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# **An alternative football club in a liquid modernity: FC United of Manchester**

## **Culture and Organization**

Special Issue: *Sport and Organization*

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# **An alternative football club in a liquid modernity: FC United of Manchester**

Critical management studies have taken an interest in ‘utopian’ models of management, especially within alternative organizations. This article focuses on FC United of Manchester, a small football club with 5000 members, whose principles of inclusion, affordability, community, and friendship evoke ideas of utopianism and collectivism. About 30 fan-owned football clubs exist in the UK, each with their own *raison d'être*, but all discontented with the commodification of the game. Bauman’s concept of ‘liquid modernity’, in which individuals find self-realization through consumption, is used to analyse how FC United reacts to the individualization and commercialization of football. This analysis employs CMS concepts to evaluate whether FC United is a genuine alternative to standard business models, and gives an empirical and critical dimension to liquid modernity as a framework for understanding society.

Keywords: football; liquid modernity; alternative; community; utopia; dystopia

## **Introduction**

Bauman’s work has been influential in several fields, and recently organisation studies have started to engage with his work on solid/liquid modernity (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera 2014; Bauman et al. 2015). Despite the limited attention to organizations in his writings, his framework allows for reflection and critique of our current society, in this case through an ethnographic study of the fan-owned Football Club United of Manchester, England (FC United). Using some of Bauman’s most famous works (1998, 2000, 2001) it can be argued that organizations (especially those related to production) are symptomatic of what can be considered a dystopian state of (liquid) modern society. More hopefully, Parker (2002a) suggests that ‘small stories’ can restore faith in human organizations and spur incremental social change. This analysis of FC United, an alternative football club and the subject of an almost two-year-long ethnographic study, will move along this dystopian-utopian line. The article argues that the emergence of

fan-owned football clubs, as examples of alternative management practices, can be explained through liquid modernity theory. While taking liquid modernity as an enabling framework, the article reaffirms pragmatic ideals by highlighting small, everyday stories, as opposed to the grand narratives and epochal shifts implied by Bauman's work. In so doing, this study shows not only how alternative football clubs constitute important sites where mainstream business models are challenged, but also the difficulties in sustaining the emancipatory- and social change efforts of such clubs.

After some methodological reflections, this article describes Bauman's theory of modernity and how it frames a call for studies on alternative- or utopian forms of organization, as advocated by several critical management (CMS) scholars. Next, FC United is placed within a larger context of football and fandom, in order to shed light on the changes in the game that have led to the creation of this and other fan-owned football clubs. Finally, the article presents ethnographic insights into FC United, one of the very first attempts in the UK to react to the Premier League business model and to use sport as a vehicle for social change.

### **Methodological reflections**

The ethnographic fieldwork at FC United followed two phases: during the first one, which lasted approximately six months, I attended a series of matches both 'at home', in Manchester, and away, mostly in the North of England, with the purpose of getting an outsider's perspective on the organisation. This outsider's position was reinforced by my personal background: an Italian man in his late 20s, without any previous affiliation to Manchester United, only sharing with FC United fans a strong passion for football. In the second phase, which lasted over a year, I took an insider's perspective by volunteering for the club. Throughout the fieldwork I strived to produce interpretive ethnographic accounts along the lines of what Van Maanen (1988) would define as

‘confessional tales’. This proved to be easier after getting access into the organization; the tales from an outsider’s point of view alternated between interpretive confessional tales and more descriptive ones that were grounded in naturalism. After several discussions with the club’s representatives about the nature of the project, I was granted access to the organization in March 2013, when I began working full time alongside Community and Education Officer Robin Pye, and often with Coach Adam Jones, on several community initiatives. This position within the club allowed me to take an active role in many of the daily operations, as well as giving me the opportunity to observe many staff meetings. My different nationality did not influence the degree of involvement with the club: actually, participating in the club’s community activities permitted me to, paraphrasing Van Maanen’s (1988) words, get as close as possible to the organization without becoming one of them, in other words, without ‘going native’ (see also Watson 2011; Van Maanen 2011).

Data was collected in a daily field diary, either written during the day at the club or at home in the evening. This constituted the main bulk of data, along with several ethnographic interviews (Heyl 2007, 369) with my colleagues, which often took the form of rather informal chats. Given the familiarity I acquired with most of the office staff and volunteers, these allowed me to discuss aspects of the club at a very intimate level. Finally, to a lesser degree, secondary data, such as fanzines, match-day programmes, and fan-written books, were a useful complement and facilitated recollections of events around the formation and early years of the club.

### **Bauman’s theory of modernity: from traditional society to liquid modernity**

Bauman has devoted much attention to characterizing modernity and its effects on society and individuals. The intellectual journey that led Bauman (2000) to theorize modernity as ‘liquid’, meaning as fluid and disembedded, started many years before,

with his efforts to come to terms with the process of transition from ‘traditional society’ to modernity. According to Bauman (1994), traditional society was rather more coherent, and people were part of the world, and vice versa, not merely populating it. A communal way of life was almost the norm, and it followed unchanging and predictable patterns that people accepted (see also Bauman 1990). With the Enlightenment, traditional society gave way to modernity in a process that ‘involved moving from a devotional religious world to a secular world of science’ (Blackshaw 2005, 38).

Bauman saw early modernity as a process of rationalization, an effort to overcome the irrationality of the previous society, in the attempt to find a reason for everything (ibid., 40). The first part of modernity, or ‘solid’ modernity, had a very close connection with science, and was organized through social engineering (Bauman, in Held and Thompson 1989). The order that solid modernity replaced, Gane (2001) says, was structured according to the rational calculation of effects, as in the Weberian tradition, and with the prominence of the economic sphere and class relations (as in Marxist thinking). Bauman was aware of the dangers of (solid) modernity, being in his opinion the necessary condition for a mass genocide like the Holocaust (see Bauman 1989), where cultural ambivalence became a problem to be eliminated in the attempt to create an orderly world (Blackshaw 2005). Modernity for Bauman could not succeed because it was trying to create a state of permanence in a world that would witness constant change (Beilharz 2001).

Modernity, as a replacement for traditional society, has paved the way towards individualism and loss of community, but Blackshaw (2005, 40) states that it also sparked feelings of nostalgia for the idea of traditional communities, ideas that can be found in classics such as Tonnies’s *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1957). Bauman understood that the attempt to solidify modernity was burdened by its contradictions

and problems, and its failure to live up to the hopes of Enlightenment exponents. The lack of orderliness and rising uncertainties left modernity with a solid front, but not with a solid substance and when, to paraphrase Bauman (1991), solid modernity came to term with its own impossibility, it became fluid.

In *Liquid Modernity* (2000) Bauman argues that the process of melting solids into new, stronger ones, as happened with traditional society to solid modernity, could not happen anymore. Modernity now fails to solidify, remaining in a fluid state: a liquid modernity. The shift to liquid modernity accentuates some of the patterns that started to appear in the solid phase, and creates others. One of the main features of the liquid state is the progressive individualization of society, which Bauman attributes partly to processes of liberalization, deregulation, and increased flexibility in the work-life spectrum.

There results a novel freedom that is nonetheless dependent. Bauman argues that as individuals we are as free as we could possibly imagine, but this state is dependent on global (corporate) powers. Lee (2011, 652) argues these global powers are responsible for such liquidity and that they define ‘the scope of individual participation in the global economy’. Bauman (2000, 14) stresses the globality of such powers and their dismantling effect on social bonds and networks, tracing this to a process that started with the rapid economic growth after the Cold War. As a result of this, according to Lee (2011), hedonistic forces were released that in turn helped create a consumer culture of spending individuals, opposed to the values of communal cohesion.

Power in liquid modernity is now free to move; there are no physical or symbolic walls to contain it anymore. The panoptical mutual engagement between supervisor and supervised, capital and labour, leader and follower (Bauman 2000, 11)

has now given way to a free-flowing power, which must break apart any obstacle represented by tight networks of social bonds (14).

The rise of individualism (as opposed to collectivism) is manifested in several ways: from the flourishing of the consumer society, to the demise of collective actions, to the emergence of a citizenship with no common public interests. A consumer society results from the increasing opportunities offered in a world of exhilarating experiences. For such possibilities to remain infinite, as Bauman remarks (2000, 62), they must not be allowed to petrify into everlasting reality: a rapid turnover of commodities allows individuals to reshape identities at will. The products of a consumer society are often narcissistic and aesthetic selves, at ease in situations and communities where social bonds are superficial and transient (Bauman 2001).

The social and political aspect of the rise of individualism is represented by the consequences of the new freedom granted to the individuals. As Gane (2001, 270) explains, individuals now have to take responsibility for their own self-determination, without the aid of any collective agency, which leaves them preoccupied with their own personal troubles, rather than with common causes to share. Therefore public life is taken over by private issues that do not add up, preventing individuals from becoming true citizens, or 'individuals de facto' (Bauman 2000). Gane (2001) sees society as becoming incapable of being autonomous, because it is no longer based on the shared accomplishments of its members. The race to the individualization of society has left individuals with an increased sense of insecurity, burdened by problems they must face all alone, which is made worse by a desire to consume and constantly replace commodities as one of the few avenues to self-affirmation. Lee (2011) argues that Bauman is implying that the transition from solidity to liquidity is an irreversible and



inevitable process, one that has produced ‘the epoch of disengagement’ (Bauman 2000, 120).

Are we stuck in an irreversible condition? What are the limits of liquidity? Lee (2005), attempts to demonstrate that development, intended as a quest to establish new structures, is a solidifying project that can therefore lead to re-solidification. This study argues, instead, that there are agents, including organizations, who can act as solidifiers, and thus counter the individualized society painted by Bauman.

### **What is the role of organizations in a liquid modernity?**

The transition from solid to liquid modernity implies a shift from a society based on labour and capital, or production, to one that is based on consumption. To better explain this contraposition, in solid modernity ‘capital was as much fixed to the ground as were the labourers it engaged’ (Bauman 2000, 58), and thus the possession of space was a fundamental feature. In liquid modernity space and time have lost meaning, and capital and labour travel fast. Work and life are organized around ‘flexibility’, responding to market forces that are no longer predictable: those who stand still are worse off. Consumerism is the expression of a society where ‘need’ got replaced by ‘desire’ and, with the definitive turn to liquidity, by ‘wish’ (Bauman 2000, 75). The wish seems to be a stimulant for compulsive consumption, for ‘never wilting excitation’ (ibid., 83). Bauman is very critical of this turn, declaring that ‘the rise of the consumer is the fall of the citizen’ (Bauman and Tester 2001, 114). Solid modernity, despite all its problems, was for Bauman an era of greater engagement, with a panoptical relationship between employers and employees, based on mutual trust and need. Bauman seems to imply that liquid modernity changed the way we think about organizations and the relationship we have with labour and capital.

Despite several hints that organizations are nothing but the means to serve insatiable consumers, Bauman's work lacks an extensive discussion of organizations. This lack is picked up by Clegg and Baumeler (2010) who emphasize that the sphere of production and organization are largely left aside in Bauman's writings, even though what is consumed must surely be produced by organizations. Their point is clear: goods keep flowing because they keep being produced. If Bauman highlights the increasing rates of alienating consumption, partly responsible for a progressively more individualized society, are then organizations just perpetuators (and perpetrators) of this trend in society? Elliott (2007) and Atkinson (2008) agree that liquid modernity is unlikely to be totalizing, universal, or one-dimensional, nor is there a uniformity of organizational types. As Lee (2006) notes, Bauman does not introduce any theory of resistance in the thesis, making it unlikely to conceive (from a Baumanian perspective) alternatives to the model.

Therefore Bauman's framework neglects theorizing any kind of alternative, any existing form of human organization that refuses to succumb to the death of collectivism. This approach is labelled by Glackin (2015, 24) as 'romantic dystopianism', which is 'more concerned with the loss of an (arguably mythical) cohesive society, and the detrimental effects of this, rather than examining the socially productive aspects of social life'. It is of crucial importance to give voice to the alternative, to show different ways of conceiving management and social relationships. Bauman seems to believe there is not much hope left for real human agency, or for social change, a position that Jensen (2014) refuses to accept, by conceptualizing individuals as potential agents of change, instead of being just left to their own devices.

A developing current of thought within Critical Management Studies (CMS) sees in alternative models of organization and management a potential counterargument to the influential view of society of *Liquid Modernity*. Alternative organizations, often based on the triumph of the collective over the individual, tend to be connected to utopianism and hope. Hull et al. (2011) state that these principles are often to be found in third-sector and not-for-profit organizations, and that they potentially connect to the emancipatory agenda of CMS.

This study argues that FC United of Manchester is such an alternative model of organization, and embodies the spirit of small wins and emancipatory projects at the micro level, as part of a broader emancipatory goal. The next section briefly traces the path of the formation of FC United and the larger context of English football.

### **The commodification of English football**

English football evolved during the '90s to become a huge international business, undermining the community spirit on which traditionally it was based. The creation of the Premier League in 1992 brought safety and control, which was lacking during the previous decade as epitomized in three big tragedies, but it also contributed to loosen the bonds of traditional fan communities. An important parallel can be drawn with the framework proposed by Bauman: tight communities progressively make way for individualism and heavy consumerism, in the broader society and also in football.

Mellor (2008, 318) asserts that during the '90s the game's spirit changed to align to the ideals of the Conservative government, and that the establishment of the Premier League undermined 100 years of collectivism in English football. He states that traditionally sport was seen as a 'community' asset, creating identities and solidarities that cannot be compared, or reduced, to a producer/consumer relation. This highlights an evolution in fans' identities and experiences, and the birth of the consumer in

football. The consumer, often from a more affluent stratum of society, comes to replace the traditional fan, the 'working man'. This led to the exclusion of the poorer sections of society; in sport, taking the whole family to a match became almost impossible economically for many (King 1997a). One of the most affected groups were what King (1997b) characterizes as 'the lads', self-defined working-class football supporters, who used to attend matches in groups, standing and chanting next to each other. For the lads the main impediments were the increased cost of tickets and the new stadium designs, with their smaller, all-seated capacity, which reduced the lads' chances to stay together and create that 'ecstatic solidarity' (ibid., 333) offered by the terraces. In other words, the working man was prevented from accessing a game that was considered by the lads themselves to be a working-class game. A good insight into this development was offered by Scott, a fan with whom I had a chat on the way to an FC United game:

I stopped going to (Manchester) United about 10 years ago. I used to go there with my dad, happy days going together, and at that time the price per match was still about £23, now it even doubled! How can you afford to pay that much for a game? My dad's a pensioner, he stopped going to Old Trafford too, he simply could not afford it anymore, how can he?

The ecstatic and ritualistic solidarity created by fans supporting their team on the terraces is replaced by the 'panoptic isolation of the seat' (King 1997b, 335). In this context, many fan groups were established in an attempt to counteract what they saw as an increasing inaccessibility to the football clubs they love, both on a financial and on a structural level; a few of those groups in 2005 decided to set up FC United.

### **From Manchester United to FC United**

The Premier League is an enormous business: Soriano (2012) considers it the best football market in the world, with revenues of over €2.5 billion. Within modern English

football (in the last 25 years) one team has distinguished itself significantly from the others: Manchester United. In the first decade of the Premier League, Manchester United multiplied its revenues by ten times, from €25 million in 1992 to €251 million in 2002, more than any other Premier League team. Despite being overtaken in recent years by the Spanish superpowers Real Madrid and FC Barcelona in terms of revenues, Manchester United remains one of the most successful clubs, with a very large international fan base (Soriano 2012). Manchester United is therefore a massive business, one in which the lads described by King (1997a, 1997b, 2002) did not fit.

Parallel to the expansion of Manchester United, a culture of dissent (Brown 2007, 616) grew among fans, and it was often rooted in exposing the perceived contradictions between the new free-market approach and the traditional input given to the game by fan communities. A significant step was the creation of the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association (IMUSA) in 1995, which fights for the right to stand in the stadium, to keep tickets affordable, and to change the club's governance by promoting democratic ownership. The process of politicization and resistance among Manchester United fans intensified when the telecommunications company BSkyB (now Sky Limited UK), and its major shareholder Rupert Murdoch, made a bid to buy the club on 6 September 1998. This was not a new relationship: BSkyB had held the TV rights for the Premier League since its inception, and the club's board accepted the bid almost immediately (Brown and Walsh 1999, 11). IMUSA, joined by a new partner, Shareholders United (SU), quickly reacted to this, organizing a campaign to convince the British government of the negative impact this acquisition would have on British football and the TV satellite market itself (Brown 2007). IMUSA and SU triumphed when the UK Monopolies and Merger Commission— rejected BskyB's bid, on the grounds that it was monopolistic (ibid., 141).

Inspired by this victory, United fan groups joined forces again to try stopping the club from being acquired by the Glazer family in 2005. Several types of protest, including flash mobs and more violent actions, proved to be unsuccessful, and the Glazers bought the club, after borrowing the incredible amount of £500 million. One of the failed means of resistance, proposed by SU, was to try to create a supporter trust powerful enough to buy the necessary amount of shares to stop the takeover. The attempt was fatally flawed: as Brown (2007, 623) reports, each fan would have had to spend about £8,000 to purchase shares, which was quite unfeasible. Despite its failure, this attempt created a certain awareness of and belief about fan ownership.

The Glazers' takeover was seen as the 'last straw' (Poulton 2009) of 20 years of discontent of the local fan base, and it spurred some of them in July 2005 to create FC United, effectively breaking away from 'Big United'. Following preliminary meetings at Manchester's Apollo Theatre on 14 June 2005, it was announced that the Football Association had registered FC United of Manchester as a bona fide club. A few weeks later, the club members elected their first board on 5 July (FCUM Review 2014). The club was registered as an 'industrial provident society', and penned a manifesto that highlights the club's political inclinations (as published on the club's official website, [http://www.fc-utd.co.uk/m\\_manifesto.php](http://www.fc-utd.co.uk/m_manifesto.php)):

The Board will be democratically elected by its members.

Decisions taken by the membership will be decided on a one member, one vote basis.

The club will develop strong links with the local community and strive to be accessible to all, discriminating against none.

The club will endeavour to make admission prices as affordable as possible, to as wide a constituency as possible.

The club will encourage young, local participation – playing and supporting – whenever possible.

The Board will strive wherever possible to avoid outright commercialism.

The club will remain a non-profit organisation.

### **Introducing FC United**

Football Club United of Manchester (FC United) is a fan-owned football club that currently plays in the Vanarama National League North, the sixth tier of English football. Ten years after its formation, the membership is still growing, with 5,000 members from all over the world.

As made explicit by the seven principles in the Manifesto, the club holds anti-corporate principles and is committed to its founding values. Having taken inspiration from other fan-owned clubs – for example AFC Wimbledon, set up in 2002, and the German model, where fans are also the major shareholders (50% +1) – FC United wants to shift the balance towards a more distributed and sustainable business model for English football, striving to serve as an example for football worldwide. FC United and AFC Wimbledon are pioneers of the fan-owned club phenomenon in the UK, which now features around 30 clubs with various forms of fan ownership.

Brown (2007) traces the reasons that led to FC United being born to the beginning of the 1990s, when Manchester United, like other professional football clubs, entered the stock market and became a public limited company (PLC), almost in conjunction with the 1992 formation of the English Premier League. Both these events irreparably changed the face of the game, according to FC United members, who listed rising ticket prices, alienation from Manchester United, and the global corporatization of the game as contributing factors. Brown (2007, 2008) argues that the fan communities at Old Trafford, Manchester United's football stadium, were destroyed by these changes, and that FC United offered a chance for these communities to reconstitute themselves, leading to a rebirth of fan communities (2007, 626).

How does FC United fit in the context of ‘liquid modernity’ and alternative organizations within it? What challenges has the club faced to sustain such a counter-consumer model for business? The next part of the paper analyses FC United as a creator of community, using data gathered during time spent at the club.

### **Meeting the fans: a Saturday match-day experience**

FC United has gained notoriety around the world, despite its relatively small size, for the match-day atmosphere that is reminiscent of old (pre-corporate) football. Part of their status as alternative consists in providing a match-day experience that cannot be found or replicated in a Premier League match. Doing away with the sanitized atmosphere of an ‘all-seater’ stadium was one of the first corrections FC United wanted to make, as explained by the general manager Andy Walsh and the first team manager Karl Marginson in an interview with the *Guardian* (Fifield 2006). Walsh stated, ‘Talking to people who went to the match at Old Trafford earlier this season, the atmosphere was dead. No life. What we’ve got here is 90–90 football: 90% of the people singing for 90 minutes’. Marginson concurred: ‘The fans have had God knows how many years of being told to sit down and shut up at games. Now they can enjoy themselves’. As eloquently explained by Poulton (2009), given the rowdy match-day atmosphere, those who are more used to Premier League games can feel a certain displacement at an FC match.

In a quasi-Malinowskian way, in October 2012, a few months before officially joining the club, I shipped myself to an unknown island, not in the Pacific, but in the nearby town of Bury, to attend my first FC United home match. It was played at Gigg Lane, a pitch that FC United rented from Bury FC. At first glance it was already clear how the club wanted to establish itself as an alternative, and it was not only a matter of being in a lower-ranking league that made it different. My first impression of the club



was of unity and collaboration towards common goals. The match-day operations were performed by several volunteers, including fundraising, the membership stall, and the merchandise sales. The active volunteers hinted at a tight fan community, and also made visible the overlapping elements of active fan-ownership. In my field diary for that day, I wrote:

As soon as I get off the 135 bus I follow the people with the red and black scarves, a few steps and I am at the ground. I am welcomed by a few guys selling tickets for the halftime draw, which is called 'A pound for the ground'. I explain to the seller that it is my first time there, and in a friendly and accommodating way he introduces me to the fundraising which takes place at halftime, where they raise money towards the building of FC United's own stadium. The other stalls are selling memberships, match-day programmes and fanzines, and the biggest one sells official merchandise. The atmosphere resembles that of a town market.

The other emerging element was the celebration of a certain Mancunian identity, celebrated with pride through the referencing of local characters, songs, and lyrics with allegorical connotations. 'Mancunianness' included a welcoming attitude towards strangers and foreigners, aimed at creating strong match-day communities. My diary continues:

Once I enter the stadium I take a few minutes to contemplate the atmosphere: Only half of the stadium is open, given its big capacity of 11,000 people, and FC fans occupy two adjacent sides. The fans are mostly white: there are middle-aged men, a good number of women and kids. You can spot several types of local Mancunian characters, I notice especially four men walking together, dressed as the likes of local characters like Ian Brown of the band The Stone Roses and the Gallagher brothers, known for the Brit-pop band Oasis. On the empty sides of the stadium there are an impressive number of banners, referencing anti-racism, or local pop culture. 'I don't have to sell my soul' says one banner, referencing the famous Stone Roses hit 'I wanna be adored'; FC fans seem not to be ready to sell themselves to corporate football. Another banner says 'Here comes a soul saver'.

Five minutes to kick off and from the speakers comes out loud and clear ‘I am the resurrection’, again by the Stone Roses. Is FC United some sort of saviour of football? Is football reborn with FC?

### **The club structure: living as an alternative**

FC United has grown tremendously since its establishment in the summer of 2005: three times promoted to the higher division in the first four seasons, four in the first ten, along with an increasing use of internet and social media, have made possible for FC United to grow as a club, in both membership numbers and types of activities and aims. From only two full-time staff, the club now employs eight, plus several coaches on a part-time basis. Moreover there are more than 300 volunteers taking part in a wide range of activities, from office duties, to match-day operations, to community work. The anti-Glazers feeling gave the spark to establish the club, which has cemented around several ideas and values that go beyond the hatred towards the owners of Manchester United. Over the years FC United has strived not only to provide an alternative, affordable, and anti-corporate football experience, but also to gain credibility as a social movement, organized around helping the community. The club has also fought hard to secure permission and funding to build its own stadium, seen unanimously as a fundamental step to ensure the club’s survival and growth. Ticket prices have been kept at a minimum: despite the need to pay rent to Bury FC, there is a policy of ‘pay what you can afford’ for season tickets, with a minimum of £90 per season. The club prohibits sponsorship logos on football shirts, a symbolical expression of resistance to outright commercialization, which is periodically reiterated by the members at the general meetings.

Other means are used to gather finances, however, that do not differ dramatically from other clubs. Among these there is a highly developed online shop, which has been modernized and made more efficient to offer a shopping experience comparable to

websites like Amazon or to the online stores of bigger football clubs. The club also has a main sponsor, a phone application company called MX Data, which has been sponsoring the club for more than five years, and whose logo appears on the website, on the match-day programme, on the pitch-sides at games and on adverts. David James, the founder of MX Data, was introduced to FC United by a member of the club. Andy Walsh described how James became the club's main sponsor:

Mr James, a big football fan, was looking for a local organization that was doing charitable and community work to be working with, and that was impressed by the big amount done by us, so he agreed on a sponsorship package.

The club's community and education officer, Robin Pye, added that MX Data did not decide to sponsor FC United for financial returns, as there was not any real economic benefit from it, but because James was inspired by the club and wanted to transmit the value of putting something back into the community to his employees.

The club's not-for-profit structure and its unwillingness to compromise impose a rigid management of the finances. The staff's wages are not very high, from the general manager to the community coaches, and the players are kept on a lower salary than what other teams (even in the same league) could offer. Among the players, only a few have a full-time contract with the club, while the majority of them are paid only when they actually play a match. The major source of funding for the club is donations from members and fans. The club over the years has put in place a high number of fundraising initiatives, either by the club officials or by members themselves, like collection barrels at match days, half-time draws, raffles, comedy nights, mini-marathons, and even donations through the online store, standing orders towards the development fund, and community shares. Selling community shares is the most innovative fundraising strategy, which was adopted by the club after taking part in a

pilot project promoted by Coop UK, a network of cooperative ventures to which FC United belongs. The scheme reached a challenging goal of raising £2 million towards the building of the new stadium. For the first three years shares cannot be withdrawn and do not pay any interest, and from the fourth year they can be withdrawn up to a maximum of 10% a year. Andy Walsh was extremely proud of the achievements of this scheme:

Our community share scheme – we saw it as a real game changer for football: one of the big barriers to supporters taking ownership of the football club is cash, and getting access to cash. The usual or accepted method to obtain that cash is either borrowing or having a wealthy benefactor – ordinary fans therefore get squeezed out, because cash in the accepted model of ownership for football club dictates the size of the say you have in the club. This is a unique project, this is a unique football club with real commitment from its members to achieve benefits in their local community, and as they say, people have ‘put their money where their mouth is’ and it is not just about saying what you’re gonna do: our members have gone out there and done it.

### **Community in the making**

‘Community’ is a term that has received and keeps receiving much attention in both theory and practice. Cohen (in Amit 2002) reflects on how the numerous attempts to define and analyse the issues around community have led to a certain theoretical sterility. This sterility seems partly due to the contested nature of community. Recent ethnographic work by Glackin (2015) analyses how much communities are fragmented in practice, and hardly resemble the clear-cut division put forth by scholars like Bauman. It is therefore impossible to classify community as a homogenous, one-dimensional concept, but it is important to explore the different facets of it.

FC United was born as a community club, with an intent to develop ties not only with fan communities, but also with local (geographical) communities in Manchester, as explicitly stated in its constituting manifesto. Nobody at FC United denies its

Mancunian (and United) roots; these are proudly celebrated, and former Old Trafford match-goers still constitute a core part of the support. Pye described the development of the community at FC United:

There is a kind of historical legacy that FC United is built on, which is men, white men, as you say, on the whole, and more men than women, although we think we have more women in our crowd than many football clubs, and also men of a certain age. By that I mean, I suppose, men in their late 40s, and early 50s, who have powerful memories of following Manchester United when they were young men, who have transferred their allegiance to FC United, because it feels better than the Old Trafford experience is today. And those men form a very solid core of our support. So, how long have they been living in Manchester? Well, probably, at least 30 years. What's their ethnic background? Well, their ethnic background reflects the ethnic background of Manchester of 30 years ago, but taking out first-generation migrants, and that's why they're nearly all white (85% in the 1991 census, CoDE 2013) . That's the core of the club, because the club is, actually, built on a historical tradition, and you can't ignore that, and in many ways that, actually, is its strength.

The split from Manchester United was an act that contained both division and inclusion, causing some of the fans to bitterly disagree with each other on the direction to take. As a result of this, FC United has had to look beyond such differences to affirm its intent of creating long-lasting, 'solid' fan communities. The match-day community at FC United, as Brown (2007) suggests, can partly be reminiscent of what Bauman (2000) calls 'cloakroom communities', namely individuals coming together for a purpose and for a limited amount of time, who then disperse, without strong social ties to hold them together. Brown (2007) argues that FC United tries to go beyond ad hoc match-day communities, stating that some of the supporters have bonded in a way that extends beyond the 90 minutes of the match. Given its relatively small size (about 2,000-3,000 on average), the match-day crowd is subject to a higher level of interpersonal interaction than those attending a Premier League match and, after a few months at the

club, one starts recognizing faces and small groups. The same people can be spotted at events, at supporters' branch meetings, on the tram or buses. Many people know each other by name and are often joking or 'taking the piss' out of each other as only people with a certain degree of closeness and familiarity can do. At the time of my fieldwork, hardly any scar was left from the scission from Manchester United, and FC United fans enjoyed solid friendships that thickened over time, as reported by Pat:

We did have some friends at Old Trafford, because we had our own seats, and, you know, you sat with the same people, and so on. We did have one or two friends there, but, certainly, through FC we've made a lot of very good friends that we stand with, and travel with. Yeah, as I say, it's a very, very large – I'm not saying it's replaced family, but now my family have grown up, and moved away, it has to some extent replaced family.

Match-day communities remain a strong form of social capital for the club, and a stable source of income, despite some fluctuations in the figures in recent seasons, but they do not constitute the only take on the concept of community for FC United. Since the second season in the club's history (2006–2007) and especially with the arrival of Robin Pye in 2009, the club's involvement in the larger, local community has increased exponentially. The community work currently undertaken by the club is quite extensive, covering a broad range of groups and geographical areas. It currently engages children as well as adults (especially vulnerable people), delivering both sports and educational activities, such as work in schools, nursing homes and offering accredited training programmes. The community programme started in a very small and local way, reaching people in north Manchester, and has become wider and more globalised, engaging youngsters at the European level. The community section of the club has grown the most in terms of staff, but it also faces more financial pressure. It has a designated budget and account, separated from the other operations of the club, and as it

gets bigger, it requires more and more professionalization and management. The main sources of funding for community work are grants from several community funds, as advertised by private and public bodies, and partnerships with local actors, like Manchester College and the city council.

Very little of the administration of these community activities is in the hands of the membership, as the work is almost totally entrusted to the club's staff, especially Community and Education Manager Robin Pye, who liaises with General Manager Andy Walsh and the board to determine the best course of action. Similarly, FC United has not yet managed to fully integrate the match-day community and the various geographical or social communities engaged with the club's activities. There are several reasons for the partial detachment between the various communities: one is the need for the club to maintain high standards when engaging in community work, which explains the need for professionals rather than member volunteers; another reason, as explained by Robin Pye and Andy Walsh, is the lack of a home ground, FC's own place. For the better integration of the club's community work with the rest of its activities, and to further create long-lasting solidarities among fan communities, the new stadium is seen as the turning point for the club.

### **Broadhurst Park: the end of one utopia and the start of another**

This is our club, belongs to you and me  
We're United, United FC  
We may never go home  
But we'll never feel down  
When we build our own ground  
When we build our own ground!  
– FC United song

Where does a utopia start, and where does it end? To argue that it can have a start and an end we must subscribe to Mannheim's definition of utopia (1960), which assumes that it is a version of a human condition believed to be actually happening in the world. If instead we envisage utopias as something that 'transcends reality, time and place' (Grey and Garsten 2002, 10) we would consider it as something quite unrealistic. Utopias must have a strong connection with the here and now and the near future to have a chance to be realised. As Grey and Garsten (2002) rightly say, utopias are a blueprint for a desired world, but located in present-day concerns. FC United has been a utopian project from the beginning, but one that finds its actualization only when one condition is satisfied: the ownership of a stadium in Manchester. Extending Bauman's metaphor, the solids at Manchester United melted and created a liquid, fluid, and homeless FC United, one that will regain solidity with a new home ground.

The road to the new stadium has been a tricky one, with FC getting very close to its achievement. Between April 2010 to April 2011, there was a proposal to build a stadium on Ten Acres Lane, in the Newton Heat area of Manchester, but this did not become reality because the City Council, one of the main funders, withdrew funds due to budget cuts (Poulton 2013). The City Council then proposed to fund the building of the stadium in the Moston area of Manchester. This was not without issues, as resistance from local residents in Moston forced FC United to undergo another judicial review of its planning application. FC United fans had to wait until October 2013 to hear the announcement that work in Moston could finally start. Broadhurst Park, the name chosen by members in April 2014, was then completed at the end of the 2015–2016 season and opened with an international friendly match against Benfica B. Since my first chat with Adam Brown at the very beginning of my fieldwork, securing a ground has been the most recurrent theme: every single speech, conversation, and



discussion was filled with hopes and expectations about how different it will be ‘when we build our own ground’. FC United is now building facilities that will be used for the competing teams, but most of the time these facilities will be used to for community work and will be rented out by people in Moston and beyond.

If FC United coming into existence was a utopian project, the result of a group of football fans reacting against the commodification and globalization of modern football, the ground is at the same time the realization of that utopia and the start of a new one. Broadhurst Park is expected to increase the club’s activities, revenues, and memberships right from the start. Andy Walsh delivered a moving speech at the ground-breaking ceremony in November 2013, which illustrated the sense of achievement and the reinforcement of the club’s values through the new stadium:

This stadium is built and designed for the community, for our community and football fans of FC United, but also as a totem against the greed and gluttony that we see at the top of the professional game. People seems to have forgotten that football is a game, commercial enterprises are welcome, but the game is not for them to exploit – they are there because we are there. We are few, but we are making a stand with what we believe has gone wrong with the modern game. If you want grassroots football where the community is at the centre, then this is the club for you.

### **Analysing FC United**

FC United was born as a reaction to a corporate takeover of Manchester United, after years of political resistance by part of the fan base. The newly born club adopted from the start a politics of inclusion and affordability, to promote a type of anti-corporate football that puts fans at the centre of the project. FC United has been one of the first examples of fan-owned football clubs in the UK, a phenomenon that has expanded over the years to include even large clubs like Portsmouth. In its first 10 years of existence the club has achieved four promotions, developed links with the public and private

sector, raised over £2 million in donations and community shares, and built its own stadium. Most of all, FC United has put into place an extensive community work programme; as Pye states: 'It is possible because of the type of organization that FC United is. FC's identity cannot be split into a football and community; one would not exist without the other'.

King's (1997a; 1997b; 2002) research presented a scenario that was symptomatic of the transition towards a more liquid modernity, with the 'new directors' and 'the lads' exemplifying the transition from solid to liquid modernity in the context of football. The 'new directors' are blamed by fans for the commercialization and commodification of football, along with new Premier League regulations that shaped the football experience in a very different way. The 'working man' has been alienated from the sport, and finds it hard to perpetuate the ecstatic solidarity that characterized interactions at football matches. The panoptic isolation of the stadium seat reflects the condition of the individual in liquid modernity. FC United was born with the intention of restoring a sense of community among football fans, promoting affordability and heightening the sense of ownership and participation.

If liquid modernity is state where individualism takes over collectivism, and if this trend encompasses all the aspects of our lives, including recreational activities like football, the existence of clubs like FC United is best understood as a reaction against the loss of collectivity. To pursue its goals, FC United joins the politics of small wins, of micro-emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott 1992; 2014), with the wider-range objectives of macro-emancipation. As Alvesson and Willmott (1992) make clear, the two types of emancipation are not mutually exclusive, but complementary; favouring one over the other can, in fact, limit the extent of a project. Fournier (2002) envisages a solution for alternative forms of organizations to pursue social development and

liberation: remaining as small and local as possible to maximize their effectiveness. This does not seem to fully apply to FC United, because over the years the club's growth has extended its range of action to encompass both the local and the global, and on this matter it can be argued that elements of liquidity are evident.

From its inception, which still represents the point of highest degree of solidity in the club's history, a series of small wins have helped FC United to gain credibility and confidence and to increase its emancipatory ambitions. One example of this is the programme of community work. Starting with small, localized activities in north Manchester, this programme has increased its range as a consequence of the club expansion, and it has assumed a European scale by hosting young volunteers from all over Europe and also organizing youth exchanges with other football clubs and organizations abroad with a similar ethos.

The new stadium constitutes a fundamental milestone in the short history of the club, one that symbolizes the solid elements of the club. As Lee (2005) suggests, development implies the establishment of new structures, which are solid rather than liquid. Broadhurst Park represents a strong example of solidification, both in its physical presence and in its consequences for the *modus operandi* of the club. FC United's utopia is perhaps more solid rather than liquid, but at the same time one that would not exist without the conditions offered by liquid modernity. The internet, online shops, and online banking, along with social media, have all contributed in allowing information and capital to travel easily and far, helping FC United to reach a wider audience and appeal to football fans around the world with similar values. Yet without a solid base, FC United's utopian project would be fatally flawed and incomplete. The ground will give FC United the chance to have a more direct control over operations, especially to host most of the community work. In an ameliorative and more positive

version of the panopticon, FC United will try to create an even tighter engagement with employees, members, and fans, and all those who take part in community activities, by operating closer to them and overseeing the activities from a much closer point of view.

FC United aspires to get as close as possible to the utopian concept of ‘orgunity’ (Parker 2002b, 80), bridging organizational values with the characteristics of a community. Bauman’s work should be taken as a caution, because not even FC United can be completely removed from a widespread consumer culture and its effects. Bauman points out that everything is now less durable and more easily replaceable: the cost of disengagement for FC United is therefore huge. To grow, the club has had to keep its expenses low, and ensure that members remain engaged and willing to donate and contribute at all times. A temporary drop in match attendances due to bad sport results would mean thousands of pounds lost, resulting in a significant delay in the fundraising for the ground. In fact, this did happen in the seasons 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, when fans felt a disappointment for the consecutive defeats in the playoffs, as well as being tired to keep travelling to Bury, to a stadium they did not feel their own.

After 10 years FC United has managed to remain a desirable alternative to Premier League football for its followers and co-owners, despite their economic sacrifices to raise enough money for the stadium. The club has tried to retain its Manchester United heritage, which still today constitutes its core support, without losing sight of opportunities to market itself and attract a more global audience. In tune with its collectivist spirit, even in what Bauman defines as the era of disengagement, FC has created important collaborative partnerships with local government, which played a key role in obtaining funding for the stadium, and with many organizations in Manchester and beyond. FC United has successfully grown without compromising on the ideals on which it is based. Despite its growth, FC United is not affected by the

‘degeneration thesis’ (Webb and Cheney 2014, 76), and therefore does not require a redefinition of its organizational values or mechanisms.

## **Conclusion**

In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman declared that the era of engagement is over and that it is now up to individuals to sort their lives. Individuals will not receive any aid from tightly connected communities, as these are progressively dismantled and replaced by temporary, ad hoc ‘cloakroom communities’. The world of football has not been spared, with the Premier League and other equivalent leagues becoming a massive business where it is easy to witness these trends of individualization, excessive consumerism, and disengagement.

This article has attempted to show, both theoretically and empirically, that even within this liquid framework, there are organizational examples that try to do things differently, and that modernity has yet to reach a point of non-return. FC United is a small club that plays in the sixth tier of English football, but its active membership has expanded as far as New Zealand. The club represents a tangible example of a reaction to the more negative features of liquid modernity, offering a viable alternative that is setting the standard for alternative football clubs worldwide. The example of FC United shows that solidity and liquidity still overlap, and that a pure liquid modernity seems neither achievable nor desirable. This article responds to the implicit invitation by Parker (2002a) and Hull et al. (2011) for more critical studies on alternative forms of organization, regardless of their size. The road to be a community organization or an ‘orgunity’ (Parker 2002b) is very difficult, and Parker’s cautious attitude and call to balance utopia and pragmatism is wise: a series of small wins can be a good starting point to achieve a better future. For FC United this means that the main challenge will

be to stay true to its ideals and to continue to display features of a liquid organization that is still rooted in solid structures.

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