Discordant Fandom and Global Football Brands: 'Let the People Sing'[1]

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INTRODUCTION

Global football brands are amongst the most profitable in the world; an industry where media and financial interests collide with fan passions and tribal affiliations. And yet, despite its prominence in the Global Culture Industry (Lash and Lury, 2007), it is surprising how little consumer culture research takes sport seriously. This is at odds with the global business and economics of sport consumption, the media interests involved and fans preferences for conversations around sport (Conn, 1997; Smart, 2007; Rowe and Gilmour, 2009; Kennedy, 2013b; Dixon, 2013), all of which demonstrate the increasing commercialization and embracing of branding practices which are entangled in the hyper-event that is sport (Crawford, 2004). In terms of brand value football clubs rank amongst the most financially affluent brands in the world (Rein et al., 2006), with Brand Finance

(2012) reporting that Manchester United, Real Madrid, FC Bayern Munich all have values in excess of US$600 million. In addition, the value of European football is ranked at US$17 billion, with a global audience for the English premiership at 643 million. In our reckoning this amounts to big business (Price et al., 2013); a global industry where lifestyle, image and brand governance converge and do battle with affective emotion and the tribal language of participation and politics. This article has three main objectives: Our first is to turn to sport as a particularly illuminating and revealing example of consumer culture in the making. Marketplace logic and emotion suffuses consumer culture and exploring practices of sport fandom thus becomes particularly revealing of the tensions and contradictions which are thrown up when emotions and passions collide with finance and branding strategies. Our second objective is to mobilize this insight to further research on brand communities through better situating social practices as entangled in this heady nexus of passion, power and politics. In this fashion, our third objective is to better understand the roles of brand agitator and brand heretic within such communities. To do so, we look to the context of Celtic Football Club based in Glasgow, Scotland, and a specific group of their supporters, the Green Brigade (hereafter referred to as 'GB'), a self-proclaimed 'ultras' group which has courted a degree of controversy in recent years (Lavalette and Mooney, 2013).

GLOBAL SPORTS CONSUMPTION AND FANDOM

An existing body of scholarship has taken sport seriously as a basis for theorizing consumer culture and consumers. Here we are thinking of the work of Derbaix et al. (2002) on the symbolic consumption of football; the work of Crawford (2004) and Richardson and Turley (2006) on how sports fans mobilise forms of cultural capital to express a sense of resistance and solidarity; and also the work of Holt (1995) on the 'good' consumer; a device through which he was able to theorise consumption as classification, integration and play. In a similar fashion, recent research by Healy and McDonagh (2013) considers brand culture specifically in the football context. Healy and McDonagh (2013) consider fandom and general consumer roles in relation to supporters of Liverpool Football Club. They show that there are subtle but significant differences with regards to the consumption practices of football fans when compared to general consumer roles, particularly with regard to the strong sense of co-creation of brands within the professional football context.

Such studies have emerged from existing research into brand communities, where football fans have traditionally been categorised in the same vein as traditional brand communities (Stratton and Northcote, 2014) and with the team itself viewed simply as the brand (Guschwan, 2012). Our research seeks to contest this evaluation through recourse to the divergent focal concerns that exist within the fanbase towards the over-commercialization and overt branding of their loyalty and passions for the club. In this manner our understanding of the ways that brand communities (McAlexander et al., 2002)

operate is broadened. Some football fans may buy into this assumption that they are a 'community' whose identity is centred on one particular brand, but others, as we shall reveal: contest and resist such language as a mechanism to preserve their own particular enclaves of community spirit.

A rich body of literature exists on football consumption to further our understanding of its particular character. Herein, football fandom is understood as an instance of *serious leisure identification* (Jones, 2000); *a way of life* and a significant component of identity stabilisation (Porat, 2010) or even a site to explore shifting community attachments, kinship and belonging in a fast-moving global context (Brown et al., 2008). Dixon (2013) considers the communal nature of the experience as paramount in forming a bond between the 'fan' and the 'team' itself. Furthermore, Sandvoss (2003) extends upon this by commenting that fans perceive the club and themselves to be one and the same when describing the nature of their support. However, fandom can also allow individuals the opportunity to feel a sense of togetherness and cohesion with fellow supporters (Zillman et al., 1989; Fillis and Mackay, 2014), and is considered as a central tenet of the sports industry (Dionísio et al., 2008). Here we quote Brown et al. at length to express this significance: "The notion of symbolic community can help us to overcome the search for geographical football communities in these increasingly 'placeless' times, whilst post-modern understandings of community can sensitise us to the multiple 'light' and fluid ways in which people opt in-and out of their associations with 'like-minded souls' (2008:

309). More recent work has also started to unpack the potential of organised fans to create and promote branded commodities for their own ends to contest the harnessing of their identity work for financial gain (Guschwan, 2012). Much like the textual poachers so well identified by Jenkins (2013), we witness through such practical collective actions the tensions and contradictions embedded within the politics of participatory culture.

In this way, a spate of global football brands have witnessed the emergence of increasing negative sentiment, discord and rebellion amongst their fan bases (Kennedy, 2013a; Bi, 2013; Brown, 2008; Stokvis, 2008; Oppenhuisen and van Zoonen, 2006). Such discord has often led to what Stokvis (2008: 497) refers to as the 'rhetoric of identity' i.e. arguments put forward to show that there is divergence between the decisions and proposals of board members of the football club and what supporters perceive to be the ethos of the club. Such differences are often expressed by fans on the terraces of the football grounds, which often have served as a 'weapon for the weak' (Tuastad, 2014: 284), a space where vociferous groups can express their opinion collectively in a public manner (Brown, 2008).

Divisions between fans and the Club, could lead to the rejection of the brand (Cromie and Ewing, 2009) and the creation of a counter-brand community (Cova and White, 2010). As Cova and White (2010) propose in the case study on the strategic battle game Warhammer, when fans appear to be taking a counter position to the brand, it is essential for the management to acknowledge their opinion in an attempt to mitigate the

dissatisfaction of fans. Indeed, the authors argue that when Dell attempted to ignore an increasingly negative sentiment in blogs and social media, the company's reputation had been damaged. This echoes the viewpoints of Cleland (2010) and Cleland and Dixon (2014) on football clubs, who contend that if the viewpoints of supporter organisations are ignored, this can lead to potential damage to the football club. However, unlike other types of consumers, a football fan is unlikely to switch allegiance as a result of disagreement with the management of the football club (Chadwick et al., 2008; Fillis and Mackay, 2014). As such, it is well established that football clubs are closed and protective when dealing with their brand (McCarthy et al., 2014), although recently some clubs have recognised the need for change (Christodoulides, 2009). The fan might consider exiting the market temporarily (i.e., through a boycott) with the hope that in the future the relationship with the Club will once again improve (Healy and McDonagh, 2013). Exiting the market, would include a reduction in the sale of match and season tickets. A case in point is that of the Dutch football team AFC Ajax, whereby traditional fans who were concerned about the over-commercialisation of the club, voted with their feet and refused to attend matches (Oppenhuisen and van Zoonen, 2006).

Alternatively, fans might use a negative 'twist' approach (Fournier and Avery, 2011), whereby they alter the branding of the football club on their own merchandise in order to show discontent (Crawford, 2004; Healy and McDonagh, 2013). In contrast, maintaining a good relationship and taking into consideration the critical input of fan bases (Chadwick

et al., 2008) is likely to lead to more benefits, such as increased match attendance and an improved atmosphere in the stadium (Guschwan, 2012). For Healy and McDonagh (2013) management must reconsider the actions which led to discontent amongst the fan base, and strive to take their viewpoints into consideration. For example, in the case of Ajax, the management decided to improve communication between the team and the fans, and although retaining the same operational strategy, match attendance improved once again and a vociferous group of supporters referred to as the 'F-Side' were granted a special section in the stadium in an attempt to satiate them (Oppenhuisen and van Zoonen, 2006).

We turn to a particularly illustrative example of such a fan base in action, that of the Green Brigade of Celtic Football Club, to explore the political possibilities of such actions. That is, how such groups forge their own counter-identities and contested identities that act, not, in harmony and tandem with the larger brand ethos but serve to legitimate and practice a counter-philosophy; how *rebels with a cause* sometimes resort to rebellion to forge a 'we' and rage against such over-commercialisation through their own co-opted brand strategies.

CELTIC FC AND THE GREEN BRIGADE

Our context for this discussion is Celtic Football Club who rank 37th in the Brand Finance charts for football brands, raking in a cool $64 million (Brand Finance, 2012). Celtic FC were originally founded by predominantly Catholic Irish immigrants, who had moved to Scotland as a result of poverty and famine in Ireland, with many links to the fans' working class social status, religious grounding, left-wing political leanings, and Irish heritage still immediately apparent today (Sandvoss, 2003; McDougall, 2013) and often expressed in rebel songs drenched in religious sentiment (Bradley, 1998; Finn & Giulianotti, 1998). Recent figures suggest that the club has a worldwide fan base of over nine million, of which one million hail from North America (The Scotsman, 2014). A crucial ingredient of the club's financial health and brand value remains tied up in the goodwill of "the Fans", or as the marketing discourse reveals: "The best that Celtic stands for is the renowned qualities of its supporters and their relationship with the Club", with season tickets holders amounting to 53,000 and 15,000 fans owning shares in the club (Celtic FC, 2014)

Subcultures of consumption are rarely monolithic and this is especially the case with Celtic FC, with a crucial social group of fans known as the Green Brigade ('GB'); a small but very vociferous group of supporters. The GB, as we seek to reveal, is a rare example of a well-organised, well-supported, fiercely loyal and yet disparate group of football fans. The group define themselves as a collective of "anti-fascist, anti-racist, and anti-sectarian Celtic supporters" (Forsyth, 2010: 9). Nonetheless, the group have courted

controversy over the last few years with their readiness to display their often-non-mainstream political leanings (Murray, 2010). This, along with their anti-commercialisation stance (McDougall, 2013), has led to discord in their relationship with the decision makers within the club (Macfarlane, 2011), but also with other supporters who are not members of their group (Murray, 2010). Perhaps the most significant admission by the club itself regarding the power of the GB came in 2010, when they were awarded their own section of the stadium to populate on match-days (McCarthy, 2012; Lavalette and Mooney, 2013). However, recent years have been tumultuous for the group. Not only are they facing pressure to alter their behaviour at the stadium due to health and safety fears (Marshall, 2011), but some of their actions have led to derision and outrage from the media, the Chief Executive of the club (Devlin, 2012; Forsyth, 2011; Murray, 2010) and fellow supporters (Halliday, 2013). This reached a crescendo when, following a display of banners of a political nature during a high-profile match, the club were fined by the governing body (UEFA) for the actions of GB members. This led to public criticism from the Chief Executive of the club, with the GB outlining its counter-position with the following response:

"We find (Celtic's) accusation of the Green Brigade disrespecting the club to be completely ironic and totally laughable when we consider the level of disrespect they have repeatedly shown to their supporters for far too long" (The Scotsman, 2013)

This pro-consumer/anti-corporate mind-set with regard to football is not unusual, with a number of supporter movements emerging in recent years with objectives at odds with those running the club they support. Liverpool FC's "Spirit of Shankly" and the "Manchester United Supporters Trust" are two high-profile groups which were unhappy with the increasingly commoditised running of their respective clubs. However, these groups received a degree of validation and sympathy from some external sources, with positive media coverage of their actions not unusual (Herbert, 2010; Massey, 2010).

Further to this, it is very unusual for a subculture of consumption to face such widespread, heavy criticism from such varied commentators. Nonetheless, with negative media attention emerging with increasing regularity (Forsyth, 2011; Murray, 2010), the group, though still in its infancy, faces a fight for its survival. This dichotomy between club and supporters reflects the situation throughout the industry, as Walters and Tacon (2010: 576) reveal one club Director as stating: "I don't think we should be accountable to supporters" (Walters and Tacon, 2010: 576). This sentiment is echoed from the supporter/consumer perspective, with the majority of respondents believing that club officials "paid them little mind". In part, this attitude and the high-level of power distance between football club decision makers and supporters have led to the nullification of some supporter movements. However, the GB appear to be prepared to tackle this, and remain as organised and as prolific as ever. This perhaps emerges from a

stronger shared tradition, heritage, and history, which supersedes that found in a number of other football supporter movements (Fillis and Mackay, 2014).

NETNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

Netnography is an ethnographic approach adapted for research conducted in online environments such as a web-based forums (Kozinets, 2006) or social media platforms (Price et al., 2013). The netnographic approach to research is well-established in consumer behaviour research (Catterall and Maclaran, 2002; Hewer and Brownlie, 2009). This is particularly evident in research into subcultures of consumption (Chalmers and Arthur, 2008; Kozinets, 1997; Kozinets and Handelman, 1998) and associated phenomena such as brand communities (Cova and Pace, 2006; Oakes et al., 2013; Schau and Mũniz, 2002; Hewer and Brownlie, 2013); and consumer tribes (Hewer and Hamilton, 2010; Hamilton and Hewer, 2009; Schau and Mũniz, 2007) and has also been used more specifically, with e-zines and message boards as a data source, in the context of football fandom and football-oriented communities (Millward, 2008).

As with the study by Hewer and Brownlie (2013) our analysis is based on the content of forum posts and discussions although, in this instance, we make use of the football message board associated with the GB (http://greenbrigade.proboards.com). Much like the online website associated with the Australian Rules Football team North Adelaide FC, the 'Grog Squad', (Palmer and Thompson, 2007), the GB forum serves as a social hub for a range of debates related to upcoming matches, merchandise, banners, and politics. Further to this, Gibbons and Dixon (2010) contend that football related forums remain a rich source of data, especially as they have not been drawn upon extensively enough in existing research. They argue that in order to understand more fully the nature of football fandom, more studies using this type of methodology must be carried out. Millward (2008), also confirms that a sustained study of message board interactions remains a valued ethnographic endeavour, and should not simply be considered as a documentary source. As such, this netnographic approach allows for access to a relatively large number of participants, an already transcribed and constantly improving data source (participant posts), and exposure to "a high level of in-group culture" which may otherwise be difficult to access (Millward, 2008: 306).

The GB fits the profile of a group with strong ideological foundations, but whose existence could be short-lived as a result of external factors and decisions. They are committed to Celtic FC, with an unusual socialist and egalitarian political agenda (Kennedy, 2013b). They are not reluctant to vocalise their values and beliefs, and are

known to express themselves in a highly symbolic fashion through displays, chants and banners when attending football matches (Forsyth, 2011; Bradley 1998).

As of March 2014, the forum has over 30,000 members, with posts dating back to 2006, the year in which the Green Brigade was formed (Lavalette and Mooney, 2013). On average, approximately 35 posts are submitted on each thread or "new topic". The forum itself is subdivided into various categories, with specific sections dedicated for merchandise and politics. To date, the highest number of active users registered was in June 2010 at 1480. Users often use evocative but non-identifying nametags such as 'EternalRebel', 'AntifaCeltic' in what is perceived to be an attempt to echo the political leanings of the group as a whole. The nametags of users also suggest that they are predominantly male, with little to indicate an abundance of female members. This can be assumed as a large number of nametags fall into two main categories; those with explicit reference to what is presumably the users' real name coupled with a reference to Celtic (i.e., "DanielCFC" or "Luigi1888") or those incorporating the word "bhoy", a nickname for Celtic supporters in general, which nonetheless has obvious gender associations (i.e., "PloughBhoy" or "BudBhoy7"). Despite both 'gender' and 'age' near-unanimously being classified as 'undisclosed' in member profiles. We considered all available posts pertaining to conspicuous member involvement, and creative, symbolic and physical displays of support and conflict based on underpinnings which emerged from past literature. Further to this, and again echoing the work of (Hewer and Brownlie, 2013), we

consider the way discussions develop and how forum-participants try to maintain relationships within the GB, while also allowing for posts and discussions which piqued our interest. Overall, all posts in the subcategories of merchandise, politics, and relevant information from the 'general chat' and other smaller sections up to March 2014 were considered.

Due to the large number of non-contributory posts, such as images, we made use of the in-built search facility in order to identify the most relevant posts by using targeted keywords (e.g. merchandise, board, protest). In doing so, we were able to identify almost 300 posts pertinent to our discussion. Filtering 'noise' proved time-consuming due to a large proportion of content-shy posts. For example, the Merchandise section contained 1,760 posts in 35 threads (topics), but many of these were either a photograph of the merchandise or forum members stating that they were interested in purchasing it with little to no detail and were thus deemed unsuitable. Therefore, as with Brodie et al. (2013), successive readings were required in order to ensure that the data was suitably rich before then progressing on to codify and analyse the data. Like Oakes et al. (2013), we have forgone the use of software packages in analysing the data in an effort to stay close to our data. Kozinets (2006) suggests manual data classification and coding can be employed within a netnographic method. Relevant posts were identified by each of the authors and analysed further in order to establish common themes. These were then discussed and a refined list of the most appropriate and significant themes was generated. On this basis a

range of themes emerged: namely merchandising as enforcing hierarchy and membership, the desire for group member validation, and an analysis of the politics section which appeared to act as a hub for the ethos and group feeling of the community as a whole.

THE EMERGENT POLITICS OF FOOTBALL FANDOM

"A social drama is initiated when the peaceful tenor of regular, norm-governed social life is interrupted by the breach of a rule controlling one of its salient relationships. This leads swiftly or slowly to a state of crisis, which, if not soon sealed off, may split the community into factions and coalitions." (Turner, 1982: 92)

As per the trials and tribulations of the group presented above, there has been a growing push towards the GB constituting itself as an ideologically traditional counter-point to the perceived recent over-commercialisation of the club (Lavalette and Mooney, 2013); "This is a PLC so out of touch with the History, the Culture and Nature of the community in which continues the Club's very existence. Us the Celtic Supporters!" GB members consider their attempts to foster a sense of identity as a way of opposing what they perceive to be the club's recent failings: "everything is heading in completely the opposite direction to the way we want it to. The people who run our club are like politicians, completely out of touch with reality" (cf. McDougall, 2013). Such dissatisfaction with the brand's ownership and strategic intent is mirrored through suspicions that the club is

targeting a particular kind of 'fan': "the people in charge at Celtic don't care about the normal fan; they are only interested in the fan with money or the middle-class new breed of fan. The PLC have been trying to rid the club of its normal fan base for years now". Discordant fans in this manner contest what King (1997) termed to shift to the logic of the customer, where the profit motive trumps local affiliation, history and tradition.

Here the labour of division (Munro, 1997) and difference is always to the fore. As such, views have emerged regarding the club's response to increased pressure from the Scottish government (Marshall, 2011) and the football authorities to eliminate sectarianism and political views on the football terraces (Kennedy, 2013a). Members accuse the club of bowing to such pressure and "trying to rewrite history … they don't really want to recognise our history, culture or traditions". This extends to disagreements over attempts to prosecute fans who express what they consider to be political statements or chants; "all a section of the support want to do is sing our songs, songs that were not illegal, bigoted, sectarian, racist or fascist. Legislation that makes it an offence because someone is offended goes against democracy". Furthermore, there is fundamental disagreement on whether politics should be distinct from football. With the group, echoing Kennedy's (2013b) assertion that the two are intertwined; "I believe both politics and football go hand in hand". In this way, they view moves to neutralise any political agenda as negatively impacting on their identity, as they believe that the club is turning fellow supporters against the GB. They question whether the group are the only voice

defending what it traditionally means to be 'a Celtic supporter' when faced with executives perceived to be hell-bent on "selling out the history and conforming to the modern day values of greed and revisionism, like a small minority in the Celtic support seem to want. You know, the ones who believe anything that the PLC tell them", an increasingly common theme in the modern world of football (Bi, 2013; Stokvis, 2008; Oppenhuisen and van Zoonen, 2006; Cleland and Dixon, 2014).

What started as disillusionment has quickly degenerated into distrust, with some members believing that all slights on the character of the GB are initiated by the club itself; "Celtic banned the Green Brigade, colluded with the authorities to have members arrested…The Club did its best to turn fellow supporters against the GB". This is used to highlight the disconnect between the club and group, where what GB members believe as the best way to show support is in direct opposition to what the club desires; "it seems…that our club and the authorities are doing their utmost to eradicate [the GB]". Far from acting as 'greeters' as per Fournier and Lee (2009), GB members appear to have no interest in welcoming new members who have not experienced the rigorous validation process due to fear of infiltration or corruption of the group identity; "we get people constantly asking "How do I join the GB?", but being as strict as we have has worked for us and got us where we are with lads we can trust 100%".

The group have aimed to highlight their disillusionment and distrust of the club by way of practical collective action, whereby they have, on occasion, agreed to avoid

attendance at matches in order to show their dissatisfaction with the actions of the club: "I'm also done with Celtic…won't be using my Season Ticket again until things change. I've lost the buzz". Some members staunchly believe in the power of the group as a collective and the extent to which they can influence non-group member supporters: "Announce a boycott...a boycott that will last indefinitely until they start supporting the support. There will be many who follow suit. Even more when they realise there is no atmosphere at Celtic Park…We are rebels, remember". The group ethos is thus one of rebels with a cause, a rebel mystique which is akin to a form of brand agitation and brand heretics. Or as they better express: "it's about being loud, being proud and ultimately enjoying yourself and having the craic with like-minded people. Sadly it seems they are things that our club and the authorities are doing their utmost to eradicate." In such appeals to their ethno-religious roots they mobilise discourses of tribal sentiment and grievance; and legitimate their actions through appeals for better standing for the ethos, history and tradition of the club. Such a stance has led to the group pursuing more overt displays of solidarity to assert their group identity in this period where they feel marginalised with no representation. An example of this is provided by Lavalette and Mooney (2013), whereby members of the group were arrested at home, banners and displays were removed by Police and stadium stewards, and travelling bans were issued rendering travel to and attendance at matches extremely difficult. The discursive rhetoric of rebels and brand agitation makes explicit the forms of contested ownership which the

group work through. Perhaps best illustrated by how the club, whilst deriding and contesting the group's existence, are willing to sell framed prints featuring the Green Bridge to the broader fanbase.

MERCHANDISING AS A COUNTER-BRAND FAN SOLUTION

"If the situation does not regress to crisis (which may remain endemic until some radical restructuring of social relationships, sometimes by revolutionary means, is undertaken), the next phase of social drama comes into play, which involves alternative solutions to the problem. The first is reconciliation of the conflicting parties following judicial, ritual, or military processes; the second, consensual recognition of irremediable breach, usually followed by the spatial separation of the parties." (Turner 1982: 92)

As a result of increasing tension between the GB and the club, the group are attempting to emulate their more established Italian counterparts in manufacturing and selling unofficial group related products (Foot, 2007), a difficult feat when considering the protective nature of football clubs and their associated brands (McCarthy et al., 2014). The online message-board acts as a marketplace for sentiments and ideas but also a platform through which merchandise is promoted and sold. Here custom made GB branded merchandise is used to engender a sense of belonging and as a symbol of attachment to the group. Group members are encouraged to wear this merchandise instead of official club merchandise, further emphasising the increasing sense of disconnect and division within the fan base: "The group are keen on no official merchandise being worn

in the section. Preferably those in the section will be wearing GB merchandise, or a khaki jacket and scarf". As such, despite the reticence in relation to group members wearing official merchandise, the use of GB-branded merchandise still ensures that GB members show their allegiance to the club without directly supporting what they view to be its over-commercialisation. A finding which supports work on other supporters groups such as the 'Grog Squad' (Palmer and Thompson, 2007). This 'policy' is well-known by group members, who have historically eschewed official products in favour of their own merchandise: "Celtic want as much money as they can off us. I'm constantly getting emails about special offers on official merchandise. I stopped buying it years ago…our club has changed so much in the last 5 years".

Such a statement echoes Derbaix et al. (2002: 517), who state 'good supporter's paraphernalia can be interpreted as an identification, integration, expression and sacralization process'. This is essential for the GB, where group-branded merchandise must be sold only to members who are proven and 'validated' as it is used as a signal of discordant fandom as practiced: "Merch[andise] will be available from the usual spot between 1-2pm. Do not give out the meeting place to other forum users". Group members are highly protective of their right to sell such merchandise, with sale locations only announced shortly before match days by a recognised member of the group; "only MerchMan can give the location out!", and within the forum reference is only made to the "usual place" rather than any specific location: "It's been said before that the group

will not come to you. The only way to get it is to go to the merch[andise] point". This considered and clandestine approach to the exchange of merchandise for money in real-world locations can again highlight members' loyalty to the group. Not only are they expected to avoid buying official Celtic FC merchandise, there is an established hierarchy where the lead merchandiser is considered a figure who wields symbolic power within the group (Bourdieu, 1992).

The secrecy and protective behaviour surrounding merchandise sales emerges from accusations that the club are actively persecuting group members who attend matches wearing GB branded products: "…at the last meeting there were reports of people being refused admission to the stadium for wearing such merchandise". This is another point of tension between the two parties, although high profile members are eager to point out that: "there is no ban on Green Brigade merchandise being worn within Celtic Park". In this manner, far from acting as 'assimilators', as revealed in the work of Fournier and Lee (2009), the GB act as brand agitators questioning how the club is managed and the over-commercialization at work. In this way, forms of talk produce not accord but discord over the future of the club.

The collective actions of the GB seek to take ownership over their branded merchandise to engender a sense of togetherness and permit the group to fund the manufacture of their banners and flags: "It goes without saying that if you want to become a member of the group then coming to these nights, getting to know people, having a

laugh and doing a bit of work with us is absolutely vital to becoming a member and can only work in your favour so get yourselves along!". In fact, this is openly stated; "as a group we spend a substantial amount of money on displays and we do rely on donations and people buying our merchandise. It is also worth noting that the Group Members also fund the group to quite a high degree". These motivations emphasize the sense of belonging amongst members and the discourses of legitimation they employ to promote the counter-brand. The issue of group related merchandise is perhaps the best example of loyalty to the group transcending loyalty to the club or to fellow supporters.   The idea to introduce group branded merchandise emerged from the previously mentioned tension between the GB and the club, with one member summarising the group's stance on the matter as: "Some group members are against wearing merchandise due to the sponsorship, some feel they have grown out of it, some prefer the different clothing similar to that of an ultras section" and another stating that "Some people have issues with the board or the way fans are exploited, others with the shirt manufacturers".   Their concerns are essentially related to how the club uses merchandise to reach its commercial objectives. Whereas supporters buying club merchandise are paying a lot of money "to serve as walking billboards for big corporations" (Kuhn, 2011: 40), in line with other 'ultra' football organisations, the Green Brigade does not have a commercial raison d'être (Giulianotti, 2002) despite the fact that it is selling merchandise.

Instead, GB members are willing to act upon their collective desire to distance the group from the perceived commercialisation of the club, and by positioning group merchandise in a manner reminiscent of niche fashion brands the GB have fostered 'fanatical followers, whose commitment to the brand transcends common levels of loyalty' (Chung et al., 2005: 43) in the name of forging their own counter-brand. A contradictory tactic that seeks to subvert the ethos of merchandising with what we see as a counter-logic of fan merchandising for themselves.

THAT FOOTBALL SPIRIT

It was George Orwell (1945) who, writing in the aftermath of WW2, spoke of sport as an "unfailing cause of ill-will…as mimic warfare". As we have sought to reveal in this paper the sport is now the global big business with many brands strategizing on how to police and govern this image terrain in the name of global entertainment. As the World Cup in Brazil 2014 demonstrated, sometimes global interests and local politics collide in an unhappy tussle to become fodder for media spectacle. *That football spirit* and its calls to passion, participation and loyalty shed light we feel on the contradictory impulses and forces at work when talk of commercialization is coupled with what some see as '*the beautiful game*'[2]. Conn (1997) argued in a similar fashion that "things of beauty need

careful preservation, not remorseless exploitation…sport has a soul, and football the heartiest of all." (1997: 301).

For Fournier and Lee (2009: 111), "Community is a potent strategy if it is approached with the right mind-set and skills. A strong brand community increases customer loyalty, lowers marketing costs, authenticates brand meanings, and yields an influx of ideas to grow the business. Through commitment, engagement, and support, companies can cultivate brand communities that deliver powerful returns. When you get the community right, the benefits are irrefutable". But the drama, spectacle and *theatre* of football, as we suggest is always contested terrain, fractured and fragmented, especially when we consider the market forces at work and the significant financial sums at stake. In such cultural and commercial worlds what we term the brand agitator and brand heretic exist as counterparts to the 'assimilators' and greeters identified in the work of Fournier and Lee (2009) with their attendant practices of agitating and contesting coming to the fore. Fandom as *dramatic ritual* and *social drama* (Turner, 1982) as we reveal brings in its wake contradictions and tensions especially when it goes toe-to-toe with the brute forces of economics, branding and marketing strategy. Herein, what Marcus termed the "nostalgic bedrock" (1998: 74) of community, ritual and tradition resurfaces and is mobilised strategically in cultural worlds for impact and export.

In this fashion, our paper seeks to reclaim the rich tradition of cultural studies which has sought to understand social groups, especially subcultural ones, not as simply as

remaindered or residual but as emergent and vital. Such work employed the ethnographic approach to understand contemporary culture, seeking to emplace practices and meaning through opening up questions of power and politics. Illustrative of such work are the papers assembled in Hall & Jefferson (2006): Clarke's (2006) reading of skinhead style and the 'magical recovery of community' as borne of social exclusion, disaffection and declining employment opportunities; Jefferson's reading of Teddy boy culture as a response to the looming structural inequalities borne of cultural change, a "reaffirmation of traditional slum working-class values…an attempt to retain, if only imaginatively, a hold on the territory which was being expropriated from them" (Jefferson, 2006: 67). Such work crafted itself around: "the nexus of culture and power. In what sense was generational disaffiliation a sign of broader social contradictions? What was the political significance and efficacy of cultural movements, when the 'political' was given a much-expanded definition, expanded, as it were, through the cultural?" (Hall and Jefferson 2006: ix). Such work took seriously style, signification practices and the power of the symbolic as performative of cultural politics. Herein the comfortable positivism of functionalist approaches to the understanding of the organization of society were unsettled and disturbed. Cultural studies as practiced was indebted to a tradition of work and understanding which included Gramsci's thoughts on hegemony and consent (Forgacs, 1998), the work and ethnographic tradition of the Chicago School, most specifically Becker's work on the labelling of deviance: *Outsiders* (1991, orig. 1963). All

such approaches, much like what we have aspired to deliver in this paper, foregrounded what Gramsci termed 'practical (collective) action', not for its own sake, or to put forward an overly romanticized or heroic conception of the individual, but as a necessary way to understand the fusion of action, common sense and cultural improvisation as responses to the here and now of economic woes, and increasingly borne of social and political disaffection.

As Illouz suggests "consumer culture fosters feelings of rebelliousness that in turn become vehicles for consumption" (2009: 393). One such solution for rebels with a cause forged through affiliation and community action takes the form of a full-frontal symbolic assault using the marketplace resources and logic at their disposal. Here a counter-brand community appears to adopt their own practices of mimicking and subverting brand strategizing and merchandizing for their own ends; to invert and convert marketplace logic for the purposes of rebellion and community formation. It would be easy to dismiss such *situated solutions* of rebellion as futile or as those of a particular few within a particular locale. Whereas we argue that acknowledging such discord and considering such actions as a form of cultural politics is increasingly necessary given the shifts in football ownership and the cleavages of contemporary society which surround Neoliberalism (Harvey 2007), Nationalism and religious division (Finn & Guilianotti, 1998). Such actions make explicit that the constant questioning of over *who owns the brand* is now commonplace and increasingly compelling for fans. More so, the

suggestion from Holt (1999) that *brands cause trouble* has only been further fuelled by the financial and cultural stakes at play but also through the practices of discord now made possible through enhancements in new media (Dart 2014). Resistance and rebellion may be futile, with commercial interests ascendant (Lee 1998), but understanding such moments of tension, contradiction and acts of reclamation in troubled times remains a valid endeavour. For discordant fans appear to follow Camus' dictum: "I *rebel* – therefore *we exist*" (1981: 28). Rebelling in this instance confers symbolic capital which may not trump economic capital but calls such capital to account through appeals to communal prestige and group honour (Bourdieu, 1992: 170; Topper, 2001: 41). In this fashion, football and its everyday forms of philosophising, forged on the pitch, terraces and through mediated interactions, are replete with survival strategies, where the tactic of the counter-attack is commonplace and always preferred to business as usual. Forms of practical action for those on the margins seeking to 'win space' and reclaim 'territory' for dissent and for hope, that we see as best encapsulated within the notion of discordant fandom. For, as rebels with a cause assert: 'Let the people sing'.

Notes

1. This is the title of a song which is sung in Celtic Park before most home games and is dedicated to those Irish ballad singers who were banned from singing

Irish songs and which is employed on the forum to mobilise a sense of

togetherness and reflexivity amongst fans.

2. One of the undoubted global heroes of football, Pelé named his autobiography

My Life and the Beautiful Game. The book's dedication reads "I dedicate this

book to all the people who have made this great game the Beautiful Game" (Pelé

and Fish 1977).

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