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## Fan protest and activism: football from below in South-Eastern Europe

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This conceptual introduction seeks to frame and provide a context for the following special issue on “Football from below in South-Eastern Europe”. The special issue focus on fan activism and protest aims to understand, theorize and interpret the efforts of football fans both visible as (sub-)political actors in public space and/or as collectives engaged in experiments with new forms of club ownership and direct/participatory democracy. This introduction first details various features of the South-Eastern European context, before exploring how the texts relate to each other in terms of fan, activist and academic positionalities. Following this, one dimension to the concept of protest ‘from below’ - namely that of a strict ‘people/politics’ (narod/politika) opposition - is explained and critiqued. Finally, thematic gaps within the special issue are identified and possible areas for future research are discussed.

Over the past few years a large number of fan initiatives have emerged experimenting with various forms of participatory and direct democracy, often taking a stand against sweeping commercialization and/or a feeling that ‘modern football’ is increasingly distanced or alienated from its fan base. Such initiatives draw on widely, indeed globally, circulating tropes such as ‘Against Modern Football’.<sup>1</sup> Similarities in slogans and tropes used, combined with the transnational circulation of fan practices on the terraces – such as the spread of the Italian ultras’ visual style, use of pyrotechnics, choreography, social media and so forth – nevertheless conceal the different social realities and underlying struggles taking place in football and wider society at different junctures in the global world system. Thus, so far scholarly efforts to describe emerging social movements of activist football fans have been largely situated in and reliant on Western European contexts.<sup>2</sup> Building on these important case studies, that have at times acted as facilitators and multipliers in other European regions, this special issue seeks to add to the existing football studies scholarship by offering insights from South-Eastern Europe.

In the region itself, aspects of life which impact on and are reflected in football include the widespread pursuit of personalized connections or ‘clientelism’ (which are typically restricted to a smaller number of domains including political lobbying, academia, higher level management and black market activities in Western Europe), the recent war(s), rising authoritarianism, state-building and/or ideological transition, managing a relationship with capitalist centres and the associated political-economic, social and cultural hierarchies, and legacies of empires. Football fan engagements

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are particularly interesting to follow given both the relative popularity of the game across the region and its imbrication in many people's everyday practices – several of the above-mentioned aspects are present in football in intensified or modified form. Several of the texts in this issue deal with these themes explicitly – such as Gutu's discussion of fan networks of influence and survival in Romania – while others deal with them implicitly. Indeed, football fans and collective fan identifications have assumed a visible presence in social protests in South-Eastern Europe, from the Gezi Park protests which began in late May 2013, to the riots across Bosnia & Herzegovina which commenced in February 2014. Other forms of protest were and continue to be less immediate and have developed as medium-term responses to some of the problems earlier mentioned. As such, this special issue seeks to understand, theorize and interpret the efforts of fans both visible as (sub-)political actors<sup>3</sup> in public space and/or engaged in experiments with new forms of club ownership and (direct and/or participatory) democracy. It aims to do so in a region of Europe often characterized as a periphery or semi-periphery,<sup>4</sup> covering a geographical area that includes Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Turkey.

The majority of texts, reflecting our expertise, deal with several of the post-Yugoslav states – Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia. This context has been shaped by recent war(s) alongside the production of states in which national belonging formed a key dimension to citizenship, interacting with experiences of post-socialist transition and neo-liberal market reforms. In one such context (Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina), Gilbert draws attention to the overlap between fan and 'traditional' political activist practices, while in Zagreb, Croatia, Vukušić and Miošić describe the form a battle against 'modern football' has taken and the creative responses fans have made to the challenges with which they have been faced. The focus remains on Croatia in Tregoures and Šantek's article which deals with the legal battles and approaches taken by certain fans of GNK Dinamo Zagreb and Hajduk Split. Moving over to Serbia, Đorđević and Pekić contrast with the other papers by offering insights into why there is a left-wing activist void in fan organizing in Serbia.

However, we wished to convey a broad geographical understanding of South-Eastern Europe, one that would try to bridge the prevalent analytical gap between studying post-Yugoslav societies and 'the rest' of the region.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the final three texts deal with Romania – also defined by post-socialist 'transition' – and Turkey – in the context of rising authoritarian tendencies and fan responses. While, acknowledging local and national specificities, the contributions illustrate regional similarities and parallels in football fan activism despite the lack of a post-socialist and/or post-conflict paradigm in the Romanian and Turkish case studies. Gutu's work with Dinamo Bucharest fans in Romania places an original focus on the interplay between personalized connections and masculinity in this context, while the two texts focused on Turkey, written by Irak and by Battini and Kosulu, describe the role of ultras and fans during and after the Gezi park protests and the increasing difficulties fans have faced due to the actions of Erdoğan's authoritarian, nationalist government.

The focus of this special issue was chosen in order to offer a wider academic readership a different perspective on football fandom in South-Eastern Europe. While, a notable reemergence of scholarly interest in the region's football culture and related social and political issues has crystallized over the last few years, this body of literature has largely remained focused on issues of ethnicity, nationalism and (physical and symbolic) violence.<sup>6</sup> While, these are all valid and important issues, we felt that there was more to say about football and football fans in the region, and that it

was important to redress a balance also present in the wider Anglo-American anthropological and political science literature on South-Eastern Europe which often treated the region as a laboratory for the study of nationalism(s).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, we aimed to go beyond and offer additional views to the existing literature whose focus may perpetuate a ‘balkanized’<sup>8</sup> narrative of South-Eastern European football almost exclusively characterized by violence, political extremism and corruption. While, we are aware that these problems exist and that they may even dominate local football cultures, this special issue also aimed to illustrate that there is considerable opposition to these developments coming directly from football fans.

### **Researcher positionality, activist and fan perspectives**

The texts in this collection also differ widely in terms of researcher positionality, both as regards fan and/or political activist positioning, and with respect to their immersion in different state contexts and local, regional, European and global hierarchies – including those present inside academia and those which emerge in everyday engagements. We write from a perspective in which all such positionalities are legitimate, while remaining aware that all are imbued with specific limitations, which emerge in their extremes as dangers to be avoided. Writing from a position of heavy and continued involvement can generate certain blind spots and/or result in an uncritical promotion of a group’s activities and a reduced ability to grasp diversity of perspectives both in and outside of a group. On the other hand, distanced writing and socialization within western academic and disciplinary cliques may lead to tendencies highlighting for example, nuanced argument and rhetorical skills over wide-ranging political critiques of the field of knowledge production. Certain research topics around which exclusive cliques have emerged in Anglo-American social sciences<sup>9</sup> pass over forms of oppression and in contexts of recent war, such silences are striking, while outside of such academic cliques, those approaches do not have the same rhetorical force.

How do the texts in this special issue relate to fan, activist, and other forms of positioning? Distinct positionalities explicitly emerge in Vukušić and Miošić’s contribution, and in Šantek and Tregoures’ contribution. Vukušić describes an involved fan perspective on the fan run club MNK Futsal Dinamo, while Miošić offers a more distanced perspective on another fan-owned endeavour, NK Zagreb 041, which is nevertheless broadly sympathetic. In contrast, Šantek and Tregoures both take a conscious step back from their fan positions to offer a critical analysis of mobilizing strategies among organized football fans in Croatia. Gutu’s contribution demonstrates the clear sharing of a ‘common discursive framework’<sup>10</sup> with his interlocutors. This contrasts with other contributions to the issue, such as Gilbert’s, which – in a more typically Anglo-American anthropological approach – are based on reflections on a more distanced engagement, following a period of immersion in the field context. The two contributions focusing on fan activism in Turkey fully abandon the activist positionality. With the authors of both texts coming from a sociological background, the lack of ethnographic immersiveness was however, not identified by us as a disciplinary deficiency but rather as an opportunity to offer a more interdisciplinary approach to fan activism in the region.

The concept of an activist approach has several different meanings, some of which may overlap, and which we will discuss in turn. In some ways, the overlapping meanings echo the various senses in which ‘ideology’<sup>11</sup> is understood.

One view, which we could describe as ‘asymmetrical’, is that an activist approach has an affinity with left-wing political organizing and a broadly defined Marxist tradition, in which attention is paid to the social world as made up of processes taking place across history, with the material organization of society key. On this view, understandings gained through fieldwork and other methods often relate to social action, either in the service of the maintenance of a status quo, or of challenging it. This is not to say that all Marxist approaches are activist: some seek a deeper understanding of a particular social situation, that may later permit thoughtful interventions. What such activist/non-activist leftist positions do have in common is an understanding of social truths as contingent in particular historical configurations, and a denial of a fact-value distinction, which imbues all statements about social reality as being ideologically inflected. This position is argued by Scheper-Hughes<sup>12</sup> polemic in which she aligned herself with the socialist party operating in the region where she was conducting fieldwork. Her alignment was criticized by D’Andrade,<sup>13</sup> who writing from a cognitive perspective, claimed that her theoretical vocabulary and approach was confounded by a distorting ‘moral vision’, a vision which often negatively impacts on one’s ability to conduct high quality ethnography. This charge has also been levied at anthropologists writing about the post-Yugoslav region<sup>14</sup> who deny the importance of national categories as a frame for understanding everyday relations and/or who do not make analytical distinctions of individuals as ‘belonging’ to nations.

On the other hand, activist approaches are not the preserve of the academic left. Among football fans in the region, activist efforts on the part of right-wing movements built around ideologies of race and/or nation have been documented in numerous contexts<sup>15</sup> and Đorđević and Pekić in this issue explicitly describe how politically active fans in Serbia gravitate towards right-wing nationalist options, negating the possibility at present of an active, explicitly left-wing presence on the terraces. The same is arguably true of large groups in Croatia, exceptions such as White Angels Zagreb being restricted to small groups generally not often harassed by larger groups, but also frequently not accepted as ‘authentic’ members of the ultras/fan scene.<sup>16</sup> To understand some of the actors in such movements as practitioners of an activist anthropology, a ‘symmetrical’ definition must be applied, in which activist approaches are those in which (i) the distance between emic (field) concepts/categories and etic (analytical concepts/categories) is small or non-existent and (ii) the ethnographer advocates particular concepts or categories, for instance on the basis of an affective affinity.

Such an affective component could be described as ‘sympathy’, which the sociologist Becker<sup>17</sup> discusses in his classic article ‘Taking Sides’. Drawing on the literature in the sociology of deviancy, Becker sets out parameters and limitations in which sociologists and ethnographers operate. Similar to Haraway’s<sup>18</sup> feminist critique of what Nagel described as a ‘view from nowhere’,<sup>19</sup> in arguing that knowledge is always socially situated and formed through particular viewpoints, Becker argues that all sociological studies ‘take sides’. Where this becomes problematic is when sociological and ethnographic descriptions come to hide crucial aspects of group interaction due to a desire to describe a group in a particularly positive or negative light. While, this issue seeks to focus on positives, describing an ultras group without discussing the articulation of dominant masculinities or pejorative use of racial, national or other categories would certainly cross Becker’s line and ought to be addressed by activists as well as scholars of football fan cultures in their work.

Gilbert's paper draws out the relationship between fan practices and political protest, illustrating how fans might mobilize and participate in political protest and how practices may be transferred and/or translated across subcultures and social movements. Both contributions focused on the Croatian state context (Vukušić & Miošić, and Šantek & Tregoures) – which deal with fan responses to the corrupt and nepotistic structures of Croatian football – do not hide their principal opposition towards the lack of democratic participation, transparency and accountability within official football structures. In a similar vein, the two contributions relating to the Turkish state context, (Irak, and Battini and Kosulu) have been written against the backdrop of rising authoritarianism exhibited by the Erdoğan government. Gutu's 'sympathy' lies with the so-called 'transition losers' who he describes in Bucharest, not only due to his deep immersion within the fan group he describes, but also due to his own autoethnographic experiences as a football fan in post-socialist Romania. Finally, Đorđević and Pekić's text almost goes as far as to suggest mobilizing strategies for left-wing activists and fans as to how to create counter-hegemonic structures within the nationalist consensus in Serbian football fandom. In the remainder of this introduction, we offer a critique of certain aspects of the chosen focus and texts resulting from this academic-activist collaboration.

### Critiquing 'the below' in football 'from below'

The social anthropologist Jansen<sup>20</sup> describes a tendency in post-Yugoslav ethnographies wherein politics and political decision-making is often abstractly represented as 'politika' which unidirectionally acts on 'ordinary people' or 'the people' (*narod*). This tendency is confounding for researchers as it also commonly encountered in everyday conversations with people in the region, and is particularly prevalent in discussions of the nineties wars. As Jansen commented:

this paradigm almost seamlessly reflects widespread emic representations of a chasm between *politika* (politics) and *narod* (ordinary people). Most of our interlocutors imagine these two in a vertical, unidirectional relationship to each other: *politika*, the subject, stands above and acts upon 'ordinary people,' the object-target it seeks to govern, exploit, transform, and so forth.<sup>21</sup>

On this view, the 'people' often respond by disengaging from politics, as discussed by Đorđević and Pekić with reference to Jessica Greenberg's work,<sup>22</sup> or exceptionally, they 'resist', in an activist/protest vein or more subtle, everyday variants. Jansen invites anthropologists to reflect on this understanding as hegemonic, and problematic in playing down the *appeal* of nationalisms and their enactment by everyday people.<sup>23</sup> Such an insight is particularly relevant to a framing of this issue as offering a positive discussion of football fans 'resisting' *politika* from below: we therefore invite the readership to reflect on the extent to which the contributions in this volume make or contest the assumptions on which this people/politics dichotomy rests, and suggest that future research might explore the contradictions inherent in fans' simultaneous enactment of 'progressive' and 'problematic' politics.<sup>24</sup>

In this vein, we might also reject tendencies to reify activist positionalities as consistently 'against' the state, system or certain oppressive practices in a given historical moment. A more suitable focus may lie on how the trajectory of a fan-activist – in broadly left- or right-wing initiatives – shifts from being legitimately considered subjected to state or police oppression, to assuming positionalities which have more

ambiguous or defined relationships with state institutions and state effects (e.g. identification with a national group).<sup>25</sup> That same fan might later become an advocate for an NGO seeking a dialogue with the state or applying for state funding, (s)he might later join a private security firm or even the police, or as in the case of GNK Dinamo Zagreb's fan group Bad Blue Boys, a certain fraction of the membership may redefine and align themselves with the club authorities (the so-called *Mamićevci*, or *Plaćenici* – see Vukušić and Miošić's text). We suggest it is consequently important to recognize fans as political actors separated in different moments – to different degrees – from state actors and politics. Such individuals shift from subordinate to superordinate positions and back again, in accordance with the possibilities at their disposal and their dispositions, a case most radically portrayed in the two contributions on Turkey. Such a recognition avoids a tendency to romanticize struggle 'from below' and recognize how participants in such struggles themselves enact oppressive practices on occasion.

### **Moving the field forward**

Of course, this special issue and its contributions are far from exhaustive. They cover only a segment of the myriad of existing local, national, and regional level football fan engagements in South-Eastern Europe. Initiatives like Za Čelik in Bosnia & Herzegovina and their successful endeavours to democratize NK Čelik Zenica and transform it into a members-run club are not mentioned, nor are state contexts, such as Kosovo or Macedonia, which are often sidelined in favour of Serbia and Croatia. In terms of further research on football fan activism in Europe's semi-periphery, interesting case studies are easily found. As also mentioned, our expertise and focus lies in studies of post-Yugoslav football fan cultures and therefore, a more in-depth analysis of particular issues in the scholarly study of Romania and Turkey remains beyond our grasp.

Continuing in the vein of self-critique, this issue reflects in important ways on the contemporary 'structure of the field' in social studies of sport. In a positive sense, our experience is that this field is often characterized by a refreshing informality compared to some other social scientific subdisciplines. However, it suffers from a male dominance, with important exceptions, which is nevertheless compounded in the South-Eastern European region by strong histories of patriarchal relations, including within academia. In the post-Yugoslav case, these tendencies have been exacerbated by recent war and more widely, across the region, by 'austerity' practices.<sup>26</sup> This male dominance is unfortunately also mirrored in this special issue. Despite our significant efforts, a balanced gender perspective on current developments in football fan activism in South-Eastern Europe remains largely missing. We take the important work by scholars like Nuhra<sup>27</sup> as steps in this direction. Possible research areas for study include women's increasing involvement in large fan groups in Croatia and presumably other post-Yugoslav states, and also participation in LGBTQ activist sport initiatives throughout the region as key areas for future study. We invite potential readers interested in and/or writing about such topics to participate in future possible academic and/or activist collaborations on these issues.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes

1. See Doidge, *Football Italia*.
2. Kennedy and Kennedy, 'Football Supporters and the Commercialisation of Football'; Numerato, 'Who Says "No to Modern Football?" Italian Supporters, Reflexivity, and Neo-Liberalism'.
3. Vrcan, 'The Curious Drama'; Beck, *Risk Society*.
4. Blagojević, *Production at the Semiperiphery*.
5. See Horvat and Stiks, *Welcome to the Desert of Post-socialism*.
6. Hughson and Skillen, *Football in Southeastern Europe*; Brentin, Galijaš, and Paić, 'Football and Society'; Baker, 'Football, History and the Nation in Southeastern Europe'.
7. For a critique of the idea that certain geographical regions are associated with the study of certain themes (e.g. UK – class, South-Eastern Europe – nationalism), see Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*. For a discussion of non-ethnographic nationalist framings of the Yugoslav wars, see Jansen, 'First as Tragedy'.
8. See Bjelić and Savić, *Balkan as Metaphor*.
9. Exclusive cliques have emerged, for example, around topics such as Latour's actor-network theory and the 'ontological school' in social anthropology. For an illustration of the passing over of inequalities and oppressions in the ontological school see Graeber's contribution to a debate in the journal *HAU*, especially footnote 46 on page 32: Graeber, 'Radical Alterity'.
10. Roseberry, 'Hegemony and the Language of Contention'.
11. Eagleton, *Ideology*.
12. Scheper-Hughes, 'The Primacy of the Ethical'.
13. D'Andrade, 'Moral Models in Anthropology'.
14. Hayden, 'Moral Vision and Impaired Insight'.
15. Brentin, 'Ready for the Homeland?'.
16. See Hodges, 'The Hooligan as "Internal" Other?'.
17. Becker, 'Whose Side Are We On?'.
18. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges'.
19. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*.
20. Jansen, 'First as Tragedy, then as Teleology'.
21. *Ibid.*, 170.
22. Greenberg, 'There's Nothing Anyone Can do About It'.
23. See Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity*.
24. See Hodges and Stubbs, 'The Paradoxes of Politicisation: Football Supporters in Croatia'.
25. Trouillot, 'The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalization'.
26. See Majstorović, '(Un)doing feminism in (post)-Yugoslav media spaces'.
27. Nuhurat, 'Fair to Swear? Gendered Formulations of Fairness in Football in Turkey'.

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