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The Rise and Fall of Italian Football

As the BBC globe faded away, the camera panned across a renaissance fresco that was inspired by Classical art. The female chorus rose while the screen filled with an image of an opera house. The curtain rose and the iconic voice of Luciano Pavarotti began the final line of ‘Nessun Dorma’, from Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Turandot*. As Pavarotti reached the climax of the aria, declaring, ‘vincerò! vencerò, vencerò!’ (I will win! I will win! I will win!), the video montage replayed iconic moments from World Cups of the past, starting with Pele celebrating his opening goal in the 1970 World Cup Final. This was followed by the Cruyff turn, through Maradona and ending with Marco Tardelli exploding with joy and emotion while celebrating Italy’s second goal in the 1982 final. The opera, culture, footballing memories and visceral emotion combined to introduce Italia ’90, the World Cup hosted by Italy. The tournament itself delivered its own iconic moments as Cameroon launched the tournament by defeating the reigning champions, Argentina, before Roger Milla shot to stardom by dancing with the corner flag. However, Cameroon’s fairy tale was ended by England, who, lost to Germany in the semi-final, a defeat that famously left Paul Gascoigne – and with him all of England – in tears. Meanwhile, Argentina overcame their loss to Cameroon to reach the final with a victory over the hosts, Italy, in Naples. The Argentine captain Diego Maradona, who played his club football with Napoli, called on the Neapolitans to support him over the Italians who, he argued, looked down on his adopted city. And in a bad-tempered final, the victors over England, West Germany, defeated Maradona’s Argentina. Despite the appeal to nostalgia and tradition presented at Italia ’90, a new era of football was beginning.

Italia ’90 was a defining moment for global football, and for English football in particular. It demonstrated, as King (1998) argues, the superior infrastructure and organization of the Italian game. The state-of-the-art stadiums housed some of the greatest players who had just graced the 1990 World Cup. Argentina’s

Maradona and Careca played for Napoli, while their German adversaries, Rudi Völler and Thomas Berthold both played for Roma. Their German teammates, Jürgen Klinsmann, Lothar Matthäus and, the scorer of the winning goal in the final, Andreas Brehme, all played for Internazionale (Inter). Across the city of Milan, Inter's rivals, AC Milan included Marco van Basten, Ruud Gullit and Frank Rijkaard from the Netherlands. Italy's most successful team, Juventus, also boasted a finalist, in Thomas Häßler, one of Italy's emerging stars, Roberto Baggio and the leading scorer of the tournament, Salvatore 'Toto' Schillaci. The range of international footballing talent, alongside the outstanding stadiums, marked a sharp contrast to the rest of European football, and English football in particular.

English football was emerging from a sustained period of crisis. Although there was a long history of disorder associated with British football matches, hooliganism became entrenched in the 1970s. Sustained patterns of hooliganism culminated in the Heysel stadium disaster during the 1985 European Cup final between Juventus and Liverpool. An hour before kick-off, supporters of Liverpool rushed towards a section of Juventus fans. The antiquated and poorly maintained Belgian stadium was ill-prepared for the onslaught and a wall collapsed on the Italians. Thirty-nine Juventus fans were tragically killed. This resulted in English clubs being banned from European competitions for five years. In addition to the ignominy of being excluded for the first time since the competitions' inception in 1955,¹ English football suffered another stadium disaster at Hillsborough four years later. Poor facilities and policing at the Sheffield stadium left ninety-six Liverpool fans crushed on the terraces. Consequently, the government investigation led by Lord Justice Taylor instigated a period of sustained investment in stadiums and policing. In particular, the stadiums of Italia '90 reinforced the dramatic deterioration of the English infrastructure and the need for a drastic overhaul.

Italia '90, more importantly, highlighted a growing demand for football in England. The relative success of the England national team, combined with the celebrity status of Paul Gascoigne's tears, suggested that the wider British public were voracious consumers of football. The Broadcasting Act of 1990 had deregulated television, which opened up competition and permitted BskyB a broader remit within British broadcasting, enabling Rupert Murdoch to use sport as his 'battering ram' to enter British broadcasting and capture the lucrative football market (Rowe 2004, p. 100). The popularity of Italia '90 and the deregulation of television combined to ensure that BskyB could table an offer for the exclusive rights of the nascent Premier League, obliterating ITV's offer and

'blow them [ITV] out of the water', as Alan Sugar lobbied (King 1998, p. 110). Thus the elite division of English football broke away from the Football League and established the Premier League in 1992. Since then, the Premier League has become the 'Global Football League' (Millward 2011) and assumed a leading position in terms of media contracts, star players and advertising revenues.

At the same moment in history, the leading European clubs were campaigning for greater control over UEFA's elite cup competition. The president of AC Milan, Silvio Berlusconi, was agitating for a league structure that would give the larger clubs a greater chance of progressing through the competition. 'The European Cup has become an anachronism', Berlusconi argued. 'It is economic nonsense that a club such as Milan might be eliminated in the first round. It is not modern thinking' (King 2003, p. 14). Meanwhile, television audience became a major driving force for owners and federations. Deregulation of the television markets across Europe, and new satellite and cable technology, saw the emergence of transnational media companies such as Kirch in Germany, Sky in Britain and Mediaset in Italy. In the end, UEFA succumbed to club lobbying and the pressures of commercial and media expansion. They established the Champions League in 1992, the same year as the English Premier League was formed, and their rebranding exercise mirrored that of the Premier League. Exclusive media contracts were granted to the highest bidder from each nation and a suite of corporate sponsors were given the exclusive rights to align their brand with that of elite European competition, mimicking what had taken place with the FIFA World Cup and Olympics previously (Sugden and Tomlinson 1998; Horne and Whannel 2012).

The deregulation of players' contracts under the Bosman ruling also facilitated in transforming the European competition (Giulianotti 1999; King 2003; Goldblatt 2007). Consequently, those national markets that could accumulate the most resources from television and sponsorship could also accumulate the most playing resources. As King (2003, p. 83) highlights:

The unification of the player market has facilitated a concentration of playing power in the core football markets of the New Europe – in England, Germany, Spain and Italy – because the clubs in these countries are financially better equipped than those in smaller leagues (now unprotected by national trade limitations) to buy players.

Those clubs within national markets that could leverage the greatest revenue could also further accumulate playing resources. Consequently, the elite clubs in England, Germany, Italy, France and Spain became central actors on the

global network. They replicated wider transformations in global capitalism that witnessed global cities emerging as central nodes for company headquarters, while subsidiary companies were dispersed across the globe (Sassen 2001; King 2003). This permitted the paradoxical process of accumulation and diffusion.

The transnationalization of the game has resulted in a process of accumulation at the wealthiest clubs within the wealthiest national leagues of England, Italy, France, Spain and Germany. The economic deregulation of national economies and national leagues permitted this accumulation, as Goldblatt (2007, p. 696) argues:

The logic of economic concentration has allowed the leading teams in Europe to assemble the global elite of football talent, drawing on players from every continent. Most teams in the final stages possessed a majority of internationals, the leading players from Africa and Latin America as well as the very best from Europe, the concentrated talent of which has been sharpened by the regularity of European games.

Deregulation had helped transform global football by permitting a coterie of elite clubs to accumulate and concentrate resources. These clubs use a variety of strategies to increase their revenue, including signing star players, merchandising, sponsorship, stadium redevelopment and media rights.

The continued rise of Italian football

Independent of these changes, Italian football was building on the strength of Italia '90. Italy's elite league, Serie A, continued to attract a range of international footballing talent. Two years after the World Cup, AC Milan signed Jean-Pierre Papin and Zvonimir Boban to complement their Dutch trio of van Basten, Gullit and Rijkaard. In addition, they made the world-record signing of Gianluigi Lentini for £13 million. In Florence, Fiorentina signed Gabriel Batistuta of Argentina and Dunga of Brazil, while Taffarel, Dunga's international teammate, and Thomas Brolin of Sweden joined Parma. Faustino Asprilla, Fernando Couto and Hristo Stoichkov followed these international stars to Parma in subsequent seasons. In Rome, Aldair and Claudio Caniggia signed for Roma, while at Lazio, Aaron Winter and Karl-Heinz Riedle were joined by one of the stars of Italia '90, Paul 'Gazza' Gascoigne. Other English players, who often aren't noted for their willingness to play outside of England, followed 'Gazza'. David Platt signed for Bari in 1991 before moving to Juventus and then to Sampdoria. Des Walker also

signed for the latter in 1992, while Paul Ince moved to Inter in 1995. As can be seen, Serie A was attracting some of the best players in the world and was increasingly being seen as the 'most beautiful league in the world' (Clegg 2010).

Much of this success was built on the money from television and the particular ownership model in Italy. For Porro (2008), the deregulation of television had a profound effect on the cultural medium of football as well as in providing increased revenues for clubs. Porro termed this new form of football, *media-calcio* (media-football), to reiterate the importance of media to the economic transformations. Other Italian academics have also identified similar changes. Russo (2005) termed these changes *ultracalcio* (ultrafootball) to suggest that football had morphed into a different sport. This was echoed by Liguori and Smargiasse (2003), who argued that football was a postmodern version of its previous guise and had now become *neo-calcio* (neo-football). What unites all of these analyses on Italian football is the role that television (through finances and cultural impact) played in transforming the sport. Silvio Berlusconi and others, who were the driving forces of Italian football, helped put it at the forefront of world football in the early 1990s. Similar globalization processes were taking place in Italy as elsewhere in Europe.

The establishment of the Premier League, and its move towards satellite television, coupled with the transfer of English players to Italy, provided an opportunity for Channel 4. Two years after Italia '90, the British broadcaster launched *Football Italia*, which ensured that high-quality football remained on terrestrial television. Moreover, Italian football exuded glamour and this was reflected in Channel 4's production. The presenter, James Richardson, hosted the shows from a range of alluring locations – from Florentine piazzas to Roman cafes. The outside broadcasts in world-famous cultural locations were congruent to the image of Italian football; it exuded quality, culture and style.

The contrast with English football was stark. The Hillsborough tragedy capped a decade of conflict and decline in the English game. Organized hooliganism had blighted the sport since the 1970s. Spectator culture was aggressively young, masculine and exclusionary. Racism was prevalent on the terraces and violence characterized Saturday afternoons. The brutal decline of the culture surrounding the game was symbolized in the infrastructure. British stadiums had not been significantly upgraded since many of them were constructed at the start of the twentieth century. The only major improvements were related to violence containment or to the early cautious approaches to sponsors' boxes. The deterioration of the stadiums resulted in the major tragedies of the 1980s. The initial warning signs were not heeded even after the Ibrox Stadium disaster

in 1971, when sixty-six spectators were crushed in a stairway while trying to exit the stadium. A month before the Heysel stadium disaster, a major fire engulfed the stand at Bradford City's Valley Parade Stadium. The stadium's wooden structure, discarded litter and locked emergency exits, together with the windy conditions, helped the fire to spread across the stand. Despite fifty-six spectators dying in the fire, major stadium regulation and reconstruction did not take place until after the Hillsborough tragedy where ninety-six fans lost their lives. The aftermath of Hillsborough combined with the euphoria of Italia '90 to create the conditions required for the restructuring of English football.

The decline of Italian football

During the twenty-five years since *Football Italia* was first broadcast on British television, globalization processes have profoundly impacted the respective fortunes of Italian and English football. While the English Premier League has developed into the most successful league in the world, Italian football has experienced profound crisis. As Gould and Williams (2011, p. 587) highlight:

Over the past two decades, it [The Taylor Report] has contributed to making English football something of a model, one that has been widely envied across Europe. Indeed, in terms of its commercial growth, rising crowds, redeveloped stadiums and its global reach – but also in its apparently effective response to a hooliganism problem that seemed endemic and almost beyond resolution in the 1980s – the top levels of English football have been transformed. By contrast, it is football in Italy today that seems plagued by entrenched problems of racism and hooliganism, by financial irregularity and by a relative lack of modernization of the sport's key structures and core facilities.

Even though Serie A was initially successful in adapting to the changing global political economy in the 1990s, it has not been able to capitalize on this early success. The turnover for Serie A in the 1996-7 season was second only to the English Premier League. By 2006-7 it was fourth behind Germany and Spain (Hamil, Morrow et al. 2010). Financially, this has impacted Serie A clubs' ability to compete over wage expenditure on players, and many clubs operated with significant debt. During this period, many of the top leagues in Europe made operating profits, whereas Serie A made an operating loss of €1355 m.² The financial crises have been compounded by a number of scandals relating to match-fixing and administration (which are explored in Chapter 4).

For decades, Italian football has also been blighted by fan violence. It reached its nadir in February 2007 when a policeman, Filippo Raciti, was killed during a riot between Catania and Palermo fans. In November of the same year, on his way to the game, a Lazio fan, Gabriele Sandri, was shot by a policeman. Violence has become a major aspect of the matchday experience. Not only do some fans engage in football-related disorder, but the police and politicians also use the symbol of violence to justify ever more draconian measures (which will be explored in Chapters 5 and 6). Alongside this, key fan groups, the *ultras*, have disrupted games, including Genoa fans invading the pitch in 2013 and forcing the players to remove their shirts, and more spectacularly, Napoli fans stalling the kick-off of the *Coppa Italia* final in 2014. With these dramatic incidents, there is a growing realization that such disruption and fan violence cannot continue. Contucci and Francesio (2013, p. 4) have argued that ‘after the *annus horribilis* of 2007 ... finally it was realised that the situation has become unsustainable’.

Crises in the Italian game have resulted in fan apathy and a decline in attendance at matches. As Merkel (2012, p. 364) argues, ‘One of the most convincing indicators of football’s popularity is matches’ attendance figures. Fans often react promptly and unequivocally to changes.’ The beginning of the 2012-13 season was notable for two games that were attended by a sole away fan. In October, Corrado Nastasio, a former Livorno player, was the only fan of his hometown team to travel to Messina, 500 kilometres from the Tuscan city (Barker 2012). A month later, Arrigo Brovedani made more headlines after he became the only Udinese fan to travel to Genoa for his team’s Serie A match against Sampdoria (The Daily Telegraph 2012). Although these are extreme examples, they symbolize a wider malaise among football fans in Italy. Chapter 3 highlights how the over-reliance on familial and patrimonial networks has prevented the Italian clubs from understanding and exploiting wider global transformations. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, the infrastructure has not been upgraded to reflect the changes taking place elsewhere. Failure to upgrade stadiums and instigate effective business policies has limited the range of fans that clubs can attract. This has been compounded with continuing problems related to violence at football matches. Attempts to tackle hooliganism have resulted in all fans being treated as potential hooligans and this has, in turn, strengthened the position of the *ultras* and delegitimized the authorities (see Chapter 6). Draconian measures have been imposed, including the introduction of identity cards, which, as Chapter 9 argues, is making it increasingly difficult for fans to attend matches.

Attendances at Italian football matches contrast sharply with average attendances in Germany and England. After comparable average attendances in the 1970s between Italy and England, the two national leagues encountered contrasting fortunes. England faced continuing problems with hooliganism that resulted in English clubs being excluded from European competition after the 1985 Heysel stadium tragedy. Italian football began a similar decline at the end of the 1970s but sustained a rapid growth in attendances after Italy won the 1982 World Cup in Spain. A sharp decline began in the mid-1980s that was again halted by hosting a successful World Cup tournament. The transformation of Italian football, as illustrated in Chapter 3, led to Serie A continuing to have the highest average attendances in Europe at the start of the 1990s. However, this success was not capitalized upon. Elsewhere, in Germany, and particularly in England, stadiums were transformed, leagues were reformatted and wider business models were incorporated. The assimilation of football into the broader global economy facilitated the wider popularity of the sport. As a consequence, Germany and England experienced continued rise in average attendances, while Italy's continued to fall. Indeed, Teotino and Uva (2010) state that Serie A was the only European league to witness a fall in the average number of spectators over the first decade of the twenty-first century. After Udinese's lone fan travelled to Sampdoria, one of Italy's national newspapers, *La Repubblica*, reported that Serie A's average crowd was just 20,732, which represented only 48 per cent of the stadium's capacity. In contrast, Germany's Bundesliga had an average attendance of 42,257, utilizing 86 per cent of capacity, while the Premier League had an average attendance of 35,753, nearly 95 per cent of capacity (Bianchi 2012). Similarly, Contucci and Francesio (2013) have observed that while the average attendance of Germany, England and Spain has increased over the previous twenty years, the average attendance has fallen by 10,000 in Serie A and halved in Serie B. Ultimately, fans are being affected, which, in turn, is impacting Italy's standing in Europe.

The problems in Italian football are affecting not only attendances at stadiums but also its ability to capitalize on the new global market for football. The English Premier League has negotiated a range of contracts with international television companies that helped promote the English Premier League's global brand. Serie A has not been able to do the same as they individually negotiated their television rights (until 2010). As a consequence, they have not been able to turn their matches into global television events. By restricting their focus to the domestic market, the Italian clubs have not maximized their global image and are losing market share to rival leagues. The failure to respond to these transformations

has affected the performances of the clubs outside their domestic league. After Italia '90, Italian football was seen as the epitome of European football; now it has joined the second tier of European leagues and its status is continuing to fall. The organizer of the Champions League, UEFA, determines the number of participants from national leagues based on their success in Europe. This is determined on a coefficient system that calculates national leagues results over a five-year period.³ Higher-ranked national leagues have more representatives in the competition. Since the coefficient system's inception, England, Spain and Italy have been in the first tier, with each tier having four representatives in the Champions League. Italian clubs, however, have not maintained their previous standard. As a consequence, they lost their status in the top tier to the German Bundesliga in 2010. Four years later, Juventus lost to Benfica in the semi-finals of the Europa League. As a result, Serie A dropped in the coefficient table to the fifth, one place below Portugal.

The coefficient reflects the transformation of European football and the relative success and failure of various national leagues. In the last decade of the twentieth century, Serie A was the undisputed leader of the Champions League. It had seven representatives in the semi-finals, six of whom proceeded to the final. Of these, AC Milan and Juventus won the competition in 1994 and 1996, respectively. Of all the national leagues in the Champions League in the 1990s, Italy had more semi-finalists than any other national league. This led to them having more finalists, and consequently more winners. During the same period, the English Premier League managed just two semi-finals, with Manchester United being the only club to achieve that feat in 1997 and 1999. The last year of the decade saw Manchester United progress to the final and win the competition in the last minute of their game against the German side, Bayern Munich. This victory marked a turning point for the English Premier League in the following decade.

The twenty-first century has seen a dramatic reversal of fortunes for the respective leagues. Since 2000, Italy has maintained its standing at the semi-final level, by having six semi-finalists. Of these, four progressed to the final, with AC Milan winning the tournament twice, in 2003 and 2007. The former was an all-Italian final against Juventus. In contrast, the same period has seen a dramatic increase in the number of English clubs at the semi-final stage. In stark contrast to the two semi-final appearances of Manchester United in the previous decade, the English Premier League had seventeen representatives in the decade after Manchester United's 1999 victory. Eight teams had subsequently qualified for the final, which resulted in three clubs winning the competition: Liverpool beat AC

Milan in 2005; Manchester United beat their fellow English club Chelsea in 2008; and Chelsea beat Bayern Munich in 2012. In sharp contrast to the dominance of Italian clubs in the early years of the Champions League, representatives from the English Premier League now demonstrate their European dominance.

Teams from Germany and Spain have also dominated the Champions League. Whereas three clubs (Inter, Milan and Juventus) have dominated Serie A, only two Spanish sides have succeeded in Europe. Real Madrid are the most successful club in European competition, while Barcelona have captured the world's imagination with an aesthetically pleasing and successful style of football that has seen them win the Champions League in 2006, 2009 and 2011. An all-Madrid final in 2014 also highlighted the power of Real compared with the plucky Atlético. Despite a strong showing in the coefficient, teams from the Bundesliga have fared less well. However, Bayern Munich have built on their strong showing in the European Cup in the early 1970s and have won the Champions League in 2001 and 2013 (which followed three runners-up positions in 1999, 2010 and 2013). The losing finalists to Bayern Munich in 2013, Borussia Dortmund, have also won the competition in 1997. What the coefficient shows is that German sides generally are more successful and progress further in the competition than Italian clubs.

Italy's approach to the economic transformation of football represents an apposite case study. Contucci and Francesio (2013) suggest that this indicates 'last days of Italian football'. Meanwhile, Teotino and Uva (2010) say that Italian football needs to 'reboot'. This book will provide an analysis of Italian elite male football in order to contribute to debates in the sociology of sport in Europe and highlight how a once powerful league has lost ground to rival national leagues. The analysis will be grounded in the global political economy; through the complex transformations that have taken place it is possible to see the profound effect that these have had on the nation state. Globalization has seen a shift in power within Italian society and this is reflected in Italian football. The continued practice of patrimonial networks undermine the state and its institutions, which reinforce the hegemonic positions of already powerful groups and individuals.

The following two chapters will focus on the wider Italian political economy. Broadly, the continued fragmentation of the central Italian state has led to the formation of competing power networks. These combined to undermine local communities and fragment political engagement in Italian society. Chapter 2 will illustrate the historical development of Italy's national political economy. In particular, it will focus on the transition from the Keynesian state capitalism of

the immediate post-war period to the more deregulated global economy of the 1980s and beyond. These globalized transformations are not uniform; in Italy, they have developed a specific characteristic because of the prior weakness of the state and the power of extensive patrimonial networks. This argument is explored in Chapter 3. The culture of mistrust in the central authorities and patrimonial networks has been replicated within the world of football. The weakness of the deregulated institutions has facilitated the emergence of strategic actors who can manipulate their networks for the benefit of the major clubs.

The subsequent three chapters focus on specific problems in Italian football: match-fixing scandals, stadiums and policing. These demonstrate how the personalized networks have been detrimental to the wider structural aspects of the game in Italy. Chapters 7 and 8 will focus on the role of the fans and how the wider crises impact upon them. Chapter 7 will trace the historical development of the *ultras* and how their social and political affiliations have fragmented and converged in parallel to the deregulation of the national political economy. The fragmentation of the fan groups has substantially weakened the position of the fans and facilitated the emergence of the strategic actors in football. Chapter 8 looks at a different aspect of football fandom in Italy. Although members of official supporters' clubs engage in forms of protest and debate politics, this is not automatically transformed into action. Supporters' trusts are new and heavily influenced by European trends of political activism among fans. These are attempting to engage politically in different ways, but they are in their infancy and have a significant battle to gain access to power. As with the *ultras*, the hegemonic patrimonial networks that operate across Italian football limit political engagement. Finally, the concluding chapter will return to the theme of Italian football in decline. It will assess the various aspects addressed throughout the book and consider whether Italian football stands at 'Year Zero', the starting point at which it can move into the future.