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Cultural Participation, the Making of Distinction and the Case of Fans of FC United of Manchester

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Abstract

This paper looks at the operation of distinction amongst FC United of Manchester fans. It begins with a discussion of Bennett et al's recent analysis of social distinction in British cultural life. Here they suggest that recent commercialisation practices and state regulation within football aimed at breaking the strong relationship between football and the working class, have led to the watching of football being a cultural activity evenly popular across social classes and, therefore, no longer a sight for the making of cultural distinction in Britain. I use my research with FC United fans to suggest that these very policies have led football fans to make explicit distinctions about how, and by whom, football should be watched. I look at how FC United fans dissatisfaction with the 'matchday experience' at Old Trafford have been expressed by drawing a distinction between themselves and 'new' supporters and their 'passive' modes of support. I suggest that these 'distinctions' have led these supporters to create a matchday experience at FC United which stands in clear contrasts to what they see as prevailing at Old Trafford. Finally, I look at FC United fans attitudes towards televised football, and suggest these are related to the distinction they draw around the watching of football and what constitutes 'authentic' football spectating.

Keywords

Football; Culture; Distinction; Spectating; Television

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Cultural Participation, the Making of Distinction and the Case of Fans of FC United of Manchester

Introduction

This paper is based around a short period of research in July and August 2009. In particular I carried out five in-depth semi-structured interviews¹ with fans of FC United which lasted between an hour and two and a half hours. I also attended a few early season FC United games and read the FC United fanzine *Under the Boardwalk*. The restricted scope of the research means that all conclusions drawn in the paper are necessarily tentative and subject to revision in a longer period of research planned for the 2009/10 football season.

FC United of Manchester (henceforth FC United), a semi-professional football team, was formed in the summer of 2005 by Manchester United fans angry at the takeover of Manchester United by the Glazer family. Since then the club has gone on to have success on the pitch (promoted three times in four seasons) while enjoying considerable support off it (with average attendances between 2000 and 3000). The club is fan-owned, with a one member one vote governance structure which allows the club's fans to make key decisions on the running of the club (Brown, 2008).

This paper will discuss the extent to which football spectating is a site for the making of distinction in contemporary British cultural life. The paper will look at how those FC United fans I interviewed had become increasingly dissatisfied by the 'matchday experience' available to them at Old Trafford and the way in which this dissatisfaction expresses itself by the making of distinctions about how, and by whom, football should be watched – in particular a distinction is made between their 'active' supporter culture and the 'passive' support of 'new' fans. The paper will then show how these distinctions have informed the kind of 'matchday experience' that these fans have sought at FC United. Finally, the paper will present a discussion of my interviewees' relationship to televised football and suggest that the kinds of watching experiences these fans seek from television is related to their idea of what 'authentic' football watching involves and the distinctions they draw around this.

1. Distinction in British Cultural Life

Bennett et al's recent analysis of British cultural life, in the book *Culture, Class, Distinction* (2009) has thrown up several interesting points of discussion in relation to the operation of distinction in cultural life and in this paper I wish to make, a necessarily limited, response to some of those points. Bennett et al's work is an engagement with Bourdieu's classic analysis of French cultural life in the 1960s, in the book *Distinction* (1984). *Distinction* (1984) addressed the idea of cultural capital, that is 'the ability of privileged groups to define their culture as superior to that of the lower classes' (Robbins, 2005 as cited in Bennett et al, 2009) and suggested, as Bennett et al put it, that 'French society was characterised by a systematic process whereby those schooled in forms of "legitimate" culture enjoyed advantages over the working and popular classes who stood outside of, or tangential to (legitimate culture)' (2009: 11). Bourdieu (1984) was presenting a claim that social classes could be distinguished by unified and internally coherent sets of cultural tastes – a distinct class habitus. Bennett et al (2009) suggest from their recent research that the primary distinction in British cultural life is not between high and popular culture, as Bourdieu found in France, but instead is between those who appear culturally active and are engaged in a wide range of cultural activities, both established and popular, and those who are relatively more detached with a more limited range of cultural interests and activities. They suggest that in this distinction between culturally 'engaged' and 'disengaged', class is the primary structuring force with those who

are more engaged tending to come from higher social classes (Bennett et al, 2009). They argue that in Britain, the middle class's increasing openness to forms of popular culture mean that few cultural activities are the preserve of the working-class (Bennett et al, 2009). Sport, and football in particular, would initially seem to demonstrate many of their arguments. They suggest that in the past sports in Britain have often had strong class connotations – for example rugby union was often symbolically associated with the middle and upper-class while football was mainly associated with the working-class² (Bennett et al, 2009). They remark that 'Soccer, while initially popular primarily with the working class, now also attracts a significant middle-class audience following commercialisation strategies and state regulation designed to detach the sport from its working-class fan-base' (Bennett et al, 2009:156). Bennett et al (2009) demonstrate how watching football – both on TV and at football grounds – which they characterise as 'passive participation' – is evenly popular across social classes. Where class matters is in levels of 'active participation' – taking part in recreational sport and exercise – which they suggest is more prevalent amongst higher social classes (Bennett et al, 2009). It would appear from Bennett et al's analysis that the watching of football – as a part of popular culture – is not a site for the making of distinction in contemporary British cultural life. However I wish to suggest, following my research with FC United fans, that this rendering obscures the increasingly intense cultural politics that have emerged over the last twenty years about the meaning of watching football as a cultural activity. These cultural politics involve the making of distinctions about by whom, and how, football should be watched and in part appear to arise out of an increasing awareness of the co-option of football into the canon of popular culture accessible to all. It is also interesting to note that much of the cultural politics and distinctions being made about watching football involve a vigorous dispute of the idea of this cultural act being 'passive participation' – as it is referred to in Bennett et al. It is with these ideas in mind that I now turn to my recent research with FC United fans.

2. Old Trafford and the Declining Match-Day Experience

I'll be honest here ... I'd gone right off football, I stopped going to OT (Old Trafford) a few seasons ago because it had become a dull experience. No not dull, totally bleedin' soul destroying. You know the score: twenty odd quid to sit next to a numpty in a (oh no here it comes) JESTER HAT and watch a bunch of millionaires whilst being told to behave by a faceless PA announcer, and the no-fun security mob! I'm getting too old for that kind of manufactured entertainment. It wasn't the football of old, the football that we grew up with, more like some marketing man's idea of what football should be ...

(Under the Boardwalk Fanzine, Issue 3, Editorial Comments)

It has often been asserted in the press (See: Conn: 2007, Fifield: 2006 and Howard: 2005), as it was by my interviewees, that the Glazer takeover was a 'final straw' for those who decided to support FC United. A number of changes at Manchester United over the preceding two decades had led to rising levels of dissatisfaction and, concurrently, politicisation amongst a section of Manchester United's fan base. As Adam Brown (2008) asserts central amongst these changes was a perceived 'deterioration of the match-day experience' (2008, 347) at Old Trafford. Anthony King's (2002) work with a group of Manchester United fans, 'the lads', in the early 1990's, is indicative of the historical genesis of these concerns over the match-day experience. His research with these fans took place during the 1993–4 season shortly after the transformation of Old Trafford into an all-seater stadium, following the publication of the 1990 Taylor report, and during the second season of the newly launched English Premier League, a time when Manchester United were attempting to attract a new (and more affluent) audience to games. King (2002) sets out how the lads experience moments of intense excitement and created bonds of masculine solidarity through their support for Manchester

United. In particular ‘the lads mutually practise and demonstrate their support, by drinking and singing together, intensifying their emotions, raising them in some cases to a crescendo of excitement’ (King 2002: 151). Further to this, King demonstrates how football support was a crucial site for the building and maintenance of significant social relations for the lads, as he suggests that it is through the communal act of support ‘the lads reaffirm their relations with other lads through their love of their team’ (2002: 152). However the changes outlined above were, at the time of King’s research, increasingly coming to threaten the lads’ modes of match-day support. For example, as King reveals the lads felt that new fans were undermining the atmosphere at Manchester United games through their passive modes of match-day support; he quotes one informant saying:

it ruins it for me sometimes, the atmosphere ... When I’ve been at some matches at Old Trafford this year and I’ve just been looking at the people sat around me. It just fucks me off so much to look at them all sat there in shirts not singing

(2002: 155)

So the lads associate these passive modes of consumption with, and in so doing make clear their distinction from, new fans at Old Trafford who were seen by them as undermining the atmosphere (actively) generated by the lads which was so crucial to their match-day experience. Furthermore, as King (2002) reveals, rising ticket prices and Old Trafford becoming an all-seater stadium made it increasingly difficult for the lads to maintain social relations and bonds of masculine sociality which were so integral to their experience of being a Manchester United supporter. Rising ticket prices left some lads excluded on the grounds of cost, while the move from terraces to an all-seater stadium made it more difficult for the lads to group together. As one of King’s informants said, ‘when you’re stood up, you tend to drift into different crowds or into different people and really you end up with people who are most like yourself ... You can’t choose who you’re with now’ (2002: 160). In effect the move to an all-seater stadium had taken control away from the lads over how, and with whom, they wished to support their football team. What King’s (2002) work indicates is that transformative dynamics at play in English football in the early 1990s were becoming a source of considerable dissatisfaction amongst a section of Manchester United supporters and this dissatisfaction was expressed through concerns over match-day experience, loss of atmosphere, passivity of new fans, the inability to maintain social relations within Old Trafford, and a loss of control.

Those Manchester United supporters who went on to form FC United, twelve years after King’s research, included, Brown (2007) suggests, some of those King refers to as ‘the lads’, but also a broader range of Manchester United supporters. Indeed those I interviewed could not easily be said to fit into ‘the lads’ category, including as they did two women and being older than ‘the lads’ in King’s study. However as I will suggest below the lads and those FC United supporters I interviewed share a common view on the effects of the changes that have occurred at Old Trafford on the match-day experience and they utilise a similar set of concepts in order to critique these changes. So, those FC United fans I interviewed expressed disapproval at the extent to which rising ticket prices and the move to an all-seater stadium had jeopardised their ability to maintain social relations around watching football which were so central to their enjoyment of match going support of Manchester United. For instance, Steven expressed his disapproval at the way the transformation to an all-seater ground and the scarcity of tickets meant he was no longer able to be with his mates in Old Trafford as they were either sat in other parts of the ground or could not get or afford a ticket. However these social relations were not restricted to the bonds of masculine sociality which were so important to the lads but embraced a broader set of social relations. For example both Dave and Jenny told me how the prohibitive cost of tickets at Old Trafford prevented them attending games with their families. So Dave had only two tickets between himself and his two sons at Old Trafford and was therefore, with a further ticket both very expensive and

difficult to obtain, forced to rotate the two tickets between the three of them. Similarly Jenny told me how 'you couldn't take your kids anymore (to Old Trafford), because it was too dear. You couldn't go as a family, because even if you got a ticket, you'd be over there and the kids would be over there' (Jenny, Personal Interview). Furthermore, those I interviewed felt that being forced to sit in the re-developed all-seater Old Trafford and the attendant effects this had on the ability to maintain social relations around football had had a knock-on effect on the atmosphere. For example, when I asked Sarah whether she felt the re-introduction of safe-standing in premier league grounds would improve the atmosphere she replied 'yeah, absolutely, it's that whole thing of being with your mates' (Sarah, Personal Interview). Further to this, the enforcement of a no-standing policy, with its attendant effects on atmosphere and the ability to maintain certain social relations, at Old Trafford seems symbolic of the loss of control over their match-day experience felt by these Manchester United supporters – so, for example, Dave talked of how Old Trafford had become 'dictatorial' in its treatment of supporters. Furthermore, much like the lads in King's study, those I interviewed were highly critical of the effect of new fans on the atmosphere and in particular how these fans' passive modes of support undermined the atmosphere, and in so doing made a clear distinction between themselves and these new fans. Dave described the atmosphere as being diluted by 'day-trippers' who were looking for a 'theme park experience'. While Steven spoke of how 'I can't disagree that there are a big part of the Old Trafford entertainment complex that are more interested in entertainment than getting behind the team' (Steven, Personal interview). Similarly Sarah spoke of how:

the really worrying thing about Premiership crowds now, is they do sit and wait to be entertained, instead of seeing their role as part of the process ... actually you've got to get behind the team if they're 1-0 down and not sit there and mutter

(Sarah, Personal Interview)

Indeed the FC United website (www.fc-utd.co.uk) describing the reasons behind the formation of the club talks of 'soulless all-seater stadia full of "new" supporters intent to sit back and watch rather than partake in the occasion'.

So from this it can be seen that those Manchester United fans that went on to form FC United had arrived at a shared critique of the kind of match going experience available at Old Trafford. Much like the lads in King's research in the early 90s, they were aggrieved at the move to an all-seater stadium, rising ticket prices and the influx of 'passive' new supporters to Old Trafford and the attendant effects that they saw this as having on the atmosphere at games and the kinds of social relations they could maintain around watching football. It is important to note, as King (2002) did in his research on 'new consumer fans' that a number of fans (especially given rising attendances at Old Trafford throughout the 1990s) are happy with the changes that have occurred in recent decades. For instance, the move to and enforcement of an all-seater stadium, that the lads and the FC United fans I interviewed so passionately object to, other supporters appear content with – what this indicates, I would suggest, is that different groups of supporters seek fundamentally different things from a common cultural act. In the next section I want to look at how this shared critique amongst FC United fans of the current situation at Old Trafford has led these fans to create a particular kind of match-going environment at FC United, one which stands in contra-distinction to what they see as occurring at Old Trafford.

3. The FC United Match-Day Experience

The desire for a 'return' to a different form of football consumption is a cultural expression of a collective *political* will and desire to effect social change

(Brown 2008: 356)

For my interviewees one of the central tenets of the match-day experience at FC United was the ability to re-establish (and build new) social relations around football support which had been lost at Old Trafford. So Dave described how at FC United he was able to take both his sons, as ticket prices were so cheap he felt he could take whoever he wanted. Steven on the other hand emphasised the way in which match-going support of FC United allowed him to recapture some of the sociality which he found was no longer available to him at Old Trafford. His response to my question about what he enjoyed about attending FC United matches is worth quoting at length

I think at first it was because it had some of the elements about matches that I didn't experience anymore, for a start being able to go with your mates ... to be able to have a laugh with your mates, it sounds a bit juvenile that, but it is kind of one of the reasons you go to football, it is a sort of shared experience ... social to be able to chat with your friends at the football and have a few pints with them before the match

(Steven, Personal interview)

So for Steven FC United matches are enjoyable because they allow for a 'return' to an earlier mode of football consumption, one where football support is a social phenomenon standing in contrast to Old Trafford where you are confined to an individual seat which may be away from your friends or where they may be excluded by the scarcity and/or price of tickets. Further to this, the ability to maintain social relations around FC United games was also related to the atmosphere. For example Sarah related the presence of atmosphere to the fact she was able to group with her mates at FC games, because of the absence of restrictions on your movements within the ground.

Indeed 'atmosphere', as a concept, was central to my interviewees' descriptions of the FC United match-day. In particular, the active and 'spontaneous'³ nature of the atmosphere at FC United was identified as being crucial to the match-day experience. So for example, Dave described how fans at FC United were keen to be interactive with the players on the pitch by singing for ninety minutes. Dave compared the active support at FC to what he saw as the increasingly passive nature of supporters at Old Trafford. Interestingly when Steven was discussing reasons why FC United games had more atmosphere than those at Old Trafford, he made a distinction based on social class between the respective fan groups saying 'I'd say the demographic of FC United supporters is a lot less gentrified than the people who are occupying Old Trafford these days' (Steven, Personal Interview). Brown sets out how FC United's manager Karl Marginson has described the club's support as adopting a '“90/90/90 culture”--90% of the fans singing for 90% of the 90 minutes of the match' (2008: 354) – and this 90/90/90 phrase can be seen as a motif of the 'active' supporter culture at FC United. Neil talked of FC United having a 'self-generated and spontaneous atmosphere' (Neil, Personal Interview). Indeed the importance placed on 'spontaneity'– embodied in the phrase 'punk football' amongst FC United supporters – to what constitutes a good atmosphere at FC United was most clearly expressed at a game I attended against Boston United. Boston United fans, who were grouped together in one section of the ground, had brought a drum with them which was banged at regular intervals throughout the game. The playing of this drum was subject to a fair number of negative comments and chants from the crowd around me. I asked Steven why the drum had provoked such a negative reaction to which he responded, 'bleeding drums, ban drums at football, it just seems non-spontaneous ... we're adults, we can generate our own atmosphere' (Steven, Personal Interview). It is important to realise that this stress on spontaneity amongst FC United fans has arisen out of the particular shared historical circumstances of the large number of changes that have occurred at Old Trafford which many see as having limited their capacity for spontaneous displays of support for Manchester United, especially through the ever greater security restrictions, identified as the 'no-fun

security mob' by the *Under the Boardwalk* fanzine commentator, at Old Trafford that forced spectators to stay in their seats. Furthermore, the panopticon isolation of the seat as opposed to the anonymity of the terrace (King, 2002) means that spontaneous shows of support at Old Trafford can result in embarrassment. This was illustrated to me by Dave, who told me how he had given up trying to start chants and songs at Old Trafford because of the embarrassment when people did not want to interact and 'looked at you as if you were doing something wrong', whereas at FC United he felt free to start chants without risk of embarrassment. Again, what Dave's story illustrates is the way in which past experiences of Old Trafford, and the distinctions they draw between themselves and new fans at Old Trafford, have shaped the kinds of match-day experience fans of FC United place stress upon, and give them heightened enjoyment of these experiences. I would suggest the active role the FC United supporters can play in creating the atmosphere they desire takes on a heightened importance and becomes the object of conscious reflection because of the experience of feeling unable to, and their awareness that other fans were not interested in, generating this kind of atmosphere at Old Trafford.

It is also worth reflecting briefly on the way that the structure of FC United – as a fan owned and fan run club – affects the kind of match day atmosphere produced by FC United fans. What this governance structure effects is a radical departure from pre-existing models of fan/club relationship – in fact it breaks down this very duality – such that the fan, as also a paying member, is part of the club as a business structure and has a say in how this overall club structure is managed. King (2002) describes how the lads would carry out a separation between the business side of the club, which they saw themselves as not supporting, and the team, which they did support, but such separation would be both unnecessary and meaningless for fans of FC United – since they are in control of the business side of the club. I would suggest that this fan-owned, fan-run club structure may heighten the need that FC United supporters feel to generate noise or 'atmosphere' which they see as their way of 'contributing' – as Dave put it – to their team's and club's success. As one FC United fan diarist put it 'there is no: "We are here to be entertained, entertain me". FC United of Manchester fans know we are all together. Club, players, fans. The unbeatable, indivisible treble' (Brady 2006: 275). Similarly Sarah described how:

you feel obliged to do your bit and sing, the players have been working during the day, then clocked off and come and (played), so the least you can do is support them ... bit of a different relationship than with Ronaldo and co

(Sarah, Personal Interview).

The obligation spoken of by Sarah to actively support the team, I would suggest, is not only the product of a critique of the increasingly passive modes of premiership support amongst some fans (although this is part of it) but is also the result of her feeling a part of, rather than just a supporter of, the club. Whereas Sarah can separate herself from Manchester United players such as 'Ronaldo and co', FC United players are part of 'The unbeatable, indivisible treble' as Brady put it and as a fan of and part of FC United football club she feels she has a responsibility to the team on the pitch to actively create an 'atmosphere' by singing.

4. Television, Authenticity and Control

I had more fun when I watched (Manchester United) in the pub with my mates. Having a beer, having a laugh, taking the piss (good craic, if you must). Sadly this too was part of the problem – football's brave new relationship with television. Step forward British Sky Broadcasting

(*Under The Boardwalk*, Issue 3, Editorial Comments)

Those FC United fans I interviewed often expressed opposition to television, and Sky broadcasting in particular, role within football. In particular this opposition seems centred around Sky Sports taking control of the match-day experience away from those fans who attended Manchester United games at Old Trafford, in particular through the movement of kick-off times from their historic spot of 3 PM on a Saturday. So, for example, Dave told me how he had become increasingly annoyed at Manchester United with kick off times constantly being moved to fit in with the needs of Sky television and Jenny spoke of how ‘they call the tune, all the game times and days are all changed to fit in with Sky’ (Jenny, Personal Interview). It is this rejection amongst fans of FC United of the control that Sky Sports increasingly had over their match-day experience at Old Trafford that leads FC United to be committed to a policy of playing at 3 PM on a Saturday. Indeed this rejection of television’s role within football is documented in FC United songs

When FC United go out to play,
It’s 3 o’clock on a Saturday,
We don’t work for Sky Sports anymore

(Brown 2008: 356)

This use of the term ‘work’ would seem to me to clearly indicate FC United fans understanding of the relationship between television and match-going football fans and the power dynamics at play in that relationship (where they see television companies as having control of football supporters). However it is not only in their control of kick-off times that television (and Sky in particular) is seen as undermining the match going experience by FC United fans, it is also seen as having a role in the perceived passivity of many fans at Old Trafford which the FC United fans I interviewed saw as undermining the match-day atmosphere. For instance, Sarah when discussing the adoption of passive modes of support by some fans at Old Trafford, suggested ‘(for) the Sky generation, it’s entertainment’ (Sarah, Personal Interview) – the term entertainment here is used in contrast with her own view of football support where a fan is a part of the game.

It is also interesting to note how ideas about ‘authentic’ football fandom are played out in relation to television by FC United fans. Brown describes how FC United fans shared ‘notions of what ‘authentic’ football consumption meant ... and the superiority of consuming it ‘live’ at the match – the ‘you don’t know unless you go’ philosophy’ (2008: 349). Jenny expressed this notion of televised football consumption as ‘inauthentic’ in her dismissal of football on television, which she did not watch, as ‘soulless’. However my other interviewees did not share this blanket dismissal of televised football (Dave, Sarah and Steven all regularly watch Manchester United on television alongside attending FC United games) and the relationship between television coverage and these fans notions of ‘authentic’ fandom is complex. As I set out in the first section of this paper, for the FC United fans I interviewed, their idea of what ‘authentic’ football consumption entails (sociality, active and spontaneous support and a noisy atmosphere) had been disrupted by many of the changes that had occurred at Old Trafford over the preceding twenty years. As King notes ‘given the increasing control of the fans in the grounds in England, watching televised games in private homes or in pubs may become a less restrictive, more engaged and socially powerful event than attending itself’ (2003: 257). The comment with which I began this section from *Under the Boardwalk* reflects this, where the writer describes how the experience of watching Manchester United in a pub allows for the kind of sociality which is no longer available to him within Old Trafford. Steven also suggested to me that watching Manchester United in a pub may offer for many Manchester United fans a preferable and more ‘authentic’ experience to attending Old Trafford:

A reason why FC United haven’t attracted more disillusioned United supporters than they have is that it’s not that hard to watch United ... In the pub with your mates and that offers for a lot of people a better match-day experience than actually going to Old

Trafford. People who can't afford and just don't enjoy paying that amount of money for something that they feel to be a bit plastic these days

(Steven, Personal Interview)

The use of the word 'plastic' indicates how for Steven the experience of watching football at Old Trafford had become manufactured (non-spontaneous) and in some sense 'in-authentic' and as such the pub, potentially, offers a more 'authentic' Manchester United match day experience. It is important to note here that other football fans may seek very different experiences from watching football on television, for example those fans attracted to Old Trafford in the post-1990 era are unlikely to watch football on television in order to see a less-restrictive experience than the one available within football grounds.

I would also suggest that the reason that many FC United fans, like Dave, Sarah and Steven continue to watch Manchester United on television is the deeply held commitment that these fans feel to Manchester United football team. As Sarah expressed to me she still considers herself a Manchester United fan, but unwilling to give any money to the Glazer ownership, match going support of FC United she feels is her way to support Manchester United. The phrase 'two Uniteds but the soul is one' is often used amongst FC United fans and this phrase communicates the continued commitment that these fans feel towards Manchester United as a football team (despite a rejection of the club's business structure). As such, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that despite opposition to many of the effects that Sky Television has had on football many FC United fans continue to follow Manchester United through this means (a means that does not involve direct financial support for the Glazer ownership). However it is interesting to note how this continued following of Manchester United is implicated in these fans notions of their own 'authenticity' as Manchester United fans. As Brown discusses, some Manchester United fans who have continued attending Old Trafford have accused FC United fans 'of 'deserting Manchester United, of "disloyalty"' (2008: 348) and these accusations seem clearly aimed at presenting FC United fans as 'in-authentic' Manchester United fans. It is interesting that both Dave and Sarah presented the way in which FC United fans follow Manchester United on television as a counter-point to these accusations and as evidence of their 'authenticity' as Manchester United supporters. Dave described how when FC United fans gathered to watch Manchester United on television there remained a great desire to see Manchester United succeed and he suggested that those who accused FC United fans of being anti-Manchester United should see them watching Manchester United in the pubs. Similarly Sarah told of how

I've got some very anti FC, Big United (Manchester United) friends ... they have this mistaken belief that we've turned our backs on United ... I always think if only you could get them to sit in a pub with a whole lot of FC United fans and see the intensity, concentration and celebration and the gloom when an away goal goes in ... you just think perhaps it would change their mind

(Sarah, Personal Interview)

I would suggest that what Sarah and Dave's comments reveal is the way in which the viewing of Manchester United on television has become implicated in FC United fans construction's of their own 'authenticity' as Manchester United fans. It could perhaps then be suggested that for FC United fans their relationship with television coverage of football opens up a paradoxical space – on the one hand objecting to the control exerted by television companies (especially Sky) over match-going fans but on the other hand because of the deep-felt commitment many FC United fans continue to feel towards Manchester United football team (and objection to giving the football club any money) the watching of Manchester United on television has become a necessary feature of their fandom.

Conclusion

I would suggest that what should be obvious from this paper is that a common cultural act, that of watching football, can be invested with very different meanings, and radically divergent experiences are sought from that act by different people. While Bennett et al (2009) suggest that the commercialisation and regulatory practices within football, designed to open up the game to a richer and more middle-class audience have closed down the watching of football as a site for the marking of cultural distinction, I would suggest the exact opposite. It is these very policies which led the lads in King's (2002) study and those FC United fans I interviewed to make explicit distinctions about the way in which they consider football should be watched and in so doing make clear a distinction of themselves from 'new' fans who do not share their modes of football watching. I think it is also clear that the kinds of football watching experiences sought by FC United fans at their games, and to some extent when watching on television, of sociality and an active and spontaneous atmosphere, are explicitly sought in contra-distinction to the kinds of football watching experiences available at Old Trafford and in distinction to the passive non-spontaneous fans they see as increasingly predominant at Manchester United home games. It would seem to me then that the cultural politics that have emerged about the way in which football should be watched, over the last twenty years, have opened up a space for political action amongst FC United supporters. The fact that the supporters of FC United share distinctions with each other about what 'authentic' football watching involves allowed them to collectively create a particular, desired, type of spectating experience at FC United.

So if this paper has demonstrated that watching football, as an act of cultural participation, is a site for the making of cultural distinctions then it perhaps begs the question of how these distinctions I have revealed relate to Bennett et al's (2009) categories of analysis such as gender and social class. As I pointed out my interviewees were both male and female and they shared a common set of distinctions with one another regardless of gender. While King (2002) sought explanation for 'the lads' modes of distinction in these fans understanding of their own masculinity, I would suggest from my research that FC United fans modes of distinction cut across gender boundaries and cannot straightforwardly be explained by reference to notions of masculinity. In the case of social class, while I pointed out that a distinction between supporters at FC United and new fans at Old Trafford was drawn on the basis of social class by my interviewees, it is also the case that those FC United supporters I interviewed could not all be easily placed in a sociological category 'working-class'. In other words, it seems to me that while social distinctions drawn around watching football are related to class, they cannot simply be reduced to class. Perhaps unsurprisingly (given the very first paragraph of this paper) I would suggest more research is needed to further elaborate the way in which categories such as class and gender are implicated (or not) in the distinctions, with regards to football spectating, I have revealed as operating amongst fans of FC United.

¹ The names of those I interviewed have all been changed for this paper – they will be called Dave, Steven, Sarah, Neal and Jenny for the purposes of this paper.

² It is important not to over-emphasise this historical association between football and the working-class in England, as King (2002) suggests, citing Dunning et al (1988), while it is probably true that for most of the 20th century football has been primarily watched by working-class men the composition of football crowds has fluctuated to include other social classes.

³ It is worth noting that the importance placed on 'spontaneity' to 'atmosphere' is quite specific to English fandom – in Europe it is common for a particular fan to lead and organise the chanting, often through the use of a megaphone (See Parks, 2003 for a description of these practices amongst fans of Hellas Verona in Italy).

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