

The Making of Brexit: Football, Sporting Disasters and the Thin Veneer of Englishness

A Construção do Brexit: Futebol, desastres desportivos e o fino verniz do inglesismo

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Abstract:

Underpinning the construction and representation of English national identity are senses of nostalgia and ethnic defensiveness that are engendered, represented and embodied. The media play a crucial role in this, as do embodied male sport identity practices. Hence, I explore how English identity found expression in British / English media coverage of past and most recent Euro 2020 men's football championships. Initially, I outline aspects of these long-term processes with reference to the early 1990's. Then, I briefly review work conducted in the late 1990's with specific reference to football and indicate how the research has subsequently developed. The final section explores both continuity and change in relation to the Euro 2020 football competition and how notions of Englishness remain contested.

Keywords: Englishness; identity politics; nostalgia; Brexit; football.

Resumo

Subjacente à construção e representação da identidade nacional inglesa estão os sentimentos de nostalgia e defesa étnica que são gerados, representados e incorporados. Os media desempenham um papel crucial nesse processo, assim como as práticas desportivas masculinas incorporadas na identidade inglesa. Deste modo, exploro como a identidade inglesa encontrou expressão na cobertura dos media britânicos/ingleses durante as competições futebolísticas masculinas anteriores e mais recentes ao Euro 2020. Inicialmente, descrevo aspetos desse processo, no longo prazo, com referência ao início dos anos 1990. Em seguida, faço uma breve revisão de trabalhos realizados no final da década de 1990 com referência específica ao futebol e indico como a pesquisa se desenvolveu posteriormente. A parte final explora as dinâmicas de continuidade e mudança em relação ao Euro 2020 e como as noções de inglesismo continuam em debate.

Palavras-chave: Inglesismo; políticas de identidade; nostalgia; Brexit; futebol.

Brexit was long in the making. Here, I trace some of the roots of Brexit through the political and sporting discourses circulating in British / English media, focusing on football. I explore the articulation of a sense of English national angst, malaise and a longing for some mythical golden age, and what one might call 'homefulness' (Connerton, 1989). These elements are vividly evident in media discourses over the past 30 years. Underpinning the construction and representation of English national identity are senses of nostalgia and ethnic defensiveness that are engendered, represented and embodied. The media play a crucial role in this, as do embodied male sport identity practices. Hence, I explore how English identity found expression in British / English media coverage of past and most recent Euro 2020 men's football championships. Initially, I outline aspects of these long-term processes with reference to the early 1990's. Then, I briefly review work conducted in the late 1990's with specific reference to football and indicate how the research has subsequently developed. The final

section explores both continuity and change in relation to the Euro 2020 football competition and how notions of Englishness remain contested.

**The Early 1990's:
Disasters, National Malaise
and the Identity Politics of
Wilful Nostalgia**

In the early 1990's I examined a range of issues concerning sport and national identity – particularly with reference to the 'British' and how and in what ways the twin processes of globalisation and Europeanisation was impacting on the nation-state (Dunning, 1992; Kruger, 1993; Maguire 1993a; 1993b). It was unclear to what extent and range were nations been strengthened or weakened by such processes. What was clear was that people in different nations were reacting to such trends through an reassertion of ethnic nationalism and or nostalgia for a real or invented past. 'For the nostalgic', as Brian Turner has remarked, 'the world is alien' (Turner, 1987, p. 149). The same can be said for sections of the English over the past three or more

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decades (Schwarz, 1992). Closely linked to nostalgia is a sense of melancholy - a longing for a time, a place or, sometimes, a person (Robertson, 1990). These embodied feelings can affect us all in different ways; yet, some societies, just as some individuals, may be more nostalgia prone than others. Turner (1987) identifies four main dimensions of nostalgic discourse; all are evident in the media reporting of sporting and political disasters in British society in the 1990's through to the present day. One dimension includes a sense of historical decline or loss: a departure from some golden age of 'homefulness' is apparent. Here we might think of the loss of the British Empire, and an attendant longing to return to some golden age - always lost somewhere in the mists of time. Second, there is a sense of absence or loss of personal wholeness and moral certainty. In this regard, the pluralization of morals, the questioning of religious certainty and the emergence of multiculturalism affect British society in a variety of ways. Third, there is a concomitant sense of loss of individual freedom, autonomy

and personal authenticity. The perceived threats posed by European integration to national sovereignty and the liberties of the 'free born' English are to the fore in this discourse. For example, when the then Prime Minister John Major, refused to 'haul down the union jack and fly high the star-spangled banner of a United States of Europe' (*Guardian*, 10th October 1992, p. 2) in response to prospects of deeper integration in the European Union.

Fourth, nostalgic discourse is linked with perceived if not actual loss of rural life, traditional stability and cultural integration. This is vividly encapsulated in speeches by John Major, who evoked specific aspects of the *British* past and emphasised the 'essentials' of *Englishness*. Addressing the Conservative party conference, Major finished his speech with an assurance that Britain would survive, 50 years hence, in its unamendable essentials, remaining 'the country of long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers' (*Guardian*, 23rd April 1993, p. 1). Such rhetoric, then and

throughout the Brexit debate of 2016, overlooked the contested, gendered nature of being British and collapsed notions of being a Briton with being English. During late 1993, Major developed this theme in his emphasis on a 'Back to Basics' campaign. He sought to gain the high moral ground - a forerunner of future culture wars - by highlighting a perceived need to return to 'certain values, respect, courtesy, obedience to the law, self-discipline, and no - nonsense decisions about right and wrong' (cited in the *Independent*, 4th January 1994, p. 13). The discourse surrounding English sport forms, e.g., cricket, reinforced such sentiments. Yet in other sports, e.g., rugby union, the contentious nature of British identity was more evident. Britain / England appears to be a culture prone to intermittent nostalgic crises.

Writing in July 1993, a correspondent of the *Guardian* newspaper observed that 'our streets are no longer safe, we're giving up power to Brussels, we can't even win at cricket anymore. Whatever happened to the English?' (*Guardian* 28th July 1993, p. 2). This observation links

a set of socio-cultural and political problems that have been perceived to be besetting Britain. Contoured by short-term dynamics, these long-term dislocating trends included economic decline and the attendant problems of mass unemployment; the loss of Empire and the failure to embrace the notion of European integration; the ongoing tensions associated with the aspirations of the various nations and peoples composing the United Kingdom; and changing social mores, seemingly inexorable rise of crime, and a perceived increase in violence. Short-term calamities, such as the effective devaluation of the British currency in 1992 on what was dubbed “Black Wednesday”, were portrayed as evidence of this decline.

The general tenor of media reporting conveyed a sense of pessimism, a lack of national cohesion and direction and a longing for a time when things ‘worked’ and people felt more secure. As but one example: an editorial in the *Daily Telegraph* highlighted the issues involved:

A mental state of pessimistic fatalism has the country in its

grip. The sense of national despondency is not purely political or economic...but spans almost the entire range of human experience. It is a crisis of national will, a moral crisis (22nd February 1993, p. 18).

Discourse of this kind was repeatedly linked to a series of sporting disasters. Four days after the above report, for example, an editorial in the *Guardian* linked the two domains of decline:

The grief - stricken tributes of the past two days to the former England football captain Bobby Moore represent something more than a general mourning for a great sporting hero...detectable within them is another kind of mourning: for a world as it seems looking back, when things sometimes used to go right... Our streets are less safe than they were 30 years ago, our world reputation less glowing, our monarchy less revered, our sportsmen less sporting, our educational system less educational. The word of an

English gentlemen is no longer his bond in the way it was when England conquered the world. What this evidence really describes is a nation ill at ease with itself, fed up with the present and fretful about the future (26th February 1993, p. 20).

The death of Englishman Bobby Moore, captain of the 1966 World Cup winning soccer team, was thus connected to broader social ills. In addition, reporting dwelt on notions of ‘England’s agony’ and ‘England’s sadness’. One reporter, writing in the *Independent* offered:

That word again. The death of Bobby Moore, England’s hero. Golden - haired, a gentle giant, a great Englishman. Sport, where Britain supports different national teams, has become one of the few areas where an uncomplicated celebration of Englishness is permissible... So England becomes a country that exists on the sports field, but not elsewhere (26th February 1993, p. 19).

The rhetoric surrounding the death of Bobby Moore centred around a sense of loss and regret that times had changed - for the worse. Britain was no longer at ease with itself. Moore was juxtaposed with present sports stars, and framed as a 'heroic symbol of a golden age'. Continuing this view the *Observer* noted:

Amid the coarsening of spirit that has been manifest in this country over the past couple of decades, there is a measure of reassurance in finding so much of the nation so deeply affected by the death of Bobby Moore...there was a pervasive sense of loss, an unforced emotion that suggested many had been taken unawares by the depth of their feelings (28th March 1993, p. 23).

This downcast tone extended to a series of disasters in football and beyond. Defeat in a World Cup qualification match in Oslo proved to be a painful experience for the English. Media reporting dwelt on the 'country's day of sporting shame' (*Daily Mirror*, 3rd June 1993, p. 1) and, in

the rhetoric of the tabloids, the defeat was viewed simply as the 'end of the world' (*Daily Star*, 3rd June 1993, p. 1). The Oslo debacle was represented as a 'symptom of a deeper crisis' (*Daily Star*, 3rd June 1993, p. 1) and the media launched into a critical review of the perceived malaise in English soccer. One newspaper posed the following question:

Where are our heroes now? The national disillusion about English football and cricket goes beyond disappointment at humiliating defeat. The heart of the matter is the failure of England's sporting stars to inspire, either by their talent or their behaviour (Independent, 12th June 1993, p. 16).

Following the Norwegian defeat, the *Sun* explicitly made this linkage when commenting on the general state of sport and politics:

Did you wake up this morning with pride in your heart? With the feeling that it is good to be British? You probably didn't. And that's a crying shame. For the one

thing this country has never lacked spirit...What has gone wrong is that we lack someone to inspire us, to bring out the best in us. Whether it is football, cricket or politics, we seem to be on a losing run. Graham Taylor manages a football team that doesn't want to play for him... John Major is not only failing to lead the country... he also heads a Tory party more divided then at any time for twenty years. Why is Britain playing below form, why are our heads down? Because we are not being led (11th June 1993, p. 40).

Other parallels were made between the fortunes of the Prime Minister and the English soccer team manager. The *Independent* treated it as a front page lead in which the fortunes and fate of the respective leaders were discussed. Such sentiments also found expression in editorials. In a general account of the perceived mess the country was in the *Daily Telegraph* concluded:

The morale of the British people is at a low ebb. A range of unrelated

misfortunes...coalesce to create a sense of national failure: lost football and cricket matches, strife in the schools system, recession, impotence in the face of horror in Bosnia, terrorist attacks and crime on the streets at home....Underlying the mood of gloom there is the indisputable fact that the government has not been conducted with much skill or conviction in recent months (11th June 1993, p. 22).

These sporting disasters were also linked to the defeats that the sports loving, cricket buff Prime Minister, John Major was having. Cartoons depicted a hapless Major trying to deal with an assorted range of issues. In one cartoon Major is keeping goal in a soccer match with shots raining in on him. The soccer balls highlight the political problems besetting his administration. In another example, Major was depicted in a cricket context with headlines asking 'Follow what Leader' and being given 'Out' by public opinion. Trivial incidents like the erosion of coastal land that led to the fall of a hotel into the sea

were depicted as symbolising the fall of Britain in general (*Daily Mail*, 12th June 1993, p. 9). Right-wing political commentators linked the precarious hotel with the general cultural malaise. Take the following examples provided by William Rees-Mogg: 'Teetering on the edge: like Scarborough's doomed Holbeck Hall Hotel, John Major, Graham Taylor, George Carey and Graham Gooch are all in danger of losing their footing as fissures appear around them' (*Daily Mail*, 12th June 1993, p. 9).

Angst about the fortunes of the cricket team spread to a general examination of the state of British sport and the leadership provided. One writer in the *Guardian* claimed that 'a lack of character has caused England's current dismal standing in modern sport' (*Guardian*, 23rd June 1993, p. 15). The *Observer*, in an article entitled 'Sport in Crisis', similarly equated failure with sporting leadership. The writer concluded:

Sport has always been a source of pride to Britain. We gave the world most of its greatest games and many of those we did not

invent, we codified and regulated. The story of sport in the past half - century is symptomatic of the state of the nation. We are not as influential as we once were and when things go wrong rarely does anyone do the decent thing... There is little honour and a lot of greed...Why has our sport turned so sour in this summer of discontent? (27th June 1993, p. 41).

These sporting disasters were paralleled by the political woes facing the government. Underpinning the Maastricht revolt were questions of sovereignty and national identity. The sense of decline, crisis, despondency and malaise was compounded by further defeats for the English football team against the United States of America and, in late 1993, against the Netherlands. A series of vitriolic headlines called for the manager to be sacked and again declared that defeat against the USA was a national disgrace, humiliation and a stain on national honour (*Guardian*, 11th June 1992, p. 20; *Daily Express*, 11th June 1993, p. 8; *Daily Star*, 11th June 1993, p. 44; *Daily Mirror*, 11th June

1993, p. 42; *Daily Telegraph*, 11th June 1993, p. 40).

Sporting defeat was repeatedly taken as indicative of national decline. A commentary in the *Daily Mail* on the defeat against the USA alludes to more general societal issues:

We lose to America in football; to Brussels in European policy; to Japan in industry; to secularism in the church; our economic policy has been a disaster. When the time comes to choose successors to these leaders I expect we shall be looking for birds of a brighter feather (12th June 1993, p. 9).

Media representation of defeats in the male versions of football, rugby and cricket ascribed a greater significance beyond that of discrete sporting events, pointing to a range of emotions playing out in the nation as a whole. Discussing this ‘crisis of self-confidence’, Rees-Mogg returned to the nostalgic theme when he concluded:

The lack of confidence eats into our national life... Before we ran

the world we produced Shakespeare, who is the world’s greatest poet and Isaac Newton, who may be the world’s greatest scientist. We also gave birth to the United States. But it would be good for our national morale if our cricketers recovered their belief in themselves (Times, 12th August 1993, p. 16).

This sense of angst, coupled with a nostalgic longing for what was presumed to be a golden age, dovetailed well with a patriotic fervour that emphasised the virtues of Englishness and pillorying of foreigners. Picking up on Major’s ‘back to basics’ theme, cabinet ministers delivered a series of speeches. The education minister argued that each school should ‘fly the flag’. The sports minister argued for Physical Education to have compulsory games that would instil the virtues that Victorians had argued were integral to muscular Christianity and the games cult. In a *Times* editorial entitled ‘The Right Kind of Basic’, the writer linked sport, the nation and Major’s policies:

We lose to America in football; to Brussels in European policy; to Japan in industry; to secularism in the church; our economic policy has been a disaster

Britons still care deeply about their nation's sporting performance and are unsettled by disasters of the sort afflicting the English cricket team in the West Indies. The sports in which the nation now excels tend to be those in which private schools traditionally specialise: rugby, sailing and rowing. Meanwhile, hundreds of potential sportsmen in state schools are missing their chance because of foolish ideology and misplaced priorities. Mr Major could hardly ask for a better basic to head back to (8th April 1994, p. 17).

Defence minister Michael Portillo mapped out what he termed 'the new British disease': 'the self - destructive sickness of national cynicism'. Some sections of the British press reinforced these sentiments. The *Times*, for example, noted that 'the current mood of national self - doubt cannot be addressed without a comprehensive debate on Britishness itself' (January 18th 1994, p. 19). Such self - doubt was not confined to national identity.

Mid to Late 1990's: 'Football's Coming Home', Fantasy Shields and a Yearning for Past Glories

The interconnections between sport and national identity during the period discussed above did not necessarily indicate that Brexit was inevitable. The roots were discernible – and would become more so as the decade progressed. In research conducted with colleagues Emma Poulton and Cath Possamai, we focused on the Euro 96 men's football tournament, and our analysis reinforced the general picture outlined above (Maguire & Poulton, 1999; Maguire et al., 1999a; 1999b). Examining the relationships between sport, national identity and the media in the English and German press we conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of the identity politics evident in media coverage of the championships. We also considered the specifically English position relative to their/its continental European neighbours. A range of national stereotyping, I/we images, established/outsider identities/relations, national habitus codes and Europeanization processes and

politics were evident in the media coverage of Euro 96. We concluded that English media coverage of football was being used to reassert an intense form of national identity discourse in opposition to further European integration. Our findings pointed to the existence of a nostalgic agenda based around ethnic assertiveness / defensiveness on the part of the English press. References to the Second World War and the English World Cup victory of 1966 were common. In contrast, we found that the German press preferred to focus on the contemporary European political situation to assert their superiority over England—and to take further satisfaction from the victorious performance of their football team.

This work spurred further work by myself. Some 10 years later, I examined Anglo-Polish media coverage of football matches between England and Poland (Maguire et al., 2009). While the European Union had by then enlarged to include countries from eastern Europe, and there was now a 'new' Europe, old games were still being played. A comparative qualitative discourse analysis of

British/English and Polish media coverage of England vs Poland football matches revealed that reporting on these matches was again characterised by nostalgia, an ethnic assertiveness / defensiveness, and a wilful stereotyping of opponents. We understood this as an active construction of ‘fantasy group charisma’ based on both the ‘invention of traditions’ and, at a deeper level, the habitus codes that underpin the ‘national character’ of European nations. More broadly, the concepts of ‘imagined communities’ and ‘invented traditions’ are of considerable help in making sense of identity politics as does Elias’s examination of the socio-genesis of more deeply sedimented national character and habitus codes (Maguire et al., 2009). Arguably, it was these deeply rooted habitus codes that provided the seedbed for the sentiments expressed in the lead-up to the Brexit decision of 2016 and, as will be shown remained evident in the more recent Euro 2020 tournament.

Similar work subsequently undertaken by other researchers tended to bear out the analysis outlined above. For example, Vincent et al. (2010)

examined English newspaper narratives about the English men’s football team in the FIFA 2006 World Cup in order to gain insight into how English national identity was portrayed. The newspapers relied on a reductionist, essentialist construction to elicit an emotional connection with a homogeneous form of English national identity. For the authors the narratives seemed designed to galvanize support for the English team through references to historic English military victories and speeches, and served to rekindle images of bygone, mythical, and imperialistic eras. Newspaper coverage also reverted to an ‘us vs them’ invective. In a follow up study, Vincent and Hill (2011) focused on English media coverage of 2010 World Cup in South Africa. Examining the *Sun*, a populist and right wing newspaper, (which would also be a strident advocate for Brexit), they revealed that narratives about the English team’s and supporters’ performance of English identity drew on selectively favourable aspects of English history. The English team’s failure to live up to the nation’s ‘finest hour’, and justify the patriotic following of their supporters in South

Africa and ‘back home’ was met with scathing, vitriolic criticism. Similarly, research conducted by Griggs and Gibbon (2014) compared representations of Fabio Capello, an Italian managing the England national team, with those of English coach Harry Redknapp. Their thematic analysis revealed that journalists often adopted a ‘Little Englander’ mentality in their attitudes towards Capello, due to his Italian nationality. Contrary to this, the press frequently depicted Redknapp as a typically ‘English’ working-class hero linking him with nostalgic references to a bygone ‘golden era’ of English soccer.

These findings illustrate the key ways in which the English press continued to present English national identity via their soccer-related coverage as insular and rooted in the past (see also Gibbons & Lusted (2007) and Gibbons, 2011). Media coverage of this kind reflected and reinforced the wider discourse that would, in 2015, be promoted by the Leave campaign, and contribute to a majority in England (but not in London or UK university towns and cities) to vote to exit the European Union. This brings

us to the current picture regarding media coverage of the most recent Euro 2020 men's football tournament. How are the fortunes of the English national team represented now that Brexit has seemingly been secured?

2021: Post Brexit insecurities and the 'thin vencer of englishness

Despite the long shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic, the English had a heightened sense of optimism about their national team's chances of success in the Euro 2020 competition. Euro 2020 had been postponed a year and was being played across Europe, with several matches due to be played in London. Noted causes for optimism included reaching the semi-final stage of the FIFA 2018 World Cup. In addition, the manager, Gareth Southgate, had proven success with the team, and was articulating a model of Englishness that was claimed to reflect both the enduring features of England and the changing nature of the nation (Gibbons, 2021). In a letter defending the decision of the team to continue to 'take the

knee' as a symbolic gesture of solidarity against all forms of racism and discrimination, Southgate wrote an open letter entitled 'Dear England'. He wrote of the inherited values of serving the nation and of loyalty to 'Queen and country'. He went on:

There's something I tell our players before every England game, and the reason that I repeat it is because I really believe it with all my heart. I tell them that when you go out there, in this shirt, you have the opportunity to produce moments that people will remember forever. You are a part of an experience that lasts in the collective consciousness of our country... For many of that younger generation, your notion of Englishness is quite different from my own. I understand that, too. I understand that on this island, we have a desire to protect our values and traditions — as we should — but that shouldn't come at the expense of introspection and progress. Regardless of your upbringing and politics, what is clear is that we

are an incredible nation — relative to our size and population — that has contributed so much to the arts, science and sport. We do have a special identity and that remains a powerful motivator. (Southgate, 2021).

Despite Southgate's letter, the team's symbolic gesture of 'taking the knee' before the kick-off of games had proven controversial, with some fans booing the action of their own team. In the lead-up to the opening matches, media discourse reflected on both the open letter from Southgate, the booing by sections of their fans, and the ongoing 'culture war' that this was said to represent. Julian Coman, in the *Guardian* noted:

Southgate's letter, by acknowledging the claims of the future as well as well as the past on English identity, offers a resonant counter-narrative. Of course, if this gifted England team manages to fulfil its potential in a tournament that now has an unavoidable political dimension, Johnson will attempt to bask in

the limelight. But it will be the other, newer England “wot won it”. That country is a work in progress. Its dimensions, hopes and desires are more vividly in our minds as Euro 2020 finally begins, thanks to Southgate’s humility and understanding (11th June 2021, np)¹.

Coman refers here to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, one of the key players in Brexit and the ongoing culture war, who had expressed, at best, lukewarm support for the team’s actions. Continuing this same theme, Barnay Ronay observed that ‘it was inevitable the so-called culture war would invade football’s very public oppositions...For the first time the England team and manager are decisively and unarguably of the left... there is a schism between players, manager and the team’s core fanbase’ (*Guardian*, 12th June 2021). This schism, between portrayals of Southgate and the England team as representing a more inclusive and diverse

Englishness, and the actions of the ‘core fanbase’, was to prove to be a key feature of Euro 2020.

Here, attention will focus on matches that the England team played in their progress to the final of Euro 2020. Several features stand out in media coverage. These include the ongoing debate about Englishness and what the team was claimed to represent; the mixture of boos and applause to ‘taking the knee’; the prominent booing of the national anthems of opposing teams, particularly Germany; and the behaviour of fans more broadly in terms of stadium security and online abuse of black players following the defeat to Italy in the final. What stands out is the juxtaposition of media attention to the booing of the team ‘taking the knee’, and the relative absence of concern regarding booing of opposing team’s national anthems. In the shadow of Brexit, English media commentary made reference not only to how success would be seen as a vindication for the Referendum, but also how European media would be supporting Italy in the final, in response to the perceived arrogance of the slogan

‘football’s coming home’ and the UK’s exit from the European Union. Some illustrative examples from the English media coverage will have to suffice for present purposes, but a more extensive and comparative study of European media would be warranted.

In the group stages of the Euro 2020 tournament, England played Croatia, Scotland and the Czech Republic. English media coverage, as noted above, highlighted the initial booing by sections of the crowd to ‘taking the knee’ but tended to note, only briefly, but not comment on the booing of the national anthems of opposing teams. English media coverage of the Scotland match played to the usual stereotypes of drunken Scots ‘invading’ London. In the *Guardian* it was observed:

It’s a funny time when I feel so little jeopardy over a game with the auld enemy. And that’s no bolshy English exceptionalism, it’s just a reflection of the protagonists. But... we’ve been here before and really all anyone English will want is a win. If it’s 1-0 after 75 minutes, anything’s possible.

¹ Media examples that record np are drawn from LexisNexis where no page number was listed on the database.

It's going to be a fiery opening 15, that's for sure! (18th June 2021, np).

Reflecting on these stereotypes and past encounters – sporting and otherwise, the *Guardian* correspondents appeared keen to downplay these issues. Jonathan Liew observed:

The truth is that for all the various confected minor controversies that have surfaced this week – fuelled largely by the media and nationalist politicians – any real large-scale footballing animosity between these two nations exists primarily in the form of nostalgia. By and large – and to perhaps a greater extent than has been true for almost a century – England doesn't really care about Scotland any more. And increasingly, the reverse is also true... England's best chance of winning on Friday night lies in turning the volume down rather than turning it up, stripping out layers of meaning rather than lashing them on, treating this as business rather than personal (17th June 2021, np).

Despite such sentiments, other media outlets such as the *Daily Mail* were more keen to highlight the behaviour of Scottish fans. Take the following example:

*Scotland football fans partied through the night in central London...Thousands of boozed-up fans draped in flags and wearing Scotland jerseys were seen chanting 'we hate f***ing England' as they jumped into the William Shakespeare fountain in Leicester Square, while others partied hard in Hyde Park - some naked - ahead of the 8pm match on Friday* (17th June 2021, np).

In keeping with other games, the national anthem of Scotland was loudly booed. English success at the group stage ensured that the team would continue to play at Wembley. Their next match would be against Germany. Echoing some of the sentiments relating to the Euro 96 tournament, left-wing media commentary sought to downplay some issues, consigning them to the past (*Guardian*, 26th June 2021). Indeed, Philip

Olterman, a German academic, cited in the *Guardian* 27th June 2021, with the headline 'The German-England clash isn't what it used to be – thankfully' claimed that the 'patriotic hubris and old footballing rivalries are harder to sustain in a world becoming more closely connected'.

Such optimism seems misplaced. Despite this commentary, other reports indicated that English fans singing the anti-German song 'Ten German Bombers' would face being banned from the stadia. Right-wing newspapers, though more subtle in their treatment of Anglo-German football and broader military and political rivalries, continued to draw links between the game and their anti-German / EU sentiments that had been a feature of media coverage during the Euro 1996 tournament (Maguire, et al, 1999a., 1999b). Take this extensive lead commentary in the ardently anti-EU oriented *Daily Mail* penned by Dominic Lawson:

There are strange parallels between German leadership in Europe and the recent regression of its once all- conquering national football

team, which might give encouragement, if you believe in political auguries. This is heightened by the fact that the German football coach, Joachim Löw, and the country's quadruple election winning Chancellor, Angela Merkel, are both standing down this year, having been in command for almost exactly the same - remarkably long - period.... without wishing to trade too much in national stereotyping, methodical German efficiency on the football field seems to manifest itself most when it comes to that most plan-able eventuality in the tightest games: the penalty shootout. With any luck, just as the other EU countries have recently defeated Berlin's ploys without recourse to one of those interminable late-night haggling sessions, the England team will take advantage of a German side in temporary decline, without need of extra time: still less a penalty shootout. Otherwise it might be a pleasant, if fleeting, improvement in fortunes for that passionate football fan, Angela Merkel (28th June 2021, np).

Though the match proved successful for the English, the prominent booing and anti-German sentiment was all too evident – though media coverage was more muted. At the end of the tournament, Southgate, the English manager, reflected on this game and acknowledged:

We have so many things here that we should be proud of that we probably underestimate that. We are always looking at the negatives of our own country and yet we have got so much to be proud of and so much talent coming through in all industries really. For an island our size we've got an incredible influence on the world and we've got to keep that in a positive way. There are historic things that we should be proud of. We've had unbelievable inventions in this country. People have tried to invade us and we've had the courage to hold that back. You can't hide that some of the energy in the stadium against Germany was because of that. I never mentioned that to the players, but I know that's part

of what that story was (emphasis added) (Daily Mail, 9th July, 2021, np).

Indeed, such 'energy' was part of the crowd. Prior to the game, section of the English fans were intent on singing songs referencing past wars. As reported in the *Daily Mail*:

Excitable fans let off red and white flares as they massed outside the stadium. With no alcohol allowed to be brought inside the stadium, thousands stood in Wembley Way drinking from cans and soaking up the atmosphere. Two German supporters draped in their national flag were ignored as the fans were more interested in singing terrace songs, some referencing the war. But when a larger group walked past waving a black, yellow and red flag they were met boos and showered with beer prompting police to escort them to the ground. An inflatable Spitfire was tossed among the crowd with one fan climbing up a tree to lead the chants (29th July 2021, np).

Following this match, England played against Ukraine. Media reporting focused on the role of a German referee and his potential bias. Nevertheless, in the comments section of the *Guardian* one fan observed:

Can anyone remember the World Cup in 1990?... One thing it wasn't was a celebration of 10 years of Thatcher...Plus she was gone a few months after. Likewise John Major in 1996. I really think many people can't understand that supporting the English football team does not equate to supporting the current UK Government. Certainly, cheering for England in these Euros doesn't automatically mean you're getting behind Boris and his Barmy Brexit. But since the vote in 2016 the political and social climate has, alas, been different and more unpleasant. Very different to back in 1990, and a tournament that felt like a celebration of European-ness. I can simultaneously feel uncomfortable with some of the behaviour of England fans, and some of the people who associate English success with

English nationalism, and at the same time be pleased for the team, for Southgate, and for all the more enlightened and sensible supporters (3rd July 2021, np).

Note here the cross reference to Brexit and the complex relationship between Englishness, the political and social climate and support for the England team. Such sentiments continued to surface in media coverage throughout the tournament. The Danish national anthem was roundly booed in the semi-final, prompting UEFA to begin an investigation about English fan behaviour. This would eventually result in the English FA being fined. Similar booing was recorded in the final played against Italy. Likewise, media reports described ticketless fans invading the stadium in advance of the game: 'unprecedented public disorder' was reported. Post tournament, UEFA would impose a one match ban on English fans attending a home game.

English newspapers also began to highlight that European media were carrying reports that fellow Europeans were supporting Italy, further enhancing an us versus them framing of sport and

politics. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Italian media were mentioning such reports. Drawing on this Italian media coverage the *Daily Mail* summarised it thus:

'All of Europe supports us': Italy's papers brag that 'The Brexit Effect' will mean Roberto Mancini's men have huge support against England in Euro 2020 final... Italian papers have not been shy to bring Brexit into the equation as they urge their long-unbeaten footballers and tennis star Matteo Berrettini to take one more step in London, winning Wimbledon and Euro 2020 to seal a momentous day for their nation. The paper notes the 'Brexit Effect' has the EU swaying towards Italy and Ursula Von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, and European Council chief Charles Michel are among the major political names hoping the Azzurri will win, according to La Stampa. 'Europe Cheers on Italy', it adds (11th July, 2021, np).

Similar sentiments were reported as surfacing in the French media. The

Daily Mail (11th July 2021) noted that the ‘French paper *L’Equipe* reinforces the theme of Europe rooting for Italy, claiming that 69 per cent of French fans will be behind the visitors’. It would be important for further research to examine how and in what ways mainland European media reported on the success of the Italian team.

In England, the loss of the final to Italy on penalties was compounded by some of those who missed being black English players. The online racial abuse of these players brought into sharp relief one feature that this analysis has sought to highlight: the contrast between what the team was portrayed as representing, and what the actual behaviour of the core fan groups of English supporters. Observer columnist Kenan Malik noted during the tournament, ‘It’s this thinness of Englishness that has made football its primary symbol’ (*Guardian*, 5th July, 2021, np).

Conclusion: *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*

Some things about Englishness and the role of football in English

culture remain consistent even as change has occurred over the thirty or more years. Identity politics tied to increasing Europeanisation and globalisation processes among other elements, have been ‘dislocating’ for the English. One response has been engender a sense of unease and a feeling that one does not belong. The study of sport in general and football in particular can provide a powerful portrayal of identity politics at work. Male football appears to play a crucial role in the construction and representation of English national identity. Defeats on the playing field are represented as a kind of litmus test for the nation’s decline. One reaction to defeat - on and off the playing field - has been a ‘defensive little Englander’ response. Another consequence was the nostalgic juxtapositioning of this present reality with some mythical golden political and sporting age of the past.

Yet, there were other pluralising processes at work in the early 1990’s. For example, arguing that ‘Golfers show Britain a way out of the bunker’, an editorial in *The Independent* advocated the demise of

British teams and the development of European teams in several sports. Following the success of the Spanish player Jose-Maria Olazabal - which was seen to be greeted with enthusiasm by British golf fans - the *Independent* concluded that ‘Suddenly, even in the most xenophobic shire clubhouse, we are all Europeans’ (*The Independent*, 12th April 1994, p. 15). This somewhat optimistic view overlooked, however, the role that sport plays in binding the people’s of Europe to dominant national habituses and a competitive hierarchy of nation – states (Gibbons, 2021; Maguire, et al., 1999a; 1999b).

Such factors clearly underpinned the 1994 European Union summit, with the British holding out against the then other eleven members with regard to joining the Euro. A cartoon in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* neatly encapsulated the issues of power, nationhood and Europe integration and, co-incidentally, the role that sport plays in this regard. Both President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl were dressed in soccer outfits, with the latter holding a football [representing the Euro] displaying

the stars of the EU: the caption read ‘Waiting for the team’ - that is the UK government (Maguire, 1993a). These sentiments, expressed in this cartoon and those highlighted earlier regarding British sporting and political disasters, would remain part of the identity politics surrounding moves towards both a common European home and unified European sports teams during the late 1990’s and into the early part of this century. But, the hope for greater UK involvement was not borne out. Deeply rooted English habitus codes underpinning the clamour for Brexit would find expression in media coverage and further European integration would be spurned. English Brexiteers got what they wanted: they had ‘taken back control’. In the process, the thin veneer of Englishness remains unresolved and the UK may yet splinter apart – with the Scots demanding their own independence and Northern Ireland reuniting with Ireland as a whole. Euro 2020 media coverage of the English national team highlights the bind the nation is in. The team may represent a more open, diverse, cosmopolitan *civic identity* of Englishness, while

a section of fans holds on to notions of nationhood rooted in a longing for a nostalgic, invented, imagined and mediated past. One on-line comment received by the *Guardian* neatly captures this dialectic:

It’s a shame that I can’t support England in the tournament’, comments bluebirds. ‘The England team are a likeable bunch, multi-cultural, vibrant and supporters of social justice issues. Both the team and manager are supporters of anti-discrimination. The fans on the other hand have demonstrated their knuckle-headed yobbery again. Booing their own team taking the knee. Booing the opposition’s national anthem. Cheering the sight of a little German girl crying... Johnson is already on the bandwagon. This will be painted as a Brexit Britain win’ (3rd July 2021, np).

This paper has thus offered an illustrative account of a long-standing seam in the media coverage of politics and football. I argue it warrants further in-depth comparative analysis

of European media, particularly as the fractious relationship between the EU and the UK further disintegrates, particularly regarding the Northern Ireland Protocol and as a fragile Englishness continues to find expression in football (Blain et al., 1993). Nation - state patriot games, expressed through football, and framed by the media, are here to stay for a little while yet!

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