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COMMENTARY

Check for updates

English premier league football clubs during the covid-19 pandemic: business as usual?

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Introduction

We have argued previously that elite professional football clubs are an unstable coalescing of (sometimes conflicting) aims and objectives: 'spending what it takes' for success, though seeking to become profit maximizers; enchanting fans through the accumulation and development of star players, while developing a reserve army of youth players for sale or rent; custodians of a civic cultural institution, but capable of hard-headed business decisions.[1] In broad terms, elite football clubs appear tosimultaneously aspire to be organizations fundamentally committed to strengthening 'their community's' local cultural and social capital, *and* efficient businesses able to grow their 'markets share'. It has been our contention that this is a cleavage whereby the business impulse of clubs does not so much win out but colours, constrains, and at times corrupts their community aspirations. Moreover, this instability is not something imposed by a two-decade long turn towards 'commercialization' by the football industry: clubs have always been the bearer of these contradictions.

What *has* changed, though, is the length and breadth to which clubs will go to embrace this instability. Football clubs are now an emerging pillar of the local welfare state, and a football club's business aspirations are being enhanced by its relationship to their growing local welfare function. Take any English Premier League (EPL) club at random and one will find they have a well-developed local community arm with their attendant welfare mission statement. 'Arsenal in the Community' is described as an entity working in the community and committed to key projects to enhance social inclusion, education and training, healthy living: 'safeguarding and promoting the welfare of all children and adults at risk regardless of their gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, religion, belief or age'.[2] The official charity arm of Wolverhampton Wanderers, the 'Wanderers Foundation' declares that they 'deliver hundreds of sports schemes, health initiatives and education programmes. All with the aim of motivating, educating and inspiring individuals and communities to be healthy, active and confident.'[3] Manchester City's 'City in the Community'claims to 'use the power of football to deliver a wide range of health, education and inclusion-led programmes across Manchester.'[4] One can go through all Premier League clubs and find the same community-focussed organizations. As much as these organizations undoubtedly carry out worthwhile work in the community, there is the unspoken understanding that runs alongside them that doing good in the community also enhances and deepens local and global loyalty to the 'brand'.

However, in 'abnormal' times – in times of social crisis – the business and welfare functions of a football club become infected with a crisis of meaning; when the business arm of the club stalls or shuts down completely, as has been the case during the Covid-19 pandemic, the 'welfare arm' takes clear precedence. Here, we explore two aspects of this crisis of meaning: how the football club welfare arm functions, expands and coalesces with the local state and third sector at a time of crisis when the community is in dire need of assistance; and how – when the business function of

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a football club shuts down (albeit temporarily) – the business ethic changes in ways very unique to football clubs as businesses.

Elite football stands business logic on its head

Within the wider business world – outside of elite football – the UK Government's introduction of key measures to support business and employees during the onset of the Covid-19 crisis met with general approval by major parties. Both the Confederation of British Business (CBI) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) view the Government's coronavirus job retention scheme to be a positive move in allowing employees across the UK to become furloughed on at least 80% of their pay, initially for three months until June 2020, with the trajectory of the virus dictating any extensions thereafter. Notwithstanding the limitations of the scheme (that it is not 100% of wages; does not guarantee living wage levels are maintained; is capped at a maximum of £2500 per month), for the TUC the new job retention scheme represented 'a big win for the union movement'. For the CBI the scheme represents a key lifeline for businesses in securing their employees during the isolation phase of the crisis while businesses are shut down. Businesses that have deferred from making use of it have risked being labelled in negative terms by the mass media.

Yet the same positive attitude hasn't been afforded elite football businesses. Take the issue of furloughing non-playing staff: clubs who decided to furlough non-playing employees have been subject to severe criticism from their own supporters, which has then been taken up and amplified by the media. It has become very clear that football clubs who attempt to make use of the government job retention scheme are judged to be callous employers, quick to treat their non-playing employees (the bulk of staff) as commodities, laying them off on 80% of wages with a stroke of their accountants' pen. In the early phase of the furloughing scheme (end of March 2020, beginning of April 2020) *the Guardian* newspaper printed what resembled a roll call of the good, the bad and the ugly of football.[5] Most EPL clubs ('the good') chose to retain staff on full pay – with the intention of reviewing and monitoring the situation over the coming months – while a significant minority of ('the bad') chose to furlough. These errant clubs included Bournemouth FC, Liverpool FC, Newcastle United FC, Norwich City FC, Sheffield United FC and Tottenham Hotspur FC.[6] Each club fell foul of a moral outrage from fans and the wider community and was very quickly forced into taking abrupt U-turns in their attempt to save face and limit the damage to brand image.

The Tottenham experience highlights the wretchedness of this group of clubs' predicaments. The club's initial decision to furlough 550 non-football staff on the Governments job retention scheme was initially sweetened by club chairman, Daniel Levy, taking a wage cut in apparent solidarity. Levy stated that he was making 'the difficult decision – in order to protect jobs – to reduce the remuneration of all 550 non-playing directors and employees for April and May by 20% utilising, where appropriate, the Government's furlough scheme.'[7] Soon after, Spurs fans reacted angrily (aided and amplified by the national media), who clearly held very different expectations about the commodity status of non-football employees at the club.

Evidences from Tottenham fan forums suggest fans had mixed feelings about furloughing club staff[8]; but those against, who appear to be given more voice in the media, took the opposite view to Levy, that the normal market relations of hiring and laying off labour according to the economic context ought not to apply to football businesses. Reasons why the felt this to be the case are nuanced. For the Tottenham Supporters Trust, immediate business plans ought to have been suspended to ensure that 'the maximum number of people possible are helped through this unprecedented crisis.'[9] Media pundits and ex-professionals who had played for the club echoed and expanded on the latter sentiment, noting how '[t]his is an example of how football and footballers are maybe held up to different standards to society.'[10] Indeed, the current playing staff at Tottenham were eventually to prove themselves decisive in putting pressure on the club to

change tack. Tottenham players were of course no exception; many other players across the EPL applied similar pressure on their clubs.

No doubt players were motivated by altruistic reasons and a common sense of fairness, butperhaps an ulterior motive was to draw attention away from their own salary security. This points us to another moral benchmark upon which football clubs havebeen judged during the crisis – a perceived double-standard approach towards playing staff (still receiving full salaries), and non-playing staff (threatened by furlough-imposed wage cuts).

There was little hope of preventing this attention, though (indeed,the public ire concerning 'greedy players', basking in hard to quantify wealth, while their own fellow employees livelihoods – and the social and economic fabric of whole communities – came under threat from a full blown pandemic, proved to be a springboard to reversing the decisions to furlough non-playing staff). Players, ex-players, football pundits and journalists popped up along cross-cutting sides, unsure whether to defend or lambast elite players in their apparent refusal to take a collective pay cut until a decision was reached between their Professional Footballers Association and English Premier League (EPL) negotiators.

But the matter was not a straight forward one, especially from the perspective of elite footballer agents. They argued their client's case thus: haemorrhaging money as their business ground to a halt, the Premier League urged players on behalf of their clubs to take a pay cut of around £570 million, but refused to countenance a cut in their stock of joint club profits, usually in the hundreds of millions pounds per season. Their advice to their player-clientswas to refuse to accept pay cuts, claiming that, trapped in contracts (unlike employees), clubs could then use the money saved in salaries once the pandemic ends and the transfer window reopening to buy-in competition, which, in turn, could threaten their player's squad position and earning power into the future.[11]

Obviously not all players agreed with this advice, and it may or may not be the case that this would be the general sentiment among players. But what the affair suggests is that, the closer one is to the football pitch and the community, the more one is expected to upend (labour) market rationale for the greater good. If we recall that EPL club owners have not experienced the sort of public vilification meted-out to players, it is an observation which rings true.

In fact, the EPL, on behalf of EPL clubs, have pressed players to take pay cuts or to defer their pay (amounting to 30 per cent of annual salaries), in response to 'substantial and continuing losses for the 2019/20 season since the suspension of matches began, and to protect employment throughout the professional game',[12] a negotiating stance met with a firm rejection from the player's union, the PFA, and so their putative collective negotiations with that body ground to a stalemate.

Against this apparent deadlock, the majority of EPL clubs subsequently thought the better of imposing pay cuts on their elite playing squad, preferring to pay their salaries in full as per normal, while a minority of clubs sought to persuade their players to accepts wage cuts – albeit some way short of the EPL's initial hopes of thewhopping 30 per cent cut across the board. For example, Southampton players bypassed a cut by accepting a wage deferral; Chelsea players accepted a 10 per cent wage cut; and Arsenal players rejected a temporary 16 per cent pay cut they could actually reclaim if they either signed a new contract (if offered one) or were subsequently sold by the club in the next transfer window. No other EPL club has, apparently, gone on public record as having attempted to negotiate a pay cut with their elite playing squad.[13]

The PFA were perhaps unsurprisingly focused early in the pandemic on the plight of professional players in the leagues below the elite league, those falling within the Football Association's domain. Then, largely in response to a very public criticism of 'greedy' elite footballers on live peak hour TV by UK Government Minister for Health, Matt Hancock, the PFA felt obliged to assure the public that they 'fully accept that players will have to be flexible and share the financial burden of the COVID-19 outbreak in order to secure the long-term future of their own clubs and, indeed, the wider game.'[14] However, the exact form this flexibility would take remained unclear. And news that the average annual salary of EPL players now hovered around the £3 million mark[15]

only fuelled the flames of disapprobation, threatening to tarnish elite players as 'modern day folk devils'.[16]

In this context of growing public disquiet on the matter -amplified by the media and certain politicians – Premier League players organized a charity fund: 'Players Together'. This move was seemingly fuelled by mixed motives: to head off further damagingperceptions of an aloof caste of elite player and, no doubt, a genuine show of public spiritedness on behalf of the players. Players Together runs in partnership with the pre-existing initiative, 'NHS Together'. By the beginning of April – and with much fanfare – Players Together boasted a membership of 180 players, signed up and proud to donate £4 million in support of the NHS fight against the coronavirus (or, an average, £23,000 per player – for many, perhaps, one week's pay). Then in June, after what appeared to be their own furlough on donations, EPL players popped up once again with an initiative involving Premier League players from all 20 clubs donating signed shirts to be won in a raffle organized by the #PlayersTogether campaign in order to raise money for NHS charities.[17] In other words, the money was *actually* raised from football supporters purchasing £5 raffle tickets, rather than cash donations from players.

What is one to make of this? Certainly, pragmatism has been to the fore amongst all parties. And motivations appear to be a conflicting mix of self-interest *and* collective spirit, manifested in an eclectic mix of reactions from all sides of the football business. Of course, many private business enterprises donate, give to charity and tend to worker welfare, both during the pandemic and prior to it. The difference, though, is one of expectation. Football businesses have this expectation as one of their core principles, rubbing up against that other core principle – the bottom line on the balance sheet. Fans, national media, governments, local communities etc, *expect* so much more from elite football businesses at EPL level. The ease with which those outside football clubs switch seamlessly from expecting them to be sound businesses to an expectation that they be a fundamental part of the cultural fabric of local moral economies indicates the hybrid nature of football clubs. All of which illuminates the fragile, and somewhat externally imposed, commercial imperatives and contrived communitarian impulses that now run through the core of elite clubs.

Reflection

The fracturing of the business logic during the pandemic (encapsulated in the above focus on the 'employer-employee relationship) has always been integral to football clubs as businesses, which, in turn, has much to do with their equally integral function as community organizations with latent local welfare functions. This, then, poses another question in the current pandemic: with its business function stalled, what extent has the rationale fallen to the welfare function of football clubs – freed off as never before from its internal struggle with the club's business logic?

One observation might be that once the commodity form of internal club relations between people and their roles as part of the business motive wanes, their social need fulfiling obligations (always latent but only partially fulfilled under the heal of 'brand loyalty'), while not entirely unleashed, are placed on a much longer leash under the imperative of the greater public good within the club's immediate community setting. Though elite football clubs fail to wholly flourish either as community assets or businesses, the contradiction is currently working its way out at a time of pandemic, when the business ethic has relinquished its grip on the community arm of clubs. With the business side of the club's activities ground to a halt by wider policies to defeat the spread of the virus, the community side of the club has been allowed partially to escape the language of the market to embrace the language of community involvement in all aspects of social life. And once we focus on this aspect of clubs we also reveal them within the framework of a moral economy. This applies to elite players too: the very same players that acted pragmatically over wage cuts and deferrals are the same ones who now reveal their community spirit without a thought to income or the concerns of the market place. It is to this aspect of the covid-19 crisis's effect on elite football that the paper now turns.

EPL clubs 'in the community'

The domination of the community welfare/social capital generating and sustaining aspirations of elite clubs has unique impacts concerning their 'real' purpose. Club owners are expected to pay all non-playing staff salaries; all football players are expected to take cuts in salaries; clubs are expected to provide auxiliary educational, health care and welfare functions, as part of a wider quasi-local governance. (For non-football businesses, the above expectations and moral imperatives are far less evident, much weaker and are effectively choices that business personnel may or may not be inclined to engage with).

A word of caution at this point, however. There is little point in glossing over the fact that there is instrumentality evident in the community arm of EPL clubs and their largesse, with each club competing for attention on social media to demonstrate their benevolence as self-styled corporate citadels of community spirit. Nor is there any sense in ignoring that money poured into communities from clubs is aimed at improving the image of the EPL as part of a wider PR campaign to market the socially responsibility of elite corporate football – all the better to attract even greater sums of money through media rights, sponsorship deals across the world (the latest figures indicate that 87 per cent of EPL revenues, which are now close to £6 billion, come from broadcasting, marketing and sponsorship deals[18] – EPL annual spending in the community averages less than £3 million per club.[19])

Nevertheless, for the moment at least, we can leave such instrumental matters aside in order to expose something more genuine. One can argue that clubs have sustained and developed their 'football in the community' programmes over a number of decades, offering genuine support for local residents through sustained education, health and wellbeing initiatives. Although the figures look miniscule, relative to the billions of revenue clubs collectively accrue, some argue that the social value added by this support far outstrips initial monetary outlay. For example, one 'societal value' report claims that, between 2016–19, for every £1 spent (from a total of £4 million invested in the community) more than £15 of social value was generated (£55.5 million, countering the rising costs to society from social deprivation, crime and loss of human potential).[20] The practical impact of this multiplier effect on people's lives within any given club's immediate locality cannot be doubted or ignored, as epitomized by the following reflection:

> My life has been transformed by * in the Community … to where I am today, and the person I am today is nothing like the guy I was five/six years ago … all because of * in the Community, the intervention and support they gave me has been utterly amazing, and I see it every day with the boys I go to play football with. And because you see people doing well it gives you that sense of belief that I can do this as well – I can improve my life.[21]

There is plenty of evidence of a genuine opening up to host communities during the covid-19 crisis.

The EPL outline numerous and overlapping social needs provided by all EPL clubs to support communities in the Covid-19 crisis – which appeared somewhat spontaneously – some of which are listed below:

- Distributing packed lunches to homeless organizations
- Providing education packages for primary and secondary school pupils
- Contacting older people living in isolation
- Working with local authorities in funding foodbanks and distributing food
- Repurposing on-site hotel facilities for key workers
- Delivering food parcels, giving phone credits to those who need it and offering mental health support and advice
- Supporting vulnerable young people and children of key workers
- Placing stadium facilities for use by the NHS
- Sourcing and donating personal protective equipment for key workers
- Donating to domestic abuse outreach and refuge services

- Donating money, IT equipment, cars, emergency supplies to local education, health and welfare schemes
- Offering benefit claimant advice, health check-ups, stadium-based maternity services, and mental health activities[22]

Highlighting individual efforts of certain clubs: Chelsea FC provided over 115,000 meals to Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust across their five local hospitals, made the Millennium Hotel and Copthorne Hotels at Stamford Bridge available to the NHS, and made available refuge, funding and awareness raising support 'for women and children experiencing domestic abuse during the current unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic'[23]; to go some way to meeting the 'significant increase in the demand for donated food during the coronavirus crisis' described as 'a fundamental human right', Manchester United FC and Manchester City FC, through their jointly run charity #ACITYUNITED, committed £100,000 of funding to be used to purchase bulk supplies, channelled through national foodbank distributors, such as the 'Trussell Trust'.[24] Manchester United forward, Marcus Rashford, explained in an open letter to members of Parliament,

> without the kindness and generosity of the community I had around me, there wouldn't be the Marcus Rashford you see today . . . This is not about politics; this is about humanity. Looking at ourselves in the mirror and feeling like we did everything we could to protect those who can't, for whatever reason or circumstance, protect themselves.[25]

One could provide many other examples from other EPL clubs, but the essential stance taken by elite clubs is characterized by the concept of 'communitarianism': the motivation to develop, nurture and preserve the wellbeing of the community. In this specific case, communitarianism signifies a football club focused on social rather than strictly economic transactions, which are enacted through the civil society agencies 'of families, local communities, voluntary associations, religious organisations and numerous social groupings'.[26] This is the application of money and corporate assets towards community uses and needs, for welfare, health, education. In short, clubs and players, however wittingly, have embraced what can be conceived as communitarian motives and actions to enhance and support community integration and social inclusion in response to the social crisis amplified by the covid-19 pandemic.

Concluding discussion

This commentary has drawn attention to the two dimensions of modern elite football clubs in England – both a business *and* a social asset. The question posed at the beginning was whether elite club responses to the Covid-19 crisis is a matter of 'business as usual' and so we return to this question in light of the above discussion.

When the focus of a football club is on business, the priority is to make money from them by using football to entertain fans and so accrue vast amounts of money through media rights, corporate sponsorship and gate receipts, etc. If we were to describe this process in Marxist terms, the circuit of business is captured by m-c-m (buy commodities, organize them and produce entertainment to realize more money). By contrast, when the focus of football clubs is on community welfare, the circuit looks more like c-m-c (using money as a means to distribute key social services, goods and skills to meet community needs).

During the short interval presented by the Covid-19 shutdown, the business imperative became less powerful, resulting in some of its key relations fragmenting and exhibiting more contradictory outcomes than usual with a loss of identity – as we have attempted to outline here with respect to key employer-employee relations. At the same time, the Covid-19 shutdown gave powerful impetus to the community function of elite football. Clubs became more pronounced focal points for the redistribution of good and services to their local communities (a case of a longer tradition in clubs being amplified by the Covid-19 shutdown).

When the circuit is placed end to end:/m-c-m-c-m-c-/a number of relations are signified as overlapping each other. Leaving aside the obvious one that signifies money as a medium enabling the circulation of commodities, the circuit signifies two crucial (sometimes complimentary, sometimes contradictory) relations a) the business function and b) the community function. The crucial point here is that during the covid-19 shutdown this contradictory circuit breaks down as the business function grinds to a virtual standstill. The breakdown exposes what is still in motion, c-m-c, which is to say the use of the social power of money to distribute socially useful and necessary services and goods directly to the community as gifts (without expecting or wanting equivalent in return).

While in 'normal' times – that is non-Covid-19 times – 'business as usual' is epitomized by the peculiarities of clubs as both business *and* community assets, in the period of the Covid19 shut-down,what was once peculiar threatens to become an internal part of the local community – football clubs as an arm of the social welfare support system.

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Disclosure statement

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