Rituals of Sport

The Ritual

Humans are unusual creatures. Unlike most other animals and even the higher mammals, human interact with each other on the basis of shared understanding. In social life, the way an act is communally understood determines what it actually is. The intentions which are imputed to an act on the basis of the shared meanings of a group define what that act is and, crucially, what its real effects on the social group will be. As John Searle has recently put it: ‘for social facts, the attitude we take toward the phenomenon is partly constitutive of the phenomena’ (Searle 1995: 34). Searle notes that because they are constituted by the definitions which are put on them, social facts have ‘no analogue among physical facts’ (Searle 1995: 34) and this also leads to a further important feature of social facts. They ‘can be created by explicit performative utterances’ (Searle 1995: 34). Thus, the phrase ‘I appoint you chairman’ so long as it is understood by those to whom it is directed has a determinate effect in the social world. A definition induces certain social actions and, thereby, creates a social reality in and of itself. In his famous tract for a Wittgensteinian and hermeneutic social science, Peter Winch (1977) gave the example of a cyclist, the raising of whose hand was taken to mean that he was turning right. The signal was a physical act but it became socially efficacious, instructing following motorists to slow down, because the motorists and the cyclist understood what raising a hand meant in this context. The meaningfulness of social life does not in any way imply that social life is reducible to merely individual interpretations. Reality is not what any particular individual takes it to be but it does consist of what the group members together agree it to be. Social relations only are what they are in virtue of what the humans engaged in them mutually take them to be. Shared understanding are critical feature of human social interaction.
If humans interact with each other and perform social practices on the basis of shared understandings which describe the significance of these acts, then humans must publicly agree upon these understandings. Shared understandings – which define what any act in fact is - are not wired into human biology; they are not instinctive. They have to be learnt and re-learnt. Consequently, the members of each social group have to confirm their mutual understanding of their practices with other members of the group. Group members have to check continually that the understandings they have of their practices are shared by others. If understandings are not compatible, then group members will act in ways which will be incomprehensible to others and will cause the dissolution of the group. Social relations persist only so long as those engaged in them act towards each other on the basis of recognised understandings, even if those understandings are often taken for granted by the parties. Although he is constantly disparaged for his putative objectivism, Durkheim provided one of the most compelling accounts of the way in which social groups re-constitute themselves by re-affirming their shared understandings of themselves. Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is a profound sociological account of ritual which, nearly a century after its publication, still provides one of the most fruitful resources for comprehending these social events. In that work, Durkheim argued that the ritual sustains the social solidarity of aboriginal clans in Australia and indeed the solidarity of all social groups. For most of the year, aboriginal clans were engaged in the profane activity of hunting and gathering during which time they would fissure into smaller groups but, periodically, the clan would gather together and engage in ecstatic rituals in which they would worship their totemic god. Durkheim appositely noted that since the totem which the clanspeople worshipped represented their own social group, whose reality they felt viscerally in these ecstatic ritualistic moments when the clan was physically congregated, aborigines, in fact, worshipped their own social group, the clan, in their
rituals. The physical sensations which aborigines experienced in the ritual and which they attributed to their god was, in fact, the power of their social group which was amassed ecstatically around them. Indeed, they did more than simply worship this social god. Through their participation in these heightened moments of collective effervescence, the clanspeople recreated this god, their society for themselves. Only insofar as the clan gathered together periodically, reaffirming its existence which was represented by the totem, did this social group exist at all. Without these periodic congregations in which the individuals who are members of a social group mutually recognise themselves as a group and enact group membership, social groups cannot continue to exist.

A society can neither create itself nor recreate itself without at the same time creating an ideal. This creation is not a sort of work of supererogation for it, by which it would complete itself, being already formed; it is the act by which it is periodically made and remade. (Durkheim 1954:422)

For Durkheim, the ritual inculcates a certain idea of society into the minds of its members, which idea is essential to that social group. The group exists only if individuals recognise this idea of society and act in ways which this shared understanding enjoins. However, this ideal does not impose itself upon individuals automatically or inevitably, as Durkheim seemed to suggest in much of his early work, in which society was given autonomous existence. Rather, this ideal has to be recreated by the individuals. The ritual constitutes the key site for this recreation. As Durkheim emphasises, this ritualistic recreation is not otiose. It is essential that individuals gather together and celebrate their membership of a unified social group if that group is to exist. The implication is clear. Without periodic ritual interaction, a social group fragments into profane and separate existence. Without ritual, the social group ceases to exist.

_Sporting Rituals_
Since human social relations are distinctively constituted by the very definitions which those people involved in them put upon them, ritual is an essential and universal element of human social life. In his recent work on ritual, Rappaport (2000) analysed the role of the specifically religious ritual in human evolution, arguing in Durkheimian fashion, that the ritual constitutes the central point of human social life, explaining the adaptive flexibility of human social groups. For Rappaport, as for Durkheim, social relations are ‘indexically’ demonstrated in the ritual. The participation in the ritual demonstrates in and of itself the social relation between to people. By this, he means that mere participation in a ritual commits group members to each other.

For instance, if one Maring casually said to another whom he happened to be visiting, ‘I’ll help you when next you go to war’ it would not be clear whether this was to be taken as a vague statement of intent, as a prediction of what he would be likely to do, or as a promise, nor would it necessarily be clear what might be meant by help. To dance this message in a ritual, however, makes it clear to all concerned that a pledge to help is undertaken and it is conventionally understood that that help entails fighting. Ritual, this is to say, not only ensures the correctness of performative enactment, but also makes the performatives it carries explicit. (Rappaport 2000:116)

Ritual indicates commitment to the group. However, in his opening definitions of the ritual, he excludes ‘games’ as a proper form of ritual because their outcomes are uncertain and they thus fail his formality criterion, where the ritual elements are known and unchanging. In addition, since ‘games’ involve winners and losers, they do not unify social groups which, according to Rappaport, is one of the other key defining functions of the ritual. The central reason for Rappaport’s desire to exclude the sporting ritual from his analysis of ritual *per se* is that he probably rightly believes that the specifically religious ritual was fundamental to the course of human evolution and he is interested in how this ritual form influenced the adaptation of human society. Thus, it is entirely valid that, for his argument, he should exclude the sporting ritual from consideration. However, that internal validity does not mean that his objections to the status of games as rituals are in themselves valid. Although religious rituals certainly
aim at unifying the church that celebrates communally in them, the unity of the church in no way implies equality. On the contrary, most religious rituals consciously vindicate social and gender hierarchies and, indeed, celebrate them. The division of winner and loser in sporting rituals is simply another way by which social hierarchy is demonstrated, vindicated and celebrated. Moreover, although a hierarchy is established between the teams in the sporting ritual, both teams are unified by their understanding of what competition involves and the virtues that constitute a winner. Rappaport’s claim that the uncertainty of the sporting ritual also denies its status as a true ritual is problematic. There are many rituals with religious dimensions, which Rappaport himself cites as proper rituals, such as potlatch or Big Man ceremonies, where the outcome is not certain; it is unclear who will establish themselves as the Big Man before the sacrifices have taken place. Moreover, the uncertainty of the sporting ritual is exaggerated. It is true that the winner is not known (and this uncertainty induces excitement in the participants) but that there will be a winner and a loser is a certainty and the criterion of winning and losing is always formally known beforehand. Sport is a form of ritual and as such it is part of that aspect of human existence – the religious ritual more generally – which Rappaport rightly and indeed, brilliantly highlights as essential to human social life and evolution.

Against Rappaport, sports have always constituted a very important social ritual in all human societies alongside other more obviously cosmologically oriented rituals (Huizinga 1949: 5), though in fact the distinction between the two is not often discernible: ‘There is no distinction whatsoever between the marking out of a space for a sacred purpose and marking it out for the purposes of sheer play’ (Huizinga 1949: 20). Archaeologists have found traces of games in the earliest civilisations and anthropologists among the Kung bushmen of the Kalahari desert have recorded betting games in which male hunters will participate. Sports provide an important ritualistic
arena in which the members of any social groups can express their understandings and affirm and re-negotiate their social relations with each other. Since social relations are constituted by these understandings, sporting rituals like any other ritual do not have the subordinate and superfluous position in human life which is often imputed to them. In the sporting ritual, the social relations of particular social groups are re-affirmed and since these social relations have an economic aspect, the economic reality of a particular society is also re-constituted in the sporting ritual. Sporting rituals are indivisibly linked to economic practices embedded in social networks and they will necessarily re-affirm these practices. It is wrong to claim that the economic reality or the mode of production crudely determines the kinds of sporting rituals which occur. Sporting ritual reaffirm social relations which inevitably involve an economic dimension. The central role of the sporting ritual in the recreation of social groups can be demonstrated by examining two prominent historic examples, the Roman spectacle and contemporary European football.

Two Historical Examples

The Roman Spectacle

Like the Greek games, the gladiatorial combats of classical Rome originated as an element in a wider religious rite; they were initially associated with funerals where the combats – and the subsequent deaths – were intended to honour the deceased. The first recorded gladiatorial combat took place in 264BC in honour of an aristocrat’s dead father and involved only three pairs of gladiators (Hopkins 1983: 4). Over the next two centuries, the scale and frequency of gladiatorial shows steadily increased so that in 65 BC Julius Caesar organised a combat of 320 pairs of gladiators in an elaborate funeral
rite for this father (Hopkins 1983: 4). Developing from this funerary origin, the spectacles which occurred in the amphitheatres of most towns and cities throughout the empire eventually consisted of three defined events; the execution of criminals often by wild animals, wild animal hunts and, finally, the combats themselves.

For the patricians and later the emperors, the gladiatorial spectacles were an effective way of gaining the political good will of the population; indeed, in many towns the organisation of spectacles was a form of compulsory public donation by the rich. Aristocrats also employed the spectacles as a means of asserting their superiority over rival patricians since the scale of the spectacle denoted their status. Recognising the political significance of the spectacles in gaining popular support, the emperors gradually arrogated the right to hold these events. The first emperor, Augustus, restricted the number of spectacles which patricians could hold and as the emperor replaced the patricians as the primary sponsor of the spectacles, the spectacles became more elaborate taking on their mature form (Hopkins 1983: 6). For instance, in 80 AD, the emperor Titus organised a spectacle in which between 8 and 9,000 wild and exotic animals were killed in a single day (Hopkins 1983: 9). Eventually, emperors ruled that they alone could organise spectacles in Rome itself. The monopolisation of Roman spectacle by the emperor was an indexical demonstration of the eclipse of the patrician class and the transformation of an oligarchical republic into an absolutist state which the emperor and the army dominated. The populace now no longer demonstrated their allegiance to aristocratic sponsors but to the emperor alone.

Through huge spectacles, involving exotic beasts imported from the furthest reachest of the empire, emperors demonstrated their absolute authority. ‘indexically’. In the course of the games, criminals were often thrown to exotic wild animals (Hopkins 1983: 11), which would themselves be killed in subsequent hunting displays within the arena. This process ritualistically equated criminals with the status of mere beasts and
was as a powerful statement of social hierarchy. The Roman spectacle was a graphic
demonstration of the social abjection of slaves and criminals (Auguet 1994:184;
Hopkins 1983:12). Significantly, although the crowd might plead for the life of a
gladiator who had fought well, the decision of life and death – as in the rest of Roman
life – rested with the emperor alone. The spectacles were political events in which the
power of the aristocrats and later the emperors were publicly demonstrated. In this way,
the social hierarchy was affirmed. Yet, this hierarchy could also be called into question
or even subverted for the spectacle provided a place where the populace could gather
and vent its communal displeasure at the emperor (Hopkins 1983: 15,18). In AD 195,
although Caligula silenced a protest by the crowd in the chariot circus against taxes by
threats of instant execution, the malcontent of the crowd, tangible even after it had been
reduced to silence by the threat of death, strengthened the conspirators’ resolve to
assassinate the emperor (Hopkins 1983: 16).

Through the spectacles the social hierarchy was publicly re-created by the active
participation of aristocrats or emperors and the people. Simultaneously, the shared
understandings which underpinned social practices and social relations in Roman life
were also publicly demonstrated. Although the spectacles seem gratuitous to the
modern sensibilities, only a few contemporaries such as Seneca were concerned by
them (Hopkins 1983: 3). The Roman Empire was created through sustained force of
arms over six centuries and the success of the Roman army in this period relied on the
sophisticated tactics but more particularly on the ruthless discipline imposed upon
Roman soldiers. Deserters were executed without mercy (Hopkins 1983: 1) while units
which were deemed to have performed poorly were ‘decimated’; every tenth soldier
was selected from the ranks and beaten to death by his fellows. This martial culture
based on extreme violence and self-discipline was communicated graphically through
the spectacles. The gladiatorial combats not only valorized military prowess but
gladiators were trained to embody appropriate Roman attitudes towards death. Gladiators were not expected to flinch in the face of death but rather, if they received the verdict of death from the emperor or presiding official, they were trained to kneel manfully before their victor holding his thigh and offering their throats silently to the blade. In this way, gladiators embodied the essential masculine virtues of Roman citizenship; the willingness to sacrifice one's own life for the Empire without question. Moreover, it familiarised the populace with violent death and combat even after the imposition of the Roman peace. The centrality of gladiatorial combats to Roman culture was evinced at Pompeii where graffiti recorded female affection for certain gladiators (Hopkins 1983: 21) and a baby’s bottle was found stamped with the figure of a gladiator. It has been presumed that the bottle denotes the parents’ hope that the stoically masculine virtues of the gladiator might be passed onto the child.

Although gratuitous to modern sensibilities, the Roman spectacle was not supererogatory to Roman society. It was an essential part of this civilisation because the social hierarchy and the understandings which defined social relations and practices in Rome were realised in the arena. Roman society was re-created periodically in the fervid atmosphere of the arena. The Roman spectacle was a central ritual in later Roman civilisation whereby the social hierarchy from Emperor, to citizens and down to slaves, criminals and finally animals was re-affirmed in the arena. The Emperor demonstrated his absolute authority and the populace subjected themselves indexically to this authority – or questioned it – through their active participation in the spectacle. Moreover, Emperor, citizens and indeed the slaves and gladiators demonstrated a commitment to the Roman way of life and death. The games communicated fundamental social understandings and were an expression of the hierarchical social order.
Football in Europe Today

1500 years after the collapse of the Roman empire, a new spectacle began to spread across the continent over which the Romans had ruled for nearly 600 years, taking place in many of the cities in whose arenas gladiators had once fought. From the end of the nineteenth century, originating in England, association football spread rapidly across Europe and became not only a participant sport as its English public-school developers had originally intended but an important social event for the growing urban population of the time. Reflecting the appetite of the new urban population for spectator sport, almost all the major European football clubs were established in the early twentieth century; Real Madrid, 1902, Barcelona 1899, AC Milan 1899, Juventus 1987, Bayern Munich 1900 and Olympic Marseilles 1900. From their inception until 1955, these clubs played exclusively in national or regional leagues which in the course of the twentieth century became more and more professionalised. However, in 1955, a new European competition was developed in which the champions of each nation would play each other in an international competition which became known as the European Cup. Like the Roman games, the spectacle of European football has similarly affirmed the wider social reality in which it took place. It has constituted an arena in which certain important social relations and understandings have been indexically expressed. The contemporary ritual of European football reflects and affirms the wider social regime in the manner in which the spectacles of Rome illustrated the imperial hierarchy.

As various commentators have noted, the process European integration can be usefully periodised into three distinct phases. From the 1950s, with the setting up of the three original European Communities, ECSC, Euratom and the EEC, and the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, European integration proceeded successfully but integration did not erode national sovereignties. Rather in this early period the sovereignty of the nation state was carefully preserved (see Milward 1992). The key
moment was the Luxembourg compromise of 1966 which allowed any nation to exempt itself from European policies if it so wished. As Alan Milward has demonstrated the early years of European integration did not involve the surrender of state sovereignty in the manner which functionalist theorists like Haas envisaged. In the early years, nation states engaged in European integration only to safeguard national prosperity and, at any point, they could appeal to the principle of subsidiarity. They could refuse to accept European legislation. Significantly, although the common market developed in the first era, it was limited only to the reduction of tariff and aimed only at increasing cross-border trade for consumer goods. This common market aimed at increasing the market for the various Keynesian-oriented national economies. However, by opening up the market for consumer goods but not labour and services, the national economic sovereignty of member states was not challenged. The corporatist relationship between labour, capital and the state was not threatened by putting domestic labour into direct international competition. In the 1970s, the progress of the early years of European integration faltered in the face of economic crisis and the incipient collapse of the Fordist consensus in each nation. European integration was re-invigorated again after 1986 and particularly in the 1990s. Neo-liberal measures which aimed at the creation of genuinely pan-European markets were implemented vigorously by the Commission. The turn to neo-liberalism was exemplified most strongly by the so-called Project 1992 aimed at European monetary integration and by subsequent treaties at Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice. During this period the Commission has vigorously promoted free market legislation which has tried to increase transnational competition within Europe in every economic sector. The fundamental idea behind this legislation is that for Europe to compete in the global economy, it needs to develop bigger concentrations of capital. Such concentrations will emerge through transnational competition which will force large national players to merge with companies from other member states to
produce genuinely European multinationals. Although the Commission has drafted important legislation during the 1990s, Europe in this final era is not a supranational phenomenon, even though the market has become dominant and nation-states have retreated from economic management. Europe is still politically dominated by states who legislate intergovernmentally through the Council of Ministers. However, in contrast to the early period on which Milward focuses, the sovereignty of the nation states has declined in the face of the pressures of multinational capital and the policy of de-regulation is ultimately promoted by the member states themselves who are worried about Europe’s low-term competitiveness. In this neo-liberal Europe, regions and cities within each nation have become more autonomous in attracting inward investment. Consequently, Europe today is a complex reality which has been described as ‘neo-medieval’ in that regional, national and supranational institutions now operate simultaneously, with overlapping and sometimes conflicting sovereignties.

Just as in Rome, European football has reflected and embodied this wider social regime and can be periodised into three main periods. In the first from 1955 to 1970, European competition, like the wider Communities was successfully established but the new European competition did not threaten the national leagues. Although the clubs of different nations played each other, the national leagues were still secure with the authority of the national federations, supported by UEFA, the Union of European Football Associations, remaining unchallenged. Although the Spanish and Italian leagues were open to foreigners in the 1950s, from the early 1960s national leagues excluded or severely limited the number of foreigners who could play for domestic clubs. Excluding the Spanish teams of the 1950s, the teams which competed in Europe from 1955 until the 1980s were comprised of indigenous nationals. It was interesting that reflecting the national constitution of the teams, the press coverage viewed European football as vicarious international fixtures in which the clubs
unproblematically represented their nations. Thus, in 1968 when Manchester United played Portugal at Wembley in the European Cup final, the match was viewed as an international between England and Portugal, even though several of the United players were in fact Scottish or Irish.

For this is a national occasion make no mistake. It is seen as revenge for Portugal’s World Cup defeat and Benfica’s humiliating 5-1 defeat by Manchester United…two years ago. (Green 29 May 1968:15)

Between 1955 and the early 1970s, European football was organised under an international regime in which the different national leagues were separate and sovereign. European competition was analogous to the developing Economic Community since it involved increasing cross-border trade in a particular good, football matches, but not in services or labour. The basis of production was still national but the market was expanded across national boundaries. From the early 1970s until the mid-1980s, European competition was compromised by hooliganism, corruption and poor play, echoing the wider crisis in the post-War settlement. European football went through its own period of Eurosclerosis. From 1986, however, after the nadir of the Heysel stadium disaster in which 39 Juventus fans died in a riot with Liverpool fans, European football began to organise itself on a new basis, like the European Union. The international regime was gradually replaced as European football experienced de-regulation which paralleled the wider project 1992.

The de-regulation of European football involved two major developments. From the early 1980s, the state control of broadcasting which had been hegemonic across Europe in the post-war era began to collapse in the face of technological developments and increasing competition. Neo-liberal policies in each country undid this state broadcasting system and allowed for the development of new television companies often delivered through new cable and satellite technology. Many of the old state monopolies, the BBC, ARD (Germany), TF1 (France), RAI (Italy) and TVE (Spain)
remained (in the case of TFI in privatised form) but they operated in competition with new private and satellite companies. The viability of these new private companies was dependent on attaining programming of sufficient quality that viewers would be willing to pay subscription fees for exclusive access to these channels. Sport and above all football was recognised as a prime form of content. ‘Sport absolutely overpowers film and everything else in the entertainment genre [and] football, of all sports, is number one’ (Rupert Murdoch cited in Guest and Law 1997:24). Sport and football in particular is, to use Murdoch’s term, a ‘battering ram’ by which new networks could break into and indeed create new markets for themselves (Harveson, Financial Times, 16 October 1996). Consequently from the late 1980s but particularly in the early 1990s, satellite, private and state broadcasting companies competed ferociously for exclusive rights to domestic and European football, multiplying the revenue which football could earn from television. This dramatic increase in revenue was not distributed evenly, though. Rather, consistent with the new neo-liberal hegemony the biggest football clubs across Europe were able to demand a greater share of this revenue. The big clubs attracted the large television audiences. The de-regulation of football precipitated a rapid concentration of financial and playing capital at the biggest clubs in Europe. This concentration was accelerated dramatically by a second piece of de-regulation.

From the 1960s, European football had been organised on an international basis. Each national league was sovereign and the playemarket was limited or restricted to indigenous players. From the 1970s, the biggest clubs sought to employ one or two foreign stars and the European Commission itself began to express concerns about the restrictiveness of UEFA’s regulations about foreign players. Gradually in the course of the 1980s under pressure from the Commission and the clubs, UEFA reduced the restrictions on foreign players until in 1992, three foreign players and two ‘assimilated’ players were allowed to play for a club team in a European competition. The
Commission were unsatisfied with this compromise and waited for a court case in which the legality of UEFA’s restrictions could be tested. That test case finally took place in 1995 when a Belgian footballer, Jean-Marie Bosman, took his club Standard Liege to the European Court of Justice to challenge the legality of Belgian transfer arrangements. Bosman’s transfer to Dunkerque had fallen through and Standard Liege had exercised their right to retain his services on a third of his normal pay because the club had no intention of playing him. In addition, supported by the Commission and the European players union, FIFPro, he appended a challenge against the foreign player restrictions on the grounds that they were in breach of European laws on freedom of trade. In December 1995, the European Court of Justice ruled in favour of Bosman. Out of contract transfer fees were abolished but far more significantly foreign player restrictions were outlawed. The Bosman ruling abolished all restrictions on football players who were nationals of European member states. Although certainly questioned, the restrictions on players outside the European Union remained. In abolishing the restriction on member state players, the Bosman ruling created a pan-European market for professional footballers at a stroke. This pan-European market brought the biggest European clubs together into ever closer relations with each other as they competed for the top players. Yet, while the biggest clubs were brought into ever closer competition with each other, funded by de-regulated television rights, they were able to exploit this new market situation to their advantage. They could hire star players from any part of the Union and since 1995, the biggest European clubs have been able to create unprecedented squads of international stars unfettered by national boundaries. In each country, two or three of the biggest club teams have been able to accumulate playing talent in a way which was impossible previously. The result is that these clubs have differentiated themselves from their former domestic rivals while forming an increasingly coherent transnational European elite.
The de-regulation of European football in the 1990s has transformed the geography of European football. European football no longer consists of a series of discrete national markets each with its won internal hierarchies from smallest to the biggest clubs. Instead, there is a single European market dominated by the biggest clubs at key points in a network which transcends national borders. A new transnational hierarchy has emerged in which the biggest clubs are predominant. The biggest clubs compete with each other for all the stars from within the European Union seriously disadvantaging smaller clubs in their own leagues and even big clubs in small markets such as Ajax of Amsterdam which are no longer protected from the transnational market. The biggest clubs can recruit from across the Union and but they are also developing transnational connections to expedite their operations in this European market. Manchester United has formal links with Royal Antwerp, Shelbourne FC in Ireland, FC Fortune in South Africa as well as two clubs in Sweden using these clubs to gather local talent for them and as nurseries for their young reserve team players. In 1998 Arsenal arranged a five year agreement with St. Etienne in which the London club has invested 3.5 million francs in return for first choice of promising stars, whom St Etienne have had a good record in producing (Eastham 1999: 72). The major European clubs are in a process of developing vertically integrated transnational networks which allow these clubs to compete more effectively in the global market for players.

Ironically, as these clubs become more European and indeed global in their orientation, they simultaneously emphasise their connection to their local city and region more strongly than was ever the case in during the era of the international regime. During that period these clubs recruited on a nation-wide basis, but in the light of the Bosman ruling the increased competition for top players the major clubs across Europe have improved their training programmes in order to monopolise and develop local talent.
I think what Bosman forced you to do was to widen the net and spend a awful lot more on trying to get talent younger and develop it. (Peter Kenyon, chief executive Manchester United Plc, personal interview 3 March 2000)

Other big clubs are developing similar schemes but also recognise the difficulty of producing in-house talent.

It is very difficult for a big club to produce talent. Man Utd are based on certain talent they found in house, with the Neville brothers, Beckham, Scholes and Giggs and so on. We are still based on Maldini, and Albertini and Costacurta, we raised ten, fifteen years ago. We don’t have anybody in between. It is not so easy… I think it is very difficult to develop young talent within your own system. (Umberto Gandini, AC Milan, personal interview 15 March 2000)

A dual process is in place where there is a concentration around certain key sites in European football from which points of concentration, new transnational networks extend. Significantly, the new geography of European football parallels wider developments in the post-Fordist, globalised era in which the forces of multinational capital have increasingly subverted the former unity of Keynesian national economies. The developments in European football match the wider processes of uneven regional development and the incipient fragmentation of formerly unified nations. Certainly as in the wider process, the nation constitutes an important institutional fact. National leagues and national federations are still strong and support for national teams remains fervent. However, the clubs are rapidly relatively more powerful in relation to national federations and to UEFA than in the previous era. In addition, the national leagues and nationalism itself are being re-formulated in the face of this growing importance of the biggest clubs. In football, as in European more widely, we are entering a de-regulated era in which a new transnational, neo-medieval order is emerging. European football today reflects the wider economic regime in which we now live. However, this economic regime does not determine the ritual form simplistically. Rather the new economic regime is the product of transforming social relations and the dominance of
new social groups and institutions which are engaged in particular kinds of economic activity. The ritual recreates these social relations and institutions and therefore the economic practices and relations which are part of them.

As we have seen with the Roman spectacle, the ritual does not merely affirm social relations between groups but it also communicates the understandings which constitute these social relations. In particular, in sporting rituals, cultural understandings of identity and agency are realised; in the arena, the gladiators embodied the stoic masculine virtues of the Roman citizen who would face violent death unflinchingly. European football similarly communicates concepts of masculinity; through their style of play, players became dense symbols which communicate to the spectators ideal forms of masculinity. Contemporary ideals of masculinity differ markedly from those embodied by the gladiators in the arena, though. Western European societies have undergone profound transformation in the last 30 years, moving from a Keynesian and Fordist regime to a neo-liberal and post-Fordist one. One of the central features of this new regime is de-regulation involving the retreat of the state from economic intervention. In place of the state, multinational corporations have become increasingly dominant and, as they have, new professional groups have emerged and become hegemonic. In the post-war era, the professional groups working in state bureaucracy, the so-called ‘state-nobility’ as Bourdieu calls them (Bourdieu 1996), were an extremely important if not dominant group in each European country. With the erosion of the state, this professional group has been increasingly superseded by a private-sector professional group employed in multinational corporations and thrown to the fore by free market forces. In Distinction (1984), Bourdieu has described the rise of this private sector group, referring to it as the ‘right-bank’ middle class. For him this group has high economic but low cultural capital as opposed to the intellectual and public sector elite which he terms the ‘left-bank’. Other sociologists such as Goldthorpe (1980),
Abercrombie and Urry (1983) and Savage et al. (1992) have also noted the rise of this professional group referring to it as the ‘service’ class. As Bourdieu et al. note this group has developed a new form of status lifestyle sometimes called ‘postmodern’ (Savage et al. 1992: 109) which has become extremely prominent in contemporary society. In her study of the culture of professional groups in financial service industries in the City of London, Mcdowell has illuminated the new lifestyles of this group, highlighting its emphasis on ecstatic and expensive practices at work and at leisure; she notes the trading floor was ‘carnivalesque’, ‘transgressing bourgeois norms of work’ (Mcdowell 1997: 167) and that this group of professionals prioritised bodily appearance which communicated a concern with sophisticated consumption. This professional group indulges in an extravagant, hedonistic life of consumption, funded by the large salaries from the private employment in large corporations. In this way, the group represents and promotes the free market but, while opposing state control and engaging in extravagant consumption, this group do not represent social disorder. On the contrary, the forms of consumption in which they indulge are increasingly focused on the family. For this group and for wider society, the private family has become the key site of activities and of social control. Men are expected to engage in ecstatic forms of consumption rather than demonstrative rational self-discipline. However, men’s role as fathers and husbands has been emphasised because the family unit has become so important. The ideal man is totally incorporated into his family not as a stern authoritarian but as a loving partner and father. It is significantly that as Margaret Thatcher who was key figure in promoting the post-Fordist transformation of Britain and a strong supporter of this entrepreneurial group against the ‘establishment’ also emphasised the significance of the family. For Thatcher, famously, ‘there was no such thing as society, only individuals and families’ (Morgan 1990: 440). In post-Fordist society, the family has become an increasingly important social unit which engaged
together in new forms of consumption. The family has become useful as a unit of consumption because it provided a lucrative market but was more disciplined in its consumption. Unlike other groupings such as young men, families remained passive as they indulged in potentially ecstatic forms of consumption.

This new familial masculinity of dominant private-sector professional groups is demonstrated in the contemporary ritual of football. Before the 1960s, professional football players in Britain were almost equivalent to the working class groups from which they generally emerged. Certainly, professional players enjoyed greater status than other workers and earned a slightly larger wage than most of the working class but these benefits were temporary and relatively small. With the abolition of the maximum wage in Britain in 1961, the salaries of professional football increased dramatically. Professional footballers were rapidly detached from working class groups and became a prominent part of emergent private sector professional groups connected closely with entertainment and media elites. From the 1960s, professional football players across Europe have become part of that status group which described as the ‘right-bank’ elite or service class. This process has accelerated and become more pronounced from the 1980s as players salaries have increased dramatically as a result of the growth in television revenue. Football players in Europe today represent a professional group promoted by neo-liberal legislation and the de-regulation of global capital. The star players are extremely wealthy and follow the ‘postmodern’ lifestyle of the hegemonic service class. At the same time as having become members of this important status group, linked closely to multinational corporations, in the 1990s professional football have become representatives of familial masculinity.

Players are now closely associated with children at critical moments in European football. Before most games, players will escort a child mascot onto the pitch. Indeed in Champions League finals, two teams of child mascots dressed in the strip of
the finalists accompany a player from the opposing team out of the tunnel onto the pitch and line up in front of the players until the opening ceremonies are complete. It is important to recognise that the inclusion of children in the opening ceremonies of Champions League matches is a completely new departure in the 1990s and before the development of the Champions Leagues, the teams walked out alone and the formerly brief opening ceremonies involved the two teams alone. In addition, before Champions League games, as the players line up, children wave a circular starred banner (the symbol of the Champions League) over the centre-circle as the anthem of the competition is played. By linking the male football stars to children, UEFA, who have choreographed these opening sequences carefully highlights a familial masculinity. This familial masculinity has been demonstrated spontaneously elsewhere. At the conclusion of the 1999-2000 season, Manchester United players brought their children onto the pitch when they received the trophy, while Chelsea’s captain, Dennis Wise, carried his six-month old son up the steps at Wembley to receive the FA Cup in the same year. Since that time, this phenomenon has become the norm; it is now expected that players should celebrate their victories with their children. In line with this, the Arsenal double-winning team of 2002 also celebrated their victory with their children. Their status as fathers has become increasingly important to their celebrity and their fatherly celebrations reflect the presence of similarly celebrating families in the stands.

David Beckham, the Manchester United midfielder and England captain, has become the most obvious symbol of this new masculinity. David Beckham is certainly exceptional because of his extraordinary celebrity partly due to his marriage to Victoria Adams, one of the members of the popular group, *The Spice Girls*. Yet, his extraordinary celebrity does not invalidate using him as an example of a wider development. On the contrary, Beckham has become a global figure because he embodies the ideals of the new familial masculinity of the private-sector elite so well.
He is handsome, talented, successful and, as a result of his professional employment, extremely wealthy. Beckham is a disciplined professional who is dedicated to his sport while, in his private life, he has become a powerful symbol of contemporary fatherhood. He has been represented exclusively as a loyal husband and caring father. In interesting contrast to the usual reasons for absenteeism (alcohol and womanizing) among British professional footballers, Beckham’s only significant breach with his club came when he missed a training session because he was tending to his sick son.

Significantly, in describing his close relationship with his wife and child, Beckham declared, “I’m not scared of my feminine side and I think quite a lot of the things I do come from that side of my character” (Lemos 2002). Although only a colloquial phrase, the concept of having a feminine side is an interesting one. In their discussion of the forms of masculinity which became hegemonic in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, Mosse (1985) and Theweleit (1987) have illustrated how this masculinity opposed itself rigorously to femininity. Masculinity was normal and respectable insofar as it separated itself from and suppressed the feminine. In his well-known study of the Freikorps in Weimar Germany, Theweleit reveals how members of this militia conceived of femininity as a flood which threatened to engulf them and which could only be resisted through strict self-discipline (Theweleit 1987). Beckham’s public statement that his masculinity includes a feminine element is an explicit subversion of this modern definition of masculinity. His masculinity involves the acceptance and indeed indulgence of the emotional and feminine. It is notable that an early controversy involved having his picture taken wearing a sarong which demonstrated sartorially Beckham’s feminised masculinity and more recently he had been pictured wearing nail varnish (Lemos 2002). Significantly, he has also become an icon for gays and he himself has happily embraced his position in the gay subculture even though he himself is not homosexual. The masculinity which Beckham represents is a decisive
transformation from modern respectability. He is a symbol of the masculinity of a new professional status group who prioritise an extravagant but familial lifestyle. Through the ritual of sport, certain players become sacred totems which symbolise the central values of the groups engaging in that ritual. David Beckham has become a representative of a dominant status group in post-Fordist society which has created a distinctive familial masculinity for itself.

Conclusion
At the end of *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim wistfully remarks: ‘A day will come when our society will know again those hours of creative effervescence’ (Durkheim 1976: 427-8). Durkheim believes that these vital moments of creative effervescence will appear among the professional groups which he promotes as the only possible solution to insidious anomie. The professional group is an important source of social solidarity in modern societies but Durkheim completely ignored a key public ritual which could also produce ‘hours of creative effervescence’: sport. It is possible that he ignored the significance of sport as a modern ritual because of the relative under-urbanisation of France. The mass urban spectator sports such as football developed slowly and weakly in France in comparison with other European countries. Like the tribal rituals of aboriginal peoples, in the modern sporting ritual some of the most important social groups of which Europeans are part are re-constituted through their ecstatic participation in sport. Consequently, the sporting ritual provides an illuminating focus for sociological research because it is an arena in which social relations and shared understandings are viscerally re-created. These recreations are not supererogatory to the social order which would exist without them. Because social relations have meaningful dimension, they have to be recognised by those who are party to them and the ritual constitutes the critical site at which this communal recognition takes place. On winter
nights European cities are studded with domes of light in which a new spectacle takes place that realises the contemporary social order of the New Europe as powerfully as the gladiatorial combats demonstrated the political structure of the Roman Empire. The problem is that so familiar has the extraordinary spectacle of European football become that it is easy to forget its social significance and to relegate it to a mere epiphenomenon. It is a strange that what appears as merely otiose to the desiccated analysis of the sociologists should be the most compelling event in the lives of millions of Europeans. Yet, as long as sport is regarded as a merely form of leisure or an unnecessary act of consumption, sociology will continue to underestimate one of the most interesting and, indeed, most illuminating social institutions in European society today.

**Footnotes**

1 UEFA was established in 1954. Since that time it has provided a forum for European football associations and organised European competitions.

2 The quotations are taken from interviews carried out as part of an ESRC-funded research-project ‘Football and Post-National Identity in the New Europe’. See King 2003 for the monograph based on that research.


4 The distinctiveness of this familial masculinity contrasts with the kinds of ways which some masculine fans in Europe find it appropriate to support of their team. They oppose Beckham’s familial masculinity and promote a masculinity which prioritises objectivising sex with women and, sometimes, violence against other fans.
5 The popular music and style magazine, The Face, calls him ‘the biggest woman in the entire history of sport.’

Bibliography


