

‘We are all Foxes Now’

Sport, multi-culturalism & business in the era of Disneyization

Abstract

On Monday 2nd May 2016 a little heralded, medium-sized, provincial soccer club, Leicester City, one with no record of league titles in 132 years of trying, no European heritage of any note, and no major expenditure on players, won the English Premier League (EPL) title. This astonishing outcome is at odds with the development of monetised late-modern European club soccer. **A select group of clubs with a global ‘reach’, owned and funded by foreign capital, have increasingly dominated the EPL since its formation in 1992.** Leicester City’s triumph was also notable because **Leicester is regarded as a settled multi-cultural city and the title win was widely interpreted as a vehicle for promoting racial integration, as well as celebrating positive owner/fan identities, civic pride, and traditional sporting values over the ethos of business.** This paper explores what the Leicester victory meant to a sample of local supporters, and to the city.

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One evening in May 2016

Monday 2nd May 2016: note the date. Because something quite extraordinary happened in sport in England on that day, an event that provoked global attention. This was something so unexpected and counterintuitive - even in the sporting realm of supposed inherent unpredictability - that it reverberated around the world and had journalists and commentators from all compass points heading for the unfamiliar backwater of the English East Midlands to try to find an angle on why it had occurred at all. They gathered because, with UK bookmaker odds at 5000-1, finding intelligent life on another planet was a more likely bet in 2016 than this sporting outcome (Wood, 2016). You just had to be there.

Later, 1,100 Italian sports fans organised by the ‘Calciatori Brutti’ (Ugly Footballers) website flew into the East Midlands, simply to join the party in what was widely depicted as a late-modern triumph - in reductive, binary terms - of sport over business. (The term ‘miracle’ would soon become common currency in media discourse about this outcome, though collective solidarity and sports science were more rational explanations). In the mass celebrations that followed, an estimated 240,000 people - in a city whose population is 330,000 - turned out to welcome their conquering heroes. These celebrants included people from a wide range of diverse and complex heritages and backgrounds: tens of thousands of men, women and

children drawn out from minority local communities which had barely registered any previous interest at all as active sports fans.

So what had made these people (including our young Italians) turn out on this scale, and with such joyous abandon, simply for *sport*? It was this: modest, unconsidered, provincial Leicester City Football Club (The Foxes) had, for the first time in its long history (est. 1884), finished top of English league soccer. One year earlier Leicester's struggling players had been promised a large bonus simply for avoiding relegation (Percy, 2015). And Leicester is not even a soccer city – its rugby union club is much more successful (Pope and Williams, 2010). But in 2016 this unconsidered local club overcame the moneyed multi-national corporate giants for whom the new soccer order in England and Europe had so obviously been shaped (Williams, 2006). The US business bible, the *Wall Street Journal* called Leicester's title win 'implausible' and 'faintly antiquated' (Robinson, 2016). Described as 'unthinkable' and the greatest upset in sporting history, on May 9th even the World Economic Forum was tweeting on, '4 leadership lessons from Leicester's unlikely Premier League success. #LCFCChampions.' This clearly needed some explaining.

Initial celebration in Leicester were strangely un-English – car horns and whistles blaring; Leicester City flags flying from car windows and rooftops; exuberant late night traffic jams; and groups of expressive, exultant, head-scarfed young women - with drink often only on the periphery of the action. Many of those involved came from Leicester's large, longstanding communities which have their heritage on the Indian sub-continent (Bonney and Le Goff, 2007). Leicester City has a small core of active local South Asian fans, but this mass expression of multi-cultural ownership of the club's achievements helped generate a mythologised national

story arc about Leicester: that the improbable success of its soccer club was somehow rooted in, and expressive of, social integration and community cohesion in the city (Kuper, 2016).

Rather more familiar fan narratives soon followed in the local press clearly aimed at recalling the game's ingrained, pre-EPL, local roots and its rather romanticised - and even filmic - culture (Thompson, 2016). Significantly, rumours soon spread about a Hollywood script and the new EPL champions were also reported to be the only English soccer club to employ a full-time trained historian (Inglis, 2016). Indeed, in a year when the familiar, moneyed football corporations were cleaning up in all the other major European soccer leagues, events in England in 2016 were interpreted very differently, despite Leicester City's own 'new football' connotations. Leicester's victory was widely read, instead, as saying 'Yes' to traditional sporting values of identity, history and community, and a resounding 'No' to neo-liberal versions of hyper-commodified 'Modern Soccer' (Numerato, 2015). Leicester-born novelist, Julian Barnes (2016), summed up what seemed a common international thread when he wrote: 'We are all Foxes now.'

1

Context: The city of Leicester – always the same (but always changing)

A mainly hosiery and boot and shoe manufacturing centre located smack in the middle of England, historically Leicester has not demanded much attention. The writer J. B Priestly (1934, 113) said of 1930s' Leicester in *English Journey*, that it lacked character and had no real atmosphere of its own: that its centre was 'neither dignified nor very extensive' and that, '[I]

was glad to think I did not live in it.’ Local playwright Joe Orton thought his home city, simply, ‘boring.’ Despite its leafy suburbs, views have not much changed since. Indeed, the city’s official motto is *Semper Eadem* – always the same. Nevertheless, in 1953 Leicester was claimed to have the second highest per capital income of any city in Europe (Vidal-Hall, 2003: 134). For those living well from the fruits of the city’s successful local businesses and trades, Leicester was probably a reassuringly self-contained and unchanging place to live.

But post-war Leicester felt the full force of economic, social and political change, especially via the mergers and capitalist ‘rationalisations’ which soon occurred in its dominant industries as a result of globalisation. By the mid-1970s its manufacturing trades were in steep decline. In effect, the cosy ‘mutual interdependency’ that had once characterised the city’s key businesses was suddenly sprung apart (Beazley, 2006, 82). By the 1980s, local historian Richard Gill (1985, 117) described Leicester as, ‘a neglected provincial town (sic).’ The economic well-being of earlier periods was difficult to recapture and by 2016 the city had fallen to the bottom of the UK league table for adult disposable income (Leicester Mercury, 2016).

However, Leicester had also undergone radical post-war change. New arrivals in waves of immigration to the city – mainly from the Caribbean, the Indian sub-continent and, in the early 1970s, 20,000 educated, English-speaking Gujarati Hindu Indian migrants expelled from Uganda – had added local dynamism and diversity by re-making their professions, trades and businesses in Leicester. For some commentators, their arrival ‘saved a dying city’ (Vidal-Hall 2003, 135). Their presence and success has certainly become a defining feature of the public version of the ‘Leicester story’ over the past 40 years: an internationally-revered, celebratory tale of largely harmonious multiculturalism (Singh, 2003; Marret, 1989). **In the 2011 Census,**

just over half (50.52%) of the city's adult population of 329,839 self-identified as White; Asians or Asian British made up 37.13% of Leicester's local community. South Asian attendance at Leicester City home games is well below this level, but in 2016 it was noticeable and growing, despite the high prices of match attendance in the EPL. The cost of a match ticket at the King Power typically ranged from £26 to £50. But the city's shifting ethnic diversity is also very strongly expressed today in local sport (Campbell and Williams, 2014; Bradbury, 2011). More recently and beyond this important diversity narrative, Leicester did briefly hit the international headlines, in 2012, by unearthing, in a city car park, the remains of a **little admired**, long-lost English king (Morris and Buckley, 2013).²

Leicester City, the local soccer club, has a similarly rather undistinguished past. Until the events of 2016 it was the ultimate, medium-sized 'nearly' soccer club of England, reaching the FA Cup final on four occasions, the last time in 1969, but winning none. Its best league placing before 2016 had been second - but way back in 1929. In the late-1990s, in an uncharacteristic, but brief, period of minor success, City won two domestic League Cups and even briefly played in Europe. But more recently the club had experienced financial turmoil after funding a new stadium while simultaneously suffering relegation from the EPL cash cow. **The EPL had become the commercial leader in European football following its increasingly lucrative deals negotiated with satellite TV companies, and the associated post-Bosman attraction of English football to a cadre of elite-level foreign coaches, players and owners – including at Leicester City. The new economics and marketing of the English game had also transformed stadia and helped grow EPL crowds, but arguably at the expense of some local blue-collar support.**

This duel process of stadium investment and on-pitch failure culminated in a financial crisis and a period in administration for Leicester City in October 2002 (Smith and Taylor, 2010). The Foxes were hardly the first English soccer club to go down this ruinous route in the new, marketised EPL era. They were precarious victims, like so many others, of the financial chasm that had opened between the global, TV funded EPL and the, decidedly impecunious and local, Football League. The club was only saved from oblivion by its own fans and a group of willing sponsors. But this affair had other serious consequences: by the 2008/9 season Leicester City had sunk to the third tier of English soccer for the first time in its long history.

Seven years later, somehow, and against all known economic and sporting indicators, the club became EPL champions. How did this happen, what did it mean to local people, and what does it mean for sport? We try, briefly, to explore these questions below. But, firstly, a few comments about the origins of the EPL and its consequences for provincial soccer clubs like Leicester City.

The EPL and English soccer

The finer details of the formation of the EPL can be found elsewhere (Bose, 2012). Suffice to say that, throughout the 1980s, pressure for structural change had been building in English soccer as crowds fell, hooliganism persisted, and club debts continued to rise. Opposition grew to the fraternal cross-subsidisation payments made by larger to smaller English clubs, and to FA rules which restricted dividends for club investors and prohibited salaries for directors (Conn, 1997). When these rules were finally circumvented (by Tottenham Hotspur) and then eventually

conceded by the FA in England in 1983, it was the signal for larger English clubs to challenge the integrity of its unique 92-club professional league. The inquiry into the Hillsborough stadium disaster in Sheffield in 1989 provided the immediate policy drive for major structural change (Taylor, 1990). It did so by highlighting a leadership vacuum in the English game, provoking the 'modernisation' of club facilities – especially via all-seater stadia - and facilitating a radical re-positioning of elite English soccer in relation to its core working class audience and potential new corporate markets (Halstead, 1995; Williams, 1999; King, 1998).

The rise of new global media and communication systems, coupled with changes in class identities and experiences in Britain (Fürtjes, 2016) and the aggressive neo-liberal marketization of business, politics and culture in the UK from the late-1970s, offered the wider socio-economic context for the restructuring of English soccer (King, 1998). All this was underpinned by satellite TV's financial 'black hole' in the early 1990s and its desperate search for saleable content to satisfy its new global markets (Boyle and Haynes, 2004). When ambitious new club director/entrepreneurs, the financial ills of global subscription TV, and pressure for English soccer modernisation post-Hillsborough, all aligned in the early 1990s the result was the formation of the EPL, in 1992 (Williams, 2006). The new league embarked on aggressive strategies of re-making and growing 'live' and especially TV audiences in England, and hawking the English game to TV markets abroad. Commercially attractive soccer investment propositions eventually resulted – or what many fans today still call their local soccer clubs (Morrow, 2011).

Critics warned that market forces would make the EPL too predictable and that it faced financial implosion should TV take flight (Mitchie and Oughton, 2004). The EPL was also

criticised for recruiting fickle and gentrified consumers to replace once devoted, but now priced out, working class fans (Brick, 2000). It was also argued that serious debt might ruin some established clubs, caught between the riches of the EPL and the poverty outside: it nearly did for Leicester City in 2002. Nevertheless, EPL crowds grew and its brand value increased as 'star quality' on the pitch overrode some of the modernist demands for unpredictability (Buraimo and Simmons, 2015; Williams, 2007). At the heart of its success was television's insatiable appetite for the English soccer. A report on the global footprint of the EPL in 2015 noted that it is now broadcast in 185 countries to an estimated 730 million homes. (Ernst & Young, 2015, 3). As Deloitte (2106) recently reported, the enhanced new broadcast deals for the EPL commencing in 2016/17 of over £5 billion, promised overall operating profits for its clubs of approaching £1 billion. Critically, income derived from fans attending matches had now become the least important part of most EPL club revenue streams.

Unsurprisingly, this lightly regulated sporting economic hothouse attracted eager new suitors and by 2016, 13 EPL clubs were all or part-owned by foreign investors with a limited range of motives (Osborne & Coombes, 2009). The EPL elite clubs (and increasingly their fans) favoured, above all, oligarchs and billionaires, whose newly-acquired mega-clubs could now routinely compete in the lucrative, uber-regulated and globally branded Uefa Champions League, and who began to measure their worldwide followers in hundreds of millions (Ducker, 2011, Holt, 2007). Leicester City, however, typically yo-yoed between the Football League and the EPL, had never played in the Champions League and barely in Europe and had few global fans. Indeed, the club's remarkable success story in 2016 seemed wholly at odds with pretty much everything one had come to expect from successful clubs in the EPL era.

But Leicester City's own story was no simple one of home-spun, local owners and the careful marshalling of resources out of economic catastrophe. In fact, the club has been foreign-owned since 2010, bought by representatives of the Thailand-based duty-free shopping business, King Power. These billionaire owners, polo-loving, Manchester United fan, Vichai and son 'Top' Srivaddhanaprabha, ostentatiously arrived and left Leicester City's home matches in 2015/16 by helicopter, landing on the King Power pitch. They had no previous background in soccer, but astutely hired in 2015 as manager Claudio Ranieri, son of a Roman butcher. Ranieri was neither a rookie nor a hugely successful coach, but a well-travelled and highly experienced practitioner. He changed little initially, but encouraged squad bonding (and good PR) by buying his City players pizzas in a local restaurant after significant performances. The club's players, though hardly costly and little feted, had been meticulously scouted and globally recruited, using complex analytics (Wood, 2016; Northcroft, 2016).

Leicester City's budget and resources were small compared to its main rivals – a total squad transfer cost of £54.4 million in 2016, for example, compared to £418.8 million at title rivals Manchester City - and, despite the club's strategic use of data analysis, its 2016 success *did*, seem like a triumph for old school intuitive character, caution and planning, as well as for some basic, modernist sporting qualities and values over the power of money: for moderate spending and excellent research, judgement and husbandry in the transfer market; for hard graft, collective belief and teamwork on the field; and for an immutable bond between Ranieri, the City players, and the club's fans. The Leicester back-story seemed to touch all sports fans by mining some very familiar cultural tropes about sporting 'miracles' and 2016 was widely read as

a clichéd case of a cobbled together ‘bare-bones team’ who wrote their own Hollywood script (Ronay, 2016).

Sporting success, local identity and community

The Leicester City narrative in 2016, although unusual and difficult to replicate in terms of its global impact, is not unique in sport. It has obvious links, for example, to the 1990s’ case of Australia’s Newcastle Knights rugby league club, from the Hunter region of New South Wales. The similarly unfashionable and non-metropolitan Knights unexpectedly won the Australian Rugby League (ARL) Grand Final in 1997, leading to celebrations which had some fans reportedly ‘drunk for three weeks’ (Rowe and McGuirk, 1999). In a period of instability and rapid economic and industrial decline in Newcastle, this unlikely Knights’ national sporting success played an important role in anchoring and relaying discourses of community solidarity, economic modernization and anti-metropolitanism in the town (Rowe and McGuirk, 1999, 126).

Leicester, in 2016, lacked Newcastle’s deeply masculinised mono-culture and its heavy industrial heritage - and perhaps aspects of that Australian city’s rapid decline, too. But Leicester’s own strong manufacturing base in the shoe and hosiery trades had certainly shrivelled in the latter part of the 20th Century (Gunn and Hyde, 2013). Its long-term transformations and its recent reconstruction as a tourism and leisure city – for example around the historic discovery of the remains of King Richard III in 2012 – meant that Leicester today mirrors similar developments and aspirations to those in Newcastle in the late-1990s. As at Newcastle, too, Leicester’s recent EPL escapade allowed for something of a, ‘connotative

transformation.... which offers the possibility of re-imagining and culturally repositioning the city.’ (Rowe and McGuirk, 1999, 133).

Moreover, again like Newcastle in 1997, the EPL title success for Leicester City was soon interpreted locally as a route for generating significant new economic activity: a means of creating a new ‘brand identity’ for the city and functioning as an effective locus of community affect and solidarity, by reproducing the concept of spatially constructed unity (Rowe and McGuirk, 1999, 126). But 1997 is not 2016, and the ARL is not the all globally-powerful EPL. However, in provincial locales like these, which have seen production-based capitalism substantially supplanted by its consumptive form, the civic branding power of successful sports clubs has become increasingly important for their cultural and economic global positioning and for their promotion as ‘unique’ sites for doing business and growing commerce. Some hard work on selling locations through sport is central here.

In the summer of 2016 the city museum in Leicester produced an exhibition celebrating its local club’s title success. Tens of thousands of people visited and many left personal messages about their experiences. Leicester City was now, reportedly, the world’s fastest growing sports club brand (Pegden, 2016). Academics from the business school at De Montfort University (DMU) in Leicester added credence – and considerable boosterism - to such claims by estimating the longer-term effect on the city. By modelling the impact on wages, employment, investment and effects through local supply chains, using ‘existing and tested formulas’ this produced calculations (speculations?) that the economic benefit of the Leicester EPL title win *could* be worth up to £866m to the city. The academics also reported a purported 60% rise in

international student DMU admissions, and Leicester City Council announced increased inward investment enquiries for the city (BBC, 2016).

There is undoubtedly some smoke and mirrors at work here: 'enquiries' are not commitments to invest and where, exactly, is the hard evidence that any student upturn in Leicester is about local success in sport? Moreover, DMU is, proudly, the 'official HE Partner' of Leicester City FC, so motivations may exist for hyperbole concerning the economic and branding impact of sport on local business, tourism, and student interest. Soccer in 2016 did put Leicester on the international map but, as was the case for the Newcastle Knights, although it lifted local people it was unlikely, alone, to be enough for re-imagining the city or offering a decisive turn in its economic fortunes (Rowe and McGuirk, 1999, 138).

So how, exactly, was this 'miracle' season interpreted and experienced locally by Leicester people and City's fans? We say a little below about our methodology before turning to this issue.

Some notes on methodology

We report here on detailed semi-structured interviews with an initial sample of 17 Leicester City fans. These were conducted near, or just after, the end of the 2015/16 season. This is part of an ongoing project on the impact of the EPL title win on Leicester and its people. The use here of semi-structured interviews is premised on an interpretivist epistemology which is, itself, based on the ontological belief that, 'culture is a complex web of meanings and [second] that the best way to examine these meanings would be to "get into the heads" of actors' (Martin,

2010, 228). Despite its limitations, this emphasis on what can be considered ‘knowledge’ in the social world helps to avoid self-censorship and can allow more valid and ‘true’ (to the interviewee’s subjective views on reality) accounts to be given, thus providing a deeper understanding of social phenomena (Silverman, 2000: 8).

Initial members of the sample were recruited via postings on two Leicester City fan forums www.foxestalk.co.uk and www.bentleysroof.com³. The posts outlined the aims of the research and asked fans to get involved. To replicate approaches adopted elsewhere, it was stressed that the research was not aimed exclusively at season ticket fans – or even at fans who had regularly attended City matches in 2015/16 (Dixon, 2014). From the initial group gathered in this way we used snowballing techniques to grow the sample up to 17. It consists of: six season ticket holders; four non-season ticket match-goers (5+ games a season); and seven, mainly media, fans. **We cannot claim, of course, that the sample is statistically representative of Leicester City supporters or people in the city. But we would argue that their views typically reflected perspectives which were more generally shared and were widely circulating in the city at this time.** Interviews took place in a variety of settings, usually workplaces, interviewee’s homes or quiet cafes chosen by our subjects for their own comfort (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). In using snowballing techniques we also tried to recruit female (4) as well as male (13) fans, some minority ethnic fans (3) (significant in Leicester’s case), and fans drawn from different age groups. Our youngest fan was 21 years and the oldest, an 84-year-old season ticket holder (See Table 1).

TABLE 1 HERE

Using snowballing techniques risk an inherent sampling bias involved in recruiting respondents based upon their contacts with, or knowledge of, each other. But, as Bryman (2008: 169) wisely notes about social research, 'it is incredibly difficult to remove bias altogether and to derive a truly representative sample.' Our own, admittedly small, group covers a range of connections and experiences in relation to Leicester City's *annus mirabilis*. We use thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) as the main technique to analyse our interview data. This is a flexible approach which allows for a range of different emphases, depending on the epistemological position of the researcher. In systematically interrogating our data we adopted a theoretical thematic analysis model, one driven by our own theoretical and analytical interests in this area, as researchers can limit, but never divorce, themselves from their prior theoretical and epistemological commitments.

Here we focus only on four emergent themes: notions of social identity, suffering and belonging in soccer fandom; the impact of 2016 on community cohesion in Leicester; questions around global owners, Disneyization and authentic fandom; and, finally, expressions of place and civic pride through local sporting success. Finally, it is also worth affirming that whilst some themes were already identified for exploration prior to data analysis, the *outcomes* of these themes were not preconceived. Eventually, we had enough material to develop an argument, based around these key emergent themes. In the findings below we include the ages of our respondents next to their pseudonyms.

Leicester City fans in 2016: 'It was just insane.'

i) Social identity, suffering and questions of belonging

A strong social identity already existed before 2016 among hard-core fans of Leicester City, but the EPL win produced considerable reflexivity locally on the personal sacrifices required to follow the 'career path' of supporting a largely unsuccessful soccer club (Jones, 2000: 284). The outpouring of emotion among City fans (including their heartfelt museum messages), communicated the extent to which self-concept and self-esteem are often interlocked with a local soccer club's success or failure. They also highlight how the highs and lows of fandom can produce spectacular expressions of affect. 'I'll tell you something about supporting a football club', confided veteran 84-year old City season ticket holder, Billy: 'It's agony. It's agony.'

The necessary suffering of loyal fans like these at unfashionable clubs is an important part of authentic identity construction in English soccer, to be contrasted (according to Charlie, below) with the unearned pleasure of consumer fans - bandwagon jumpers - of more successful clubs. Club 'shoppers' like these could also be born and raised in Leicester, including young South Asians whose local ties are often attenuated by their complex heritages (Burdsey, 2004). Loyal City fans quickly anticipated negative impacts of their recent success: new followers, squeezing out local fans. What was the 'typical' experience of being a Leicester fan before 2016 – and what had changed since?

‘Traumatic, I think (laughs). But that’s how I’d describe it. It was something a bit akin to masochism, you know? People who like getting beaten by other people.’ (Cameron, 59)

‘One of misery, generally. There’s been some good times.... but for the most part you almost expect disappointment. You’re conditioned for that. People support - they jump on the bandwagon - the winning team, whoever’s winning. I put up with that when I was at school, and I was a Leicester fan and a lot of my friends and peers were supporting Man United, Liverpool, Arsenal – even Leeds.’ (Charlie, 34)

There is obvious local pride – even a sense of moral superiority and some dark humour - expressed here, of course: ‘trauma’ and ‘misery’ are also deeply felt. This is a very familiar modernist trope about authentic fandom: that by dint of ties of place or family, and for good or ill, one’s club chooses you, rather than the opposite. But in multi-cultural Leicester, the complexities of local heritage meant that for some South Asian fans with fractured local ties, supporting one’s local club could be perceived as opposing the ‘flow’; a denial of both ambition and home. As South Asian fan Bali (48) put it:

‘An Asian person supporting Leicester was like being a rebel. It was like it was a rebellious thing that you were doing. Because, otherwise, to follow the flow, you had to be a Liverpool fan, a Man United fan, [or] Tottenham. You know? Or Everton, because these teams were the ones that used to win things. So, being a Leicester fan was like being a bit of a rebel, like “Woah!” People used to say: “Why do you support Leicester?” And, you know, you used to say it’s your home town. And always the comeback is: “It’s not your home town, because you’re Indian”, things like that.’

If emotional investment in their home town club was regarded as a kind of deviance for some Leicester South Asians, other City fans showed resentment that the club’s unexpected success threatened to derail or undermine established local attachments, despite a general, redemptive message for sport from 2016 about metropolitanism and provincial identities. As Niall (22) put

it: 'It's basically saying you don't have to be one of these massive clubs, or you don't have to be from London or one of these huge cities – Manchester – you know? It is anyone can do it.'

Accordingly, for some Leicester City fans in 2016, emotions simply spilled over as their club approached their improbable first ever title win in metropolitan territory:

'Like, when Leicester played [Manchester] United and I went to Manchester, I was worried to be going out at night and then – not be bragging about it – but you're proud of it. And you've got people that are just so emotional. Like there was this one guy who was in tears near to me. It was just insane.' (Jeremy, 22)

Fans of smaller, provincial clubs could, of course, take inspiration from Leicester City's astounding win. But Tom Clark (2006) argues that such fans can often best negotiate and maintain satisfying identities in other ways – for example through the ritual performance of song. This is premised on the sense of place associated with the local soccer stadia, established residual traditions of local fandom, and the interlocking elements of social identity which accompanies such feelings, and is expressed in local chants such as: 'I'm Leicester 'til I die'. This 'imagined' community of loyalty and rootedness thus mobilises social identity through an 'internal-external dialectic of identification.' (Clark, 2006, 500).

ii) *Inclusion, community cohesion and sport*

The perceived strength of the connection between 'real' Leicester City fans and the club emerged repeatedly in our interviews. But it was most apparent – perhaps ironically – when discussing the wider issue of racism at soccer in England. Satnam, a 62-year-old long-standing

Leicester fan of South Asian descent, described being spat at football in the 1970s. So why had he continued to attend City matches in the light of such racist abuse?

“It didn’t put me off, because you were supporting the local side and I was standing with good people, you know, where we were in the family end. You get to know people that you’re around, and people were quite supportive, generally.” – Satnam, 62

Leicester City has been notable in the UK for its fan-led *Foxes Against Racism* campaigning, and here we can see, at a personal level, the positive inclusion sometimes enacted at football. The importance of ‘supporting the local side’ and ‘standing with good people’ hints at wider local practices and cultures around belonging and the positive race equality agenda long established in the city. Leicester City’s shock title win in 2016 was seen by some fans as a means of extending and accentuating such inclusivity. Here, the multi-national nature of the Leicester team was highlighted for its messages about cross-national collaboration in a ‘global’ city. As Sarah (57) put it: ‘I like the fact that we live in a multicultural city and we’ve got a team that shows that all these different nationalities can play well together.’ Other younger fans – like Danny and Niall (both 22) - were somewhat sceptical about Leicester’s positive global PR on ethnic integration, but they also sensed the EPL title win had some, possibly ephemeral, cohesive effects:

‘There is like, a lot of divide in the city from different cultures in different areas. Whereas whenever I’ve actually been out, post-us winning the league, it’s been, kind of, people are talking about it, people are connecting together. And I think it has shown that sense of community more than probably what I would’ve felt had I gone out before.’ (Danny, 22)

‘More people are interested in it [Leicester City], and I think, like, as well, because so many different people go to it, it’s like, it’s completely seen as ‘the family club’ right now, isn’t it? It’s the ‘people’s club.’ Like, it doesn’t matter who you are, where you’ve come from, you can come and be part of our party.’ (Niall, 22)

The ideas expressed here - City as a local, smaller and successful ‘people’s club’, one which is multi-national but also admired for its capacity to bind local people, fans and players closely together - is perhaps unsurprising given the enormity of Leicester City’s achievement and the perceived lack of intimacy and local affinity typically associated with some of the larger EPL clubs. Our interviewees also pointed to the sheer inclusivity of the celebrations in the city after the title win. Again, our respondents were well aware of existing divisions in the city but argued, nevertheless, that the power of soccer could produce significant, symbolic messages about shared local sensibilities among the city’s wide range of communities:

‘We went down to the stadium immediately [after Leicester had won the title]and the whole city, everybody, was represented. It wasn’t just a kind of – like we are – old, white Leicester. It was *Leicester*, you know? We saw these three young girls with Hijabs and Leicester flags and that’s also what I loved about it, more than anything. It made us look like a unified city and often – because we’ve got white bits of Leicester and Asian bits of Leicester, Muslim bits of Leicester, Hindu bits of Leicester, Sikh bits of Leicester, Somali bits of Leicester. But it was *all* Leicester.... Everybody loved that.’ (Sarah, 57).

Sarah (57), a local schoolteacher and recent season ticket holder, was especially aware that Muslims in Leicester were sometimes isolated and could be regarded with suspicion by other people in the city. For her, the football success of 2016 had provoked a very different public articulation of Islam locally. The inclusive nature of the Leicester soccer celebrations signified local processes of belonging and inclusion as well as the perceived capacity of soccer to briefly sublimate social divisions – to provide ‘common ground’ (Jared, 21). As Derek (55) recalled,

later TV coverage of the 'Leicester story' had made some surprising connections: 'When they were doing a documentary about it, they showed some lads from St Matthews [estate], which is a highly Somalian area. They were all in the local coffee shop, all watching Leicester City!'

(iii) Global owners, Disneyization and 'authentic' fandom

Sociological accounts have typically argued that the interconnected processes of Disneyization and McDonaldization in EPL soccer have led to a plasticity, and a 'placeless' standardisation of the stadium experience: a lack of creativity and a reduced spontaneity in crowds, producing a concomitant placidity and reduction in stadium atmosphere (Brick, 2000; Nash, 2000; Duke, 2002; Sandvoss, 2003). Much is over-simplified here, but the new King Power stadium could be accused by such theorists as being a rather sterile and uninteresting arena, though the noise generated by the Union FS Leicester 'ultras' ⁴ was an attempt to re-appropriate part of this space, an increasingly common development in England (Bakowski, 2016). Elements of what one might call a safe, Disneyized ambience, shaped by marketing and consumer ideologies, were clearly evident at the King Power in 2015/16. **They reappeared for Champions League nights in 2017.** Like all elite English clubs today, Leicester City favours a 'family' audience and a heavily merchandised crowd. But, uniquely, the club also provided cardboard 'clackers', costing £30,000, for home fans at each match to generate stadium noise. Its owners even offered free gifts, vouchers, drinks and doughnuts for Leicester fans at selected fixtures. The match-day atmosphere in 2016 was typically identified by City supporters and media commentators alike as celebratory, loud and committed. 'Atmosphere at the minute?' asked Stan (42), rhetorically.

‘Deafening!’ It was also reflective, for some – good PR this - of a positive Buddhist Karma, derived from the club’s Thai links, which supposedly shaped a calmer late-modern style of English soccer support (Northcroft, 2016: 105).

Most Leicester City fans probably accepted, at some level, that the club’s new owners were in the EPL as part of a themed project for their own commercial advancement and positive identity projection. And yet, in ways also identified elsewhere (Dixon, 2014), fans at Leicester largely acceded to these new club interventions: they seemed to enjoy the increased ‘choice’ and variety of experiences on offer at the King Power. Active City fans were also keen to distinguish between this, participatory-but-constructed fan/club engagement model, and those allegedly extant at rival ‘super-clubs’ in England. The latter were argued to be unacceptably exploitative and corporate in their approach to fan relations. However, when pressed on issues of corporate versus more inclusive approaches to fan engagement, Leicester fans were also generally openly pragmatic in their views. If Leicester City was to try to establish its own position as an elite *European* club – and why not now? - then some changes in the local architecture of fan relations were also, probably, inevitable:

‘You know, it’s not the biggest of stadiums [King Power] so I hope it doesn’t turn too corporate. Because it will have a massive effect if they turn it a bit corporate, because it’s so small. I mean, if they was to build a new stadium, I wouldn’t expect anything less, because it’s the way football’s going. It’d be full of corporate seating and the fans would be sat further away from the pitch. But I hope, I hope, it doesn’t go like that.’ (Jared, 21)

Caribbean-heritage Leicester fan, Jared, seems to accept that a more corporate hold may indeed magnify at City, although this is tempered by his reluctance to welcome it. Attracting more fans from outside Leicester – or even outside Britain – because of events in 2016, might

indeed change the character of the club, but it would also ensure the sort of profile and capitalisation deemed necessary to challenge the EPL and European club elites in the long-term.

‘It’s a good thing, isn’t it?’ argued Jared, looking at the hard finances: ‘It’s more money going into the club and that’s what you need.’ ‘Undoubtedly, undoubtedly,’ says Cameron (59).

‘Whether that actually has an effect, other than, you know, we’ll get people buying shirts and stuff.’ For Jeremy (22), extending Leicester City’s global reach meant the club might eventually build up its own global fan base: ‘Yeah, I think it’s a good thing. The more support the better.’

How aspiring clubs such as Leicester City manage these two, rather opposing, agendas – maintaining authentic local (and multicultural) ties whilst, simultaneously and pragmatically, capitalising on the club’s new potential for corporate and global growth – is likely to shape future relations between City fans, local people and the club’s owners.

Our interviewees knew that public discourse about the Leicester title win had eulogised the ‘togetherness’ around the club and its strong, local support, epitomised in media accounts by the insistent din of the club-supplied cardboard fan clackers. Some fans also knew about the more ‘organic’ supporter traditions established at the Leicester’s old Filbert Street base.

Unsurprisingly, all were convinced that ‘the fans’ had been a critical part of Leicester’s ‘miracle’ season in 2015/16. ‘This crowd, here at the King Power, it’s not the biggest stadium in the world’, said Cameron (59), ‘but it’s the loudest one I’ve ever been in.’ In terms of comparisons with the past:

‘Like, I speak to people of the older generation and they say the atmosphere is a lot more family orientated now and there was more of a boozy culture [then], where the atmosphere was so loud all the time. But the Leicester ground, even like, it was always

rocking. All season. Like the crowd there was a joke - probably one of the best in the league.' (Jared, 21)

Jared uses the term 'joke' here as a positive comparative: the King Power support in 2015/16 was, he claims, up there with the best in England, despite a modest stadium capacity (32,000), its recent sanitation, its 'family' theming, and the lack of an alcohol-fuelled heavily masculine culture. Christine (66), a more seasoned City fan, reflected more critically on the earlier classed traditions of standing support for soccer in Leicester's older stadium: 'I think the atmosphere has changed', she remarked. 'When it used to be standing and 42,000 [capacity], there was something – I think probably that. It was good, and it was more working class.'

On the more specific subject of the Thai owners and their rather infamous fan clackers, there was general – though far from unanimous – support:

'I think it's good [giving out the clackers]. Everyone says about the atmosphere at Leicester and the way that it is and you won't get many teams like that in the league. But Leicester, last year, completely shone above the rest, simply for that aspect. A lot of people didn't like them [the clackers], but they associated that with Leicester and the Leicester fans loved it.' (Jack, 22)

'People at cup games who are not season ticket holders sometimes don't know how to use the clackers. They get all out of sync, so the atmosphere doesn't build up, it's not as loud at cup games. When you are at a Premier League match, it can get really loud, a great atmosphere, cos people get into the rhythm properly.' (Julie, 54)

Jack, although approving himself, recognises not all City fans were behind the owners' interventions on how to perform fandom. Julie, an older female fan, strongly approves, but argues that regular City fans themselves developed the collective skills required to appropriate

the clackers and use them effectively and creatively as their own: as part of a unique new Leicester fan culture. Finally, Charles detected only the manufactured nature of the owners' involvement – for him, stadium atmosphere should be generated by *fans* and the context of the match, not by some external provider, no matter their motives or impact:

'I don't like the clackers. I think they're very corporate and manufactured. I'd like to see an organic atmosphere, something that is generated by genuine emotion, genuine excitement at seeing what's happening on the pitch. And that translates itself into the stand.' (Charles, 34)

This was a rather lone voice. More common were those which argued that the provision of clackers was less a cynical kind of emotional labour aimed at seducing and corporatizing the Leicester crowd, but more a bulwark *against* the risk of a soulless, corporate stadium atmosphere:

'They're [Leicester City's owners] very good for that [getting involved with the fans] especially with the clappers [sic] and that. 'Cos a lot of stadiums you go to it's just corporate – especially in the Premier League. If you ever go to, like, the Emirates [Arsenal's home stadium], it's the quietest stadium I've ever been to in my life. Full of corporate tickets. Whereas Leicester is complete opposite. It's full of fans - and *football* fans.' (Jared, 21)

Winning the EPL title, obviously, colours fans' views in this (and other) respects. But, generally, the rather 'Disneyized' or Americanized gestures made by Leicester's Thai owners in 2015/16 – the clackers, free beer and doughnuts - were read positively by most supporters and were often contrasted with experiences elsewhere. As Darren (22) put it: 'It was to just walk in and get handed a free beer and a free badge! It was like: "You know what, thanks!"' Moreover, it was

widely noted that Vichai or 'Top' did *attend* most of City's home matches in the title-winning season: not all foreign owners in England did the same. Our respondents necessarily assumed these men to be emotionally engaged in the Leicester project, in contrast to some rather less committed, if high-spending, foreign owners identified elsewhere in the EPL:

'They're [Leicester City's owners] just like... they're not like that Abramovich [Chelsea owner]. He's just, like, sour, in the crowd. They're there, they're happy, they're doing stuff, thinking of new ideas to boost the fans, like giving of the beer and, like, stuff like that. I just think they're good, they're creative. They're not just doing it as a way to make money and stuff. They're doing it because they actually care.' (Jeremy, 22)

This carefully projected image, co-managed by both fans and the club - that the City owners 'cared' and were in the sport for the 'right' reasons - counterintuitively also explained for fans why the Thai billionaires were limiting their investment in Leicester City: their motives were not for profit, or buying influence, or respect, around the world (But what, exactly, *were* their motives?). The view here was that foreign owners who invest too much and without due care traduce the spirit of English soccer by converting its outcomes into measures of global capitalised power. The real romance of the Leicester City project in 2016 was that its owners had attempted no quick-fix to buy the major honours in the English game. This clearly mattered to committed City fans:

'I think that wages wise, transfer wise, what clubs are prepared to pay out is ridiculous. But I have to say that Leicester have done very well on that side of things. ... I don't want to support a team that splashes out big money!' (Christine, 66)

This clever masking of corporate ambition meant important distinctions could thus be drawn by local fans between the warmer, paternalistic (and Disneyized) stadium practices now well-rooted at Leicester, and the colder, more calculated, more corporate policies identified at other foreign-owned English clubs. Claims about social solidarity and a positive local identity – ‘Fearless Foxes’; ‘Foxes Never Quit’ – could thus be co-developed with the club’s marketing department as self-defining motifs, in a way that did not chafe too much as exploitation, nor as the arch-construction of ersatz forms of fandom. Even a gigantic flag produced, North Korean-style, by the club but borne by fans to wish the Chairman a happy birthday, seemed to deepen, rather than damage, the view that the Leicester City hierarchy was simply responsive to fans, rather than manipulating their identities.

iv) Sport, branding and civic pride in a multi-cultural city

We have already discussed how success in sport might help in global branding and in drawing communities together, especially perhaps in provincial locales which have undergone transformative post-industrial change. Our interviewees were well aware of the wider impact of the Leicester story. As Niall (22) remarked: ‘Globally, it’s been recognised: “Doing a Leicester” has become a term, in itself.’ In fact, ‘Doing a Leicester’ was a phrase first used by London mayoral candidate Zac Goldsmith in an LBC radio interview on 3rd May 2016 to describe his own (unsuccessful) election hopes. It soon became common currency in Denmark and elsewhere for describing any unimaginable underdog outcome (Tennant, 2016). Leicester has an important rugby union heritage, but our interviewees argued that only *soccer* could engage and connect across social and ethnic divides. In this sense, Leicester City’s EPL win so caught the national

and international popular imagination that its local celebrations were depicted and experienced as intoxicating, democratic and open enough to involve people across communities and sports - including those who, otherwise, had little or no interest in soccer:

‘I think it was how it brought everybody together, from different background socially, as well as culturally. And people who hadn’t really been interested in football before. Like my husband was never really that fussed - he liked his rugby - he was included as well. And all age ranges - just a great, family atmosphere. There was a good feeling, a really good feeling in the city. People were happy. Yeah, it was a brilliant feeling.’ (Christine, 66)

‘The atmosphere in the city was fantastic that day. You know, everywhere you went you could see signs of Leicester’s win and people being happy. And I think that rubs off on the city, and the people and the atmosphere.’ (Satnam, 62)

Harmonious diversity as a positive international ‘brand’ might be publicly demonstrated by seeing local people mixing together in sporting celebrations, and being co-present in local cafes and shops. But meaningful intercultural links in Leicester could still be ‘weak or non-existent’ and policy debates about ‘race’ remained largely outside interactions in cultural forums (Bonney & Le Goff, 2007; Machin and Mayr, 2007). Nevertheless, the potential role of the 2016 celebrations for accentuating this image of a successful, vibrant international city, one which was ‘open for business’, was very clear to many of our respondents. Our older season ticket fan, Billy (84), thought the EPL success had (almost literally) put Leicester on the map in civic terms - ‘I think the coverage must’ve pleased the mayor!’ Other respondents emphasised the new internationalisation of the city, especially as fans across Europe now identified with victorious Leicester players. As Niall (22) pointed out: ‘You’ve got people in Switzerland who watch just to see [Gokhan] Inler. Or people from Austria watching, to see [Christian] Fuchs.’

This intensified international focus on the city through sport had produced, it was claimed, a new sense of purpose among local people, something concrete to challenge the abiding local sense of relative anonymity and inferiority of the past, especially in comparison to more metropolitan areas of England. Fewer people abroad, for example, would now have to ask how, exactly, to pronounce the city's name. For Stan (42): 'I think gone are the days of: "Oh, we're from Leicester," and no-one had really heard of Leicester. Now, *everyone* has heard of Leicester!' Monica, a City fan and a local councillor, argued that visitor numbers were up in a city which had a 'growing confidence' and was developing a more positive self-identity. After all, Leicester City FC had even made it into the local museum, scotching the usual narrow middle class, educative emphasis on high art, nature and obscure historical artefacts:

'We've got the museum display [on City and football], which is incredible really, one of the most successful exhibitions they've had..... It's actually changed the demographic of people who are going into the museum. So, in the last few years there's been a decline in the number of working class people going to museums, and this has brought in a whole new working class audience.' (Monica, 59)

The museum's popular, interactive account of Leicester's EPL title win eventually attracted a record 100,000 visitors in five months. It clearly added to the city's powerful civic branding through soccer, but it also claimed to challenge barriers, not just between different ethnic groups but between high and low culture, in a way that might offer opportunities for local working class people to access previously rather 'closed' cultural sites. Was this an unexpected bonus, perhaps, of an unprecedented local soccer success?

Some conclusions

What can we draw out from this very preliminary investigation of the impact of unexpected sporting success on a place and its people? For James (22), Leicester's remarkable achievement meant: 'There's a whole community now which has just erupted from this win.' Clearly, a sporting outcome of this magnitude can easily conjure up ideas about new solidarities and new local connections that are likely to be more imagined than real. Our interviewees certainly *believed* that success in soccer can (however temporarily) sublimate local structural divisions and can also reach beyond the relations of the marketplace to promote a sense of well-being and belonging among local people from different constituencies. How deep, and how long such sentiments last, is quite another question.

We have also argued that the Leicester EPL win was widely interpreted around the world, and in Leicester itself as a historic triumph for sport over business. We would put it another way: that Leicester City's story reminds us that even corporate EPL clubs still straddle an ontological uncertainty: between being businesses and working positively as important community assets (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012, 332). The era of global sport and the EPL has increasingly produced elite clubs as multi-nationals; leading actors in a system of nodes making up a new European-wide 'network society' for sport and business. Its continuing basis and attraction is in maintaining this constant, self-reproducing, flux of exclusive interactions (Millward, 2011; Levermore and Millward, 2007). In an era in which billionaire foreign owners routinely pump money into metropolitan English soccer clubs as a presumed entry ticket into this lucrative golden, global network, Leicester City took a rather different route in 2016. It was a provincial intruder, an outlier; one that even briefly threatened this self-selecting cartel.

Leicester City's foreign (Thai) owners' investment and recruitment strategies were embraced in the East Midlands area, not because of their weighty ambition but more for their judicious, relative modesty. Always subject to clever PR, Leicester City fans assured themselves that more than money and influence was in play for the club's new backers. This meant the owners' rather Disneyized interventions into local fan practices were generally interpreted positively, and compared favourably with more corporate intrusions identified elsewhere in England.

On the pitch, a combination of the clever use of scientific analytics in recruitment, a clear tactical plan, and an adherence to modernist sporting values - teamwork, character, skill, and the strong backing of noisy, local fans - overcame Leicester City's more powerful and richer rivals in 2016. Ingenuously, perhaps, the title win was praised by the EPL's executive as a signal to soccer's critics that sport today was more than just a business. However, in season 2016/17 England's multi-national clubs spent lavishly once more to reassert their dominance; unsurprisingly, Leicester City struggled to recruit well or recapture the consistency that had underpinned its domestic title form. **Indeed, despite some Champions League success – Leicester City reached the last eight – the club briefly flirted again with relegation from the EPL in 2017, eventually even sacking coach Ranieri before pulling out of the impending crisis.** The ruthless business structures of elite level English soccer were shaken in 2016, but they are far from broken.

We have also argued that elite sport can, and does, play an (often hyperbolised) role in civic branding and place marketing. But, perhaps more importantly - and depending always on local context - it can promote a strong, shared sense of civic pride which can appear, perhaps fleetingly, to bind together different local communities when other, more substantive, forms of

solidarity may be being challenged, or be in chronic decline. Finally, we might even hazard that the sheer, joyous absurdity of this upset might mean that in 100 years' time, the date May 2nd 2016, will still be remembered in sporting circles as the moment when The Foxes from provincial Leicester overturned odds of 5000/1 and astonishingly, in the era of corporate sport, won the EPL title.

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Notes

¹ Leicester City's nickname is 'The Foxes' because of the county of Leicestershire's historic role as a centre for fox hunting in the UK.

² The exhumation and eventual reburial in Leicester Cathedral of the largely vilified King Richard III began with the discovery of his remains in September 2012 within the site of a former Friary Church in the middle of Leicester. These events soon became a global story.

³ The name comes from the fact that the Bentley's factory was sited outside the old Filbert Street stadium in Leicester and City fans could watch matches without paying for tickets by climbing onto the factory roof.

⁴ Union FS is a self-organised Leicester City supporters' group formed in September 2013 which is committed to improving the stadium atmosphere through fan-driven initiatives. Like other UK ultras groups, Union FS believes that atmospheres are best served by fans acting creatively and independently, rather than being directed by their club.