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# Generations, events, and social movement legacies: Unpacking social change in English football (1980–2023)

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## Abstract

This article critically employs the case of association football in England, from 1980 to 2023, as a social movement *timescape*, to examine the political consciousness and long-term mobilisations of a generation of football supporter activists, and their capacity to influence politics, and respond to new, emerging, critical junctures, through networks of trust and shared memories of historical events. This is of crucial importance to sociology because it reveals the tensions between what are considered legitimate and illegitimate social practices which characterise contemporary society's moral economy. Focusing on temporal contestations over regulation, policing, governance and cultural rituals, the article deconstructs the role of generations in social movements, and critically synthesises relational-temporal sociology and classic and contemporary work on the sociology of generations, to show how legacy operates as a multifaceted maturing concept of power and time. In English football's neoliberal *timescape*, the supporters' movement has reached a critical juncture; the future will require a new generation of activists, to negotiate, resist and contest the new hegemonic politics of social control and supporter engagement.

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## KEYWORDS

football fans, generations, relational sociology, social movements, temporality

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent work in relational sociology on social fields and arenas (Jasper, 2021) has mobilised new thinking on the outcomes and legacies of social movements, and the distinction between movement 'victories' and 'successes' (Useem & Goldstone, 2022; Turner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023a, 2023b). Situating social movements within a dynamic relational field, where power and counter-power are manifested through the temporal and evolving actions of state and non-state actors, brings into analytical focus the ways in which movements emerge, mobilise, and succeed or fail (Goldstone, 2004). The temporal nature of social movements is thus constituted by a full external relational field or *timescape* (Gillan, 2020), encompassing a complex set of relationships amongst activists, counter-movements, Allies, political actors, authoritative bodies, and wider publics. Here, the strategic interactions of these 'players' respond to and create new political and cultural opportunities (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015), and are hence characterised by a patterning of social relations between interdependent actors. Fields or arenas are therefore emergent properties of social interactions which act back upon and shape those interactions (Crossley, 2022). Recently, this temporal relational thinking has been expanded to consider the impact and restlessness of momentous, or transformative events, producing ruptures, critical junctures, and new forms of prefigurative politics and institutional legacies (Della Porta, 2020; Roberts, 2015; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017, 2021). However, to fully understand the significance of social movements outcomes, as reflecting and constituting wider historical processes of social change, any temporally orientated relational sociology must, we argue here, critically unpack generational continuities and micro-cohort changes of politically orientated activists (Whittier, 1997), and their networked memories, tastes, tensions, and conflicts.

In this article, we aim to map the contours of a theoretical framework for deconstructing the role of generations in social movements by critically synthesising relational-temporal sociology with both classic and contemporary work on the sociology of generations. To do this, we employ the case of association football in England, from 1980 to 2023, as the movement *timescape* or relational field, to examine the political consciousness and long-term mobilisations of a generation of football supporter activists, and their capacity to influence politics, and respond to new, emerging, critical junctures, through generational networks of trust and shared memories of historical events. This, we argue, is sociologically significant because it reveals the tensions between what are considered *legitimate* and *illegitimate* social practices, which characterise contemporary society's moral economy. Indeed, the 40-year social scientific study of the football crowd tells us something important about temporal contestations over regulation, policing, governance, and cultural rituals, which characterise the mobilisations of groups to respond to historical events and influence social democracy and policy. By adopting a conceptual approach, which is simultaneously informed by our prior-empirical research into supporter activism and what we term the neoliberal *timescape* of English football (Turner, 2022, 2023; Lee Ludvigsen, 2023; Turner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023a, 2023b), this article then establishes and elucidates some pressing, research-portable questions for future sociological research on events, legacies, memories and transitions of social movement generations, by considering how long-term social changes may generate new generational tensions or conflicts. We contend that, in English football, the cultural and political character of the new generation of supporter activists remains undecided, but of critical importance for the game's future sustainability. This we argue, is characterised by three interdependent factors; first, young supporter affordability and access; second, the erosion of the kinds of dense solidarities of traditional terrace culture out of which some independent supporters' groups emerged; and third, the wider absence of young adults in formal political engagement and community leadership.

## 2 | A RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY FOR THE SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT GENERATIONS

Over the past two decades, there has been a renewed interest in sociology in the historical problem of generations for understanding the structure of social, intellectual, identity and global movements (Bristow, 2016; Edmunds & Turner, 2005; Kaplan, 2020; Nettleingham, 2015; Roberts, 2012; White, 2013). Following Edmunds and Turner (2005), it is through various demographic transformations—and their significant political repercussions—that this sociological interest in generations has re-emerged, notably, the potential for intergenerational conflict arising from new welfare and employment concerns. For White (2013), the contemporary application of the generational concept in British public life is marked by attempts to explain and periodise historical change; to conceptualise and interpret community belonging; to unpack social injustice; and identify sources of conflict and impending social crises.

Importantly, this body of work has re-awakened an intellectual interest in 'generationality', which began with the classic essay by Karl Mannheim (1952[1928], p. 167) and his argument holding that what distinguishes, or marks a (political) 'generation' is a common location in the historical dimension of the social process. Accordingly, generation units encountering the same events also interpret them similarly and '[form] an ideological unit or cultural movement' (Whittier, 1997, p. 761). However, this generational location both limits and predisposes individuals to specific expressions of thinking or emotions and facilitates a type of 'generational consciousness' (Connelly, 2019). As Mannheim (1952[1928], p. 297) argued:

the fact that people are born at the same time, does not itself involve similarity of location; what creates a similar location is that they are able to experience the same events and these experiences impinge upon a similarly stratified consciousness.

Whilst Mannheim's influence on the contemporary sociology of generations is clear in this canon of work, Connelly (2019) contends that Elias's formulations on generations offer a more empirically grounded theoretical frame for explaining intergenerational conflict. Indeed, Elias's *Studies on the Germans* (2013[1989]) presents a figurational, eventful sociology of generations. It views collective consciousness and collective identifications as constitutive of similar interdependently linked generational experiences, through the emergence of 'we-feelings' and social habitus. Importantly, intergenerational tensions or conflicts emerge when new channels of opportunity and life meaning for younger generations are narrowed or closed, often in response to the impact of significant events.

By bringing together these insights, Mannheim and Elias illustrated how the sociological problem of generations is characterised by processes of generational transmission and consciousness through which political and intellectual self-awareness are re-shaped. However, contemporary post-structuralist critiques of Mannheim suggest that generations are better conceived as discourses with which individuals relate to establish 'we-identification'. Here, generation-units are replaced by dominant ideas and, indeed, 'generations are also a question of culturally constructed labels and narratives that are discursively mobilised, to the detriment of others, to identify a given generation' (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2014, p. 167).

More recently, neo-Mannheimian sociology has sought to distinguish *birth cohorts* from *generation units* by considering industrial and post-industrial changes which are evolutionary and transformative. Cohorts, following Della Porta (2019, p. 1412), 'acquire more of an impact on collective action when they go through some shared, important event that contributes to shaping their norms, values, and behaviour in their future lives'. This emergence of a political consciousness—often formed in youth—follows a similar trajectory to older generations when social, cultural, and political changes are developmental. Contrastingly, where change is substantial, new generations, including youth political movements, will require new ways of thinking (Roberts, 2012). Importantly, the impact of political generations, once formed, is temporally significant and often delayed until members of a new generation constitute a critical mass of actors, including state-actors (Roberts, 2012).

In contemporary sociology, research on political generations has primarily examined contemporary leftist youth politics (Gonzalez-Valliant, 2013), youth climate movements (Soleri-Marti et al., 2022), UK students' experiences

of austerity (Cini & Guzmán-Concha, 2017), and intergenerational continuities and changes in the post-millennial movement landscape in Greece (Papanikolopoulos, 2023). This body of work identifies the role of emotions and generational discourse to unpack processes of agitation, social unrest, and citizen engagement with anti-neoliberal mobilisations. The contemporary analysis of social movement generations follows what has been described as a 'relational turn' in sociology (Edwards, 2014). Relational scholars of social movements have argued that the social reality of modern society consists of complex webs (networks) of social relations and interactions. These produce shared, intersubjective, and mutually interdependent meanings across different temporal periods (Crossley, 2011). Through this philosophical lens, the emergence of generational networks, cohorts and generational consciousness is a social structure in *becoming*; a pattern of relations between interdependent actors or, in other words, a *dependent structure of interdependencies* (Crossley, 2022). We argue that this social relational ontology has three important conceptual implications for the role of generations in social movements, and their interpretations of, and responses to significant, historical events.

First, by treating generational structure and agency as *emergent* properties, the importance of temporal thinking is brought into analytical focus, specifically, by seeking to understand the ways in which different social networks negotiate time, through their intersubjective lives, and interdependently linked, temporal strategies and mobilities. Thus, to understand what social movements *are* and what they *do*, we must historicise the mobilisations of activist networks across a longer-term *timescape* (Gillan, 2020). This *timescape* captures both the sudden and gradual social changes which, over time, alter the societal contours and flows of power and counter-power. Here, social movements move with an uneven temporality, encompassing repeated patterns of interaction and the contingent unfolding of historical events which, in turn, produce interpretations of those events, or what we might term collective (political) consciousness, social action on those events, and new events (Gillan, 2020).

Second, such eventful sociology of movements bridges Mannheim's work on how shared experiences of significant events is what distinguishes a particular (political) generation, with contemporary sociological research on the institutional legacies of transformative events, discursive turns, and social movement critical junctures (Della Porta, 2020; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017). Following Della Porta (2020), critical junctures emerge out of what are sudden ruptures or moments of social or political crisis. Often, they produce eventful protests which catalyse intense waves of contention. Consequently, the legacy of the initial rupture begins to sediment and produces an institutional (generational) legacy. Here, critical junctures are then reproduced in those generational legacies in ways that differ from the political-organisational structure that preceded. Adapting this work, we centralise the importance of unpacking the generational networks and biographies of activists in the *lifeworld* at the point of rupture(s), and through the sedimentation of those rupture(s). Indeed, a 'relational logic of legacy' becomes a defining feature in the sociology of social movement generations, events, and generational consciousness.

Third, to understand the meanings attached to generation-specific social engagement in collective action, we must identify the symbolic and discursive spaces, where interactions between networks and other agents take place. Advancing this, we suggest here that such fields are types of 'generational arenas', or '[generational] fields of struggle' (Ibrahim, 2015) which constitute intersubjective understandings of the social world, events, and social problems. Such generational arenas can include political, symbolic, mediatised, technological, and legislative spaces (Turner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023a, 2023b), which constitute the wider movement field of contention. By examining both outcomes and legacies of protest that originate from social networks, across multiple temporal periods and arenas, we stretch and problematise the view holding that individuals' experiences are shaped by historical contexts and events (Whittier, 2022).

Bringing these insights together to develop a critical lens on the neoliberal *timescape* of English football from 1980 to 2023, we argue, presents an important case and context for unpacking generational social movements for two significant reasons. First, historical processes of enculturation into this *lifeworld* are themselves generational. Indeed, many of the collective memories and social histories of men, women, and children in Britain, are linked through the multi-generational life-time support of the local football club, composing a marker of (family-orientated) social identity. Second, one of the most significant events in British society during the late twentieth century occurred

in this *lifeworld* and became a microcosm for the managed decline of the urban working class, and policing with contempt during the Thatcher government's response to civil disorder in the 1980s. This event, the Hillsborough stadium disaster (1989), raises important questions around the historical views on football supporters as deviant, and becomes—as explored next—an important historical and social movement context. Yet, whilst this *timescape* captures Heysel and Hillsborough's aftermath, it remains important to highlight that *within* it, a more pronounced, neoliberal, temporal period of radical change can be located. This concretised in 1992 with the formation of the Premier League, the league's lucrative broadcasting contracts signed *BSkyB* and the all-seater stadium roll-out, which transformed the consumption of English football (David & Millward, 2012; King, 1998). As such, in the *timescape* of concern here, a neoliberal period exists and intensified from 1992 onwards and altered football's spectator groups and rituals but shaped largely by the political economic transformations of the late 1970s and 1980s, namely the emergence of post-Fordism and Thatcherism in the UK (King, 1998).

By unpacking the consciousness and legacies of a political generation of supporter activists in England across this pre-and-post-Hillsborough timescape, we demonstrate how the construction of relational collective identities reflects both the external contexts, and internal conditions of the social movement at the time they enter (Whittier, 1997).

### 3 | RELATIONAL COLLECTIVE ACTION AND THE NEOLIBERAL TIMESCAPE OF ENGLISH FOOTBALL

Sociologists of social movements have examined how, during the late twentieth century, old capital and labour conflicts were replaced by lifestyle and identity politics. This produced a theoretical and empirical shift from *old* to new social movements (NSM), inspired by the cluster of generational movements emerging during the 1960s, including the peace movement, second wave feminism and campaigns for animal rights. The works of Habermas (1987), Touraine (1981) and Melucci (1996) were central to the theoretical development of NSM, and the former conceptualised NSM as reactions to what he argued was a 'colonisation of the *lifeworld*' (Habermas, 1987), evidenced by strains or grievances which emerge in post-industrial societies. For Crossley (2002, p. 158), this contains a 'process of juridification, whereby ever more areas of life become subject to legal regulation'.

English football, as argued here, provides a fruitful site for analyses of NSMs, and generational consciousness. Whilst not all football supporters choose to engage in collective action, supporters' political engagement has occurred and matured over several decades (Amann & Doidge, 2023) and reflects the late-twentieth century shift from old to NSM sources of social unrest. In addition to wider changes and socio-economic conflicts in British society in the 1970s and 1980s, the emergence of a political generation of football supporters throughout the mid- and late 1980s must be analysed in the context of the social world of English football in the 1980s and 1990s which—as situated within a post-Fordist economic framework—became largely synonymous with large-scale political, economic, and social transformations. Hence, compared to other European contexts, King (2004) observed early on that the British society was where the politicisation of social relationships between supporters, clubs and authorities was most advanced.

Social concerns and 'moral panics' related to football-related violence and disorder since the 1960s culminated with a famous *The Sunday Times* (May 19, 1985) article describing English football as a 'slum game played in slum stadiums watched by slum people' (Goldblatt, 2007, p. 542). This depiction was then succeeded by the turning points of the and Hillsborough (1989) stadium tragedies, Lord Justice Taylor's report published after Hillsborough, and the neoliberal mindsets increasingly subscribed to by the 'new directors' and club owners entering English football in the 1990s (King, 1998). Crucially, returning to Della Porta's (2020) critical junctures, this period of social, centrifugal transformations, and its aftermath, saw a critical mass of politically engaged football supporters become an increasingly strong collective force through their efforts to acquire a greater say in English football's future (Fitzpatrick & Hoey, 2022), and contest the loss of important collective rituals (Turner, 2022, 2023).

In the UK, the emergence of a supporter activist scene, and what we term here a 'political generational consciousness' both *in*, and *through* football, may be traced back to the 1980s and this critical juncture. Here, it emerged through

diverse formats. Specifically, throughout the early and mid-1980s, we detect the rise of the fanzine movement and the correlated activation of fan networks (Millward, 2008). Football fanzines are exemplars of cultural contestations and NSMs responsive to political and social changes impacting specific clubs and football more holistically. Whilst the first football fanzine was created in 1972, it was throughout the 1980s that fanzines proliferated and became established spaces for the expression of supporters' vernaculars (Millward, 2008). Fanzines surfaced as alternative, amateur magazines produced by and for fans, and through these written and visual forms, supporter writers started to voice their criticisms of uncritical match-day programs, but also the police, authorities, and media. Indeed, political commentaries were central to fanzines representing 'sites of resistance' to the hegemonic forces (Jary et al., 1991), thus developing what Mannheim (1952[1928]) referred to as a common location (of supporters) in the historical dimension of the social process.

Importantly, the fanzine movement was paralleled by the rise of the Football Supporters Association (FSA): a national supporters group led by two politically left-wing activists in Liverpool, who opposed the Thatcher government's supporter identification card proposal.<sup>1</sup> Then, in the 1990s, Independent Supporters Associations (ISAs), comprising of predominantly left and centre-left activists hailing from industrial trade unions, local government, academia and other public and private sector industries (Turner, 2022, 2023), entered the UK supporter activist scene, and thus constituted a critical mass of highly resourced actors who were able to communicate effectively across the various regions of English football, notably from cities such as Liverpool, London, Sheffield, Birmingham, Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester, and Southampton, characteristic of the type of collective effervescence produced by larger populations where resources, communication, and capital are more effectively connected (Crossley, 2015). Together, they were networked together through a shared ideological commitment to a post Thatcherite social democracy and what constituted the appropriate consumption of football (Turner, 2022, 2023; Nash, 2000; King, 2003), and sought to reinvent fan politics (Numerato, 2018); it was here a new generation of politically engaged supporters expressed their political contestations over the colonisation of the *lifeworld* of traditional supporter rituals.

During the mid-to late 1990s, the creation of all-seated stadia threatened a particular practice of fandom, in the way it restricted the masculine ecstatic solidarity of the terrace and transformed the modern consumption of football. In 1995, the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association (IMUSA) emerged after a group of supporters standing in the all-seated K-Stand at Old Trafford were threatened with eviction from the ground. At a meeting at the Gorse Hill pub in Stretford, a network, with prior social ties, emerged seeking to mobilise against draconian measures taken by the club towards standing supporters. King (1998) argued that the development of ISAs, like IMUSA, were characteristic of NSM, wherein a socially diverse group becomes united around an issue of consumption as opposed to traditional employment. Indeed, Habermas (1987) conceptualised NSMs as reactions to what he argued was a 'colonization of the *lifeworld*' evidenced by specific strains or grievances which emerge in post-industrial societies. Through this lens, the building of supporter coalition networks was led by former trade union activists who had shifted their interest in workplace conflicts towards the lifestyle and identity politics of modern football.

In 1998, a coalition of leading ISA and FSA activists, were invited to give evidence to the New Labour government's Football Task Force (FTF) on the main commercial and regulatory issues, seen as fundamental to the game's future. This generational coalition network, involving former members of the Militant Tendency, a Trotskyist group in the British Labour Party, along with other independent labour activists that had laid low for years after the repression of the communist strikes in 1970, held important communication skills and political-organisational resources to mobilise cooperation and trust amongst other ISAs leaders (Turner, 2022, 2023). In doing so, a relational collective identity, or what Elias (2013[1989]) called 'we-feelings' through generational experiences of the neoliberal transformation of football, emerged as a particular type of generational social unrest. Contestations against the politicisation of football consumption throughout the 1990s then, was led by an alliance of a generation of political activists and fanzine writers, whose origin is located within the leftist sections of the professional middle-class generation of the late 1960s and a mythic affiliation with what they view as the traditional, authentic working class (King, 1998).

Here, a political generational consciousness of a post-Heysel and post-Hillsborough *timescape* emerged, through a collective love of football, a commitment to socially democratic policies, and opposition to many of the conjunctural



arguments for the reform and regulation of supporters (Turner, 2022, 2023). The mobilisation of these movements—what we might term generational transmission—allowed supporters to produce alternative discourses and narratives surrounding key issues including the intensified security and commercial regimes of English football, and their impact on important socio-cultural rituals (Lee Ludvigsen, 2023). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the continued and elevated commercialisation (King, 1998), globalisation (David & Millward, 2012) and securitisation (Turner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023a, 2023b) of English football have prolonged the mentioned social trends. Digital transformations like social media have also assisted heterogeneous fan networks' transnational connections, as encapsulated by the foundation of Football Supporters Europe (FSE), a European-wide, representative body for supporter issues, seeking to promote and empower supporter cultures, in 2008, and the 'against modern football' movements (Hill et al., 2018). Crucially, however, at the social movement organisational level, the key switchers, and programmers of these transnational networks (Castells, 2015), are the *same* former Militant political actors who helped build the UK supporter activist scene (Turner, 2022, 2023).

Overall, the abovementioned processes have collectively (re)generated 'a growing sense of voicelessness and dispossession amongst fans, who have become increasingly critical and reflexive about their lack of representation and participation in the governance of football' (Fitzpatrick & Hoey, 2022, p. 1246). We argue here that the transformative events in the 1980s—externally *and* internally positioned to football—brought about an important legacy in the context of British society: social networks of supporter activists whose political consciousness was formed in youth during the 1970s and mobilised through relational networks of trust. The nature of this generational legacy is illustrated by the fact that, between 1980 and 2023, supporters' movements mobilised and resisted various social, political, and cultural issues *in and through* football (Numerato, 2018). Whilst this includes what appears as football-focused issues (including club ownership, rising ticket prices or the all-seated stadia)—these issues concurrently reveal wider, highly contested political processes relating, for instance, to the authorities' attempts to regulate social groups, the global flow of capital and neoliberal strategies. Here, a new political economy of English football is emerging, in which governance, supporters' engagement, and security and policing are being brought under the British regulatory state.

As argued, therefore, the emergence of a political generation of supporter activists should be attached a special sociological importance, not solely as a portal to understand social groups' interactions (Amann & Doidge, 2023), but intergenerational continuities and micro-cohort changes of politically oriented activists. Despite the growing work on collective action in football, however, the *outcomes* and legacies of this generational consciousness, which we unpack next, have been left under-examined and under-theorised.

#### 4 | GENERATIONAL EVENTS, OUTCOMES, AND LEGACIES OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

We now focus on the outcomes and legacies of the political generational consciousness of an important historical location in English football, namely, through the collective shared experiences of transformative events between 1985 and 1992 (cf. Mannheim, 1958[1928]) including Heysel, Hillsborough, and the formation of the Premier League. It draws primarily upon thematic analysis of our prior-empirical research into supporter activism and football's wider social and political transformations (Turner, 2023; Turner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023a, 2023b). As argued, generational consciousness is a social structure in becoming (Crossley, 2022), whilst social movement analyses must be *temporally sensitive* (Gillan, 2020). Thus, our analysis of movement legacies captures how the outcomes produced by this political consciousness are often latent and tempo-spatially diffuse. As such, supporter activists' struggles over (i) policing and legislation; (ii) governance; and (iii) fan culture, are now discussed with respect to *current* and *past* event within the three domains. Ultimately, we argue that these struggles are generationally sensitive because they reveal temporal networks, discursive practices, and political frames to be diffused through a through generational consciousness and sense of belonging and identity.



## 4.1 | Contestations over policing and legislation

Throughout the 2021/22 football season, concerns over post-lockdown anti-social behaviour and pitch invasion in English football stadia (Turner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023a, 2023b), and the heavy-handed policing and organisational failures at the UEFA Champions League final between Liverpool and Real Madrid in Paris, renewed the political interest in questions surrounding policing and legislation in English football. This was demonstrated by the Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport Committee (DCMS) launching an inquiry into the safety at major sporting events, in July 2022, seeking to examine the effectiveness of existing alcohol and new stadium licencing, and the need for changes to the regulation of football supporters in the UK (DCMS, 2022). At this inquiry, a long-serving influential figure within the FSA, who played an important role in setting up the Independent Newcastle Supporters Association (INUSA) in 1995, programming the Coalition of Football Supporters (CoFS) in 1998, and switching transnational networks to form FSE in 2007, gave evidence, arguing that the rise of a younger generation of fans had emerged 'post-Covid', who had not experienced the same enculturation process into the *lifeworld* of fandom, as those of his generation. The DCMS inquiry occurred in parallel with the independent review into the Champions League final, and the subsequent report published in February 2023. The report, worked out by a panel composed of nine members—including one representative each from the FSA and FSE—repeatedly emphasised the need for enhanced supporter engagement, dialogue-based policing and made, overall, 21 recommendations. However, whilst we observe that several supporter activists, through certain authorities' recognition of FSA or FSE as dialog partners, have access to football's decision-making centres at this critical juncture in supporters' contestations over policing and legislation, it is required to situate this as a *generational legacy* within an overarching *timescape*. This outcome, we contend, should be genealogically traced to shared memories and experiences of Heysel and Hillsborough and their long-term impacts.

Following the two tragedies, British supporters, including current professionally paid activists on the FSAs board and national council, and those voluntarily working on new supporter engagement mechanisms at individual clubs, were subjected to a myriad of new mechanisms and legal frameworks seeking to police, govern and colonise their behaviours, cultures and *lifeworlds* (cf. Habermas, 1987). This included, inter alia, *The Football Spectators Act 1989*, *The Football Offences Act 1991*, and *The Football (Disorder) Act 2000* (Giulianotti, 2011). Following the recommendations of the Taylor Report, which became 'a key driver of UK social policy on football [and] granted widespread political support' (Giulianotti, 2011, p. 3300), the *Football Spectators (Seating) Order 1994* then mandated all-seated stadiums in English football's top-flight. However, these socio-legal interventions did not merely pave the way for the current regulation and criminalisation of supporters' behaviours, including their right to stand. They were also followed by formal and informal opposition and calls for sociolegal reforms from the generation of activists unpacked above. Indeed, for decades, 'the spiral of regulatory measures and policing' has been one of contemporary football's most contested aspects (Numerato, 2018, p. 81), mobilised by a political generation of actors with a history of FSA and ISA activism spanning two decades.

Since the 1980s, the legal regulation and policing of supporters have been heavily contested by the FSA and fanzine movements in the UK. Indeed, the parallel—sometimes overlapping—movements, in themselves, originated from the sentiment of some activists that supporters' civil liberties and rights were compromised by the identification card proposal, the prohibition of standing in the stadiums and repressive policing. The 1990s and 2000s also saw the concretisation of more specific campaigns directly related to football legislation and policing. This includes the FSA's (2008) 'Watching Football Is Not a Crime' campaign, and the Safe Standing movement which, over three decades of campaigning against the all-seating stadium legislation and state power, has recently prefigured a new regulatory regime, through the formal introduction, in 2022, of 'licensed Safe Standing areas' in English football's top divisions (Turner, 2023). However, concerning social movements more generally, one theoretical departure point to be highlighted here speaks to how movements' alternative narratives surrounding policing, legislative efforts and the concentration of power and social control emerge and mature in line with activist generations' life courses, and events within legislative and policing arenas.

## 4.2 | The struggle for independent regulation

In February 2023, the UK government published its White Paper on football governance. This report articulated, most remarkably, plans to introduce an independent regulator of elite clubs in English football, whilst ensuring that supporters acquire a greater say in their clubs' management, given football's community-related importance (DCMS, 2023). Calls for a more democratic governance of football also followed the sudden European Super League (ESL) rupture in April 2021, characterised by intense mobilisations including street protests and online anger, largely coordinated by long-serving activists networked through independent supporters' groups and trusts, and the FSA. These groups, Spirit of Shankly (Liverpool); Tottenham Hotspur Supporters Trust; Chelsea Supporters' Trust; 1894 (Manchester City); Arsenal Supporters' Trust; and Manchester United Supporters' Trust (MUST) are the long-term networked legacies of the 1990s ISA movement. Indeed, many of those core activists at these six groups, were previously involved with IMUSA; Arsenal Independent Supporters Association; the Tottenham Independent Supporters Association; club-specific fanzines; and the national FSA. Consequently, an anti-ESL movement was instantly drawn from many such fans of otherwise rivalrous clubs, who are now in their mid-to-late 50s and mobilised through the adaption of existing tactics and social relations, but also, historically formed, shared meanings on football's tradition and moral economy (Turner, 2022, 2023). Yet, the ESL breakaway must be contextualised. Around the turn of the millennium, one of European football's most radical developments was when Milan-based media rights group 'Media Partners' proposed an independent 'super league' for selected European clubs. This led to the formation of G14, a lobby group of 'super clubs' challenge UEFA's running of the Champions League (King, 2004). However, unlike in 2021, where the most successful and vocal protests were fan-led, the main opponents in the early 2000s were largely excluded clubs, media, and football authorities. Consequently, the 'puzzling out' of a new post-ESL regulatory regime in football reveals the tensions between what are considered legitimate and illegitimate practices, which characterise the moral economy of the contemporary English football crowd. The ESL case thus extends analysis of the new consumption of football because it illuminates the reality of the long-term deregulation of English and European market societies, and how critical junctures drive, but also constrain, the capacity of durable activist networks to address larger social contradictions in modern capitalism. The subsequent establishment of the Fan-Led-Review therefore demonstrates how dramatic, crisis-driven moments at this critical juncture, of important historical change, can produce important and immediate consequences of generational collective action.

Putting this into a wider temporal context, the significance of new, emerging, regulatory reform of English football is an important legacy and outcome of a long struggle for independent regulation across the neoliberal *timescape* of English football (1980–2023). Twenty-six-years-ago, a new political 'Third Way' movement in Britain surfaced, aiming to renew social democracy through values of mutualism and cooperation and, in doing so, resolve the contradiction inherent within neoliberalism's encouragement of economic individualism and social conservatism (Hutton, 1995). Here, the national football supporters' movement and leading ISAs, in cooperation with the Labour Party, mobilised campaigns for fans to have a greater stake, or influence in, the organisation and governance of the game. Consequently, a new political framework emerged titled: 'The Charter for Football'. This again led to the formation of a FTF. Upon winning the general election in 1997, the New Labour government established the FTF to investigate whether the deregulated football industry had failed to meet its social obligations. However, whilst the FTF demonstrated the Third Way's weakness, calling for greater fan involvement in the regulation of the game through the principle of football clubs being participatory democratic organisations (Martin, 2007), ultimately, the opportunity was missed to radically reform the governance of English football through independent regulation.

Despite this, the success of a political generation of activists in football during the 1990s secured new government funding to establish Supporters Direct (SD) in 2000, and Supporters' Trusts at individual clubs,<sup>2</sup> underpinned by the desire to democratise supporters' relations with the game, through mechanisms of achieving supporter ownership of clubs (Hamill et al., 2001). In the historical practices of the UK fan activist scene, SD produced a type of (football supporter) social movement industry, complimenting the work of the FSA, and the emergence of Supporters Direct Europe (SDE) through interlocking generational network structures. Supporters Direct Europe, similarly, was

an organisation advocating for enhanced supporter involvement and ownership in clubs which, specifically, developed the supporter liaison officer role in Europe with UEFA. Significantly, those responsible for leading SDE and SD, before it merged with the FSA in 2018, include former Militant activists within the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association (IMUSA) and CoFS, and the former shadow government minister for Energy, who played a key role in the anti-ESL movement. These networked alliances have been important in developing effective strategic interactions with key stakeholders across the governance of the game over the past two decades, including the establishment of the Government Expert Working Group on Football Supporter Ownership and Engagement in 2014, and the Fan-Led Review of Football Governance in 2021, described by the current FSA Chief Executive, and former communications officer for the All Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation in 1989, as a 'once in a lifetime opportunity to fix football' through new, independent regulation (Turner, 2022, 2023).

Following this, 23 years after SD's inception, new mechanisms on supporter engagement in England are emerging in the wake of the White Paper, including strengthening the Supporter Liaison Officer role, as evidenced by best practice in Europe through the former work of SDE and now FSE, and the development of new supporters (shadow) boards and fan advisory boards (Numerato, 2018). Leading work on supporter engagement at the national level continues to be coordinated by long-serving networks who built the historical and contemporary fan activist scenes, informed by the memory of those significant shared events during the 1980s and 1990s. This includes the current FSA's Head of Community Ownership, now aged 60, who has been politically active since the age of 15, having formerly worked on the national executive committee of the banking union and chairman of the Greater Manchester Anti-Poll Tax Federation during the late 1980s (FCUM, 2023). Moreover, two leading activists appearing on the new shadow (supporters) board and fan advisory board in Liverpool and Manchester United played a key role in the 2021 anti-ESL mobilisations and are currently in their late 50s and early 60s.

Bringing these two temporal periods together, we argue, reveals the restlessness of historical events in football—notably, Hillsborough, the Premier League's formation in 1992 and the emergence of SD in the wake of the FTF, as important collective generational memories, within the sedimentation of contemporary, eventful protests. Any new, stable, and favourable equilibrium on football's governance must also reproduce itself within the legacies of these ruptures. This new critical juncture therefore reveals the capacity of durable, generational activist networks, to address larger social contradictions of modern capitalism, and a discursively framed imperative to involve, and listen to, supporters and their democratic rights. The struggle for regulation unpacked here, therefore, remains important to sociologists because it illustrates the generational element situated within a key area of collective action, namely, movements' contestations of neoliberal agendas in contemporary society.

#### 4.3 | 'Supporters, not customers': Standing up for football culture

The current presence and penetration of supporters on advisory boards, working groups and independent panels, illustrated by the above legacies, also extend into matters related to cultural practices, supporter rituals and atmospheric elements that are perceived to be sanitised or impeded by legislation and the 'customer-care' practices view subscribed to by football clubs and authorities (Hill et al., 2018). For example, new stadium developments, like those at Manchester United before the 2023/24 season, are illustrative of longer-term mobilisation of improving supporter engagement and dialogue through the establishment of a fan advisory board, led by Supporters' Trusts, to address long-term impacts of the colonisation of the (traditional) *lifeworld* of football fandom. Indeed, the contemporary, regulatory arena continues to sediment the long-term hermeneutic struggle between supporters and the state, on rights, rituals, and cultural practices. Specifically, this may be viewed through recent mobilisations to allow supporters to legitimately stand at football matches in England's top two divisions for the first time in 30 years, following the mentioned introduction of the all-seating legislation after the Hillsborough disaster (Turner, 2022, 2023). Here, we see the long-term legacy of the Third Way political ideology which underpinned the arguments for football's reform during the FTF at the turn of the millennium. This is important since institutional legacies are revealed through the

claims made by contemporary supporters' groups, which are generally led by the political generation of activists who mobilised social movements in football during the 1980s and 1990s, and thus informed by imagined constructions of authenticity and tradition but achieved through principles of mutualism and building diplomacy with key political actors.

While the notion of supporters as 'customers' has attracted more women and families to football over the past 25 years, it concurrently helped legitimise increases in admission prices, and methods of disciplining the crowd through all-seated stadia (Hudson, 2001). This, in turn, facilitated increasingly subdued and dispassionate forms of spectating and less space for collective forms of expression and physicality associated with terrace culture (Crabbe & Brown, 2004). The removal of the terraces, and the increased regulation in, and around, football grounds during this new political economy, reduced the capacity for younger fans to experience the 'carnavalesque' nature of 'home' matches in traditional ways (Pearson, 2012). Moreover, whilst expanding further football's wider public appeal as a modern inclusive game, the imposition of all-seated stadia and the consequent increases in admission prices and surveillance of supporters represented a significant assault on 'traditional' fan culture which, following Hopcraft (1971), represented a 'privileged place of working-class communion'. Standing together on the terraces, football supporters and the social networks they formed, produced the atmosphere and spectacle which characterise the collective memories and social histories of generations of men, women, and children in Britain. It is significant then, that contemporary mobilisations on Safe Standing are characteristic of a burgeoning active fan culture seeking to generate, manufacture and replicate aspects of the 'ultra' counterculture which historically spread through parts of Europe in the 1980s and 90s (Turner, 2022, 2023).

Significantly, in the English Premier League, the MUST has recently claimed that the 'Stretford End' at the club's Old Trafford stadium is being restored to its 'traditional supporter base' from August 2024. This involves the removal of executive seats and extension of Safe Standing capacity across the entire stand. MUST—whose CEO is 57 years of age, with a long history of supporter activism at Manchester United, including IMUSA, and who played an important role in the anti-ESL mobilisations—argues that supporters are able to 'truly reclaim the Stretford End and recreate the fearsome atmosphere which was so diminished when stadia went all-seated' (MUST, 2023). Such developments follow new mobilisations on the development of atmosphere groups, led by the FSA who have recently established a new network seeking to reclaim the common desire for supporter freedom to 'bathe in the ethereal and hazy world of "leisure life"' (Woolsey, 2021). There is thus a recognition that younger, active supporters are coalescing around the maintenance of aesthetic atmosphere and pleasure, as a key marker of social identity at football 'post-pandemic'. Indeed, at this critical juncture, new, independent grassroots supporters' groups at clubs like Manchester United and Manchester City, including 'The Red Army', and 'We Are 1894' are restoring elements of terrace culture, but in doing so, the atmosphere, culture and level or regulative techniques they envisage and seek to restore are likely to differ from those viewpoints held by organisations such as the FSA, given that the latter's embedded position in policy circles means they must proceed selectively regarding which objectives to prioritise.

Bringing these insights together, at this critical juncture, in English football's new regulatory arenas, atmosphere-based campaigns are likely to become an increasingly significant contemporary focus, providing the new 'supporter engagement' social order with opportunities to re-state and re-claim the social, and cultural values of football spectatorship. At a time when only recently football emerged post-lockdown, where matches, for several months, were played in empty and silent stadiums, the famous words of the late Celtic manager, Jock Stein: 'without fans who pay at the turnstile, football is nothing', cuts through the game, with purpose and authority.

Yet, it again becomes paramount to situate these recent developments and policy moves, which have implications for fan culture, match-day atmospheres and the preserved consumer-oriented imperative in English football, within the long-term neoliberal *timescape*. As Turner (2022, 2023) shows, generational understandings of standing at football, reflect the capacity of long-serving politically orientated activists to draw upon important forms of social capital, relational networks, and collective contestations against the reprogramming of English football along commercial lines. Collectively, then, supporter activists' current struggles over, and recent transformative events in the realms of policing/legislation, governance, and fan culture—as unpacked—showcase how, in making sociological

sense of these current, critical political events, it is crucial to locate the legacies of generational events, the collective shared experiences of those events and, finally, the legacies that the political consciousness in English football brought about. Notwithstanding, in the wider study of social movements, the theoretical insights devised here, emphasising the role of generations and events, are portable and can be transported into other movement contexts because, ultimately, they speak to the ways in which activist generations resist, or contest, forces of neoliberalism, juridification, and securitisation.

## 5 | CONCLUSION: NEW GENERATIONS AND THE FUTURE *TIMESCAPE* OF ENGLISH FOOTBALL

This article advances further towards a theoretical framework that deconstructs the role of generations in social movements. It does this by synthesising relational-temporal sociology with sociologies of generations and analysing the 40-year neoliberal *timescape* of English football which composes an important sociological *lifeworld*. Here, football's future stands at a critical juncture, evidenced by several new crises which are radically transforming the regulatory state—namely, the impact of lockdown measures on professional football's economy, health and sociability, the ESL proposal, and poor organisational, safety and supporter welfare failures at the UEFA Champions League finals in Paris (2022) and Istanbul (2023). At this critical juncture, new norms, laws, regulations, and legislation are emerging, representing the institutional legacies of moments of crisis, and the UK supporter activist scene is embedded in new, emerging regulatory reviews on the governance, transparency, organisation, and safety aspects of football and its future. The establishment of these reviews demonstrates how dramatic, crisis-driven moments, of important historical and social change, can produce important and immediate, consequences of collective action. Here, the restlessness of historical events, notably, the Heysel and Hillsborough disasters, the formation of the (breakaway) Premier League, and the emergence of the Supporters Trust movement in the wake of the FTF, are collective, generational memories within the sedimentation of contemporary social movement outcomes.

Significantly, the networked biographies of influential activists across the contemporary UK fan activist scene demonstrates how long-term social transformations are most fully experienced by those with a historical narrative of events, and their capacity, or not, to prefigure a future for new generations of social actors (Turner & Millward, 2023). In this regard, culture and power are embedded within the construction of relational collective identities, and what is perceived as *the* legitimate future, by influential movement actors. Looking to the future, a post-regulatory *timescape* is likely to appear, in which different interpretations, and regulations of contemporary football culture, become prominent. Across this *timescape*, in England, we may locate an ageing supporter demographic: indeed, over the past decade, the average, 'traditional' match-attending season ticket holder in the Premier League has ranged from 40 to 45 years of age (Premier League, cited by FSA, 2016) and, as this article unpacked, many of the networked activists who built the UK fan activist scene, and retain positions of influence and political power, are now over 55. Some of these networked actors are recognising the challenges of recruiting younger supporters into formal, democratic, and supporter-led organisations in football. Indeed, and more generally, this reflects the wider absence of young adults in political engagement and community leadership (Stockemer & Sundstrom, 2022). In the case of football, this may present a serious threat to the game's future sustainability and its local economies.

In this post-regulatory *timescape*, new, younger, and non-match attending, global fan segmentations are likely to increasingly be seen, by professional club-networks in men's football, as 'fans of the future' (European Club Association, 2020). In England, particularly, despite new regulatory reform on club ownership, financial regulation, improving supporter engagement, and Safe Standing at football matches, a new critical juncture is thus likely to emerge in the future; one where new ESL-type projects, and corporate-orientated, 'fan experience'-stadia facilities, will require a new generation of activists, to negotiate, resist and contest the new hegemonic politics of social control and supporter engagement.

And thus, our contribution here further evidences how social problems are often framed as 'the problems of generations' (White, 2013, p. 216), and, nearly three decades after the claim that 'little theoretical work has examined

how political generations and cohort replacement affect social movements' (Whittier, 1997, p. 761), we have demonstrated the importance of situating eventful protests, critical junctures and mobilisation outcomes within an overarching *timescape* or relational field, to show how legacy operates as a multifaceted, maturing concept of power and time. Crucially, and beyond the study's immediate context, it is hoped that this contribution will generate and engage further and research-portable thinking on the sociology of generations, events and social movement outcomes in other cases and diverse social and national contexts including, for example, social justice and climate movements. This, in turn, may reveal new, intergenerational tensions, challenges, and questions, facing *lifeworld's* with important historical and social value.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## INFORMED CONSENT

Material not reproduced, rather prior work is referenced appropriately. In that prior work, full consent was obtained for data collection, and write up, including permission to use names (however no names are cited in this article).

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Responding politically to football-related disorder, the Thatcher government—throughout the 1980s—proposed a national ID card scheme for match-goers, which was later abandoned.
- <sup>2</sup> SD and Supporters' Trusts were organisations set up (with government support), to enhance supporters' influence in the governance and management of clubs.

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