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Events, turns, and critical junctures: unpacking the temporality of supporter rights and democracy in English football

Mark Turner[a] and Daniel Fitzpatrick[b]

[a]Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Institute of Sport, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; [b]School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Aston Centre for Europe, Aston University, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

The future of professional men's football in England stands at a critical juncture. In the wake of a global pandemic, the national game has been beset by volatility and upheaval. In April 2021, six of the most storied clubs in England announced they would be joining a new breakaway European Super League (ESL). These proposals triggered vehement opposition from fan movements, catalysing the intervention of the UK government who established a fan-led review of football governance (FLR) to consult fans on future regulatory reform and the security and safety of supporters at major events. Emerging out of these exogenous shocks and endogenous change, the governance of English football is set to be radically transformed via the establishment of a new regulatory regime. In this article, we employ eventful sociology and historical institutionalism to operationalise the concept of critical juncture and apply this through an analysis of two temporal periods (1985-1990) and (2020-2024). In doing so, we show how the current 'regulatory turn' is interdependently linked to prior historical transformative events, namely the Heysel and Hillsborough stadium disasters and the subsequent neoliberal transformation of English football across the last four decades. Incorporating a more nuanced understanding of change and continuity in the governance of English football, we argue that new regulatory frameworks, despite their transformative potential, may continue to exhibit institutional legacies of the existing regime and prevailing political economy.

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Introduction

In the wake of a global pandemic, English football has been beset by volatility and upheaval and subject to several internal and external challenges: secret 'backroom deals' on restructuring[1]; breakaway leagues[2]; and serious organisational and safety failures at high-profile, showpiece events.[3] Emerging out of this period of tumult, we argue the future of professional football in England stands at a critical juncture. This critical juncture rests on a 'regulatory turn', in two ways. First, following a Fan-Led Review in 2021, the governance of English football is set to be radically transformed via the establishment of a new regulatory regime. In the 2023 King's Speech, the UK Conservative government announced the inclusion of the Football Governance Bill which seeks to 'safeguard the future of clubs for the benefit of communities and fans' (HC Deb 19 March 2024), through the establishment

CONTACT Mark Turner MTurner@mmu.ac.uk Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Institute of Sport, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

of a new independent regulator (IRF).[4] Second, following major safety failures at two men's football finals, scrutiny of the planning and delivery of football's security operations by the British state has intensified.[5] A central thread running both developments is the consolidation of the rights and democratic participation of supporters in the governance and safety-security nexus of English football.

Taken together, these changes constitute significant institutional and cultural change. Constituting the first and only independent statutory regulator of football in the world, the IRF signals a new relationship between the British state and elite professional English football, which has hitherto been characterised by a (putatively apolitical) tradition of self-regulation. The establishment of the IRF has been variously described as a 'landmark commitment' (Parry 2023), a 'watershed' (Delaney 2023), and a 'historic moment' by Prime Minster Rishi Sunak (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, DCMS 2024). Second, it reconfigures the role of football fans, who (rhetorically at least) are placed at the heart of these new regimes of governance and security, as citizens with democratic rights and civil liberties rather than merely patrons or consumers. Institutionally and culturally, therefore, this critical juncture for the English national game is of importance not only to scholars interested in the future trajectory of English and European football but also to the wider development of the British regulatory state.

Given the entrenched nature of neoliberalism and the longue durée of self-regulation in the governance of English football, two central questions emerge: 'how did this major policy change happen?'; and 'why now?'. To answer these questions and understand this current phase of transformation, in terms of the scope and nature of the new regulatory regime for football, it is essential to situate analysis within a wider historical scene. Employing a 'sociological imagination' (Mills 1959) to the future governance of English football, we identify the connections between the experiences of exogenous shocks and the wider social and political environment in which they are enmeshed. Despite the extensive discussion of football's transformation, there is a distinct lack of academic research on explaining the temporal processes of that change and how it relates to wider political phenomena.

The transformation of English football has been analysed by several scholars, hailing from various disciplinary backgrounds, in recent decades (King 2003, Grant 2007, 2021, Millward 2011). Since the breakaway of the Premier League in 1992, English football has been employed as an archetype; invoked to demonstrate that the essence of *modern* football has fundamentally changed. This change, notably in the way football is experienced and 'consumed' by fans, has been explained in relation to the interlinked processes of globalisation, commercialisation, securitisation, and mediatisation (Numerato and Giulianotti 2017). Emerging as a countervailing force to these neoliberal processes, supporters' movements mobilised to contest the impact on traditional 'terrace culture' and campaign for the rights and democratic participation of supporters in the governance of English (and European) football. More professionalised social movement organisations, in the form of the Football Supporters Association (FSA) in the UK and Football Supporters Europe (FSE) in Europe, have emerged as the unified, democratic voice of fans. Through sustained activism and lobbying, these peak associations have consolidated their position within the wider policy network on football governance over the last two decades.

Yet, whilst the mechanisms and implications of these underlying '–isation' processes have been unpacked and examined (Ludvigsen 2020), little attention has been afforded to systematically theorising the temporality of this change. The extant literature on supporter-based movements too often takes the form of a series of almost discrete studies, with little or no attempt to provide a longitudinal, diachronic analysis. A lack of serious theoretical development has led to a privileging of change over continuity in the analysis of English football in the last 40 years. Addressing this directly, this article has two principal original aims.

First, we aim to analyse how the current moment of transformation was prefigured by the long-term impacts of the interlinked processes of globalisation, commercialisation, securitisation, and

mediatisation, which have been contested through the practices and identities of football supporters and the processes of relational collective action across four decades; what we term the 40-year neoliberal *timescape* of English football. Cross-pollinating ideas from sociology and political science, we offer the first-to-date analysis of the relationship between 'rupturing' moments of crises (whether real or perceived) in football and the prefiguring of contestation over the future of the national game.

Second, we aim to provide a more theoretically sophisticated account of the transformation of English football from 1985–2024 and its relation to wider configurations within the UK polity, by assessing two 'critical junctures' in this period. By taking 'time seriously', accounting for both change and continuity (Skocpol and Pierson 2002), we aim to provide a more nuanced temporal analysis of English football's contemporary political economy. We identify two interdependently linked, temporal periods: 1985–1990 and 2020–2024. Synthesising eventful sociology (Sewell 1996, Della Porta 2020, Wagner-Pacifici 2021) and historical institutionalism (Hall 1986, Hay 2002), we stretch and problematise established conceptualisations of the transformation of English football. Employing these temporal frameworks, we demonstrate how the interplay of structure (significant events), agency (of fan movements), and ideas (on fan rights and democracy) have both constrained and facilitated change at different, critical, points in time. Building on the existing literature, we argue that these critical junctures, and their legacies, in terms of their temporal mobilisations, social histories, and collective memories are interdependently linked. It is precisely here we argue that the 'antecedent conditions' of the current critical juncture need to be recognised and theorised.

The remainder of the article is organised into four sections. The first outlines our novel theoretical framework, explaining how our syntheses of eventful sociology and historical institutionalism enable us to theorise the temporality of change and continuity of the national game over the last 40 years. The second section briefly describes our methodology, stating our research strategy and data collection sources. The third section applies the theoretical frameworks of eventful sociology and historical institutionalism to analyse, for the first time, the interdependent relationship between two critical junctures in English football: 1985–1990 and 2020–2024. Grounding our claims empirically, we argue that intersubjective meanings, collective memories, and social histories of the conjectural events of the 1985–1990 period are interdependently linked to the fan-led mobilisations on supporter rights and democratic engagement over the last 40 years, which in turn have given rise to the contemporary rupturing moment. Bringing these new insights together, the final concluding section highlights some important political and cultural implications for English football at this current critical juncture. The introduction of the IRF signals a new era for the governance of English football, whereby the financial compliance, engagement of supporters, and security and policing are being brought more firmly under the purview of the British regulatory state.

Critical junctures, collective action, and social change

To guide our temporal analysis of the role of exogenous shocks, the agency of fan movements, and discourses in prefiguring the current phase of transformation, we synthesise two theoretical frameworks: eventful sociology and historical institutionalism. The former enables understanding of how relatively rare events (such as crises and revolutions) produce critical junctures and instigate processes of collective action. The latter situates these rupturing moments of change within a wide temporal context to trace their historical antecedents. Both heuristic frameworks focus on the importance of exogenous shocks in initiating change and emphasise 'temporality – the notion that the timing and sequence of events shape political processes' (Fioretos 2011, p. 371). Whilst all theoretical frameworks are partial and to some degree self-limiting, we argue that eventful sociology and historical institutionalism are apposite to theorising change and continuity in English football, for three key reasons. First, the synthesis of these frameworks from sociology and political science is appropriate given

that football is a sociopolitical phenomenon; in the post-war period, it has conventionally occupied a liminal space between state and civil society. Where academic research has investigated the dynamics of change and continuity in sport this has tended to focus on UK sport policy almost exclusively (Houlihan 2012, Tacon 2018). The peripheral role of the state in the governance of football *per se* has led to a neglect of its temporality. Second, both eventful sociology and historical institutionalism highlight the role of events as exogenous shocks that precipitate institutional change. Whilst this perspective has disadvantages (for example in underplaying how endogenous change happens [Blyth 2016]), it is apt for our case study given the key role of 'focussing events', such as the Heysel and Hillsborough disasters and more latterly the COVID-19 pandemic, on instigating transformation. This is not to dismiss the role of agency and ideas in accounting for change; indeed, we do seek to factor both into our analysis here. Nevertheless, more agency-centred or ideational frameworks are likely to be better at operationalising these explanatory factors and we encourage more academic scholarship of football along these dimensions. Third, taken together, they enable us to conceptualise the temporality of English football over the last 40 years around two critical junctures, which have both constrained and enabled further changes.

Critical junctures are defined here as an episode of major institutional innovation, which generate an enduring legacy (Collier and Munck 2017, p. 2). The concept of critical junctures is associated most closely with Collier and Collier's (1991) temporal analysis of the labour movement in Latin America. Central to their study was an attempt to capture the moments at which older institutional patterns or political processes are dislodged (Collier and Collier 1991, p. 36); or what Roberts (2015) describes as periods of crisis or strain that existing policies and institutions are ill-suited to resolve. Such junctures are often caused by an external event or shock, which triggers amongst actors in that lifeworld, the need to reinterpret their environment and respond to feelings of disorientation and disruption.

For historical institutionalists, critical junctures are 'configurative' moments of transformation that punctuate periods of relative continuity or equilibrium. This literature argues that institutional change is 'episodic and dramatic rather continuous and incremental' (Hay 2002, p. 161). Consequently, it implies that the change comes only in 'bursts' (Schmidt 2006, p. 106), with relative stasis in the intervening periods of time, in other words, critical junctures mark 'moments when substantial institutional change takes place thereby creating a "branching point" from which historical development moves onto a new path' (Hall and Taylor 1996, p. 942). For instance, the Industrial Revolution in Britain created social and economic challenges that led to the reconstruction of regulation, stimulating the creation of a Victorian regulatory state (Moran 2003, p. 41). Braithwaite *et al*. (2008) have claimed that major regulatory innovation is introduced by the following crises: for example, the South Sea Bubble Act 1720; the Wall Street crash in 1929; the stock-market crash in 1987; the Asian financial crisis in 1997–1998; the Sarbanes-Oxley affair in 2000–2001; the scandals of Enron and WorldCom; and then the collapse of global financial markets after the sub-prime mortgage crisis in 2008. Crises, such as these, create:

> … environmental pressure that highlight wide-spread inefficiencies in extant domestic institutions or afford elites wide-ranging autonomy from short-term political constraints … They therefore create the possibility for wide-scale structural modifications that seek to break with prevailing customs and procedures. (Cortell and Peterson 1999, p. 18)

Synthesising these frameworks allows us to mobilise and unpack a 40-year *timescape* that constitutes the neoliberal political economy of English football from 1985–2024. In doing so, we lay the theoretical ground for our analysis of two temporal periods, which we argue, represent important critical junctures; linked interdependently through the temporal mobilisations, social histories and collective memories of significant historical events and their legacies in prefiguring the new regulatory regime of English football.

Eventful sociology: the 'restless indeterminacy' of historical events

Put simply, eventful sociology foregrounds the pivotal role of 'events' – as opposed to more prosaic 'happenings or encounters' – in transforming social structures (Sewell 1996: 262). Drawing on Sewell's notion of 'historical transformative events' (1986), Wagner-Pacifici (2021) explores the impact on of such *ruptures* on social identities, relationships, and institutions. Seeking to make sense of their disorientating and disruptive effects, she argues that our experiences of events are *in* movement. Characterised by a restlessness, understandings of events are articulated through the emergence of specific frames and discourses, often located in social movements. Consequently, different social actors attempt to control the interpretation of the event, producing a 'hermeneutic tug-of-war'. It is precisely through such radical contingency, that new cultural meanings (or discursive 'turns') may facilitate emergent political transformations or outcomes.

Similarly, Della Porta (2020) draws upon Sewell's eventful sociology, alongside the concepts of critical junctures and *timescapes*, to analyse the temporality of collective action and protest. According to Della Porta (2020), sudden *ruptures* can lead contingently to a moment of crisis and produce intense waves of contention. Where these *ruptures* characterise profound moral shocks, critical junctures emerge, which in turn, direct networked movement action through an urgent need to interpret and respond to the event (Jasper 1997, Wagner-Pacifici 2017). Consequently, according to Della Porta (2020), critical junctures challenge social actors' visions of the status quo, producing contextual opportunities and resources, to create – or resist – social change.

Initial forms of collective action are thus produced relationally, by both a *crack* within the existing institutional, political, or corporate environment and the coexistence of affective and cognitive dynamics within social networks. These emergent relational impacts shape both the cultural meanings and framings of the event. Through this, *vibrating* patterns of social relations are both *ruptured* and reproduced. But they do so, through important 'choice points' which develop the organisational culture of social movement networks and new discursive frames. Such choice points are made in the context of instantaneous interdependence because the intensity of momentous events and critical junctures reduce the availability of time to reflect or deliberate (Della Porta 2020). The legacy of the initial *rupture* or protest *crack* begins to sediment and produces a type of 'institutional legacy'; here, critical junctures are then reproduced in those legacies in ways that differ from the political-organisational structure that preceded.

Eventful sociology is thus useful in developing a temporal understanding of critical junctures by highlighting how the contingent unfolding of historical events gives rise to different interpretations of those events and stimulates collective action. Eventful sociology also draws attention to the interdependence between events over time. Rather than separate, discrete units of time, events are seen to be in dynamic interaction (Hirschman 2021).

Historical institutionalism: the paradox of continuity and change

Historical institutionalism, which emerged in the early 1980s, contends that both institutions and history *matter*. Institutions are important because they shape, constrain, or enable agents and their actions (Hall and Taylor 1996). This institutional focus is set within 'an explicit temporal scope that concerns the creation, reproduction, development, and structure of institutions over time' (Fioretos 2011, p. 372). Like the wider New Institutionalism, of which it forms part, historical institutionalism differs from the more traditional descriptive and legalistic varieties of intuitionalism in that its scope encompasses the 'less formal organisational networks' as well as 'the constitution and formal political practices' (Hall 1986, p. 19). This is important to our study, given the historically bound institution of that English football involves a complex web of informal norms, practices, and cultures as well as formal rules, not least due to its self-regulatory nature.

Historical institutionalist analysis 'draws attention to the significance of history, timing, and sequence in explaining political dynamics' (Hay 2002, p. 11) and is useful as it enables us to identify the lines of continuity within the specific historical development of political institutions across multiple temporalities. As Houlihan (2012, p. 19) observes, 'the significance of historical institutionalism for the analysis of sport policy goes beyond the simple argument that "history matters", as it encourages the analyst to investigate why and under what circumstances history matters'. Historical institutionalism distinguishes between two main types of change: first, incremental changes that build upon existing institutions in 'layers'; and second, episodic changes that produce radically alternative institutional outcomes that break established values and assumptions and thereby punctuate the extant stability. The first kind of change is characterised by path dependency; the second introduces 'branching points' to new historical paths (Battilana *et al*. 2009). Historical institutionalism draws attention to the vested interests – or 'sunk costs' – of institutional actors in reproducing the key features that helped create and sustain it. In highlighting the preponderance of 'small, slow and gradual reform' over radical change (Kickert and van der Meer 2011), historical institutionalism is often critiqued for privileging continuity at the expense of change. To overcome this bias, theorists have often borrowed from other analytical approaches to accommodate for change, such as discursive institutionalism.

In this article, we combine historical institutionalism with eventful sociology as a heuristic framework, or organising perspective, rather than a causal, explanatory theory. Integrating historical institutional with eventful sociology brings cultural meanings and framings into analytical focus, which enables us to unpack how specific discourses on important events in English football, have iteratively shaped the governance of the game across the 40-year neoliberal *timescape* of British society.

Methodology

We draw upon prior-empirical research and participant observation to identify key themes which help unpack the impacts of *rupturing* moments across two temporal periods (1985–1990 and 2020–2024). We do not select these periods as totalising concepts; as Gillan (2020) notes, spatial (and we would add temporal) boundaries are not secure, and historical temporality is uneven and unpredictable. We recognise that critical junctures are constitutive of periods of time, even if those periods are interdependently connected across a wider *timescape*.

Our historicising of 1985–1990 is informed by our prior research on the emergence of a neoliberal *timescape* in England (Turner 2023) and the social history of the countermovement of supporter resistance and contestation. This analysis is underpinned by prior-interview data with historical and contemporary UK fan activist networks and supplemented by analysis of key official and legislative documents of football governance, safety and security, and sustainability. Particular attention is paid to the Taylor Report (Taylor 1985). Our contemporary analysis of 2020–2024 is informed by participant observation at two stakeholder events which were: (i) a one-day multistakeholder event on 'disorder at football matches post-pandemic' in July 2022, which we co-convened at the National Football Museum in Manchester; and (ii) the three-day European football fans congress at Manchester Metropolitan University in June 2023, at which were both invited to speak on a 'supporter [democratic] engagement' panel. Our observations and analysis are thus informed by access to, and engagement with, key stakeholders across the governance of English football, including those working in government; the Premier League; Football League; Sports Grounds Safety Authority; Football Policing Units; Safety Advisory Groups; Football Safety Officers Association; Supporters' Groups and Trusts at the local, national, and transnational level, and Supporter Liaison Officers. We followed the British Sociological Association's ethical recommendation on confidentiality; we thus avoid using any direct statements made at these events without consent and neglect to name any individuals directly.

Unpacking English football, temporality, and social change (1985–2024)

The following discussion applies the theoretical frameworks of eventful sociology and historical institutionalism to analyse the relationship between two critical junctures in English football. Identifying two temporal periods of 1985–1990 and 2020–2024, we examine the dynamics of football governance over a 40-year neoliberal *timescape*. We argue that intersubjective meanings, collective memories, and social histories of the conjectural events of the 1985–1990 period are interdependently linked to the fan-led mobilisations on supporter rights and democratic engagement over the last 40 years, which in turn have given rise to the contemporary rupturing moment. The cultural meanings and frames of key historical events – including the Heysel and Hillsborough stadium disasters; the formation of the Premier League; and the introduction of all-seated stadia – represent the antecedent conditions of the contemporary *rupture* in the game. This contemporary 'event' is characterised by experiences of the global COVID-19 pandemic; the continued threat of a breakaway ESL; safety and security failures at two UEFA men's finals; and a series of political interventions on football governance, regulation, supporter safety, and fan engagement. The culmination of these phenomena in this contemporary post-2020 period has both accelerated the agglomeration, commodification, and globalisation of English football and the counter-hegemonic resistance to these processes. These divergent forces have led to a crisis point, creating a new critical juncture for the future of English football.

To show how these critical junctures are interdependently connected, we draw attention to historical and contemporary discourses on, supporter behaviour, deviancy, and operational failures; the legacy of 'third way' cooperative governance structures and democratic principles; and the norms of self-regulation. In doing so, we discuss how supporter-based mobilisations, underpinned by broadly democratic principles, practices, and identities, have campaigned for fans to exert a greater influence over the running of their clubs and the future governance of the game across the ensuing four decades.

By taking time seriously, we demonstrate how the interplay of structure (significant events), agency (of fan movements), and ideas (on rights and democracy) both constrain and facilitate change at critical points in time. In this way, we follow eventful sociology in claiming that the two events under investigation are linked interdependently through the temporal mobilisations, social histories, and collective memories of these events and their legacies. Post-1985, fan-led collective action on supporter safety, security, and democracy has entailed a reinterpretation of the 1985–1990 critical junctures and the perceived over-policing, over-regulation, and disenfranchisement of football fans. Analysis of the contemporary period of English football, including regulatory interventions, must historicise the specific claims made by fans that seek to legitimise their social value, safety, and democratic rights. The following discussion captures how the political, security, and legislative arenas in which these claims are embedded, are in a constant state of flux (or restless indeterminacy), notwithstanding the social, political, and institutional path dependencies of the neoliberal *timescape* of English football between 1985–2024.

The critical juncture of 1985–1990: Heysel, Hillsborough, and neoliberalism

During the 1970s and 1980s, English football witnessed an intensification of supporter disorder and violence, often referred to as 'football hooliganism', which became ingrained within British societal consciousness as a social problem and was presented as symptomatic of Britain's post-war decline and the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state (Dunning *et al*. 1986, King 1998). The political and football authorities came to essentialise *all* football supporters, and their activism and resistance, as inherently deviant. As the UK economy entered a period of economic recession and significant unemployment in the early 1980s, a 'moral panic' regarding the social menace of football hooliganism took hold of the political and popular consciousness (Greenfield and Osborn 1998).

On 29 May 1985 during the UEFA Cup final between Juventus and Liverpool at the dilapidated Heysel stadium in Belgium, 39 Juventus fans perished after a wall collapsed precipitated by a charging group of Liverpool supporters. The Conservative government neglected to undertake any official inquiry into the disaster, despite supporting an indefinite UEFA ban on all English clubs in Europe and establishing a raft of new security measures for supporters. In responding to the 'social problem' of football, the government and football authorities adopted a lens of law and order that essentialised all football fans. Even supporters not in attendance spoke of their collective guilt and shame by association (Hornby 1992). Post-1985, a more securitised approach to football crowd management, including increased spectator surveillance (Pearson and Stott 2022), the installation of perimeter fencing, the mandating of all-seated stadia, and the attempted (but aborted) introduction of a national spectator identification membership scheme (Taylor 1987).

Four years later, on 15 April 1989 at Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield, the most critically fatal disaster in English football history occurred, during an FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest. A failure of crowd management led to crushes within two over-crowded, standing-only, sections of the Leppings Lane terrace. The gross negligence of police and ambulances to fulfil their duty of care at Hillsborough led to the unlawful deaths of 94 Liverpool supporters (Scraton 2013). By 2022, the total loss of life stood at 97 after three other supporters suffered severe and irreversible injuries caused by the disaster over the past three decades (Conn and Vinter 2021). The Lord Justice Taylor-led inquiry into the disaster recommended a series of more robust regulatory measures on the need for greater crowd control, and this included making all top-level football grounds in England and Wales all-seated. Whilst the Taylor Report was underpinned by the universal provision of football underpinning and public provision of seating, it nonetheless catalysed the transformation of English football consumption (King 1998). The report was premised on the inculcation of a more 'disciplined' and family-orientated football spectatorship, balanced by the caveat that any future market pressures should not result in the exclusion of traditional supporters from the new consumption of football.

The 4-year period between Heysel and Hillsborough we argue, constituted a critical juncture for English football. The lifting of the Heysel ban at the start of the 1990–1991 season coincided with the publication of the Taylor Report and the mandate for all-seater stadia. The two disasters, and the regulatory frameworks of English football that followed, became the core conjunctural argument for the reform of the game and its supporters (King 1998). As Sugden noted:

> The post-Heysel European ban, and the Hillsborough tragedy conspired to all but kill off football's traditional post-war persona. Out of the ashes, a new and more consumer and customer-orientated, all-seated version of the game arose, which proved to be more attractive to sponsors, television companies and private sectors (Sugden 2002, p. 142)

Tellingly, whilst Lord Justice Taylor's interim report was critical of the police officers in charge at Hillsborough, the main thrust of the final report shifted responsibility towards Britain's decaying terraces, and therefore the opportunity was missed to challenge the prevailing antipathy that existed then and indeed continues to exist today, towards football fans amongst those responsible for enforcing law and order (Webber 2017). Hillsborough was emblematic of a sector that was incapable of regulating itself and the direct result of the football authorities' dereliction of duty to ensure minimal safety standards at English football grounds (Fitzpatrick 2015). It tragically reflected football's indifference to the safety and comfort of its patrons (despite earlier fatal disasters at British football stadia in the twentieth century) and central government's unwillingness to intervene in the self-regulatory tradition of sport. The ambivalence of the government to the overarching governance of football contrasts starkly with its strongly interventionist stance on regulating stadia and supporter behaviour. Between 1985s and 1990s, new compliance mechanisms and legal frameworks – via *The Football Spectators Act* 1989, *The Football Offences Act* 1991, and more latterly *The Football (Disorder) Act* 2000 – were developed to seek to police, govern, and colonise the football spectator (Giulianotti 2011).

The ascendancy of the elite post-Hillsborough discourse revealed how historical crises in football can be politically manufactured, which work to legitimate programmes of reform; in this case, to bring about extensive changes relating to the wider commercialisation and securitisation of the game during the late twentieth and twenty-first century (Woolsey 2021; Numerato 2018, Woolsey 2021). Consequently, significant changes in football's political economy have led to a recasting of the relationship between clubs and supporters. The nature of this relationship has changed from one based on the club-fan model to one more analogous to the relationship between a conventional business and a consumer (Fitzpatrick 2015).

The new neoliberal *timescape* of English football during the 1990s was characterised by a post-industrial transnational economy, which permeated the ideological fabric and symbolic meanings attached to football as the 'people's game' (Kennedy and Kennedy 2007). In England, the success of the new consumption of football, including the formation of the Premier League in 1992, as the optimal commercial, economic, and global entity in European football, meant embracing values of the entrepreneurial enterprise culture associated with Thatcherism (Braithwaite 2000). For this to take hold, however, the embedding of this new culture required a mutually constitutive relationship between clubs and their supporters (Kennedy and Kennedy 2007). Yet, despite expanding the game's broadening appeal in the 1990s, the deepening processes of securitisation and commercialisation led to the mobilisation of supporters in resistance to such practices and to the interruption of traditional, more deferential tradition of supporting clubs.

These mobilisations were characterised by the networking practices of three relational social movements: the emergence of the National Football Supporters Association (FSA); the growth of Independent Supporters' Associations (ISAs); and the proliferation of football fanzines. Together, underpinned by a general commitment to 'fan democracy' and a broadly traditionalist perspective on the consumption of football, these movements developed informal and formal ways of working together to actively oppose the rationale and outcomes of the post-1985 reform programme. This became a critical juncture in two important ways.

First, the *ruptures* of Heysel and Hillsborough were significant events that agitated a period of supporter social unrest and growing consciousness about the need to exert a greater influence over the running of their clubs and the future governance of the national game. Indeed, the growing neoliberal logic of English football, involving the incremental decoupling of many Premier League clubs from their traditional supporter communities, provided the impetus for a greater awareness of the lack of control and representation that supporters were afforded under existing governance structures. Second, the emergent relational impacts of Heysel and Hillsborough shaped the cultural trauma, meanings, and framings of the events, namely, through the normalisation of all-seated stadia and securitisation processes (Turner and Lee Ludvigsen 2023) and the superseding of local policing operation autonomy through the establishment of the National Football Intelligence Unit/ UK Football Policing Unit (Pearson and Stott 2022).

Assessing the initial critical juncture of 1985–1990 and the movement legacies of the FSA, ISAs, and football fanzines, through the *sedimentation* of protest cultures, must consider the wider political fields across which those mobilisations occurred. During the mid-to-late-1990s, a new 'third way' political movement emerged in Britain, aspiring to renew social democracy through values of mutualism and cooperation, and hence, resolve the contradiction inherent within neoliberalism's encouragement of both economic individualism and social conservativism (Giddens 1998). In English football, this was reflected in new calls for fans to have a greater stake, or influence in, the organisation and governance of the game, resulting in the formation of the Football Task Force (FTF), which aimed to examine the lack of supporter involvement in clubs, the conflict created by the emergence of club PLCs, and the game's relationship with the wider community (Fitzpatrick 2015). Although such communitarian ideas became much less prominent as the New Labour government sought to coordinate public service reform from the centre, the work of the FTF led to a concrete outcome in supporter participation, through the establishment of Supporters Direct (SD). SD provided advice and resources to facilitate greater supporter involvement in the governance

of football clubs and their work had an important impact on the role of supporters in football, through the forming of Supporters' Trusts. The creation of SD was an indirect mechanism employed by the government to try and steer the ownership structure of football, without recourse, to direct, statutory regulation. It was, therefore, a move away from tacit self-regulation to more facilitated self-regulation (Fitzpatrick 2015).

The organisational form of Supporters' Trusts, in terms of their cooperative governance structure and the democratic principles on which they are based, offered a direct challenge, not only to the traditional governance of football in England but also to the broader culture and dominant traditions in British politics. Representing a more European democratic model of sport, they have provided supporters with a mechanism to actively pursue their rights as stakeholders (Hamill *et al*. 2001 [2000]). However, whilst important at the club and community level, the increasing activism of supporters did not lead to any significant changes in football power structures at the national level, until recently (Fitzpatrick and Hoey 2022). Similarly, the FSA's longer-term transformations are characterised by diplomacy building with key figures across the political, regulatory, and legislative arenas (Turner and Lee Ludvigsen 2023), which in turn helped establish new political mobilisations on football governance, including the forming of an expert working group on football supporter ownership and engagement in 2014 (within the DCMS). Yet, there were some small amendments to internal regulations and a greater formalisation of rules to obviate the need for direct intervention, before the onset of the pandemic in 2020 football's self-regulatory nature had been preserved, largely through a conciliation that satisfied both the state and many supporters (Fitzpatrick 2015).

Where the supporters' movement has achieved some policy-based victories on the long-term impacts of all-seated stadia, notably, through mobilisations on 'Safe Standing', the outcomes of recent state-commissioned reviews, continue to reinforce the long-term impact of Hillsborough on supporters' modern consumption of the game, through new methods of surveillance and control (Turner and Lee Ludvigsen 2023). Moreover, following the death of Ian Tomlinson in 2009 and the consequent evolution of public safety and public order policing in England, a move towards more dialogue-based policing poling approaches vis-a-vis supporters began to emerge. However, these developments, including the introduction of Police Liaison Officers, have yet to be systematically applied to policing of domestic English football matches (Pearson and Stott 2022).

This period (1985–1990) constituted a critical juncture through the emergence of post-Hillsborough regulatory frameworks and mechanisms (and legitimating discourses on fan deviancy) which brought about extensive changes to the economic, cultural, and security structures of English football, in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century to the dominant discourses on supporter deviancy, and its attribution to the cause of the two stadium disasters in question, and the subsequent political-economic transformation of football, reveal the long-term impacts of this period as a historically transformative 'event'. The supporter-led mobilisations in response to this transformation constitute an important historical antecedent to the contemporary era, prefiguring the contestation of the British state's relationship with football.

The critical juncture of 2020–2024: COVID-19, the ESL, and the IRF

On Friday 13 March 2020, professional football in England was suspended after the UK government announced lockdown measures in the wake of the exponential outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. One month later, the suspension of live matches was extended reflecting broader global changes in sport, constituting the suspension of the European football calendar for the first time since World War II (Bond *et al*. 2022). Over 100 days later, games resumed but were played behind closed doors without supporters in attendance. Fans would only return to watch live sport in England, without any restrictions, in July 2021, after the Prime Minister announced an end to social distancing rules. Consequently, the exogenous shock of the pandemi, produced a series of financial threats to the sustainability and future of many English football clubs, whilst simultaneously highlighting the

importance and value of supporters, and how their voice, influence, and legitimacy, extends beyond the weekly ritual of attending a live game (Bond *et al*. 2022).

The disproportionate impact of the pandemic laid bare how the football ecosystem in England is incredibly fragile and pervaded by unsustainable business models (Parnell *et al*. 2021). In April 2021, the long-term market-led disintegration of the social function and value of football was revealed, when six of the most historic clubs in England, announced their intention to join other leading European clubs from Italy and Spain, in forming a new competition; the European Super League (ESL). The ESL posed a further imminent threat to the financial sustainability of clubs at the lower end of the pyramid, and an existential threat to the foundations and future of European football. Despite collapsing within 48 hours after sudden, and intense, anti-ESL supporter-led mobilisations (Turner and Millward 2024, Brannagan *et al*. 2022), the UK government commissioned an immediate Independent Fan-Led Review (FLR) to explore ways of improving the governance, ownership, regulation, and sustainability of clubs, which would include the introduction of an independent regulator. Here, the moral shock of supporters and their anti-ESL mobilisations; what Della Porta (2020) termed a protest *crack*, brought into focus, how English football, despite its unparalleled wealth in the Premier League, has over the past 30 years, been unable to reform itself and deliver a measure of distributive justice that insulate clubs across the EFL, as important heritage and community assets, from market realities. But, despite appeals to solidarity (via mechanisms such as parachute payments and grassroots levies), in the post-1985 period the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots', both within the Premier League and across the rest of the football league, has grown ever wider (Millward 2011).

In this context, the announcement of the Fan-Led Review in 2021 represented a critical moment and demonstrated how exogenous shocks (in this case the pandemic) can produce significant change. Here, the long-term restlessness of other historical events in football – notably, the formation of the Premier League in 1992; debates around the independent regulation of football through FTF in 1998; and the government's Supporters Direct policy intervention in 2000 – became important collective memories within the *sedimentation* of these eventful protests. Yet, arguably, the unfolding interpretative and interactive disruptions of the ESL *rupture* and the Fan-Led Review further reinforce capitalist relations of power within the football pyramid structure (Turner and Millward 2024). Following the publication of the Fan-Led Review White Paper in February 2023, a new focus on supporter engagement is emerging, seeking to use football as a tool to embed, and structure, supporter democracy, through the establishment of 'supporters' boards' or 'fan advisory boards', to help regulate, and safeguard, clubs, and improve their long-term sustainability.

The specific policy interventions on governance, ownership, sustainability, and supporter democracy have emerged at what is also a *rupturing* period for the future management and policing of supporters in England, in the wake of a post-lockdown uptick in crowd disorder. Emerging out of the pandemic reports of increased spectator disorder at both football and other sports events, including the increased use of pyrotechnics, missile throwing, and pitch invasions, has led to a renewed political and media focus on the issue of crowd management and sports' grounds safety. This scrutiny peaked following two key events: the Euro 2020 final at Wembley in 2021; and, the organisational and safety failures at the 2022 UEFA Champions League final in Paris. The subsequent publication of the independent report into the 2022 UCLF in Paris marked a watershed in the management of major sports events. The independent report concluded that the final at the Stade de France was a 'near-miss disaster' that resulted from several, compounding, governance, operational, and intelligence failures and that there was a lack of effective joint working between the relevant stakeholders and an absence of clear lines of responsibility and accountability. However, the chaotic scenes at the 2022 UCLF, we argue, do not only reflect a failure to follow established procedure, in terms of interoperability of the key stakeholders. Rather, at its heart, the policing operation in Paris also reflects a more fundamental flaw: the long-term failure to incorporate the democratic voice of fans in the event management of football.

Consequently, there has emerged, a widespread recognition from UEFA's Safety and Security Unit, and the General Secretary, that 'things must change' (UEFA 2022). One of the key recommendations of the report states that UEFA, should, in future, 'proactively integrate supporter perspectives and input into the planning and delivery stages through better collaboration with FSE [Football Supporters Europe] and its affiliated organisations' (9.13.1). This chimes with the view of the UK government: in a recent Parliamentary debate, the Sports Minister, Stuart Andrew, reaffirmed how vital it is that the 'voices of fans are listened to' regarding football policing and crowd management (HC Deb 2023b). In this context, there is a growing recognition across the safety-security nexus of football, that engagement with fans – as the end-users – through a dialogue-based approach, is needed for effective crowd safety at football events (Pearson and Stott 2022). This is evidenced by the Fan-Led Review of Football Governance; UEFA's independent review report recommendations on 'supporter engagement' for the future of policing of major international football events; and Baroness Casey's ['Euro Sunday' at Wembley] report recommendations on stronger fan-led [Football Supporters Association] approaches to eradicating post-pandemic crowd disorder. At this critical juncture, legal reforms in football are now urgently required to both remedy outdated and ineffective 'panic laws' created in response to events over 30 years ago and improve the legitimacy of the law in the eyes of supporters (Pearson and Stott 2022). Here, the importance of dialogue with supporters, including the role Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs) in terms of pre-during-and-post-event management, might operate as a new framework through which supporter participation, in policing and crowd management, via a model of stakeholder governance could be achieved.

Together, these recent *ruptures* converge to form a transformative event; one which is characterised by understandings of the long-term discrimination, neglect, and failure to incorporate the democratic voice and rights of fans in the ownership, governance, and event management of football. Indeed, the political salience given to these events through the publication of official or independent reports demonstrates how important lessons may be learned, on the long-term over-regulation, over-policing, and disenfranchisement of football fans. Consequently, a new critical juncture has emerged which is characterised by what is a discursive turning point on regulatory reform and supporter [democratic] engagement.

We conclude by offering some critical reflections on the following: what the analysis means for our understanding of critical junctures, supporters' rights, legitimacy, and democracy within English football; and how this might inform future regulatory reform with a particular focus on the independent regulator. We thus turn to consider emerging questions as this *rupturing* period, and discursive regulatory turn, begins to sediment, both inside and outside of football supporter-based social movements.

Concluding thoughts: eventful legacies and the future of supporter democratic engagement

This article makes an original, novel contribution to the study of English football and its contemporary transformation by utilising a novel theoretical framework, which synthesises eventful sociology and historical institutionalism. We highlighted for the first time how the prefiguring of a new regulatory regime is laid bare through new policy trajectories on football governance, financial sustainability, democratic engagement of fans, and crowd management. These developments should be seen in the context of the legacy of dominant discourses on supporter deviancy, stadium event operational failures; the legacy of 'third way' cooperative governance structures and democratic principles; and football's self-regulatory tradition. We state our contribution in three specific ways, addressing our article's aims.

First, we have shown how transformative events, over three decades apart, are linked interdependently through the production and experience of critical junctures, and their institutional legacies. By identifying the antecedent conditions of the current critical juncture, we pay attention to the everyday understandings and impacts of social change within the football *lifeworld* and the

continuities and changes that constitute the wider political economy in which they are embedded. Indeed, the specific claims and discursive frames of networked actors mobilising social movements in response to these events or *ruptures* tell us something important about conjectural moments which create the circumstances for significant social change.

Second, we have demonstrated how the legacies of events like Heysel and Hillsborough, namely, in the way they strengthened the role of the state by introducing new regulatory measures on crowd control and an ideological commitment to the neoliberal free-market reform, are characterised by a restless indeterminacy. The contingent unfolding of Heysel and Hillsborough, and the forming of the Premier League, as historical [transformative] events, have mobilised iterative reinterpretations of those events, through supporter-based mobilisations, on safety, security, and democratic engagement. The sudden *ruptures* of the pandemic, ESL, and crowd management safety failures at Wembley and Paris, have produced new moral panics on the long-standing over-regulation, over-policing, and disenfranchisement of fans in England. This, we argue, represents a significant opportunity for the transformation of supporters' human rights and democratic voice.

Third, we capture the emergence of a new political economy in English football, in which governance, supporters' democratic engagement, and security and policing are being brought under the British regulatory state. This connects to a wider debate on the changing nature of the regulatory state and the participation of citizens within the wider UK polity. The growing politicisation of football and the increasing role of the state in its governance demand greater engagement from political science scholars, interested in British politics, state theory, and regulation. The tendency to treat football as 'a relatively autonomous space' (Bourdieu 1998, p. 155) has marginalised political science from its study. One of the significant developments of the contemporary period is that it firmly 'brings the state in' to the discussion on the governance of English football.

Despite its transformative potential, we suggest that the new regulatory frameworks in English football may continue to exhibit institutional legacies of the existing regime and prevailing political economy that were created for different purposes and different eras. This is important for any future assessment of the new IRF. Its remit is likely to be limited, and the oversight over 'social' concerns regarding democratic supporter engagement will need to consider multiple models, interpretations, and regulations of engagement across different levels of the game. This, we suggest, will likely constitute a new regulatory *timescape*, in which supporter movements will contest new hegemonic politics of surveillance and control and other long-term impacts of football's historic critical juncture 40 years ago, including, the ubiquity of commercial sponsorships and the arbitrariness of kick-off times determined by international TV broadcasting schedules. It is important that further scrutiny is applied to these different levels of football to address undemocratic and opaque practices and ensure the unique social and cultural value of the game, at the local, national, and international level, which is recognised and preserved.

Notes

1. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, with only 'behind closed doors' games without fans permitted, the self-appointed 'Big 6' of Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United and Tottenham sought to strike a deal – with the rest of English Football League. 'Project Big Picture' offered a £250 million Financial Rescue Fund in return for a more streamlined football calendar (including a smaller top flight of 18 teams and the scrapping of the League Cup and Community Shield) and establishment of 'special voting rights' for nine of the Premier League's 'long-term shareholders' (the Big 6 plus Everton, Southampton and West Ham), in contravention to the conventional 'one-club, one-vote' decision making process. Labelled 'a money and power grab' (Slater 2020), this scheme was hatched without the knowledge or approval of the Premier League or the Football Association.
2. In April 2021 six of most storied clubs in English football sought to establish a breakaway European Super League (ESL), which threatened to unravel the cultural heritage and financial sustainability of the national game (Author A 2023b; Brannagan *et al*. 2022).
3. Bookended by serious security failures at two major sports events – the Euro2020 final at Wembley and the 2022 UEFA Champions League Final (UCLF) in Paris – the post-lockdown period has witnessed a reported uptick in

crowd disorder, relating to the use of pyrotechnics, missile throwing, and pitch invasions (Pearson and Stott 2022).

4. This legislation was shelved due to the announcement of an early general election in July 2024. However, the central tenant of the Bill – a licencing regime enforced by an independent regulator – continues to enjoy cross-party support and is included in the Conservative and Labour party's manifesto.
5. As evidenced Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) Select Committee Inquiry into Safety at Sports Events Inquiry in 2022.

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