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Contested centralisation: broadcasting rights, legal reform and power struggles in Portuguese football

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the legal reform aimed at implementing a centralised marketing model for audiovisual rights in Portuguese professional football, interpreting it as a politically contested and transformative process. Promoted through legislation as an instrument to correct revenue distribution inequalities among clubs and to enhance competitive balance, the measure translates into a reconfiguration of the institutional, symbolic, and media fields, exposing structural tensions within the Portuguese football ecosystem. Grounded in a qualitative documentary analysis, the study examines the frictions between dominant clubs, regulatory bodies, and media dynamics. Assemblage theory constitutes the central analytical lens, enabling an understanding of how actors, discourses, and *dispositifs*, in the Foucauldian sense, articulate and reconfigure in contexts of pronounced power asymmetry. The article contributes by conceptualising centralisation as a dynamic relational assemblage, critically demonstrating how reforms oriented towards competitive balance may simultaneously reconfigure and reproduce structural inequalities within the football ecosystem.

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Broadcasting rights; Portuguese football; legislative reform; assemblage theory; sports governance

Introduction

In recent years, the development of football as an industry has reached unprecedented levels, transforming competitive relations within the sport's value chain and driving demand for broadcasting rights, which in turn has led to a rapid appreciation of these rights (Buraimo, Simmons, and Szymanski 2006; Gratton and Solberg 2007; Hutchins and Sanderson 2017). As a consequence of this increase in value, clubs' financial sustainability has become increasingly dependent on these revenues, making their equitable distribution crucial for maintaining competition integrity and preserving competitive balance (Evens and Smith, 2024; Ramchandani et al. 2023).

In Portugal, the Competition Regulations assign clubs individual ownership of the broadcasting rights for their home matches. This model has allowed the three historically dominant clubs (SL Benfica, FC Porto, and Sporting CP), known as the 'big three', to secure far more advantageous contracts due to their privileged position within the national football ecosystem, understood here as a dynamic assemblage, generating power asymmetries that undermine competitive balance (Brand and Niemann 2011). In 2021, the Portuguese league constituted the largest case among a small group of European leagues where broadcasting rights are negotiated individually by each club, the ratio between the highest and median revenues from rights distribution stood at 12.8 (UEFA 2023), a situation that benefits the dominant clubs, enabling them to sign the best players and further consolidate their leading position (Downward, Dawson, and Dejonghe 2009).

In this context, the Portuguese Government approved, in a meeting of the Council of Ministers on 22 March 2021, Decree-Law No. 22-B/2021, establishing the ownership of television and multimedia broadcasting rights for the men's First and Second League football championships and

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mandating their centralised commercialisation to be implemented by the 2028/2029 season (Portuguese Government 2021). According to the Decree-Law, this legislative intervention aims to correct the inequalities generated in the distribution of revenues among clubs, which have exacerbated competitive imbalances in the competitions. To advance this process and submit a proposal for a centralised model to the Competition Authority by the end of the 2025/2026 season, Liga Portugal established 'Liga Portugal Centralização', a business unit comprising representatives from five First Division clubs (including the 'big three') and two from the Second Division.

Centralised commercialisation of television broadcasting rights is the dominant model in the rest of Europe, being responsible for subsequently distributing revenues to clubs according to pre-established criteria. By contrast, in just three top-tier leagues, Cyprus, Greece, and Portugal, some or all clubs negotiated their own television deals (UEFA 2024). Although collective selling is not a prerequisite for redistributing funds generated from broadcasting rights, most leagues consider it the most direct way to transfer resources from wealthier to poorer clubs (Evens, Iosifidis, and Smith 2013). Centralisation allows leagues to control the number and geographic distribution of matches, maximise revenues, and facilitate the sharing of resources among clubs with different levels of support, thereby promoting greater competitive balance (Plumley et al. 2022). Although it may appear less attractive to larger clubs, the literature suggests that collective selling reduces revenue disparities and supports the financial viability of smaller clubs (Kesenne 2009; Solberg, Jacobsen, and Jakobsen 2018).

To understand these dynamics, this study draws on Assemblage Theory (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and the Foucauldian notion of *dispositif* (Rabinow and Rose 2003), providing analytical tools to examine power relations, processes of institutionalisation, and visibility mechanisms underlying the centralisation process. This approach allows the study to move from empirical observation to conceptual analysis, addressing the central research question: how can policies formally oriented towards competitive balance simultaneously restructure and reproduce structural asymmetries within national football ecosystems?

The main theoretical contribution of this study lies in conceptualising the centralisation of broadcasting rights not as a merely economic or regulatory mechanism, but as a complex relational process of power reconfiguration in which institutional, media, symbolic, and economic dimensions interact contingently. Building on this perspective, the article advances three specific contributions to the literature: a reinterpretation of centralisation through assemblage theory; the articulation between assemblage and *dispositif* in the analysis of football governance; and an integrated reading of sports governance that combines media political economy, critical social theory, and sport studies, offering an analytical framework potentially transferable to other leagues and media contexts.

Although this study focuses on the context of Portuguese professional football, it contributes to an interdisciplinary debate by shifting the dominant analysis, often centred on financial redistribution, towards a relational understanding in which competitive balance also depends on symbolic, media, and historical factors. Existing literature has largely focused on the 'big five', where rights are sold collectively. By contrast, Portuguese professional football has maintained a decentralised system of media rights, remaining outside dominant strategic trends and making its examination particularly relevant. The Portuguese case is thus treated as an instrumental case study, selected for its ability to illuminate broader structural and governance dynamics (Stake 2003).

Adopting a qualitative approach, the study draws on a multidisciplinary framework to examine the ongoing transformation of football broadcasting governance (Gratton and Jones 2010). The analysis is based on an assessment of governmental texts, club financial reports, official publications from Liga Portugal, UEFA, and the European Commission, as well as sports media reports, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the complexity, political tensions, and structural effects of this process.

Theoretical framework

From cultural phenomenon to market asset: power, visibility and structural inequalities

The centrality of football in European societies has consolidated over time, largely due to its distinctive status as a national sport (King 2016). It is characterised by its capacity to foster identification and loyalties rooted in popular culture (Cleland et al. 2018), by its competitive structure

(Dobson and Goddard 2001), and by its potential to generate enthusiasm linked to the uncertainty of live sporting results (Andrews 2003). Within this framework, media narratives play a decisive role: it is through them that sport is continuously reinterpreted and incorporated into collective memory, reinforcing identities and consumption practices associated with the sporting spectacle (Horne 2006).

Within the media landscape, football has become part of the television industry, establishing a mutually beneficial relationship: it provides attractive content, while the media offer revenue streams and global visibility (Bolotny and Bourg 2019). Although stadium attendance and mediated consumption are distinct, since television audiences are not necessarily composed of supporters of the competing teams (Buraimo, Paramio, and Campos 2011), relevant synergies exist between consumer culture and the media industries, both of which seek to address audiences as autonomous individuals.

According to Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington (2017), it is the very existence of supporters that cements the commercial character of football. The presence of spectators in stadiums reinforces emotional and identity ties between clubs and fans, indirectly contributing to economic sustainability (Biscaia, Yoshida, and Kim 2023). This effect is further strengthened by the attraction of audiences to matches involving teams with high-quality players or clubs competing for the title (Caruso, Addesa, and Domizio 2019), as well as to games of high symbolic significance, such as derbies, which intensify fan engagement and positively influence attendance. In turn, higher stadium attendance translates into increased television audiences (Scelles 2017).

Characterised by its flexibility, televised sports audiences are influenced by the atmosphere and dynamics associated with events in stadiums. While sport has always extended beyond the confines of the stadium, it has become increasingly intertwined with processes of mediatisation, particularly through television, reinforcing its presence and influence in society (Boyle and Haynes 2009).

As a result, the interplay between stadium attendance and media has transformed football into a hyper-commercialised industry, in which the value of broadcasting rights is reinforced by visual appeal and financial investment (Billings and Buzzelli 2022). Although some international sporting mega-events have significant global appeal, in most cases it is local and/or national teams, athletes and competitions that are most popular with television audiences (Solberg and Gaustad 2022). This preference naturally concentrates viewership on dominant clubs, whose matches attract disproportionate media attention regardless of sporting outcomes (Buraimo 2019). This pattern reflects the logic whereby global sports rights are structured around national or regional hubs, shaped by local traditions and preferences, but supported by a global fan base (Evens and Smith 2024).

As a result, in the early years of the 2020s, some of the major European clubs sought greater commercial autonomy over broadcasting rights, claiming a larger share of collective revenues, as evidenced by the Premier League's Project Big Picture and the ephemeral European Super League (ESL) (Evens and Smith 2022). Welsh (2023) argues that the ESL project does not constitute an anomaly, but rather the most visible manifestation of trends of corporatisation and concentration of power in contemporary European football. These cases illustrate not only competitive and financial tensions but also the monopolisation of power that shapes the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, a central dynamic in the political economy of the media (Mosco 2009).

Consequently, these developments raise questions about balance and power relations in the governance of football, with advocates of collective selling arguing that it promotes greater competitive balance through revenue redistribution, solidarity, mutuality, the financial stability of clubs, and the sustainability of leagues (Buraimo and Simmons 2015; Kesenne 2009; Ramchandani et al. 2018). This argument aligns with competitive balance theory, which maintains that consumers prefer matches between teams of similar quality, as solidarity and mutuality increase outcome uncertainty, thereby generating greater interest and fostering more balanced leagues (Andreff and Bourg 2006; Heller, Sudaric, and Winkler 2023).

However, evidence from the Portuguese league complicates this linear assumption. Martins and Cró (2018) demonstrate that outcome uncertainty is not a uniformly significant determinant of match attendance, with demand being strongly shaped by the appeal of matches involving dominant clubs. Although some sports economists question whether revenue redistribution necessarily enhances competitive balance (Szymanski and Késenne 2004), it is widely accepted that revenue sharing can increase

outcome uncertainty. Thus, the outcome uncertainty hypothesis maintains that spectator interest grows as competition results become less predictable (Szymanski 2014).

The demand for sports rights depends on viewers' interest in specific matches, making them scarcely substitutable, neither for media companies nor for viewers (Heller, Sudaric, and Winkler 2023). Consequently, the commercialisation models, whether collective or individual, shape the symmetry or asymmetry of relationships between actors, depending on the market structure and each actor's bargaining power (Pfetsch 2011). The way rights are sold and redistributed directly impacts the competitive balance of leagues, an effect more pronounced in championships where clubs negotiate individually, since bids tend to concentrate on those that attract the greatest media attention and generate significantly higher revenues (Andreff and Bourg 2006). For this reason, leagues with individually sold rights rank among UEFA's least balanced (UEFA 2024), and in Portugal, Serrano et al. (2023) confirm this trend, showing that competitive imbalance has remained stable over time, demonstrating that regulatory interventions have not altered the structural dominance of the leading clubs.

In this context, higher levels of economic concentration tend to reduce competitive balance, undermining the sustainability of the football ecosystem (Andreff and Bourg 2006; Plumley et al. 2022). Accordingly, the economic organisation of team sports relies on institutional cooperation and solidarity mechanisms, frequently determined by regulation and redistribution, including broadcasting rights (Gerrard and Kringstad 2022). As in other negotiated orders, cooperation here does not necessarily imply consensus, but rather reflects power differentials (Clarke 2021).

Contemporary research on television and sport highlights that televised sport not only connects audiences to sporting practices but also shapes social perceptions of nationality, class, race, gender, age and disability, while emphasising the importance of a historical perspective for understanding these dynamics (Boyle and Haynes 2009). These dynamics are further shaped by the political, institutional and legal configurations of each country, which structure and regulate broadcasting markets (Gibbons and Humphreys 2012; Iosifidis 2015). Added to this national framework are European Commission directives, which introduce further layers of national and transnational regulation (Evens and Smith 2022), contributing to what Butler and Massey (2019) describe as a complex regulatory environment that combines external legal frameworks with market-specific institutional structures.

In this evolving landscape, the combination of these regulatory structures with technological evolution has transformed football distribution, with digital convergence reinforcing multi-platform broadcasting, expanding the media ecosystem, and multiplying sports platforms (Hutchins, Li, and Rowe 2019). Spectators can now access more sport, across more devices and locations, customising their experience across screens and interest communities (Hutchins and Sanderson 2017). Simultaneously, the shift from free-to-air signals to paid digital platforms, such as subscriptions and paywalls, raises accessibility challenges and potential exclusion effects for certain audience segments (Macedo, Dias, and Mourão 2023). Although it is difficult to precisely quantify the impact of price on the consumption of televised sport, it can be confidently stated that it exerts a significant influence on audience demand (Buraimo 2019), as viewers are often forced to pay more and/or face the inconvenience of subscribing to multiple service providers (Evens and Smith 2022), materially shaping the ways in which audiences access and consume football (Tamir 2022).

Assemblage theory and dispositif

Assemblage theory has been applied in sports research to examine the configuration of political authority, media visibility, and institutional power in governance contexts (e.g. Brannagan, Grix, and Norrito 2026), to analyse cultural and institutional processes in talent development environments (Darpatova-Hruzewicz and Ryba 2025), and to address the material-discursive and affective dimensions of sports practice (e.g. Camiré 2023; Leeder 2022). Recent work has further demonstrated the value of assemblage thinking for unpacking the multiscalar and contested nature of sport governance processes (Norrito, Widdop, and Giulianotti 2026). In this study, we extend this line of inquiry by applying assemblage theory to the centralisation of football broadcasting rights in Portugal. This perspective conceptualises governance as a contingent and emergent configuration of heterogeneous elements whose articulation evolves dynamically (DeLanda 2016), shaped by tensions such as market

dynamics versus political regulation, collective interests versus the interests of dominant clubs, and equity versus media profitability. Within this complex and multidirectional assemblage, agency is contingently distributed and exercised, shifting the analysis from binary oppositions toward a relational understanding of centralisation. This perspective emphasises multiplicity and the ongoing process of assembling through which power, agency, and institutional order are continually produced and reshaped through interaction (Bennett 2010).

By emphasising the ontological equivalence of actors across different scales, from individual agents to organisations, this approach allows for the analysis of dynamic interactions without privileging any particular level, offering analytical flexibility. It builds on DeLanda's (2006, p. 10) definition of assemblages as 'totalities characterised by exterior relations', highlighting the autonomy and recombinatory potential of their constituent elements. In contrast to hierarchical or totalising models, assemblages assume the possibility of multiple forms of power operating simultaneously across different contexts, in ways that challenge rigid analytical boundaries (McFarlane 2009).

DeLanda (2006) proposes that assemblages should be analysed along two axes: the first relates to the material and expressive roles that components may perform; the second refers to processes of territorialisation/coding, which stabilise and produce assemblages, and deterritorialisation/decoding, which introduce dynamics capable of reconfiguring or disaggregating them. A component may contribute to both processes, depending on the capacities it activates in a given context. Building on this relational perspective, Savage (2020) argues that assemblages are not defined solely by aggregation but by constantly evolving interactions that configure structure, meaning, and agency. Within this framework, agency is understood as the capacity of actors, individual or institutional, to influence outcomes and reconfigure relationships within an assemblage.

Decree-Law No. 22-B/2021 can be interpreted, in light of the conceptual framework of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Deleuze (1988), as an act of reterritorialisation, that is, an attempt to stabilise a field marked by fragmentation and by the dominance and resistance of powerful actors. In this sense, the centralisation of broadcasting rights operates as a territorialising movement, while the resistance of the 'big three' clubs introduces countervailing processes of deterritorialisation. At the same time, emerging discursive reframings function as moments of recoding that seek to restore coherence and legitimacy to the reform process. The interplay between territorialisation and deterritorialisation offers a lens to examine how the football broadcasting assemblage interacts with institutional, media, and symbolic formations, indicating that this reterritorialisation produces only a provisional reorganisation shaped by competing pressures.

From this perspective, the commercialisation model is better understood as fluid, emerging from interactions among stakeholders, with agency remaining, as Hayden, Center for Environmental Philosophy, and The University of North Texas (1997) observes, a 'non-totalisable sum' whose incompleteness generates new asymmetries, resistances, and institutional negotiations that coexist and are reconfigured within the assemblage itself. In the Portuguese football context, these dynamics both shape and are shaped by a broader configuration that is constantly evolving, composed of diverse actants. The term, originally coined by Latour (2005), refers to both human and non-human elements, encompassing bodies, objects, intensities, and affects. Human actants include clubs, regulatory bodies, policymakers, broadcasters, journalists, and fans; non-human actants comprise legal frameworks, broadcasting contracts, economic models, technologies, and UEFA rankings. These elements interact contingently without forming a closed totality, while non-human entities may assume the form of 'vibrant matter' (Bennett 2010), encompassing social, discursive, and institutional processes and objects. The result is a field of continuous reconfiguration, marked by negotiation, instability, shifting alliances, and competing interests.

At a concrete level, this logic of agency and power reconfiguration is particularly evident in Portuguese football, characterised by a strong tradition and a robust institutional structure. The 'big three' clubs, SL Benfica, FC Porto, and Sporting CP, function as central actants within the national football assemblage, whose longevity and socio-political embeddedness grant them significant agency, expressed in a persistent concentration of economic and symbolic power. Throughout the history of the Portuguese league, these actants have dominated almost exclusively: SL Benfica has won 38 titles,

FC Porto 30, and Sporting CP 21, with only two clubs outside this trio, Belenenses in 1946 and Boavista in 2001, achieving championship success (Barros et al. 2021).

This hegemony has shaped supporter identities across generations, functioning as a cultural anchor for the sport (De Carvalho et al. 2014), and, in a context where star quality is a key determinant of television audiences (Scelles 2017), has enabled these clubs to consistently attract the most talented Portuguese players, many of whom are internationally recognised. A defining feature of European leagues is the interplay between domestic and continental competitions, in which only the 'big three' actants maintain sufficient competitiveness to qualify for the UEFA Champions League, thereby securing an economic advantage over clubs confined to domestic championships (Andreff and Bourg 2006).

In the Portuguese context, football is deeply rooted in local club loyalties, and the social value of clubs is widely recognised at both local and national levels (Corthouts et al. 2020), forming part of an assemblage that articulates historical, symbolic, and institutional relations and helps explain the strong identification of fans with specific institutions. A survey indicates that 94.5% of football supporters in Portugal identify with one of the 'big three' clubs (Gouveia, Espanha, and Di Fátima 2020). This overwhelming concentration of popular support functions as a form of territorialisation, consolidating the economic and symbolic power of the 'big three' within the competitive assemblage and reinforcing the agency of these clubs, demonstrating, as Giddens (2002) observes, that traditions are neither spontaneous nor timeless, but continuously constructed and maintained through ongoing practices and relationships.

This hegemony manifests not only in a larger fan base and greater media visibility, but also in economic dominance, underpinned by broadcasting and commercial revenues that reinforce sporting performance, expand the fan base, and generate income that sustains continuous cycles of success (Sass 2016). Between 2014 and 2020, these revenues accounted for approximately 70% of the total broadcasting income of Portugal's top league, reinforcing a reconfiguration of power that perpetuates structural imbalances and constrains the competitive mobility of smaller clubs (Gouveia and Pereira 2021). As Szymanski (2014) notes, clubs with greater market size benefit from cumulative advantages, which hinder the competitive mobility of smaller clubs and further entrench pre-existing hierarchies.

Within the context of structured power in the assemblage, the hegemony of the 'big three' can be analysed through the Foucauldian concept of *dispositif*, as mobilised by Rabinow and Rose (2003), understood as a set of procedures and techniques guided by a particular strategy. This perspective enables an understanding of how institutional, symbolic, and discursive elements are activated to sustain and reproduce relations of power (Villadsen 2021). These strategies do not arise directly from the intentional efforts of actors but emerge from intersectional practices that develop through interactions (Gøtzsche-Astrup and Villadsen 2025), although they do not always generate points of convergence sufficient to cause the assemblage to reterritorialise around objectives (Turner, Baker, and Thurlow 2022). Nevertheless, discursive positioning serves a function of symbolic affirmation. As Fairclough (2001, 91) argues, 'discourse is a mode of action, one way in which people act upon the world and especially upon each other, as well as a mode of representation'. In this process, actors organise material and discursive elements, narratives, norms, laws, institutions, and practices within a specific domain, whose power is amplified when articulated into *dispositifs* composed of heterogeneous components (Gøtzsche-Astrup 2023), producing subjects and practices that tend to naturalise particular forms of knowledge, authority, and control (Hardy and Thomas 2014).

Rather than functioning as a causal mechanism, the *dispositif* constitutes a condition of possibility that enables and constrains certain actions, understandings, and relations (Callewaert 2006). As Raffnsøe (2008) observes, a *dispositif* only acquires meaning in relation to something, insofar as its function emerges from the configuration of agents within a specific field of practice. Buchanan (2015), in turn, highlights a conceptual convergence between Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage and Foucault's analytics of power and governance, both centred on the relational structuring of practice.

Rather than operating as a causal mechanism, the *dispositif* constitutes a condition of possibility that enables and constrains power relations within Portuguese football (Callewaert 2006). As Raffnsøe

(2008) observes, *dispositifs* acquire meaning in relation to something, as their function emerges from the configuration of agents within specific fields of practice, while the convergence between assemblage thinking and Foucault's analytics of power, highlighted by Buchanan (2015), helps explain how historically sedimented relations continue to reproduce structural imbalances in Portuguese football.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative instrumental case study design, underpinned by a theoretical framework grounded in assemblage theory. In line with Stake (2003), the case functions as an analytical device for examining broader socio-institutional dynamics. Drawing on the capacity of this approach to capture relational complexity (Gratton and Jones 2010), the analysis conceptualises the centralisation of football broadcasting rights not as a linear sequence of institutional decisions, but as the contingent outcome of a dynamic assemblage.

This assemblage comprises both material and human components that come together in provisional, decomposable, yet functionally irreducible formations oriented towards specific purposes and capable of generating agency (DeLanda 2006). It is through the contingent interaction of these heterogeneous actors that specific configurations of regulation, resistance, and redistribution take shape, a process particularly visible in the ongoing debate over football broadcasting rights in Portugal.

The research was based on a systematic documentary analysis conducted between 2021 and 2024, involving a carefully curated and purposively selected set of documents from multiple sources: national legislation (e.g. Decree-Law No. 22-B/2021), institutional reports from Liga Portugal, official publications from UEFA and the European Commission, club financial reports, statistical data, relevant academic literature, as well as press articles and opinion pieces published in specialised national media outlets.

The documents were selected according to their relevance to the legal, economic, and governance dimensions of the centralisation of broadcasting rights. For data collection and organisation, research procedures were guided by key thematic terms such as 'broadcasting rights', 'media centralisation', 'football governance', and 'competitive balance'. Whenever possible, priority was given to official institutional repositories, regulatory documentation, and peer-reviewed academic databases, rather than an exhaustive search based solely on rigid keyword strings (Bowen 2009).

In addition to the analysis of public documents, data from clubs and Liga Portugal were included, obtained through annual reports, public information, and official disclosures submitted to the Portuguese Securities Market Commission (CMVM). These data were handled in a manner that preserved the integrity of financial and institutional information, ensuring consistency with the documentary analysis.

The analysis followed an interpretative and thematic approach, organised around three main axes:

(1) legal frameworks and discourses surrounding centralisation;
(2) financial and structural data related to revenue distribution;
(3) institutional tensions within the Portuguese football ecosystem

Each axis was analysed manually, through careful readings, selection, and rereading of the documents, allowing for the identification of emerging patterns, relationships among actors, and institutional effects. These axes were treated as dimensions of the assemblage, enabling the mapping of how regulatory practices, commercial interests, and legitimacy discourses are reconfigured throughout the transition process.

The choice of the Portuguese case is justified by its exceptional position in the European context, as it remains one of the last leagues to maintain an individual sale model for television rights and exhibits the highest asymmetries among the thirty leagues that distribute more than €1 million in television revenue among their clubs (UEFA 2024).

In recognition of the non-linear and contingent nature of the processes under analysis, the study was conducted with a reflexive methodological stance, attentive to the complexity of actors and *dispositifs* involved. This aligns with the ontological premises of assemblage theory, which rejects deterministic causal models and instead prioritises the analysis of heterogeneous articulations and shifting configurations.

Analysis

Reconfigurations in the Portuguese football assemblage

The analysis focuses on three central dimensions of the Portuguese football assemblage: the structural dominance of the 'big three' as key actants; the asymmetrical distribution of media visibility and broadcast revenues; and the discursive strategies that shape public and institutional narratives surrounding the reform. These elements function as interactive components within a dynamic system, in which power, agency, and resistance are continuously reconfigured.

The individual negotiation of television rights in Portugal allows each club to operate as an actant within the assemblage, exercising agency in pursuit of strategic interests and the maximisation of organisational resources. For instance, the 'big three' capture approximately 64% of the league's total television revenue (UEFA 2024), demonstrating not only the effectiveness of their strategies but also the structural inequality that differentiates these actants from the remaining clubs. This imbalance is further corroborated by the indicators presented in the UEFA (2024) report, namely the ratio of highest to median earning club and the percentage of top-division club TV revenue earned by the three highest-earning clubs. Portugal therefore constitutes an extreme case of imbalance, illustrating the structural effects of individual rights negotiation.

These inequalities are further reinforced by the weight of UEFA prize distributions, which account for 32% of total revenues, disproportionately benefiting the 'big three' (UEFA 2024). Despite overall growth in match-day revenues, the 'big three' maintain average attendances exceeding 30,000 spectators, while other clubs struggle to attract audiences in the four-digit range (Liga Portugal 2023).

Beyond these financial factors, this disparity in the capacity to generate revenue and attract spectators also stems from non-human structural components of the assemblage, such as the competitive calendar and the constraints imposed by television broadcasting (Buraimo 2008), as well as human actants, including fans whose deeply rooted loyalties and preferences for matches involving the 'big three' influence the assemblage both economically and symbolically (Martins and Cró 2018). This heterogeneity operates as a mechanism of territorialisation and deterritorialisation within the assemblage, shaping the agency of clubs and reverberating through the competitive balance of domestic competitions (Dobson and Goddard 2004).

This imbalance, which extends beyond the strictly financial sphere, corresponds to the snowball effect described by Hoehn and Szymanski (1999) and is evident in the 2021–2022 season: SL Benfica, FC Porto and Sporting CP earned over €90 million in UEFA competitions, while the remaining clubs did not exceed €7 million (Liga Portugal 2022a). This asymmetry reinforces the agency of the dominant actants within the assemblage, enabling them to consolidate sporting performance, attract broader supporter bases, and generate additional revenues that can be reinvested, thereby perpetuating cycles of success within the system (Sass 2016).

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the annual turnover and UEFA revenues, highlighting the centrality of broadcasting rights and European prizes in the financial structure of the 'big three'. Figure 2 shows that the revenues of the dominant clubs exceed the turnover of most other clubs, thereby distorting the economic balance. The outcome is a self-reinforcing sporting and financial configuration within this assemblage that enables the leading clubs to invest in the most talented players and, in doing so, reproduce their position as dominant actants (Andreff and Bourg 2006).

Table 1 complements this analysis by presenting the average stadium attendance per club for the 2022–2023 season, highlighting the disparity in fan mobilisation between the 'big three' and the other league clubs.

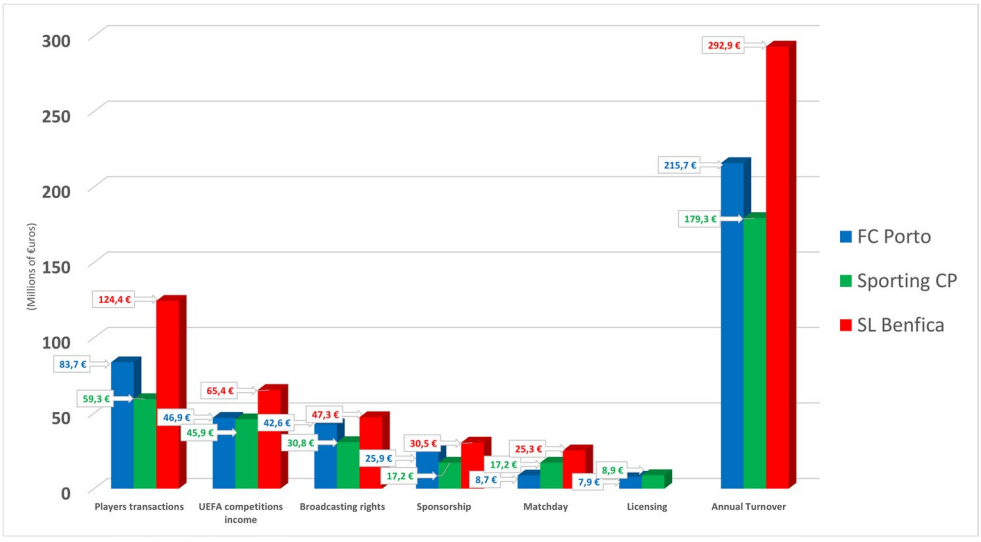


Figure 1. Main revenue streams of the 'big three' clubs (2021–2022).
Source: Liga Portugal 2022a).

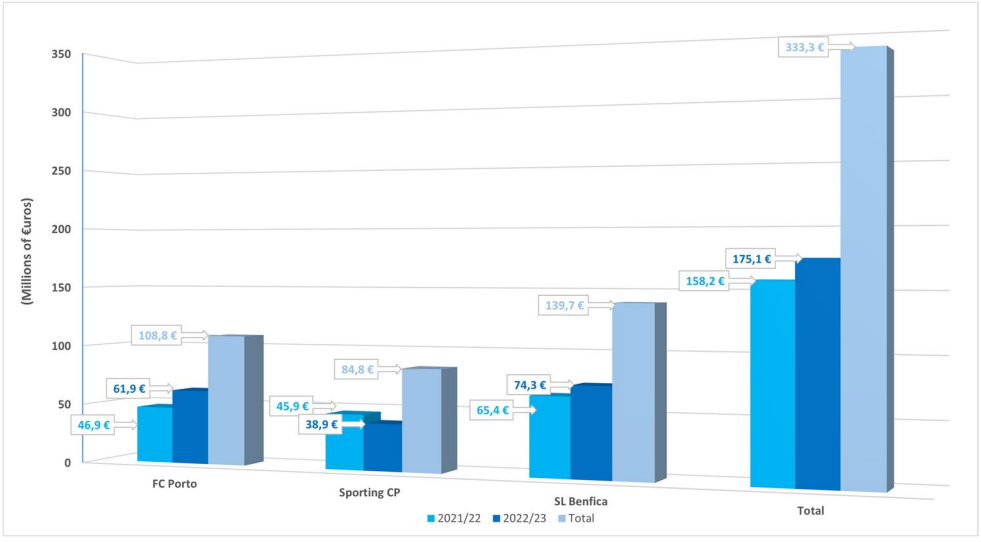


Figure 2. UEFA income comparison: the 'big three'.
Source: Liga Portugal 2023.

Broadcasting revenue and media exposure

The main telecommunications operators in Portugal have entered into long-term contracts, initially with Benfica and subsequently with Porto, Sporting, and other clubs, with Benfica's agreement being the first to expire in 2025/26 (UEFA 2024). These contracts with dominant clubs can be understood as material elements of the media-sport assemblage, deriving their value from audience demand organised around national or regional poles, thereby reflecting specific sporting traditions and preferences (Heller, Sudaric, and Winkler 2023).

The valorisation of media rights largely results from competition among media organisations for premium sports content (Solberg and Gaustad 2022), a mechanism that exerts economic agency within the assemblage and helps to explain the particularly high value of the contracts secured by dominant clubs. The dynamic is evident in Portugal: according to filings submitted to the CMVM, SL Benfica signed an agreement with NOS potentially worth €400 million over ten years, covering the broadcasting rights of home matches and distribution through BTV, the club's television channel; FC Porto

Table 1. Match attendance in Portuguese stadiums (2022–2023).

Club	Attendance (%)	Average spectators (per game)	Stadium capacity	Total spectators during season
SL Benfica	89%	57.108	64.012	970.836
FC Porto	83%	41.380	49.499	731.629
CS Marítimo	81%	8.509	10.547	163.200
FC Famalicão	73%	3.800	4.992	79.866
Sporting CP	58%	29.292	50.095	667.964
Rio Ave FC	55%	2.906	4.134	46.750
Vitória SC	54%	16.116	22.733	292.298
FC Vizela	53%	3.310	5.872	54.111
SC Braga	51%	15.490	22.256	219.844
Estoril Praia	50%	2.524	4.858	69.768
FC Paços de Ferreira	48%	4.430	8.060	37.230
GD Chaves	46%	3.396	8.297	110.466
Portimonense	40%	1.945	4.474	60.112
FC Arouca	38%	1.836	4.614	55.114
Gil Vicente FC	38%	4.528	11.694	56.355
Boavista FC	25%	6.520	11.335	142.970
Santa Clara	22%	2.160	9.701	43.911
Casa Pia AC	12%	3.422	22.251	53.074

Source: Liga Portugal (2023).

concluded a €457.5 million agreement with Altice covering ten seasons, incorporating broadcasting rights alongside cross-selling arrangements involving sponsorship and advertising. Similarly, Sporting CP entered into a €515 million ten-season contract with NOS that combined broadcasting rights with integrated sponsorship, advertising, and cross-selling components.

In 2023, the combined budget of the 18 Primeira Liga clubs reached €396 million, with the 'big three' accounting for €270 million, while more than half of the remaining clubs operated with annual budgets below €10 million. This disparity is also reflected in squad valuations, with SL Benfica (€427.6 m), Sporting CP (€384.2 m), and FC Porto (€369.6 m) compared with SC Braga (€159.4 m) and the lowest-valued club (€18.8 m) (Transfermarkt 2023). This dynamic confirms that sporting and financial success tend to reinforce one another, operating as an endogenous mechanism for the strengthening of agency and the expansion of economic power within the assemblage, thereby generating cumulative competitive advantages over time, as argued by Sass (2016).

The Portuguese league displays high aggregate levels of television revenue for a medium-sized competition, creating a relatively paradoxical situation within the European context. Nevertheless, this pattern is partially consistent with other leagues that adopt centralised selling models, where the title race tends to be concentrated among a limited number of dominant clubs (Serrano et al. 2023). According to Buzzell (1981), asymmetric structures are a recurrent feature of competitive industries. In professional football, this logic is reflected in the historical dominance of certain clubs, suggesting that the sector exhibits a persistent structural asymmetry (Plumley et al. 2018; Szymanski 2014). Table 2 illustrates the distribution of television broadcasting revenues across several European football leagues, distinguishing between centralised and decentralised models of media rights commercialisation.

In the Portuguese league, the issue lies less in asymmetry per se and more in the structural, symbolic, economic, and access inequalities that shape football consumption as a cultural product, a dynamic highlighted in the wider sports economics literature (Plumley, Ramchandani, and Wilson 2018). The interface between football and television constitutes a space of economic, media, and symbolic contestation (Dobson and Goddard 2001), while economic theory suggests that sports television audiences behave rationally and are influenced by factors analogous to those shaping stadium attendance demand (Simmons 2006). In line with this rationale, a study on the costs faced by supporters in the Portuguese Championship identified ticket prices, match scheduling, and distance to stadiums as the main obstacles to physical attendance (Monteiro and Mourão 2024).

Despite Portugal having one of the lowest average wages in Europe, fans face some of the highest television subscription and season ticket prices, exposing a structural tension between disposable income and access to football. This disparity underscores how economic inequalities condition the consumption of this cultural product within the media-sport assemblage. As illustrated in Figure 3, the comparison of access to televised football across different national markets is based on the minimum monthly subscription cost weighted against average wages, rather than on the equivalence of

Table 2. Broadcasting revenues in major European football leagues (2022/2023).

Country	League Name	Commercial Model	Domestic (million €)	International (million €)	Total revenues (million €)	2022/23 vs. 2019/20 Growth (€m)	Growth (%)
UK	Premier League	Centralised	1844	2100	3944	342	9%
Spain	La Liga	Centralised	1194	835	2029	202	11%
Germany	Bundesliga	Centralised	1079	170	1249	−181	−14%
Italy	Serie A	Centralised	930	205	1135	−191	−13%
France	Ligue 1	Centralised	580	80	660	−158	−19%
Portugal	Primeira Liga	Decentralised	190	8	198	0	0%
Türkiye	Süper Lig	Centralised	123	–	123	−248	−67%
Netherlands	Eredivisie	Centralised	105	15	120	1	1%
Belgium	Jupiler Pro	Centralised	103	–	103	20	24%
Norway	Dutch Eliteserien	Centralised	67	–	67		
Poland	Ekstraklasa	Centralised	50	–	50	0	0%
Denmark	Danish Superliga	Centralised	43	–	43		
Austria	Austrian Bundesliga	Centralised	40	–	40		
Scotland	Cinch Premiership	Centralised	29	–	29		28%
Switzerland	Swiss Super	Centralised	22	–	22		
Czechia	Fortuna Liga	Centralised	17	–	17		
Greece	Super Liga	Centralised					9%

Source: UEFA (2023); Liga Portugal (2022b).

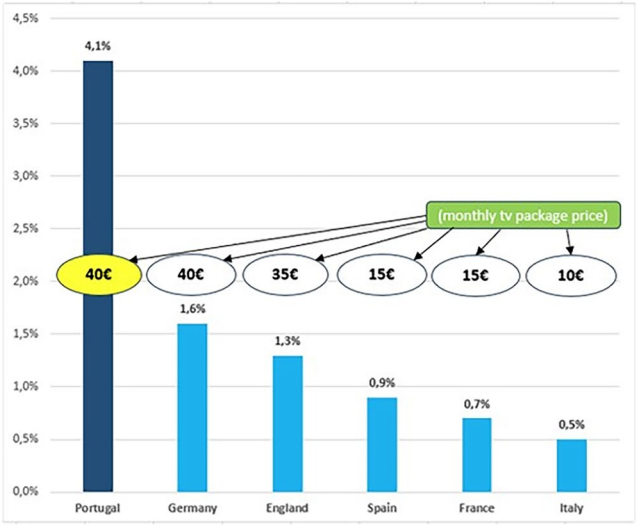


Figure 3. Cost of access to televised football as a percentage of the average national salary.
Source: EY, Club Licensing Benchmarking Report (EY18), as published in the Portuguese Professional Football Yearbook 2019–20.

the content offered in TV packages. The figure thus seeks to capture differences in the economic accessibility of televised football.

Narratives, resistance and discursive framing

Foucault conceptualises power as circulating through discourse, operating as a 'productive network that runs through the entire social body' (Foucault 1980, 119). Within this framework, resistance to centralisation is manifested primarily through the discursive strategies of dominant clubs, which seek to preserve their positions of influence and shape public perceptions of the process. Statements by club presidents, interviews, and commentary from former players and analysts construct narratives that frame centralisation as a threat to the competitiveness and revenues of the 'big three', potentially undermining their participation in UEFA competitions (Brinca 2022; Pinheiro 2022; Ribeiro 2025).

These narratives mobilise symbolic legitimacy, supporter capital, and international visibility, thereby reinforcing structural dominance while resonating with fans' identities and emotional investments. This reflects a form of power exercised not only through institutional means but also through the

production of discourse and of what Foucault defines as 'truth' (Foucault 1980), by setting the parameters within which public debate on legitimacy and authority is structured.

In this context, the institutional agency of clubs becomes evident. For example, the public statement issued by SL Benfica (SLB, 2025), in which the club announces its decision to suspend participation in the 'Liga Portugal Centralização' memorandum, can be seen as an expression of institutional agency within the Portuguese football assemblage. This position, justified by alleged poor refereeing decisions and concerns over the integrity of refereeing structures and broader football governance in Portugal, illustrates that the club is not merely reacting to institutional changes, but is strategically acting to influence public perceptions, challenge regulatory authority, and attempt to reconfigure power relations. From an assemblage perspective, this episode demonstrates how power, legitimacy, and institutional authority are continuously reconfigured through discursive interventions.

Similarly, FC Porto mobilises its agency by calling for debate at the General Assembly and advocating for a more assertive stance from Liga Portugal (Record 2025), thereby negotiating influence within the institutional and discursive network. Sporting CP, while not engaging in public interventions, exercised agency by strategically positioning itself in internal decisions and negotiations.

Similarly, Liga Portugal and the Portuguese Football Federation exercise discursive agency by framing centralisation around principles of equity and sustainability and by frequently invoking the misalignment between the current rights model and prevailing practices across Europe, yet without substantively interrogating the structural conditions that underpin this divergence.

Discussion: the power of context

This study examined how the centralisation of broadcasting rights in Portuguese professional football has been promoted as a corrective measure aimed at reducing inequalities and strengthening competitive balance. The findings suggest, however, that centralisation is better understood less as an automatic solution to competitive imbalance and more as a process of relational reconfiguration embedded within a structurally asymmetric ecosystem. In line with Serrano et al. (2023), the introduction of structural rules or redistributive mechanisms does not, in itself, guarantee immediate changes in competitive outcomes, thereby corroborating the patterns observed in the Portuguese context. The evidence therefore indicates that policies oriented towards competitive balance may simultaneously restructure and reproduce structural asymmetries, revealing the dependence on a broader relational ecology in which the formal redistribution of revenues constitutes only one of the multiple forces at play.

In light of assemblage theory, centralisation operates as a movement of regulatory reterritorialisation that seeks to stabilise a historically fragmented field, while the resistance of the 'big three' generates dynamics of deterritorialisation that expose persistent frictions within the football ecosystem. As in other European contexts, these centre periphery tensions are structurally asymmetric. The attempted creation of the European Super League constitutes the most visible expression of these tendencies, confirming that the inherently asymmetric nature of sports markets tends to produce domestically unbalanced competitions (Szymanski 2014) and reflecting broader transformations in the political economy of European football (Welsh 2023).

The dominance of the 'big three', as central actants, is sustained by their institutional longevity and deep sociopolitical embeddedness, factors that confer upon them a high capacity for agency and a persistent concentration of economic and symbolic power. In this context, the observed asymmetries, expressed, for example, in the ratio between the highest-revenue club and the median club, as well as in the share of total broadcasting revenue captured by the three highest-earning clubs, rank among the most pronounced across UEFA leagues and should be understood as an expression of broader dynamics in political economy and social structure. From a structural perspective specific to professional sport, competitive balance is intrinsically distinct from that of other economic sectors, since sporting production is based on a logic of interdependence between teams. The contingent interaction between these elements produces frequently non-linear effects, as more pronounced financial disparities tend to reduce competitive balance, thereby compromising the sustainability of the football ecosystem.

The asymmetric distribution of media visibility and broadcasting revenues constitutes a central dimension of the Portuguese football assemblage. Individual agreements enable dominant clubs to secure more robust contracts, attracting greater investment from operators and expanding their media exposure. The concentration of television audiences around these clubs further enhances the valuation of their rights, generating feedback loops between visibility, revenues, and sporting performance. Within this framework, the actions of the actants that regulate football in Portugal, in seeking to align the league with European standards, demonstrate that football governance involves multiscalar negotiations among economic, political, and symbolic interests.

In this context, the main telecommunications operators in Portugal have established preferential partnerships with dominant clubs, positioning themselves as material elements of the media-sport assemblage whose value is continuously shaped by patterns of demand organised around national and regional poles and by specific traditions of sports consumption, often associated with different levels of economic capacity.

Football clubs function as central symbolic actants, mediating loyalties, local identities, and collective memories within the assemblage. Supporters' agency is conditioned by institutional and contractual *dispositifs*, notably the high cost of televised football, which operate as socioeconomic filters and tend to reinforce the centrality of dominant clubs. In the Portuguese context, supporters face some of the highest prices for television subscriptions and season tickets, revealing a structural tension between disposable income and access to football. This disparity reinforces the ways in which economic inequalities materially shape access to and consumption of football (Tamir 2022). These dynamics structure processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation that simultaneously shape patterns of cultural consumption and the possibilities for institutional transformation.

These dynamics suggest that reforms focused exclusively on the redistribution of broadcasting revenues are unlikely to produce lasting effects without broader adjustments in the conditions of access to the media market, in competitive visibility, and in the institutional *dispositifs* that shape power relations between clubs. In this sense, the centralisation of rights should be understood not as a one-size-fits-all solution but as an instrument whose impact remains contingent upon the specific configurations of each national ecosystem.

At the discursive level, centralisation is inscribed within a field of struggle over visibility and legitimacy in Portuguese football, where institutional authority and agency are continuously constructed and contested within the assemblage. Within this process, dominant clubs and entities with greater media capacity tend to preserve positions of high visibility and symbolic authority, while other actors remain relatively peripheral. Thus, rather than eliminating pre-existing hierarchies, the centralisation dispositif contributes to their rearticulation under new forms of legitimation.

Opinion-makers and public interventions, such as statements issued by dominant clubs, operate simultaneously as forces of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, mobilising strategic narratives to reconfigure practices that tend to naturalise specific forms of knowledge, authority, and control (Hardy and Thomas 2014). The convergence or conflict between actants demonstrates that the stability of the assemblage is continuously reconstructed through these processes, continually reorganising flows of power, agency, and visibility. Within this framework, public narratives operate as instruments of legitimation that shape perceptions of equity, sustainability, and competitiveness.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the centralisation of broadcasting rights in Portuguese football extends beyond a strictly economic-instrumental reading, emerging as the expression of a dynamic and tension-filled relational process that articulates the media market, sports governance, and the symbolic capital of clubs. Anchored in assemblage theory, this process should be read not as the outcome of linear or monocausal interpretations but as a relational reconfiguration in which power relations and regimes of visibility are continuously negotiated within the Portuguese football media ecosystem, involving legal instruments, political-economic dependencies, symbolic capital, and institutional discourses.

Consistent with recent analyses of sport governance informed by assemblage theory (Brannagan, Grix, and Norrito 2026), this perspective highlights how reforms framed as corrective or redistributive

may simultaneously open space for change while rearticulating existing power relations. In this sense, centralisation, understood as an act of reterritorialisation, risks stabilising pre-existing hierarchies under new institutional configurations unless accompanied by deeper structural and symbolic realignments.

It should therefore be assessed in light of the broader structural conditions of the football ecosystem. From this perspective, competitive balance must be understood as intrinsically distinct from that of other economic sectors, since sporting production is based on a logic of interdependence between teams. A genuinely equitable approach thus requires moving beyond formal legalism to entail a shared responsibility that engages with the affective and symbolic dimensions of football, while critically examining unequal regimes of media visibility, representation, and institutional influence among the different actors involved in governance processes. At the same time, unpredictability, emotional intensity, and passionate attachment, alongside processes of socialisation and talent circulation, may appear peripheral to conventional value creation but are, in fact, central to the production of 'sustainable value' underpinning the stability of the football assemblage.

One of the main contributions of this study lies in recentring centralisation as a contested political process produced within a dynamic configuration of institutional, symbolic, and media power relations. By mobilising assemblage theory and the concept of the *dispositif,* the analysis helps explain why reforms formally oriented towards competitive balance tend to rearticulate and, in many cases, reproduce structural inequalities rather than attenuate them.

This study presents some limitations inherent to its qualitative and documentary nature, namely the absence of post-implementation longitudinal data and the non-inclusion of interviews with institutional or media stakeholders. Moreover, the centralisation process remains ongoing, which constrains definitive conclusions regarding its structural effects. In addition, one of its conceptual strengths, assemblage theory, may also be read as a limitation, insofar as the ubiquity of agency does not in itself render assemblages analytically transparent nor endow them with clearly delimited or linear causal power.

Future research should explore systematic comparisons with other mid-sized European leagues, analyse the effective impact of centralisation following its full implementation, and further examine the role of digital platforms and emerging media consumption models.

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