

## **New Directors, Customers, and Fans: The Transformation of English Football in the 1990s**

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*In the 1990s, English professional football has undergone rapid and marked changes with the restructuring of the Football League, the signing of new and lucrative television contracts, the construction of all-seater stadiums, and the growing involvement of progressive entrepreneurial capitalists—the new directors—in the game. This article examines one element of those transformations; the political use which the new directors have made of the concept of the customer. The article argues that the use of this term has been important to the transformation of the relation between the fan and the clubs, facilitating and legitimating the profit-making projects of the new directors. Drawing on the tradition of dialectical critical theory derived from Mannheim and Adorno, the article submits this notion of the customer critique to demonstrate its deliberate partiality and its intensely political nature.*

*Au cours des années 1990, le football professionnel anglais a subi des changements rapides et drastiques dans la foulée de la restructuration de la Football League, de la construction de stades munis uniquement de places assises et de l'implication d'entrepreneurs capitalistes progressifs—les nouveaux directeurs—dans ce sport. Cet article examine un élément de ces transformations, l'usage politique du concept de consommateur par les nouveaux directeurs. L'article soutient que l'usage de ce concept a été important dans la transformation de la relation entre les supporteurs et les clubs, en ce qu'il a facilité et légitimé les projets de maximisation des profits des nouveaux directeurs. S'inspirant de la tradition de la théorie critique, dans la foulée de Mannheim et Adorno, l'article examine cette notion de consommateur dans le but de démontrer sa partialité délibérée et sa nature intrinsèquement politique.*

Since the publication of Ian Taylor's theory on the origins of football hooliganism (1971), serious sociological interest has been overwhelmingly directed at this violent social phenomenon. Both Duke (1991) and Moorhouse (1991) have questioned this concentration on hooliganism, and Duke has argued that sociologists should look for other important areas of investigation. In particular, Duke cites the issue of modernization as a fundamental concern (1991, p. 637). In the light of the marked transformation of the consumption of English football in the 1990s, this need to go beyond research into violent fandom has never been more pressing. Although in no way dismissive of the work carried out into hooliganism, this article focuses exclusively on a single but important aspect of the transformation of football in the 1990s; the use which the entrepreneurs who have become directors of football clubs in the 1980s and 1990s have made of the concept of the

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customer. Specifically, the article is concerned with showing the way in which the concept of the customer has been used as a rhetorical and ideological device in the new consumption of football.

In his contemplations on the Hillsborough disaster of April 15, 1989, Ian Taylor correctly identified an authoritarian discourse (insisting on the containment of the violent crowd) as paradigmatic of the 1980s (1989, p. 97). However, substantially as a result of that disaster in which 95 Liverpool fans were crushed to death inside the very containing pens recommended by authoritarian discourses in the 1980s, the fallacy of simple authoritarian solutions to crowd disorder at football became evident. Consequently, after Hillsborough in the 1990s, free market principles became the framing orthodoxy for the reform of football, and this article intends to examine one feature of that free market orthodoxy—the concept of the customer—and thereby throw some light on the transformation of English football in the 1990s and its connection to wider social changes.

### Theory and Method

The attempt to uncover the unacknowledged assumptions of the free market discourse suggests an affinity to Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, although the latter theorists were heavily critical of Mannheim's (unsustainable) notion that intellectuals were somehow separated from social and political processes and could thereby achieve an "objective" synthesis of the various competing ideologies and utopias proposed by dominant and subordinate groups (Mannheim, 1976, p. 136-143). Nevertheless, there are important commonalities between the theorists of the Frankfurt School and Mannheim.

Both attempted to locate knowledge or discourses socially and historically in order to demonstrate the necessarily political and partial nature of those claims and, thereby, to undercut them. Effectively both the Frankfurt School and Mannheim were dialectical critical theorists, although the former were more radical because they demanded the necessity of dialectically positioning their own ideas (even though they knew that complete self-consciousness was finally impossible). Thus, Mannheim (1976) argued that "what seems to be so unbearable in life itself, to live with unconsciousness uncovered, is the historical prerequisite to the scientific criticism of self-awareness" (1976, p. 42). The aim of the sociology of knowledge was to bring the unconscious, unacknowledged assumptions of thought to light and thereby to gain some control over our own lives for "when any human activity continues over a long period without being subjected to intellectual control, it gets out of hand" (1976, p. 1).

In his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argued along similarly critical and dialectical lines, "The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy" (1990, p. 5). For Adorno, the crucial starting point and method of dialectics is given by the inevitable fact of the inadequacy of the concept. Every concept hides aspects of the object it represents and the task of the dialectician is to uncover the social, political, and historical origins of this deliberate partiality of the concept through a reexamination of the object.

In order to analyze the concept of the customer as a central element of wider free market discourse expressed by the new directors, I want to draw on this critical

tradition. By situating the notion of the customer historically and socially, and by comparing it with the actual experience of the football fans to whom it is applied, I want to demonstrate its inadequacy; an inadequacy that originates in the political and economic needs and interests of those entrepreneurs who have become involved in football in the 1980s and the 1990s<sup>1</sup>.

In order to apply this critical theory to the new directors' concept of the customer, it is necessary to establish both who the new directors are and the particular details of the idea of the customer. This data that was researched in the course of a doctoral thesis<sup>2</sup> was gathered through two principal methods. First, traditional documentary sources, newspapers, business reports, journals, and various books were consulted to gain an insight into the new directors and their use of the notion of the customer. Secondly, various chairmen of football clubs in the Premier League (at the time of the research) were invited to be interviewed with regard to the transformation of football. Elite groups often make themselves unavailable for interview and I experienced this reticence in my research, especially among the most important new directors at the biggest clubs, though five chairmen or directors at various football clubs (albeit smaller ones), as well as two other official figures at Manchester United<sup>3</sup>, did make themselves available for interview. These interviews were analyzed and employed as evidence of the new director's use of free market discourse. Although more acceptances for interview would have been advantageous, the interviews that were conducted proved useful. Furthermore, they were triangulated by the documentary research which, for the most part, replicated the claims that the new directors made in interviews. This replication of data is significant as it suggested that I had reached the point that Glaser and Strauss (1968) recognized in their grounded theory as a satisfactory place at which to finish research; when new data merely reconfirms the categories that have been developed in the course of the research (p. 61).

### **Historical Context: Post-Fordist Britain**

Both Mannheim and Adorno prioritized the need for historicizing the concepts and arguments that were to be subjected to critique. Only by comprehending the wider historical context in which concepts and discourses arise is it possible to recognize the significance and, therefore, the potential partiality of any concept. To this end, it will be worth providing a very brief outline of the recent historical developments in Britain as it is only through some knowledge of these developments that the new directors and their use of the free market discourse becomes meaningful.

After the collapse of the postwar settlement in the 1970s (see, for example, Kavanagh, 1990; Marquand, 1988), there has been a rapid transformation in the social, political, economic, and cultural constitution of Britain which some commentators, citing global comparisons, have termed post-Fordism (e.g., Hall & Jacques, 1990). Although different aspects of this historic transformation have been emphasized by different schools of thought (see Amin 1994, pp. 1-39) and some theorists have denied the development of post-Fordism at all (e.g., Lee, 1993), this article recognizes two central transformations that have characterized post-Fordism. On the one hand, mass manufacture of scale has been replaced by economies of scope that are based on flexibly specialized production techniques (Piore & Sabel, 1984). On the other, there has been a growth in the service sector and a

concomitant decline in manufacturing that has divided society into a periphery (of marginalized or unemployed workers) and a core (of relatively secure, well-paid workers). This divided society also has been termed the two-thirds, one-third society (Therborn, 1990; Burrows, 1991) or the 30, 30, 40 society (Hutton, 1996).

In Britain, many of these changes have been affected under and in the name of Thatcherism. As Hall and Jacques have argued (1983), Thatcherism constituted a hegemonic project that sought to replace the framing Keynesian paradigm of the postwar consensus with a new set of principles. There is no room to consider Thatcherism at length here, despite the extensive academic debate about it<sup>4</sup>. I will merely follow Gamble (1988) in maintaining that Thatcherism comprised two central guiding principles—the free market and strong state—by which Thatcher sought to revitalize Britain's economy and society in the light of the new pressures of the post-Fordist global economy. The principles of the strong state and the free market (Gamble, 1988, p. 32) were directed at five specific tasks laid out in the Conservative manifesto of 1979: the restoration of economic and social life, the recreation of incentive through the removal of the burden of state intervention and heavy taxation, the upholding of Parliament and the rule of law, the support of family life, and the strengthening of Britain's defenses (Gamble, 1988, p. 121). The first two measures would be achieved by the application of the free market, the last three would require a strong state. Consequently, from 1979, solutions to economic and social problems have been increasingly informed by free market ideas or the notion of the strong state, and this continued into Major's premiership. The attempts by the new directors to apply notions of the customer to reformulate the relation between fans and clubs in the 1990s becomes especially meaningful in the context of this wider Thatcherite reformation of British society into its peculiar form of post-Fordism.

### The New Directors

The term, the new directors, refers to those entrepreneurs who emerged after the collapse of the postwar consensus and have, since the early 1980s but more particularly the 1990s, become involved in football<sup>5</sup>. There are two principal defining features of the new directors, although one of these features will be qualified in the discussion of Sir John Hall at Newcastle United and Steven Gibson at Middlesbrough below. The first distinctive feature of the new directors is the market position in which these entrepreneurs are situated. The new directors operate in the interstitial markets at the regional level below that of the concentrated multinational companies. The subsidiary nature of the entrepreneurial capitalist fraction in Britain has given the transformation of English football in the 1990s a distinctiveness in comparison with other European countries<sup>6</sup>. English football clubs have not been incorporated into larger capitalist companies but, rather, the new directors have merely added the football club to their capital interests or have put all their capital into a single club. For the new directors, the football club is an independent, regionally situated investment opportunity.

From this fact follows a second crucial defining characteristic of these new entrepreneurial football directors. Because the football club is regarded as an investment opportunity in itself—a business operating in its own right in different niches to multinationals—it is essential that the football club is profitable. Here, the new directors in England are distinguishable from both their predecessors and

from many football club owners in Europe. For the very reason that football clubs are integrated within larger capitalist interests in many parts of Western Europe, immediate losses are acceptable in the footballing subsidiary, if the club provides the parent company with an international profile and assists in easing relations between capital and labor.

The demand that football clubs must operate like any other business and make a profit amounts to a sea-change in the administration and perception of football in England. For instance, in the past (probably between the 1920s and 1970s), the football club was not seen as a profit-making institution but part of a city's public amenities and as a source of kudos for the owner. "A football club was in many ways as much a part of the burgeoning corporation as a public library, town halls, and law courts and was certainly used by more people" (Inglis, 1991, p. 12)<sup>7</sup>. Denis Hill-Wood, who was chairman at Arsenal in the 1970s, created a League team in his hometown of Glossop in Derbyshire, in which he owned some mills, and his son, Peter (also a subsequent chairman at Arsenal), explained this creation of a football club as an example of bourgeois philanthropy. "I suppose my father felt it was his duty to give the townspeople something. They had schools and a hospital, so I suppose he said he'd give them a football club" (Hopcraft, 1990, p. 153). Even in the 1980s, Peter Hill-Wood expressed similar notions about the football club. When David Dein, one of the earliest of the new directors/figures to become involved in football, acceded to the board of directors at Arsenal in 1983, Hill-Wood commented, "Some rich men like to buy fast cars, yachts, and racehorses, but Dein is more interested in Arsenal. I'm delighted he is but I think he's crazy. To all intents and purposes, it's dead money" (*The Sunday Times*, August 8, 1991). This quotation highlights the distinction between traditional English football chairmen and the new directors with some precision. Whereas the traditional directors regarded the football club as a philanthropic hobby, the new directors recognized the economic potential of football clubs as a new form of service in the economy and actively sought to realize this potential.

That the profit motive is the decisive defining and differentiating feature for almost all the new directors' involvement in football was evinced in the interviews I carried out with the directors football clubs. Ian Stott, the owner of Oldham Athletic, had originally become involved in Oldham in the 1970s and had now moved all his capital interests into the football club that was now his full-time occupation (personal interview, June 21, 1994); the inference being that his livelihood was at stake if Oldham failed to make a profit. Ken Bates (personal interview, October 10, 1994), the chairman of Chelsea Football Club, was typically outspoken about the need for football clubs to recognize that they had to make a profit, and he usefully distinguished himself from more traditional directors.

I can remember arguing with the late chairman of Gillingham, Dr. Grossmark. Again, 15, 20 years ago, and he turned 'round and said, 'Oh, you don't understand football. It's not like any other business.' I said, 'That's rubbish.' I said, 'The plumber down the road writes a cheque and there's not enough money in the bank and it will bounce.' I said, 'At the moment, you don't think banks won't dare to do anything but one day they will, they will bounce your cheques.'

The belief that football is a business and must therefore prioritize profit-making (or at least solvency) is a practically universally held belief by the new directors<sup>8</sup>,

and this belief differentiates these entrepreneurs from their forebears at football clubs. The rhetoric of profitability has, to some extent, been matched by the actual financial figures that the clubs in the Premier League have delivered. For instance, in the 1993-94 season, the clubs in the Premier League as a whole made a £49,278 million operating profit and a £6,297 pretax profit (after transfer fees had been extracted). In the 1994-95 season, the Premier League had operating profits of £40,831 and pretax profits of £12,826 (Deloitte & Touche, 1996, p. 7).

Although the notion of profit is central to most of the new directors, there have been examples where new directors have not been motivated out of a concern with short-term profit. Sir John Hall, the chairman of Newcastle United, is a key example of this kind of financial strategy that does not prioritize immediate profit<sup>9</sup> but regards the football club as part of a much larger and more integrated strategy of capital accumulation. Hall's development company, Cameron Hall, has invested some £26 million into ground renovations and an estimated £40 to £50 million on players (J. Williams, 1996, p. 28). There is clearly going to be no immediate financial return on this huge investment. Rather, Hall has employed Newcastle United as a symbol of Northeastern identity and cosmopolitanism designed to attract international capital into Tyneside.

They say you can't regenerate the UK by shopping centers alone. But you can break into the manufacturing decline of an area by making it an attractive area. Industries won't come just because Geordies are nice people. You have to present them with ambience, life-style. (cited in Gardner & Sheppard, 1989, p. 41)

Newcastle United is being employed by Hall along with the very large shopping mall, the Metrocentre, which Hall also built, to demonstrate to international capital that Newcastle is an affluent, thriving city in which capital can be invested with a good chance of a return. Hall seems to have been successful in this as Samsung, the large Japanese electronic company, has decided to set up its European operations on Tyneside, very much due to Hall's intervention (see J. Williams, 1996, p. 26). Hall, then, is more radical in his project than the other entrepreneurs involved in English football in the 1990s. By employing Newcastle United as a symbolic representative of the economic and social vibrancy of the area, Hall intends to regenerate Tyneside through attracting international capital that will expedite his own regional business project there. The more international capital to come into the Northeast, the greater the potential for profit-making. Hall's use of Newcastle United as a symbol of Northeastern cosmopolitanism and affluence accords with Lash and Urry's (1994) argument that in post-Fordist economies of signs and space, the central economic value is no longer use or exchange value but what they call sign value. That is, commodities whose worth is decided by the identities that they are able to provide. Newcastle United is, in effect, a commodity with sign-value that Hall sells not only to the fans of the club but through which he intends to sell Tyneside on the international markets. At the same time, it should be recognized that Hall has in no way ignored the financial possibilities of the football club, and it is certain that in the long-term he is concerned with the club's profitability. For instance, he has increased the club's turnover from £4 million in 1991 to £40 million in 1995, £8.5 million of which is derived from the sale of merchandise (J. Williams, 1996, p. 30).

Interestingly, in the same region, Steven Gibson has transformed the Middlesbrough Football Club along very similar lines to Hall<sup>10</sup>. Gibson has invested substantially in the club which has also been dependent on some more or less covert underwriting from the chemical giant (and major local employer) ICI, which is the main sponsor of and majority shareholder in the club and is represented on the Board (by George Cook). The relationship between Middlesbrough Football Club and ICI is somewhat Byzantine, but it seems that Gibson is typical of new directors in that he brokers the relationship between the chemical giant and the football club, effectively operating at an interstitial level in the market. Gibson is well-positioned for this mediating role as he used to work for ICI and now has close business contacts to the corporation through his haulage firm, BulkHaul, which specializes in the transportation of dangerous chemicals, especially for ICI.

However, although both Gibson's company BulkHaul and ICI are hugely successful businesses in their own right, Middlesbrough Football Club operates at a loss due to extravagant dealings in the transfer market that have included the purchase of 1994 World Cup star Juninho in 1995 and the Italian player Ravanelli in 1996. The acceptance of that running loss by both Gibson and ICI seems to be explicable on two counts (beyond Gibson's undoubted fanaticism for Middlesbrough). First, the heavy investment into football in the mid-1990s can be seen as a rational strategy of capital speculation. With the influx of hugely increased television revenue for Premier League football through the Sky contracts in the 1990s and the promise of much greater rewards if a club is successful enough to compete in Europe, Gibson and ICI in Middlesbrough might have these long-term rewards in mind and without accepting initial investment losses, the club (and, therefore, Gibson and ICI) would never have a chance of the kind of rewards offered by the Premier League and European competition. It is likely that Gibson and ICI may be speculating to accumulate.

A second strategy can be inferred that parallels Hall's own project at Newcastle. Gibson and ICI, in particular, have invested in Middlesbrough not as a profit-making business in itself but, rather, as a crucial symbolic part of a more integrated strategy. The success of Middlesbrough Football Club creates sign-value for Middlesbrough as a city, situating that city in the global economy. In particular, the new Riverside Stadium, which is significantly situated on the once-derelict docks that were traditionally the heart of this city's economy, communicates the rejuvenation of the region and the development of new (post-Fordist) service industries that sell sign-values. The new Riverside Stadium, like the new St. James' Park, communicates an "ambience" about Middlesbrough. ICI has been more or less explicit that their investment in the club is predicated on the creation of a sign-value that will assist in the wider regeneration of the region and therefore successful capital accumulation on a greater scale. The creation of a successful football club is beneficial for ICI because not only does it communicate their name as the formal sponsors of the club across the globe, but this club makes the region more attractive, facilitating the employment of the best staff at ICI and encouraging international capital to invest in the area and the company. The use of Middlesbrough Football Club as a sign-value suggests that, although some of the new directors like Gibson and Hall may not look to the football club for immediate profit, the club is part of an integrated strategy of capitalist accumulation. Immediate loss is only accepted for greater long-term returns. Gibson and Hall have a grander strategy in mind than other new directors but not different; they, too, are concerned with profit.

Furthermore, although these football clubs are themselves loss-making at the moment, their effectiveness as sign-values for the new directors lies in the fact that they connote profitability and wealth, *despite* this fact of loss-making. This is substantially due to the fact that the new directors insist that football now embodies the free market values of the Thatcherite hegemony, even though particular clubs might not actually be profitable in the short-term. The expense of new stadiums and new playing squads is important here because these developments demonstrate the clubs' wealth that then comes to connote profitability as a result of Hall and Gibson's rhetoric. This appearance of profitability is also very significantly assisted by the fact that other clubs in the Premier League are profitable, and the profitability of these clubs effectively rebounds onto Middlesbrough and Newcastle, endowing them with a sense of financial success. The strategies (and rhetoric) of Hall and Gibson are intended as self-fulfilling prophecies where the communication of wealth and profitability (even in the absence of the latter) is intended to attract investment which will eventually ensure that profitability<sup>11</sup>.

It is at this juncture, when an emergent entrepreneurial class fragment has become involved in football and has sought to transform the football club into a profit-making business, that the concept of the customer, as a central element in a wider free market discourse, has become crucial. The concept of the customer envisages a transformation of the relationship between the fan and club that is essential if the club is to succeed in turning itself into a primarily profit-making organization. The profit-making club has to exploit the fans' monetary potential to a far greater extent than when football clubs were run according to the public service ethos. Football clubs have had to charge more for admission, and they have had to look to increasing the amount that fans spend at the club through the purchase of food and drinks at the game and merchandise at the club shop. In order to justify that increased demand on the fans' incomes, the club has to insist that its relationship to the fan has changed. The fan has to pay more because they are no longer fans as they once were. They are now customers.

### *The Press and the Idea of the Customer*

It was noted previously that Taylor (1989) had argued that the framing paradigm, which informed discussions about the reformation of football in the 1980s, was disciplinarian. Yet, there was a subsidiary argument throughout that decade which insisted that football should be reformed by the application of the free market, and this free market discourse became dominant in the 1990s after Hillsborough. A brief examination of some of the press' use of this free market argument in the 1980s and, in particular, their use of the notion of the customer, will provide a useful introduction to the analysis and critique of the new directors' employment of the term.

Before I go on to this critical analysis, it is important that we recognize the reasonableness of these demands for reform to avoid falling into facile, reactionary, and romanticized responses to the reformation of the game that have been expressed by some fans and, indeed, some "academic" commentators. English professional football was in crisis in the 1980s. The administration of many clubs was unsound and the facilities offered to spectators were unsanitary and dangerous. Furthermore, football was facing an economic crisis in the mid-1980s due to a long-term decline in attendance and the increase in wage costs since the abolition

of the maximum wage in 1961. Consequently, there was a need for some form of reformation. However, having recognized that some reformation was required and prevented a retreat into romanticism, it is possible and indeed essential to analyze the particular nature of those reforms critically.

In the 1980s, the press' free market argument for the reform of football operated around two major points. First, football grounds needed to improve their facilities. After the Bradford fire<sup>12</sup>, *The Sunday Times* was at the forefront of this call for a transformation of the grounds: "The game needs cleaning up and revitalizing every bit as much as the rest of Victorian industrial Britain" (May 19, 1985, p. 16). However, the call for the complete renovation of the grounds became overwhelming after the Hillsborough disaster. *The Times* insisted on the creation of all-seater stadiums: "But its [Hillsborough's] principal result may eventually be the modernizing of Britain's league football grounds into all-seater stadiums where a tragedy such as Saturday's simply could not happen" (April 17, 1989, p. 1). Or again: "I believe we are in sight of an end to standing accommodation which will give way to seated stadiums with better facilities such as cover from the rain, decent lavatories, and improved refreshment areas" (April 17, 1989, p. 16). *The Daily Telegraph* echoed this view: "It is no longer safe or socially tolerable for football supporters to be packed standing in huge crowds. All-seater stadiums must become the rule" (April 17, 1989, p. 20). Even *The Guardian*, with its politically liberal and anti-Thatcherite editorial line, effectively adopted a very similar position to the avowedly rightist *Times*:

Terraces on our big grounds pack in more spectators than the seated areas where no surges can occur. Scrapping the terraces, installing seats would cost money. So what? The clubs gripped by market forces have never struck a balance between transfer fees and civilised facilities for the millions whose five pounds a time make them possible. (April 17, 1989, p. 18)

Football grounds needed complete renovation and, in particular, all-seater stadiums had to become a requirement.

The renovation of the grounds in the press' arguments implied a second very important transformation in the relationship between fans and clubs. In the improved grounds of the future, fans were to become customers. Concluding their demand for the complete reconstruction of the terraces, *The Guardian* argued that, "the paying customer always comes second to a good inside forward" (April 17, 1989, p. 18), implying that from now on fans should be treated as customers. *The Financial Times* maintained a similar line: "All-seater stadiums and fewer all-professional clubs may be part of the answer, but it is definitely time for the spectator to be treated as a paying customer and not a dangerous nuisance" (April 17, 1989, p. 10). Because football fans became customers when the grounds were reconstructed into all-seater stadiums, the customer, which was widely envisaged by the press after Hillsborough, referred to an individual who paid more in return for better services at the match.

That simple transformation, which was certainly inspired out of a genuine concern for the welfare of football spectators and which seemed entirely commonsensical, actually implied a significant and politically controversial development. The notion of the customer, who paid more for better service, implied a shift of football support toward more affluent sections of society. That shift was explicit in some of the press' arguments in the 1980s. One of the earliest examples

of this argument for the social relocation of football was Russell Davies' piece published in *The Sunday Times* called "Cockpits of Ignobility." He argued that, "the game drifts slowly into the possession of what we are now supposed to call the underclass; and a whole middle-class public grows up without ever dreaming of visiting a Football League ground" (August 28, 1983, p. 12g). In response to the Bradford disaster<sup>12</sup>, *The Sunday Times* expounded on the need for the social relocation of football furiously: "British football is in crisis; a slum sport played in slum stadiums increasingly watched by slum people, who deter decent folk from turning up" (May 19, 1985, p. 16a). By slum people, *The Sunday Times* can only have referred to those sections of society that have been confined increasingly to permanent unemployment, crime and poverty, and that have been described as the "periphery," "the one-third" or the "underclass" in British post-Fordist society (Therborn, 1990; Burrows, 1991; Mcdowell, 1989; Murray, 1990)<sup>13</sup>. *The Economist*, "a key voice of progressive capital" (Taylor, 1989; p. 95), was similarly explicit about the need to attract a more affluent audience to football, at the effective cost of excluding the poor.

Those close to Mrs. Thatcher have always seen measures to change the nature of football as guaranteed vote winners. Their convictions reflect a common view that the game is irredeemably tied to the old industrial north, jobs and slum cultures of the stricken inner cities—everything, in fact, that modern Britain aspires to put behind it. (April 22, 1989, p. 28)

By putting these slum cultures behind it, however, Thatcherite free market arguments did not refer to eliminating the poverty in which these cultures have developed but only the social exclusion of the poor. With regard to football, the creation of the customer refers to the exclusion of the urban poor from football and their replacement by the affluent middle classes. *The Economist* was explicit about this exclusion.

What of the fans themselves? American football is a family event, with many women and elderly people in the crowd. Clubs try to encourage parents to bring children by selling cheap family tickets and putting on children's entertainment before a match. Stadiums are organised with middle-class families in mind. (April 22, 1989, p. 38)

In the press' arguments for the reform of the game in the 1980s, the customer refers to the exclusionary remarketing of football away from the periphery and into the core of post-Fordist society. According to free market arguments, the renovation of football grounds is intended to replace the dangerous poor with "decent folk;" the respectable members of the white-collar workforce and the service class. The customer is a useful rhetorical device because, within the context of an emergent Thatcherite hegemony, the benign neutrality of the term conceals the intensely political nature and social divisiveness of the developments that the concept envisaged.

### *The New Directors and the Creation of the Customer*

The concept of the customer, which the press had increasingly foregrounded in the 1980s, became important to the new directors in the 1990s as they attempted to renovate the game and, in particular, as they tried to make the game profitable.

Ken Bates (personal interview, October 10, 1994) revealed the importance of the notion of the customer to the new directors in the 1990s.

The customer in any business pays for what he gets. I've been converted to all-seating. I mean, the working class no longer go to Blackpool for their holidays, they go to Spain or Madeira and Phuket and the Caribbean, they go on cruises. They no longer have Blackpool rock and cloth caps and handkerchiefs on their heads and their stockings rolled up while they're packing in [unclear] Brighton. And the other thing is that when they go to the pictures, the working class, they don't go in and stand in the rain with water running down the back of their f---ing neck with their cloth cap and a muffler. They go into a warm place where they can sit down. Somewhere to hang their coats up. They can get a cup of coffee or an ice cream or popcorn or whatever and they sit down in two or three hours comfort.

In line with the argument forwarded in various parts of the press in the 1980s, for Bates, the football fan has had to become a customer, the defining feature of which is that more is paid in return for better services.

In addition to referring to a more affluent market supporter, the concept of the customer also envisages that many of these new spectators will be women<sup>14</sup> and, indeed, whole families. For instance, Peter Storrie (personal interview July 25, 1994) argued that, "Football is moving towards the family model. There is a strong basis to go forward if we push the family idea." While Robert Chase (personal interview, October 18, 1994) confirmed the need to attract women and families, "It's life. Women have a greater role in the world than they were in the past. They are 50% of the market. Isolate yourself or improve your facilities." The improvement of facilities in order to create a customer for football is an explicit attempt to increase the attendance of women and of whole families in order to increase the clubs' revenues.

However, the new directors' emphasis on the need to attract families reveals that they effectively endorse the exclusion of the poor envisaged in the press' use of the concept of the customer. Although the price of tickets to the new football customer has become expensive for the single fan, to fund the attendance of an entire family (or even part of a family) to a football match in the 1990s renders the attendance of the unemployed or marginally employed impossible. The attraction of affluent families through the improvement of facilities and the concomitant increase in prices necessarily implies the exclusion of poorer sections of society from an important public ritual, in which identities, solidarities, and social debates are articulated.

The attempted introduction of new affluent families to football under the concept of the customer implies not only socially exclusionary strategies, but the idea of the family as the new customer has also suggested a new method of disciplining the crowd. In this, the notion of the customer, although originally embedded in the free market discourse, also effectively connects with important authoritarian strands of which Taylor wrote (1989). Robert Chase has made this disciplinary aspect of the notion of the customer explicit.

In any business, in any walk of life, you have to say sometimes to your customers, 'I'm sorry, you're abusing the service that I'm providing, if you're not prepared to mend your ways or to conduct yourself in a better or more reasonable manner, the service will cease.' Take, for example, the bank. If

you open an account and you don't stick to the rules, the manager generally writes to you nicely. The second time, he rings you up and says, 'I think you ought to come and see me' and the third time, he closes the account. (personal interview, August 10, 1994)

The free market model carries with it disciplinary implications but, significantly, the free market argument obviates political debate about these implications. The free market argument, which Chase uses here, reduces the relationship of the fans and the club to a purely economic one given by the market. Political debate about the nature of this relationship is, therefore, effectively side-stepped because the rules that govern market relations are all but commonsensical. Drawing on the market principle that the owner of a private service must be free to refuse to serve a customer, Chase therefore concludes that football clubs must be equally free to refuse entry to those who go beyond the rights prescribed by the market or who simply cannot afford entry. The political dimension of the issue of discipline is effectively repressed, as the argument is flattened to an economic issue.

Although the seriousness and unacceptability of much of the behavior on the terraces since the 1960s should not be ignored (Taylor, 1989), the strategy by which the new directors seek to transform this behavior by reducing political and social issues to economic ones (which are much more difficult to dispute) is significant. In particular, Chase's commonsensical appeal to the analogy of a bank assumes that football clubs are now suddenly private institutions and therefore, the rules that frame relations in the market for private services are automatically applicable to football. Yet, the crucial assumption that the football club is a private service (to which free market discourses and notions of the customer are applicable) has not been established through public debate but merely taken as an *a priori* fact by the new directors. Although it is all too easy to accept that assumption because it is in line with the free market commonsense that has become dominant in Britain since 1979, this privatization of the football club is a new and radical departure. In the past, the traditional directors, as we have seen, viewed the football clubs not as private, profit-making domains, but rather as public institutions whose purpose was the provision of an inclusive public good to the working population. Ian Taylor (1971) probably overstated the case when he argued that traditionally football clubs were participatory democracies—fans have never had formal entry to the board—but these clubs were democratic in their provision of the leisure service they offered. Entry to the ground was sufficiently cheap to be potentially universally affordable. The notion of the customer is intrinsically bound up with the privatization of the football club and the reduction of the social relations between fans and club to a purely formal economic one. That reduction has not only facilitated and legitimated the transformation of the football club into a capitalist enterprise, but it has undermined the potential political protests that fans have mounted against these changes. According to the market model, which the new directors are attempting to institute, the only valid form of protest in the market is the withdrawal of custom, but that is exactly what the fans are protesting against.

### *The Inadequacy of the Concept of the Customer*

Sociological research (Tomlinson & Whannel, 1986; Bromberger, 1993) and football fan autobiographies (e.g., Hornby, 1994) have emphasized that football

fandom is centrally bound up with issues of identity formation. Because fans express their identities and self-understandings through the club and, therefore, simultaneously define themselves in terms of football, their attachment to the football club is peculiarly strong. Their consumption of football is radically different to the purchaser of food or household goods who will merely go to the cheapest or most convenient shop. Indeed, even in comparison with the fans of pop bands, the football fan shows remarkable monomania. Most fans of pop bands own the records of other bands or see other bands playing, whereas the dedicated fan of a football club will exclusively attend the matches of that club and purchase only that club's merchandise.

In addition, the consumption of football is curious in a second but equally important way. The standard economic model of the consumer envisages that figure purchasing a commodity at a shop and then using that product away from the shop at a later time. The shop provides the commodity and the service at the time of purchase, and it is for this that the consumer pays. The consumption of football differs significantly from this conventional model for the football fan does not simply purchase what the club presents to the fans. The commodity that fans buy is not confined to the players whom they watch. Rather, the fans purchase the atmosphere that they themselves create in watching the match. Paradoxically, at the football match, the fans are partially asked to purchase what they themselves actively and imaginatively create: the spectacle of support. In his account of his life as a fan, Hornby recognizes this interesting feature of football:

atmosphere is one of the crucial ingredients of the football experience. These huge ends are as vital to the clubs as their players, not only because their inhabitants are vocal in their support, not just because they provide clubs with large sums of money (although these are not unimportant factors), *but because without them nobody else would bother coming.* (1994, p. 77)

The fans are an integral part of the commodity that the new directors ask them to buy as customers.

The football fan's relationship to the club, although at one level monetary, is complex and much richer than the unidimensionality of the market transaction. The close identification that the fans have with the club, and the fact that they are an integral part of the very commodity which the new directors seek to sell, suggests that the fans' relation to the club cannot be adequately theorized within the confines of conventional economic understandings. Football is a curious product, fans extraordinary consumers<sup>15</sup>. Yet, the concept of the customer reduces all this complex and significant social process to the grayness of standard economic concepts. The new directors flatten out the interpretative aspect of fandom and the vital and active contribution the fans make to the commodity.

This flattening of a complex relationship of mutual indebtedness is convenient for the new directors because, by attempting to reduce their relationship to the fans to a purely economic one, they can deflect attempts by the fans to actualize their special relations to the clubs into a formal political relationship with the club. The concept of the customer has been central to the transformation of clubs into businesses because it has justified the increase of admission prices that has been crucial to the clubs' profitability. Simultaneously, by reducing the relationship between fan and club to a purely economic one, the notion of the customer then serves the useful political purpose of ruling any fans' protests about higher

prices out of court a priori<sup>16</sup>. Within the market, all political debate is reduced to a haggle over prices.

The conscious attempt of new directors to anticipate and prevent the inconvenience of public, political debate is evinced by the experience of the chairman of Newcastle United's independent supporters' association, Kevin Miles. He related how in a public debate with Freddie Fletcher, the chief executive at Newcastle United, on local radio in 1995, the latter had dismissed Miles' suggestion that fans should have some representation on the board at the club. Fletcher asked Miles where he shopped, to which Miles replied that he shopped at Safeways. Fletcher then asked Miles whether he wished to be on the board of this supermarket because he was a customer there, or whether such a demand would be considered legitimate by Safeways. In other words, Fletcher explicitly drew an analogy between the football club and its fan, and the supermarket and its customer as the appropriate (economic) model to which the relation between fan and clubs should accord. Demonstrating the inadequacy of this purely economic model to the experience of fandom, Miles replied ironically that he did not spend his weekends and evening visiting "away" stores, nor did he possess a Safeways' away strip (personal interview, September 10, 1996). The special attachment and dedication that the fans demonstrate for their club demands the recognition of the social and political relationship of the fans and club in place of a flat formal economic ideal.

The concept of the customer echoes the bourgeoisie's classical division of politics and economics, whereby they hoped to exempt themselves from the interferences of state legislation. Through the notion of the customer, the new directors have attempted to reduce their relationship to the football fans to a purely economic transaction. As Bates says, "the customer gets what he pays for." For the new directors, this is all they are willing to give to the customer; the only rights that they are willing to concede are economic ones of nonpurchase. The concept of the customer conveniently rules out a priori any serious political intervention the fans might have in the running of the football club.

## Conclusion

Critical theory seeks to uncover the political nature of discourse by highlighting the social location and historical context that gave rise to that discourse. This article has applied that critical method to one aspect of the free market discourse to show how the concept of the customer has informed the new directors' transformation of their football clubs to private, profit-making businesses.

However, although this article has critically demonstrated the deliberate inadequacy of the concept of the customer, the article does not suggest that this concept is totally false in the sense that there is a "true" reality that this concept covers up. Rather, the concept is only inadequate and partial, taking into account only one aspect of the fans' relations to the football club, while ignoring other elements that would impinge on the new directors' project. On their part, the fans inevitably employ similar strategies of partial and inadequate concepts that highlight and advance their social position, while playing down other aspects that undermine their position. Fan discourse is equally open to critical theory. Critical theorists should remain detached from any particular political standpoint, including (as Adorno insisted) their own.

Nevertheless, despite the need for moderation in the critique of the concept of the customer in order to avoid falling into facile dualisms of the inevitable opposition of interest between fans and new directors, it is equally important to recognize the intensely political nature of the concept of the customer. It has been noted that the concept of the customer attempts to reduce the political and social relationship between fan and club to a purely economic one. The significance of this reduction of the political to the economic has significance beyond football for it has been typical strategy in Thatcherite Britain to de-legitimate political opposition by narrowing broad social issues down to very limited economic problems (to be answered by equally limited economic concepts). In his recent manifesto, Hutton (1996) has demanded the need for the extension and transformation of citizenship to overcome the social divisions that have emerged in post-Fordist Britain. As a central ritual of social debate and solidarity, the football ground would seem to offer an obvious arena in which new notions of citizenship—that is, active participation in decision-making—might be expressed. The critique of the concept of the customer is, then, intended in a very small way to contribute to those arguments for a better form of citizenship through the demonstration of the sterility of economic thinking and the constrictedness of its vision.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The echoes with Williams' discussions of customers and consumers are plain here, although Williams argues against the concept of the consumer rather than the customer (1961, pp. 296-298).

<sup>2</sup>I wrote to the chairmen of the clubs in the Premier League in 1994, requesting an interview. Ten replied, four refused (Walker, Blackburn; Moores, Liverpool; Edwards, Manchester United; and Hammam, Wimbledon), and six accepted (Bates, Chelsea; Chase, Norwich; Stott, Oldham; Dooley, Sheffield United; Storrie, West Ham; and Askham, Southampton).

<sup>3</sup>This doctoral dissertation, *The Premier League and the New Consumption of Football*, was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council postgraduate studentship and was awarded at the Institute of Social Research, Department of Sociology, University of Salford, UK. The research from that thesis will form the basis of a book, *The End of the Terraces*, to be published by Leicester University Press (1997).

<sup>4</sup>Jessop has argued that Thatcherism amounted to pragmatic statecraft with no discernible ideological project (1988, p. 74). There is no room to refute this claim here.

<sup>5</sup>The central figures among the new directors are: Sir John Hall (Newcastle), David Dein (Arsenal), Martin Edwards (Manchester United), Alan Sugar (Tottenham), Steven Gibson (Middlesbrough), Bob Murray (Sunderland), Jack Heyward (Wolves), although almost every club in the top two divisions has converted its style of operations in light of the increasing control of these entrepreneurs over the game.

<sup>6</sup>Many large European clubs are integrated into multinationals: Juventus with Fiat, PSV Eindhoven with Phillips. While Olympique Marseilles and AC Milan have been integrated with the television companies of their respective owners, Bernard Tapie and Silvio Berlusconi (Duke, 1991, p. 634), and "it is widely accepted that all Italian and Spanish clubs run on huge deficits" (Inglis, 1992, p. 51).

<sup>7</sup>Fishwick's historical account of football makes a similar point, arguing that football in the middle years of this century amounted to the "Labour party at prayer" (1989, p. 150; see also King, 1995, p. 208).

<sup>8</sup>By this criterion, Jack Walker, the chairman of Blackburn Rovers, cannot be described as a new director because he has invested enormous amounts of money in the club with no hope of a return and he does not seem to have any grand integrated project of accumulation which Hall and Gibson have in mind.

<sup>9</sup>Although Deloitte and Touche recorded that Newcastle made an operating (pretransfer fee) profit of £5,251 million in the 1994-95 season, that profit became an £8,159 million deficit after transfer fees were included (Deloitte & Touche).

<sup>10</sup>This account of Steven Gibson's strategy at Middlebrough is taken from a personal interview with Louise Taylor, Northeastern football correspondent for *The Sunday Times* (October 16, 1996).

<sup>11</sup>I have made a similar argument in a recent article (King, 1996).

<sup>12</sup>Bradford's main stand burnt down on May 11, 1985, killing 55 people.

<sup>13</sup>The conduct of some masculine fans in the past should not, as Taylor has suggested (1989, p. 104), be romanticized in order to argue against the transformation of football.

<sup>14</sup>Feminists would object strongly to the passive notion of women suggested by these arguments.

<sup>15</sup>Sloane has recognized the peculiarity of sport as an economic form (1980), although his arguments are very different from my own.

<sup>16</sup>It should be emphasized that the new directors have only attempted to undermine the arguments of the fans through the use of the concept of the customer. That use has not always been successful. This article does not examine the resistance of the fans to the notion of the customer (see King, 1995, pp. 245-307).