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Football ownership, fan politics and Liverpool football club

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This paper focuses on the arguments concerning sport and Americanisation, especially in relation to the recent spate of ownership buyouts, by American businessmen, of English Premier League football clubs. The central case study here is of Liverpool football club in the north west of England. The economic trajectory of football in England is analysed, as is the current attractiveness of the English game to foreign investors The specific history and traditions of the Liverpool club and the city of Liverpool are also examined in some detail as a means of contextualising the response in the city to the proposed investment buyout by Tom Hicks and George Gillett Jr., which eventually materialised as a leveraged deal early in 2007. The paper considers the almost complete breakdown of relations between the new owners and the Liverpool fans which occurred between autumn 2007 and spring 2008. It concludes that in painstakingly attempting to maintain core aspects of the Liverpool club’s organic traditions, the Liverpool board, paradoxically, colluded in the excessive commodification of the club and the alienation of many of its own supporters.

Americanisation and the New Economics of English Football

From around the late-1960s the discourse of cultural imperialism in academic theorising about popular culture tended to characterise the critical reception of globalisation by casting the associated processes as the diffusion of specifically American values, consumer goods and lifestyles [1]. Later, Roland Robertson’s influential work took a rather different route by seeking to establish globalisation as ‘the process whereby the world becomes a single place’ but one characterised culturally, less by American influences per se, but by ‘a general mode of discourse about the world as a whole and its variety’ [2]. In the field of research on sport recent critical theories of globalisation have tended to run together the processes of commodification, homogenisation and Americanisation, though some accounts have
stressed, instead, that we are, more accurately, witnessing an homogenisation of world leisure practices and sports rather than their Americanisation [3].

Still other approaches have stressed the emerging ‘glocal’ character of sport, as the unity of nation states is dissolved or pluralised, thus giving way, not to homogenisation, but to processes of global diversity or polyculturalism [4]. Other accounts have argued in relation to elite football in England and in Europe that processes of Europeanisation [5] or of internationalisation, rather than free-market globalisation, best define recent developments, especially in relation to the transnational flows of capital and cultural signs across national boundaries, and in the area of player recruitment [6]. Finally, and in a typically provocative and challenging thesis, David Rowe has suggested that rather than articulating processes of globalisation or Americanisation, the very constitution of sport makes it a wholly inappropriate vehicle for the carriage of such a project in its fullest sense, primarily because of late-modern sport’s ultimate dependence on the production of national cultural difference [7].

Professional football - or soccer - has played but a marginal role in America’s sports culture throughout the whole of the 20th century, though soccer’s historic ‘foreignness’ for Americans has recently, arguably, been allayed by, ‘the globalisation of a cosmopolitan culture that rapidly diminished established boundaries and introduced new patterns of consumption previously unknown to Americans’ [8]. Central here, too, has been the recent international playing successes for both the USA women and men’s soccer squads and their role in developing what has been described as a ‘World Cup consciousness’ among the American sporting publics [9].
This latest development has produced something of a tripartite divide in public interest in soccer in the USA, one that is segmented between its committed male and female recreational soccer players, the struggling, low impact, domestic professional soccer leagues in the USA such as Major League Soccer, and the glamorous, televisual and international version of the sport, as represented by football’s global mega-events such as the World Cup finals [10].

Notwithstanding this rather uneven progress made by soccer in its various formats in the USA in the last two decades, traditional American sport still harbours its own ambitions to ‘break’ into the dominant sports markets in England and in the rest of Europe. For example, an annual NFL fixture now takes place at English soccer’s national Wembley Stadium: the event is sold out within hours of tickets going on sale and it attracts considerable press coverage in Britain as well as a substantial television audience. The innovation and commercial success of this global sports business rival in promoting the NFL and its products to world markets, was widely argued to provide one of the main motivations in 2008 for the decision of English football’s Premier League (founded in 1992) to advocate the playing of an additional 39th round of club fixtures in a range of countries around the world, including perhaps the USA (Premier League clubs play 38 league fixtures in a season). There was almost universal public opposition to the plan in the UK, and from amongst the sport’s international governing bodies and domestic federations for this proposed aping of ‘Americanised’ sporting expansionism, which effectively killed it off – at least for the present [11].
Nevertheless, the recent intensive commodification and marketisation of the top levels of English professional football – its emphasis on branding and merchandising; on producing highly packaged and spectacularised ‘leisure experiences’ aimed at sports ‘customers’ and ‘consumers’ (including advertisers); and its television-driven agendas that define football as a digestible, dramatic yet pacified ‘entertainment’ for otherwise uncommitted armchair viewers [12] - have all been argued to correspond with some key features of the Americanisation thesis. One recent commentator even argued that the 39th fixture ambitions of the English game corresponds best to the global domination of US fast food franchises. In short, ‘We are witnessing the birth of the McLeague [13].’

American-based global corporations continue to be key figures as sponsors in the staging of football’s mega-events, of course, but what has been ‘missing’ from the English football model - until fairly recently at least - has been the direct involvement of American sports entrepreneurs in the ownership structures of elite level English football clubs. This has now begun to change. Since 2006 three Premier League clubs (out of 20) – Manchester United, Aston Villa and Liverpool – have all been purchased by American owners, men who own, or have owned, sports franchises in the United States [14]. Why the sudden extension of English football club ownership across the Atlantic? One reason is the changing corporate structure and financial outlook of English clubs in the new global markets for professional sport.

Historically, the distinctiveness of the ownership structures of UK football clubs lay in their limited liability corporate structure, a feature which dates back to the late nineteenth century and which effectively had the potential to divide the interests of
owners and club supporters at the very point of the sport’s movement into the professional era from 1885. However, the sort of local patrician businessmen who set up the Football League in England in 1888 was not only driven by free market principles. Nor were they solely motivated in their involvement in local football clubs by the direct prospects of making healthy profits: club shares often provided only ‘psychic income’ in the form of influence and power for their owners. Instead, this collection of northern and Midlands Methodists and local businessmen embodied in their work a philosophy of ‘mutual protection’ in which wage restraints exercised on players, via adherence to a fixed national maximum wage for example, and also the defence of a retain-and-transfer system which effectively tied players to their clubs, was designed to ensure that the League’s better-off members would share common and reciprocal interests with its less wealthy members [15].

It was in this supportive context of mutuality and cross-subsidisation that limited liability was designed to protect the league’s founders and club directors. The Football Association (FA) introduced Rule 34 in order to restrict the payment of dividends to owners and to prevent the payment of club directors. Restrictions on dividends remained at 5% of the nominal value of shares in England, until it was raised to 15% in 1981. Under these penal conditions football club investors typically sunk their own capital into clubs when no-one else would, and they took considerable risks in guaranteeing club debts at a time when the future of many clubs was at best insecure [16]. These highly regulated ownership arrangements for football clubs characterised almost the first 100 years of professional football in England.
However, as neo-liberal economic and social policy began to dominate the wider political agenda in the UK in the 1980s, and with English football immersed in a series of crises around stadium provision, safety and hooliganism indicative of a wider crisis around public provision in Britain [17], traditional ‘custodian’ English football club directors began to be publicly criticised. A new breed of more entrepreneurial football club owners and directors slowly began to appear in the sport in England as pressure grew inside the elite Football League clubs to change or evade the FA limitations. When the London club Tottenham Hotspur became the first British football club to be listed on the Stock Exchange in 1983 it set up a holding company (Tottenham Hotspur plc) to act as a parent company for the football club in order to evade FA rules – including Rule 34. This example of ‘regulatory capture’ revealed the FA’s feebleness as a regulator and other clubs adopted similar corporate structures prior to flotation [18]. In 1992 the FA Premier League was established in England by a breakaway group of the sport’s senior clubs, largely on the back of income from emerging satellite television conglomerates. Its effect was to shatter the historic mutuality of existing arrangements in the old Football League. By 1998, in a public admission of its impotence in the face of the aggressive new market-driven economics of the sport, Rule 34 was finally abandoned altogether by the FA [19].

In the 10 years since 1998, the appetite of satellite television for live coverage of Premier League and European Champions League matches shows little signs of slowing. The latest broadcasting deals involving Premier League clubs (2007-2010) is set to raise some £2.7 billion. Moreover, the attractions of the ‘brand value’ of the Premier League itself have proved highly resilient in the face of both annual ticket price rises and the growing gulf of uncompetitiveness that has emerged between a
small group of ‘gold standard’ English clubs who might reasonably claim to have aspirations to become global sports brands, and the rest of the English Premier League clubs [20].

Aided by stadium expansions, average crowds at Premier League matches moved to a new league high of 36,100 in 2007/08, up 5% on the previous season, and wage costs had stabilised in 2007, at a relatively healthy 63% of turnover [21]. With the enormous potential earning power existing in new sports markets that are being carefully excavated in China, India and the Far East – and possibly in North America too – and with the relative absence of FA regulations or British Government legislation restricting foreign investment in the English game, professional sports clubs in England today have come to be regarded, less as distinctive social and cultural associations that require protection against hostile external investment and potential asset stripping, than as ‘just another business’ [22]. It is in this new febrile global business context for sport that foreign club owners have recently moved into English football. They include American co-owners of one of the most culturally distinctive and successful of all English football clubs, Liverpool FC.

The ‘Americanisation’ of Liverpool FC: a North West football club ‘in turmoil’

On 8 June 2008 any casual passer-by in the working class Anfield district of Liverpool might well have had their attention grabbed outside the Liverpool football club stadium on an otherwise unremarkable Sunday afternoon. They would have been faced by the bizarre sight of 300 of the club’s own fans pasting posters on the empty stadium walls. These were eviction notices demanding the repossession of the club from its American co-owners, George Gillett Jr. and Tom Hicks. The act was a
symbolic re-assertion of collective ‘ownership’ of the club by its longstanding main advocates and traditional funders - the Liverpool supporters. Weeks before this, many of the same small group of fans, calling themselves the *Spirit of Shankly/Liverpool Supporters’ Union*, had begun a symbolic ‘dig’ on the site at nearby Stanley Park, where the proposed new Liverpool FC stadium had been confirmed for development following the American buyout of the club early in 2007. The point of this protest was that not a sod had been dug in anger by the club’s builders since the agreement on a revised version of the stadium had been reached.

On 24 January 2008 the *Liverpool Supporters Network*, a hastily-convened coalition of Liverpool football fanzines and websites, reported on a poll of 2,000 of the club’s supporters which found that 98% of them reportedly ‘did not trust’ Gillett and Hicks, and that 76% said that they, the club’s fans, as a protest against the American ownership of the club, were willing to withdraw their financial commitment from Liverpool in the form of the purchase of match tickets, merchandising and subscriptions to the official Liverpool website [23].

In February 2008, also as a response to the American owners, Liverpool University academic, ex-national fan organiser and Liverpool Kopite, Rogan Taylor, launched the *Share Liverpool FC* group, a fans consortium which planned to persuade 100,000 of the club’s fans worldwide to pledge to contribute £5,000 each for the purchase of a single share in the club in an audacious attempt at a £500 million buyout from its American owners. The new ownership structure of Liverpool, it was promised, would be loosely based along the membership lines of a number of the major professional football clubs in Spain, including Barcelona and Real Madrid. Meanwhile in March
2008 another group of the club’s supporters formed an entirely new local football club, AFC Liverpool, apparently as a protest against the club’s increasingly public and discordant ownership wrangles and the rising ticket prices at Anfield [24].

Finally, at Liverpool home matches throughout the second half of the 2007/08 football season, supporters of the club regularly organised a series of public demonstrations insisting the new owners were ‘liars’ who allegedly did not ‘care’ either for the fans or for the club. According to the British broadsheet and popular sporting press, the Anfield club was now, very publicly, ‘in turmoil.’

Modern Liverpool football club supporters, it must be said, are no strangers to expressive forms of collective solidarity and protest in the wake of perceived external attack or threat to the club or to the city. The initial defensive reactions in the city to the Heysel Stadium disaster in 1985 and the later determination to ‘organise’ supporters are one example. Another is the on-going popular campaign in Liverpool for ‘justice’ following the death, by police mismanagement, of 96 Liverpool supporters at the Hillsborough Stadium disaster in 1989 [25]. But this more recent series of collective outbursts and gestures concocted by Liverpool supporters was something almost entirely new. It contravened a crucial set of cultural and organisational practices which are associated with the club locally and are known, colloquially, as the ‘Liverpool way’.

In this context, it is argued that Liverpool fans should show unity in the face of ‘outsiders’ and never be knowingly publicly critical of the club’s staff. ‘Difficult’ issues of the sort that actually plague all football clubs – training ground bust-ups, financial disputes, management disagreements, board room rows, player indiscretions
should always be settled privately rather than in the glare of the public eye. This is a general approach to managing club affairs which chief executive Rick Parry has summarised recently as the ‘natural conservatism’ of Liverpool football club, one that denies advantage to rivals and is taken to evoke ‘respect’ for the club and its officers both inside and outside the sport. But it also reveals an archetypical, and a much more general, Merseyside suspicion of the national news media and what are assumed to be its nefarious agendas in relation to the city and its people. It calls up, too, the very real late-modern ambivalences inside Liverpool football club concerning the value and specific meaning of the Liverpool football club ‘brand’ today and how it compares to the much more commercialised and glamorised, more media-conscious approach of fierce local rivals Manchester United. For Liverpool chief executive Rick Parry, for example:

‘I hate to use the word “brand” but it’s a word that fits. The great thing that Liverpool had never done was to prostitute its brand. And that is terrific. There is a paradox for Manchester United that they are simultaneously the most loved and the most hated brand of all, which is kind of tough from a commercial perspective. The brand values that we have developed for Liverpool well the key word for us was “respect.” In the ’70s and ’80s we were not loved by everybody, but there was always a respect for Liverpool, and that’s a value that I think is extremely important’ [26].

Comments such as these also emphasised that the sometimes grubby economic realities of sport have traditionally been relegated by Liverpool fans, and even by the owners and directors of the club, to a distracting, though unfortunate necessity. Indeed, when the commercial bases of football in England were already beginning to change quite radically in the 1980s and early 1990s, the dominant football club on the field in England - Liverpool FC – soon slipped some way behind its commercial competitors off it [27]. In fact, it might be said that the eventual (but hasty) sale of the Liverpool club to new foreign investors from the United States early in 2007 can best
be read as a belated acknowledgment of the new realities and the inevitable re-ordering of the sport’s financial base in the new global era. As Steve Kelly, astute club critic and editor of the premier Liverpool fanzine, *Through the Wind and Rain*, put it at the time of the American takeover early in 2007:

‘There’s been some disquiet about Liverpool FC being in foreign hands. I’m not sure that’s entirely relevant any more. We’re quite happy to celebrate a manager and a playing staff who aren’t from “round ’ere like are de dough.” If anyone from the city does have £450m lying around I’m sure we’d have heard about it by now….. We’re not a corner shop any longer – we’re a fairly successful modern international concern. We’ve all talked some pretty big talk at one stage or another about following the team if they were also-rans, but seriously: do you want to put that theory to the test? At £40 a ticket? Honestly?’ [28]

All this meant that the extended fan protests about the governance and ownership of Liverpool football club which began to emerge during the 2007/08 league season were as much a reminder of the club’s glorious and largely stable recent past as it was a signal of current and future tensions. It was certainly to do, in part, with frustrations felt among the club’s supporters about Liverpool’s failure to be truly competitive in the newly monied Premier League era. It was certainly to do, too, with some of the specifics of the American takeover, a slick piece of image management business this, which, initially at least, seemed to promise considerable financial and emotional investment by the co-buyers. Finally, this Liverpool fan unrest may have reflected a more general concern about new patterns of global ownership at the top levels of the English game in the twenty-first century. As Rogan Taylor had put it at the launch of the democratising *Share Liverpool FC*, ‘The time is right to offer a different solution to the rising concerns that football fans have about the patterns of ownership developing at our major football clubs’ [29]. Arguably, in fact, such democratisation would have had more chance of success at a much earlier stage. But to understand exactly how Liverpool football club and its supporters came to this quite atypical
pitch of agitation and discord about the ownership of the club in 2007 and 2008 we need to examine, very briefly, the management and ownership history of the Liverpool club.

**Football and business in Liverpool: from John Houlding to the Moores money**

Historically, English football clubs have always been undercapitalised, with little or no retained profit and they have always relied on borrowing and overdrafts as a source of funding. However, Tischler [30] has also argued that early professional football in England represented nothing less than a ‘microcosm of the larger business environment’ and that local Victorian and Edwardian businessmen – especially those involved in building, brewing and catering – made some profits indirectly out of their role as local football club directors. Certainly for local Liverpool Tory, prominent Irishman and Orangeman, successful brewer and Victorian patrician John Houlding – one of the men who formed Liverpool FC in 1892 out of an acrimonious split of the board at the Everton club - involvement in football was obviously an important part of the wider commercial, moral and political appeal that local elites felt they had to make to working people in nineteenth century British cities. John Houlding was a deeply commercial animal as well as an ambitious and driven local politician, a man who used his standing at the two football clubs on Merseyside to bolster his political base, his role in local civic governance and his public image. He also used his involvement in football locally to cement his wide-ranging commercial interests in the city [31].

It was political Liberals and religious non-conformists inside Everton who were most opposed to Houlding’s brewing interests (and politics) and who wanted the early
Everton distanced from the drinks trade, and thus Houlding out of the club.

Houlding’s key opponents on the Everton board probably wanted to change much more: they wanted to establish a rudimentary democratic ownership and membership structure for their club. The Tory ‘King John’, by contrast, preferred to tap into local working class community support, whilst still maintaining overall control of the club along much more corporate lines [32]. When these tensions could no longer be resolved, in 1892 Houlding and his supporters formed a new club at his Anfield base, and the rest of the old Everton board departed to build a stadium for their historic club across the other side of Stanley Park. The later, uneven spread of share ownership at the two clubs rather confirms the view that the nature of the split between John Houlding and his opponents at Everton was probably about the control of a local football club as both a civic and a business interest [33].

These early traces of the Merseyside’s club’s origins and forms of governance would suggest that it was Liverpool football club that was rather more commercially driven and certainly more closely controlled by a few key shareholders, than was Everton [34]. But Liverpool was also, palpably, a family business. Houlding’s son William followed him into the club and Liverpool’s board was dominated in the years that followed by fathers and sons from wealthy local families – the Williams’s in the first two decades of the twentieth century; the Martindales from the 1920s to the 1940s; the Cartwrights in the 1930s and then the 1960s; and the Reakes in the 1960s and 1970s. Traditionally, most English football clubs have been identified as having a dominant owner or major shareholder interest. Cameron [35], for example, argues that these sorts of benefactors can be split broadly into two groups: those who have childhood links to the club and/or the vicinity, links that determine, emotionally, the
scale and the recipient of the investment; and those who want an investment as a viable business interest in a club to which they have no prior allegiance. Stephen Morrow rightly argues that these divisions are rather too fixed and that some so-called ‘emotional’ investors might also see their childhood club as offering an important investment opportunity [36]. ‘Business’ investors might also later develop meaningful ‘emotional’ ties to the football club they initially began staking for profit. Unusually, in Liverpool, one single family was to become a very dominant feature of the funding of both of the major professional football clubs in the city in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Morrow suggests that the Moores family falls firmly into the camp of those club benefactors for whom normal business criteria have been set aside when it comes to football [37]. The Moores made their money from the Littlewoods Pools and mail order businesses that originated between the wars and the family has, at different moments, made investments in both the Liverpool and Everton clubs. John Moores, the ‘genius’ behind the football pools, was born in Eccles in Manchester, but when his family moved to Merseyside, as a teenager Moores watched the great Everton forward Dixie Dean at Goodison Park and so he became a committed supporter of the Everton club. Starting as a lowly telegraphist at the Commercial Cable Company, and also playing as a local amateur footballer, John Moores introduced his first pool in 1923, using boys to distribute forms at football matches. During the Second World War, he bought half of the Everton shares then owned by later club chairman Dick Searle, with the option to buy the remainder on Searle’s death [38].
In 1960 Moores became the Everton chairman after it was revealed at the club AGM that he had offered Everton £56,000, free of interest, ‘to enable star players to be secured’ [39]. Indeed, it was this leadership and unfettered financial backing from John Moores that effectively bankrolled Everton’s growing national reputation in the post-maximum wage era of the early 1960s, as English football’s most free-spending club and one with an expansive transfer and wages policy. It was a strategy which showed its early reward: Everton won the club’s first post-war League title in 1963, repeating the feat in 1971.

Raised in the family business – but rising to no great heights within it - and also entranced by sport, John’s nephew, David Moores, leaned towards Liverpool football club rather than to Everton. Everton had faded from their 1960s peak and Liverpool began to dominate the domestic and European football club landscape from the late 1970s and into the 1980s. Significantly, it was also around this period that Liverpool football club ended its traditional rotational practice of voting in a new club chairman every three years. Instead, for 17 years between 1973 and 1990 Liverpool’s own ‘dapper businessman chairman’ John Smith, a boyhood Liverpool fan, brewery sales director and deputy chairman of an electronics firm, and also chairman of the Sports Council between 1985 and 1989, ran the club as a traditional ‘family’ concern, but it was also a tight and cohesive administrative and business unit. He did so alongside the long-serving Liverpool club secretary Peter Robinson [40]. Together, these two men were the backroom lynchpins at Liverpool across three decades, skilfully piloting the club, its staff and supporters through the 1980s’ economic slump and the effects of the Heysel and Hillsborough tragedies, as well as overseeing an unprecedented 11 League championship wins and four European Cup victories for the Liverpool club.
This pair of experienced administrators and shrewd businessmen was always reassuringly discreet, but also ‘realistic’ about the necessary commercial dimensions of running professional football clubs at this time. After all, it was Liverpool football club that negotiated the first major shirt sponsorship by a top English professional club, a £100,000 deal with the Hitachi electronics company in 1978, and Smith was also unapologetic about making the Liverpool team slog around Europe playing lucrative foreign friendly fixtures in mid-season as soon as the club was eliminated from European or domestic cup competitions. When, in season 1978/79, Liverpool made a profit of just £71,000 on a turnover of £2.4 million, it was Smith who publicly commented that this was ‘absurd’ and that: ‘Clubs like Liverpool cannot exist on the money coming through the turnstiles alone…. we have to use every avenue to increase our income’ [41]. This was an unusually frank assessment because, crucially, these men and their hard-headed concerns about the difficult economics involved in running even the highly successful Liverpool club, were seldom in the public eye in an era in which the financial aspects of sport - and the media focus on business more generally - were much less intensely promoted than they have since become today [42].

Cosseted by the Littlewoods-produced family millions, it is probably fair to say that the young David Moores lacked much of his uncle John’s imagination, personality and drive, and also much of John Smith’s political savvy and sharp business acumen. But at least the young Moores shared the haircuts and enjoyed the lifestyle of the city’s young footballers and musicians, and he became personal friends with a number of the great Liverpool players of the 1970s and 1980s, thus evoking aspects of the
close-knit ‘family’ ethos that had long been championed inside the club and which
linked the boardroom with the pitch and the club’s fans. When he eventually inherited
part of the family fortune, and with it shares in Liverpool football club – and with the
once indispensable John Smith now departed from the Anfield board - David Moores
was set reluctantly on a path which he could never have envisaged for himself. He
was seduced into becoming the new Liverpool football club chairman in 1991
following a brief stint by Noel White.

After the calm reassurance and firm leadership offered by Smith in the most
successful period of the club’s history, the role of Liverpool chairman in a period of
relative decline for the club was one in which David Moores rarely seemed to radiate
either comfort or direction. With Smith gone and Peter Robinson approaching his own
retirement - and with the sport itself in a period of frantic economic and cultural
transformation – the Liverpool club had sought comfort and stability in procuring
reliable local money and by drawing, once again, on the reassuring rhetorics of
localism and ‘family.’ John Smith himself had remarked approvingly that, ‘David’s
appointment will keep the predators at bay’ [43]. With ex-Premier League chief
executive and another Liverpool fan, Rick Parry, eventually installed as the club’s
new chief executive, the Liverpool club did not especially crave leadership from its
new figurehead chairman. Nor, it is safe to say, did it get it. In fact, Moores hated
formality and public speaking and, notoriously thin-skinned, he confessed to having
no real head for public scrutiny, conflict or high finance. At best he acted as a bulwark
against the excesses of the new market economics of the sport; at worst he contributed
to the very real sense that Liverpool lacked both direction and leadership in the 1990s
when the sport was rapidly changing. Amongst most Liverpool supporters, it is fair to
say that Moores was affectionately regarded as a soft-hearted man who cared deeply, as they did, for the club. But in this emerging new era of satellite TV and global finance for English football, he would also soon be some way out of his depth.

**It’s a whole new ball game**

By the early 1990s, many top English football clubs were turning, fashionably, to new neo-liberal ‘solutions’ to the sport’s financial challenges, in the shape of spreading share ownership and stock market flotation as a means of paying for post-Taylor report stadium improvements. Liverpool FC, by contrast, had stuck resolutely to its traditional structures and to its trusted local benefactors. In June 1994 David Moores paid £8 million for 15,164 new Liverpool shares in a rights issue that raised £9.3 million for the club. He now owned 51.6% of all Liverpool football club shares. Later, this injection of private funds from a single known benefactor – the continuation of the ‘Liverpool way’ – would prove, in hindsight, also to have constituted a very shrewd piece of sports investment business. After all, attendances and TV audiences for football were rising in England, while club stadia were being revamped to open up new corporate and middle class markets for the sport. Internet technology seemed to be pointing to potentially impressive new income streams for top English clubs, and all of this was occurring in the context of a generally much improved public image for the sport in England and the reduction of hooliganism [44]. Indeed by 2006, as global finance began to dominate the highest levels of English football thus outstripping, it was argued, the capacity of even the local Moores family inheritance to keep Liverpool football club truly competitive on the international stage, the 1994 investments by Moores looked very good business indeed.
It has been argued that globalisation and the international circulation of sports capital has effectively homogenised the international ownership structures of football clubs, but Morrow [45] suggests it would be a mistake to exaggerate the common features here at the expense of their local cultural peculiarities. In Italy, for example, a prominent ownership role in football clubs is still played by domestic family groupings and companies (Fiat, Pirelli, etc) in which a small number of individuals maintain control via holding companies and cross-shareholdings and by having their voting rights concentrated at the top of a pyramidal structure. In Spain, season ticket and fan investors are often registered as club members who can vote periodically for the club President and board members, who are usually local industrialists and businessmen.

In Britain, by way of contrast, there were now few cultural or legal prohibitions on foreign investment in football clubs or, indeed, in any other British businesses and cultural institutions. Instead, the British Government seemed, willingly, to have ceded control of its role in the world economy to a new elite of freebooting, super-rich free market speculators and institutions that promised accountability, economic stability, transparency and thrift but, in the main, actually delivered more volatility, chronic indebtedness, greater uncertainty and a sense of being remote from people’s everyday lives [46]. In this changing governance and investment context, the market success of elite English football clubs in the twenty-first century seemed increasingly to demand billionaire speculative global investors, rather than rooted and committed local ones.

Since at least 2003 Liverpool football club had been urgently seeking out potential new major investors. Central here was the fact that Liverpool had no excess stadium
capacity for league matches – customers were being turned away – and that income streams derived from ‘sweating’ sports stadiums had begun to climb in England. But the Liverpool club remained rooted in its historic, but by now outdated, Anfield home. The Liverpool board decided it needed to raise the capital to build a completely new structure in Anfield, the cost of which was high, and would later rise prodigiously. Liverpool FC had actually been talking since 1999 about building a new stadium to increase the capacity from the current 45,362. The project had been closely bound up with the proposed regeneration of one of the most deprived areas of the city, Anfield and Breckfield, and the restoration of one of the city’s magnificent, but long neglected, Victorian parks, Stanley Park. Three separate planning applications had been approved (the first in July 2004, for a 60,000 capacity arena), but by the summer of 2008 projected costs had risen to close to £400 million and preparatory work on the stadium site had barely begun. Chief executive, Rick Parry stated that the club remained committed to the project, and that there would be no further slippage in the oft-delayed timetable; the most recent declaration was that the stadium would finally be ready for the kick-off of the 2011-12 season. Long-suffering supporters and observers of this protracted saga could be forgiven for remaining underwhelmed; back in October 2002, Parry had argued that once Liverpool city council had agreed planning permission for a projected new 55,000-seat arena, ‘our hope is still to be in a new stadium in time for the start of the 2005-06 season’ [47].

In their search for finance to fund a new Anfield, Moores and Parry were clearly keen to conserve as much as possible of the status quo ante, in terms of the cultural heritage, the administration and the ‘family ethos’ of the club. Ideally, in their prospectus for future development, the ‘Liverpool way’, built patiently over many
generations of essentially conservative (and often Conservative) stewardship, would remain intact and relatively unsullied. But despite this ambition and Liverpool’s complex mix of parochialism and historical ‘openness’ as a city, its status as a site of both economic and cultural exchange with the port facing outward at the hub of an historic, global network of interwoven relationships [48], the realisation that investment in Liverpool football club was now being sought from all corners of the globe made some fans - especially locally-based Liverpool fans - uneasy.

Thus, in May 2004 the billionaire Prime Minister of Thailand Thaksin Shinawatra had offered a £65 million investment for a 30% stake in the Liverpool club, while a ‘hostile’ counter offer of a reported £73 million was placed on the table from local building magnate Steve Morgan to buy outright control of the club. Both offers were eventually rejected, Shinawatra’s possibly because of rising public unease among fans about his alleged human rights abuses in Thailand and the potential use of the Liverpool club brand in that country’s forthcoming elections. Morgan’s offer was at least made up of more, local capital, but it was rejected because it was claimed by the Liverpool board to ‘undervalue’ the club. Morgan also, undoubtedly, posed a threat to the future at Liverpool of both Moores and Rick Parry [49].

In the light of the obvious difficulties involved in finding suitable new investors, or even owners, for the club, other avenues were also tentatively explored by Liverpool, ones that stressed the local affinities of the club much more clearly. There had been discussions below the surface for some time, for example, regarding the potential for a shared stadium with neighbours and eternal rivals, Everton FC. The Goodison Park club was also eyeing several potential sites for relocation (prominent among them was
the vacant King’s Dock on the city’s waterfront). Predictably, there were vehement objections to the idea of a shared stadium from many diehard fans and elements within both club boardrooms, who viewed the proposal as little short of sacrilegious. More prosaically, a shared stadium would cut potential profits as well as costs, and the question that proponents of this solution failed to address was how and where the near-destitute Everton club would come up with their share of the capital required for such a venture? Nonetheless, as Liverpool’s and Everton’s respective problems with completing (or even beginning) their own stadium projects have continued, the idea of a shared stadium has resurfaced regularly over the course of the last decade [50].

More than two years of searching later, Liverpool still had no new investment capital. Then a consortium representing Dubai International Capital (DIC), an arm of the Dubai government and ruling family, reportedly offered a total of £156 million for the purchase of all existing Liverpool shares, plus funds to cover debts and the building of a new stadium on nearby Stanley Park, a total package of around £450 million. The Liverpool board seemed keen to accept the Dubai bid, despite further human rights concerns [51]. However, just two months later, in February 2007 two American sports and property tycoons Tom Hicks and George Gillett Jr., men who had never worked seriously together in business, raised the offer for the club to £5,000 a share, or £172 million, plus promised funds for a new stadium. The DIC group had earlier sneered that the ‘soccer-phobic’ Gillett would not know Liverpool FC from a ‘hole in the ground’, but it was now publicly furious at the sudden collapse in negotiations, describing the Liverpool board as ‘dishonourable’ and the club as ‘a shambles’ [52].
Liverpool chairman David Moores now had the onerous responsibility of weighing up the pros and cons of the American and Middle Eastern options: he eventually decided to take the plunge, and agreed to sell his controlling stake to the US entrepreneurs.

Rick Parry was quick to deny that Moores was being swayed by the increased offer for the club shares, saying: ‘the price is not a factor in David Moores’s mind. He is not after cash for himself, absolutely not. Be assured the only thing David Moores is concerned about is the club being in the right hands for the future. You can be certain he has done his homework carefully and will make a decision in the best interests of the club’ [53]. Moores, himself, was determined to make it clear that he was selling up only to secure the long term future of the club:

‘People know me and they know that if I had the money to afford the stadium – which is the main thing - then I would have done it myself. We had to find the money for the stadium and players so that the manager could have good funds each season. I am handing it over into safe hands because I can’t afford to take the club any further forward. I haven’t got that money and I’m not going to bankrupt the family….We have made considered judgments. When you have a decision to make like this and you are so desperate to see the club go into the right hands then you have to be comfortable with whatever you decide.’ [54]

Moores would certainly be ‘comfortable’: he stood to raise his own cut of the club buyout by some £8 million, to a reported £89.6 million. He was also installed as honorary life president of the club in recognition of his decade-and-a-half service, and he was charged to act as something of a nominal ‘boardroom delegate’ for astonished Liverpool fans. David Moores may well have favoured passing on his Liverpool shares to the Americans for reasons other than profit. After all, these were two identifiable sports benefactors from across the Atlantic, people who understood the global sports business and who had money to invest, but who also had the club apparently at heart. These may have looked a better bet for a city with strong business
and cultural links to the USA than a faceless and rather ‘alien’ corporate government body from the Middle East. And David Moores was hardly the first football club chairman in England in the new era to profit from the sale of a club: Manchester United’s ex-chairman Martin Edwards, for example, had cleared some £93 million from the transfer of his United shares between 1991 and 2004.

But what is more significant here is that this piece of late-modern corporate sports profiteering seemed like a complete reversal of the history of the patrician and custodian local funding for Liverpool FC; indeed, it seemed like an inversion of the entire Moores family project of long term investment in the Merseyside football clubs and in the city of Liverpool itself over more than 70 years. In short, this was a business deal typical of the new age of global liberalisation, one that plainly traduced the core tenets of the ‘Liverpool way.’ It was certainly unlikely to endear David Moores to Liverpool fans in 2007, even to those who approved, initially at least, of the American investment over that offered by the men from Dubai.

**Fistfuls of dollars**

Two American billionaires, Tom Hicks, owner of the Texas Rangers baseball franchise and the (US) National Hockey League’s Dallas Stars, and George Gillett Jr., owner of the Montreal Canadiens and formerly of the Miami Dolphins, had cobbled together in just two months an unlikely alliance to secure a reported £470 million funding package via a loan from the Royal Bank of Scotland to buy Liverpool football club and to allocate some £215 million to begin work on a new stadium. Hicks, a Texas acolyte and former business partner of President George W. Bush, had precisely made his fortune from raising private equity to fund multi-million dollar
corporate takeovers. Liverpool football club was suddenly in the hands of the sort of global sports capitalists who made no secret of their financial motives, their ignorance of ‘soccer’, or of their ambitions to model this highly atypical English football club, commercially, along the lines of an NFL franchise. They openly highlighted the attractions of English football’s booming TV monies, the growing internet income streams for the English game, expanding markets for the Liverpool club in South East Asia and in South America, stadium naming rights, and even their plans for introducing American-style ‘bunker suites’ into the proposed new Liverpool ground: underground ‘living rooms’ where corporate elites could dine in plush splendour and watch banks of TV sets before taking an elevator ride to their match seats [55]. This seemed like ‘Americanisation’ writ large.

And yet local resistance on Merseyside to this cultural, as well as corporate, takeover of one of the city’s core institutions was, for some commentators, surprisingly muted to say the least. As football business analyst David Conn later put it: ‘There was remarkably little Scouse scepticism… about the men wearing scarves; the pair were presented as billionaires who would take Liverpool into their new stadium, girdled by all the banqueting required to finance competing with Manchester United, Arsenal and Roman Abramovich’ [56]. This apparently benign reception for the Americans on Merseyside was mainly for four reasons.

Firstly, as Conn implies, a realist resignation now existed among most Liverpool supporters that, in the age of open borders and global sporting capital flows, non-local financing - and probably the additional commodification that went with it - was inevitable for any football club with serious pretentions to be competitive for titles at
home in England and in Europe. More knowledgeable (and, perhaps, cynical)
Liverpool fans could even make the appropriate historical connections here, about the
origins of the club and the commercial hard-headedness of one of its great cultural
leaders of the past, as ‘Real Deep’ told readers of Through the Wind and Rain in
2007:

‘Haven’t we been a plaything for the rich from day one, when we were
formed, not for sporting reasons, but to fill a recently vacated Anfield, and
provide the owner John Houlding with a steady stream of income from both
paying customers at the game and the sale of beer in the nearby hostelry? And
he imported a whole troop of Scottish mercenaries to fill the team. [Bill]
Shankly, if he ever stops spinning in his grave (to listen to some people), was
quick to threaten to resign when not offered enough money in the transfer
market…. He was also happy to advocate a move away from a dilapidated
Anfield [57].

Secondly, the cosmopolitan and transient ‘city of the sea’ of Liverpool was no
stranger, of course, either to global cultural exchange or, more specifically, to
American cultural and commercial penetration. Indeed, for much of its history
Liverpool had looked west, to Ireland and the United States, for guidance and
inspiration on identity issues more than it had to other English cities. Near its height
in the early years of the twentieth century, the port at Liverpool had provided direct
employment for up to 60,000 people in the city, much of it in trade involving North
America. Liverpool’s seafront streets aped those its seafarers had experienced in
America, and ‘going to sea’ was both an exotic and staple form of employment for
many men working in the city, with merchant seaman desertion rates to the USA and
Canada testimony to the common bonds already established between Liverpool and
the transatlantic seaboard [58].
Even before the First World War, Americans were envied in Liverpool for their supposed modernity and stylishness, and American fashions were imported by Liverpool tailors, who regularly copied clothes brought in by seamen from the Eastern seaboard of the USA [59]. Later, this maritime connection – seamen on the passenger services to the USA were known locally as ‘Cunard Yanks’ - also fed directly into Liverpool street idioms and language, nightlife and music, with ‘the most American of English cities’ acting as a site of feverish transatlantic cultural exchange of a sort which allowed the city to take the lead in pop music in the world during the 1960s [60]. The city of Liverpool already had ingrained American sensibilities and sympathies well before Tom Hicks and George Gillett strode into Anfield early in 2007 with their ‘good ole boy’ homilies about ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’ and their promises to make Liverpool FC the most successful football club in the world. Given the city’s distinctive history, the possibility of transatlantic investment and exchange in football did not strike most of its citizens as an especially alien or threatening intrusion.

Thirdly, allied to their obvious commercial savvy, the new Liverpool co-owners were experts in what Erving Goffman has called ‘impression management’ [61]. In ‘selling’ themselves to the Liverpool supporters in the set-piece press conferences which followed they showed little of the alleged arrogance of the Glazers at Manchester United, for example, who seemed to believe that money was its own explanation for their actions and who had made little attempt to engage with Manchester United fans. ‘They are very private people’, said Tom Hicks of Malcolm Glazer and his family. ‘I have owned sports teams for 13 years. I gave up my privacy a long time ago and it is easier for me to be open about these things…. He showed us
how not to do it’ [62]. With the Merseyside press acting as cheerleaders, crucially, the general assumption here was that the Liverpool buyout would not involve the kind of leveraged deal which had loaded more than £600 million worth of Glazer debt onto the Manchester club. Indeed, in the offer document for the Liverpool club the Americans had made it very clear that any loans taken out to secure the deal would be personally guaranteed and that payment of any interest, ‘will not depend to any significant extent on the business of Liverpool’ [63].

The new owners also cleverly, and rather humbly in this charm offensive, played back to the Liverpool club’s supporters some of the familiar and comforting rhetoric about the club’s past. ‘We are custodians not owners of the franchise’ Gillett said, thus combining the Victorian Britain of John Houlding with the discourses of late-modern American sport and both reassuring and alarming Liverpool supporters simultaneously. It was left to David Moores to admit that, ‘I don’t think we have maximised our world brand and hopefully they [Gillett and Hicks] will help us get into these areas where we have fantastic fan bases,’ and it was George Gillett who coyly told the same group of journalists on 6 February 2007 that:

‘I don’t think it’s appropriate for Tom or I to try to convince the fans today that we understand the history, the support or the legacy anywhere as well as they do. What we would try to say to the fans is that we have respect. Respect is the way we feel about the history and the legacy of this franchise [sic]…. I am still learning about the club but I will get it into my blood in every way I can’ [64].

Finally, another familiar rhetorical device skilfully employed by the Americans and their advisors to mask some of the bleak economics of the deal was that about the Liverpool ‘family’. The patrician Moores family dynasty would now be seamlessly
replaced by a trans-Atlantic equivalent, made up of the Gilletts and the Hicks’s. This message about ‘respect’ and ‘family values’ was strongly reinforced in words and images in a commemorative booklet issued by Liverpool FC carrying pictures of the American buyers and their adult sons at Anfield. It was almost as if the club had been acquired through marriage by some august royal family from a superior and distant culture. Gillett’s son Foster would even come over to work inside the club on a day-to-day basis on an executive level with Rick Parry, while Tom Hicks Jr. would join the club board. How, exactly, this arrangement would pan out remained a moot point because it seemed potentially full of tensions and conflict. By the end of the 2006/07 season there were already reports that, smelling who now held the club purse strings, Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez had started to by-pass Rick Parry, and was talking directly to Foster Gillett in order to expedite transfers and other matters. Parry was now the self-appointed guardian of continuity and the main defender of the ‘Liverpool way’ inside the club, but he was already starting to look increasingly and disturbingly isolated in the new Liverpool ownership structure.

**The back of love**

In May 2007 Liverpool reached the European Cup (Champions League) final for the second time in three years, but it was not a happy occasion either for the club or its followers, a 1-2 defeat to AC Milan. Given the size of the club’s following, Liverpool had received a miserly 17,000 ticket allocation for the final from Uefa, and some frustrated supporters in the city turned unexpectedly on Rick Parry, arguing that tickets had been mal-distributed. It was a sign of the wider malaise and uncertainty which already existed in the city about the new administration [65]. Tellingly, the
traditionally strong bond of trust between Liverpool supporters and the club’s board seemed strained near to breaking point.

By the autumn of 2007 it had become clear that the American owners would have to renegotiate a new financial package worth £350 million with RBS and the American investment bank Wachovia in order to pay off their original loans and raise cash to begin work on the Liverpool stadium. Revised plans for the new stadium insisted upon by the new owners had considerable increased its price, so proposals to raise a further £300 million for the funding of the new ground would now have to wait until 2009. Worse, despite their initial denials, the Liverpool owners now, reportedly, wanted to load the whole of the original acquisition debt of £298 million onto the club’s balance sheet, thus replicating core aspects of the Glazer deal at Manchester United. This was reported to have been ‘fiercely resisted’ inside the club, presumably by Rick Parry and members of the board [66]. Tom Hicks had earlier seemed quite unfazed by suggestions that the Liverpool leverage deal now looked very like the Manchester United buyout. Gone too was much of the earlier Americans’ discourse about ‘respect’ and the ‘tradition’ and the ‘heritage’ of the Liverpool club. Instead, Hicks chose to compare the purchase of Liverpool football club to that of a breakfast cereal company:

‘When I was in the leverage buyout business we bought Weetabix and we leveraged it up to make our return. You could say that anyone who was eating Weetabix was paying for our purchase of Weetabix. It was just business. It is the same for Liverpool: revenues come in from whatever source, and if there is money left over it is profit’ [67].

In the climate of an unpredicted global credit crisis initiated by the sub-prime market collapse in the USA in 2007, borrowing was now much more expensive and more
difficult to secure, and a £500-600 million loan would be around 16 times Liverpool’s operating profits for 2007. In comparison, Manchester United’s borrowings were eight times their operating profits and Arsenal’s only four times [68]. Nevertheless, the first element of the refinancing package was finally agreed in January 2008, with £105 million of the debt saddled on Liverpool and £185 million secured on a holding company, Kop Investment LLC, held in the tax havens off the Cayman Islands and in the US state of Delaware. These were the routine machinations of global capitalism in full flow. The Americans increased their personal guarantees, mainly in the form of credit notes, to around a reported £55 million [69]. This suddenly looked like very deep financial water and not the sort of deal that Liverpool fans – or Moores and Parry – had anticipated.

Added to this, a very public row over transfer funds between manager Rafa Benitez and Tom Hicks in November 2007 mobilised Liverpool spectators squarely behind the manager and against the new owners, sparking fan protests. By January 2008 any debates there might have been over the ‘politics’ of foreign ownership at Anfield had, for some fans, effectively been replaced by a stark pragmatism: broadsheet newspapers carried pictures of Kopites holding up a large home-made banner reading: ‘Yanks out, Dubai in. In Rafa we Love’ [70]. This position hardened still further when it was revealed that Parry, Hicks and Gillett had all secretly met with ex-Germany coach Jurgen Klinsmann to discuss the managerial position at Liverpool should Benitez’s position at the club become ‘untenable.’ The mood was changed decisively with this revelation. Moreover, despite repeated promises given by the new owners – and this was the main reason, after all, why the club had sought large
investors - no visible progress had yet been made on building the proposed new Liverpool stadium.

Finally, as rumours began to circulate early in 2008 that DIC were considering a new £500 million offer for the club, it was clear that Hicks and Gillett were no longer in direct communication with each other, nor could they agree on the future of Liverpool football club. Gillett looked as if he might be willing to sell his share of the club, possibly to DIC, while Hicks publicly demanded the resignation of the ‘failing’ Rick Parry, possibly in favour of the appointment of Hicks protégé inside the club, commercial director Ian Ayre, in his place [71]. Liverpool football club, once a model of conservative and unobtrusive stability in the English game, suddenly seemed impossibly split, rudderless and constantly in the public eye in the summer of 2008 as a new league campaign approached.

**Conclusion**

On Saturday 23 February 2008, after the Liverpool home fixture v Middlesbrough, the visiting Tom Hicks Jr. sought out some Liverpool supporters in Anfield for a quiet post-match discussion about the club and its future. Instead, he was hounded out of a local pub by angry fans, who then caused a reported £1000 worth of damage to his retreating chauffered car. It was a moment of some considerable symbolic significance: the Liverpool club had been founded by John Houlding and John McKenna in the same Sandon public house some 116 years before. Rarely, if ever, during that time had the club’s fans been so at odds with its owners. It was not difficult to understand why.
The ‘condition’ of Liverpool football club in 2008 might be interpreted, by some, as simply the routine outcome of the ‘normative’ tensions that exist between the profit-driven ambitions of global capitalists and the ‘romantic’ aspirations of English football club supporters that twenty-first century elite English clubs can, indeed, remain somehow locally-rooted and true to their traditions while still being competitive on the national and international stage. We have argued something slightly different in this account. We have suggested that, paradoxically, it was the attempt to defend and even to reproduce specific aspects of what we have called here the ‘Liverpool way’, the economic and cultural DNA of the Liverpool club - its distinctive local communalism and patrician ownership structures and cultures - that had brought the club to what now, admittedly, appeared to be a rather doomed scenario with its divided transatlantic investors.

The club had delayed its entry into the global market place for investors, in part precisely because of its innate conservatism, but also in an honourable, if ultimately misconceived, attempt to try to resist some of the excesses of late-modern sporting commercialisation. Its American owners seemed, initially at least, to share some of the Liverpool administrators’ and the club’s supporters’ anxieties and concerns about preserving traditional and specifically sporting values at Anfield. But the club now seemed impaled on the horns of a dilemma concerning balancing its global brand ambitions – which many of the club’s supporters still share - against more longstanding and local Liverpool traits that go right back, through the Moores and the other Liverpool family owners, to the Victorian administration of John Houlding and his followers.
We cannot easily predict from here (June 2008) the end-game for Liverpool FC with either Hicks or Gillett, but it seems unlikely that these Americans can easily claw back the ground now lost with the club’s followers and its key administrators and staff. Moreover, the once dominant regulatory systems of the older, modern game in Europe also seem newly energised in their determination to limit some of the economic adventurism of global investors from the USA, especially in the English game. Michel Platini, the Uefa president, was reported recently to have submitted new regulatory plans for football to the European Union, which would involve a licensing system to prevent indebted clubs, such as Liverpool and Manchester United, from competing in European competition [72]. Platini had previously called such clubs and their new foreign owners ‘cheats’ for inviting substantial debt, and he questioned the motives of Americans for investing in European football at all: ‘Why don’t they invest in football in America?’ he asked BBC TV’s Newsnight programme, rhetorically. ‘You don’t think they come here for the football? They don’t know what football is’ [73].

A spokesperson for the British Government described Platini’s plans as ‘an unnecessary Europeanisation of sport’ [74] and, despite Uefa’s concerns, it seems unlikely that Hicks and Gillett will be the last American owners attracted into the highest reaches of the English game. Moreover, Liverpool football club’s is no simple story of ‘Americanisation’, nor is it one of the ‘natural’ cultural and economic dissonance that inevitably exists between American sports capitalists and the less aggressive and more organic European markets for sport. In Birmingham in the UK, for example, Cleveland Browns owner and credit card billionaire Randy Lerner had bought the Aston Villa club for a rather more manageable £66.2 million in August
2006, and without raising a dollar of debt. Success-starved Villa fans seemed immediately in thrall. Lerner then spent £4 million restoring the Holte, a Victorian pub alongside the Villa ground, whose decay had symbolised Villa’s decline. In January 2008 he also made a £5 million gift from his family’s charitable foundation to the National Portrait Gallery. In June 2008 Villa even became the first Premier League club to carry the name of a charity, the Acorns Children’s Trust, as their shirt sponsor [75].

Simon Inglis, sports writer, Villa fan, and the editor of a series of books for English Heritage about British sport, commented on Lerner that his philanthropy put most other football club chairmen in Britain to shame and that he, ‘seems to have appreciated that heritage is not a luxury but an intrinsic part of football clubs’ [76]. Here, on the face of it at least, was an American John Houlding incarnate: a twenty-first century transatlantic equivalent of the English Victorian custodian club owner of exactly the type that Liverpool’s Rick Parry and David Moores had searched so long and hard – and so fruitlessly – to find. ‘In fact, after so many years of disappointment’, said Inglis, ‘he [Lerner] seems almost too good to be true.’ [77]. Liverpool supporters might wryly respond in the affirmative here, while Villa fans will, of course, demand much more from Lerner than mere philanthropy. Rather than Americanisation per se, perhaps the fundamental issues concerning transatlantic football ownership in England in 2008 are still rather prosaic ones: which club? and exactly which American?
Notes

[7] Rowe, ‘Sport and the repudiation of the global’
[9] ibid, 1545
[10] op. cit. Interestingly, the two main obstacles identified by Richard Gillis, editor of *Sports Business* magazine in 2003 to the establishment of a global league for football were: evidence that fans would support such a development; and the difficulty of attracting television interest from the United States, where ‘soccer’ is still not a major sport (‘Saturation – so go Asian’, *The Observer* 13 July 2003)
[11] Conn, ‘All powerful Scudamore accused of going a deal too far.’ Uefa’s president Michel Platini described the proposals as ‘absurd’, though there are precedents for club matches being played outside national boundaries. For example, the InterLiga tournament held in the USA, determines Mexico’s entrants for South America’s annual Copa Libertadores. The NFL’s Miami Dolphins franchise was reported to want to host a Premier League 39th fixture, and in June 2008 Mohammed Bin Hammam, president of the Asian Football Confederation, who had initially strongly rejected the idea of the 39th fixture as an example of English ‘colonialism’, reportedly, told the Premier League chief executive Richard Scudamore that, ‘If you want to come to Asia, I will welcome you’ (The *Daily Telegraph*, 21 June 2008).
[12] See, Crawford, *Consuming Sport*. In 2009, for the first time Premier League clubs will generate more than half their total income from television; in 1991/92, the season before the formation of the Premier League, TV income for clubs stood at just 9%
[13] Hyde, ‘Empty seats and dwindling ratings? It’s time to launch the global McLeague.’; see also Williams, *Is It All Over?*; ‘Screen Grab’ *The Observer* 4 November 2007. There is a salary cap in British rugby league and one has also been mooted for European club football. On the issue of the strength of sporting place ties in England, in 2002 the Football League turned down a proposed move for the London-based Wimbledon football club 60 miles north to the new town of Milton Keynes, but on appeal a three-man independent FA committee ruled two to one in favour of the move. This ‘American-style’ club re-location remains unique in the English game. The Wimbledon Supporters’ Trust formed a new club, AFC Wimbledon, to play locally in non-league football, while the transported version of the Wimbledon club, now named Milton Keynes Dons, is still widely abused by angry English fans as ‘Franchise FC.’
[14] In the face of fierce supporter opposition, in May 2005 Malcolm Glazer president and CEO of First Allied Corporation and controlling stakeholder in the NFL’s Tampa Bay Buccaneers, bought a controlling share in Manchester United FC before delisting the club from the Stock Exchange and effectively saddling United with a reported annual £60 million bill for the interest payable on the loans Glazer had arranged to cover the United purchase. In August 2006 property and banking tycoon
and owner of the NFL’s Cleveland Browns, Randy Lerner, bought the Aston Villa club for a reported £66.2 million in a debt-free deal which seems to have been largely supported by the club’s fans. In February 2007 two American businessmen and sports franchise owners, Tom Hicks and George Gillett Jr., bought out the existing shareholders in Liverpool football club.

[19] Brown, ‘European football and the EU’; King, The End of the Terraces, 128-131; Dobson and Goddard, The Economics of Football
[20] Williams ‘Protect me from what I want’
[21] Deloitte, Annual Review of Football Finance. Deloitte reported in 2008 that the total revenue of English Premier League clubs in 2006/07 totalled 2.3 billion euros, up 11% on 2005/06, and that this figure was 0.9 billion euros higher than that reported by its nearest challenger, the German Bundesliga. Overall revenues for the top 92 professional clubs in England and Wales exceeded £2 billion for the first time in 2006/07.
[22] Conn, ‘What money can’t buy.’ For a wider critique of the regulation and governance of the modern English game, see Mitchie, ‘The governance and regulation of English football.’ A top-four Premier League football club was reportedly involved in 2008 in talks about a tour to India and possible football franchise links following the success of the India Premier League in cricket (‘Football the next target as sport booms in India’, The Daily Telegraph, 2 June 2008). The latest Global Entertainment and Media Outlook report published in June 2008 by PricewaterhouseCooper shows that China was expected to pass the United States by 2009 to become the world’s largest broadband internet market, with 80 million households on super-fast connection. Asia-Pacific media markets were also predicted to grow by 8.8% between 2007 and 2008, from $333 billion to $508 billion (‘Entertainment and advertising move east in a mobile world’, The Guardian, 18 June 2008).
[24] ‘Liverpool fans form a club in their price range’ Daily Telegraph, 18 March 2008. An adult standing season ticket on the Kop which had cost £45 in 1985 in the old Football League would now cost a minimum of £650 for a seat in the Kop in the Premier League of 2008/09. The hike in prices meant, according to AFC Liverpool spokesman Alun Parry that, ‘a whole community is being denied the opportunity to grow up in the “match-going” culture.’ Perhaps paradoxically, Liverpool FC seem to have ‘incorporated’ the AFC Liverpool project, providing it with publicity on the club’s official website.
[25] See, Williams, ‘Kopites, “Scallies” and Liverpool fan cultures.’ A spectator charge and missile throwing by Liverpool supporters before the match caused panic inside the Heysel Stadium amongst adjacent Juventus supporters. In the ensuing disorder and confusion, a stadium wall collapsed and 39, mainly Italian, fans died in the crush. In Liverpool, the sport’s European governing body UEFA, the Belgian police, the stadium authorities and alleged National Front infiltrators from outside Liverpool were all held partly responsible for the tragedy. Later, a group of supporters from the city initiated the formation of the national Football Supporters Association, arguably the first supporters’ body in England to offer fans some effective critical distance from the clubs they supported. In January 2007, almost 18
years after the Hillsborough disaster, and at the start of a televised third round FA Cup tie between Liverpool and Arsenal, most of the 12,000 fans on the Kop terrace took part in a continuous six minute demonstration (the fatal crush of Liverpool supporters in 1989 began six minutes into the match) involving the display of a giant ‘Justice’ mosaic and co-ordinated chanting about the way the authorities had dealt with the disaster and its, mainly Liverpool-based, victims. Nineteen years after the event, The Sun newspaper is also still boycotted in the city because of its vicious coverage and lies about Liverpool supporters at Hillsborough.

[26] quoted in Williams, The Liverpool Way, 153
[27] Williams, Into the Red, chapter 4
[28] ‘Through the Wind and Rain’ No. 75, 2007
[29] quoted in Barclay, ‘Super rich owners playing with fire’
[30] Tischler, Footballers and Businessmen, 69; see Taylor The Association Game, 70
[31] Kennedy, ‘Class, ethnicity and civic governance’
[33] ibid. Liverpool’s early shares, for example, were concentrated in the hands of much fewer shareholders than were Everton’s. Everton’s shares were also well spread among manual workers (36%) whilst Liverpool FC could claim very few obviously working class shareholders (just 5%) under John Houlding.
[34] Carter The Football Manager, 149
[35] Cameron, ‘Net loss’
[37] ibid, 85
[38] McKibbin, Classes and Cultures, 373; Corbett, Everton: the school of science
[39] Corbett, ibid, 129
[40] Fox, ‘Sir John Smith: obituary’; See also Liversedge, Liverpool from the Inside
[41] Kennedy and Williams, Kennedy’s Way, 120
[42] Boyle ‘Doing the business?’
[43] Liversedge, Liverpool from the Inside, 131
[44] Williams, ‘Protect me from what I want’
[47] The Independent, 12 October 2002
[48] Belchem (ed.) Liverpool 800
[50] Barclay, ‘Grounds for sharing on Merseyside’
[51] Hyde, ‘No place for grass roots in shifting sands’
[53] Liverpool Echo 1 February 2007
[54] ‘Gillett and Hicks are right for Liverpool FC’, LiverpoolFC.tv, 6 February 2007
[55] Bond, ‘Texans vow to protect Liverpool spirit’
[56] Conn, ‘Prospectors for gold leave Liverpool with mountain of debt.’
[57] Through the Wind and Rain, no. 75, 2007, 14
[58] Lane, Liverpool, City of the Sea, 75
[59] ibid, 81
[60] Belchem and MacRaid, ‘Cosmopolitan Liverpool’, 417-8
[61] Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life
[62] Rich, ‘Quiet end to the old order’
[63] Conn, ‘Prospectors for gold leave Liverpool with mountain of debt.’
Manchester United fans daubed graffiti on the walls of the house of chief executive David Gill as a ‘reminder’ that a section of United’s following remained ‘betrayed’ by the 2005 sell-out to the Glazers.

Not that the so-called ‘membership’ clubs in Spain are clear of debt. Real Madrid, for example, seems routinely mired in financial problems, which the local state in Spain then periodically clears.

The new shirt sponsorship was reported to have cost Aston Villa £2 million per year compared to a commercial package.

ibid
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