

CARRINGTON WALKER
**“WHY DO POLITICIANS GET INVOLVED WITH
FOOTBALL?”**

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Introduction

Politics and sports have often entwined themselves together throughout history. Any given sport has the power to capture the mind and heart of a nation. A society bound to the promise of sporting glory can potentially hold a lot of power. Football is the most popular spectator sport in the world, meaning that, politically, it's a populists' dream. Through tried and tested methods politicians have, almost systematically, used football as a means for political gain in one form or another. Lincoln Allison notes how "in the United Kingdom, government is involved in programmes to achieve sporting success and acquire major championships to a degree that was almost inconceivable in the 80s." **(Allison, L 2004)** Allison also points out how this tactic of linking sport and government is displayed across all cultures, further discussing "in Africa, we shall argue, there was a heyday of successful intervention lasting from the 1960s to the 1980s during which governments were able to achieve goals of international prestige and internal unity through sport." (2004)

Moreover, it can be said that political involvement with football varies depending on the nation in question, as Allison alluded to. However, this also applies to the reasoning behind a politician's participation in the sport, be it nationally or at club level. These two factors are both primary influences on the analysis I will be undertaking throughout this dissertation. I'll be using three countries as primary case studies and for each example I'll examine an incident, or incidents, where a politician has attached themselves to a football side and the reasoning behind their decision. While comparing, I'll use the 'Imagined Communities' theory, devised by Benedict Anderson (2006), to deduce why and how they have a presence in football.

Literature Review

The premise for this paper comes from Benedict Anderson's theory of 'Imagined Communities' in which he defines a nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of communion." **(Anderson, B 2006:6)** This definition presented the concept of imagined communities to me, leading to the idea of a football fan base being an example. A football fan base consists of people from a range of social backgrounds, yet all unite together in support of 11 men, most of whom they'll never meet, playing a game on an outlined stretch of grass. As a result, the link between politicians and football clubs, or fanbases, became more intriguing as it was clear a fanbase offered a ready-made platform and audience for them to voice their ideologies.

Something that became obvious when researching was the connection between a person who is, or has a desire to be, a part of a footballing fan base and someone who holds patriotic views. This was heralded by Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent* when he converses: "I remember in high school, already I was pretty old. I suddenly asked myself at one point, why do I care if my high school team wins the football game? I mean, I don't know anybody on the team, you know? I mean, they have nothing to do with me. I mean, why am I cheering for my team? - It doesn't make sense. But the point is, it does make sense: it's a way of building up irrational attitudes of submission to authority, and group cohesion behind leadership elements - in fact, it's training in irrational jingoism." **(Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent*, Channel 4 1995)**

There were few sources of literature that directly addressed the fundamental question I set out to address in my research which was 'Why do politicians get involved with football?' However, many alluded to areas of enquiry I was targeting to obtain an answer. This suggested to me there was an apparent gap in the research analysing political influences in football whilst implementing the 'Imagined Communities' theory.

Perhaps the most explicit application of Anderson's theory to the sport of football is the Frank. J Lechner article 'Imagined Communities in the global game: soccer and the development of Dutch national identity' in which Lechner states in his abstract that he sets out to "show how the involvement of the Dutch national team in global competition aided the construction of a myth of national football distinction and how media coverage and discourse turned this myth into a key element of a reimagined national community." **(Lechner, FJ 2007)** Lechner draws on the "idea that nations are 'imagined communities' that have 'invented' their presumed national traditions, it has developed a way of thinking about national sporting traditions that lead us to expect any imagined distinction to break down on closer inspection, both because the actual soccer record does not match the idealized national style and because any country's national myth-making is bound to resemble that of many other nations." (2007) The article also highlights how football was used to expose an imagined community, in this case the football identity of the Dutch national side, using the 2006 FIFA World Cup performance and appointment of Dutch footballing icon, Marco Van Basten, as key components in doing so. By doing so, Lechner has allowed me to set a distinction in how I am able to identify the imagined communities in my chosen case studies by transferring the idea that the fans of the Dutch national side share enough ideologies to qualify as an example to a football club's fan base. Because there was no discussion of political influences in the article, I have assessed academia in other fields to bridge this gap.

Vic Duke and Liz Crolley address the relationship between politics and sport in Argentina, observing that "what is distinctive about Argentina is that sport and politics are inextricably linked. *Futbol* is an extension of politics; it is part of the political system and anything that begins as a sports issue rapidly becomes politicised." **(Duke, V & Crolley, L 2001)** This alliance began to form in the early 1900s, with the 'population explosion' of Buenos Aires being a huge catalyst. A rise in population led to "an accelerated process of suburbanisation and a marked expansion in the transport infrastructure" Duke and Crolley continue to observe "this combination of urban elements rendered the *barrio*, or neighbourhood, central to life experience for the inhabitants of Buenos Aires. The *barrios* were crystallised as political and cultural creations in the 1910s. - Football clubs that were established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries played an important role in the social

and political life of the *barrio* where they were based. The football club came to represent the locality and contributed to the integration of a young immigrant population into Argentine society.” Shortly after these developments, which oversaw the beginnings of an imagined community in the form of ‘*barrios*’, “the structures that integrate *futbol* and politics to this day were established. Of crucial importance to the subsequent development of *futbol* in Argentina is that it preceded democratic politics.” (2001) Interestingly, as not seen in other literature on the subject of politics and sports, Argentine culture saw political parties adopt football infrastructure. They effectively used the imagined communities which had spawned through neighbourhood clubs as a template to run themselves in a “similar manner”. This was exploited by Juan Peron in the late 40s – 50s who established the Peronist political movement in Argentina. Following his removal from office in 1955, the newly formed government sought to “eradicate every vestige of Peronism from national life” (Rein, R 1998) “One of its first moves was to ‘de-Peronize’ sports” this step was taken after the minister of education stated: “The deposed government turned the organization and teaching of physical education and sports into an instrument of political propaganda.”

Duke and Crolley conclude that “the workers were used to be an important market for *futbol* and *futbol* was to become a useful medium by which the state could control the population since it could be used to distract the workers from everyday problems and political issues.” In a similar light, years prior, German philosopher and economist, Karl Marx, when considering the social power religion holds, declared “it is the opium of the people.” (Marx, K, O’Malley, JJ & Davis, RA. 1994) Bearing in mind the previous Duke and Crolley remark, sport was, and still is, the opium of the people, exploited by politicians as “a vehicle of social control.” (2001) Moreover, when identifying just what appeals to the fans of football, Gabriel Kuhn’s deduction that “football appeals to deeply rooted notions of collectivity and solidarity.” (Kuhn, G 2011:51) could be applied to a politician’s role at a particular football club or footballing nation. The idea being that, the fans, being an imagined community, along with the team, are seen as a collective who benefit greatly from a certain political figure, in this case representing Kuhn’s “solidarity” model.

Building upon this, the way in which a fanbase benefits from a political figure can vary. As used in Argentina, the promise of new stadia is very rewarding, not just in the eyes of supporting community but also the local surrounding community. A larger, state-of-the-art stadium usually draws clubs even bigger crowds which correlates into larger revenue streams for the home club. About the local community in this scenario, Jason Smith and Alan Ingham both agree that “political leaders search for some ways to generate support for policies” leading them to “the use of professional sport as an economic engine. - Promises are made of great economic gains from building these venues.” **(Smith, JM & Ingham, AG 2003)**

In this article, Smith and Ingham often refer to Benedict Anderson’s ‘Imagined Communities’ term. Along with this they offer a new perspective on the word ‘community’, saying that it’s “a word that frequently elicits nostalgic yearnings for a way of life that, in fact, never really was.” (2003) The pair also explicitly outline, from an American stand point, the manner in which an elected official markets themselves to their constituencies, often relying on a sporting franchise. “Public officials are accountable to the constituencies that elect them. An important selling point for the ‘general public’ to buy into the purported benefits of the relationship between public and private is the establishment and/or maintenance of community identity. This identity includes, and even emphasises, the (false) bond between a sport franchise and the city in which it plays its home contests.” (2003) This is followed up with an example of a politician using a sports team’s stadium as sufficient reason to spend tax money to gain supporters. “Regardless of the strength of a city’s attachment to a team, in order for a constituency of citizens to be willing to have their tax dollars spent in such large amounts, they must believe that the building of a new stadium/arena for ‘their team’ is ‘good for the community’ or ‘in the public interest.” (2003)

Also featuring in ‘On the Waterfront’ is the statement that “Political and economic leaders promise the public that a professional sport franchise can also provide for this sense of community, bringing together our communities around a central rallying point, ‘our team.” (2003) Such a statement could encapsulate a politician's abilities to capture the hearts of a

fan base, presenting the idealistic image of togetherness in order to build a relationship with a large, and useful, number of supporters.

Tying into the idea of the before-mentioned nostalgic route a politician may use to infiltrate an imagined community, is the sociological study of American society, 'Habits of the Heart' by Richard Bellah and colleagues. Within the study is a glimpse of how nostalgia can attach a person to an imagined sports community, painted through the eye of Joe Gorman. "I would like to see Suffolk get back to that type of atmosphere where 15 people could get together, form a baseball team, go down to the park, don't need uniforms or anything like that, play some ball and just have a good time. Nowadays to do that sort of thing, people demand uniforms and leagues and regulations and so forth. They don't trust each other. But this other, older kind of spirit is what you need." **(Bellah, RN, Madsen, R, Sullivan, WM, Swidler A & Tipton, SM 2007:11)** Adding to Smith and Ingham's perspective of 'community' eliciting 'nostalgic yearnings', a politician could easily exploit such yearnings with promises, fake or true, that target such an audience.

Imagined communities can also be facilitated by the internet. Ingham and McDonald (2003) explain that "In today's - society, members of representational sport 'communities' do not necessarily inhabit a shared geographical space. Fans can form symbolic 'communities' in distanced relational space." **(Ingham, AG & McDonald, MG 2003)** The use of "symbolic communities" in this instance can easily be switched to "imagined communities" as, in the context used, it shows a community not based on geography but more on a common, sporting interest, such as a club.

After inspecting the literature submitted for review, there is a clear suggestion that an imagined community, given the Benedict Anderson definition, is a reason for a politician to get involved with football. The imagined community outlined in this section has been that of a footballing fan base who, through either promises directly relating to the club they support, the surrounding area in which the club is based or the fan base themselves, are susceptible to the words and actions of the given government official. This subsequently offers a stable target audience through which political agenda and/or personal views can be filtered down through.

Methodology

The research methods used to aid the case studies of this essay will be archival. Through various referenced journals, books, essays, films, etc. an argument will be formed depicting a fan base in football as an imagined community which has been engaged with by a politician. After this case has been made, I will explain how the politician became involved with the fan base and why they have chosen to do so. Then a comparison between the three case studies will be made to see if there are or are not any striking similarities or even a way of accounting for the possible lack of similarities. This may result in an answer for the question in my title.

The definition for the label 'Imagined Community' will come from its originator, Benedict Anderson, and is a term that is yet to be applied to the population group I will attach it to. This linking enables me to argue that they supply a target audience for a politician to hold. However, when appropriate, there will be evidence of the term being applied to similar groups, and I will be linking this to political influences already established in football. These two research topics, that of imagined communities and that of politicians involved with football, are not currently the subject matter of further academic study, hence the reason for this dissertation topic. By filling the gap in research, the archival research methods provided will be accompanied with a clear and well analysed argument explaining the association the research approach has with the initial thesis of "why do politicians get involved with football?"

A clear example of archival research that will be used as a template for my chosen case studies is the case of politicians' involvement in Argentine football, which is both historical and current. As explained in the literature review, this example is the closest instance I have found linking political influence in football to an imagined community. Although it does not use the term coined by Benedict Anderson, I believe the argument can be easily made for the term's application to the Argentine template.

The benefit for using this template is that, if found applicable, it transcends cultural barriers meaning it will leave us with a clear criterion for understanding why politicians have chosen to get involved with football. As well as this, the imagined community theory will be verified as tried and trusted for its use to describe a footballing fan base.

Potential shortcomings of this research method include the possibility that there is not any, or not a substantial amount of, research into the specific link between politicians targeting imagined communities in sport due to the lack of evidence available to back this point. However, in each case study an argument will be put forward explaining the reason this can be perceived to be the case.

Més que un Club

My first case study will analyse the relationship between politics and football in Catalonia.

The case of FC Barcelona and their political ties is almost unprecedented in the sport of football. With the self-branding maxim; “Més que un Club”, more than a club, they symbolise a constant identity struggle amongst not only its supporters but also the residents of Catalonia. Regarding Anderson’s ‘Imagined Communities’ theory, Catalonia can be seen as an imagined community on the cusp of becoming an ‘actual’ community. As recently as 2017, the state of Catalonia has undergone a referendum process in order to gain independence from Spain. Although, controversially, unsuccessful, Catalonia’s referendum again emphasised the region’s desire to evolve from an imagined community to an accepted one.

Hunter Shobe (2008) writes that “sport is mobilised to reproduce dominant identities associated with places, and to contest dominant meanings and identities associated with places. More than being merely reflective of nationalism or place-based identities, sports and stadiums are themselves drawn upon to construct ideas about place and nation.”

(Shobe, H 2008.) This passage touches upon the fact that the ideal of *Catalanisme* was outlawed in Spain under Franco, an act which resulted in the Nou Camp being one of the few locations in which the native language of Catalonia was widely spoken, in defiance of the law. This furthers Benedict Anderson’s theory on imagined communities by highlighting

the importance a location can have on developing an imagined community. A venue where people who share a common interest, the support of a football club for instance, come together to express their support for that interest is integral to allowing an imagined community to thrive and a football stadium is the perfect candidate for that venue.

Emma Kate Ranachan (2008) has also looked into the ties between FC Barcelona and Catalonia, drawing upon Benedict Anderson's theory in the process. When providing a historical background to FC Barcelona and Catalonia under Franco's rule she notes that "in Franco's worldview, Spain's enemies were not outside their borders, but within."

(Ranachan, E. 2008) This section of Ranachan's thesis depicts Catalonia as an enemy of Franco, inevitably leaving its inhabitants with a sense of sub-nationalism, this is likely due to Franco's fascist policies opposing the more socialist outlook of Catalonia and something which can be viewed as an imagined community. This is something she confirms when she continues "Sub-state nations are often constructed in a manner that resembles Benedict Anderson's idea of an imagined community." Moreover, Ranachan seconds my initial idea of a football fan base being an imagined community when she refers to FC Barcelona's followers by stating "As a sports team, Barca is not a nation, but it does have an imagined community of supporters" although she goes as far to say "Yet it does not adhere to Anderson's definition in the sense that it is neither territorially limited nor sovereign (Anderson 1983)."

Similarly, to Duke and Crolley's (2001) findings relating to Argentina, where political unrest coupled with rapid urban developments provided the breeding ground for a prominent football club to be born into, Barcelona was such a club. "The turn of the twentieth century was a politically turbulent time in Spain. FC Barcelona appeared during a critical time in both the urban development of Barcelona and the establishment of nationalist movements in Catalonia." (Shobe 2008) Additionally, a great migration of workers in Catalonia spurred a political movement to establish an identity, something in which FC Barcelona would hold great significance. Once again, this series of events mirrors that of Argentina around the same period. Despite this, Catalonia and the *barrios* reacted in juxtaposition of each other when faced with a growing working class. Shobe continues "People from rural areas moved to the city in search of work. The borders between urban and rural Catalonia were

beginning to blur. Some suggest that this breakdown between urban and rural areas facilitated Catalanist political movements and efforts to construct a [separate] Catalan identity.” (2008) Whereas local football clubs birthed through the working class *barrios* “contributed to the integration of a young immigrant population into Argentine society” (2001), in Catalonia integration led to a political movement which sought segregation in order to develop a Catalan identity.

Barcelona, as a club, originally did not intend on being “wrapped up in the political issues of Catalonia and Spain” (Shobe 2008). This mindset resulted in the club’s crest being that of the city of Barcelona, although after just ten years this would change in order to accommodate four red stripes on a yellow backdrop, the Catalan flag, along with St George’s cross, the patron saint of the region. Jimmy Burns (1999) comments on this process in his book *Barca: A People’s Passion*, stating that “politics and sport could be part of the same culture identities.” (Burn, J 1999:85) Once again, echoing back to Anderson’s theory and further extending the importance of a political identity in shaping an imagined community.

An example of the powerful connections between Barca and Catalonian identity is evident in the story of the second-generation footballer formerly of FC Barcelona, Marcos Alonso. Marcos’s father, nicknamed Marquitos, featured heavily for bitter rivals Real Madrid in their 1950’s European Cup triumphs and Marcos unsuccessfully passed through their youth set-up. Marcos admits “Barcelona have a social significance I didn’t see at Madrid; in Barcelona you have a sense of complete identification with the club. It means a massive amount for Catalan society.” (Lowe, S 2013:10) From this we can deduce that, over the course of the club’s history, FC Barcelona has been moulded around the Catalan identity to rival that of the Spanish identity, something the club initially didn’t wish to transpire but ultimately remained powerless to, in accordance to the imagined community forming around it. FC Barcelona has become more than just a sports team, more than eleven men on a field, more than a crest and stadium and that is made all the more apparent when facing their biggest rivals. Club legend Hristo Stoichkov, when interviewed in the same book, stated “every time Madrid and Barcelona meet, it becomes a rebellion against the Establishment.”

(2013:10) Such a sentiment harks back to Burns' (1999) point, referred to above, about sport and politics shaping culture identities.

Real Madrid were very much seen as an embodiment of the central government in the eyes of Catalan nationalists, and often dubbed the 'Regime Team'. This has potentially led to exaggerations in Catalan football folklore. A particularly explosive tale is one that involves the transfer of Real Madrid legend, Alfredo Di Stefano. The Buenos Aires native striker would go on to represent Franco's Spanish national team and is regarded as one of the greatest players in Real Madrid's rich history, but he was initially set to be clad in Catalan colours. In fact, as Andy West writes for BBC Sport online, Di Stefano "even played at least one pre-season friendly for Barca in the summer of 1953." **(West, A 2014)** During the previous year, the player had travelled to Spain with his, then, current club, Millonarios. The Colombian club played in a tournament based in Madrid and caught the eye of both Barcelona and Real Madrid. Barcelona were first to make an offer to Millonarios; however, things were not straightforward for them. "Barca appeared to take an early lead in a race that was complicated immensely by the fact that Di Stefano's registration rights were also claimed by Argentina giants River Plate, who were still less than delighted about their star player's controversial (and perhaps illegal) move to Colombia three years earlier." (2014) Essentially this resulted in negotiations between Barcelona, Millonarios *and* River Plate, during which Barcelona directors believed the latter to be the only club they had any business with as Di Stefano's transfer to Millonarios wasn't seen as legal. A deal with River Plate was reached and the striker was flown out to the imagined community of Catalonia. It was at this point that Real Madrid struck a deal with Millonarios for the same player, and subsequently the Spanish Football Federation stepped in. The resolution was bewildering to both clubs: a suggestion that Di Stefano turn out for the two sides in alternating seasons, beginning with Madrid. Barcelona rejected this notion and ended their interest in Di Stefano. He would go on to score four goals for Real Madrid against Barcelona a month later in a 5-0 defeat for the Catalan club.

To this day, this transfer provokes emotion in all corners of Spain, and respective republics. FC Barcelona's official website describes "a strange federative manoeuvre with Francoist backing" **(FC Barcelona)** when referring to the Di Stefano transfer, a view shared by most of its imagined community. As already stated in this essay, Franco made it clear he saw

Catalonia as an enemy, and this leads many to believe he had made the overruling decision for Di Stefano to feature for the 'Regime Team'. Such an act would perfectly embody events that answer the question at the heart of this dissertation. Franco imposed sanctions in Spanish football, and culture, to sabotage the spirit and ideology of his opponents. Franco got involved with football to continue further his personal political agenda.

Beitar Jerusalem FC

My second case study is the Israeli Club, Beitar Jerusalem and showcases the difficulties of harnessing an imagined community to an individual's political agenda.

Birthered in 1936 pre-statehood Israel through Shmuel Kirchstein and David Horn, the latter of whom played a key role in the political Betar movement, Beitar Jerusalem is often hailed as "the most racist club in football." **(Mishra, S 2018)**

Yet this club has one of the largest followings in the divided country. Going even further, this club has some of the most prominent political figures sitting in its terraces. Former Mayor of Jerusalem, Ehud Olmert, frequented the "racist volcano at Jerusalem's Teddy Stadium" **(Kalman, A 2013)** before going on to serve as Prime Minister of Israel between 2006 and 2009. Even the current Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is a vocal supporter of Beitar Jerusalem. Netanyahu stems from the *Likud* political party, a successor party of the Revisionist Movement and described as "ideologically - right-wing and nationalist." **(BBC Online 2013)** Beitar Jerusalem align themselves with both this movement and political party.

The Revisionist Movement in Israel challenged Zionism and "at its inception, the Revisionist program centred on the following demands: to re-establish the Jewish Legion as an integral part of the British garrison in Palestine, to develop the Jewish Colonial Trust as the main instrument of economic activity, and to conduct a 'political offensive' which would induce the British government to adapt its policy in Palestine.." **(Jewish Virtual Library 2008)** Like the Argentine template in this essay, the political allegiance of Beitar Jerusalem has, from its outset, gravitated towards a political force that promises to benefit the fanbase directly, as well as the surrounding area, thus making them a target for politicians. The Revisionist Movement set out to establish a Jewish presence at the forefront of pre-statehood Israel

for its followers and to attain political power. The latter point being more evident post Israel's independence in 1948. In fact, due to Israel's identity changes in recent history, the case study of Beitar highlights an imagined community working inside of another imagined community. This provides symmetry with FC Barcelona and Catalonia, except in Beitar Jerusalem's case they hold much more political sway over the imagined community they are based within, an opportunity FC Barcelona were denied in many Catalan independence referenda.

On top of this, with the identity of Israel being in, almost, constant contention, the actions of Beitar have evolved over time. This transition has overseen support for the early Revisionist Movement to more recent acts of political support such as renaming themselves 'Beitar Trump Jerusalem' in honour of US President, Donald Trump after he "defied global opposition by recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, angering Palestinians and Muslims around the world." **(Lutz, T 2018)**

Now I come back to the fanbase of Beitar. More specifically, what kind of influence do they hold? In December of 2018, Reuters published an article stating, "Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will easily win a snap election set for April 9 [2019], according to an opinion poll." **(Heller, J 2018)** As previously mentioned, Netanyahu is a self-confessed avid fan of Beitar Jerusalem, a team described as "a favourite among his political base." **(Bachner, M 2018)** Interestingly, and perhaps no coincidence, Reuters (2018) add that he "has focused in recent speeches on what he called his main achievements in meeting security challenges posed by Iran and Palestinian militants, [to] building a strong economy..." These speeches come around 100 years after the first steps of the Revisionist Movement were taken, yet they consist of similar actions. Originally, the movement intended to support the British military's garrison of Palestine (2008), now Netanyahu lists "meeting security challenges posed by ... Palestinian militants" (2018) as one of his top achievements. Besides this, Netanyahu boasts about "building a strong economy" for Israel (2018), reminiscent of an achievement set out years prior by the Revisionist Movement when they looked to "develop the Jewish Colonial Trust [the first Zionist bank] as the main instrument of economic activity." (2018) This can be likened to Smith and Ingham's idea of 'nostalgic yearnings' stimulating a community (2003), creating a noticeable trait that

reoccurs when politicians tap into a mindset to target their audience, which in this case study happens to be the football club Beitar Jerusalem as they make up a lot of his votership.

Beitar do not guarantee political success however, as Russian oligarch and former owner, Arcadi Gaydamak discovered in 2008. Gaydamak differs from Netanyahu and Olmert as he attempted to use the football club as a means to get into politics, whereas the other two were already established politicians who supported Beitar and relied on its fanbase. Speaking in Maya Zinshtein's *Forever Pure* (2016), a documentary that follows Beitar Jerusalem through perhaps their most controversial season in 2012/13, Gaydamak claims to have bought Beitar Jerusalem FC purely in a bid to become Mayor of Jerusalem. "I never was a football fan. I always said that. But Beitar has more fans than all the other clubs in Israel combined and this is why it's a very interesting propaganda tool. It has a huge influence on Israeli society." (2016) Here, Gaydamak encapsulates what this dissertation seeks. In the interview, while reflecting on his failed attempt to use *La Familia*, the name given to the most devout Beitar fans, for his own personal, political gain, Gaydamak lounges in a lavish mansion. The documentary details how he invested \$100 million into the club in order to become Mayor of Jerusalem, declaring "in 2008 I will be elected Mayor of Jerusalem!" (2016) He has openly declared the footballing club a "propaganda tool", thus following the path that was set out earlier in this paper: he identified an imagined community in football and acted as a financial aid to that imagined community in order to gain their support and, hopefully, their vote.

Initially, Gaydamak's reign over Beitar Jerusalem was a success, both on and off the pitch. In *Forever Pure*, Beitar fan and "senior right-wing journalist", (Alpher, R 2018) Erel Segal explains that "Beitar Jerusalem, has a much deeper meaning than the game itself. For decades, it represented the Mizrachi Jews and the right-wing. Over the years, it became a political symbol for second-class Israelis. It was a team for the underprivileged." (2016) With such a historic political connection in mind, Gaydamak began to make charitable donations around Jerusalem and support the local sporting teams. "First, he bought the Hapoel Jerusalem basketball team. A month later, he donated \$400,000 to Bnei Sakhnin FC. Arcadi wanted to make friends everywhere. Later that day, Arcadi announced his

purchase of 55% stake at Beitar Jerusalem, and 48 hours later, had sole ownership of the club.” (Mishra, S 2018) The following year Beitar won the league title, which they would then go on to successfully defend in 2008. Along with this were two State Cup triumphs in 2008 and 2009. At the height of his popularity amongst *La Familia*, “Arcadi had founded a political party called *Tzedek Hervrati* or ‘Social Justice.’” With crowds of adoring supporters celebrating Beitar’s ‘double’ winning season of 2008, songs of support were aimed at the Russian oligarch; “You’re a star! There’s no one like you. I adore you, you are the greatest!”

Yet, when it came to election time during that same year, Gaydamak “loses with just 3.6% of the votes.” (2016) The crushing defeat was a shock to Arcadi and signalled the start of austerity for Beitar Jerusalem. “He lost a huge amount of money in terrible business deals and Beitar was the first victim. After losing the election he said, ‘I don’t care about this club anymore.’” (2016)

The defeat also represents the defiance based within the imagined community of a footballing fan base. This is, again, similar to FC Barcelona’s fan base and their defiance against the centralised Spanish government, however it once again differs. In this case, the imagined community did not willingly back the politician affiliated with them. Instead “a secular, right-wing Israeli businessman” (McCarthy, R 2008) went on to become Mayor of Jerusalem. Expanding on this point, this behaviour exhibits a new trait for the imagined communities of this dissertation, this trait being that the imagined community can pick and choose how, if at all, they react to a politician's involvement with their club. Recalling his high school epiphany from *Manufacturing Consent* (1995), Noam Chomsky concludes that supporting a sports team is “a way of building up irrational attitudes of submission to authority, and group cohesion behind leadership elements - in fact, it’s training in irrational jingoism.” Although I certainly agree, and have demonstrated examples in this essay, I must also conclude that Beitar Jerusalem’s *La Familia* offer a counterpoint to this argument. Whilst maintaining an element of jingoism, *La Familia* displayed in the 2008 Jerusalem election their willingness to not submit to authoritative figures, as Chomsky would have expected them to do. By adding another dimension of authority inside of an imagined community, *La Familia* act as an imagined community with significant power inside of two other imagined communities, Jerusalem and Israel. Still, they themselves can

be defied by other supporters of Beitar Jerusalem. With this in mind, I present Beitar Nordia, breakaway club of Beitar Jerusalem.

Framed as the club “rejecting the racism of La Familia’s far-right ultras” **(Lewis, R 2017)**

Beitar Nordia further contradict Chomsky’s idea of a sports team’s followers being geared up to submit to authority. As mentioned above, *La Familia* represent the majority of Beitar Jerusalem’s fan base and therefore, creating a breakaway faction in the form of another football club signifies a huge act of defiance to authority.

In regard to the subject of this paper, Arcadi Gaydamak expressed his own reasons for getting involved with football, a sport he confessed “is not a very fascinating sport, in my opinion.” (2016) These reasons were based solely around using the club as a vehicle to distribute propaganda and as a springboard for his political career in Israel. Gaydamak failed. Nonetheless, by doing so he uncovered that a football fan base doesn’t just represent an imagined community with a shared ideology that centres around Beitar Jerusalem FC. In fact, he allows us to add to Benedict Anderson’s theory (2006) and infer that these imagined communities can often hold changing ideologies that, over time, cause division. This was introduced to us through Beitar Nordia supporters’ reluctance to abide by *La Familia’s* radical mindset. This case study also allows us to deduce that imagined communities will not submit to authoritative figures, such as politicians, in all scenarios. This even includes situations where politicians may be financially aiding their favoured football club, as was the case with Arcadi Gaydamak and Beitar Jerusalem.

Big Business and Politics in the United Kingdom

When assessing politicians' involvement in football in terms of the UK, the first aspect to delve into is that of domestic politics, more specifically 'New' Labour and the idea of 'Social Exclusion'.

Social exclusion is defined by Labour as something that "can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, poor health and family breakdown." (**Social Exclusion Unit (2003)**) They then go on to state that "In the past, governments tried to deal with each of the problems of social exclusion individually, but there was little success". This cluster of categories are usually attributed to the working class of the UK, a core section of the Labour party's votership. From this we can infer that Labour have selected to tackle these issues to garner electoral votes from the affected audience. Bearing this in mind, football in the UK, at least up until the last decade, is very much presented as 'the working class game', as Richard Jolly (2010) observes "The aristocracy had organised and codified football, but the lower class had started playing it."

A sport-orientated, working class demographic can, as already exemplified, present itself as an ideal candidate for a politician to infiltrate. Labour's Tony Blair has on occasion been accused of lending himself to this scenario. "Blair was from a wealthy background and enjoyed a lifestyle and education removed from that of the mainstream populace." (**Busby, R 2009:113**) Such an upbringing would have rendered Blair out of touch with his Labour votership. However, "the evolution of party and personal marketing was pronounced by the time Blair assumed the leadership of his party and there was a significant embrace of technology and strategies to refine how party leaders might associate with and appeal to the voting block." (2009) One reported 'strategy' said to be deployed by Blair to associate himself to the working class involved him relaying nostalgic tales, the kind that fit the bill of

Smith and Ingham's theory in *On the Waterfront: Retrospectives on the relationship between Sports and Communities* (2003). "During an interview with a local radio station in 1997 and speaking of his passion for football 'the prime minister reminisced about watching his favourite Newcastle player, centre forward Jackie Milburn, from a seat behind one of the goals at St James's Park.'" (**Assinder, N 1999**) Here we believe to be analysing Blair in 1997, the year he was elected Prime Minister, identifying with the typical football fan, often from a working class background deemed 'socially excluded' in the words of his own party. Yet this alleged anecdote flashes hints of propagandist advertisement when it's uncovered that "seats weren't installed behind the goals until the 1990s and Jackie Milburn left the club when the prime minister was four-years-old," (1999) At the time this only strengthened further the notion that has been threaded through this essay of politicians constantly identifying with the "underprivileged" (2016) or "socially excluded" as a means to achieve political success. Yet, it was later revealed that this fabricated story was in fact fabricated itself. Although it took over ten years for the BBC to publish an article stating "Blair football 'myth' cleared up" (**BBC 2008**) Adding to this, you could argue that the 'myth' stuck for so long due to artificial nature with which the 'New' Labour party acted. Here we move on to the myth becoming political folklore, almost acting as a reference piece to future political gaffes as seen in 2012 while David Cameron was the UK Prime Minister. While attempting to "demonstrate his common touch" (**Mason, R 2012**) Cameron was caught lying about his love as pasties and the headline "David Cameron suffers a 'Jackie Milburn moment'" (2012) followed.

Nevertheless, for the most part, political involvement in English football hardly compares to that of the Argentine, Spanish or Israeli game. Yet this doesn't mean it's non-existent, and, further than this, you can look to the top of the footballing pyramid to find perhaps the most notorious case of a politician meddling in 'the working class game.'

Roman Abramovich, former governor of Chukotka, made the high-profile acquisition of Chelsea FC in 2003. At the time, Chelsea were not seen as glamorous a club as they can be described as now. So, the deal, rumoured to cost Abramovich £140m in full when considering the mass amounts of debts he inherited, came as a shock to some. In fact, when pressed for the motives behind his splurge, the thirty-six-year-old stated "there are lots of rich, young people in Russia. We don't live that long, so we earn it and spend it."

(Randall, J 2003) This mindset is believed to be a potential reason for Russian oligarch's venture.

As Jeff Randall goes on to comment in the BBC article, "A much tougher challenge will be withstanding the intense scrutiny of his business affairs by British newshounds - that will inevitably follow his emergence as a public figure in London." Just over 15 years since Randall's statement Abramovich is a staple in English football culture. "Success at Chelsea under the ownership of Roman Abramovich has been a constant theme. - The fact that in the past 15 years, Chelsea is the club in England that has won the most major trophies only serves to highlight just how positive his overall impact at Stamford Bridge has been."

(Chelsea FC 2018) Funding the most successful footballing side in the country he arrived in as a young, rich Russian, the oligarch's identity in football and general English culture is evident, but this wasn't ever the plan for the Russian while he was situated in his homeland.

In 1999, Abramovich gave an interview with the, then named, company Sibneft, whom he owned a 51% stake in. At the time he was running to become governor of Chukotka, a move that prompted the interviewer to note that "there is a theory that you chose Chukotka in order to be out of the public eye? It is a closed border region and it is almost impossible to get there." **(Sibneft 1999)** To which he responded "partly, yes." During this time, Abramovich was a quiet character, in fact he's later posed the questions "why did you never give interviews beforehand?" and "why did nobody have your photograph?" to which he responded, "I didn't want to" and "I did not hide from photographers on purpose." Seemingly elusive, Abramovich represented the envied oligarch status in Russia at the time, a wealthy demographic who often held political ties. The interview continues; "How actively should big business influence politics in our country?" To this Abramovich answered "In the world, big business influences politics. In Russia, to a lesser extent. I think that this influence should become greater." Shortly after this interview, Vladimir Putin was elected for his first stint as Russian President, and Abramovich's wish of big business having a "greater" influence on politics came to be.

Sibneft, Roman Abramovich's oil firm, was later sold to the "state-controlled gas group Gazprom" **Walsh, NP & Macalister, T (2005)** in 2005 for £7.4bn. Abramovich had purchased ten years previously when the shares were "worth 30 cents each" at a

“privatisation auction”. It would later emerge, in 2011, during court proceedings brought against Abramovich by former “mentor, Boris Berezovsky” **Koshan, N (2003)** that this auction had been rigged by Berezovsky in favour of Abramovich. “Jonathan Sumption QC, representing Mr Abramovich said - Mr Berezovsky had "persuaded" the Yeltsin government to create Sibneft out of state-owned businesses in return for the support of his media. There had then been a "rigged auction" – "rigged by Mr Berezovsky himself."

Whitehead, T (2011) It was also reported that “Roman Abramovich funded French palaces and a private jet for fellow oligarch Boris Berezovsky to act as his ‘political godfather.” This would later lead the duo into the ‘Aluminium Wars’ of the early 2000s.

Boris Berezovsky died in 2013, with a coroner reaching “an open verdict on the death - after hearing conflicting expert evidence about the way that the Russian oligarch was found hanged.” **Cobain, I (2014)** Abramovich’s late ‘mentor’ was a critic of President Putin in his later years, which may explain his inclusion in the 2017 Washington Post article ‘*Here are 10 critics of Vladimir Putin who died violently or in suspicious ways*’. **Filipov, D (2017)** The article goes on to describe that “his falling out with Putin led to his self-exile in the United Kingdom, where he vowed to bring down the president.” Coming back to the main questions of this essay; why do politicians get involved with football? I put forward the idea that Berezovsky stands as a testament of what Abramovich fears most, an untimely death in a *suspicious* circumstance. Al Jazeera reported in 2017 that “proximity to Putin, which used to be considered most important for capital growth in the Russian oligarchic system, is now becoming a considerable risk.” **Dobrokhotoy, R (2017)** While Reuters Russia label “acquaintance with Putin a toxic asset for a number of businessmen.” **Golubkova, E, Korsunskaya, D & Stolyarov, G (2017)** Putin has become an enemy of people like the Chelsea owner, therefore he must be kept sweet.

Abramovich was suspected of being involved in Russia’s successful 2018 World Cup bid. “A 2014 parliamentary report outlined how an ex-MI6 agent, - had been spying on the Russian delegation on behalf of the failed England bid. ‘Roman [Abramovich] was absolutely integral to the Russian bid.’ an anonymous source, [believed to be the agent], told the *Sunday Times*.” **Montague, J (2017:58)** This act can be viewed as a political favour for Putin due to the massive financial opportunities hosting a World Cup can bring. Alongside this, “as a reward for securing the finals, Abramovich was handed a large bill to pay. ‘I don’t rule

out that Mr Abramovich may take part in one of these projects,' Putin said when discussing who would contribute to the cost of building the stadiums for 2018." (2017) These acts add to the reports that Abramovich "admitted paying billions of dollars for political favours."

Sage, A (2018) Now when assessing this and the fact that was originally reported by Jeff Randall (2003) that his purchase of Chelsea Football Club cemented "his emergence as a public figure in London." I believe there is sufficient evidence to suggest Roman

Abramovich became involved with football in England to become a staple of English culture, something that would remove the considerable risk of backlash from his former business or political ties. In the words of Matthew Syed; "Roman Abramovich used Chelsea to sanitise his image." **Syed, M (2018)**

Conclusion

In conclusion, based upon the case studies given, and in conjunction with Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* theory, we can deduce that politicians get involved with football mainly, but not exclusively, for their own personal gain whilst using a footballing fan base as a target audience. Moreover, this essay builds further on Anderson's theory by unveiling certain characteristics imagined communities develop that differentiate themselves from one another.

Whilst using the Argentine template taken from Duke and Crolley's (2001) findings, you could distinguish certain traits from the given case studies such as; an imagined community's tendency to gravitate towards nostalgic propaganda, as shown in the Beitar case study. Something else unearthed was that an imagined community also has the capacity to pick and choose how it reacts to a politician's involvement at their club, and the wherewithal to alter, or rebel against, the general consensus of the imagined community. Finally, shown in the FC Barcelona case study, the sub nationalist aspect of an imagined community is sometimes integral to its outlook. If a demographic is made an enemy of another population, such as Catalonia versus Franco, it can shut itself off from the outside world and promote its own identity.

Another point to make is that the level of involvement a county's government has had in sport historically can influence how the sporting imagined community react to political involvement. This is why Abramovich and Chelsea's relationship was studied as it could be

argued there isn't much political involvement in football in the UK due to the country's lack of trust in politicians who have, as seen in this graph, consistently been ranked amongst the least trust worthy professions.

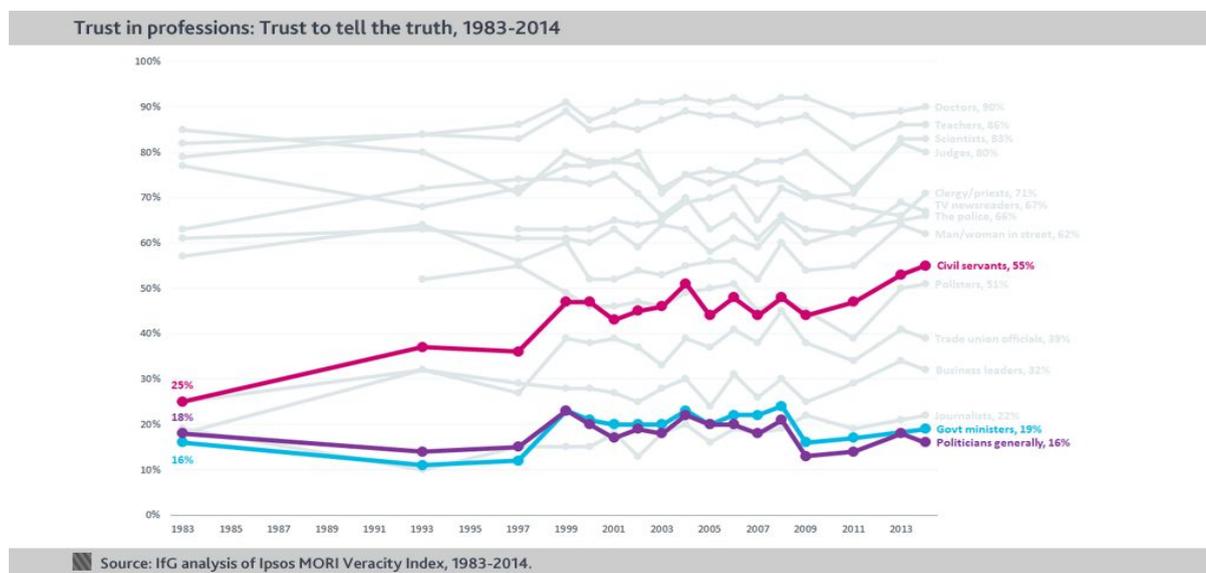


Table 1: Trust in professions: Trust to tell the truth, 1983-2014. (Institute for Government Online, 2015)

Looking ahead, there could be considerable arguments made in favour of further research into the topics touched upon in this study. As one of the first academic writings bridging the gap between politics and sport while keeping in mind Anderson's *Imagined Community* theory, this essay could be used as an initial foray into topics regarding football fan bases as imagined communities. For example, the Argentine template based around the *Barrios* that shaped Argentine political parties could be further used as a means to look into how local football sides that people identify with shape their own identity and personality. Another potential study based upon this essay could be to look further into the success rate of 'New' Labour's Social Exclusion Unit and whether it has had a positive or negative effect on grassroots football in the UK.

Additionally, it is also worth noting that a study could be conducted using the same format as this dissertation but without such 'westernised' cultures. Although it could be said Israel do not geographically fit this profile, it could be argued they strive to replicate a western society.

The average football fan, whether intentionally or not, identifies with an imagined community of fellow supporters. This community offers the perfect target audience for a politician to use as a springboard for political or personal advances and, based upon the country the politician is operating in, will continue to do so. The question that comes from this essay is one that asks if that imagined community chooses to adhere to a politician's influence on their football club.

Appendices

- 1. Table 1: Trust in Professions: Trust to tell the truth, 1983-2014. (Institute for Government Online, 2015)**

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