

‘Much more important than that’ – Football and the Left



The recent visit by Ken Loach and Eric Cantona to Dublin for the première of [Looking for Eric](#) drew a surprise guest who Loach, at least, was unpleasantly surprised to see. Former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern [muscled in on the occasion](#), accompanied by his hapless brother Maurice on the latter's doomed election campaign. The Aherns presented the former Manchester United star with a personalised Dubs shirt. Loach, not surprisingly,

accused Ahern of hijacking the première, and it's hard to disagree with him, particularly as Bertie came out with his standard guff about being a big fan of Loach and having met Cantona many times at Old Trafford. Loach wasn't impressed by this 'dodgy rightwing politician' who didn't care for the film enough to wait for the screening.

The release of a film about football by that most leftwing of directors provides an opportunity to examine the left's relationship to the game, a relationship that has long been an uneasy one. In Loach's case the link has always been there: despite his middle-class background, he has been a football fan for decades, and one of his earliest films *Kes* had a famous comic sequence in which the PE teacher, played by Brian Glover, commentated an imagined goal he scored for Man Utd.

Left View of Sport: 'war minus the shooting'?

But those anti-sport voices on the left have often been the loudest. George Orwell's comment that sport is 'war minus the shooting' has been the abiding dogma of leftist intellectuals, if not the left as a whole. Of course, Orwell's words have rarely been put in their context, i.e. the hugely successful [Dynamo Moscow tour of Britain in 1945](#). It was a tour by the team most closely associated with the Red Army, and presided over by Stalin's NKVD chief Lavrenti Beria, that had the sole intent of propaganda. Most British fans were more interested in the mesmerising passovotchka football played by Dynamo but Orwell, being one of the first leftist critics of Stalin, and having lived through a six-year-war which



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challenged, but never broke, his internationalism, saw it differently. His distaste was perfectly understandable, as would be the later sporting boycotts of Apartheid South Africa and the Beijing Olympics.

But to use nationalism as a stick to beat international sport is misguided and largely beside the point. Loach put this well in his Cannes press conference for *Looking for Eric* when he said that football, on the contrary, provides an escape valve for national chauvinism, being the only time when it is really acceptable for those on the left to take excessive pride in their country. There are cases where the chauvinism does become ugly, and I will come back to them, but these days, at least, the passions unleashed by international football and sport are for the most part good humoured.

The left, or at least the cosmopolitan left that has formed opinion in the West in the past forty to fifty years, has been largely suspicious of football. This has its roots in classical Marxism – [Karl Kautsky](#) was scornful of football, seeing it as an instrument of control of the working classes. The German and Scandinavian Social Democratic parties likewise opposed professionalism on ideological grounds, a view that still exists on leftwing fringes. Though French footballers in May 1968 – at the time, some of the most appallingly treated in Western Europe – [mounted their own occupation of the French Football Federation headquarters](#), the *soixante-huitards* were indifferent to or dismissive of the sport. This was mainly due to their bourgeois backgrounds and the fact that France’s football heritage at the time – a few glory years in the 1950s aside – was poor. Albert Camus was one of the few French intellectuals of any era to have any fondness for the sport, mainly because he grew up poor as a *pied noir* in working-class Algiers. There was even a bit of a shock among leftist French intellectuals when their beloved Ken Loach thought a subject as vulgar as football worthy of his attention. [Serge Kaganski](#) of *Les Inrockuptibles* wondered why Loach ‘steered clear of the murkier zones of football’ in the film. Kaganski clearly wasn’t paying attention to the film or was ignorant of the history of FC United, the team formed by United fans in protest at the potentially ruinous takeover by the Glazer family. *Looking for Eric* features a lengthy scene in the pub – which is classic Loach – where supporters of the new club defend their abandonment of a club that has been stolen from them by an uncaring behemoth of American capitalism.

There are also those on the liberal left who have a simple personal distaste for football, such as Robert Fiske, [whose bad experience at the hands of sadistic](#)

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[public school jocks](#) has forever coloured his view of the sport. Christopher Hitchens thinks any sport, like much else in life, below him. Noam Chomsky probably has no opinion on the round-ball game, but he’s very much of the ‘bread-and-circuses’ school of thought when it comes to his [assessment of American sport](#). You cannot argue with anyone who just simply dislikes football, it hardly leaves a void in their life and there are more important things to be concerned about. But it sometimes is difficult to explain to some people why you can’t meet them the night of an Ireland world cup qualifier or a Champions’ League game. I feel like Umberto Eco, who when not wishing to be disturbed when watching his beloved Bologna on television on Sunday afternoons, instructs his family to tell highbrow callers that ‘Professor Eco is listening to Brahms’ so as to remain unmolested.

There are also those people, on the left as well as elsewhere, that love to bash football in favour of rugby (rugby ‘fans’, of course constitute a large number of these). I have already written at length on this [elsewhere](#) so I won’t go on. Suffice to say that contrary to the hackneyed expression that tells us football is a gentleman’s game played by thugs and rugby a thug’s game played by gentlemen, I would say that rugby is simply a smug bastard’s game played by smug bastards.

Football as a Political Tool

Football, as we have seen with Orwell, has been accused of whipping up nationalist passions, which is admittedly true though more often it has been the vehicle for more deeply seated poisonous energies. The famous [football war](#) between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969 used the controversial World Cup qualifier between the two nations as the pretext for a conflict that had already been simmering for a three decades. Nationalists both Serb and Croat built their militias in the Yugoslav wars around hooligan elements from clubs such as Red Star, Partizan Belgrade and Dinamo Zagreb. [An attack by Zagreb player Zvonimir Boban](#) on a Yugoslav policeman in 1992 is even seen by some to be the Gavrilo Princip moment of the conflict. The Old Firm, while certainly not blameless, is rather hysterically accused by some of being the sole source of sectarianism in Scotland and Northern Ireland. All too often political strongmen are happy to use football successes to their own advantage. There’s a long history of it in Brazil, by both elected and military leaders, to the extent that when the country finally regained the World Cup in 1994, some of the players

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expressed the hope that the victory would not be exploited by the country’s politicians. Argentina’s generals were enthusiastic supporters of the sterile but successful anti-football employed by Racing Club and Estudiantes in the late 1960s. Colonel Gadhafi even managed to worm his son onto the books of Juventus (sponsored at the time by the Libyan state oil company Tamoil) despite the latter having no discernible footballing talent. But all one can really draw from this is that football, as a hugely popular sport, can be implemented in the service of mass political and social movements.

Footballers Turned Politicians and the Power of Protest

The left has not been completely absent from football either; there are teams with a clearly defined left-wing fan culture such as Celtic, Barcelona, Rayo Vallecano, Bologna, Livorno, Hammarby, St Pauli. Not that these have been without their own unsavoury elements from time to time either. There have been a number of players that have dabbled in leftist or left-of-centre politics, such as Gianni Rivera, a former Italian junior secretary for Defence and now a Social Democratic MEP, Grzegorz Lato, a former Polish Social Democratic senator, Dominique Rocheteau was an outspoken communist throughout his playing days and now heads the French Football Federation’s ethics committee. Miguel Saldanha, who was originally set to manage Brazil in the 1970 World Cup finals, was a communist who resisted attempts by the Generals to interfere with team selection. He was replaced shortly before the finals began. Lilian Thuram is unaffiliated to any party but has not ruled out entering politics in the years to come. On the more Stalinist end of things, the trainer of Hungary’s Golden Team Gusztáv Sebes was a staunch communist and former union organiser at the Renault motorworks in Paris, while Oleg Blokhin combined his stewardship of the Ukrainian national team at the 2006 World Cup with his role as a Communist Party deputy.

Football has also occasionally been the vector for left-wing liberation movements. Much of the organisation for anti-colonial movements in African countries came as a result of football, which, in many countries was the only means of assembly the natives were permitted. In countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Rhodesia football stars such as Benjamin Borombo and Sipambaniso Manyoba doubled as union organisers. Football provided the sporting bulwark of the ANC in Apartheid-era South Africa and was one of the few areas of interracial activity. African countries, after a long struggle eventually forced FIFA to leave a South Africa

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that refused to field a mixed-race team out in the cold. Meanwhile the inmates at Robben Island maintained a [fully-organised league](#) for more than twenty years. And only last month, six Iranian footballers showed remarkable courage in [wearing the green](#) of the opposition protestors in a World Cup qualifier in South Korea.

Football Largely Apolitical

But these affiliations aside, football is a largely apolitical animal, something which has, no doubt, earned it the scorn of the militant left. This left sees a docile crowd cowed into submissiveness by its weekly fix of football; it sees the masses dissipating their revolutionary energies in the service of a commercial enterprise that has been magnified in recent years by television and spiralling salaries and admission fees. All very well but it omits to mention that much footballing culture is created by those very masses, it ignores the inventiveness and wit of those working-class fans who furnish the sport with its chants, its legends, its nicknames, its collective memory. No matter how much television, government and the world of big business and marketing may try it will always be the fans and not prefabricated franchises that will control the culture of football. This left also ignores the fact that many of the people who follow football also play it or organise it, usually for no material gain. It’s an old cliché but it does keep the kids off the streets, often children from backgrounds that have very few other activities open to them.

Bill Shankly’s famous line ‘Football’s not a matter of life and death; it’s much more important than that’ has too often been taken at face value. Something that is ridiculous given Shanks’ renowned dry wit (he once denied taking his wife to see Rochdale play on their honeymoon - he said it was Rochdale Reserves), and his own socialist political leanings, forged in the Ayrshire mining community in which he grew up. Shankly, like Matt Busby at Manchester United and Brian Clough at Derby and Notts Forest, fostered a club culture of mutual respect, solidarity and a belief in entertaining and respecting the people who spent much of their modest wages supporting them. All of this came from traditional communal values that have been eroded by industrial and societal decay over

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the past thirty years; it’s notable that Clough was a strong supporter of the striking miners in 1984. Shankly had the view that football, like anything else, should be undertaken with as much seriousness as anything else, but only a fool would think that he, Busby, Clough, Jock Stein or any of the great managers of that era thought it was the centre of the universe.

Footballers and Their Earnings

Of course the recent financial mushrooming in football, which has brought some good, and much that is bad, to the game, paradoxically has its roots in labour rights. The minor Belgian player Jean-Marc Bosman secured at the European Court of Justice in 1993, the right to leave his club for free once his contract was up. A basic right that was taken for granted by every other worker in the EU was now available to footballers. The [Bosman ruling](#) also decreed that workers’ freedom of movement throughout the EU applied equally to football, and so the way was open for clubs to help themselves to players from other countries. This skewed the balance in favour of bigger clubs in bigger countries but also attracted more lucrative television deals – which larger clubs were already in the process of hogging for themselves - generating more and more money. The bigger countries cordoned off the lions’ share of the Champions’ League for themselves and players have since moved about more and more and earned more money than ever before.

Professional footballers, overwhelmingly drawn from the working classes, always did constitute a labour aristocracy of sorts, even if they were for long still attached to the communities from which they came. But apart from a few minor revolts in the 1920s and 1930s, in Britain at least, there was never much of a push for better wages or working conditions. Most players lived out an existence where they earned decent wages by the standards of the aspirations of their class, but were tied to a serf-like relationship with their employers, a situation vividly described by Gary Imlach in his [memoir](#) about his father, former Everton and Scotland player, Stewart. It was only when Jimmy Hill took over the Professional Footballers Association at the turn of the 60s that the old tyranny evaporated and the maximum wage was done away with. But Hill’s intention was

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to move players away from status as workers and towards the entertainment strata. This gentrification of footballers brought more money to players for the duration of their career though at retirement poverty continued to bite those who didn't fall into the limited career options available at that stage of life. All of this changed in the mid-90s. Footballers are often scorned these days for the astronomical amounts they earn, and it is true that many of the wages paid are obscene. But it's hard to begrudge the players plugging away in the lower reaches of the professional game a wage that allows them to better plan for a life after the game.

Big Club Domination

But football suffers from the insane amounts of money being pumped in as power, both on and off the field, becomes increasingly concentrated in a limited number of centres. Gone are the days when teams from countries such as Sweden, the Czech Republic, Poland and Austria could genuinely expect to challenge for European trophies. In Scotland, which as recently as the 1980s saw unfashionable teams such as Aberdeen and Dundee United compete with the best in Europe, Rangers and Celtic now dominate more than ever before. Both sides would undoubtedly prefer more domestic competition but their own limited potential in Europe also depends on pulling away from the pack in terms of expenditure and income. Scottish Socialist Tommy Sheridan, himself a serious amateur player, in his book, [Imagine](#), published a decade ago, suggested such imbalances could be reversed under a socialist sports policy. Perhaps, though it is in the very un-socialist world of American sport, with its draft systems where such a situation currently exists. Of course, this is in the service of leagues where the clubs are more consciously enterprises than football clubs were at the start of their existence. It certainly provides a greater level of competitiveness but it has also done away with the notion of a plucky underdog, something that is fading from European football too. Those few successful underdogs that do arise, like Hull City, Hoffenheim, Wolfsburg, Shakhtar Donetsk or Chievo do so thanks to the largesse of wealthy individual or corporate donors.

Supporters have in many cases seen their clubs taken from them, as in the case of Manchester United and Wimbledon, whose hardcore fans have founded breakaway clubs. It has left fans on the left with a quandary, as continuing to support clubs they have followed their whole life means pouring money into the coffers of capitalists as invidious as Silvio Berlusconi, Malcolm Glazer and

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Thaksin Shinawatra. Toni Negri, the renowned Marxist theorist continues to support his beloved Milan despite Berlusconi's patronage, saying in an interview with the irreverent left-leaning French football magazine [So Foot](#) last year that 'just because the woman you love becomes a prostitute doesn't mean you love her any less.' For many, the hijacking of their club by far-right thugs was already a strong enough challenge to their support, which, in most cases endured nonetheless.

Football the Preserve of Neither the Left or the Right

Despite the broadly working-class culture of football, it has only intermittently intersected with left-wing progressive politics. And there's no real reason why it ever should have. While only a fool would say football is, or ever was, apolitical, it has never been the preserve of either the left or the right. There have been times when football fans have resisted political domination, such as when 22,000 Irish fans defied the Catholic Church [to watch their team play Yugoslavia in 1955](#) or during the Nazi Occupation of Norway when Norwegians boycotted en masse all football and sporting fixtures organised by the puppet Quisling regime. American neocons, who never fail to draw grotesque Panglossian morals from that which they do not know, like to claim that the US' lack of enthusiasm for soccer is a reflection of the [country's love of competition and individuality](#). Latin America and Europe, supposedly saddled with their backward socialist and populist worldviews, plump for soccer, which, like socialism, enshrines collectiveness and mediocrity. Football's historical weakness in the US has more to do with historical accident than cultural inclination, but such a truth sits uneasily with the armchair Hegelians of the American Enterprise Institute.

No, football is not especially socialist, or leftist, any more than it is intrinsically fascist or reactionary. But it's not anything that should be particularly anathema to an intelligent lefty. After all, the history of glorious failures on the left mirrors those in the beautiful game: the left has its Luxemburgs and Liebknechts, its Connollys and Noel Browns, its Allendes and Popular Fronts; football on the other hand has its Hungaries from 1954, its Austrias from 1934, its Hollands from 1974, its Brazils from 1982. Funny old game...

Photo of Eric Cantona and the Ahern Brothers courtesy of [The Sunday Tribune](#).

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