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Article:

Politicising Fandom

Abstract:

This paper aims, firstly, to argue that fandom matters to politics and, secondly, to offer a theorisation of what I call politicised fandom. The paper proceeds through three stages. Part one offers a brief mapping of the existing scholarship within the interdisciplinary sub-field of fan studies, and alights on a definition of fandom offered by Cornel Sandvoss, before mapping some different understandings of the fandom/politics relation. Here, I argue for an emphasis on the agency and capacity of fan communities to intervene politically. Part two then provides an initial theorisation of politicised fandom, highlighting four key elements: productivity and consumption, community, affect, and contestation. Part three offers some snapshots of how this politicised fandom is manifest empirically via the analysis of three similar yet different instances of politicised fandom in UK left politics: Russell Brand, Milifandom and Corbyn-mania.

In July 2016 a colleague and I attended a rally in Conway Hall, London, in support of UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn who – at the time – was facing a leadership challenge from former Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary Owen Smith. Halfway through the event, Corbyn himself made a "surprise" guest appearance, emerging from backstage to rapturous applause with the same kind of choreographed spontaneity that accompanies unexpected guest appearances at pop concerts. His speech saw several (partly unanticipated) instances of call-and-response with the audience, and the end of his speech was met by a standing ovation, stamping of feet, and a spontaneous chant of "Jez We Can". We left the event in little doubt that many Corbyn supporters relate to Corbyn in a manner similar to how fans of pop or film stars relate to their chosen fan object. What is more, so-called "Corbyn-mania" is one of several politician "fan communities" to have emerged in recent years. High profile politicians as diverse as prospective Democratic presidential nominee Bernie Sanders, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, erstwhile UKIP leader Nigel Farage, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau – as well as, of course, Donald Trump – have, arguably, seen fan communities spring up around them. This in turn suggests that fandom is now an established feature of contemporary politics deserving of greater analytical attention than it has thus far received from political scientists.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper, quite simply, is firstly to argue that fandom – the state of being a fan of a public figure or cultural text – matters to politics and, secondly, to offer a theorisation of what I call politicised fandom. To flesh this out, the paper proceeds through three stages. Part one offers a brief mapping of the existing scholarship within the interdisciplinary sub-field of fan studies, and alights on a definition of fandom offered by Cornel Sandvoss, before mapping some different understandings of the fandom/politics relation. Part two then offers an initial conceptual mapping of politicised fandom, highlighting four key elements: productivity and consumption, community, affect, and contestation. Part three offers some snapshots of how this politicised fandom is manifest empirically via the analysis of three similar yet different instances of politicised fandom in UK left politics: Russell Brand, Milifandom and Corbyn-mania.

Fandom: From Pop Culture to Politics

Fan studies is a relatively new field of scholarly analysis. Spurred on by earlier attempts at legitimating scholarly analysis of pop culture – especially those associated with the Birmingham cultural studies tradition (see, for instance, Hall, 1992; Hebdige, 1979) – much fan studies scholarship starts by contesting popular representations of fandom as deviant or pathological (Sandvoss, 2005; Duffett, 2013; Lewis, 1992; Jenson, 1992). Fandom, fan studies scholars argue, is an increasingly common mode of socio-cultural practice and pop culture consumption. But what, exactly, is fandom? At one level, fandom is self-evident. As Matt Hills points out at the start of his 2002 book Fan Cultures, 'everybody knows what a 'fan' is. A fan is somebody who is obsessed with a particular star, celebrity, film, TV programme, band; somebody who can produce reams of information on their object of fandom, and can quote their favoured lines or lyrics, chapter and verse' (Hills, 2002, ix).

But this common-sense definition invites further conceptual reflection on how one distinguishes the fan from the non-fan. One influential response from the first wave of fan studies in the early 1990s is to stress the subversive and productive aspects of fandom (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992), whereby fandom is aligned with the 'cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race' (Fiske, 1992: 30). Henry Jenkins' (1992) influential conception of fandom as "textual poaching" emphasises fans' capacity to creatively deconstruct and rework aspects of the original fan text in new and subversive ways. Although this emphasis on fan production – and its capacity for subversion and critique – remains influential, it has proven vulnerable to the charge of "cultural populism" (McGuigan, 1992), that is the tendency to over-estimate the progressive potential of fandom (and pop culture consumption more generally). An alternative approach – such as that advanced by Grossberg (1992) – claims that the fan, in contrast to the average consumer, is shaped by particularly strong affective investments in practices or objects, which in turn assume a centrality in the fan's identity formation. Elsewhere, Matt Hills (2002) stresses the subjective feelings, practices and intentions of the individual fan via an appeal to Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic account of 'transitional objects'.

A more recent set of perspectives conceptualises fandom as a distinctive set of practices. In a wide ranging overview of the field of fan studies, Duffett (2013) suggests that fandom is marked by a distinctive range of behaviours including, for example, spoiling, slash fiction, fan fiction, collective participation, collecting of objects, blogging, fanvids and "filking" (re-imagining the lyrics to a popular song such that it relates to the singer's chosen fan object). Similarly, Cornel Sandvoss suggests that it is the practices of fandom – particularly those pertaining to regular consumption of media texts – that render it distinctive vis-à-vis non-fandom. Indeed, Sandvoss offers a nice, pithy definition of fandom as the 'regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text' (2005: 8). While mindful of its contestability, the rest of this paper adopts and develops Sandvoss's definition, in part due to its simplicity, and due to the fact that, as argued below, it lends itself well to the analysis of the fandom/politics relation.

But why does fandom, so defined, matter to politics? Indeed, to claim that fandom is (potentially) political may seem counter-intuitive: fan practices are often the preserve of the private sphere, and fandom's association with strong emotional commitments to the fan object puts it firmly at odds with the cool-headed rationality seen by many political scientists as necessary for productive citizen engagement (see, for example, Stoker, 2006). But there is a plurality of ways in which fandom becomes relevant – perhaps crucial – for understanding politics. As Sandvoss (2013: 253) argues, 'fandom has become an increasingly ubiquitous mode of media consumption driven by ever greater access to and choice between different media texts'. Consequently, to study fandom from within the disciplinary rubric of political science is crucial if we are to come to grips with new (or, perhaps, hitherto overlooked) modes of political engagement by (predominantly) young people in a highly mediated milieu (Inthorn and Street, 2011; Jenkins, 2006).

But even if we were to agree that fandom is something political scientists should take seriously, this begs the question of how, precisely, the fandom/politics relation should be conceptualised. There are a number of possibilities here. One could, for instance, take up Liesbet van Zoonen's (2005) claim that fandom is analogous to politics, by stressing the structural similarities in the moods, values and practices of fan communities and political communities. However, van Zoonen's analysis is oriented

towards highlighting similarities between fandom and politics in general: as such, it treats "politics" and "fandom" as two analytically separable domains, rather than treating – as I aim to do – politicised fandom as a distinct phenomenon. By contrast, Henry Jenkins' (2012) engaging analysis of "fan activism" is much more narrow. Fan activism refers to the phenomenon of pop culture fan communities mobilising politically in a manner in keeping with the values of their fan object, with a group called the "Harry Potter Alliance" acting as Jenkins' key case study (Jenkins, 2012). While Jenkins' analysis is invaluable as a detailed empirical analysis of an instance of politicised fandom, it invites a broader theorisation of the contexts and practices constitutive of politicised fandom in general.

A further line of enquiry, likely to be more familiar to political science scholars, emerges from the literature on celebrity politics (Marsh et al, 2010; Wheeler, 2013; Street, 2012; Wood et al, 2016). Scholars of celebrity politics have identified a now well-established phenomenon whereby media celebrities seek to leverage their celebrity status – including by mobilising their fan-base – to push particular political claims. In this context, a celebrity's fan base – or at least a section of it – can become politicised when the celebrity/fan object takes up a particular political position. For example, Beyonce's recent embrace of radical black politics amidst the release of the Formation single and Lemonade album in 2016 drew a substantial part of her fan base – affectionately known as the "Beyhive" – into the orbit of discussion about race and gender in contemporary America (see, for example, McFadden, 2016). A similar strategy – outlined by John Street (2004) – occurs when an established celebrity seeks to use their public profile and fan-base to gain entry to electoral politics (Reagan, Schwarzenegger and indeed Trump are relevant cases here). However, Street identifies a further possibility: that elected politicians may be able to use certain publicity and marketing techniques – or styles of speech and comportment – to cultivate a fan-base of sorts and thus take on a celebrity status that other politicians lack. Tony Blair in his early years, former Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, Obama and the late Dutch right-winger Pim Fortuyn have all pursued this strategy with varying degrees of success (Street, 2012; Drake and Higgins, 2012; Pels, 2003).

This paper attempts to build on the celebrity politics literature's emphasis on the crucial intersections of politics and popular culture, by stressing not just the claims

and actions of celebrity politicians (or politicised celebrities), but also the capacity of fans of individual celebrities or texts (rather than the celebrities themselves) to actively shape certain kinds of political spaces and power relations. Such a view, expressed in recent work by Cornel Sandvoss, suggests that 'fandom itself, not the politics of individual fans, may impact on democracy' (Sandvoss, 2013: 253) by virtue of 'fan like attachments to politicians and political parties [which] shape citizens' participation in political debate and democratic process' (ibid, 254). Distinctive to this approach is an emphasis on the agency of fan communities, i.e. their capacity to intervene politically and thus for fandom to be constitutive of particular moments of politics, rejecting a rather banal equation of politicised fandom with 'fans of (specific) politicians'. By contrast, what interests me here is the ways in which fandom becomes politicised and takes on political significance under particular circumstances. This is why I err towards the use of politicised rather than political fandom: to foreground the processual character of the fandom/politics intersection: no fandom is necessarily or intrinsically political. The task at hand, then, is to theorise the conditions under which fan communities become political.

Theorising Politicised Fandom

This section seeks to offer a more precise sketch of the key features of politicised fandom. Recall again that, at a basic level, fandom is 'regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text' (Sandvoss, 2005: 8). Even this short definition implies at least two key features: consumption and emotion (or, rather, affect). However, to these I would add two further features: community and contestation. While all these features are present, to some degree, in all forms of fandom, they assume particular characteristics as fandoms become more politically charged. As such, this section aims to provide analysts of politics and pop culture with some conceptual tools with which to identify when and how a "fandom" becomes politicised or, conversely, when a political movement assumes the character of a fandom.

The first feature, productivity and consumption, are central concepts in fan studies scholarship. While at first appearing different, I treat them here together, given that fan practices trouble the production/consumption divide. As Mark Duffett (2013: 251) points out, 'the distinction between active producers and passive consumers has been reduced or erased because both are now actively engaged as players in the flow of media culture. Fan creativity is not simply derivative here, but part of a two-way traffic within the media industries instead'. As such, fandom should not be thought of as a response to some self-evident property of the fan object (such as charisma or sex appeal), but from the dynamic relationship between the individual fan, other fans and the fan object. Thus, fan practices are in this sense creative in the sense that they generate what political theorist Yannis Stavrakakis (2015: 279) calls, in a discussion of charisma and populist politics, a 'socially produced reciprocity' between fan object and fan community. This reciprocal relationship means that fans constitute (rather then simply react to) the properties of the fan object and the "fandom" as a collective – and potentially politicised – entity. As John Fiske puts it:

> Fan productivity is not limited to the production of new texts: it also participates in the construction of the original text and thus turns the commercial narrative or performance into popular culture. Fans are very participatory. Sports crowds wearing their teams' colors or rock audiences dressing and behaving like the bands become part of the performance. This melding of the team or performer and the fan into a productive community minimizes differences between artist and audience and turns text into an event, not an art object (Fiske, 1992: 40).

John Fiske's work also offers a useful account of the specifics of fan productivity: he distinguishes between three modes of productivity present in the consumption of pop culture texts (Fiske, 1992: 37-39). Semiotic productivity – the way individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to cultural texts – is constitutive of all popular culture. The other two, enunciative productivity and textual productivity, are more prevalent within fan communities. The first refers simply to verbal discussion about a pop cultural text. The second, textual productivity, refers to the enactment of fandom through the production of new texts such as fanzines and fan fiction. Indeed, this is rendered considerably easier in the age of social media than it was at the time Fiske

was writing, as the production of online texts (through blogs, forums, social media) is now central to most fan activity (Jenkins, 2006). A further crucial point here is that, as Sandvoss's definition makes clear, fan productivity and consumption is 'regular': i.e. it has a certain voraciousness and durability. So while a casual listener may enjoy listening to Blonde on Blonde once in a while, a fully fledged Bob Dylan fan will regularly engage in practices such as collecting limited edition LPs, frequently communicating with fellow Dylan fans online, writing blogposts about Dylan's work, or following Dylan on tour.

This intensity and voraciousness characteristic of fandom leads us to a second key feature, namely the role of affect. Within fan studies, the concept of affect – still rather marginal to political science – stresses the strong embodied and emotional attachments to a particular political ideal or (more usually) an individual, which are sustained over time. As Larry Grossberg puts it, 'the fan's relation to cultural texts operates in the domain of affect or mood' (Grossberg, 1992, 56), 'affect is what gives 'colour', 'tone' or 'texture' to our experiences' (1992: 57). Fandom, then, is a mode of social and/or political practice in which the affective dimension is particularly intense. Think, for example, of the intensities of feeling characteristic of so-called Directioners' investments in boy band One Direction. Indeed, it is precisely this perceived excess of affect (and alleged deficit of rationality) that has prompted some to see fandom as pathological and potentially dangerous (Jenson, 1992; Ehrenreich et al, 1992).

But what precisely is "affect"? Grossberg is a little vague as to its conceptual status, but the overall thrust of his analysis is to suggest that for the fan certain objects or contexts are 'saturated with affect' (1992: 59), such that particular things or practices come to assume a central role in the fan's sense of identity. As Grossberg puts it, 'the fan need not – and usually does not – have blind faith in any specific investment site, but he or she cannot give up the possibility of investment as that which makes possible a map of his or her own everyday life and self' (Grossberg, 1992: 60). A more precise definition is offered by Jon Protvei, who claims that affect encompasses two different, but connected facets of human experience: on the one hand, affect refers to 'being affected' – 'the somatic change caused by an encounter with an object' and on the other, it references 'the felt change in the power of the body, the

increase or decrease in perfection, felt as sadness or joy', i.e. something akin to what we might ordinarily call 'emotion' (Protevi, 2009: 49) but that is not reducible to it.

While the precise affective dynamics of fandom vary considerably depending on the specific fan community and fan object, affective orientations such as pleasure, indulgence and impropriety figure prominently in the fan studies literature, particularly given fandom's rather lowly social standing, what Matt Hills (2002: xii) calls its 'improper' character. It may well be that certain affective orientations (such as anger and hope) become more prevalent in politicised rather than ordinary fandoms. However, I argue that what distinguishes politicised fandom is not its affective content, but the direction of the affective flow. By this I mean that within ordinary fandoms the affective "charge" runs primarily between fan, fan object and fellow fans. As fandoms become politicised, however, fans' affective investments become more "outwardly" oriented in the sense of being constituted by a desire to change wider society: politicised fans' affective investments are thus oriented towards society as it is currently constituted and a vision of a (changed) future society.

These affective orientations in turn help to form bonds between individuals that sustain a sense of community, our third key dimension of politicised fandom. To be a fan is to have some sense of oneself as a member of, to use Benedict Anderson's (2006) terminology, an imagined community. Fan communities are imagined to the extent that – as with Anderson's initial characterisation of the nation as an imagined community – the fan will (except perhaps in a very small number of highly specialised fandoms) never meet in person all other members of the fan community, but nonetheless feels a sense of belonging, kinship or comradeship in relation to them. Furthermore, the fan community is bounded, limited, to the extent that it has a sense of its otherness vis-à-vis the mainstream. This is implicitly reflected in the use of vernacular names for specific fan communities, such as "Whovians" for fans of British Sci-fi TV show Doctor Who, or "Directioners" for fans of One Direction, terms which arguably reflect the fan community's sense of its otherness relative not just to wider society, but also to more casual consumers or viewers (i.e. not all Doctor Who viewers are full-blown Whovians) (Duffett, 2013: 245).

Within these broad parameters, however, there is considerable variability within and between fan communities. One axis of variability concerns the intensity with which the fandom is felt and enacted. Some of this variability is nicely captured in Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) influential articulation of what they consider to be a continuum between fans – 'those people who become particularly attached to certain programmes or stars within the context of relatively heavy media use' (1998: 138), cultists (who are more organised than fans), and enthusiasts (who are even more organised, voracious and activity-focussed than cultists) (Abercombie and Longhurst, 1998: 139). Despite defining "fan" in a rather narrower way than Sandvoss (whose definition arguably also encompasses those whom Abercrombie and Longhurst would consider "cultists" or "enthusiasts"), this framing of a continuum is potentially helpful insofar as it suggests that there will be varying levels of intensity and commitment within (politicised) fan communities. For example, to use their terminology: Jeremy Corbyn "fans" may simply have voted for him in Labour leadership elections, Corbyn "cultists" might be those who invest time doggedly defending him online, while "enthusiasts" might be those who have invested time and effort actively mobilising supporters and organising pro-Corbyn events.

A second axis of variation relates to dynamics of power, inclusion and exclusion. For instance, fandoms are often sustained by a sense of belonging and membership of a fan community, a 'mutually supportive social network of people that can – and do – regularly communicate with each other as individuals' (ibid: 244). These feelings of belonging to a fan community are often reflective of, and sustained by, the fan's sense of distance from dominant social norms, for instance in relation to gender or sexuality (Sandvoss, 2005: 16). Conversely, fan communities can also function as sites of hierarchy and exclusion. For instance, one could raise questions about racialised hierarchies by highlighting the whiteness of many fan communities (Stanfill, 2011). Alternatively, one could raise doubts about the tendency for fan communities to reflect rather traditional hierarchical relationships between the fan community and fan object, the latter of whom is disproportionately likely to be a middle class white man (indeed, this applies to pop culture and to mainstream politics) (see, for example, Ehrenreich et al, 1992).

While this may mean that all fandoms are political in the broad sense of constituted by diverse modes of power, inclusion and exclusion, it is still, I would argue, fruitful to identify fandoms which are more overtly politicised than others. It is here that the final dimension, contestation, comes into play. To flesh out "contestation" conceptually, I turn to the so-called 'constructivist turn' (Disch, 2012) in theories of political representation, particularly the work of Michael Saward (Saward, 2006; 2010). Put briefly, Saward's "claims-making" perspective foregrounds political actors' claims to speak and act for particular constituencies. Crucially, these constituencies are to be seen not as a pre-existent referent, but as something apt to being made and re-made via the articulation and reception of representative claims. Political communities thus come into being via the consolidation of a series of representative claims. In line with performativity theory, the representative claim is thus constitutive of the community it ostensibly represents. This in turn means that the conception of politics underpinning this paper rejects the traditional equation of politics with the formal institutions of the state – what Foster et al (2013) call an 'arena' based understanding of politics – as representative claims are articulated by a broad range of actors across a broad range of spaces.

In fairness, such a view of politics partly informs John Street's (2004) work on celebrity politics, which references Saward in a discussion of the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of political representation (Street, 2004: 443). However, Street's analytical focus is on the celebrity as claim-maker, inviting the question of the agency of the fan community, and/or the relationship between the celebrity claim-maker, and the fan community that take up and respond to the claim being made. As Saward makes clear, 'representative claims only work, or even exist, if 'audiences' acknowledge them in some way, and are able to absorb or reject or accept them or otherwise engage with them' (Saward, 2006: 303). Consequently, I would stress here the circulation of representative claims in and between fan objects (such as an individual celebrity or political figure) and fan communities.

One further important implicit throughout Saward's account – and indeed the broader "constructivist" tradition of which he is arguably a part – is that the collective articulation of representative claims intends to bring about certain effects or consequences (otherwise there would be no need for the articulation of representative

claims). As such, there is an intentionality and self-consciousness behind representative claims: 'a self-conscious notion of itself as an audience' as Saward (2006: 303) puts it. The claim-maker and the audience are united by a (largely) conscious wish to contest certain aspects of society as it is presently constituted. The scale of the (envisioned) change will of course vary, potentially encompassing anything from a minor policy change to a radical reconstitution of society's foundations.

Against this backdrop, using Saward's terminology, we can say that fandom becomes politicised when the fan community is sustained by the circulation of representative claims oriented towards contesting perceived injustices and transforming wider social relations. To be clear, these "representative claims" are articulated not only by high profile political and/or cultural figures (i.e. "fan objects"), but also by ordinary fans. This formulation suggests that as fandoms become more politicised they tend to become more outward-facing insofar as they seek to intervene in, challenge and shape aspects of wider society (more explicitly and with more intentionality than in "ordinary" fandom) and, second, they are proleptic, i.e. it is oriented towards impacting upon future society. Of course, empirically the distinction between less politicised and more politicised fandoms will be less clear-cut: "ordinary" fandoms may, for instance, be sustained by subversive (i.e. contestatory) readings of texts. However, more politicised fandoms, I would argue, are sustained by the intentional collective pursuit of a particular vision of socio-political change, in opposition to, as opposed to merely distinct from, some aspect of wider society as it is presently constituted.

As a result, and perhaps in contrast to the literature on celebrity politics, the politicality of a fandom depends not on whether the fan object is a professional politician. Rather it depends on the nature of commitments and practices that sustain the fan object/fan community relation. Thus, a hitherto apolitical fan community can become politicised if and when that fan community seeks to challenge and intervene into wider social relations. Jenkins' aforementioned analysis the Harry Potter Alliance (2012) is one such example. A perhaps more subtle and less formalised instance of politicised fandom arguably emerged shortly after the re-launch of Doctor Who in 2005, when the programme and its fan-base become important voices in advancing

greater recognition of sexual minorities within mainstream British popular culture (see, for example, Hurst, 2014). Conversely, an already politicised community can renew or sustain momentum by taking on some of the features associated with fandom: for instance, Milo Yiannopoulis – the flamboyant and highly divisive figurehead of the so-called "alt right" movement – saw his political and cultural clout expand as the size and commitment of his fan base has increased (see Penny, 2017). It goes without saying that all cases of politicised fandom will be subject to significant empirical variability. With that proviso in mind, the following section puts the framework developed here into action by examining some empirical examples of politicised fandom.

Politicised Fandom in Action: Brand, Miliband and Corbyn

In this section I offer some sketches of several empirical manifestations of politicised fandom, with a focus on contemporary left politics in the UK. This is largely because my interest in fandom arose initially from its capacity to capture some phenomena observed whilst undertaking an empirical research project on UK left politics. The following cases are drawn from this project, using data from interviews with activists and key informants, text analysis of media coverage and commentary, and participant observation at meetings and rallies. My focus on UK left politics is not to suggest that fandom is necessarily unique to left politics. But it is true to say that the UK left has seen the emergence of several noteworthy instances of politicised fandom. Furthermore, by comparing three cases of politicised fandom in UK left politics, it becomes possible to trace some interesting similarities and differences between different instances of politicised fandom.

The three cases are Russell Brand, Ed Miliband and Jeremy Corbyn. Brand is an actor, comedian and TV personality who has had a high public profile in the UK since the early 2000s, and became politically active from 2013 after guest editing an issue of political magazine New Statesman on the theme of "revolution" (Brand, 2013). Thereafter, Brand became a high profile exponent of a not always coherent model of radical left politics inflected with Marxism, anarchism, mysticism and his own

idiosyncratic verbosity (Brand, 2014). As well as attending rallies, supporting grassroots housing campaigns in London, and interviewing high profile politicians (especially in the run up to the 2015 general election), Brand's own youtube channel – entitled The Trews (a portmanteau of "true news") – achieved a degree of notoriety and popularity, arguably becoming the key medium through which Brand communicates with his fan-base (for an excellent summation of Brand's journey from comedy to politics, see Arthurs and Little, 2016).

Ed Miliband was Labour Party leader from 2010-15 and was, for the most part, a fairly conventional politician despite his father's fame as an academic Marxist (Bale, 2015). Often criticised for his allegedly "geeky" persona and lack of telegenic demeanour, there was widespread bewilderment when it was discovered, during the 2015 general election campaign, that Miliband had a small but significant fan-base of teenage girls, generated largely through the use of the #CoolEdMiliband and #Milifandom social media hashtags (Jewell, 2015). To some extent, particularly in its early stages, Milifandom was perhaps something of a joke and was in part a media-driven phenomenon rather than a genuine movement. However, as it gained a degree of momentum and visibility, Milifandom became a genuine, if perhaps rather transient and often tongue-in-cheek, community of girls and young women who, for the most part, genuinely admired Miliband and were committed to contesting unfavourable media portrayals of him which they considered a 'deliberate distortion' (Bromwich, 2015).

Jeremy Corbyn, a veteran left-wing MP who became Miliband's unlikely successor as Labour leader from 2015, thanks in part to widespread mobilisations in support of him by left activists inside and outside the Labour Party (Dorey and Dunham, 2016). His leadership has been characterised by, among other things, a political polarisation within the Labour Party, such that there is now a significant and seemingly intractable division between those who are loyally pro-Corbyn, and those who consider him a political liability. Within this context, Corbyn's more loyal supporters have come to exhibit a number of features associated with fan communities.

The three cases are of course in some senses similar: all three are of the UK left, two are of the Labour Party (and Brand pledged his support to Miliband just prior to the

2015 election), and all three are white men. There are, however, significant differences: Brand is a figure from outside formal politics, Miliband is very much within formal politics, while Corbyn is something of an "outsider within" (i.e. a long-serving MP who has frequently aligned himself with extra-parliamentary movements and causes). Furthermore, the fan practices, affective orientations and political commitments that sustained the three fandoms were rather different.

Let us begin with productivity and consumption. Here, Russell Brand's fan base was shaped in a rather top-down manner: indeed, Brand has in some cases functioned as a classic "CP2" in John Street's (2004) terms, i.e. a celebrity who used their existing cultural and media capital to pronounce on political issues. Thus, the productivity side came largely from Brand himself, through the writing of a book (Brand, 2014), collaborating with director Michael Winterbottom to create the documentary film The *Emperor's New Clothes*, and producing his youtube channel The Trews. While there is relatively little evidence of what Fiske calls "textual productivity" by Brand's fans, there was considerable "enunciative productivity", with Brand's interventions generating online and offline discussion on a scale unusual for political commentary, in part facilitated by the size of his pre-existing fan base and media profile prior to his 2013 "politicisation" (Robertson, 2014; Arthurs and Little, 2016).

Milifandom and Corbyn-mania, however, were both much more bottom-up: i.e. they were largely fan-generated, to such an extent that Miliband and Corbyn both expressed bewilderment towards their status as "fan objects" (Ross, 2015a). Miliband, for instance, remarked as follows in his May 2015 resignation speech: 'Thank you for the selfies, thank you for the support, and thank you for the most unlikely cult of the 21st century, Milifandom'. And yet Milifandom bore witness to textbook modes of fan productivity in the social media age: it was spearheaded by young women and teenage girls (particularly high profile Labour activist Abby Tomlinson) who were already politically engaged and internet savvy. It sought to recreate the fan practices associated with more traditional pop culture fandoms – Directioners, Beyhive etc – but bringing these, with a palpable sense of playfulness, to the realm of formal politics. This took the form of, for instance, declaring admiration of Miliband online, and/or producing memes with Miliband's face superimposed onto images of

classically masculine images of coolness, such as Harrison Ford, Daniel Craig and James Dean (Media Mole, 2015).

The modes of productivity and consumption associated with Corbyn-mania have been much wider ranging. Two main forms of productivity and consumption predominate. Firstly, Corbyn-mania has often entailed simply using the #Jezwecan hashtag, or the uploading and circulation of selfies with Corbyn (of which there are many). Secondly, Corbyn fans have been very active in terms of embodied participation at rallies, meetings and events, prompting some (including us) to notice a tendency for fans to react to Corbyn in the way one would react to a rock star (see Crace, 2016b). As such, Corbyn's speeches and rallies testify to Fiske's observations above on the constitutive role of fans in sustaining (politicised) fandoms. After all, many have remarked upon the unremarkable, unassuming demeanour of Corbyn himself (see, for example, Younge, 2015): thus, Corbyn-mania's status as a fan community – and thus Corbyn's status as a fan object – is largely fan generated, exceeding any individual personal qualities Corbyn himself may possess.

However, Corbyn-mania has also given rise to a broad array of often improbable forms of textual and artistic productivity. For example, the JC4PM ("Jeremy Corbyn for Prime Minister") tour – which hosted events at a range of major cities across the UK – saw a range of pro-Corbyn pop cultural figures (such as actor Maxine Peake, comedian Jeremy Hardy and musician Charlotte Church) perform to audiences of Corbyn fans. Furthermore, Corbyn fans have produced, among other things, Corbyn fan art, a selection of Jeremy Corbyn figurines made from vegetables, a Kittens 4 Corbyn facebook page, a Jeremy Corbyn colouring book, Corbyn mugs (Ross, 2015b), and a brief craze in which the words "We're with Corbyn" were drawn in sand on UK beaches, especially in Cornwall (BBC News, 2016). In addition, during the initial rumblings of a challenge to Corbyn's leadership from within the Parliamentary Labour Party, one fan produced a mock-up of the video for Rick Astley's 1988 hit Never Gonna Give You Up, with Astley's face replaced by Corbyn and a Labour Party logo super-imposed on the face of the woman to whom the song is addressed. Some months later, following Corbyn's victory against challenger Owen Smith, another fan video was made featuring a mash-up of Corbyn "singing" alternative lyrics to the Queen track Another One Bites the Dust. All of these were

widely shared and distributed by Corbyn supporters online, consolidating the extensive "enunciative productivity" characteristic of Corbyn supporters' online interactions (on sites such as the Labour Party Forum facebook group).

The affective dimensions of the three fandoms vary significantly. Brand's politicisation has been met with highly polarised affective responses. Many commentators and fans expressed admiration for his outspoken politics and capacity to communicate in the vernacular with hitherto apolitical young people (Jones, 2014; Robertson, 2014; Finlayson, 2015). This was particularly evident in the often enthusiastic responses to his near daily episodes of The Trews, and palpable sense of sadness that arose among his fans when the series was brought to a temporary close in 2015. As Arthurs and Little put it, 'The audience's emotional attachment to its celebrity presenter is acknowledged in his affectionate sign-off and in their response on Twitter: 'Nooooo!' 'why? The Trews is needed for our generation', 'the trews was like my favourite thing ever'' (Arthurs and Little, 2016: 80). By contrast, Brand was widely denounced for, among other things, his perceived lack of political knowledge and expertise, his questionable gender politics, his "flamboyant" style of speech and dress, and his refusal to vote in elections (Arthurs and Little, 2016). Former Sex Pistol, John Lydon, for instance, described Brand's politics as 'the most idiotic thing [he'd] ever heard', a sentiment shared by much of the left-liberal commentariat (Toynbee, 2014; see also McGhee, 2014).

The affective dimensions of Milifandom, however, are perhaps more difficult to read. On the one hand, Milifandom was generated by genuine anger towards what its participants saw as the disproportionately unfavourable treatment of Miliband in the press. One the other hand, there was more than a hint of playfulness and irony. It thus existed in an ambiguous liminal space between genuine political and personal support for Miliband, and at times ironic replication of the textual and visual tropes of more traditional fandom. However, when interviewed by The Guardian Milifandom "founder" Abby Tomlinson reported genuine sincerity in her enthusiasm for Miliband (Bromwich, 2015). Milifandom thus combined sincere political commitment with, perhaps, a certain kind of transgressive pleasure. For instance, as one "Milifan" tweeted, 'this all started out as a joke but now i think i legitimately fancy ed miliband' [sic] (Cosslett, 2015), in keeping with the wider tendency for Milifans to coyly

concede that they 'sort of fancy' Ed Miliband (Cosslett, 2015). If, as Matt Hills suggests, there is something "improper" about fandom because its affective commitments are directed towards the "wrong" objects, then there could scarcely be a more "improper" object of (teenage) fandom than someone as ostensibly uncool as Ed Miliband. Indeed, this is borne out by the mixture of bewilderment and derision that accompanied much media coverage of the Milifan phenomenon (see, for example, Crace, 2016a).

Corbyn fans, however, have typically been more overt and less ironic in their displays of affection for Corbyn. Indeed, on the occasions we have attended Corbyn speeches for research purposes – including in Manchester in October 2015 and in London in July 2016 – we have been struck, as the opening anecdote to this paper indicates, by the palpable sense of warmth, excitement and anticipation that accompanies his public appearances. This is in part because of Corbyn's personal qualities – his accessibility and amiability – but, more importantly, by virtue of his capacity to embody a form of radical left yet parliamentary politics which has been absent from British politics since at least the Thatcher era (Seymour, 2016). As one interviewee put it: 'he met the desire of many party members to feel something again, you know, inside them' (interview with Labour activist, 11/02/16). This means that many left activists have expressed at times quite deep emotional ties to Corbyn, prompting many to suggest that Corbyn fans' devotional attachment was problematic for the Labour Party as a whole: for instance, in 2016 Margaret Beckett attacked Corbyn supporters for turning the Labour Party into a "Jeremy Corbyn Fan Club" rather than a serious political party (Simons, 2016), while many within and outside the Labour Party have argued that the "cult" of Corbyn has potentially disastrous consequences for the party (Crines, 2016; McTernan, 2016)

The situation with regards the community dimension of politicised fandom is similar in our three cases to that concerning affect. With regards Russell Brand, the fan community was rather hard to discern: this is in part because the fan community was split between pre-existing fans (of his film and comedy work) and new fans drawn to his politics, many of whom found his accessible speaking style and disdain for mainstream representative politics refreshing. That said, there was rather little by way of people mobilising explicitly as Russell Brand fans. This may in part be because the

political agency of Brand's fandom was driven in, initially at least, a rather top down manner by Brand himself and the 'celebrity apparatus' deployed around him which, Arthurs and Little (2016: 24) argue, resulted in readers of his Revolution book being 'interpellated as fans'. Arthurs and Little's use of the Althusserian language of 'interpellation' (referring to the process of being hailed by a figure of social authority) is precisely testament to the rather top-down character of Brand's fan community. That said, events where he was present to speak about his politics – such as a panel discussion with Owen Jones in London in 2014, attended largely by 'Guardian – reading lefties' (Arthurs and Little, 2016: 112) and broadcast live to cinemas nationwide, and a speech at an anti-austerity march in London in June 2014 – were characterised by a certain "buzz" and excitement towards his presence.

Milifandom, however, was less clearly characterised by a sense of community. While individual "Milifans" identified themselves with a broader 'imagined community', this never took on a clear-cut organisational form, and, it seemed, genuine "Milifans" constituted a relatively small (yet social media savvy) coterie of politically aware young women and girls. However, references to Milifandom in the mainstream media have proved surprisingly durable, in part because of the praise afforded to Miliband's apparent knack for "sassy" tweeting following his move away from front-line politics (Brown, 2017).

The community surrounding Jeremy Corbyn, however, is very different, at least insofar as there is a strong, substantive community of Jeremy Corbyn supporters who display significant loyalty to him and who are willing and able to mobilise in his name (Richards, 2016). The size of the pro-Corbyn community took commentators by surprise during the 2015 general election, when large crowds gathered across the country to hear him speak. Furthermore, unlike Brand and Miliband, the Corbyn fan-base assumes an organisational form, partly through the Labour Party itself (especially at constituency level, where most active members are broadly pro-Corbyn), and partly through Momentum, an organisation set up to express and sustain support for Corbyn following his 2015 leadership victory (Klug et al, 2016). Indeed, given Corbyn's difficulties securing support from the Parliamentary Labour Party, his fan-base of Labour Party members and activists has been crucial to sustaining, and giving legitimacy to, his leadership (Blakey, 2016; Crines, 2016). Arguably,

Corbynmania's status as an instance of politicised fandom has only intensified following the challenges to his leadership in 2016, and much of the defence of Corbyn by his supporters is deeply personalised. As Heather Blakey (2016) puts it, 'the public focus remains on the individual – the expression of the movement is primarily to defend Corbyn from attack, and to keep him in place', a phenomenon perhaps best exemplified by the use of the hashtag #whatyoudotojeremyyoudotome among Corbyn supporters, which earned the mockery of Guardian journalist Marina Hyde (2016).

But there is a clear tension here. On the one hand, Corbyn supporters see themselves as a collective movement advancing a certain form of left politics but, on the other, the movement is sustained in part by a strong sense of personal loyalty to Corbyn as an individual. As one pro-Corbyn interviewee put it, 'the movement isn't his, he's a servant to the movement' (interview with Momentum activist, 15/02/16). Meanwhile, another interviewee, a Momentum activist, worried about there being 'so much hyperbole' and 'lionisation' of Corbyn (focus group with Momentum activists, 03/06/16). This tension was neatly embodied by the contribution of a further interviewee who remarked that 'I do like to indulge in a bit of we love Jeremy, but [other focus group participants]'s right about the fact that we have to be making it into a movement rather than about one man' (focus group with Momentum activists, 03/06/16). While particularly pronounced among Corbyn supporters, it may well be that this tension between membership of a political community/movement versus attachment to one specific individual is a recurring theme within politicised fan communities.

With regards the final dimension, contestation, all three fandoms were generated in part by a desire to challenge certain aspects of UK politics and society. Milifandom was arguably the least "political" of the three, at least in the sense that it did not take the form of a clearly organised movement with a broad transformative agenda. But it was underpinned by criticism of (what were felt to be) negative and/or superficial media depictions of Miliband (and to some extent politicians in general). As Milifandom "spokesperson" Abby Tomlinson put it, 'we just want to change opinions so people don't just see the media's usual distorted portrayal of him – and actually see him for who he is' (Cosslett, 2015). Milifandom also, to some extent, sought to challenge the erasure of young women and girls' voices within UK public debate.

The contestatory elements of Brand's and Corbyn's fandoms were, by contrast, rather more expansive. Both were sustained in part by the articulation of a radical anti-austerity politics, as well as a broader left critique of socio-economic inequality, right-wing media, and unresponsive political elites (especially in Brand's case). In this sense, Corbynism and to some extent Russell Brand, constituted moments of what Margaret Canovan, in her classic essay on populism, calls redemptive politics. Redemptive politics, for Canovan (1999: 8), 'entails mobilisation of popular enthusiasm behind this enterprise, a quest for increased power to accomplish it, and confidence that such power can be safely entrusted to human beings. Devotees of this political style are impatient of legalistic restrictions that may stand in the way of salvation'. Brand and Corbyn's fandoms chime with Canovan's account insofar as they were not only (or even primarily) seeking specific concrete reforms: arguably, they drew momentum from their expansive, indeed at times messianic, commitment to large scale egalitarian change.

Overall, then, the three cases outlined here differ significantly. Corbyn-mania arguably constitutes the most fully-fledged case of politicised fandom, insofar as it consists of a (relatively) well organised fan community as well as a clear set of political commitments. As such, the fan practices of Corbyn-mania were situated alongside more "typical" forms of activism such as attending demonstrations, door knocking, branch organising and online discussion. With Milifandom, by contrast, the fan attachments and political commitments contained therein were more fleeting and transitory, but still sustained by genuine politically charged affection for Miliband which we should not be too quick to write off. With regards Russell Brand, there were clearly a set of political commitments but there was less of a sense of a bottom-up fan community mobilising in Brand's name. Therefore, the buzz around Russell Brand's interventions in 2013-14 perhaps sits somewhere between politicised fandom, as outlined here, and what Jon Street (2004) calls a Celebrity Politician 2, i.e. someone who uses their fame and profile to give voice to advance certain representative claims (to use Sawardian parlance).

Concluding Remarks

This paper has argued that political scientists' lack of interest in fandom as a concept or object of study is unwarranted, and that a more thoroughgoing reflection on fandom may provide a valuable addition to our conceptual toolkit for making sense of contemporary modes of political engagement. More specifically, I argued for greater sensitivity towards the political agency of fan communities. Against that backdrop, I then offered an account of the features of politicised fandom, by drawing on Michael Saward's work on political representation and work on affect and fan productivity from within the fan studies literature. This framework was then used to map some different manifestations of politicised fandom within contemporary UK left politics.

Given that fan studies is a relatively small sub-field, and given that almost nothing has thus far been written on fandom by political scientists, this paper is of necessity rather tentative and exploratory. However, the analysis above opens up a number of fruitful potential lines of enquiry. One could, for example, explore the relationship between fandom and populist politics, especially in light of the latter's associations with bottom up movements and charismatic leadership (Canovan, 1999: 6). The connection between politicised fandom, political disaffection and so-called "anti-politics" (Flinders, 2012; Stoker, 2006) might also be a fruitful line of enquiry. Furthermore, one could, potentially, undertake extensive comparative analysis of how politicised fandom is manifest in different national and ideological contexts. Finally, there is scope for further normatively oriented assessment of whether and how regimes of power – in relation to class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, disability and so on – shape the practices of politicised fandom (Stanfill, 2011).

Ultimately, I hope this paper will have encouraged readers to extinguish any residual unease about taking the politics of pop culture seriously. Indeed, my consideration of fandom, I would suggest, highlights the kinds of questions and practices the political science community should begin to take more seriously than it has done in the past if we are to be equal to the task of mapping changing modes of political participation in the twenty-first century.

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