is sensitive. There is a contradiction evident here, though: a recognition that the club operates in a market environment and an implied acceptance of takeovers, accompanied by an admonishment for the Everton board for their Kirkby strategy which would, perhaps, lay the foundations for a takeover but see the current board profiting by it.

It is clear also that the involvement of Tesco Plc as one of Everton's project partners is viewed with great alarm by many supporters—who might be described as *brand managers*—concerned with the impact this association will have on the club's status and wider reputation. Chief amongst these concerns is that a 'cheaply-built new stadium in an out-of-town retail park' will diminish the status of the club *and* place increasing financial burden on it. In an era when football is awash with money and investors, the idea that the club should be being dictated to by a retail company is unappealing. This state of affairs is viewed as anathema to the club's traditions:

> Frankly, Kirkby isn't good enough … the actual stadium cost at £75m suggests that it will be a pile of crap. Brighton are spending £50m on a 22,000 seater stadium FFS! Arsenal spent up to £390m on their 60,000 seater stadium scheme. Let the board know that this 'deliverable' stadium isn't good enough, remind them what *Nil Satis Nisi Optimum* ['nothing but the best is good enough'] is supposed to be about. If they can't give us a stadium to be proud of in the city then they should move on and let someone else who can. (Supporter G)

A narrative emerges in which the club is portrayed as being uncomfortably bound by the requirements of its partners in the Kirkby stadium project: Knowsley Borough Council, which covets Everton's presence in its authority area, and, more especially, Tesco Plc:

> It seems to me that all that Tesco are 'providing' us with is the opportunity to develop on some land that they will be given (not pay for) by a council that wants them there, and a 'Clubcard style' note/voucher that we can take to Barr [stadium construction company] that gives us 50% off the shell of a stadium that they will build for us … As far as I am concerned that is where their involvement begins and ends—once they have done enough to get the planning permission for their store that's them done with Everton and it's up to Everton to kit out the shell of a stadium and come up with the costs of any over-runs to the project. Tesco won't be involved in any of that—why would they be? They've got their planning permission and they've got a new store to run (which will be busy whether Everton get their ground sorted out or not). (Supporter H)

And there is clearly a sense of unease concerning the club's willingness to apparently act as a Trojan horse in the interests of Tesco:

> [Tesco] are not doing this to help Everton out of a hole; they are doing it because they stand to make vast amounts of money out of it themselves by having the biggest supermarket in the country on the same site. This is only possible because of the commercial power of Everton

> Football Club. Put simply, Everton FC is a massive brand who can make other companies. (Supporter I)

For other anti-move supporters, who might be described as *traditionalists*, the stated rationale for the stadium move (to make the club more competitive on the pitch in an effort to install the club in amongst the elite of the English Premiership) will be at the expense of 'the soul' of the club:

> What are the disadvantages? … We become a club … with all the history and tradition of a Tesco's store … Am I crazy, or does this fill anyone else with dread? The main attractions to Everton are our fantastic and loyal support, our history, tradition ethos and culture of the club … absorbed into every brick that builds Goodison … I'll still be happy to watch Everton there. I'll still feel a shiver when I see her rise out of the urban landscape … (Supporter J)

A sense of loss is to the fore in what is, perhaps, the most contentious aspect of the Everton board's decision to relocate: that of pursuing a stadium plan outside of Liverpool's city boundaries. Since it was formed in 1878, the club has had a number of grounds, but all within or at the periphery of the environs of Stanley Park. There is a clear identification with the local territory, and, in particular, a proprietary attachment to Goodison Park:

> Whoever thinks that by moving out of a city into a town and onto a retail park is not going to change the identity of a club is fooling no-one but themselves. You can argue all you want that it will still be Everton Football Club, and it will, because that's the name of the club. But it won't be 'Goodison Park, Home of Everton Football Club' anymore. It will be 'Tesco Stadium'? 'The Stadium of North Merseyside'? It's these little details which make up our identity. (Supporter K)

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to offer a Marxist political economy of football that gives priority to the unstable commodity structure of the football business, and to offer suggestions about how this political economy can help explain football supporter attitudes. In particular, and to reiterate a point made in the article's abstract, our aim was not so much to reveal class struggles or fan revolts, but rather to offer a snapshot of the daily uncertainties and dilemmas of fans in resisting commodity fetishism in the context of an industry exhibiting a highly unstable commodity structure. In particular, the paper has argued that a more fruitful way of understanding supporter attitudes emerges from a view of the football business as producer and consumer of a 'fictitious commodity' (Polanyi, 1957): something creative, enduringly communal and a basis for collective identity that must be continually bent out of shape until it looks more like (but never quite like) something one invests in, exploits, sells or purchases as a consumer in the market place. However, as we also argued, the fiction is double-edged—part of a dialectics of dis-embedding and re-embedding of market ideology and traditional rhetoric that can also be understood as a daily occurrence in describing the micro processes of containment and resistance to commodity fetishism.

The overview of findings from the debate among Everton supporters presented above demonstrates how fan attitudes to the game and their club can be fruitfully understood within the broader claim that football is a 'fictitious' commodity which does not so easily or naturally lend itself to supporters as something to be produced as a package to be sold to consumers or customers for monetary gain. In keeping with the theme of a double edged 'fiction', Everton supporters display an irony and scepticism towards football as a business and implicitly reveal their tacit grasp of how this 'fiction' equates with the social construction or reconfiguration of natural resources, manufactured/useful objects and social needs into commodities or exchange values. Equally, Everton supporters were adept at *performing* 'traditional values' as a means of argument against those seeking a move to Kirkby. In so doing, they display a tacit grasp of the fiction of re-embedding or subordinating market relations to 'social needs' and 'traditions'. This performativity, we suggest, will be found amongst most supporters. As we recall, the 'double fiction' lies in the fact that the commodity structure of football is unstable given the inability for capital accumulation to take a hold, but that social needs and traditions remain constrained and alienated by the overarching power of capital due to football's being 'embedded' in the market.

We argued at the beginning of this paper that the current literature on the commodification of football implies an 'either/or' dimension to the football business: that it is either economic asset or community asset; each separately articulated. It was then suggested that the concept of fictitious commodity holds out more promise for capturing the nuances of supporter attitudes to football, because it captures the peculiarities of the football business, in which clubs rarely make a profit or go out of business, and supporters are part-producers, whilst also having much more than a consuming role to play in the overall functioning of the club. We have highlighted the fact that supporter's help to produce football because they add to the match-day atmosphere and influence the game itself, as well as the way in which supporters are moral owners, and so continue to consume football even when the 'commodity' proves to be an 'unsatisfactory' or unsuccessful one. These aspects are all part of the 'double fiction' and help in the blurring of the boundaries between supporter roles as producer and consumer, and of ownership claims, all of which is demonstrated in the above overview of Everton supporter attitudes, but which, we would argue, will tend to be repeated across supporter groups, as they contest the fictitious nature of the 'commodity', football.

What becomes particularly clear in the Kirkby stadium debate is that only a small minority of supporters amongst the 'Yes' camp defend the move on principled business grounds *first and foremost* (a recognition by supporters that football can not be rationalised solely in business terms or language). There is very little evidence to suggest that those supporting the Kirkby project embrace the commercialisation of the game to the extent that they see their relationship with the club from the point of view of *consumers.* Although there is certainly an undercurrent of a more principled stand towards market and commercial rationality, the language of commercialism remains mostly rhetorical and pragmatic.

Despite the majority 'Yes' vote in the supporters' ballot over the move to Kirkby, the board's ability to get the most competitive deal from its 'partners' is judged to be an article of faith for those supporting the Kirkby scheme, rather than an expectation.

And reservations about the club's association with Tesco are clearly only offset by the belief that Goodison has had its day, and that the municipal authority in Liverpool either will not or cannot furnish an alternative to a stadium in Kirkby. This suggests that Everton fans have developed a vocabulary in relation to the commercialism of football, without fully endorsing its principles. And it cannot be ruled out that the language of commercialism might also be deployed by some in the Yes camp merely because it enables them to position themselves as the more 'down to earth' fans—'realists' relative to those supporters in the No camp, who are then positioned as 'idealists', 'football Luddites' or 'traditionalists'—supporters out of touch with the demands on a modern football club.

Fans against the move to Kirkby also draw pragmatically on the language of commercialism. However, here there is another purpose at work: a means of undermining the entire business plan put forward by the owners of Everton FC in relation to Kirkby. For fans against the move, the language of the market and their use of commercial strategy—including putting forward a variety of plans to reinvigorate Goodison Park, or for alternative new stadia within the City of Liverpool—is a rhetorical device to gain a hearing in order to fortify traditional values and community allegiances, and to underpin a moral economy of Everton FC. Scepticism and doubts concerning the motives of individual members of the Everton board and their business acumen, as well as their critique of branding by association with Tesco, is driven by a fundamental rejection of the political economy of football as it affects Everton, and the embracing of an approach to the running of the club that emphasises the importance of place and history, seen in its purest form by the linking of this with Goodison Park.

The above concurs with our earlier observation that against the tensions and dynamics involved in activities with the status of fictitious commodities, the commodity structure will be highly variable, unstable and open to contestation and ingrained resistance, rather than being an omnipotent fixture in the commercialisation of football. Indeed, as we have shown, amongst supporters in the No camp, the board's current commercial trajectory is alien to the traditions of Everton FC, and exposes the gulf between them. From this vantage point, the world of business is seen as an undeniable feature in football, but one that must be kept at arm's length. There is, perhaps, more than a hint of irony here in the fact that those who express such views have now become lay experts in deploying commercial arguments to expose the corroding effects of football's business mentality. In so doing, and despite themselves, they are drawn into the market rhetoric they struggle against.

Following the lines of enquiry of the non-Marxist commodification literature, one might have expected the Everton ballot debate to lead to a more pronounced split between those in favour and those against the move, with the former providing evidence for increased supporter commodification, and the latter evidence of resistance to commodification. Giulianotti's (2005) study of supporters in Glasgow, for example, found this to be a significant aspect. However, while there is some evidence to support the axis of 'accommodation and resistance in terms of commodification', the evidence of this case study suggests that the instabilities and complexities of football as a fictitious commodity may be more helpful in explaining the overlap between supporters.

For one thing, aside from isolated comments, there is little evidence of the wholesale commodification of supporters. Overwhelmingly, the evidence presented supports the view that supporters are pragmatically adapting to commercial *rhetoric* simply in

order to press their case: fans from both sides of the ballot debate deploy the language of commercialism in support of, or to undermine, the business case for the move. Even those in favour of the move expressed little faith in the Everton board's business acumen, and we think this is reflective of a cynical attitude on their part to the commercialisation of football in general. On the other hand, those against the move (even those whose primary critique was based on the language of tradition and community) executed their argument over the relocation's presumed shortcomings in the form of a sustained critique of its *economic irrationality*, supplemented by a rigorous appraisal of possible alternative *business ventures*, with respect to either the refurbishment of Goodison Park or a new stadium built within the City of Liverpool's boundaries. Therefore, *on both sides of the debate,* there are very few clear-cut examples of supporter commodification, and, indeed, very few clear lines of resistance to the language and practice of commerce. Hence, the use of binary oppositions—between, say, commodification and decommodification—cannot deal with the complexities and instabilities of a football industry which is forever *becoming* both commodity and use value.

In keeping with this latter ontology, our study shows that what unites supporters across the ballot divide is a critical and reflexive attitude towards the proposed ground move forged out of an ability to deploy market rhetoric and argument to make their case, *without necessarily succumbing to commodification*.

As we stressed earlier, further insights into the 'present tense' dialectic and so the fragility of commodity fetishism in football obviously requires an in-depth study of clubs, the relationship between clubs and supporters, and supporter attitudes. However, we can tentatively summarise that in the evidence we have presented here, the claim that football is a fictitious commodity with a fragile commodity structure is given credence by the complex reaction of Everton supporters. In our study, Everton supporters waxing lyrical about 'football identity' and 'tradition' were likely to incite the collective raising of sceptical eyebrows from fellow supporters (resignedly, perhaps) won over by the 'economic realities' of the 'modern football industry'. Indeed, our study suggests that Everton supporters who pursue the line of 'tradition' and 'spiritual attachment' to their club in ways that are perceived to challenge the club's economic progress are likely to become the subject of rebuttal from business-minded fellow supporters, who may charge them with being the football equivalent of industrial relations Luddites. Here, there is evidence of supporters tacit awareness of the 'double fiction' mentioned earlier: football is not a business/commodity as such, but that traditions and a sense of a common community also sit uneasily and become rhetorical devices to gain political leverage rather than essentially held beliefs.

This paper has summarised the principle concepts for developing a Marxist political economy of football support, and demonstrated its applicability to understanding supporter attitudes through a brief discussion of Everton supporter attitudes to their club's proposed ground move. Of course, we should also recognise that the football industry operates in a capitalist environment in which the commodity structures have a much closer relation to capital accumulation, and thus where capital ensures the coherence of the commodity structure and its dominance over use value and social needs. To this end, the football business, football supporters in general and the pragmatic responses and cynical attitude of Everton supporters noted above towards the football business come up against the structural affinities of the capitalist political economy, most prominent

of which is the rapidly declining hegemonic hold of neo-liberalism as a doctrine of the supremacy of the market in arranging and ordering all aspects of a social relations. In this respect, the instabilities and contradictions borne by football's nature as a fictitious commodity has so far been steadied through the wider political economy of capitalism, through the doctrine of neoliberalism. However, short of wholesale challenges to capitalism, one might speculate that as neoliberalism declines, the structural affinities amenable to extending commodity fetishism into fan culture, however fragile this extension has been, will come under increasing pressure from the fictions of tradition and community, perhaps in the form of a growing commitment to the 'football mutualism' that Supporters Direct has been pursuing since 2000. It is in these areas that the further development of a Marxist political economy of the football business may be of most value.

Endnotes

1. Recognising this apparent trend, studies in marketing strategy have turned their attention to identifying and targeting 'segmented markets' within football fandom. See Tapp and Clowes, 2007; Tapp, 2004; Adamson, Jones and Tapp, 2005.
2. Everton FC's CEO, Keith Wyness, made reference to 'The Green Guide' (Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds—HMSO) during the stadium debate, stating that the club would not meet its requirements. However, a one time editor of the Guide, renowned stadium historian Simon Inglis, contributed an article to fans' group Keep Everton in Our City (KEIOC), 2007, supporting the campaign to retain Goodison Park.
3. The deal was negotiated through investment bankers Bear Stearns. The current bondholders of the loan are the financial services group, Prudential Plc.
4. This was typified by Bill Kenwright's statement at a recent EGM: 'I want this club to have its billionaire, but it is not me. My shareholding has been for sale from the day I bought in' (www.evertonfc.com).
5. All the supporters' quotes ('Supporter A', 'B' etc.) are taken from the supporters' online forums listed in the article, namely www.toffeeweb.com, www.bluekipper.com and The People's Forum (http://members.boardhost.com/peoplesforum). Information on the source of specific quotes can be requested from the authors.

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Peter and David, I am missing both author biographies, please supply them with your corrections, or ideally on the Author Checklist I sent you, where you will see the wordcount etc.