

The Long Read: Beyond the Beautiful Game: Football as a Means for Control and Protest by Michael Warren

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2016/07/05/the-long-read-beyond-the-beautiful-game-football-as-a-means-for-control-and-protest

The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer. James M. Dorsey. Hurst. 2016.

From the Back Page to the Front Room: Football's Journey through the English Media. Roger Domeneghetti. Ockley Books. 2014.

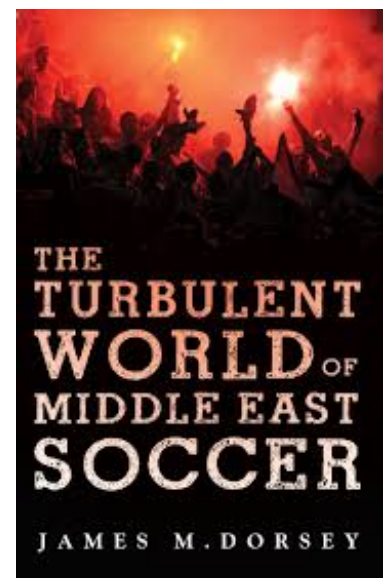
Find these books:  

'The first prize of superstition goes to the English, who for many years now have been worshipping Beckham as the thirteenth Apostle, and this is why they have built him a huge statue in Trafalgar Square, to worship in his shadow and pray.' This claim from a Greek bishop in *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* might make you guffaw, but perhaps he is right. David Beckham could be the nearest thing we have to a deity: he has transcended the earthly football pitch to command the respect of billions through his handsome looks, amicable demeanour and, of course, financial clout. Beckham even recently waded into the recent EU referendum debate in the UK to implore support for the 'Remain' campaign. His significance beyond the 'Beautiful Game' is emblematic of football's ability to reach all parts of the globe. More darkly, though, football is not simply a recreational pursuit, but also a means of exercising control and a tool for power.

Control and power are themes at the heart of James M. Dorsey's *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* and Roger Domeneghetti's *From the Back Page to the Front Room: Football's Journey through the English Media*. Although very different in focus – Dorsey concentrates on politics and protest in Middle Eastern football, whilst Domeneghetti writes about English football's fractious relationship with the media – both show that football is not simply a game, but more often than not a cash cow to be milked no matter the cost to on-the-pitch aesthetics or the fans. In fact, it is the disempowerment of fans in the face of pillaging political owners and media moguls that sticks out when reading both books in conjunction. However, all is not entirely sombre – when fans have successfully claimed football as their own, they have been able to use it as a source of escapism, expression, protest and, above all, pleasure.

In oppressive societies with limited opportunities for expression, the football stadium offers one of the few venues for airing grievances. As an Iranian journalist noted in 2003:

in terms of freedom of expression, soccer stadiums are nearly as important as the internet in Iran now. The protest is more secure there because the police can't arrest thousands of people at once [...] They're showing banners and singing protest songs, which is why some games are broadcast without sound now.



Although the stadium can act as a place of suppression – as evidenced by the mass graves discovered in Iraqi stadiums by US troops following the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 – it can incubate revolutionary ideals, as shown not only in Iran, but also in countries including Libya, Turkey and Egypt. Stadiums are also barometers for gauging levels of frustration in a population and a training ground to build battle-hardened protesters for confronting government might. In the Tahrir Square revolution of 2011 in Egypt, footballing Ultras stood between the mainstream protesters and police fury. From regular training altercations on Saturdays when supporting their teams, they were prepared for the onslaught of tear gas, had honed ‘hit-and-run tactics’ and had mastered strategies of rotation and withdrawal to avoid panic and fatigue.



Image Credit: Egypt v Algeria, 2-0, 2010 World Cup qualifier ([Muhammad Gafari CC 2.0](#))

In Western countries, the stadium is not as politicised or as violent a crucible, but it remains the domain of supporters with a controversial history. The British press frequently demonised fans, lumping them into one venomous hooligan cult that congregated on Saturdays. In the 1980s, the bleakest of decades for football’s public image, *The Times* newspaper penned an editorial that derided football as a ‘slum sport played in slum stadiums and increasingly watched by slum people’. For *The Times*, stadiums evoked low social stratification, arguably in a similar way to social housing. The stadium therefore became a locus for blinkered hostility towards fans and the game itself. This culminated with the Hillsborough catastrophe of 1989 in which 96 fans were crushed to death, and witness voices were silenced by a prejudiced police force and media. It took many years for this injustice to be heard (as recently documented in [Hillsborough Voices: The Real Story Told by the People Themselves](#)), but this shows how with perseverance, fans can eventually tell their side of the story.

The determination of fans to tell their own story is frequently undertaken with ingenuity. Domeneghetti writes vividly of the advent of fanzines that confronted these stereotypes. Soon after the Hillsborough incident, one fanzine editorial noted that supporters are:

deemed to be passive accomplices to the sociopathic minority. The police see us as a mass entity, fuelled by drink and a single-minded resolve to wreak havoc by destroying property and attacking one another with murderous intent. The implication is that ‘normal’ people need to be protected from the football fan. But we are normal people.

The proliferation of fanzines began in the 1970s, riffing off the *Private Eye* format. With hundreds to choose from, often locally produced and geared to local audiences, they were a localised form of expression that allowed fans to organise themselves to build a mosaic of intertwined identities across the UK, challenging negative perceptions of football.

Alongside fanzines, the Football Supporters Association (FSA) also used the media to project alternative images of football fans via localised FSA branches. This reached a zenith at the 1990 World Cup where lawyers, journalists, medical staff and interpreters were on hand to resolve any 'area of potential friction' and to ensure that the stories that reached the British public were not misrepresentative.

Although the stadium is still the domain of fans, how long for is another matter. Domeneghetti notes that in the final season of the old First division, the forerunner to today's glitzy English Premier League that commenced in 1992, children could stand for 90p. That has now exorbitantly risen by 2240 per cent. Working-class fans are getting priced out by owners who mine the commercial power of football. Hundred-million-pound TV deals transformed football in England, but, as Domeneghetti reminds readers, if you look beyond Rupert Murdoch's wily brinkmanship in securing the deals, it is the fans who are the driving force behind them. They are the ones with BskyB dishes – fans who had been demonised in the Murdoch-owned *The Times* as 'slum' people and were falsely accused, in another Murdoch-owned title *The Sun*, of [robbing the dead](#).



Image Credit: Official Programme, Newcastle United v Bela Vista (Brazil), 1958 ([footysphere CC 2.0](#))

It is not just powers of commerce that shape and share complicated relationships with fans, but also political owners. In Turkey, increasing wealth and the professionalisation of football has encouraged socially climbing owners to buy up clubs to gain political leverage and increased personal recognition. Clubs can be symbols of power, and the central football asset is Fenerbahçe – coveted by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and cleric Fethullah Gülen. The latter wished to reduce Erdoğan's power over the club and a member of Gülen's movement to be placed at its heart following match-fixing scandals. The club became a key piece in the political chess match between the two, as recounted in detail by Dorsey. This acrimonious dispute highlighted murky but inextricable ties between football clubs in Turkey and organised crime, with football emerging as a ploy for obtaining wider political power.

The commercialisation of football and the acquisition of clubs by political owners also raises the issue of 'the outsider' in football. Football can be a close-knit homogenous world where fans nurture kinship through collective chants, their team's run of form and shared ideals about the club (the latter may include views on race, class and locality). A national team's success is one of the few things that ties together fans who are otherwise in perennial internecine confrontation. The Chairman of the English Football Association recently noted the Premier League has been a 'massive success [...] except it's owned by foreigners, managed by foreigners and played by foreigners', all of which are seen as having a knock-on effect on the England team.

However, blaming foreigners is not a new spectacle in English football. Domeneghetti observes how the *Roy of the Rovers* comic strip – a long-running popular comic following the topsy-turvy world of fictional footballing demi-god, Roy Race – expressed negative stereotypes held by British fans when Roy ventured into European adventures. Opposition teams were often 'sneaky', 'unfit' and more defensively inclined, unlike the cavalier Roy Race. Visits to South America were even more dangerous, with Roy's entire team being kidnapped twice whilst on different tours in the 1960s.



Image Credit: Anglo-Italian Cup 1973 – Official Souvenir Handbook. Newcastle Utd beat Fiorentina 2-1 in the final ([footysphere CC 2.0](#))

Alongside this fear of 'the other', football itself has been viewed as a dangerous Trojan horse importing alien values. Al-Qaeda-affiliated bomb maker Nordin Mohammed Top asserted that the 2009 bombings of Western hotels in Jakarta were to kill 'salibis (crusaders)' – i.e. the Manchester United team. However, Dorsey interestingly recounts that among Islamist factions across the world, there are split views on football. Whereas Osama Bin Laden was an Arsenal fan who utilised football as a tool for physical enhancement and recruitment, other Islamists were more concerned by the sport's threat to conservative values, condemning the 2006 World Cup as a 'plot aiming to corrupt Muslim youth and distract them from jihad'.

Furthermore, as Domeneghetti observes, perceived 'others' need not be from outside of a country. English football's attitudes towards women's involvement in the men's game is notably poor. Manager Dave Bassett's opinion of the female commentator Jacqui Oatley in 2007 epitomised this antagonism: 'It's a disgrace! Football's against it.' Bassett's view stemmed purely from Oatley's gender, disregarding her expertise garnered from working at numerous radio stations as well as a coaching qualification. Four years later, Sian Massey acted as a lineswoman

for a Premier League game to the disbelief of two male Sky Sports pundits, Andy Gray and Richard Keys. Off-air, Gray remarked, 'women don't know the offside rule', to which Keys replied, 'the game's gone mad.'

These are not isolated incidents, but part of a wider phenomenon where many within football see the sport as a bastion of masculinity to be protected from feminine encroachment. Domeneghetti hints at one solution to ensure greater parity in women's involvement in, and playing of, football: more media exposure. This is most profoundly demonstrated by John Morgan, sports editor of the *Daily Express*, who held many reservations about women's football in the 1960s. In 1977, he watched an England women's game and contritely wrote: 'Ladies, I apologise unreservedly [...] I went with all the usual male prejudices about soccer being "unfeminine" that the girls would break down and cry if someone kicked them [...] I saw instead the best game of football I have seen since the famous Wolves managed by Stan Cullis.'

There is much to be gained from reading both books: Dorsey's is academic in tone and politically focused, whilst Domeneghetti's is constructed through loving anecdotes and a close study of the media. Both are accessible to non-football fans whilst offering new interpretations for anoraks. These are also timely works as the footballing world comes to grips with the possibility of a resurgent spectre of [hooliganism at the 2016 Euros](#). With the 2018 World Cup due to be hosted by Russia, there are potential lessons enclosed in the book for fans concerned about the image of the sport. It may also be interesting to build on these studies with a look at the role of managers in the football power nexus. Managers make decisions that affect the game and fans – see the intense ire heaped upon Roy Hodgson as part of the now biennial phenomenon of England managerial recriminations – yet are also beholden to the whims of owners and whatever backlash the media can arouse. Strong managers, like Sir Alex Ferguson, can wield control and use owners and the media for the purpose of the game, whilst others are conduits for enacting decisions from above.

For all the power dynamics swirling around the football pitch, it is a relief to note that it still lacks predictability and thus can never be fully controlled by the media, owners and external forces. [Chris Anderson and David Sally's theory](#) that about 50 per cent of occurrences in a match are down to luck comes to mind. Football's beauty transcends winning, with a far greater purpose of giving escapist pleasure to millions of fans and a means of expression. This lies beneath both Dorsey and Domeneghetti's complementary texts. Although they approach the subject in very different manners, they understand the essence of football and the centrality of the fans. A fitting summary comes from Dorsey's book as one Egyptian supporter explains in 2008 that the average fan at their club 'is paid minimum wage and life sucks. The only thing is that for two hours on Friday he goes to the stadium [...] that is why it is such an obligation to win every game. It makes people's lives happy.'

Michael Warren completed an MSc in Empires, Colonialism and Globalisation at the LSE in 2012, and graduated from the University of Sheffield (studying on exchange at the University of Waterloo, Ontario) with a BA in Modern History in 2011. He researched on an open data project for Deloitte and the Open Data Institute, and worked for the All-Party Parliamentary Health Group and as a Management Consultant in Health and Public Service at Accenture. He is a Policy Adviser at the Professional Standards Authority. [Read more reviews by Michael Warren](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books