

## **Political ideology and activism in football fan culture in Spain: a view from the far left**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how left-wing ideology is articulated, displayed and enacted among organized groups of football fans in Spain. The left-wing political space in Spanish football fan culture is occupied by multiple autonomous but often interconnected points of organizational and activist activity characterized by ideological flexibility, heterogeneous identities and interests, and a diffuse message, and whose solidarity is based on a sense of shared struggle. Solidarity and identification among left-wing fan groups is built through the contestation of three issues: neo-fascism, racism and the increasing commercialization of football. The political beliefs and actions of left-wing fan groups in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia are further informed by peripheral nationalisms and the struggle for the revival of the historic communities. It is illustrated how left-wing fans promote and engage in collective social action at the local, national and transnational levels.

### **Introduction**

*Contra el racismo, la represión y el fútbol negocio*<sup>1</sup>

-- Against racism, repression and football business

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The ways in which Spanish football has mirrored and contoured the political conflicts in Spanish society are well documented.<sup>2</sup> Over the past 20 years, the aspect of the association between football fan culture and politics that has been highlighted in media, policy and academic discourse is the (perceived and actual) link between political extremism and those fan formations known as *ultras*. Most public commentary on the subject focuses on right-wing fans as protagonists in acts of violence, racism and homophobia.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the ideas and actions that inspire thousands of football fans who identify with the far left remain under-examined, despite the fact that these ideas and actions may also involve or be used to legitimize the use of violence (physical, verbal or symbolic).<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that, despite their opposite political ideologies, the creeds of both far-left fan groups and extreme-right fan formations can be identified as ‘resistance ideologies’ containing an intrinsic revolutionary value.<sup>5</sup> The origins of collective identity building among left-wing football fans in Spain may be found in what Manuel Castells calls ‘resistance identity’, which is ‘generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society’.<sup>6</sup> Over time, however, this construction of collective identity has come to induce ‘project identities’, where left-wing fans ‘build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure’.<sup>7</sup>

This paper explores how political ideology and projects are articulated, displayed and enacted by organized groups of Spanish football supporters who self-identify as ‘far left’ or ‘anti-fascist’. The first part of the paper discusses the concept of ideology and the contemporary meanings of the political categories of ‘left’ and ‘right’. We then draw on these terms to trace the history of left-wing thought and action in football fan culture in Spain. We also examine the local, national and transnational linkages that have been forged between these groupings as well as between the fan groups and non-sport organizations and activist networks, showing how left-wing fans promote and engage in collective social action at these different levels. The paper then proceeds by arguing that solidarity and identification among left-wing fan groups in Spanish football is built through the contestation of three issues: neo-fascism, racism and the increasing commercialization of football. Finally, we discuss how the beliefs and actions of left-wing fan groups in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia are further informed by peripheral nationalism. In identifying and illustrating these issues, we draw on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, fanzines, direct observations and other data sources collected and analyzed as part of our long-standing research with a wide range of football fan groups throughout Spain.

We draw particularly on in-depth interviews with fans of Cádiz FC, which were conducted during a research project on racism and anti-racism in Spanish football.<sup>8</sup>

### **Ideology and political categories**

Ideology is a contested concept with many interpretations.<sup>9</sup> It continues to be a valuable conceptual tool that can be used to illuminate the ways in which different social groups think, feel and act.<sup>10</sup> Ideology can be broadly defined as a set (or system) of political beliefs, ideas and values about how society ought to be and how to improve it. These belief systems are socially shared by the members of a collectivity of social actors.<sup>11</sup> Ideologies are guides to political and social action, providing ideals to believe in, goals to strive for and causes to fight for. In doing so, they offer the individual follower a sense of identity and a sense of purpose.<sup>12</sup> Ideologies are ‘expressed and generally reproduced in social practices, and more particularly acquired, confirmed, changed and perpetuated through discourse’.<sup>13</sup>

Ideologies, however, are non-deterministic. Individuals do not necessarily and always express or act on the beliefs of the ideological groups they identify with. Furthermore, not all members identify with an ideological group in the same way, or equally strongly.<sup>14</sup> And even though ideologies are socially shared, not all members of an ideological group ‘know’ or express these ideologies equally well. As will be seen in this paper, left-wing football fan culture in Spain is characterized by ideological flexibility and heterogeneity. In some important respects, it resembles Griffin’s analysis of the ‘new faces’ of fascism, which poses that contemporary fascism’s independence from a mass party-movement or a regime with a centralized hierarchy of command and propaganda directorate endows it with ideological flexibility and a rhizomic, groupuscular structure.<sup>15</sup> The anti-fascism that manifests itself in Spanish football stadia exhibits similar ideological and organizational flexibility.

Moreover, it should be noted that although left-wing fan groups draw on ‘thick’ ideologies to articulate their beliefs and legitimize their actions, we must bear in mind their often shallow ideologization, which in many cases goes no deeper than the display of symbols and paraphernalia. In that regard, it is arguably more pertinent to speak of a ‘pseudo-ideology’ built on image alone, lacking any coherence or depth of thought. Whilst political identification is at the heart of the identities and social practices of these fan groups, they typically operate in what Casals calls the ‘periphery of politics’: an aggregate of manifestations in which the display of symbols, the singing of songs and verbal and physical violence predominate over ideological formation, with few (if any) direct links to formal political organizations.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, as we

will show in this paper, the cognitive and social functions of their ideological discourse should be taken seriously, and their appropriation of left-wing ideology is a demonstrable reality.

Within the broad notion of ideology discussed here, 'left' and 'right' are political categories that have particular meanings in different historical, political and cultural contexts.<sup>17</sup> Some analysts note that left and right have ceased to be significant political categories, but others argue that the left-right distinction is still meaningful. Proponents of the latter view see this distinction as being principally concerned with the issue of equality/inequality.<sup>18</sup> For example, Noël and Thérien argue that 'the left-right cleavage expresses enduring and profound differences about equality, and equality is one of the most fundamental issues of controversy in any political community'.<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, Bobbio contends that the left-right distinction continues to be at the heart of political debate in the post-Cold War era. For Bobbio, the right tends towards inequality, while the left is characterized by 'a tendency to praise that which makes people more equal rather than that which makes people less equal'.<sup>20</sup>

If we accept that 'left' and 'right' remain significant political categories, then what are their functions and how are they deployed or contested in political and social exchange? Left and right are classifications that are both cognitive and symbolic. They 'promise understanding by interpreting and simplifying the complexities of political life and they stimulate emotions, awaken collective memories and induce loyalties and enmities'.<sup>21</sup> One approach is to regard these categories as expressing fairly stable traditions of political beliefs and ideas. This approach emphasizes a core set of meanings which, despite some variation, stays largely the same across time and space. Thus, Lukes suggests that what unifies the left as a political tradition is its rejection of the symbolic hierarchy and the inevitability of the inequalities it sanctifies.<sup>22</sup> For Lukes, the left denotes 'a tradition and a project ... which puts in question sacred principles of social order, contests unjustifiable but remediable inequalities of status, rights, powers and condition and seeks to eliminate them through political action'.<sup>23</sup> The left, then, is a 'critical, strongly egalitarian project' which, however, allows for varying interpretations of what unjustified inequalities consist in and of how they can be reduced or eliminated.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst this approach to understanding 'left' and 'right' is instructive for the analysis of left-wing activism in Spanish football, it fails to illuminate an important dimension of these categories, which concerns the ways in which they are invoked in discourse. Ideologies are discursively (re)produced, and it is imperative to understand ideology as 'a set of complex effects internal to discourse' rather than as (merely) some static set of beliefs.<sup>25</sup> In the same vein, left and right are discursive resources drawn upon, contested and resisted by reflexive political and social actors in public interaction.<sup>26</sup>

Discursive positioning through the use of the political categories of left and right can have a number of effects. First, left and right are used to indicate how different groups relate to one another politically and thereby to map the political field.<sup>27</sup> This typically involves partisan profiling: to identify and categorize the self and the other, friends and adversaries, and to draw a strong boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’.<sup>28</sup> Thompson refers to this as the strategy of the ‘expurgation of the other’, which involves the construction of an enemy which is portrayed as evil, harmful or threatening and which individuals are called upon collectively to resist or expurgate.<sup>29</sup> Ideological discourse further attends to the promotion and legitimation of the interests of social groups in the face of opposing interests.<sup>30</sup> Within this context, left and right are used to signal varying degrees of legitimacy through a strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.<sup>31</sup> Political actors typically emphasize their ‘good things’ and de-emphasize their ‘bad things’, whilst their opponents’ ‘bad things’ will be enhanced and their ‘good things’ will be mitigated, hidden or forgotten.<sup>32</sup> When invoked for the purposes of self-positioning, left and right are often boasting categories, while for the purposes of other-positioning, they are often derogatory categories. As will be seen below, left-wing football fans in Spain also use the category ‘left’ (or ‘anti-fascist’) to evoke an appearance of continuity and an enduring constituency which resonates with the notion of an enduring core meaning of left and right discussed earlier. In the next section, we draw on this conceptualization of ideology and the political categories of left and right to examine left-wing ideology and activism among organized groups of football fans in Spain.

### **The origins and development of left-wing fan groups**

The emergence of organized football fan groups associated with the far left in Spain can be traced back to the early 1980s, coinciding with the birth of the ultra movement in the slipstream of the 1982 World Cup hosted by Spain. As we have shown elsewhere, the first organized groupings of young football fans that were established during this period largely copied and sought to emulate their Italian and British peers.<sup>33</sup> The establishment of pioneering fan groups in cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, Gijón and Seville also reflected and built on the symbolic connotations that characterized the fan bases of those clubs. In the beginning, the radical fans ascribed to political tendencies that came to constitute a dichotomy between those disposed to the postulates of the extreme right - the self-identified ultra groups - on the one hand, and those who expressed stances close to the far left on the other hand. Across Spain,

football stadia gradually converted into a space used by diverse communities to represent their symbolic struggles which typically linked into pre-existing football rivalries and identities.

In this early phase of organized groupings of young football fans in Spain, the majority of fan groups that identified with the far left were associated with peripheral nationalisms, defending the cultural nation (Catalonia, Basque Country, Galicia) against the nation-state.<sup>34</sup> The left-wing fan groups that were founded at clubs such as Athletic Bilbao, FC Barcelona and Celta de Vigo emerged within this context. However, organized groupings of left-wing fans also emerged in other parts of the country, such as Andalusia and the Canary Islands. These groups highlighted the antagonism that dominated the Spanish ultra movement. In order to distinguish themselves from their rivals, the left-wing fans initially eschewed the term 'ultra' altogether due to the fact that the term was commonly used to refer to right-wing groups; that is, as a shorthand label for *ultraderecha* (right wing). None of the left-wing or anti-fascist fan groups publicly portrayed themselves as ultras, while the label was vehemently used by ideologically opposed groups such as Ultras Sur at Real Madrid and Ultras Boys at Sporting Gijon. Only later, when the initial insinuation that ultras were necessarily right-wing had been overcome, did some left-wing groups, such as Biris Norte (Seville FC), Bukaneros (Rayo Vallecano), Frente Blanquiazul (CD Tenerife) and Riazor Blues (RCD La Coruña), come to employ the term 'ultra' as a badge of honour. In contrast, other left-wing fan groups, notably Herri Norte Taldea (Athletic Bilbao), continue to oppose this label and instead promote the use of term *anti-ultras* ('against ultras').

The connection between politics and football fans, aided by the minimal structuring of the groups involved, increased at the end of the 1980s with the emergence of skinheads on the football terraces.<sup>35</sup> Their presence strengthened the links between radical fandom and extremist ideologies. As far as left-wing fan groups were concerned, the burgeoning of the skinhead style was reflected in the spread of this aesthetics within the aforementioned groups. Some of these groups included bands of redskins (leftist skins) or anti-fascist skins within their ranks.

Beginning in 1986, the proliferation of violent confrontations between ideologically opposed groups and also between groups that were a priori politically related, characterized the second stage of the development of radical fandom in Spanish football. At the root of such events, and also as a result of police repression, the phenomenon showed signs of exhaustion, demonstrating the need for some form of regeneration. Despite this, the (pseudo-)ideological idiosyncrasies of radical fandom continued, although there were no direct links between this and formal political organizations. It was hardly more than the simple dynamics of empathy generated by a certain number of unruly fans, largely unacquainted with the active political militancy in which they simply wanted to play a part; a collateral relationship characterized by

their members' concern with demonstrating a provocative attitude characterized by flaunting symbols, banners and posters and singing offensive chants.

The increase in police pressure on radical fandom encouraged the appearance, in the 1990s, of alternative fan groups, so-called *grupos de animación*, that attempted to emphasize the more light-hearted aspects of the game and marginalize violence on the terraces. This new generation of fans arrived on the scene at the same time as other groups such as Riazor Blues and Bukaneros that combined animated support and non-conformist behaviour. Through their often spectacular choreographed displays (*tifos*), these groups, who largely saw themselves as apolitical, were able gradually to acquire followers and generate an opposition that marked the subsequent development of radical fandom in Spanish football. Over and above an extreme left/extreme right or anti-fascism/neo-fascism dichotomy among radical fans, there coexisted two styles: that which prioritized the intimidation of rival teams and supporters by means of violence, whether physical or ritual, and another that foregrounded active, constructive (but critical) fandom and rejected any type of aggressive culture. Both models counted leftist and/or anti-fascist fans in their following.

### **Key issues in left-wing fan culture**

Left-wing football fan culture in Spain is characterized by ideological and organizational flexibility and heterogeneity. Seeking to identify a single meta-narrative or unified belief system would superimpose a homogeneity that simply does not exist in left-wing fan culture. In what follows, we will identify the political and social issues that feature centrally in the fans' words and actions, while accounting for some of the variations in how these issues are interpreted, articulated and enacted across and within left-wing fan formations. The overarching theme that aligns the otherwise disparate social practices of left-wing fan groups in Spain is the contestation of dominant political and cultural values. This politics of contestation rests on the notion of diverse and oppositional value systems within football,<sup>36</sup> and involves a combination of resistance and project identities. We aim to illustrate how left-wing fan groups seek to build 'those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities', and how they use the discursive practices of positioning discussed above to 'draw the political boundary lines without which political contestation is impossible'.<sup>37</sup> We posit that, in Spain, the boundary lines effectively drawn by football fans revolve around an ideological struggle between left and right, and that mutual solidarity and identification among left-wing fan groups is built, first and

foremost, through the contestation of three key issues: neo-fascism, racism and the increasing commercialization of football. As will be seen, the political ideology and activism of left-wing fan groups in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia are further informed by peripheral nationalisms and the struggle for the revival of the historic communities. Below we discuss and illustrate each of these issues.

### *Anti-fascism*

If we take the words and actions of left-wing fan groups in Spanish football seriously, one of their main common denominators is a commitment to anti-fascism. This identification with anti-fascism is expressed in public and private discussions, songs, banners, fanzines, blogs, press releases and other texts and materials. Left-wing fans' identification with anti-fascism should be understood within the context of the historical influence of fascism in Spain, particularly the Franco regime.<sup>38</sup> Anti-fascist activity in Spanish football is principally a reactive force that gathers to oppose and confront fascist ideologies, groups and individuals. This opposition is grounded in left-wing fans' recognition that although neo-fascism is a relatively marginal feature of the institutional political landscape in early twenty-first century Spain,<sup>39</sup> it is highly visible in the Spanish ultra movement as well as a significant force in extra-parliamentary politics. Within this context, groups such as RCD La Coruña's Riazor Blues, Seville FC's Biris Norte, Sporting Gijón's Norte Xixon, Real Valladolid's Fossa Garrafonti and Cádiz FC's Brigadas Amarillas refer to anti-fascism as one of their core principles. Guillermo (male, late 40s), a founding member of Brigadas, expresses this view as follows: 'The great success that Brigadas Amarillas has had is because of its two major principles: *Cadismo* [Cádiz fandom] and anti-fascism'.<sup>40</sup> Guillermo asserts that despite their heterogeneous interests and identities', different anti-fascist fan groups seek to act collectively against a 'common enemy':

The fascists know that their principal strength is their unity. That's why we established this alliance [with other anti-fascist groups], this campaign that unites us against our grand enemy. We aim to cultivate common attitudes [across these groups] within which we can maintain our tribal sporting differences. We are uniting ourselves to fight this enemy. We are organizing ourselves well, on the Internet, catching up at away games, concerts, and so on. And we are doing lots of reading and study.

The ‘enemy’ tends to be broadly defined as including not only specific neo-fascist groups or organizations, but right-wing groupings more generally. The categories of ‘right’ and ‘fascist’ are discursively conflated as part of left-wing groups’ partisan profiling and expurgation of the other. Furthermore, the category of ‘apolitical’ is also typically associated with conservatism or even with (inadvertent) complicity with fascism. Several left-wing fans consider the apolitical fan groups described earlier as ideologically aligned with, or at least implicitly sympathetic to, their political adversaries. Guillermo’s description of these groups is indicative of this discursive positioning which seeks to draw a firm boundary between ‘us’ and ‘not-us’/‘them’:

Those who define themselves as apolitical want to be a bit centre-right. The left-wing citizen [who is oppressed] has to barge in and speak up. The centre-right person thinks ‘I live well, don’t bother me [with politics]’. That’s why he sees himself as apolitical: ‘I’m doing just fine, I don’t care’. They have less solidarity. They don’t define themselves as right-wing ... but it is clear that most apolitical groups have right-wing people within their groups who act as fascists.

Pedro (male, late 30s), another Brigadas member, adds: ‘I have a problem with many of those who portray themselves as apolitical. They won’t participate in activities against racism and xenophobia because they don’t want to align themselves politically’.<sup>41</sup>

Members of self-identified apolitical fan groups typically recognize that by not taking an explicit political stance their groups may come to be defined by left-wing groups as being ideologically opposed. Alberto (male, late 20s), cofounder of an apolitical fan group at Cádiz FC, describes the difficulties associated with such positioning as follows:

At a personal level I get along with them [Brigadas] just fine. I have friends who are Brigadas and if there is a problem they will always help us. But they don’t like the fact that we are apolitical. ... A problem we have is that by being apolitical, it is difficult to have friendships with other groups. If you have friendships with left-wing groups, then straight away you have enemies, and the same thing with a right-wing group. At a personal level I have had such friendships, but only at a personal level.<sup>42</sup>

Alberto’s remarks suggest that although political difference is a major fault line that fuels and contours in-group and out-group relations, supporting the same club also creates bonds of solidarity among the different fan groups at Cádiz FC. In some cases, however, political

difference has effectively eroded intergroup solidarity. A number of fan groups that have historically portrayed themselves as left wing have had to come to terms with the introduction into their groups of opposing political views. Occasionally, this has led to manifest conflict among opposing factions within a single fan group. Seville FC's fan group Biris Norte is a noteworthy example, as the 1996 events described below suggest:

This season the incidents between the leftist members of the group and a reduced group of Biris with a right-wing ideology were continuous from the first game ... One of the tensest moments occurred when the group Riazor Blues visited the Sánchez Pizjuán [stadium of Seville FC]. The friendship between both groups, mainly due to sharing similar political beliefs, is well known. At the end of the game, the right-wing section of Biris attacked both groups with stones ... But the most serious incident occurred on 24 January [1996], when members of the right-wing section exhibited a pro-constitutional flag and the main group of opposite ideology steamed into them. The fight that followed resulted in various injuries among the right-wing side, three arrests on the opposite side and the arrest of four other persons.<sup>43</sup>

Left-wing fans' anti-fascist activism is directed not only at ideologically opposed groups, but also at the state, which again should be understood within the historical context of state fascism in Spain. Several left-wing fan groups seek to influence or combat state attitudes towards (neo-)fascism and defend civil liberties more generally. This anti-state activity is often carried out on an issue-specific basis, for example protest against the imprisonment of anti-fascist activists. The Rayo Vallecano fan group Bukaneros, some of whose members are actively involved in Madrid's urban anti-fascism movement, has engaged in protests against the perceived state repression of the movement. Indeed, this vigilance on state repression underlies the activities of many left-wing football fans, indicative of which is the following comment by Brigadas Amarillas member Juan (male, late 30s): 'The government has always used repression against left-wing groups. The only way that they want to deal with the problem is through repression. Their use of power has been inherited by Francoist policies ... The military and the Civil Guard they are almost openly right-wing.'<sup>44</sup> In 2008, his group released a public statement criticizing the 'indiscriminate policing measures' the fans had been subjected to, notably the excessive searches that had been carried out on male and female group members. The group called for a meeting with government representatives to resolve the tensions between police and fans.<sup>45</sup>

The anti-fascist football fans examined in this paper recognize the need to fight fascism in all its facets, however their views on how this struggle should be fought differ. While some see violence as the only way to combat fascism effectively, others hold a more moderate view and recognize that antifascist ends should not be pursued using fascist means. These different perspectives on the legitimacy of the use of violence are articulated in the responses of the members of Brigadas Amarillas interviewed by the authors. Some of the group's *Vieja Guardia* (old guard) sees violence as 'the only way' and 'the most effective way'. Others argue that 'nowadays there are other ways'. Pedro's (male, late 30s) views resonate with the latter perspective:

We have a long history of violent clashes with fascist groups. We used a lot of violence against that other violence [fascism], but our violence was understood differently [by the media and the state]. ... But I also have to admit my own mistakes, and one of them has been to defend our beliefs through violence, putting other possible forms of struggle aside. There are people who believe violence is the best way but there are others who don't think it's the most effective. And some people have been using violence for the sake of violence. Our philosophy has changed a bit though. I am now much more involved in grassroots activities like education and raising awareness.<sup>46</sup>

As Pedro's comments suggest, in practice left-wing football fans' opposition to (neo-)fascism is conducted principally at a localized, grassroots level. Spanish anti-fascism is characterized by its heterogeneous character and diffuse message, and can be understood as 'a point of concentration, with which members of diverse political and cultural movements could identify'.<sup>47</sup> Football, Juan (male, late 30s) suggests, affords such a point of concentration and can facilitate social and political mobilization:

Football has social representation. One way for people to have power, apart from the political class, is football. Football has its good parts and its not-so-good parts. They always say that football rocks the common classes to sleep; they think about football and don't think about other things. For the state, football has always sought to achieve this. What they don't know is that you can use football for other purposes. In football we bring together people with the same ideology, and when they are together they can unite to act on other things such as political issues.<sup>48</sup>

However, for Juan such activity is not confined to football. He asserts that an important aspect of anti-fascist activity is to ‘practice what you preach’, that is, to act in an ‘anti-fascist way’ in everyday life both in and outside the football context. He explains: ‘The best way to be anti-fascist is not to fight against fascism. It is to not be fascist in your own life, in your daily life.’ In the same vein, José (male, mid 20s) seeks to apply this attitude to his work with Brigadas Amarillas. He describes the group’s ‘anarchist nature’ and ‘horizontal relationships’, deliberately eschewing hierarchical leadership:

We don’t like leaders. We are all friends, colleagues, with horizontal relationships. There are certain people who carry more weight within the group due to their way of being, but he/she does not lead more than another person. Their relationships are horizontal. ... We have never allowed people to impose their will on others. The means we use against this [authoritarian] thinking is to not impose, but to educate people, to show them.<sup>49</sup>

This comment reveals that these fans are particularly opposed to the authoritarian and non-egalitarian nature of fascism, with its focus on hierarchy and the leadership principle.<sup>50</sup> However, both men recognize that their group has been somewhat less inclusive and egalitarian when it comes to the role of women, and that it remains largely male-dominated and male-centred. Even though in recent years women have come to play a somewhat more prominent, autonomous role within the group, at present only approximately 10% of the registered group members are female. Overall, women remain a minority and their role continues to be mostly secondary. José notes:

Some of the songs can be a bit offensive by praising things like ‘I have more balls than you’, but I would say it is improving bit by bit. It’s not something that changes overnight, but over a period of years. Women are doing lots of good things in our group. They are full members who belong.

The narratives of left-wing fans such as José and Juan further indicate that, in their experience, left-wing ideology and activism in football and elsewhere necessarily includes a strong commitment to anti-racism work. It is to this issue that we will now turn.

Anti-racism stands out as an issue pursued by virtually all left-wing fan groups in Spain, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways. Anti-racism is both a political discourse and a form of collective social action. A minimal definition of anti-racism is that it ‘refers to those forms of thought and/or practice that seek to confront, eradicate and/or ameliorate racism’.<sup>51</sup> Contemporary anti-racism in Spanish football is characterized by its heterogeneity. While some fan groups work with or alongside state-endorsed versions of anti-racism, others seek to construct radical anti-racisms ‘on the ground’ that are anti-state-based (what Lentin calls ‘anti-anti-racism’).<sup>52</sup> These different forms of anti-racism operate with different definitions of what racism is and what drives it.<sup>53</sup>

Anti-racism work has been carried out by left-wing football fan groups in Spain since at least the mid-1990s. In 1995, the Athletic Bilbao fan groups Herri Norte Taldea and Abertzale Sur organized an anti-racism rally in cooperation with the non-governmental organization (NGO) SOS Racismo (SOS Arrazakeria in Basque), entitled ‘In favour of immigrants and against racism in football’. Osasuna fan group Indar Gorri followed this example in 1997 when it organized a ‘Day against racism’. In the El Sadar stadium the group displayed a banner with the words ‘All against racism’. Recent initiatives show that anti-racism continues to inform the practices of left-wing fan groups in Spanish football. In 2011, Riazor Blues produced anti-racism displays with the slogans ‘Love Depor, hate racism’ and ‘Ultras against racism’. In that same year, Bukaneros issued a statement advocating multiculturalism and conviviality among people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, calling on their club to embrace the fight against racism at the institutional level. The group’s *Jornadas contra el racismo* campaign stresses the need for a sustained, proactive approach to combating racism: ‘Every time we hear a racist insult in the stadium ... we need to be responsible for reminding whoever necessary that this behaviour remains present at our club, remains in football, because if we don’t, we will be complicit in tolerating racist behaviour’.<sup>54</sup> Similar activities have been organized by Kolectivo Sur, a radical fan group at Xerez CD, and Frente Blanquiazul at CD Tenerife. For example, in 2011 Kolectivo Sur celebrated the second edition of its ‘Days against racism and homophobia’ to mark the Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE) action week.

Anti-racism is not restricted to grassroots campaigns by individual left-wing fan groups, even though this continues to be the most common type of anti-racism work. In some cases sustained partnerships between fans and NGOs have been established. In addition to the aforementioned cooperation between Herri Norte and SOS Racismo, the collaboration of

Brigadas Amarillas and Kolectivo Sur with the NGO Colectivo de Prevención e Inserción Social Andalucía (CEPA) is a noteworthy example. These actors collectively engage in a range of grassroots activities that extend well beyond the football stadium and are recognized throughout Andalusia. Although CEPA seeks to work with a range of fan associations, left-wing fan groups are regarded as the most proactive and the most committed to the cause of anti-racism. A CEPA coordinator expresses this as follows:

Here in Spain we have three [political] lines [in football fan culture]: the extreme right, apolitical, and the far left. I see a great importance in left-wing groups in the fight against racism here in Spain because they are the only ones that are really fighting against racism. Not always using the means that I like, no, sometimes very violently, but with them you can organize projects not only inside the stadia but also in their communities. They have that ability, not the politicians. Therefore it is necessary to think about these groups in a different way. They have a productive potential that we need to utilize.<sup>55</sup>

As part of its 'Football without borders' program, CEPA has implemented a number of fan projects at Cádiz FC aimed at promoting anti-racism and intercultural awareness among supporters and local residents, with the active involvement of fan groups such as Brigadas Amarillas and the apolitical Hinchas Carranza. In 2006 CEPA launched the project 'Cádiz against racism', with the aim to stimulate the active participation of children, young people and adults in cultural activities, enhance their understanding of different cultures, and build partnerships with key stakeholders including Cádiz FC and its fan groups as well as the local and regional community.<sup>56</sup> One of the main events was an 'anti-discrimination roundtable' in which representatives of Brigadas Amarillas, Hinchas Carranza and Cádiz FC's official supporters' association participated. Such activities have continued on a regular basis beyond the duration of the project. For example, in 2011 CEPA organized the *Jornadas Hinchas-Ultras* in cooperation with Brigadas Amarillas and the Centro Social Recuperado Valcárcel, an autonomous, reclaimed social center.

In addition to localized activities, CEPA and Brigadas Amarillas have been at the forefront of efforts to establish national and transnational anti-racism networks and campaigns, with the objective to promote a better understanding of and attitude towards combating discrimination in and beyond football. They have sought to bring together various Spanish and European fan groups to foster collective social action against racism. In 2004 representatives of CEPA and Brigadas Amarillas visited Germany, where they met with a number of German fan

groups and participated in sporting and social events. A year later, representatives of several left-wing and apolitical fan groups met in Madrid to discuss future strategies for anti-racism action. On that occasion, they were joined by CEPA, SOS Racismo Madrid and FARE. During the annual FARE action week in 2005 the fan groups displayed large banners with the words '*Las gradas unen, el racismo divide*' ('The terraces unite, racism divides') during matches. CEPA continues to be an active member of FARE and other pan-European anti-racism networks.

Other left-wing and nationalist fan groups have also been involved in FARE action weeks in the past decade, as well as in the Mondiali Antirazzisti, the Anti-Racist World Cup held in Italy, an event that brings together thousands of participants from all over the world with the aim to promote intercultural dialogue and global solidarity. These groups recognize that networked grassroots activism is of vital import in the fight against racism, and that this activism needs to be enacted and sustained on a day-to-day basis in local communities. A CEPA coordinator explains:

The network that works against racism in football is of great significance because it is a network of many associations and many initiatives... they have a wealth of initiatives within their network. They always try to start grassroots, with projects in their communities. They open a youth centre, with workshops and things like that. That's the way... they look for day-to-day contacts with immigrants, for example.<sup>57</sup>

In the experience of the fan groups referred to by this coordinator, anti-racism work on the ground is far more effective and morally justified than the officialized, state-endorsed version of anti-racism that is promoted by state institutions such as the Observatory of Racism and Violence in Sport.<sup>58</sup> As is shown below, comparable critiques have been levelled at state and corporate institutions with regard to the increasing commercialization of football.

### *Contesting the commercialization of football*

A third area of common struggle among left-wing football fans in Spain is the commercialization of the game and the capitalist forces that drive it. Some left-wing fans identify with Marxist interpretations of fascism which view fascism as 'the creature of monopoly or finance capitalism and its ideology - a crude rationalization of capitalist interests'.<sup>59</sup> Similar to their European counterparts, these fans tend to see the increasing commercialization of football as weakening or eroding the links between football clubs, their supporters and local communities, and as

diminishing supporters' influence on the game.<sup>60</sup> A member of Osasuna fan group Indar Gorri expresses this concern as follows:

There is a fault running through football at the moment. Stadiums that have been there forever are changing names ... historic uniforms are changing including their colours, club emblems are being redone time and time again, ticket prices are increasing, etc. ... The outlook is depressing; football removes itself from the working class more and more every day ... and comes ever closer to the more well-off classes who can afford to pay exorbitant ticket prices...<sup>61</sup>

In the same vein, Brigadas Amarillas' member Carlos (male, early 30s) notes: 'Our club is a business; it has shares and so those who buy the most shares buy the club. This removes the supporter's influence. It's a scandalous business, and more blatant. So it's not the same influence that supporters used to have. It's a business.'<sup>62</sup> For this reason, then, these fans seek to resist and transform *fútbol negocio* (football business) and to engender a democratic ethos in football by engaging in collective social action.

Various groups of left-wing football fans in Spain organize campaigns and activities to show their rejection of the growing commercialization of football under the slogan of 'Eternal hate to modern football', a catchphrase adopted by the fans from their Italian counterparts. The 'football business', according to these fans, involves:

- an unreasonable hike in entrance prices that privileges match attendance by supporters with the greatest spending power to the detriment of the popular classes or younger fans;
- clubs running into debt due to both competition demands considered as the key to success and bad management by the boards;
- the control of competitions by private bodies that manage television broadcasting rights of matches;
- the schedules that these companies impose on clubs in order to gain maximum profit from their investment;
- the privatization of clubs in sports limited companies (*sociedades anónimas*) or the sale of clubs to corporations and multimillionaires leading to their 'delocalization'.

Following this same line of complaint that football is being transformed into a business, it is pertinent to highlight the role that some left-wing fan groups have played. Specifically, some have helped to revive clubs that have disappeared due to debt caused by bad management. It is worth mentioning here the work of City Boys, supporters of the defunct Ciudad de Murcia club that competed in the Second Division and which ceased to exist in 2007. Three years later, after several unsuccessful attempts to refloat the club, the fans themselves got together to rebuild a totally new organization, the Club de Accionariado Popular [Popular Share-ownership Club] Ciudad de Murcia, a club controlled by its shareholders, similar to other schemes on the European football scene, such as FC United of Manchester and SV Austria Salzburg.<sup>63</sup> Other examples of left-wing fans who have mounted campaigns against the growing commercialization of football can be found in Madrid. In 2011, Rayo Vallecano fan group Bukaneros organized a referendum in order to give all Rayo Vallecano supporters the opportunity to vote on the new name of the stadium, arguing that ‘the name of the stadium, like the rest of Rayo symbols, should be untouchable’ and not be messed with by club directors.<sup>64</sup> Chants such as ‘Eternal hate to modern football’ can be commonly heard on its terraces.

#### *Political and social activism outside the football stadium*

In each of the three areas discussed (anti-fascism, anti-racism and anti-commercialism), left-wing fan groups do not limit their political and social actions to football stadia alone. On the contrary, many of them, both as individuals and collectively, participate in or collaborate with different social movements. Their militancy leads them to link up with different factions whose action is focused on various fronts, such as anti-fascism, anti-racism or the squatter movement. There are numerous examples in the fan groups referred to in this paper: some meet up in social centres and organize activities, such as concerts, lectures or seminars, while others actively participate in the occupation of buildings, improving them so that people can live there. One example of this can be found in the involvement of Brigadas Amarillas with the Centro Social Recuperado Valcárcel in Cádiz, where some of its members worked together to decorate the centre and subsequently make dynamic use of the space. In January 2012, Cádiz fans succeeded in unfurling posters displaying slogans supporting the centre, such as ‘Valcárcel, better reclaimed than abandoned’ (*‘Valcárcel recuperado mejor que abandonado’*), on the terraces of the Ramón de Carranza stadium to protest against its closure by the authorities. Another group that has been well known for its activism is CD Tenerife fan group Frente Blanquiazul, which organizes an annual

Antifascist Event and is part of the Alerta Network, an international network of anti-fascist fan groups established in 2007.

Left-wing fans also maintain links with those political or social organizations that have nothing to do with football but are close to them ideologically, although such relationships are typically more about making contact for specific events than militant membership. Such connections are also maintained by left-wing and anti-fascist fans with similar fan groups throughout Europe, such as the USP of Sankt Pauli, the Green Brigade of Celtic Glasgow, and the Ultras Inferno of Standard de Liège.

### **Left-wing fan culture and peripheral nationalism**

As noted earlier, the political ideology and activism of left-wing fan groups in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia are informed by peripheral nationalisms and the struggle for the revival of the historic communities. For peripheral nationalist football fans, Spain is merely a state of nations and regions, and does not (and should not) exist as a nation. The historical significance of clubs such as Athletic Bilbao and FC Barcelona, with peripheral sovereigntist claims, is reflected in their respective fandoms.<sup>65</sup> Thus, in both institutions, as can be seen in other clubs such as Real Sociedad, CA Osasuna, RCD La Coruña and Celta de Vigo, organized groups of fans have openly demonstrated their nationalist sympathies on the terraces. As a Herri Norte Taldea member states:

All our members are clearly from the Basque nationalist left; we don't simply feel an emotional attachment to Athletic's strip but are fighting to gain independence for Euskal Herria [the Basque Country], since we believe that the football terraces are as good a place as any to battle against the repression suffered by our people.<sup>66</sup>

This stance was clearly in evidence during the final of the Copa del Rey in 2009 that pitted Athletic Club de Bilbao against FC Barcelona when the Spanish national anthem was greeted with resounding catcalls from the Basque and Catalan supporters in the Mestalla stadium in Valencia before the match.

This nationalist stance should be understood in relation to the ideological bipolarization that exists within the ultra scene in Spain, with groups having recognized ultra-right affiliations pitted against others with peripheral nationalist sympathies and/or from the far left. Although whenever we analyze the subject of politicization within football fan culture we must bear in

mind its often shallow ideologization, which in many cases goes no deeper than the display of symbols and paraphernalia, this has become one of the characteristic features of the Spanish ultra scene compared with other similar manifestations in neighbouring countries. The presence of nationalism (whether in its Spanish or Basque, Galician and Catalan nationalist forms) within fan culture in the Spanish football leagues is undeniable. As far as left-wing fans in the territories referred to are concerned, their appropriation of nationalist demands is a demonstrable reality. It can be seen in the left-wing fans' constant display of an iconography associated with nationalism: in their flags, the *estelada* (a variant of the official Catalan ensign associated with the independence movement), the *estrelaira* (symbol of left-wing Galician independence) or the Basque *ikurrina*; in their printed material (photomontages, stickers or merchandising); in their chants ('Bloody Madrid and bloody Spain' [*Putá Madrid i putá España*], 'Spaniards are bastards' [*Españoles hijos de puta*] or 'Better Poles than Spanish dogs' [*Antes polacos que perros españoles*])<sup>67</sup>; or on posters with messages supporting Basque prisoners or displaying slogans such as 'Catalonia is not Spain', in evidence on various occasions in FC Barcelona's Camp Nou stadium. An adherent of Celtarras, a group of organized supporters of Celta de Vigo, has the following to say on the subject: 'On going to a match we never forget Galician prisoners, repression, the secular subjection of Galicia... Spain limits the ways in which we can fight, so football is a way of voicing our demands'.<sup>68</sup>

Another example of the political affiliation of left-wing pro-independence fan groups can be found in the participation of their members in the various projects conceived in the 1990s to support the non-official national football teams of the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia. Left-wing fans with peripheral nationalist links formed part of the organized groups that were created to cheer on their respective national teams: Euskal Hintxak in the Basque Country, Escamots Catalans and Segadors in Catalonia, and Siareiros Galegos in Galicia.<sup>69</sup> All these groups unify left-wing supporters of the aforementioned clubs that are sympathetic to pro-independence ideas.

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to explore the nature of contemporary left-wing football fan culture in Spain. We have sought to show how left-wing fan groups use the political categories of 'left' and 'right' to define and position themselves and their adversaries, most notably in the construction of boundary lines between the self and the (neo-)fascist 'enemy'. Although the fan groups draw on 'thick' ideologies to articulate their beliefs and legitimize their actions, their ideological formation

is often 'thin' and their ideological discourse largely confined to certain provocative, nonconformist behaviours. However, this paper has clearly shown that the appropriation of left-wing ideology among football fans is a demonstrable reality, and that the cognitive and social functions of their ideological discourse ought to be taken seriously.

The politicization of football fan culture in Spain reminds us that sport is a microcosm of society and, as such, can reveal a lot about a society's hegemonic (and counter-hegemonic) ideology, values and goals. Spanish football has always mirrored, and continues to reflect, the political and cultural conflicts that are endemic in Spanish society at large. Yet football not merely reflects, in certain ways, profound sociocultural processes in society; it is also part of a more general process of the way society models and negotiates some of its key moral and political issues. The left-wing fandom examined in this paper indicates how football stadia can be used as an arena for mobilization, resistance and contestation in relation to issues such as fascism, racism, hyper-commercialization and nationalism. While in most cases such activism remain largely confined to the football domain, some of the political and social actions carried out by left-wing fan groups transcend this space and transfer to other social spheres, where left-wing fans can seek to engage and build alliances with like-minded groupings, organizations and networks. This left-wing political space in Spanish football fan culture is occupied by multiple autonomous but often interconnected points of organizational and activist activity characterized by ideological flexibility, heterogeneous identities and interests, and a diffuse message, and whose solidarity is based on a sense of shared struggle.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Slogan of Rayo Vallecano fan group Bukaneros.

<sup>2</sup> Seguroola, *Fútbol y pasiones políticas*; Gómez Amat, *La patria del gol*; Fernández Santander, *El fútbol durante la guerra civil y el franquismo*.

<sup>3</sup> Salas, *Diario de un skin*; Durán González, *El vandalismo en el fútbol*.

<sup>4</sup> However, the violent incidents in which left-wing groups have been implicated do occasionally receive major media coverage. For example Delgado, 'La batalla de los "bukaneros"'.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Alberto Testa's analysis of neo-fascism and Italian *ultras*. Testa and Armstrong, 'Words and Actions', 477-8.

<sup>6</sup> Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 8.

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- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8.
- <sup>8</sup> Spaaij and Viñas, 'A Por Ellos'.
- <sup>9</sup> Freedon, *Ideology*.
- <sup>10</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology*; Adams, *Political Ideology Today*.
- <sup>11</sup> Van Dijk, 'Ideology and Discourse Analysis', 116.
- <sup>12</sup> Adams, *Political Ideology Today*, 6.
- <sup>13</sup> Van Dijk, 'Ideology and Discourse Analysis', 115.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 119.
- <sup>15</sup> Griffin, 'Fascism's New Faces (and New Facelessness) in the "post-fascist" Epoch'.
- <sup>16</sup> Casals, *Neonazis en España*, 269.
- <sup>17</sup> Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*; Noël and Thérien, *Left and Right in Global Politics*.
- <sup>18</sup> Jost et al., 'Political Ideology'.
- <sup>19</sup> Noël and Thérien, *Left and Right in Global Politics*, 3.
- <sup>20</sup> Bobbio, *Left and Right*, 71.
- <sup>21</sup> Lukes, 'Epilogue', 602.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 611.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 612.
- <sup>25</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology*, 198.
- <sup>26</sup> White, 'Left and Right as Political Resources'.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 128.
- <sup>28</sup> White, 'Left and Right as Political Resources'; Van Dijk, *Ideology*; Mouffe, *On the Political*.
- <sup>29</sup> Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture*, 65.
- <sup>30</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology*.
- <sup>31</sup> White, 'Left and Right as Political Resources', 131.
- <sup>32</sup> Van Dijk, 'Ideology and Discourse Analysis', 126.
- <sup>33</sup> Spaaij and Viñas, 'Passion, Politics and Violence'.
- <sup>34</sup> The notion of peripheral nationalism is discussed in Hechter, *Containing Nationalism*. On peripheral nationalisms in Spain, see e.g. Balfour and Quiroga, *The Reinvention of Spain*.
- <sup>35</sup> Viñas, *Skinheads a Catalunya*; Adán Revilla, *Ultras y skinheads*.
- <sup>36</sup> Nash, 'Contestation in Modern English Professional Football'.
- <sup>37</sup> Hall, 'New Ethnicities', 445.
- <sup>38</sup> Payne, *Fascism in Spain, 1923-1977*.

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- <sup>39</sup> Payne, 'Fascism and Racism', 148.
- <sup>40</sup> Author interview with member of Brigadas Amarillas, 2005.
- <sup>41</sup> Author interview with member of Brigadas Amarillas, 2005.
- <sup>42</sup> Author interview with member of Hinchas Carranza, 2005.
- <sup>43</sup> *Super Hinchas*, 4, no. 30 (1996), 33.
- <sup>44</sup> Author interview with member of Brigadas Amarillas, 2005.
- <sup>45</sup> 'Brigadas Amarillas se queja del trato policial de los últimos meses', *La Voz*, 15 March 2008. <http://www.lavozdigital.es/jerez/20080315/deportes/cadiz/brigadas-amarillas-queja-trato-20080315.html>. Accessed 6 June 2010.
- <sup>46</sup> Author interview with member of Brigadas Amarillas, 2005.
- <sup>47</sup> Gemie and Schrafstetter, 'Reassessing Anti-fascism', 417.
- <sup>48</sup> Author interview with member of Brigadas Amarillas, 2005.
- <sup>49</sup> Author interview with member of Brigadas Amarillas, 2005.
- <sup>50</sup> For a discussion of these common elements of fascism, see Payne, 'Fascism and Racism'; Adams, *Political Ideology Today*.
- <sup>51</sup> Bonnett, *Anti-Racism*, 3.
- <sup>52</sup> Lentin, 'After Anti-Racism?'
- <sup>53</sup> Bonnett, *Anti-Racism*.
- <sup>54</sup> Bukaneros, 'Comunicado Jornadas contra el racismo', 4 November 2011. <http://www.nodo50.org/bukaneros/wordpress/?p=1756>. Accessed 18 November 2011.
- <sup>55</sup> Author interview with CEPA coordinator, 2005.
- <sup>56</sup> CEPA, 'Proyecto Cádiz contra el racismo'.
- <sup>57</sup> Author interview with CEPA coordinator, 2005.
- <sup>58</sup> On state responses to racism in Spanish football, see Spaaij and Viñas, 'A Por Ellos'; Durán González and Jiménez Martín, 'Fútbol y racismo'.
- <sup>59</sup> Sternhell, 'Fascist Ideology', 316.
- <sup>60</sup> Nash, 'Contestation in Modern English Professional Football'; Brown, 'United we Stand'.
- <sup>61</sup> 'Entrevista a Indar Gorri', *La Banda Izquierda*, 14 January 2010. <http://labandaizquierda.blogspot.com/2010/01/entrevista-indar-gorri.html>. Accessed 18 November 2011.
- <sup>62</sup> Author interview with member of Brigadas Amarillas, 2005.
- <sup>63</sup> Giraldo, 'La afición reclama su papel'.

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<sup>64</sup> Bukaneros, 'Referéndum, este domingo, por la recuperación del nombre de nuestro estadio', 7 September 2011. <http://www.nodo50.org/bukaneros/wordpress/?p=1756>. Accessed 18 November 2011.

<sup>65</sup> On the non-sport dimensions of Basque and Catalan football clubs, see Seguro, *Fútbol y pasiones políticas*; Gómez Amat, *La patria del gol*; Santacana, *El Barça i el franquisme*.

<sup>66</sup> 'Herri Norte', *Super Hincha* 9, no. 58. (1998), 6.

<sup>67</sup> The term *polaco* is used in Spain as a pejorative term to designate the Catalans. It refers to the Catalan language which is seen by some non-Catalans as resembling the Polish language.

<sup>68</sup> 'Celtarras', *Norte Xixon*, 49 (1995), 16.

<sup>69</sup> Groups with similar characteristics have been established in other regions of the country, such as Alzadas Canarias, Hinchá Andaluza and Hinchas Castilla.