LOCAL POLITICS, IDENTITY AND FOOTBALL IN PARIS

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Abstract

The creation of the Paris Saint-Germain Football Club in 1970 has been best described as a bet (to build a major football club) which resulted from Parisian football clubs’ failure to stay in France’s top flight, in the context of the long-lasting crisis of French football. 35 years later, the bet has proved stupendously successful: not only has PSG had remarkable success on the field – being for example, the youngest club ever to win a European Cup (Cup Winners’ Cup 1996) – but it has also managed to build up a sizeable audience (certainly by French standards, and arguably by European ones too).

Why has PSG thrived where forerunners had failed? The political explanation has a claim to being one of the most convincing explanations put forward: from 1977 onwards, PSG have benefited not only from the help of the Paris City Council (‘Ville de Paris’) but also from the election of the first Mayor of Paris since 1794 (Jacques Chirac) who has taken personal interest in the development of the club. A study of the PSG case, and the City council’s policy towards PSG, indeed elicits both the role played by a football club in order to build a local identity (the City council has used it in order to foster an image of Paris distinct from the idea of Paris as the capital of France) and the importance of this identity in local elections, notably after Jacques Chirac became the President of the French Republic in 1995.
Local politics, identity and football in Paris

The Paris Saint-Germain Football-Club (PSG) exemplifies particularly the early need for French clubs to build up an audience and the subsequent ability of some to do so. As Patrick Mignon pointed out: «Paris pousse à l'extrême la distance caractéristique de la passion française pour le football» [Paris pushes to the extreme the distance that characterises the French passion for football]. And for years, PSG struggled to catch the attention of a significant audience, playing often in a gigantic but rather empty stadium during much of the 1970s and 1980s when the average attendance when PSG was in in the first division oscillated between 10,030 in 1971-72 and 24,572 in 1985-86. An all-time low was reached when an average of 679 spectators followed their games during their transitory stint in the third division in 1972-1973.

Yet, since the beginning of the 1990s, following a change of ownership which brought more funds, and enabled an impressive run of success from 1991 to 1998, the club has been able to attract a regular audience, now the second largest in France (after Marseilles) and a rather sizeable one, even by European standards, averaging at 42,793 in 1999-2000, almost double the average attendance in the French League that season (21,632).

The issue of audience building has greater relevance in the case of the Paris Saint-Germain, for PSG, has existed for barely thirty-five years. They are a relatively new club, at least by the

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1 MIGNON 1998 p 223. All translations are by the author.
standards of European football, whereby it is not uncommon for a club to be a century old.\(^6\)

Unlike other clubs in France, Scotland, England or throughout the rest of the continent, which in the 1970s could already boast a history full of memorable successes (or defeats), written by legendary players in order to attract new followers, *Paris Saint-Germain* had to start afresh and attract a Parisian audience which (despite the occasional period in the first division from the suburban Saint-Ouen based *Red Star*), had been deprived of much football competition in the highest division since the demise of the *Racing Club de Paris* in 1964.\(^7\)

In the face of these humble and recent beginnings, Paris Saint-Germain have succeeded in establishing themselves as one of the major clubs in French and European football. In 2003 indeed, *PSG* was unquestionably the best known French club in France, with a rate of 80% spontaneous recognition.\(^8\) Their staggering run of success at European level (five semi-finals of European cups in five years between 1993 and 1997, and two consecutive finals of a European Cup, including a victory in 1996)\(^9\) has secured them a massive recognition throughout Europe. *PSG* has also secured a place as one of the founding members of the G14, a Brussels based organisation lobbying in the interests of the major European clubs with the European Union and the European football governing body (UEFA). This meant that it is on a par with giants such as *Real Madrid* or Manchester United.\(^10\)

It is important to look at the beginning of Paris Saint-Germain’s story in order to understand what this really means.

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\(^6\) Clubs which have recently celebrated their centenary include Real Madrid (founded 1902), Barcelona (1899) and Olympique de Marseille (both 1899).

\(^7\) MIGNON 1998, p 216.

\(^8\) According to the yearly poll on football clubs recognition made by an agency that specialises in sports marketing, Sport Lab, PSG has the highest “taux de notoriété spontanée” ahead of *Olympique de Marseille* (75%) and third-placed *Olympique Lyonnais* (21, 30%). Quoted p 234 of Jean-François PÉRÈS ; Daniel RIOLO ; David AIELLO (coll). *OM-PSG PSG-OM, les meilleurs ennemis : enquête sur une rivalité.* Paris : Mango Sport, 2003. 263 p. (Henceforth PÉRÈS, RIOLO, AIELLO, 2003)

\(^9\) On that occasion, PSG became the youngest club ever to win a European Cup.

As revealed by Paul Dietschy,\textsuperscript{11} the very foundation of the Paris Saint-Germain in 1970 can be best explained in terms of an (eventually successful) bet, to build a “major football club”\textsuperscript{12} in Paris, which in itself only makes sense in the double context of a failure (that of the Parisian clubs) and a crisis (that of French football). The crisis, Dietschy explains, was firstly due to a string of bad results, the worse since the 1920s: the national team had just failed to qualify for the 1970 World Cup in Mexico and French clubs had performed poorly in European club competitions. This sporting crisis explained why audiences plunged and it was unsurprisingly coupled with a financial and organisational crisis that finally led in 1972 to the appointment by the Secrétaire d’État aux Sports [Sports Minister] of a young civil servant at the Cour des Comptes, Philippe Séguin,\textsuperscript{13} to prepare a report on the difficulties encountered by French football.\textsuperscript{14}

The crisis was even more serious in Paris. Paris can arguably be considered the cradle of French football,\textsuperscript{15} as it had completely dominated the game from its introduction until at least the 1920s.\textsuperscript{16} Yet, in 1969, the failure of the Parisian clubs was patent: 6 clubs had represented Paris in the Professional League when it was founded in 1932; only one, the Red Star (which had since moved to the Parisian suburb of Saint-Ouen) was still in the First division – fighting to avoid relegation as it often had in the recent past, not always successfully. Dietschy argues that Parisians clubs failed for they were not able to meet the two challenges that they were faced with: a certain lack of sporting culture (sport was not a major leisure activity in

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\textsuperscript{11} Dietschy 2002, p 275.
\textsuperscript{12} “un grand club de football”, DIETSCHY 1998: p 275
\textsuperscript{14} Rapport à Monsieur le Secrétaire d’État auprès du Premier Ministre, chargé de la Jeunesse, des Sports et des loisirs, sur certaines difficultés actuelles du football français, établi par Monsieur Philippe Séguin, Auditeur à la Cour des Comptes, 12 février 1973. (Henceforth SÉGUIN 1973)
\textsuperscript{15} “le berceau du football français” DIETSCHY 2002: p 278.
\textsuperscript{16} WAIL 1989: passim.
and the expectations of the Parisian audience made of spectators (rather than supporters) which considered the games to be a show and could therefore become hostile to the home-team, if they played badly. Dietschy is adamant that:

C'était une situation inédite en Europe, si on la compare à Londres, à Rome, Glasgow, Madrid. Depuis le début du XXème siècle, dans ces capitales et métropoles européennes, le succès des clubs de football ne reposait pas tant sur le spectacle qu'ils proposaient mais plutôt sur le fait que ces sociétés sportives étaient porteuses d'identités, de « traditions inventées » pour reprendre une nouvelle fois Eric Hobsbawn, qui permettaient à une partie de la population, en grande partie masculine, il est vrai, population nouvellement arrivée ou subissant l'expansion et les transformations rapides de l'espace urbain, de retrouver des repères, des lieux de sociabilité où se fondre en se retrouvant entre soi.  

[This situation was completely unheard of in Europe, if it is compared to London, Rome, Glasgow, Madrid. Since the beginning of the XXth century, in those capitals and large cities, the success of football clubs was not based so much on the show they offered, but rather on the fact that these sporting societies were carrying identities, “invented traditions”, to quote Eric Hobsbawn once again, which allowed part of the population, largely masculine it is true, that had recently arrived or that was going through the expansion and the rapid transformations of urban space, to find again points of reference, social places where they could mingle and gather among themselves.]

It is in this context that in February 1969, the Fédération Française de Football (FFF) organised a poll among the Parisians: “Voulez-vous un grand club à Paris ?” [Do you want a major club in Paris?]. The aim was not to create just another club, but a major one, which meant not only a wealthy or successful club but clearly also one that found an audience. This in itself was a bet. Yet, the answer was an overwhelming “yes”: 66,000 people answered favourably.

A committee was consequently set up to study whether it was feasible to found a “Paris Football Club”. They decided to adopt a method whereby, as in Barcelona, Madrid or since 1967, Nancy, the club assets would be provided by a large number of associates (in Spanish,

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17 As emphasised by Philippe Seguin, SEGUIN 1973.
18 DIETSCHY 2002, p 279.
19 DIETSCHY 2002, p 279.
20 French Football Federation, the Association in charge of Football in France.
socios) who would hold the shares of the club. A subscription was launched on 1 February 1970 during a radio show on Europe 1 hosted by their main announcer, Pierre Bellemare;\textsuperscript{22} within four hours, it managed to collect 842,000 francs from 17,400 people\textsuperscript{23} coming from Paris but also the Île-de-France, the province, Africa (both the Maghreb and central Africa), Belgium, Italy, Yugoslavia...\textsuperscript{24}

The impact of the circumstances of the club’s foundation cannot be underestimated: from the very beginning, the history of Paris Saint-Germain has been an attempt to build a club with supporters; and, for that reason, it relied on a double appeal to the mass. Patrick Mignon argues that for Parisian football supporters, deprived of a team to support and who only discovered the football supporters’ sub-cultures during school trips abroad (mostly in Spain or in Great Britain), the foundation of Paris Saint-Germain could appear as an occasion to live at home the forms of participation that they experienced abroad.\textsuperscript{25} It is therefore possible to follow Patrick Mignon’s argument that:

\begin{quote}
Montrer la spécificité du supportérisme à Paris consiste moins à décrire une culture dont il n'y aurait qu'à dévider la cohérence et la force qu'à analyser la tentative de créer une communauté des supporters et l'invention d'une tradition qui lierait la construction simultanée d'un club, d'un public, d'une identité locale.
\end{quote}

[Showing the distinctiveness of partisanship in Paris has less to do with describing a culture, which coherence and force would only have to be explained, than with analysing a community of supporters and the invention of a tradition that would link the simultaneous construction of a club, an audience, a local identity.]

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After 35 years of highs and lows, The success of the Paris Saint-Germain in nurturing support is unquestionable. Initially, the increase in the number of PSG supporters appears to have been the result of an active campaign from the club management, under the auspices of

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\item \textsuperscript{22} Matthieu LE CHEVALIER. « Colette et Daniel font de la résistance », page 16 in Le Parisien, jeudi 12 avril 2001.
\item \textsuperscript{23} BERTHOU 1998: p 22.
\item \textsuperscript{24} According to France Football, one week later, as quoted in BERTHOU 1998: p 22.
\item \textsuperscript{25} MIGNON 1998, p 226
\item \textsuperscript{26} MIGNON 1998, p 223
\end{itemize}
Les Amis du PSG created by Daniel Hechter, then as a result of the creation of a stand first dedicated to, then reserved, for PSG supporters, Boulogne. Under Francis Borelli’s presidency and Canal+’s ownership, the club has kept on actively promoting support to the club through various publicity stunts, and even by helping the first ultra group the Boulogne Boys in 1985-86. Nevertheless, the general trend has been a growing autonomy of the most dedicated supporters. And following phenomena of violence in the 1980s, which gave PSG an incredibly bad press, the club management had to adopt another strategy, leading notably to the creation of a structure within the club exclusively in charge of maintaining links with the supporters in order to control them whenever possible.

Apart from the direct involvement from the club, it seems that four elements have encouraged the process of identification with the club.

Firstly, newspapers. Some newspapers take a more important role in that process than others. Actually, the attitude adopted by the newspapers seems to depend on their nature. Specialised daily papers (by regions, on sports), a particular feature of the French press, indeed dedicate more coverage to sports than the nation-wide generalist press. The overall trend identified in the reporting on Paris Saint-Germain in France, over-coverage and systematic disparagement, is therefore even more bald-faced in their case. Journalists are also certainly aware that their reporting has consequences in the real world (‘effets de réel’). They acknowledge it when they hesitate between giving full coverage to the PSG-OM game, in order to maximise sales, and playing down the rivalry (including past confrontations) between supporters, so as to avoid new incidents.

The role of the press (altogether) must be analysed in light of the fact that it emerges as an actor in the complex relationship between the club and its supporters. The findings here are
twofold. On one hand, supporters build their identity not only owing to the press (ie through reading it) but also against it. Undeniably, the negative bias that the most dedicated supporters perceive in the press coverage of their favourite club has, by and large, antagonised them. To some extent, a strong dislike of, at least, some parts of the press now lists for some fans among the characteristics of the ‘true supporter’. On the other hand, comments on the press by various actors (even as echoed by the press itself) have appeared to perform an important role in the definition of identities. Indeed, in many occurrences, Paris Saint-Germain’s officials have used the ill feeling of supporters towards sections of the press in order to gather support momentarily.

Secondly, the Bosman ruling seems to have had little effect on the supporters’ ability to identify with the team, for foreign players can truly be symbolic of a local identity. New figures through which supporters are able to identify with the club have also been pinpointed. Officials (managers, president) too can be vectors of identification, especially if they have already played a role in the history of the club and come to symbolise continuity between past and present. Furthermore, identification with supporters themselves (among which, the independent and the various ultra groups, each with their own characteristics and values) has proved important in the recruitment of new supporters.

Thirdly, the function of symbols has appeared elaborate. Further to being ‘invented traditions’, thus providing continuity between past and present, some of them have also appeared to be ‘realms of memory’, thus shaping the way the past is remembered in the present. Symbols have therefore provided the club with an identity: sameness between two successive states of one object. Yet, the precise content of this identity has proved difficult to pinpoint: it is neither political (as in the case of Barça, fighting for Catalan independence),
social (the decision to support the club does not seem to be linked to class consciousness) nor religious (as in Glasgow).

Still, it appears clearly that Paris Saint-Germain would not have been successful in building an audience without the concurrent definition of an identity for the club. Paris Saint-Germain has indeed, it comes out, overcome the two obstacles that, (according to Alfred Wahl and Paul Dietschy) had previously prevented French football clubs, and especially Parisian ones, to gather fans. First, the Parc des Princes now is a place to socialise, as demonstrated by the growth of the Ultra groups but also of the so-called ‘independent’ supporters. Second, concurrently with becoming more numerous, the audience has also become faithful. A few years (1998-2005) without much sporting success have not deterred fans to attend matches and buy season-tickets. Even when the sporting stakes are indubitably low, the PSG-OM games have gathered a full crowd and remained important for followers of Paris Saint-Germain. The current situation is in stark contrast with the one at the beginning of the 1970s analysed by Paul Dietschy. Regulars at the Parc des Princes are not spectators, who come to watch a show, anymore; they have become supporters – and this should be because the club has become representative of at least one aspect of their identity. The names of the supporters’ club and the inscription in the past of Paris, as a city, all point out to the fact that Paris Saint-Germain has actually come to symbolise a Parisian local identity.

But why did this happen recently only? And why had no club previously taken this role? Part of the answer is, possibly, to be found in political changes. If the Paris Saint-Germain case

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27 Wahl and Dietschy are quoted in the introduction to the case-study.
28 Sporting results (or lack thereof) have been shown to have an impact on attendances (cf Jean Philippe BOUCHARD. ‘PSG, où est ton public ?’ in France Football n°2298 bis : Friday 26 September 2003), which has however proved temporary and marginal so far.
29 Cf Clameur, the ‘fanzine’ of the Boulogne Boys, which ran several articles and a whole series on the history of Paris since the Roman times.
study brings to the fore the importance of local identity in football clubs, it also recalls the role played by French local authorities in sports. A historian of Paris, Bernard Marchand, has best summed up the situation of the city between 1794 and 1977 when he said that:

Effrayés par la grande métropole, les régimes successifs lui ont tous refusé l’autonomie et l’ont pratiquement administrée directement.  

[Frightened by the huge metropole, the successive regimes have all refused it autonomy and have almost administered it directly.]

This is patent in the administrative status of Paris as a ‘commune’. The French commune has no exact equivalent in the British system, since this category is intermediate between those of parishes, districts and chartered cities. The communes are the smallest administrative and political division of the French territory, which they cover entirely: they can be cities, towns and villages. They are all ruled by an elected ‘conseil municipal’ (city council), which in turn elects a ‘Maire’ (Mayor) at its head. Between the French Revolution and March 1977, the status of Paris was different from any other commune, for it was divided into 12 then 20 ‘arrondissements’ (districts), each with its own elected city council and a Mayor, but the commune of Paris as a whole had only a city council (‘Conseil de Paris’) and no elected Mayor. After 1800, in his stead, and playing his role, a ‘Préfet de Police’ was nominated by the government. He was granted additional powers after the ‘Commune de Paris’ of March-May 1871, when Paris was self-governed by an elected Council and the French government had to flee to Versailles.

The consequences for the City of this peculiar status have been colossal. Everything concerning the Capital was decided by the State, which, controlling the finances and the police,

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32 BONNARD 2005: passim.
34 The whole of the paragraph is based on MARCHAND 1993; passim.
had a very noticeable impact on urbanisation. Throughout the XIXth century, Prélèts de Police like Rambuteau and Haussmann, usually under the guidance of the Head of State, have changed the face of the city by designing new streets or erasing whole areas. This trend continued well after the Second World War. Charles de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou, for example, built a highway in the centre of Paris, on the Quais de Seine, the Tour Montparnasse and the Centre George Pompidou in Beaubourg without consulting the Parisians. The situation changed slightly after 1977, when the population was allowed to elect a Mayor of Paris for the first time since 1794 – the incumbent being former Prime Minister Jacques Chirac. The completion of François Mitterrand’s Grands Travaux (including the Très Grande Bibliothèque, now Bibliothèque François Mitterrand or the Grand Louvre) indeed received some stern resistance from this political opponent of his.

Yet, with comparison to all the other Mayors in France the ‘Maire de Paris’ enjoys limited powers, since the police is still administered by the Prélèt de Police and although the ‘décentralisation’ policy of the 1980s as well as a further reform of the status of Paris in 2002 has increased his role. Paradoxically, this explains why the re-establishment of a Mayor of Paris has proved crucial in the development of Paris Saint-Germain. In many ways deprived of the possibility to act effectively, the Mayor of Paris (and especially Jacques Chirac, the longest incumbent of the post, 1977-1995) has seized every opportunity, including symbolic ones, to establish the image of Paris as a local administration or community (‘collectivité locale’), against that of Paris as the Capital (and symbol) of France as the siege of the national government. One of the most conspicuous, though symbolic, actions was the rebranding of the City Council as ‘Ville de Paris’ then ‘Mairie de Paris’ in preference to the more ambiguous

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35 BONNIARD 2005: passim.
‘Paris’, which is often a synecdoque for France. Sport has also played a particularly significant role in that respect. The City Council and its Mayor have performed three main actions: they have subsidised a number of (unsuccessful) bids to host the Olympics (1992, 2008, 2012); they have sponsored an America’s Cup challenger, fittingly called ‘Ville de Paris’; and, after 1978, they have backed Paris Saint-Germain.

The importance of the football club for the City Council is patent in three ways. Firstly, they give Paris Saint-Germain a huge subvention, currently the highest received by any club of any sport in France (though the amount paid by each taxpayer is actually the lowest). Secondly, the City Council has also had representatives to the administration board until a change in the law forbid it. As such, it was very active in the negotiations surrounding the takeover by Canal+ in 1991. Thirdly, it is also very telling that questions pertaining to the club were dealt with by a City Councillor who would later become an important political figure: Alain Juppé (French Prime Minister after 1995) then Jean Tibéri (Mayor of Paris after 1995). The direct involvement of Jacques Chirac, as Mayor of Paris, is also well established. He has never hidden his support for Paris Saint-Germain, often attending games in Paris (and even kept on claiming his attachment to Paris Saint-Germain, as ‘le Club de Paris’, after his election to the Presidency of the French Republic). More crucially, while Mayor, the club seems to have come

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37 3,495,000 € in 2003, according to document 2003 JS 036 at the Mairie de Paris
43 He also mentioned his attachment to Paris Saint-Germain in 2001 on a Radio interview in Moscow, cf: http://www.elysee.fr/elysee/elysee.fr/francais/interventions/interviews_articles_de_presse_et_interventions_televisees./2001/juillet/interview_de_m_jacques_chirac_ president_de_la_republique_a_la_radio_l_echo_de_moscou.2805.html
44 and in 1997, when welcoming the Brazilian head of state, cf: http://www.elysee.fr/elysee/elysee.fr/francais/interventions/discours_et Declarations/1997/mars/allocation_prononcee_par_m_jacques_chirac_president_de_la_republique_a_l_occasion_de_jeune_offert_en_son_honneur_par_son_excellence_fernando_henrique_cardoso_president_de_la_republique_federative_du_bresil.2769.html
under his personal scrutiny, for it was asserted that he went as far as deciding to increase the subvention payed by the City to the club so the latter could retain one of their key player (Luis Fernandez).

Why so much involvement? What is there to gain for the City of Paris, its Councillors and Mayor? The question is not generally thought of this way. Equally, it is the general agreement between all actors in the football world (supporters, journalists, governing body) that Paris cannot but have a football team. Actually, the cliché is even to mourn the absence of other football clubs in Paris – arguably a French exception since London and other European major towns have many. The club, it is asserted, makes Paris known through their participation to national and European competitions. Therefore the City of Paris makes it a condition of their subsidising the club that it performs some ‘prestations de communication’: the logo of the Mairie de Paris be included on virtually every publication from the club, the jersey of the club has to match the shades of the Parisian flag, and to include the Eiffel Tower logo. But the symbolic representation of Paris, in France and abroad, is not the sole motive for so much involvement in a football club. When the ecologist Councillors of Paris regularly vote unsuccessfully against the subvention payed by the City to the club, they even give as a reason that, unlike Auxerre for example, in Paris the club is conspicuously less famous than the city and wonders ‘who promotes whom’ (‘qui promeut qui’), club or city.

On some occasions, the distinction between the local and national administrations has

46 Cf document 2003 JS 036 at the Mairie de Paris, where an appendix includes the Convention de partenariat entre la Ville de Paris et le club de football Paris Saint-Germain. Title II, Article 7 [Hereafter Convention]
appeared clearly, notably when they were headed by members of opposite parties. For example, Jacques Chirac, reportedly, rather enjoyed being congratulated by François Mitterrand when Paris Saint-Germain won Cup finals (notably in 1986, during the first cohabitation).\textsuperscript{49} What is at stake is indeed a question of power. The fortnightly gathering of thousands of parisian fans has been cited as a major reason for providing support the club.\textsuperscript{50} It demonstrates a local identity, this legitimises the existence of the Paris City Council and of an elected Mayor as it contradicts the stereotype that Paris is a city where people live but don’t belong. The City Council has capitalised on this as it made it compulsory, as a counterpart of the subvention, for the club to organise a number of \textit{`animations’} (activities) for the young parisians\textsuperscript{51} and as it also buys a number of game tickets every year that they can distribute to schools.\textsuperscript{52} This is also why, conversely, all major candidates in the 2002 election (Bertrand Delanoë, Jean Tibéri, Philippe Séguin) have been so eager to claim their longstanding connection with Paris Saint-Germain (and to a lesser extent to the Stade Français).\textsuperscript{53} It was crucial for them not to antagonise the Parisian supporters, a significant portion of the electorate, and to reassert their own Parisian roots.

The importance of the political stake in the development of Paris Saint-Germain and its gathering of an audience should not be overestimated. It is unlikely that any election in Paris was ever won or lost on football and Paris Saint-Germain; and the club was able to exist before 1977-78. What the study more essentially points out is the strong link, in France, between local

\textsuperscript{49} cf L’Équipe 5 V 1995, and 9 I 1996
\textsuperscript{50} Noted by socialist Paris Councillor Pascal Cherki in a meeting of the Commission de suivi de la convention de partenariat ville de Paris-Paris Saint Germain Foot Ball (sic) du 30 juin 2002 dated 17 VII 2003 à 15h30
\textsuperscript{51} Title IV in the aforementioned Convention.
\textsuperscript{52} Lot N°1 in the aforementioned Contract
\textsuperscript{53} Bertrand Delanoë could notably be seen wearing Paris Saint-Germain scarves on some of the posters for his election campaign; a compilation on what the main candidates had to say on the matter of Paris Saint-Germain has been made by a fan in 2001 and is available on: http://www.psgmag.net/chroniques16_02.php (accessed March 2006)
politics, sport (especially football) and local identity and that there has been a convergence of interests between *Paris Saint-Germain* and the *Mairie de Paris* (prominently his Mayor) regarding the development of local identity.

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54 Evidenced throughout RAVENEL 1998.