Scotland, Football and Globalization: A Sociology of Contemporary Change

The project ran from February 2003 to January 2005, which was a particularly challenging period in Scottish football. Most Scottish Premier League (SPL) clubs possessed dangerously high levels of debt. Despite dominating national competitions, the Old Firm (Celtic and Rangers) struggled to make an impact in Europe’s Champions’ League, in part due to low Scottish television revenues. Meanwhile, Scotland’s national team plummeted to 88th in the FIFA world rankings.

Our research set out to:
- Examine Scottish football in the context of globalization processes, with particular reference to supporters, officials and media workers
- Assess the relationship of Scottish football to wider cultural and national identities in the context of Scottish devolution
- Assess social identities within Scottish football, with particular reference to consumption and club/national issues
- Explore questions of globalization in Scottish football with particular reference to Robertson’s sociological theories
- Disseminate research findings through articles, conference presentations and a monograph

Over one hundred interviews were conducted with supporters, officials and journalists in Scotland, England and overseas (notably North America).

We have published six articles in refereed journals, have a further six under review, and are negotiating a book contract with a leading social science publisher. We have presented our research at several symposia in the UK and overseas.

For reasons of brevity, we present our research findings under four headings:

1) Scottish Football and Globalization

We locate Scottish football within a wider set of globalization processes. We deployed Robertson’s theories of globalization, ‘glocalization’ and ‘relativization’, to explore how Scottish football has witnessed intensified supporter differentiation, such that for some, fan identity provides a fundamental ‘way of life’.

Socially, Scottish football is marked by greater levels of ‘mundane cosmopolitanism’, for example through journalists building contacts with colleagues on the continent to exchange information, or through fans making increasingly routine trips overseas to watch games or viewing international leagues at home.

Scottish football has maintained its international political influences, notably in UEFA and FIFA. Yet some officials report that arising structural pressures might undermine that status, for example through other national associations questioning Scotland’s autonomous membership of FIFA, or in regard to the Old Firm’s attempts to quit the SPL for more lucrative competitions.

Economically, we considered the Old Firm, like other big European clubs, as ‘transnational corporations’ that maintain strong local ties while seeking to
internationalize their labour and consumer markets. Yet generally, Scottish football still has many 'under-globalized' features, for example in terms of relatively limited revenues being garnered overseas.

2) Scotland, Football and the Tartan Army

Despite Scotland’s lowly status, there is an increasingly large hard-core support within the ‘Tartan Army’ which travels to overseas fixtures. The Tartan Army’s dominant culture of gregarious, boisterous, non-violent behaviour remains paramount. Anti-Englishness is less explicit or significant, particularly among hard-core fans; no religious sectarianism was encountered. Most supporters consider that the Tartan Army derives greater proportions of its support, and its dominant culture, from non-Old Firm fans, particularly followers of east-coast teams. Women have become a more prominent minority, though a predominantly masculine culture remains.

The fans have a wider international profile, for example through establishing North American supporter organizations or operating charities for overseas causes. Most respondents insisted that the national team remained as important to Scottish identity as ever, with devolution and political nationalism having no impact either way.

Research with the Tartan Army took two directions. First, we considered how the supporter culture illustrated the theories of the sociologist Georg Simmel regarding social forms and sociability. For example, the fans prioritize informal, playful sociability (downplaying or ignoring class divisions) within a (serious-yet-recreational) football context. Second, we considered the extent to which modernization or ‘rationalization’ processes are evidenced in the Tartan Army. For example, relatively new, official supporters clubs, and an umbrella national association have been established. Older fans reported that excursions to overseas games had become more routinized and less adventurous experiences, notably in regard to eastern Europe.

3) Supporters, Consumerism and Identity

Many fans adopted ‘realistic’ views of the commercial influence in football, recognizing that their financial input was crucial to their club’s survival. However, many supporters did criticize aspects of football’s commercialization:
- visiting fans were considered to incur excessive costs at many grounds
- Old Firm fans criticized their club systems of ticket distribution for big games, which favoured wealthier or corporate supporters
- the marketing description of supporters as ‘consumers’ was rejected, notably by Old Firm fans
- many fans, notably outside the Old Firm in the SPL, highlighted the failure of Scottish football to offer ‘value for money’ against alternative entertainment
- fans of smaller clubs, notably Brechin City, flatly rejected the suggestion that they should amalgamate with other clubs to form a stronger team.

Contra the views of many journalists and officials, most fans of non-Old Firm clubs considered that Scottish football would be better and more secure if Celtic and Rangers left the SPL. Most Old Firm fans favoured this scenario, although very few considered it likely.
4) The Old Firm

Celtic’s appearance in the 2003 UEFA Cup final in Seville provided a significant research focus. The final highlighted the club’s international fan base and global potential, yet few fans considered that commercial globalization might jeopardize Celtic’s cultural ‘traditions’. Research with Rangers fans highlighted their greater and more generalized concerns with club and football issues (e.g. debts, management) rather than broader political questions. Old Firm fans generally viewed the ‘sectarianism’ issue as overblown, although some Rangers fans noted the need for clearer club policy regarding specific songs. Celtic fans emphasized their club’s ethno-national ancestry; some Rangers fans criticized Scottish media and political inconsistencies in failing to label forms of anti-Englishness as sectarian.

Extended research was undertaken among some of the 120 Old Firm supporters’ clubs in North America. The supporters’ clubs are dominated numerically by first-generation male Scottish immigrants, commonly aged in their forties and over. These fans reported relatively amicable relations with rival supporters, and some have developed closer rapport with club officials and players (especially former stars) than is otherwise possible in Scotland. However, the Old Firm, notably Rangers, face problems in trying to sustain these clubs by attracting the younger/second generations.