Football fan culture and politics in modern Greece: the process of fandom radicalization during the austerity era

Yiannis Zaimakis

To cite this article: Yiannis Zaimakis (2016): Football fan culture and politics in modern Greece: the process of fandom radicalization during the austerity era, Soccer & Society, DOI: 10.1080/14660970.2016.1171214

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2016.1171214

Published online: 11 Apr 2016.

Article views: 8
Football fan culture and politics in modern Greece: the process of fandom radicalization during the austerity era

Yiannis Zaimakis*

Sociology, University of Crete, Gallos Campus, Rethymno, Greece

The article explores the intersection between politics and football focusing on political activism in football fandom starting from its origin in late 1970s to the contemporary mass protests against austerity policies. The analysis focused on ideological conflicts between fascist and anti-fascist fans within football lifeworlds and the ways organized fans use current political circumstances to negotiate and re-interpret their identities. In the context of the Greek economic crisis, the intersection between fandom and political activism as well the newly emerged political formations that come from football elites and big business signify an important turn towards the ‘footballization’ of Greek politics. This trend reflects the growing disillusionment of Greeks towards a discredited political system and their anxious seeking of some savours come from outside the politics, as a magical solution to the social pressures and deadlocks of a society in crisis.

Introduction

Football communities are often a visible vestige of an alternative, collectivist approach to life in the atomized societies of late modernity offering opportunities for the construction of collective identities. These communities constructed and performed their identities creating symbolic boundaries with the other: rival fans, football authorities and police. Sport, in Bourdieu terms, is a relatively autonomous social field with its own dynamics, history and chronology where fans construct their narratives and patterns of behaviour. However, during times of crisis, political ideologies tend to pervade sport lifeworlds resulting in new models of collective action where football fandom meets socio-political activism.

Under these conditions, football functions as a cultural space that dramatizes and codifies wider political and ideological confrontation under the football subcultures’ way of thought. Within the realm of football fan clubs negotiation of identity, political ideologies and activism was reshaped and reinterpreted by football communities in their strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other presentation. Sport fan identities are constructed through a process by which fans take on roles that they then perform for an audience. Fandom performative acts are contextual, relational and negotiable: they are grounded within the broader social and political context in which they occur, they exist in relation to specific people, situations and events and they constantly engage in negotiation with opposing groups and clubs constructing identities and determine the relevant counteridentities.

*Email: zaimakis@uoc.gr

© 2016 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
Football activism can be seen as resistance practices which attempt to change the status quo within power relationships of football world. When football activism moves beyond sport matters and approaches wider social or political affairs can be encountered with the discourse of new political movements creating a space where political ideas, participatory democracy and sites of resistance may be cultivated. Political activism within football society can be linked either to resistant or to project identities. Resistance identities are constructed by fans that are at the wrong end of social domination, in the sense that they are or felt socially excluded or stigmatized within the existing power framework. Project identities are articulated by politicized groups who are committed to the creation of a different life via the radical transformation of society.

Football, as a contested ideological terrain, offers possibilities for collective action and resistance to hegemonic discourse that can move towards the action repertoire of social movements. According to Snow and Soule, social movements are challengers or defenders of existing structures or systems of authorities through collective enterprises acting in various degrees outside existing institutional or organizational arrangements. They operate to a certain extent of organization and they typically do with some degree of continuity. Politicized fan cultures, such as the Independent Supporters Association Movement in English, the far left fans in Spain, the neo-fascist-oriented fans or the left-wing supporters in Italy and German, construct politically oriented identities, address civic or political issues and expose grassroots radicalism. These sites of resistance entail controversies and ambivalences and often challenge dominant codes by producing alternative practices and discourses whose content is flexible and fluid ranging from conservative and reactive sentiment to progressive and emancipated discourse.

Greek football fan culture has followed, with a few years delay, the patterns of their counterpart in Southern Europe, especially Ultras movements in Italy and Spain, in terms of the intense and passionate level of support. In Greece, the vast majority of organized fans remained non-political keeping political affair away from stadiums, until the 2000s when political struggles gradually entered the field. The process of fan politicization came to a head during the period of Greek severe economic crisis when organized football fans participated in the protest movement against austerity policies and fierce political disputes occurred between anti-fascist and nationalist fans.

The article use sources derived from a wider field research on the social organization and cultural content (attitudes, meanings, values and identities) of football fan communities in Greece. This research used the ground theory perspective and a multi-disciplinary approach in order to grasp and analyse the social world of fan communities. For the research purpose, various forms of information and data were collected, including questionnaires, biographical interviews, participant observation, archives, graffiti, fun’s chanting and songs, fanzine texts, newspaper and social media data. This article makes use of selected sources, namely research diary, field observation, fanzines and Internet websites, newspaper reports and banner messages and seeks to explore the process of politicization in football fan culture in Greece within the historical and political contexts that surround football societies. Part of the fieldwork consisted of observation at important matches in football stadiums, as well as at protest events and radical fans’ gatherings during the last six years. During field participation, informal interviews and discussion with fans provided us with
the opportunity to obtain a feeling of the meaning systems and action patterns of the politicized fans.

The study investigates the intersection between politics and football, focusing on political activism in football fandom starting from its origin in late 1970s to the contemporary mass protests and rallies against austerity policies. The analysis is focused on ideological confrontations with everyday life football issues and the way that fan communities made use of the current political circumstances in order to negotiate and re-interpret identity by cultivating resistant, anti-systemic and anti-establishment sentiments for their own benefit.

The first wave of political confrontations within football worlds

Football development in post-war Greece followed the political conditions prevailing in the country after its bloody civil war (1946–1949). The state apparatus had penetrated all fields of social life including football. During the late civil war years, left-wing athletes and executives had been exiled on isolated islands and over the post-war decades football was largely controlled by right-wing state apparatus and mainstream politicians who maintained informal clientelist networks with all leading teams.

The state intervention in the field of football reached its peak during the years of Junta of the Colonels (1967–1974). The military regime manipulated sport, and especially football, turning the people’s interests in the sports fields away from the alleged symbolic pollution of politics. Athletic events were used as a mass theatre of indoctrination, allocating an important role to sport and bodily culture to shore up their nationalist ‘mission’.13 The ephemeral success of Greek football teams was presented by dictators as historical victories of the nation, evidence of its progress.14 Greek state television controlled by armed forces started to televise football matches and cover important football matches, as well as the Colonels’ conspicuous presence at major sport spectacles. The military regime took action against ‘unpatriotic acts’ of left-wing and controlled completely the football authorities and the team’s boards of directors expelling those who were regarded by dictators as real or imagined enemies of the regime.

The first two decades after the restoration of democracy in 1974 were marked by intense politicization and radicalization of youth groups. In the context of youth politicization, football was confronted with suspicion by the sizeable left-wing youth that became growingly influential, especially among students.15 For them, especially for Orthodox Marxists, football was a leisure field manipulated by the forces of reaction that used it as opium for the people promoting commercialization, political apathy and alienation.

Despite the officials denouncement that football field should be kept away from politics, football functioned as a branch of the political system patronage networks. The team’s owners utilized the electoral force of fanbase as a bargaining chip in their effort to impact the authorities’ decision to their own ends. By the advent of professionalism in Greek football in 1979, the cultural practice of clientelism reinforced since exceptional rich businessmen with strong political affiliation with mainstream political parties gradually took over leading football clubs (e.g. Vardinogiannis at Panatinaikos, Kokkalis at Olympiakos and Melissanidis at AEK). Moreover, in the context of the country booming economy over the post-junta decades a newly emerged bourgeois class entered in the field. A few of them invested
in football teams and transferred their money from club to club (often regardless
their sentimental ties with the clubs), seeking the best choice in terms of symbolic
and social capital, namely prestige, fame and publicity. Despite their long-age mis-
managements, the leading football clubs secured their viability through the tolerance
of successive Greek Governments and favourable settlements of their debts and
obligations.

The 1980s was a period of football fandom transformation when the organized
fans appeared in the stadium curves. The phenomenon had emerged in western
countries, especially Italy, England and Spain and diffused in Greece by students
abroad who carried home new patterns of fan behaviour. In addition, reportage of
furious ultras fans in mass media and athletic press excited the interest of football
society. The rise of the Greek fanatics was associated with the intensification of state
apparatus surveillance in the terraces in the 1980s and, mainly, in the early 1990s,
when police started to separate opponent fans in terraces setting railings among them
in distinguished gates.\footnote{Gradually, fanatical supporters occupied curves of terraces
located behind the goalposts where the ticket was cheap and made it a space of gath-
ering, social interaction and ritual. They draw their names from the number of the
entry gates to the club ground (e.g. Gate 13 of Panathinaikos, Gate 7 of Olympi-
aks, Original 21 of AEK, Gate 4 of PAOK, and Super 3 of Aris) and behaved as
they possessed the curves endowing them with symbols and meanings.}

In their curves, organized fans used to sing offensive, easily memorized chants
praising the pride of their teams or clubs and undermining the image of antagonistic
clubs through chants full of irony, sarcasm and hatred. They choreographed rich
repertories of spectacular visual displays, including muffles, coreo, flags, banners
and fireworks. The impressive choreographies, the strong sense of membership and
the hostility against the rival fans and what they regarded as systemic forces, espe-
cially police and the media, made this kind of fandom differ from those of tradi-
tional supporters. The new aggressive patterns of behaviour, images and chants
displayed in the terraces, seem to function as artifacts, similar to the Italian Ultras
that appeal to youth because the rebelliousness they represent is conducive to the
same youths pursuit of toughness and virility.\footnote{Like Spain and Italian Ultras, the osmosis of the increasing passionate fandom
with the skinhead subculture and its values of aggressive masculinity as a means for
acquiring prestige among peers and provoking outsiders, drew the attention of neo-
fascist groups. The first effort of extreme-right fan formation to infiltrate into organ-
nized fan clubs dates back to 1977, when \textit{NOPO (Nazi Organization of Panat-
inhaikos Fans)} a neo-Nazi, racist group made its presence felt through banners and
flags displaying fascist symbols and Nazi catchphrases. Soon another similar-minded
group, the so-called ‘\textit{Vasileios Bulgaroktonos}’ referred to the Byzantine emperor,
famous for his clash against Bulgarians, appeared articulating an outspoken and
aggressive nationalist discourse. These extreme right-wing groups consisting of a
small number of followers who were periodically involved in various episodes of
racist violence directing to rival fans, had limited influence on the majority of
Panathinaikos’ fanbase. For example, in June 1982 during the extensive riots
between hardcore fascist fans of Panathinaikos and supporters of PAOK Thessa-
loniki in Leoforos Alexandras Stadium of Athens, fascist fans made a racist procla-
mation calling Panathinaikos supporters to turn away the alleged Bulgarian-origin
PAOK counterparts and acted as a vanguard in the incidents of organized violence
against rival fans outside the stadium.}

\footnote{The rise of the Greek fanatics was associated with the intensification of state
apparatus surveillance in the terraces in the 1980s and, mainly, in the early 1990s,
when police started to separate opponent fans in terraces setting railings among them
in distinguished gates. Gradually, fanatical supporters occupied curves of terraces
located behind the goalposts where the ticket was cheap and made it a space of gath-
ering, social interaction and ritual. They draw their names from the number of the
entry gates to the club ground (e.g. Gate 13 of Panathinaikos, Gate 7 of Olympi-
aks, Original 21 of AEK, Gate 4 of PAOK, and Super 3 of Aris) and behaved as
they possessed the curves endowing them with symbols and meanings.}

\footnote{Like Spain and Italian Ultras, the osmosis of the increasing passionate fandom
with the skinhead subculture and its values of aggressive masculinity as a means for
acquiring prestige among peers and provoking outsiders, drew the attention of neo-
fascist groups. The first effort of extreme-right fan formation to infiltrate into organ-
nized fan clubs dates back to 1977, when \textit{NOPO (Nazi Organization of Panat-
inhaikos Fans)} a neo-Nazi, racist group made its presence felt through banners and
flags displaying fascist symbols and Nazi catchphrases. Soon another similar-minded
group, the so-called ‘\textit{Vasileios Bulgaroktonos}’ referred to the Byzantine emperor,
famous for his clash against Bulgarians, appeared articulating an outspoken and
aggressive nationalist discourse. These extreme right-wing groups consisting of a
small number of followers who were periodically involved in various episodes of
racist violence directing to rival fans, had limited influence on the majority of
Panathinaikos’ fanbase. For example, in June 1982 during the extensive riots
between hardcore fascist fans of Panathinaikos and supporters of PAOK Thessa-
loniki in Leoforos Alexandras Stadium of Athens, fascist fans made a racist procla-
mation calling Panathinaikos supporters to turn away the alleged Bulgarian-origin
PAOK counterparts and acted as a vanguard in the incidents of organized violence
against rival fans outside the stadium.}
The incidents were disreputable to the commercial brand and the image of Panathinaikos, the only Greek team which achieved to become a finalist in the European Champions Cup and have constructed a cosmopolitan identity based on its success in European competitions. The defamation of the club due to racist and violent actions by neo-Nazi groups incited the strong reaction of the club president Georgios Vardinogiannis, who managed to disperse them in the mid-1980s. In the early 1980s, another racist fan organization called TOFA (Terrorist Organisation of AEK Supporters) appeared exposing graffiti with nationalist symbols. TOFA had a long-termed history. In 1982 Original 21 was created. It was affiliated with left-wing and anarchist circles and soon became the dominant expression of AEK organized fanbase and led to the rapid marginalization of TOFA. In Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece, similar efforts for the creation of neo-Nazi groups had little success. The impact of far-right political parties in Greek society and football communities was inconsiderable and football authorities employed a market-oriented approach keeping politics outside the game. As a result, the history of this first wave of neo-fascist groups was short with the actions of extreme-right groups being limited till the end of 1980s.

At the same time, on the opposite camp, the two major formations of communist youth KNE and Rigas Feraios (affiliated with Communist Party of Greece and Communist Party of Greece, Interior, respectively) had a dominant position in ideological conflicts inside the progressive movement. The hegemonic narrative within left-wing camp remained the perception of football as opium to the people that blunts working class-consciousness. Football, rebetika, rock and the American way of life were regarded as space of young people’s alienation promoting political apathy, commercialization of working class leisure, cultural imperialism, conformism, immorality and hedonism.

In the late 1970s, new agents of left-wing youth politicization emerged. They were fluid networks of autonomous communists who called themselves Χώρος (Choros) and came mainly from the split of Rigas Feraios in 1978 and various anarchist groups with several nuances developing new types of protest, including public squatting and violent juxtaposition with riot police. Within these groups there were some fans, inspired by extra-parliamentary left, situationist and anarchist perspectives, who sought to bridge the passion of working people for the football with political sentiments, creating the first cells of politicized far left-wing fans within the ranks of organized fans in the early 1980s. For example, AEK Original 21 developed an organizational model based on the principle of direct democracy informed by leftist and anarchist ideologies and in the early 1990s for the first time banners of solidarity with political prisoners raised up by anarchist cells of Original. In January 1991, the widespread student protest against the reforms of the conservative government in education pervaded football society. The political tensions were triggered off by the political murder of Nikos Temponeras, a left-wing teacher, during a protest rally in the city of Patras. On 13th January, young fans of AEK and Olympiacos, many of whom were affiliated to political groups, involved in widespread clashes with police shouting aggressive slogans against the state and the police during the eventful match between the two clubs in the stadium of Nea Philadelphia. However, such evidence of left-wing activism was rare. The majority of organized fans, mainly young men, remained either non-political or kept politics outside the sports, confronting politicized youth formations with suspicion, if not with hostility.
During the 1990s, the mass immigration from the countries of ex-communist regimes in the Balkans to Greece strengthened nationalist ideas, xenophobia and racism. In this climate, nationalist fans found an open space to propagandize their opinions. The passionate atmosphere and the expression of national pride during the matches of the Greek national team drew the attention of the official magazine of Golden Dawn, an extreme right, racist and xenophobic party, with very limited influence in society. On 25 November 1990 during the match between the national teams of Greece and Turkey, Greek supporters created an atmosphere of intolerance hooting and booing the Turk players. The official organ of the Golden Dawn praised the national fanaticism against the alleged inferior others, calling them ‘Mongol subhuman’ and ‘dirty Turks’ and called nationalist organizations to transform the ‘spontaneous and yet immature patriotism’ of football ground to a ‘mature and conscious nationalism’. In 1997, the same magazine commented on the presence of strong cells of nationalist fans not only within major clubs in Athens but also within many provincial teams underlining that the field of sports offers opportunities to endow football society with nationalist spirit.

The spread of nationalism within fan culture was evident during a match between Greek and Albanian national teams in the Olympic Stadium of Athens on 6 October 1999, when Albanian hooligans burnt a Greek flag in their stand celebrating the victory of their team. The incident was covered extensively by mass media and resulted in several attacks of nationalist fans on immigrants. The occurrence seemed to activate the nationalist feelings of extreme-right fans that started to organize a social network of nationalist football supporters in order to react vigorously to the alleged challenges of the ‘racial others’. Since all the major football clubs were constituted by fans deriving from all the spectrum of political views, the creation of a nationalist club in the ranks of a single team was a risky undertaking. The national team that traditionally consisted of a small number of dedicated fans was a fertile ground for neo-fascist groups to promote their political goals.

In the same period football activism was cultivated as a reaction to the sport laws that had been instituted in the context of the media-orchestrated and often governed-sustained process of criminalization of illegal immigrants, juvenile delinquents, hooligans and other forms of disorderliness. Covering the issue with contentious comments, the Greek press confronted hooligans as particularly threatening (anti)social figures fuelling the image of their ‘dangerousness’ and created a climate of moral panic that mounted a sense of insecurity in football society.

Since the decades of 1990, football executives and owners used organized fans to resolve and handle on their account inner controversies concerning mismanagement of club finances, changes of coaches and property status. Public rallies and mass protests were often called by the owners of the teams or the fan club leaders forcing football authorities and ruling parties to settle their team’s debts and deficits to their benefit or to repeal authorities’ decisions which were against their interests. In order to avoid political costs, leading parties supported the settlement of the debts and accumulated accounting losses of football clubs, often under the legal shield provided by laws. The article 44 of the Law 1892/90 was a striking example. It allowed the deletion of a big part of the teams’ debts and the settlement of the rest through long-term installation, running the risk of never being collected by the State. Politicians intervened on behalf of their favourite clubs, increasing the political patronage networks within fan communities.
Football transition in the new millennium

Since the early 2000s, a growing number of official and unofficial sports-related websites, sports radio stations provided the opportunity for fans to discuss on football issues. Until the outbreak of the crisis, nine daily national sports newspapers were in circulation and the majority of them were affiliated to the most affluent and popular clubs in the metropolitan centre of Athens. They handle a populist discourse imbued with fanaticism and prejudices in the service of the football club owners’ interests. In the dawn of the new millennium the wider political struggles between grassroots anti-fascist and nationalist groups seem to infiltrate football society and the sporadic presence of nationalist and left-wing symbols were evident in and around Greek football grounds. The formation of the Galazia Stratia (Blue Army) in the early 2000s in the local office of the far-right party Golden Dawn triggered off the political conflicts within football societies. According to Ilias Panagiotaros, a leading member of the Blue Army and later a Golden Dawn deputy, the main target of the club was the promotion of nationalism and consequently the affiliation with Golden Dawn was an effective means to achieve its purpose. 27

The first public appearance of the Blue Army was dated on 7 November 2000, when their members exposed banner with the swastika and performed Nazism salute during the match between the national teams of Greece and Finland. The action of the organization became widely known during the riotous demonstration of its members against the joint bid submitted by Greek and Turkish Football Federations to host Euro 2008. On 20 November 2001, around 60 members of Blue Army protested loudly against the Greek Football Federation joint, hung a swastika banner, gave out leaflets saying ‘Greece is above all’ and chanted xenophobic slogans, such as ‘Turks, Mongols, Killers’ or ‘Gagatsi [the president of Greek Football Federation] Turkish seed’. Sport and political press covered extensively the events, in some cases with tolerance, while the official organ of Golden Dawn welcomed the ‘patriotic outbreak’ of the Greek fans. 28

The victory of the Greek national team in the Euro 2004 competition was a watershed moment in the rise of nationalism within stadiums. In the climate of national enthusiasm for the victory of the ‘underdogs’, members of the Blue Army celebrated the national triumph in the roads of big cities and played a leading part in various racist attacks on immigrants. The official organ of Golden Down gave a racist account of the incident regarding it as a presumable outbreak of the Greeks, ‘a reaction to the system which is unable to control the thousands of criminals and bums of all sorts of nationalities allowing them to move in our country and baptizing them as economic migrants’. 29

In September 2004, the victory of the Albanian national football team against the Greek counterparts shook up the climate of nationalist euphoria which had been cultivated after the Greek victory in Euro 2004. Moreover, it disputed the disdainful sense of Greek superiority to Albanian counterparts that had been grown during the period of economic immigration from Albania to Greece. In this climate, various violent episodes against Albanian immigrants took part all over the country, without a strong reaction of the police forces that are traditionally characterized by attitudes of patriotic nationalism, often accompanied by xenophobia. 30 Aftermath of the racist violence was the death of a 20-year-old Albanian (who was stabbed by a Greek supporter) and the injury of his brother and another Albanian man. Another striking incident occurred during the match between the Greek and the Turkish national
teams in Karaiskaki Stadium on 24 March 2007. Blue Army launched a campaign through social media calling Greek patriots to create a hostile atmosphere in their curve stirring up hatred against the football representatives of the ‘hateful nation’. In so doing, nationalist fans greeted the Turkish national anthem with hooting and catcalls and a few hardcore nationalists performed Nazi salute.31

On the opposite camp, different narratives and understandings of football fandom emerged. The major left-wing parties entered the field elaborating political postures referring to the potential of a football out of the ‘chains of capitalism’. The Greek Communist party (KKE) and the Coalition of Radical Left (SYRIZA) attempted to develop their politics on the football issue and to handle the popularity of the ‘people game’ for their own benefit. Extra-parliamentary left groups started to infiltrate into football fan communities society recruiting new members to their formations. Building their worldviews on the old extreme-left groupuscules’ theories concerning the working-class football culture and the unmediated expression of autonomous community passion, a new generation of leftist fans sought to articulate and to reinvent fandom identities constructing an anti-establishment, anti-capitalist and non-conformist agenda. They respond to the fascist and neo-Nazi groups’ action that threaten to appropriate and colonize the space of fandom spreading a xenophobic and anti-immigration discourse.

Similar processes took place within the anarchist camp. In the context of the increasing repressive policies of the Greek state against hooliganism, the deep-seated rivalries between football organized fans and police forces in and out the football stadiums pave the way to the construction of temporary alliances between anarchist groupuscules and football fanatics. Some anarchist groups saw passionate and violent fandom as a potential force in their effort to recruit and mobilize the oppressed people towards a desirable social uprising. This mobility favoured a newly emerged football activism informed, to some extent, by wider political struggles and social tensions. In mid-2000s, fans graffiti adorned with anarchist or left-wing symbols and slogans saying intriguing phrases spanning football and political questioning (e.g. ‘Utopia is the revolution; utopia is PAOK being the champion’) appeared in the visual landscape of Exarcheia, a central district known as the anarchist and leftist home of Athens.

In the late 2000s, football activism was increasingly developed as a reaction both to the strict enforcement of the past draconian sport law by Greek football authorities and the climate of moral panic against hooligans cultivated by press and the media. A violent incident had preceded in March 2007, when a 25-year-old fan of Panathinaikos was stabbed to death during a prearranged street battle in an eastern suburb of Athens between fans of Panathinaikos and Olympiakos.32 In this vein, the authorities banned the organizational autonomy of the football fan clubs and obliged them to run under the control of team officers, settling the teams responsible for the possible deviant behaviour of organized supporters. Teams were forced to implement the nominal electronic ticket and electronic surveillance, organized fan trips to away games were banned and strict penalties to deviants with concise procedures were imposed. Many fan clubs issued furious statements expressing their strong oppositions to the new policies that confronted fans as potential deviants and infringed their rights.

The resistant spirit within fan communities against the repressive policies had paved the way to the rise of a new generation of fans informed by extreme and radical political ideologies. Activists, attached to extra-parliamentary formation,
anarchist or radical left groups, created an anti-capitalistic alternative football network of fans, the Radical Fans United (RFU), with main goal to unite politicized and anti-fascist groups all over the country against authoritarian state policies. They issued the Rfuzine, a political fanzine and the Humba, a quarterly magazine focused on the ‘social and political meaning of sport’, the experience of football pitch and the fandom culture. In these magazines the targets of the network were presented: the exchange of views on football issues, the advocacy of their rights, the creation of a ‘tier of socially conscious fans’ addressing wider social issues, such as solidarity, the impoverishment of Greek society, the squats and anti-fascism.\textsuperscript{33} Since 2009, RFU has organized five festivals including football and basketball matches, film shows, sports documentaries presentation, photo and book exhibitions and groups’ discussions. Moreover, radical fans have participated in two international anti-racist fan festivals, the Mondialli Antirazisti festival in the summer 2009 at Bolonia, Italy and the Antira Tournament in May 2008 in Sankt Pauli, Germany.\textsuperscript{34}

Some months after the formation of RFU, a network of nationalist fans attached to far-right political formations was built around a website called ‘No Fair-Play 88’. It became a central meeting point for all, some newly emerged, hardcore fascist cells not only in the leading clubs of Athens and Thesaloniki but also in the provincial ones. Employing a flexible anti-systemic rhetoric mingling nationalist, anti-capitalist and racist sentiments with aggressive tone, they displayed images taken by nationalist curves with fascist, Nazi and racist content and declared the faith to the spread of patriotism ‘in every curve of the Greek stadiums’ through the action of ‘united, imaginative and ideologist’ nationalist fans.\textsuperscript{35}

Another hallmark in the process of the radicalization of fans was the killing of Alexandros Grigoropoulos, a 15-year-old schoolboy fan of Panathinaikos, by a police officer in Exarcheia, on 6 December 2008. It gave rise not only to vigorous demonstrations all over the country followed by fierce clashes between young protesters and riot police but occupation of schools, radio stations and town halls as well. The sad event activated deeper feelings of frustration in the younger generation concerning specific economic problems of the country, the increasing unemployment rate of young people and the common sense of corruption in Greek state institutions.\textsuperscript{36}

The youth uprising triggered off left-wing criticism against the repressive apparatus of state and police violence. The fact that Grigoropoulos was a Panathinaikos fan came to the front the organized fans. During the Champion League match Panatinaikos-Anorthosis Famagusta, Gate 13 fans greeted riot police in Athens Olympic stadium with boos and catcalls and hung up a banner reading ‘No Justice, no Peace’. In the streets around the football grounds a lot of graffiti were appeared with artistic images of Grigoropoulos accompanied by anti-systemic and anti-authoritarian messages.

For the first time, blocks of organized fans were involved in street politics and protest marches consorted with a motley crowd of protesters, including schoolchildren, students, anti-fascists, communists and anarchists in a young revolt. A part of organized fans adopted politics that transgressed the limits of football activism claiming wider social and political changes. Narratives informed by civil rights movements were articulated reinforcing the criticism of hardcore fans against the restraint of their rights and linking them with anti-systemic and anti-establishment sentiments, often employed a shallow or populist political discourse.
In the second half of 2000s, new fan communities of middle-level teams arrived on the scene using symbols of international social movements and opening up new horizons of politicized football activism. Autonomous Gate 10 of Iraklis Thessaloniki, Fentagin of Atromitos, Che-Gevara of Pansseraikos, Apei-rota of PAS Ioannina, Warriors of Panaitolikos and Alternatives of Ergotelis are some striking examples. Within all leading clubs, political opinions were expressed by radical fans and intragroup conflicts related to the identities politics and the hegemony within each club took place. However, the ideological confrontations remained limited within the circles of politicized fans and the wider network of organized supporters deliberately attempted to avoid intragroup or opposing clubs conflicts related to political tensions. The process of politicization within football communities reaches its peak during the onset of economic crisis

The economic crisis and the football crisis: the protest movement of fan communities

By May 2010, the austerity measures taken in the wake of bailout offered by Troika (the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Union) were followed by rapidly increasing unemployment, impoverishment and precariousness of Greek labour relations. The economic crisis changed dramatically the field of professional football. The policies of strict austerity deteriorated the living conditions of the Greek supporters, excluding many poverty-stricken fans from the attendance of football games. Although football clubs have cut down drastically the price of match tickets, the official data show the decline in average attendance in the Super League matches during the age of austerity (7.547 per match in 2009–2010 season, a year before the country’s entrance to the austerity age, 6.424 in 2010–2011, 5.149 in 2011–2012, 4.896 in 2012–2013, 3912 in 2013–2014).  

The rapid fall of teams’ revenues from ticket, advertisement, grants and state subsidies was followed by the drastic reduction of clubs expenditures and footballer transfers from abroad. Football authorities imposed transfer bans and financial charges on clubs with strong economic problems not being able to pay footballers and to reduce their debts. Aftermath of the severe economic crisis was a poor quality championship with sharp reduction of club investments and an increase in the gap between rich and poor clubs. The unequal competition led to a predictable championship since Olympiakos, the only thriving club, has been the ‘permanent’ champion.

It is worth mentioning that AEK Athens, one of the most popular clubs in the country, was relegated after the 2012–2013 season from the Greek Superleague to Football League (Second division) for the first time in its history. Melissanidis, who took over the club with the full support of its fanbase, dropped AEK into the third division (Football League 2) benefitting from a rule, according to which any professional club can have its debts write off provided that it had chosen to be relegated. In so doing, during the two next seasons AEK filled its depleted roster and became a competitive team dominating in domestic championships on its way to return to the Super League. Similar to AEK, three historical teams (Larisa, Pansseraikos, Kavala) utilized the favourable legislation to their own interest and dropped out of the Football League to compete in the amateur Football League 2 purging, by this way, their finances.
The crisis of the Greek professional football in combination with the precarious living conditions of many fans triggered off the political questioning in football communities. In the era of the memoranda mass demonstrations and a grassroots social movement emerged expressing fierce opposition to austerity policies. In these contexts, politicized groups within fan communities attempted to activate organized supporters to be involved in political struggles against strict austerity and state authoritarianism.

At the same time Golden Dawn, which has managed to accelerate its force within the electoral body, reinforced its influence in football communities. Employing conspiracy theories about the suspicious role of the foreign usurers in the Greek tragedy, the Golden Dawn articulated a populist, ethnocentric discourse based on an anti-immigrant, anti-globalization and anti-communist agenda. Nationalist symbols appeared on several curves and neo-fascist ideas and pictures were spread in fans’ websites.

During the mass demonstration against austerity policies in the late 2011 and early 2012 politicized groups of fans expressed their strong opposition to the governing policies and the Troika surveillance of the country through orchestrated symbolic protests. Although the authorities banned the presence of political symbols at the stadiums, organized fans with joint effort managed to pass into their stands banners with political messages, offering commentaries on wider political and social issues and protesting against austerity and neoliberal policy measures.

These banners conveyed a multiplicity of messages reflecting various political sentiments within organized fans. Some of them employed an aggressive nationalist or anti-systemic discourse (e.g. ‘Politicians betrayers: we will burn you and the Parliament’, Olympiakos, Gate 7). Other used more playful, intriguing slogans lifting up the spirit of revolt within football worlds and connecting football activism with street politics and anti-systemic discourse (e.g. ‘In order to save the banks from their failure, they have led us into poverty and unemployment, they have sold our country out and whatever belongs to us, turn the t.v. off on the way to the victory’ (Panathinaikos, Gate 13). ‘The flame has been burning for a while now in the pitches and roads. Now it has become a blaze and it will burn all of’ (AEK, Original 21). Provocative slogans, related to extreme ideologies commenting on urban guerrilla and social inequality, also appeared: ‘Steal from the rich and give to the poor’, (PAOK, Gate 4), ‘In your eyes they are terrorists, in ours they are rebels: Freedom to the armed guerillas’, (Aris, Super 3).

Fans from small clubs intervened in the joint actions, displaying sometimes messages that move from the context of football rivalries to the realm of political struggle (e.g. [Papandreou, the then prime minister of the country] The people do not want you. Take the Troika and go away, Gate 4, OFI; ‘Do not seek enemies in other teams, come with us to fight for a different society’, Ergotelis, Alternatives). Cyprus supporters expressed their solidarity with their Greek counterparts and sent warning messages to their governments (e.g. ‘Solidarity with the Greek people’, ‘People should not be afraid of their governments, Governments should be afraid of their people’, Omonoia, Gate 9 and ‘Death to the Banker, Freedom to Greece’, APOEL, The Oranges).

The anti-memorandum spirit of fans spread in everyday life. Live athletic radio programmes and social media hosted views of indignant supporters calling the people to participate in political actions. Since political polarization was at its climax, various unexpected incidents with political significance within football pitches
sparked off political confrontations and ideological contestations between extreme-right groups and antifa supporters. On 16 December 2012, three fans of AEK, members of the Golden Dawn, attacked and beat the Radical Left Coalition deputy Dimitris Stratulis in the Super League match AEK-Atromitos outside Athens Olympic Stadium. The incident caused a strongly worded protest of *Original 21* through an announcement that disapproved the ‘carcinoma of fascism’ calling the attacker ‘blusterer worms’. The announcement highlighted the historical identity of the club that originated from ‘refugees and immigrants coming from Asia Minor’, a community ‘without colours and borders’ and warned the ‘misanthropes’ attackers that they were ‘undesirable and outlawed’ within AEK family.

On 16 March 2013, a Nazi salute gesture performed by Giorgos Katidis, a 20-year-old AEK footballer during a Super League game at the Olympic Stadium caused fierce disputes between supporters and critics of the player in social media. Except the Golden Dawn, all political parties condemned his behaviour. The Greek Football Federation decided Katidis’ lifetime exclusion from playing in all Greek national teams because the Nazi salute insulted the public sentiments and the victims of Nazi atrocities, violating the peaceful spirit of football. *Original 21* made a harsh statement through which denounced Katidis for his offensive behaviour that insulted the cultural heritage of the team, called him ‘scurvy, trivial and swank’ and asked politicians to let them free to settle the issue alone expressing its hostility to political system. The political circumstances favoured various grassroots conflicts between *Original* and nationalist groups in Athens and provincial cities too, including exchanges of aggressive statements, offering the opportunity to *Originalistas* to bring the memory of their historical origins in the forefront in order to reinforce a modern construction of their identity associated with libertarian, antifa and anti-racist ideas.

The politically fuelled juxtapositions between the Golden Dawn and anti-fascist hardcore supporters soon have spread in the Northern Greece. On 4 September 2013, Kaçe, an Albanian player of PAOK who was born in Albania and moved to Thessaloniki at the age of three, was involved in a scandal posting on the Facebook a photo of himself wearing a T-shirt with the symbol of the *Kosovo Liberation Army* (*UCK*). This gesture set off criticism in the football world and the Golden Dawn issued an inflammatory statement, imbued with ultra-nationalist spirit and hatred against multiculturalism and globalization, accusing Kaçe for his action and called the *Gate 4* to take a stand on this question. The announcement prompted the violent reaction of PAOK supporters attacking with stones, bottles and firecrackers at the offices of the Golden Dawn. The *Gate 4* made an announcement by which it denounced the appropriation of the cultural tradition of PAOK, which has been offered for political games by any political party. Recalling historical narratives, the announcement articulates a story of the club which consists of ‘proud migrants’, who ‘came butchered and expelled from Turkey and when they arrived in Greece the locals treated them like dirt because they regarded them as Turks’. PAOK supporters, just as AEK *Original* did, negotiated current political conflicts for their benefit, reinforcing the sense of community solidarity and of belonging to an underdog, unprivileged club, a popular narrative within PAOK fanbase.

Another incident that brought into action a new circle of ideological juxtapositions was the assassination of Pavlos Fyssas, an antifa rapper supporter of Olympiakos, by a Golden Dawn member outside a coffee shop in Keratsini of Piraeus where he was watching a European Champion League match of his favourite team. Radical
fans expressed their feeling of grief and loss through anti-fascist banners and graffiti inside and outside stadiums during the following matches of the domestic leagues and some clubs made announcements stressing their indignation against fascist threat. Since the club of Gate 7 did not issue a statement, furious intragroup disputes between anti-fascist and ‘non-political’ fans were taking place in social media. Anti-fascist fans of Olympiakos in Exarcheia disapproved the silence of Gate 7 on the Facebook, criticizing its affiliation with Greek and Serbian nationalists followed by an aggressive announcement by the local club of Porto Leone in Keratsini. Employing a macho rhetoric, Porto Leone defended the honour of a club ‘where right-wingers, left-wingers, workers and bosses become one’, and slashed the use of Facebook reminding that the real condemnation took place during the mass demonstration of 20,000 people in Keratsini.44

Despite the criticism against the fascist infiltration in stadiums the existence of nationalist symbols within the stands of Gate 7 continued to signify its ties with nationalist circles. In the Super League matches Olympiakos-Anterlext on 9 December 2013 members of Gate 7 hung up a skull and bones flag, historically associated with fascism, incited the prompt reaction of UEFA. It punished Olympiakos, due to the ‘racist conduction’ of a part of their fans,45 with the closure of the lower tiers of the northern stand at the Karaiskakis stadium for the next UEFA competition. The UEFA decision led to the withdrawal of nationalist and aggressive symbols from Olympiakos game and brought into the foreground of public discourse the danger of far-right spread into football lifeworlds.

The process of footballisation of politics, in Scalia’s terms,46 is another landmark in the process of intersection between football and politics. In the 2012 national election, the infiltration of football society into the political system was strengthen since prominent organized fans were elected as deputies and came in the foreground of political stage. For example, Vangelis Diamantopoulos, a founder member of Aris, Super 3, Grigoris Psarianos, an ex-president of the grassroots formation of AEK, Enosis 1924, and Ilias Panagiotaros, a leader of Blue Army and ex-member of Panathinaikos Mad Boys, became members of the Greek Parliament with SYRIZA, Democratic Left and Golden Dawn, respectively.

The double local and euro-election in Greece in May 2004 was marked by an unusual invasion of football elites in politics. Yiannis Moralis, the vice-president of Olympiakos and, then, president of Super League gain the mayoralty of the biggest Greek port with an independent combination called ‘Victorious Piraeus’, a term inspired by football jargon. The combination was constructed by the chairman of Olympiakos, Vaggelis Marinakis, a shipping tycoon, who got into the Town Council, along with others prominent executives of the club, such as Petros Kokkalis, son of the former Olympiakos owner Sokratis Kokkalis who has been running the team for 17 years. Using the votes of 1000s of dedicated fans of Olympiakos, they gained political power aiming at the promotion of the ambitious enterprising plans: to reorganize the port of the city into a hub of international trade, attracting foreign investment and creating ‘a job for each citizen’, with the same business acumen that led the club to the domination of domestic leagues.

Similarly, Axilleas Beos the former owner of Olympiakos Volou who was brought to court for match-fixing was the winner of the local mayoral contest. Using a populist discourse against the alleged discreditable local party politicians, he attracted the voters of Volos promising a fast truck economic development, promoting successful citizens, mainly coming from market and sport worlds. In Athens,
Panathinaikos Movement, a political party founded in 2012 by supporters of the team, got 2.91% of the vote in the local election and participated in the Euro-elections promoting football-related interests in its campaign. In Euro-election, Theodoros Zagorakis, the former player of PAOK and captain of the victorious Greek national team of the 2004 European championship, was elected with the conservative New Democracy to the European parliament.

While in the past, the clientelist networks between club officials and the political system were behind the scene, nowadays the unusual open mingling of big business surrounding football world with hybrid political combinations signifies an alarming turn in the political culture of the country towards the footballization of politics. It reflects the growing disappointment of Greeks towards a discredited political system in the austerity era that leads indignant people to seek anxiously some savours, not being in traditional politics. Popular football celebrities and owners of clubs, who exemplify the ‘ordinary yet special’ men among us, fulfill the ‘capitalist dream of attainable and self-producible stardom and richness’. They seem to offer a ‘magical’ solution to the social pressures and deadlocks of a society in crisis.

Although fandom activism criticized the commercialization and the embourgeoisement of professional football they often follow interest-driven politics characterized by opportunism and fluidity. A remarkable example is the recent dispute between Original 21 and activists who are opposed to the Melissanidis’ plans to build a new luxurious stadium with commercial facilities in the location where AEK had its home ground, trespassing on part of the neighbouring public park space. In June 2014, approximately 200 organized AEK fans vandalized the anarchist squatting Strouga, attacked on protesters and beat the left-wing major of Nea Philadelphia-Aris Vasilopoulos. During the 2015, national election campaign, this conflict was continued and Original 21 expressed publically its disapproval for the Syriza pointview. Original issued an announcement criticizing the mayor of Nea Philadelphia and calling Syriza to take a clear stand on the issue and on 8th January during the AEK-Atromitos match raised up a warning banner saying: ‘having our own stadium we support and accordingly we vote’. What the research findings show is that the protection of their favourite club interests remained a basic motivation of fandom collective action and thus the identity of dedicated football supporter often prevail over the political identity of the fan.

**Conclusion**

As Brown has pointed out the osmosis of football fandom with political activism reflects the fluid, changing and contested nature of football community of the late modernity, where people from different communities and subcultures can constantly be reinterpreting and re-negotiating their identities transgressing the symbolic boundaries of their communities. In this changing space the lines between fandom modes of action and traditional civic and political activities are blurring, opening, with Foucault terms, more possible sites of struggle and resistance to dominant order in everyday life within and outside football societies.

During the last 30 years, Greek football has become a highly charged field encompassing wider social, political, racial and economic conflicts. Traditionally, hardcore football fans perceived themselves as agents of a counter-culture resistance to the system of corrupted football governance, the repressive state and the heightened commercialization of football. They called for changes of the clubs’ ownership
and for the unequal power relationships within football society, benefiting for their groups’ interests. The mainstream political party used the fandom in order to increase their electoral base and the owners of leading teams pressed the political system to pass laws favourable to their interests.

During the era of the financial crisis, football became a fertile ground where the borders between football, politics, economy and society became increasingly blurred. The austerity measures spread rapidly from wider society to football world deteriorating the long-standing financial problems of clubs and increasing the gap between a few powerful clubs and the rest. In the context of political fluidity, economic interests around football tycoons and executives have controlled not only local authorities in important cities, but also several mass media and sport press. Football celebrities became members of the Greek Parliament and political discourse has been saturated with football culture and jargon leading to the footballisation of politics.52

On the other hand, the alarming deepening economic crisis of the country that has deteriorated the living conditions of Greek people and has hit football societies gave rise to the construction of an expressive protest movement by radical fans against austerity policies and the country surveillance by the Troika. To some degree, this movement is a continuation of the 2008 youth uprising after the assassination of Grigoropoulos, a milestone in the process of politicization of football world. Politicized fans have constructed resistant ideologies inspired both by the unequal power relationship of Greek professional football and the political conflict in surrounding society, utilizing them for their own benefits. In this context, new fandom identities and counter identities were constructed, including political activism, performing through street politics, collective action and protest demonstration. For radical fans political activism is a source of meaning and a means of the construction of collective reputation and identity.

Organized fans articulate and display criticism against opponents: modern football, commercialization, police, media and football authorities and also wider political entities and social process, for example, state, capitalism and globalization. Within the realm of their discourses, nationalist fans have focused on issues of the nation, region, migration, sex and race, promoting local pride, ethnocentric chauvinism, manliness, sexism and anti-globalization sentiment. In the conjuncture of crisis, the xenophobic, anti-systemic and populist agenda of the far-right Golden Dawn have promoted hostility against the sexual deviant, the female, the globalization and the ‘racial others’. Connecting the passionate hardcore fandom with the populist patriotism and machismo of the Golden Dawn, nationalist fans construct a space where different cultural subjects and behaviours (e.g. black clothes, shaven head, tattooing, heavy metal music and skinhead’s norms) are interwoven in order to make sense of nationalist sentiments and to express publically the distinctive identity of neo-fascist groups.

On the contrary, antifa supporters tend to pay attention to class, multiculturalism, anti-racism, social inequality and power relationship issues articulating anti-systemic, anti-fascist and anti-capitalist discourses with raw and aggressive texture. They borrow slogans and symbols of anti-globalisation, social justice and anti-capitalist movements, employing a rather shallow ideologization without systematic conceptual elaboration. They often construct invented traditions of their teams projecting heroic elements and resistant spirit on them. Despite the controversies and ambivalences prevalent within these discourses, the political discussions within
progressive football life worlds and the new forms of activism in the times of crisis (e.g. anti-racist campaigns, connections with grassroots networks of social solidarity) could open up new horizons for more critical approaches.

Football fans’ political stances are characterized by flexibility and heterogeneity reflecting the fragmentation of political life and the transgression, to some extent, of modernist boundaries. Political confrontation pervades horizontally all popular clubs, often resulting in intragroup conflicts concerning the hegemony of the club identity. Since the wider context of social turmoil in the Greek society has infiltrated football worlds, politically fuelled evidence at the stadiums offered chances to fans to negotiate their identities and articulate stories which often call the cultural tradition of their teams and its alleged intrinsic values to mind. Social crisis activated existing intergroup juxtapositions and provided some clubs with the opportunity to express their self image of the underdog and, thus, to separate them from the others, those regarded as the football establishment and as an expression of the wider systemic forces of Greek society.

These are the cases of AEK and PAOK fans that have made use of the present circumstances to affirm resistant identities and to reinforce the sense that they are socially excluded within the existing power relation of Greek football, cultivating a self-image of an anti-establishment and non-conformist group. Their attitudes are characterized by controversy and opportunism. While they present themselves as the guardians of their team’s anti-capitalist spirit, at the same time part of them can collaborate, sometimes harmonically, with the new rich owners of their team, (Mellisanidis in AEK and Savvidis in PAOK) supporting their plans to extend their enterprises into football world.

The situational and contextual character of fandom identities is also evident in several other examples. In the case of Panathinaikos, the involvement of Gate 13 in the mass protests against state authoritarianism after the assassination of Grigopoulos offered an opportunity to some radical circles within clubs to re-interpret the team identity, traditionally considered as an expression of political conservatism, moving to more libertarian and anti-establishment positions. Similarly, Autonomous Gate 10 in the club of Heracles in Thessaloniki, despite its historical ties with conservative circles of the city, appeared to be the most visible, anti-capitalist football network participating in several action of social solidarity in the era of austerity. By contrast, in the case of Olympiakos, a team with strong historical ties with the working class of Piraeus, strong cells of nationalist fans, often under the veil of non-political supporters, is struggling with anti-fascist counterparts. The Olympiakos case reflects wider political changes such as the increasing influence of the community-based organizations of the Golden Dawn in working class areas and its successful infiltration into football communities.

The study on Greek professional football within a society in crisis shows the fluid and liquid identities of the football fandom and the complex intersection between football activism and politics. Anti-capitalist alternative football networks call for political action addressing wider social and political issue, bridging in some degree the gap between fandom sentiments and new social movements discourse. Radical fans seek to change the existing power relationship, correcting its injustices but the majority of them are unwilling to force changes harmful to the interests of their team. The devotion of a fan to a particular club seems to be a permanent component in the fan’s identity profile and it generally dominates all other components. However, a few cells of politicized fans seem to deal with taboo in fandom.
world issues, such as localism, homophobia, sexism and masculinity and offer self-criticism on the role of organized fans in long-standing corruption of the Greek professional football. This offers room for significant changes in a deep corrupted and alienated world. It is remain an open question whether Greek football activism can move forward from interest-driven opportunistic politics to a social movement discourse that challenge, with some degree of continuity, existing patterns of inequalities and structures of exploitation not only within the sports field but also in the wider society.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

9. R. Spaaij and C. Viñas, ‘Political Ideology and Activism in Football Culture in Spain’.
11. Doidge, ‘The Birthplace of Italian Communism’; and Tottem, ‘Political Activism and Political Praxis within the FC Sankt Pauli Fan Culture’.
15. Papadogiannis, ‘From Coherence to Fragments’, 79.
21. Papadogiannis, ‘From Coherence to Fragments’.
23. Ibid., 152.
25. Ibid., 604.
28. Ibid., 142–6.
30. It is worth mentioning that according to a survey of the newspaper Vima on several constituencies where police officers in service cast their ballots approximately 50 per cent of police officers voted fascist Golden Dawn in the 2012 Greek parliamentary election and the 2014 European election, Vima, May 26, 2014.
35. http://nofairplay88.blogspot.gr. In the late 2013, after the criminal proceedings against the leadership of Golden Dawn the website retired, possibly temporarily, from web.
38. Gurdián, December 17, 2012.
40. AEK was founded in 1925 by refuges that were arrived from Constantinople with the exchange of Greek and Turkish populations in the framework of the Lozanne Treaty’s orders sighed by the governments of both states.
42. PAOK was founded in 1926 by Greek refugees came from Istanbul (Constantinople in Greek).
46. V. Scalia, ‘Just a Few Rogues?’, 49.
47. H. Van Houtum and F. Van Dam, ‘Topophilia or Topoporno?’; and Giulianotti, Football, a Sociology of the Football Game, 118.
51. Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’.
52. V. Scalia, ‘Just a Few Rogues?’, 49.

References


