

**Football clubs ownership and management.
The fans perspective**
**Propiedad y gestión de los clubes de fútbol.
La perspectiva de los aficionados**

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Abstract

Two decades ago a law was passed in Spain that led to the conversion of football clubs into Public Limited Sports Companies (Sport Law of 1990). This article presents an investigation into the fans' perceptions of the clubs' current configuration and functioning. The changes that have taken place in the ownership and management of the clubs are examined from the point of view of the fans, as well as the effects these changes have had on their relations with the clubs. After describing the process leading to the transformation of Spanish football clubs into public limited sports companies, the article presents the main results of qualitative research consisting of interviews with 25 football fans. The conclusions point to the existence of a feeling of symbolic ownership of the clubs that might be weakening in recent seasons, but that determines fans' perceptions of the clubs' new status. The study also shows that in the current football scenario, the fans see themselves as mere spectators, a condition that produces distancing, indifference and apathy toward anything that does not have to do with their team's game.

Key words: football clubs; management; ownership; fans; sociology of organizations.

Resumen

Dos décadas después de que entrara en vigor la ley que impulsó la transformación de los clubes de fútbol profesional en Sociedades Anónimas Deportivas (Ley del Deporte de 1990), este artículo presenta una investigación sobre las percepciones que los aficionados tienen de su configuración y funcionamiento. Se examina la valoración que los aficionados efectúan de los cambios que se han producido en la estructura de propiedad y gestión de los clubes, así como las consecuencias que estos cambios han tenido en sus relaciones con ellos. Tras exponer el proceso que condujo a la transformación de los clubes de fútbol españoles en Sociedades Anónimas Deportivas, se presentan los resultados de una investigación cualitativa en la que se entrevistó a 25 aficionados al fútbol. Las conclusiones apuntan a la existencia de un sentimiento de propiedad simbólica de los clubes que, aunque en los últimos años podría estar debilitándose, condiciona la percepción que los aficionados tienen de las transformaciones de estos. El estudio también pone de manifiesto que en el actual escenario futbolístico, los aficionados se ven como meros espectadores, una condición que provoca distanciamiento, indiferencia y apatía hacia todo aquello que no tiene que ver con el juego del equipo.

Palabras clave: clubes de fútbol; gestión; propiedad; aficionados; sociología de las organizaciones.

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Introduction

During the past twenty years, European football has witnessed an intense change process that has radically transformed some of its main structural characteristics. This process is related to the same tendencies that have affected other aspects of social and economic life in Western societies, such as the communication technologies revolution, the progressive rationalization of work, the increase in migrations, the commodification of human activity, and the development of social and economic globalisation processes, to name a few of the most relevant changes. These trends are usually thought to have had a strong influence on the recent evolution of football, giving rise to a redefinition of its competitive structures (Giulianotti, 1999), the clubs' transformation into business organizations (Moor, 2007; Walsh & Giulianotti, 2001), the formation of a global market of hyper-professionalized footballers (Lafranchi & Taylor 2001), and the general commercialization of the *ethos* that articulated the modern formation of this sport around values of fun, sport sociability and fair play (Andrews, 2004; Sewart, 1987). In this context, various authors have referred to the recent transformations in football as the new football business (Conn, 1997; Finn & Giulianotti, 2000; Garland, Malcolm & Rowe, 2000; Hamil, Michie & Oughton, 1999; Morrow, 1999; Szymanski & Kuypers, 1999; Wagg, 2004). These authors point out that the media have become the main propellers of the new football business, transforming the main clubs into 'televised content businesses' (Boyle & Haynes, 2004). As a result, the 'fans' have become 'consumers' (King, 2002: 203), and the main European leagues personify the basic characteristics of a high-level sport that is the vehicle for their insatiable consumption, as well as a forum for physical enjoyment, cultural identification and festive creativity (Horne, Tomlinson & Whannel, 1999).

To understand the profound effects of these changes on the fans it is necessary to study their experiences and perceptions (Crabbe & Brown, 2004; Wheaton, 2004). Some studies published in recent years have analysed the fans' relationship with the clubs and the degree of participation in their management structures (Hamil, Michie, Oughton & Warby, 2000; Lomax, 2000; Nash, 2000; Watkins, 2000). In the past decade, this line of research has focused more on the difficulties fans have faced in their attempt to influence the club owners' decisions (Brown, 2008; Cleland, 2010), or on the instability of their commitments and actions supporting the clubs (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2010; Millward, 2012). The majority of these studies are case studies about one club, such as Manchester United (Brown & Walsh, 1999; Brown, 2007; Cleland, 2010; Duke, 2002), Liverpool (Millward, 2012), Aston Vila (Coombs & Osborne, 2012), Everton FC (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2010; Kennedy, 2012), Northampton Town (Lomax, 2000) or AFC Bournemouth (Watkins, 2000). Some of them examine the fans' responses to the relocation of the stadiums (Bale, 2000; Duke, 1994; 2002; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2010; Kennedy, 2012; Nash, 2000), the increase in the price of tickets to the games (Brown & Nash, 2000; Conn, 1997; Giulianotti, 2005; Hudson, 2001; Watkins, 2000; Williams, 1998), or the changes in the clubs' ownership (Brown, 2007; Coombs & Osborne, 2008; Hamil et al., 2000; Millward, 2012; Nauright & Ramfjord, 2010). Finally, there are also more global approaches to the analysis of football fans that focus on studying their behaviours and their situation in today's football, with some presenting them as victims (Sandvoss, 2003) or as having been deceived (King, 2002), while others define them as rational actors (Crawford, 2004) or focus on their dimension as communicators (Giulianotti, 2002), as summarized by Aldridge (2003: 15-23).

In Spain, the first football clubs appeared at the end of the 19th century in urban areas with the presence of British professionals linked to industrial or port activities. The geographical locations of the first teams demonstrated this: Huelva Recreation Club (created in 1889),

Athletic Club de Bilbao (in 1898) or the FC Barcelona (in 1899). These clubs adopted the guidelines of the British clubs, such as equality among players, the social prestige of the members of the board of directors or the competitive *ethos* of their members. They were private clubs, although they acted as collective sociability platforms and fomented *amateurism* as a main value, which meant that the players themselves were the managers and organizers (Pujadas & Santacana, 2003: 510-513).

The progressive transformation of football into a performance led to the implantation of professionalism and its regulation by the Spanish Football Federation in 1926, without the intervention of any state mediator (Martialay, 1996). Thus, the *amateur* model began to decline, giving way to a dynamic of recruitment, contracts and transfers, which in time would lead the clubs to focus more on producing a show and less on promoting the sport activity (Pujadas & Santacana, 2003). With the establishment of General Franco's regime (1939-1975), the clubs came to depend on a state organism created in 1938, the National Sport Delegation (initially called the National Sport Council), whose control was ceded to the Traditionalist Spanish Falange and the JONS, the regime's only party. The subordination of football clubs to the State apparatus affected their internal functioning and signified the disappearance of their conception as associations made up of equals who had the authority to choose their own executive posts (Santacana, 2011: 211). The system changed slightly in the 1950s (with the introduction of elections by delegates), but the election of the general assembly of members still had to be ratified by the corresponding sport federation, which maintained the right to directly name the members of the board if it had previously rejected the members' initial proposal twice (Pujadas & Santacana, 2003).

With the transition to democracy (1975-1982), the clubs began a reconversion process that allowed them to recover their previous status, although their organizational culture and operational guidelines were permeated by the authoritarianism that characterised the regime. In the middle of the 1980s, the idea that those clubs that carried out a professional sport activity should adopt a public limited sports company model was already being discussed. At the end of the 1982 World Football Cup, held in Spain, it was common knowledge that the main football clubs had contracted large debts due to the investments they had had to make to remodel and update their stadiums for the World Cup celebration. Shortly before the end of the 1980s, the liabilities of the clubs making up the First and Second divisions had already reached more than 120 million Euros. There was a great need for financing, and their financial insolvency kept them from accessing new credits unless their owners presented personal guarantees.

The situation of the football clubs obligated the State to erase their debts by approving the first so-called *plan de saneamiento* (clean-up plan), which basically consisted of granting subsidies to the sport entities (Palomar, 1999). This first clean-up plan was approved in 1985, and it was put together without any norm supporting it in the sport legislation at that time. It meant that 2.5% of the revenues from the pools were used to finance the restructuring of the clubs. Therefore, the measure was designed to restructure the patrimonial situation of the clubs with public funds, which, however, was ineffective, as it coincided with the appearance of new types of gambling, producing a decline in the predicted income. This reduction in the income from the pools coincided with the deficient management of the clubs and the lack of legal responsibility of their executive committees. The Superior Sport Council attributed the clubs' delicate financial situation to their legal status: a type of non-profit association that had been shown to be ineffective for managing professional sports (Barajas, 2007: 111). Therefore, the Council considered it necessary to promote a new legal social figure that would allow the clubs to function as professional businesses with legal responsibility.

One of the main deficiencies of the sport clubs was the lack of elements of economic responsibility, which led many clubs to take on expenses that were higher than their incomes, with the resulting increase in their debt. When the financial situation was unsustainable, the executive committee renounced their positions and left the clubs in a situation of bankruptcy. The 1990 Sport Law (Law 10/1990 of the 15th of October) set up a second restructuring plan for professional football which established that a higher percentage of the income from the pools would be ceded to the football clubs. More importantly, it created a new legal framework in which the fan clubs were separated from the professional clubs (first and second division of Spanish football and ACB Basketball League). The clubs became SAD, *Sociedades Anónimas Deportivas* (Public Limited Sports Companies), a new legal figure that was accompanied by a series of conditions and controls by the competent organisms and that meant the gradual transformation of the old clubs into business organizations (Bertomeu, 1993; Palomar, 1999). Although the 1990 Sport Law proposed the general transformation of all the clubs that participated in professional sport competitions into SAD, an amendment to the law contemplated the possibility that those with a positive patrimonial balance –in the audits carried out from the 1985/86 season to the 1989/90 season by petition of the National Professional Football League (LNFP)–, could maintain their legal structure. Accordingly, in 1992 all of the clubs in the First and Second divisions became SAD, with the exception of Real Madrid, FC Barcelona, Athletic de Bilbao and Osasuna, which had a verified positive patrimonial balance and were exempt from it. They decided to maintain their club status, although they were going to have to follow the same economic control rules, and they were even going to have the norms for sectorial adaptation from the General Accounting Plan applied to them (Barajas, 2007: 111).

The transformation of the football clubs into SAD led to the incorporation of institutional investors or shareholders and, therefore, foretold the possibility of changes and divisions in matters of ownership and control of the entity. On the other hand, it increased the clubs' transparency and signified the progressive establishment of professionalized business management structures, based on which the economic management of the club would have to be optimized. However, there was also a loss of the associative and participatory structure that had characterized these entities from their beginnings, where the members could participate in the club assemblies and meetings and choose the members of the Executive Committee as long as they were up-to-date on paying their dues. The members were substituted by shareholders and subscribers, the former linked to the club through the purchase of shares and the latter through the purchase of a yearly subscription with which they obtained access to certain league games.

The system established by the 1990 Sport Law produced some technical problems as well as some doubts about its viability. However, it became consolidated thanks to the great interest football arouses in Spain and the enormous amounts of money that entered its financial circuit (González-Cueto, 2000: 109). These circumstances led to the reform of the SAD legal regime, expressed in Law 50/98, which introduced liberalizing measures and a regimen that approached that of common public limited companies. Among other things, it eliminated restrictions due to nationality that the 1990 Sport Law had established as a requirement for shareholders, as they conflicted with European Community Rights, involved discrimination based on nationality, and violated the basic principle of free circulation of capital.

While sociological research on the aforementioned changes in football clubs is non-existent in Spain, the majority of the studies about British clubs face some limitations that should be pointed out. First, they are mainly case studies that refer to only one club. Although they provide information about the fans' perspective that can be quite interesting, they do not go

beyond the context of the club itself. Second, many of these studies are elaborated from the perspective of the 'insider', that is, by people who are linked to the club in question to some degree and form part of a group of fans that perform actions related to it. Very few studies draw on fans from a broader social range and try to examine their opinions, not about a particular club, but about the set of clubs and the organization of football in general.

The research presented in this article examines Spanish fans' perceptions about the clubs' management more than twenty years after the law went into effect that promoted their transformation into Public Limited Sports Companies (1990 Sport Law). After emerging at the end of the 19th century as non-profit sociability associations, professional football is currently an area of economic activity whose contribution to Spain's Gross National Product –according to the latest estimation made– is close to one percent (LFP, 2004). Professional football's debt, however, has not stopped growing in the past fifteen years, and at the end of the 2010/11 season, it reached 3,530,000,000 Euros (Gay de Liébana, 2012). Professional football continues to have economic losses –225 million Euros last season– but after the recent tightening of the financial normative, some signs of change can be observed. According to budgets presented to the *Consejo Superior de Deportes* (Superior Sport Council, CSD) at the end of June 2013, the Spanish clubs are dedicating 650,000,000 Euros to salaries in the 2013/14 season, 100 million less than the previous season. Moreover, the number of transfers has declined significantly and –according to Tax Collection Authority data– the fiscal debt declined by 80 million Euros between March 2012 and March 2013. These data, however, do not take into account that, during the past few years, in order to avoid being denied economic support by financial entities and public administrations, the clubs have resorted to new practices, such as signing up new players through investment funds¹. Already a dozen First and Second division clubs have used these funds as instruments for obtaining the services of footballers that they otherwise would not be able to hire (Iribar, 2013).

This article analyses the fans' discourse about the management and ownership of the clubs, an objective that has not been dealt with by any other study to date. More specifically, the purpose is to find out: the fans' opinions about the evolution of the Spanish clubs in the past twenty years; how they rate the changes that have occurred in their ownership; what they think of their economic management; and how these changes have affected their relationship with and feeling of belonging to the clubs.

The study is framed in the area of research on social responsibility and good corporate governance in sports. These proposals require the incorporation of the fans' perspective –as key stakeholders in the process– about the management and governance of the clubs, in order to guarantee their own sustainability and survival (Copeland, Frisby & McCarville, 1996; García-Caba, 2013; Godfrey, 2009; Paramio-Salcines, Babiak & Walters, 2013; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). This aspect shows the scientific and social interest in the topic dealt with in this study. As can be seen from the state of the art described above, even though this topic has not aroused interest among Spanish academics, it already has an extensive bibliography in countries like the United Kingdom. Finally, further proof of the social and economic importance of the study objective is the fact that, during the past decade, the authorities in a country like the United Kingdom, with very little tendency toward state interventionism, have emitted various recommendations about the unequivocal need to take the fans' perspective into account in the management of professional football. The Department of Culture, Communication and Sport, which depends on the central Government, recently asked those

¹ Both the UEFA and FIFA, however, have announced that they intend to prohibit this practice in order to add transparency to the market and avoid the formation of a bubble (Sanz, 2013).

responsible for British football to allow a representative of the fans to form part of the Executive Committee of the English Football Federation (DCMS, 2011). A few years earlier, the report by the *All Party Parliamentary Football Group*, significantly titled *English Football and its Governance* (Keen, 2009: 14), criticized the exclusion of fans from the management of football clubs and pointed out that 'they are the voice that should be heard most'. These types of warnings have been reiterated for more than a decade. The *Football Task Force* expressed similar ideas in the diverse reports it elaborated shortly after Tony Blair's arrival to the presidency of the United Kingdom, as it was Blair who ordered the creation of this organ (Football Task Force, 1999a, 1999b).

Based on the proposal described throughout this section, the study presented in this article had two main objectives. The first was to find out the fans' opinion about the economic and organizational changes in professional football in the past twenty years with regard to the clubs' ownership and management. The second objective was to identify how this transformation process has affected the fans' relations with the clubs and their feelings of belonging to them. To approach these two objectives, 25 semi-structured interviews were carried out with football fans in two Spanish cities, Valencia and Zaragoza, who were followers of five First and Second division Spanish football teams. Although the fans were invited to talk about their own experiences as fans, the interview focused on their opinions about the changes that had occurred in the ownership and management of the Spanish football clubs in the past twenty years. The intention was, therefore, to avoid the limitations of the majority of the studies reviewed above, which focused on only one club and were carried out with a sample of fans closely linked to the activities of organized groups.

The rest of the article is divided into three parts. The first part outlines the technical and methodological characteristics of the study carried out. The next section contains a presentation and discussion of the results, divided into three sections in which the analyses are consecutively presented referring to: i) the clubs' ownership; ii) the influx of foreign capital as shareholders; and iii) the clubs' management and governance. The article closes with a section of final conclusions.

Method

Technique and participants

To carry out the proposed objectives, the semi-structured interview technique was used. This technique was chosen due to its conversational nature (Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2003; Valles, 1997), which makes it possible to find out the interviewees' perceptions and interpretations of the study topic. These perceptions and interpretations have a discursive nature and, therefore, require the application of qualitative techniques like the semi-structured interview. Twenty-five interviews were carried out in the cities of Valencia and Zaragoza between October 2010 and June 2011. Nineteen men and six women were interviewed, a similar proportion to the sexual distribution of football fans in Spain (CIS, 2007; Llopis-Goig, 2011; Torregrosa & Cruz, 2009). The age of the interviewees ranged between 35 and 65. The minimum age limit was set at 35 to make sure the people interviewed had a certain time perspective on the evolution of the football clubs in recent years.

Procedure

After using an initial question to test the interviewees' interest in football, two other questions were formulated to evaluate the frequency of their attendance at football stadiums and their consumption of information, programmes and football matches through the communication media. The responses to these two questions were used to classify the interviewees in one of four profiles obtained in a previous study on football fans in Spain (Torregrosa & Cruz, 2009: 153). These profiles were: the 'enthusiasts' (high attendance at stadiums and high football consumption), the 'in-stadium' fans (high attendance at stadiums and low football consumption), the 'virtual' fans (low attendance at stadiums and high football consumption), and the 'spectators' (low attendance at stadiums and low football consumption). In the present study, the focus was only on the first three profiles, which included 12, 4 and 9 people, respectively, a similar distribution to the one obtained by these three profiles in the aforementioned study. In addition, the interviewees' loyalties were spread over five First and Second division Spanish football teams.

Interview guidelines

The interviewees were asked to talk about their experiences as football fans, and they were encouraged to refer to Spanish football in general. For this reason, to a certain extent, the results obtained illustrate the general feelings of Spanish fans about football. The questions included in the interview were: What do you think about Spanish professional football?; What is your opinion of the transformation of football clubs into public limited sports companies?; How has this transformation affected the fans' relations with the clubs?; What do you think of the way the football clubs are managed?; What do you think about foreign investors entering the clubs as shareholders?; and, What effects have the changes in the ownership and management of the football clubs had on the fans? The interviews were carried out by the author of the study, and they lasted from approximately 35 to 45 minutes each.

Data analysis

Once the interviews had been transcribed, the data analysis took place. First, the transcriptions were read carefully to get an overall view of their content (Friberg & Öhlen, 2007). The data were fragmented in minimal units of meaning and classified in four categories: i) opinions about the ownership of the football clubs; ii) opinions about the incorporation of foreign investors as shareholders in the clubs; iii) rating of the clubs' management; iv) effects and reactions. Thus, the data were grouped in each of the categories according to their similarities and differences in meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results and discussion

The ownership of the football clubs

This section focuses on the evolution of the ownership and governance of the clubs from the fans' point of view. The introductory section pointed out that one of the main effects of the Sport Law (Law 10/1990 of the 15th of October) was the transformation of the football clubs into SAD. More than twenty years later, the majority of the interviewees indicate that the fans feel a high level of confusion about what this transformation has meant, and they are not fully aware of the consequences of the legal changes these societies bring:

'people have no idea what this thing about public limited sports companies means'.

'the truth is that I don't know either; it's that they are now businesses'.

Both statements clearly show that the relationship of some fans with the football clubs could be viewed as 'an act of consumption' (Horne, 2006: 35). On the other hand, according to Bourdieu's analysis of the social mechanisms of distinction, fandom and identification with a football club would act as a space for projecting one's own image (Bourdieu, 1999). However, not all fans are completely unaware of or foreign to the legal status of the clubs. Therefore, beyond what has just been pointed out, the declarations of other interviewees should be considered, as they recognize that 'passion for the club' might be influencing this lack of awareness:

'I think the fans are quite confused about it; they get carried away by their feelings and identification with the club, the t-shirt, and everything they usually say'.

'What is the most important is what one feels about the team; it's his/her team, and the other is just secondary'.

Other interviewees think fans do not really want to accept the reality and prefer to deceive themselves, acting as if things were still the way they were in the past. One fan described it this way:

'we fans continue to act as if things were like before, and we don't want to know that there is a public limited sports company law that allows a guy to come and buy the club and from that time on, it's his'.

In any case –because those who prefer to deceive themselves also feel passionate about the club– these statements are clear proof of the way 'loyalty to the clubs continues to be an essential characteristic of football fans' (Giulianotti, 1999; Henry & Lee, 2004). This idea is widely accepted by researchers, and it explains why fans do not change clubs (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012). The influence of this loyalty toward the club is so strong that the fans end up feeling part of them, regardless of who owns them.

One aspect that confirms this situation of confusion and self-deception that characterizes fans is the survival in everyday language of an expression from before the 1990 Sport Law: the word *socios* (member). As pointed out above, before the Sport Law was passed, the clubs were made up of *socios* who could participate in periodic club assemblies and meetings and had the capacity to choose a Board of Governors. The current legal set up of the clubs as SAD does not contemplate the existence of members and restricts the connection with the club to the condition of shareholder or subscriber. However, both of them, especially the subscribers, continue to use the word member to describe their relationship with the club.

It is not surprising that they continue to use the word *socio* because, as pointed out earlier, the fans continue to think of themselves as 'club owners'. In some cases, they use the term in a strictly symbolic way. Regardless of who the owner is, the fans think they are the clubs' true owners and, therefore, can and must influence its progress. A fan described it in this way:

'we still consider ourselves owners of the club; a football club is not a business that only belongs to the person who buys it, but instead it belongs to its fans'.

In other cases, a large part of the club's shares belong to the fans, who become small shareholders and, therefore, continue to carry a certain amount of weight in the club's ownership. This is the case of those clubs whose capital –as there are no shareholders who hold more than ten percent of the capital– is dispersed among a large number of small shareholders.

The feeling of *symbolic ownership* of the club is reinforced by a series of peculiarities of Spanish football that have a strong influence on the clubs' management. The first has to do with the paternal and sometimes populist tone of some club presidents. Some fans refer to

this aspect, providing ample proof of integrating what Anthony King considered the predominant sentiment in current football fans: the feeling of deception (King, 2002):

‘we didn’t realize that the clubs belonged to their owners, and we have continued to act as if they were ours, largely because they made us believe it by using big words and telling us that we had to contribute to save the club, when in reality what they wanted was to do their own business’.

Another influence has been the local and regional roots of many of their presidents. In contrast to the entrance of foreign investors, this local and regional link of the directive teams of many football clubs has kept the fans from fearing the loss of the clubs’ identity. They have remained loyal to their clubs, unlike what they think occurred in the case of some English clubs:

‘the people who control or have controlled the club have been from here, all their lives, so that they are not going to change the club’s identity or go against its traditions’.

‘at least what happened in England hasn’t happened here, that they were bought by people from outside who did whatever they wanted to. Well, at least it hasn’t happened as much, because some have been bought by foreign investors’.

The territorial connection, therefore, reduces the effect of the possible loss of tradition that fans could attribute to the clubs’ transformation into SAD. This aspect distinguishes Spain (and Europe) from the United States (Hamil, Michie, Oughton & Warby, 2000). In both cases, when faced with a decline in their income from attendance at stadiums and an increase in costs due to the hyper-professionalization of the club, the big clubs have looked for additional income through sponsors, merchandising and broadcasting rights to the matches (Williams, 2007). However, in the United States, the big leagues are organized as franchises, and the organizers require certain economic criteria from the participating clubs. Depending on whether or not these are met, the franchises can change their geographical location, which obviously impedes the strong territorial identification that usually occurs in European countries (Horne, 2006: 31).

However, there is a second reason for the feeling of *symbolic ownership* of many Spanish fans, the regional representation they attribute to the clubs. The clubs are not perceived as merely sport entities or public limited sports companies, but rather as ‘regional teams’, that is, official representatives of each region, almost the same way the Spanish National football team represents Spain. Thus, they adopt a regional representation role, which is manifested in a natural way, as it is fully integrated in the common sense of the majority of the fans. In fact, the fans usually point out that on many occasions municipal and regional governments have had to economically rescue certain football clubs by giving them financial support to avoid bankruptcy and their eventual disappearance:

‘the clubs represent each region and cannot disappear; if they go bankrupt, anything will be done to save them’.

‘people don’t understand that the club is owned by investors because town halls and regional governments have rescued a lot of clubs’.

In this sense, the image of the clubs is impregnated with what could be defined as *implicit* or –paraphrasing Billig (1995)– *banal regionalism*. It is a sort of social mechanism that orients the perceptions of connection between a region and a football club to the point of making them seem natural. Thus, *banal regionalism* would reproduce the schemes of regionalism in an everyday manner, in both apparently trivial and collective rituals that develop, in this case, around football, impregnating citizens’ cognitive mind sets (Billig, 1995).

In summary, the loyalty to the club with which each fan identifies, the lack of awareness about the exact reach of the structural transformations of the club, the characteristics of the European league model (in contrast to the American franchise system), the local origin of the majority of the presidents or owners of the clubs, and the *banal regionalism* of Spanish society are factors that, combined, would explain the persistence of Spanish fans' feelings of ownership toward their clubs.

The incorporation of foreign capital as shareholders in the football clubs

The connection between local/regional governments and the football clubs is reinforced even more in the fans' minds due to the number of times the public authorities have acted directly or indirectly –that is, through financial institutions or entities that largely depend on municipal or regional governments– to keep foreign capital from entering the football clubs:

‘it's not that there is one example, in Spain there are many, of how they have done everything possible, forgiving debt, allowing them to continue without paying what they owe, and keeping them from being bought by other people, all because they ultimately do not want them to fall into someone else's hands’.

The incorporation of foreign capital in the Spanish clubs is a possibility that has especially worried fans and authorities during the past few years, perhaps as a result of the Spanish public's negative view of the Dmitry Piterman era in Racing de Santander and Alavés. In January 2003, Dmitry Piterman acquired 24% of the Racing de Santander shares, thus taking control of the club with the permission of the other shareholders (Lino, 2003). He was a controversial figure, and in spite of not having the corresponding licence, tried to act as coach, which caused great disagreement within the League. At the beginning of the 2003/04 season, the businessman Santiago Díaz managed to regain control of Racing thanks to the support of the rest of the shareholders, so that Piterman no longer had control and years later was left with no shareholder representation (Silva, 2007). In 2004 Piterman bought the Deportivo Alavés, a Second Division team, and managed to bring it up to First Division. However, in the 2005/06 season, it descended again to Second Division. After various confrontations with Alavés fans, the relationships between the team and the Alaves institutions worsened considerably. Now facing diverse economic problems and various convictions for not paying salaries (Martínez Viguri, 2007), in March 2007 he left the club after a group of investors bought the majority of the shares. During his four years in charge of the club, its debt multiplied by three until reaching 23 million Euros (Ubera, 2008). Piterman's actions created a precedent that has acted as a warning about what could happen in other clubs if they allowed the incorporation of foreign investors who are not part of the tradition and sport culture of the club:

‘here the advantage is that there were some cases that ended badly, like Piterman in Racing; I think that has made them pay some attention, that is, that the institutions and the people in the club have taken steps to make sure that what happened with Piterman in Racing doesn't happen again’.

This situation, however, has begun to change slowly, one decade after they modified the limit on the purchase of shares by foreigners that the 1990 Sport Law had set at 25%. In the new version of article 22 of the Sport Law established by Law 50/1998 (article 109 four), the mention of the nationality of the shareholder disappeared, an aspect that had already been criticized at the time for being incompatible with the free circulation stipulated in the European Union treaties. During the 2010/11 season, for example, Malaga was acquired by the Qatari Sheik Abdullah Bin Nasser Al Thani, thanks to an injection of 36 million Euros, while the Indian millionaire Ahsan Ali Syed bought Racing de Santander with an investment

of 50 million Euros, which made it the team with the third highest investment in hiring players, after Real Madrid and FC Barcelona.

Some interviewees believe that the arrival of foreign investors could mean the loss of the clubs' identity, as these investors will not be ruled by the same criteria as the Spanish managers. It is accepted with resignation as something that can have a great influence on the culture and tradition of the football clubs, which shows the *resigned* character of many Spanish fans. Others, however, point out that the arrival of these foreign investors is inevitable, and even desirable, given the complicated financial situation of Spanish football:

‘why wouldn't it be good for them to buy the teams if they are completely bankrupt?, Are they going to put in money? Go ahead then. Or many will disappear, unless, of course, they are saved by the tax money of all the Spanish people, which I don't think is a good idea’.

‘the clubs are selling their shares to foreigners because they don't have any money. The shareholders sell because the clubs are unsustainable. In England the same thing happened and the results were good. If it's to avoid bankruptcy, I think it's fine’.

These results coincide with the findings of some British researchers when they highlight that, contrary to what is usually recognized, the foreign owners are not always rejected by the fans (Brimson, 2006; Coombs & Orborne, 2008). The investigation with Spanish fans has shown that there is no direct rejection of foreign investors acquiring the control of the clubs, as what most concerns the fans is the future of the clubs, a future that currently struggles between the leaders' drive for sport success and the need to guarantee the clubs' long-term economic health (Coombs & Orborne, 2008). In this sense, if the survival of a club with serious economic difficulties can be assured by the incorporation of foreign investors, the fans seem willing to accept this as a lesser evil, which again shows the *resigned* character of many Spanish fans.

The clubs' management and governance

The majority of the interviewees argue that the transformations in football make up one more aspect of the evolution process that Spanish society has experienced in the past twenty years. The transformation of football into a commercial, televised and global phenomenon was, therefore, inevitable, allowing it to survive and maintain its hegemony as a social and sport phenomenon. Thus, rather than a misfortune, football's evolution in recent decades is a clear sign of its supremacy in Spanish society:

‘I think football great success is having remained in its privileged place and having overcome that competence; it has consolidated its hegemony in a time when there is a broad offer of leisure activities. This shows the strength of football’.

These proposals, however, do not keep the majority of the interviewees from having a negative view of the football clubs' trajectory in terms of management. The general feeling is that they are poorly managed, committed to an irresponsible dynamic of waste, and removed from any mechanism of control and supervision:

‘it's a disaster; I think one day it will blow up and take a lot of things with it, and I don't think anyone dares to clean it up. They do what they want, and in the end the enormous holes they leave behind have to be covered up’.

In this way, what could be defined as current *football ambivalence* is set up: its growing spectacularity produces great enthusiasm among the fans, but this enthusiasm co-exists with the feeling that their management is embarked on an unsustainable course from which it is quite difficult to escape. Again, the fans seem resigned to co-existing with this ambivalent character of today's football, an ambivalence that, on the other hand, some sociologists consider a defining characteristic of western societies (Bauman, 1991). It generates relevant

and contradictory thoughts that produce cognitive instability in the fans, which affects their interest and can unleash diverse processes designed to reduce this instability (Festinger, 1957), such as distancing themselves from the clubs' management.

In fact, the testimonies collected show the growing breach that this ambivalence has created between the fans and the clubs' management. This distancing has been increasing since the transformation of clubs in SAD took place. The fans have seen that the clubs' management has become an increasingly specialized and complex task which, moreover, has nothing to do with them now, as it is the shareholders and managers –and not the fans– who have to determine and direct the club's management.

‘the club's management does not depend on us, in the sense that it is in the hands of the shareholders, and it is something we can't control; so, even if the managers are very bad, in the end you realize that for those topics they do not count on us, and, therefore, we can't do anything’.

This distancing or lack of interest in the management and governance of the clubs contrasts, however, with British fans' demands for greater influence and internal democracy in their clubs (Brown, 2008; Millward, 2012; Nash, 2000; Watkins, 2000). This difference may be due to the fact that in the United Kingdom the football clubs never granted the fans any status other than that of mere fans, even when they asked them for donations to guarantee their survival (Cleland, 2010).

Thus, the fans end up realizing that the role the new football scenario has designed for them deprives them of any responsibility for the progress of the club and turns them into mere consumers of sport performances. This finding coincides with the conclusions of King in reference to the British fans, when he pointed out their progressive transformation into consumers (King, 2002), and it confirms the arguments of Giulianotti (1999) and Williams (1999), when they highlight that football (and sport, in general) cannot currently be understood without a prior analysis of its relationships with consumption and of the different dimensions sports include. On the other hand, the fans' acceptance of their condition as consumers would be proof of the way football is becoming one of the cultural products par excellence of post-modern societies (Sandvoss, 2003).

In addition, the fans' testimonies point out that the lives of individuals in western societies have become increasingly complex and tense, as a result of transformations in the world of work and the advance of individualization processes (Sennett, 2000). It is not surprising, therefore, that fans are more interested in the fun and festive aspects of football, avoiding anything that can detract from their enjoyment and cause them more worries:

‘I think what also occurs is that people think they already have too many problems in their lives to become involved in the problems of an institution, no matter how much they love it, in which they cannot participate’.

It should be added, on the other hand, that this distancing from the clubs' management is not necessarily evaluated negatively. Some interviewees feel more comfortable in the role of spectators, as this role allows them to separate themselves from the club's problems and take pleasure in the game and their team's goals:

‘football is to distract me from my problems, not to get more, so I go to football to have fun, like I go to the cinema to watch a good movie’.

‘I go on Sundays to see my team, and I don't want to know anything about debts; I go there to have fun, and I don't want to hear about other things’.

All of this has produced another characteristic trait of today's football fans: *indifference or apathy* toward aspects related to the entity's management. The interviewees point out that the

consolidation of their role as spectators has meant a distancing from decisions about the organizational and economic functioning of the club, which they ultimately do not feel are their responsibility:

‘we are less and less active; in reality, we have been distancing ourselves, and now we watch the matches and that’s it; we don’t live the club like before because we only care about winning matches. The club’s economy can be fixed by the shareholders, which is their thing’.

However, it would be a mistake to state that the fans’ apathy toward the club’s management means they do not influence its functioning and evolution. The pressure that can be exerted at the stadiums –especially when the sport performance of the club is not positive– can play a decisive role in determining whether the club’s president or coach continues in his post. In the recent history of Spanish football, there have been many situations in which the fans have protested about the club’s progress and exerted pressure in the stadiums until achieving the president’s resignation. However, this attitude of protest is only activated when there is an accumulation of negative sport results. It is not usually a response of resistance toward the club’s functioning or management. As long as the team has good results, the fans do not usually express any discontent:

‘people protest when the team isn’t doing well and doesn’t win games; they don’t care about anything else; the only things that can make them stand up and ask the president to go is when the team loses matches, plays badly or is close to being demoted to second division- things the fans do not tolerate’.

It should also be mentioned that this attitude of protest has become less frequent in recent years as the feeling of ownership of the club has also diminished. In fact, some interviewees have pointed out that protest actions when the team is going through a bad sport streak or playing below the expected level are less and less frequent. Currently, the fans’ most common reaction when their team has poor sport results or does not play well is to not attend matches at the stadium.

Finally, some limitations of this research should be taken into account. First, it is a qualitative study that has tried to deeply analyse the fans’ discourse about the ownership and management of professional football clubs. The results obtained, therefore, can only be considered an exploratory approach to the study object. A second limitation is that, although the economic reality of the majority of the First and Second Division Spanish clubs is quite similar, the field work on which this study was based took place in two Spanish cities, Valencia and Zaragoza, whose main clubs have faced truly serious economic problems in recent years. Third, the study focused on Spanish fans’ opinions of the changes and transformations in football clubs that were converted into public limited sports companies, without including clubs that were not obligated to make that change because they had a positive patrimonial balance.

Conclusions

This article has provided an analysis of the fans’ perspective of the current configuration and functioning of the Spanish football clubs. Two decades after a law went into effect that led to their transformation into public limited sports companies, an analysis has been made of the fans’ opinions of the changes that have occurred in the ownership and management structure of the clubs, as well as the effects on their relationships with them. Studies on the fans’ vision of the football clubs’ management are essential from any sport entity management proposal that adheres to principles of corporate social responsibility and good governance practices, as these fans are their main stakeholders. This approach is already widely recognized in countries like the United Kingdom, where various governmental or institutional petitions

have encouraged both the clubs and the organisms responsible for the professional football league to incorporate the fans' voice in the decision-making structures.

The study presented in this article has shown the existence of a sense of *symbolic ownership* of the clubs among the fans, which explains the fact that the majority of them continue to consider themselves as *socios*, even though the clubs' transformation in Public Limited Sports Companies (SAD) does not allow them any role other than that of spectators. A clear example of this is the continued use of the word *socio* to define themselves or refer to those who in reality are shareholders or season ticket holders. The paternalism and local link of the majority of the club presidents, their strong regional symbolism, and local authorities' interest in avoiding the incorporation of foreign investors as shareholders are elements that contribute to fans not being completely aware –or preferring to deceive themselves– about the implications of the clubs' transformation into SAD. However, many fans consider it inevitable –and even positive– for foreign capital to enter, if it guarantees what really worries them: the clubs' survival. It is, in any case, something to which they think they should *resign themselves*, taking into account the risks to the clubs' identity.

The study has also shown the existence of a syndrome of *ambivalence* in today's football, as the fans' fascination with this sport co-exists with the feeling that the clubs are poorly managed and economically unsustainable. The tension between these extremes is resolved by adopting the role of spectator and distancing themselves from the clubs' management and anything not strictly related to sport aspects. Moreover, in this case, the condition that arises is that of a *resigned* fan. This process involves a profound alteration in the football cultures of the fans, transforming them into mere consumers of football spectacles, voluntarily removed from the extra-sport dimension of the club. They go to the stadium looking for a pleasant experience, and they only react in a critical way when their team accumulates poor sport results. Thus, they have feelings of apathy or indifference when they contemplate the economic progress of the club, and they restrict their protests to those periods in which the sport performance of the club is far below what would be expected or could result in its descent to a lower category.

Finally, this and other similar qualitative studies will have to give way to quantitative studies that can propose specific hypotheses and test them with broad samples of fans. Furthermore, the extension of the field work to other cities and geographical areas will provide new nuances and details that will make it possible to better understand the relations between fans and clubs in Spain. In addition, future studies will have to examine the differences that, from the fans' point of view, exist between the clubs that were transformed into Public Limited Sports Companies and those that had a positive patrimonial balance and were able to maintain their previous legal status.

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