"Nostalgic Revolution": Negotiating Symbolic Boundaries in the First Fan-Owned Football Club in Israel

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1. A new community of football fans

In the summer of 2007, most of Hapoel Jerusalem (HJ) Football Club’s fans decided to abandon their beloved team and to establish a new fan-owned club, named Hapoel Katamon (HK). The fans were fed up with the way HJ was managed by the two business men who owned and controlled it, and who brought about its professional and financial deterioration. Instead, they wished to found a football club that raises a clear liberal-democratic agenda, in order to build a non-racist, non-violent and socially active fan community. As characterizing other bottom-up social movements, this building process included intense negotiations between the members of the community. One of the non-formal issues raised in these negotiations was the drawing of the community's symbolic boundaries, meaning, as Lamont offered, 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space'. In this presentation I will use two examples from the negotiations between the fans during the first year of the club’s existence. My aim is to demonstrate how the moral and political boundaries of the new community were delineated by the fans. My analysis is based on a close reading of the fans’ virtual forum, which served the fan community as an important communicative sphere for boundary-work.

This study of boundary work draws on the model that conceives boundaries as a dynamic zone created through a dialectic process, and existing in a constant flux. Boundary-work is always shaped within a specific cultural context made up of 'cultural repertoires, traditions, and narratives that individuals have access to'. The boundary work of HK fans was conducted mainly between "authentic fans". These fans are familiar with the common practices of fandom, and as I will show, many of them conceive themselves as the only ones with the legitimacy to discuss the community’s boundaries. Thus, the many new fans that joined HK’s fan community during the club’s first year remained in the margins of the negotiations. Most of the new fans were neither football supporters nor HJ fans previously. Although these fans are not active actors in the forum negotiations, their being part of the club has a significant impact on the discourse. In that way, the boundary-zone in which they reside is not merely a space that separates one symbolic place from another, but serves as an important area in which significant processes, such as the drawing of boundaries, take place.

The virtual forum often addresses the question of 'who we are', and therefore, 'who we are not', in order to formulate the consensual boundaries of the community. These negotiations mainly revolve around the issue of the club’s main obligation. A few narratives represent the fans' conceptions, and they were organized by me on a continuum. Two main conceptions regarding HK’s main obligation are located on the continuum’s edges: on the one hand, the revolutionary narrative emphasizing HK's social-communal ideology of actively opposing violence, racism and tycoons that take over football clubs; on the other hand, the 'nostalgic narrative' highlighting the role of HK as preserving and continuing the historic heritage of HJ. According to this narrative, HK’s main obligations are to achieve professional success, to maintain affinity to the abandoned club, and to aspire and work for the reuniting of both teams. Between these polar positions, many fans conveyed a mixed, twofold orientation that I will term "the nostalgic revolution". These fans have had an important role in the boundary-work of the fan community, as mediators.

My claim is that the dynamic character of HK’s fan community boundaries helps to moderate the tension between the revolutionary and the nostalgic orientations. By generating dialectic and relational symbolic boundaries, the fans' negotiations enabled to maintain community solidarity. The idea of relational boundaries is intended to describe boundaries that shift according to the social position of individuals within a specific interaction. An example to this kind of boundaries model is provided by Fuller, who examines boundary-work processes among climbers. She shows how the 'cultural boundaries are emergent: they shift and change as people interpret and rework a variety of meanings in response to both events and to one another'.

And yet, most of the literature describing dialectic processes in the production of boundaries among communities addresses the boundaries between communities, often considering an individual community as if it were made from one fabric. As I will show, the diverse character of HK's fan community creates not only an us/them process, but at the same time breaks the binary division between the community members and others. Thus, the collective identity of HK's fans is created in light of an internal dialectic process and in light of different types of interactions. The fans' discourse also creates a hierarchical relationship among the 'us', despite the important role of the new fans, who are inhabited in the boundary zone. The voice of the new actors, who are first timers to the world of football fandom, is not heard in the negotiations.

2. What is football fandom? Moral boundaries in HK fans community

One of the common debates among HK fans deals with the traditions of football fandom. For some of HK's fans, football fandom in general, and HK fandom in particular, does not have to do with either fans' ownership or other social and ideological values, and therefore, the boundaries of the community must not be based on those values. They perceive HK fandom to be based on HJ continuity and its heritage. Fans advancing this continuity narrative have chosen names of previous HJ players as their nicknames in the virtual forum. This narrative is prominent in the new club's name, which indicates the mythological "Katamon" football stadium, where HJ had its best years,
back in the 1970s. The nostalgia to the previous stadium, as known from other researches, serves the fans as a 'source of geographical memories' which help to maintain their solidarity.5

Other HK fans emphasize the fans' ownership characteristic of the club, and advance the revolutionary narrative. The user who calls himself Balash Biko signs all his messages in the forum with the slogan "fans' ownership is not a means, but an end". In this rhetoric, he expresses his opposition to the commercialization of football fandom, which creates a generation of football fans seeking mainly winning, and judge their clubs only according to the results on the field. According to the football scholar, Guy, despite the intense commercialization of football, in the 21st century English football has managed to emphasize both the winning and the experience of fandom.6 While Guy refers to teams in the premier league, who have found their way to the fans' hearts, HK follows another direction within English football. This direction of fan-owned clubs, currently occurring in the lower divisions, has developed a new way of combining winning and the experience of fandom.

The debate over the linkage between ideology and football in HK's virtual forum has revealed the issue of placing moral boundaries to the fan community. This debate was sparked by rumors regarding a new goalkeeper who signed for HK, despite the fact that he was convicted of crimes related to women trafficking. The user Kally began a thread in the virtual forum, proposing that the issue 'be reconsidered, so that if the fans oppose the signing, this will be brought to the management before a contract is signed'. Without writing his own opinion regarding the goalkeeper itself, Kally raised the question of moral boundaries by suggesting that there are professional decisions that the management cannot take alone. The user Shlomi Danino claimed that this signing is way beyond HK moral line, which distinguishes HK fans from their hated rivals, Beitar:

We mustn't accept the goalkeeper, above all, because of the fact that Beitar got rid of him after the incident. If the garbage has thrown him out, how could we take him? I think we should sign a way better goalkeeper, professionally and morally.

Beitar symbolizes what HK fans do not want to be: tycoon dependent, racist, and violent. Therefore, Shlomi Danino perceives the goalkeeper's signing as fundamentally opposing HK character. Furthermore, he tries to resolve the conflict between the moral and the professional by claiming that HK should find a better goalkeeper, not only morally, but also professionally.

Some of HK fans perceived the goalkeeper's signing harshly, as something that they cannot accept. The user Danny Penn wrote:

For us the shareholders, it is a case of 'to be killed but not to transgress'. This goalkeeper will not play for HK. Period. As many other fans, I always try to recruit people to become shareholders, and I tell them about the club's values. I will not be able to do so if he is going to be our goalkeeper.

With a similar outlook, the user Shkenazi wrote: 'HK is not just another club. It should represent superior values and be light unto the nations'.

These fans clearly identify the moral boundaries, yet other fans despised the interference of moral values in the management of their beloved football team. The user Danny Penn cynically mentioned a famous Israeli football player, well-known for his discipline problems:

A message to Maor Buzaglo: Since we found out that you're a traffic criminal, you won't be able to play for us. You are just not good enough for our moral club. It will be difficult to persuade pedestrians to become shareholders, and fans who are cyclists won't come to see our games.

Danny Penn's message was clear: If someone will not become a shareholder because of the new goalkeeper, it is obvious that he is not an authentic HJ fan. Penn hints that the moral boundaries approach harms HJ's heritage, as this approach may cause the fans to no longer seek professional success, and therefore turn HK into an entity other than a football club.

Some of the fans did not oppose the moral boundaries, but outlined them in a different manner, so that they will not affect the signing of the goalkeeper. In light of this, the user Victor Bockobza wrote:

We cannot and should not educate the players. Our ideological activities take place within the fan community and this is the only place in which we have control. As for the players, the only thing I demand is that they fight and win.

Victor Bockobza put the moral fence between the fans and the players, and claimed that the players have professional responsibility, while the community building work is the fans' responsibility.

Throughout the goalkeeper debate, the voice of the new fans, most of whom believe in a model combining football fandom and moral values, was not heard. Yet, we may assume that the veteran 'authentic' fans felt the new fans' presence, even though they were silenced in the community's marginal zone. Even the most powerful actor in the field must sometimes content with the rhetoric of his rivals who threaten his power and legitimacy.7 Thus, as the revolutionary narrative becomes stronger and spreads to the heart of the community, those who sanctify HJ's continuity feel threatened and concerned.

3. Who is a football fan? Political boundaries in HK's fan community

In June 2008, a woman named Adar Grievsky participated in the TV game show '1 vs. 100'. Grievsky identified herself as a HK fan, and sang in front of the cameras the fan song 'I am Hapoel Katamon fan / I hate the tycoons'. On the next day, the user Kiki Pargiot could not restrain himself and wrote: 'Another woman who wishes to turn...
Hapoel Jerusalem into Hapoel Bil'in. Bil'in is a Palestinian village in the Occupied Territories known as a center of political demonstrations and activities of left-wing Israelis and Palestinians, protesting the separation barrier built on the village's lands. The ironic expression 'Hapoel Bil'in', illustrates Kiki Pargiot's fear that behind the revolutionary narrative, a political left-wing narrative is hidden, and both are gaining control of the community at the expense of HJ's continuity and its professional ambitions. According to his point of view, Grievsky represented in the television prime-time the ideal-type of the 'new fan', the revolutionary fan who has nothing to do with the idea of HJ continuity. By using the name 'Hapoel Jerusalem' instead of Hapoel Katamon, he tries to strengthen the continuity narrative, as if HJ and HK were one entity. As Grievsky is a woman she was immediately suspected to be a new fan, and therefore not an authentic one.

This kind of messages seeks to exclude political leftist remarks from the community discourse, as these fans fear that right-wingers will not be able to take part in the community, even though they could be truly HJ fans. In other words, the continuity narrative seeks to exclude leftist discourse among the fans in order to eliminate any political discourse and to completely remove the political boundaries. To achieve this, the new fans, and mainly the new female fans, were pushed aside. This was also the reason for Yogev Shimon Yogev's message: 'There is no such thing as 'Katamon spirit', there are no 'Katamon values', everything is Hapoel Jerusalem.'

In the 21st message of the thread about Grievsky, the direction changed. The message was written by Danny Penn, who defended Grievsky and explained: 'She was a radio broadcaster for a few years, and always identified herself as a HJ fan... She has always been red, and has never hidden her hatred for Beitar. Respect'. From this moment onward, since it turned out that Grievsky is a veteran fan, who hates Beitar as if she were an authentic fan, she was once again considered part of the fan community, far from the marginal zone back there in the boundary lines.

The Grievsky case demonstrates how the same words and the same discourse may be perceived as more or less legitimate depending on the speaker's social position within the community. Veteran fans have more legitimacy to use the revolutionary narrative, or at least to use part of the terminology of this narrative. The new fans attend HK games, some of them even read the virtual forum regularly, but they do not have the symbolic capital it takes to voice their opinions. Hence, they need the veteran fans to fight for the revolutionary values for them. In that way, a hierarchy of fans is created, reflecting a struggle over power positions. As Bourdieu claimed, all social fields, including the football fandom field, are 'locus of a struggle to determine the conditions and the criteria of legitimate membership and legitimate hierarchy'.

The struggle of some of HK's fans is to create a revolution in the spirit of football fandom. And yet, their struggle is inseparable from the fandom field itself, and challenges the hegemonic discourse but at the same time utilizes this discourse. The struggle for change, as Bourdieu offers, is the motor of the field, since the struggling actors accept the field's existence, together with its meanings, hierarchies and boundaries.

4. Between the center and the boundary: creating a nostalgic revolution

Some of the authentic veteran fans use symbolic violence toward new fans, and strengthen their way of fandom as the only legitimate way in the field. But the presence of many new fans in the boundary zone may cause the shifting of the boundary lines themselves. As the boundary line becomes thicker, and many new fans are located on the verge of the community, so it is easier to expand the boundaries and to include many new fans into the heart of HK's fan community.

Those who are able to move the boundaries, and to build a bridge between the revolutionary and the nostalgic narratives, are mainly the veteran fans, who are considered to be authentic fans, and yet believe in the social and ideological values attributed to HK. While the new fans threaten the continuity narrative from their position in the boundary zone, the veteran fans have the legitimacy to implement the sought after revolution. In that way, the moral and social revolution in the field of football fandom, which some fans claim to have occurred with the founding of HK, does not threaten the continuity narrative anymore, but the opposite. As Amos, a veteran fan who tries to contribute to the liberal democratic character of the club, wrote: 'There is nothing to miss, because there was no split and no abandonment – only continuity'.

HK's fan community offers an interesting case of boundary work, as it is a community which built itself from the beginning, and attracted many new members, but at the same time sanctifies its continuity aspect. A model of relational boundaries has been created, and describes changeable boundaries not only between members of the community and others, but also between members and themselves and between actors in a specific field (in this case, football fans) and others. The research has shown a continuum with two ideal types at its edges, each holds a narrative concerning football fandom. On the one hand, the revolutionary narrative, which is held mainly by the new fans who tie football fandom with ideology and who are not obligated to HJ continuity. On the other hand, the nostalgic narrative emphasizes more than anything the continuity of HJ, and is held by some of the veteran 'authentic' fans. Along the continuum, between those edges, there are many veteran fans, who have the cultural capital of what is considered as authentic fans, but at the same time sanctify the social and ideological values of the fan community as conceptualized by the revolutionary narrative. These fans tie the two narratives into a double one, which produces dynamic boundaries that include and exclude the new fans alternately. Thus, the boundaries may change relationally, according to the relations and discourse types. The new fans knock on the community's doors, and by doing so they challenge the hegemonic fandom. The intermediary fans are veterans that join the new fans' challenge, without compromising the nostalgia and HJ's continuity. These fans, therefore, make HK's nostalgic revolution possible.
Notes

2 Ibid, 171.
7 Fuller, 'Contesting Boundaries', 5.

Bibliography


Hapoel Katamon fans' virtual forum.

<www.katamon.co.il/forum>
