

Conflicting Responses to Djokovic’s Deportation: Citizenship, The Rule of Law, and Commercial Nationalism

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This article focuses on the international incident sparked by Djokovic’s arrival in Australia, unvaccinated, to consider the forms of citizenship associated with the rise of nation branding and its attendant forms of commercial nationalism. The combination of commercial and national identity highlights the convergence of the economic and political characteristics of commercial nationalism. This is a context in which consumer sovereignty reconfigures and displaces civic commitments. To explore the dimensions of this version of citizenship and the tension between its existence and alternative versions, we interviewed 12 Serbian Australians shortly after the Djokovic incident (March–May 2022) and conducted a media textual analysis of Serbian and Australian media. We argue that Djokovic became an avatar for the elevation of a consumerist version of citizenship in which the social contract featured as a form of oppression from which consumers-as-king can exempt themselves.

Keywords: Djokovic, commercial nationalism, media, brand, sports

The detention of the tennis superstar Novak Djokovic at the Australian border on his way to Melbourne to defend his Australian Open title was quite an international incident. Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic publicly attacked the Australian government, describing the detention as part of a “political witch hunt . . . by everybody including the Australian Prime Minister” (France 24, 2022, para. 5). Djokovic’s parents jumped into the fray, with his father announcing that the tennis player was the victim of a political “agenda” dedicated to “stomping on Serbia” and his mother proclaiming, “Novak is Serbia, and Serbia is Novak. They want to clip his wings, but we know how strong he is” (Henley & Pantovic, 2022, para. 7). These comments were framed as an attack on the Serbian nation via an attack on one of its most famous and wealthy (but nonresident) citizens. Djokovic’s father, Srdjan, described the attack in starkly nationalistic terms: “They’re stomping all over him to stomp all over Serbia and the Serbian people” (Henley & Pantovic, 2022, para. 4). He accused Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison of attacking Novak “to bring Serbia to its knees” (Henley & Pantovic, 2022, para. 4). In Australia, protesters waving Serbian flags gathered to

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support Djokovic outside the Melbourne hotel, where he was detained while his legal representatives worked their way through the courts.

Despite these nationalistic appeals, the Australian government insisted that there was nothing political about any of its decisions—that it was simply upholding the principle that no one—not even a fabulously wealthy athlete hoping to seal his reputation as the “greatest of all time”—was above the law. As the Prime Minister put it, “Australians have made many sacrifices during this pandemic, and they rightly expect the result of those sacrifices to be protected” (Meacham, 2022, para. 14). Such sentiments resonated with the strong egalitarian strain in the nation’s self-image and its overt commitment to the rule of law.

What emerges from this prolonged border incident is what might be described as, among other things, clashing versions of national identity—and the forms of nationalism with which they are associated. On one hand, Djokovic is framed—by his supporters, his president, and his family—as a unique symbol of the Serbian nation, one whose body came to stand for the country (recalling the figure of the “king’s body” as consubstantial with the territory). The representative of the nation, on this account, is the exceptional figure of the sovereign. The associated version of nationalism identifies with the figure of the sovereign exception—and allegiance to it in the face of the law (on the understanding that the sovereign exception stands outside the law).

In contrast, the Australian response—and, as we shall see, that of Djokovic’s detractors—framed the nation in terms of universal equality before the law. The associated form of nationalism, in this case, is one in which national identity and the rule-of-law go hand in hand, and the figure of the exception is backgrounded. In this article, we consider the relationship between these two forms of nationalism, as they play out in the responses of ex-patriate Serbian Australians articulating their own reactions to the detention and deportation of Djokovic. We further consider how these reactions highlight the distinctions between consumerist and civic versions of nationalism.

We might unpack the distinction between these seemingly opposed forms of nationalism in various ways, but for this article, we are interested in the particular issue that precipitated the distinction: the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic provides a useful site for considering nationalism and national identity because of the way both were mobilized in the face of what was portrayed as a global emergency. The media coverage played out along clearly defined national lines, as infection and mortality rates were reported nation by nation—and often correlated with varying national responses to the pandemic. Australia, for example, took what might be described as a particularly strong top-down response, imposing some of the strictest lockdown controls, including closing its borders. As the response to the pandemic became increasingly politicized, the varying strategies of different countries became points of national difference and even contention. Michael Skey and César Jiménez-Martínez’s (2020) contrast of the simultaneous twin imperatives to treat the virus as a global issue requiring international solidarity and a national issue emphasizing public health programs and quarantines places the indirect nature of discourse concerning nationality in full focus.

Approaching these issues from the perspective of sport—the arena in which the Djokovic incident took place—it is possible to invoke similar aspects of nationalism and national identity. While tennis is a

sport based primarily on the profiles of individual competitors, it is nonetheless framed in terms of national identity. For promotional purposes, for example, players are treated as champions of their respective nations (Black, 2021). This redoubling of national identification—in response to the pandemic and sports fandom—helped ensure that the Australian reaction to Djokovic’s detention immediately fed into discourses of nationalism and national identity.

We might describe the surfacing of national identification in these contexts in the everyday terms of “banal nationalism” (Billig, 1995), so it is worth considering how they are caught up in promotional logics, both in terms of nation branding (Kaneva, 2011) and sports branding. Drawing on Volcic and Andrejevic (2015), we note that the intersection of these promotional strategies results in a compounded form of commercial nationalism. Commercial nationalism certainly overlaps with banal nationalism (understood as everyday routine practices that reproduce national identification) insofar as a range of national signifiers, including flags, slogans, and sporting allegiances, can be mobilized for commercial purposes. However, not all strategies of commercial nationalism are banal—as in the case of using tariff policies to boost national brands and products.

We invoke these versions of nationalism to situate the response to Djokovic’s detention by both his partisans and detractors. Djokovic can be considered an icon of commercial nationalism, as he represents the nation-state within the high-profile realm of commercial sport. His national affiliation is a marketing asset, so his brand identity works to boost national pride and identification. Similarly, his stated response to the pandemic—and that of his supporters—highlights some attributes of commercial nationalism, particularly the privileging of consumerist traits over civic ones, and how this, in turn, results in a focus on the individual as the figure of exception and, relatedly, as a victim.

Although Djokovic is not directly a political figure—that is, he is not an elected representative, a political candidate, a civil servant, or a political functionary—his embodiment of the nation through his celebrity persona and sporting prowess invokes a nationalist response from many of his fans—a fact that may explain the polarized response he receives from fans (Adair, 2022). As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) note, the shift in focus from more overt nationalistic endeavors like national holidays to sporting events and patterns of consumption “entails a concomitant search for the sites where those symbols are wielded and manipulated by ordinary people” (p. 347). It also entails the displacement of nationalist sentiments onto heroes of consumption, with clear ties to the figure of the nation.

Djokovic’s role as a sports figure exempt from the realm of proper politics allows for the commercial engagement of his persona to be invested with a sense of unmediated engagement with national identity (bypassing the vexed and contested realm of actual politics).¹ From our analysis of commercial nationalism, it is significant that he is a highly valued brand—someone who makes more from his sponsorship agreements

¹ This exemption was strained when Djokovic’s nationalist sentiments became overt during the 2023 Roland Garros tournament. After his second-round win, he wrote on the camera lens “Kosovo is the heart of Serbia”—a reference to ongoing opposition in Serbia to Kosovo’s independence (Hamilton, 2023, para. 10). Djokovic’s use of the traditional ritual of autographing the camera for an overtly political cause led France’s sports minister to decry the act as inappropriate (Hamilton, 2023, para. 10).

than from tournament prize purses. According to Forbes, in 2020, Djokovic made \$4.5 million in prize money and salary—a princely sum that was nonetheless dwarfed by the \$30 million he received the same year in sponsorships from international brands, including Lacoste, Asics, Head, and the Swiss watchmaker Hublot (Forbes, 2021, p. 1). In 2021, he earned almost \$7.5 million in prize money and \$42 million in sponsorships (Goodwin, 2022, para. 12). The combination of commercial and national identity highlights the convergence of the economic and political characteristics of commercial nationalism.

Against this background, we approach the international incident sparked by Djokovic's arrival, unvaccinated, in Australia, as an instructive site for considering the framing of citizenship associated with the rise of commercial nationalism. We draw on the high-profile clash over vaccination to consider how it pits civic responsibility against personal choice. This clash elucidates emerging concerns about the fate of civic life in increasingly commercialized forms of nationalism and national identity. In short, the logic of commercial nationalism (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011) interpellates a consumerist version of citizenship that backgrounds and suppresses the recognition of mutual interdependence crucial for the civic life of democracy. Instead, it privileges a model of commercial citizenship patterned on the consumerist logic of personal preference. In this regard, Djokovic approached the vaccine issue via the logic of personal choice (and individual freedom), which is that of the autonomous neoliberal subject and the sovereign consumer. In contrast, the Australian response invoked the communal responsibility associated with the social contract and the collective sacrifice made by so many Australians to manage the viral spread and reduce morbidity and mortality.

To explore some aspects of the version of citizenship that corresponds to the formation of commercial nationalism, we interviewed 12 members of the Serbian Australian community shortly after the Djokovic incident (March–April 2022). We also canvassed Australian print and television media coverage during the period Djokovic was in Australia (January 2022) to understand the contrasting approaches to negotiating the conflicting versions of nationalism and national identity that played out over the course of Djokovic's attempt to enter the country. Our focus in the interviews was to understand how Serbian Australians responded to the competing versions of national identity invoked in the response to Djokovic's detention. In particular, we focused on the link between the commercial appeal of Djokovic as a branded sports icon and a version of consumerist nationalism in which individual choice and personal freedom exist in tension with civic obligations. We interviewed members of the Serbian Australian community because of the way they are situated with respect to the competing versions of nationalism invoked in the response to Djokovic's detention. Their response to the incident ran the spectrum from strong support to equally strong criticism, but they were able to provide insight into the tensions between the version of Serbian nationalism invoked by the Serb president and that of Australia's "rule-of-law" response.

Border Issues

Long before arriving in Australia to defend his title at the Australian Open, Djokovic received attention for both his alternative health beliefs and his vaccine skepticism. In April 2020, for example, he said during an interview prior to organizing a series of exhibition matches in Croatia, "Personally, I am opposed to vaccination, and I wouldn't want to be forced by someone to take a vaccine" (Dickson, 2020, para. 4). In keeping with his apparent skepticism, the matches he organized in Croatia in 2020 did not incorporate any social distancing

measures and had to be suspended after he and other players came down with COVID-19. Subsequently, on his arrival in Australia, it was revealed that he had applied for a vaccine exemption from Tennis Australia and the state of Victoria (where the Australian Open is held) for having contracted COVID-19 a second time in December 2021 (Callanan, 2022, para. 15). Both entities accepted this application, but they did not have jurisdiction over Australia's international borders. The federal authorities who govern the borders did not recognize recent infections of the virus as grounds for a medical exemption from the vaccine. The confusion over jurisdiction was perhaps understandable given the high-profile role that state governments in Australia played in controlling their borders during the pandemic. However, Djokovic's support team apparently either overlooked the federal guidelines, assumed that permission from Tennis Australia was good enough, or hoped he could rely on his international celebrity status to bend the rules.

When it became clear that Djokovic had not met the entry requirements for Australia, he ended up in detention, and a series of legal hearings ensued, lasting 10 days and receiving global front-page coverage (Gatter, 2022, para. 13). During the hearings, it emerged that Djokovic had attended a children's tennis event after being exposed to COVID-19 (although he said he had not received a positive diagnosis) and that he had participated in a magazine photo shoot after testing positive (Sakkal, 2022, para. 10). What emerged then was the picture of someone who took whatever concerns he had about the vaccine—these remained largely unexplained—more seriously than the virus. This information did not help his supporters' public relations campaign—nor did the revelation that, in his entry documents, he had provided incorrect information about his recent travel.

What ensued was a legal back-and-forth that gave the Australian prime minister, facing an upcoming election, an opportunity to take the public temperature. Djokovic's visa was cancelled but then reinstated on the grounds that he had not been given reasonable time to contact his lawyers (Karp & Sport, 2022, para. 16). In the end, the visa was revoked by the immigration minister on the grounds that Djokovic might stir up anti-vaccine sentiment (McGuirk, 2022, para. 7). The decision highlighted the discretionary power of the minister, but it also shifted the stated grounds for deportation from Djokovic's vaccine status to his public stance on vaccines. The athlete who sought exceptional status ended up receiving it in the form of the minister's ability to suspend the legal reinstatement of his visa with powers that, in legal circles, were described as unreviewable "god powers" (Aidone & Kwan, 2022, para. 7). The decision became less of a decision about the public health threat posed by Djokovic and more about the purported ideological threat he posed. However, the media coverage and popular opinion both remained focused on the scenario of an international celebrity attempting to circumvent the restrictions imposed on everyone else.

Vaccines and the Social Contract

An issue in the vaccine discussion is the familiar tension between individual choice and social responsibility—a tension that aligns with that between consumer sovereignty and the civic commitments of citizenship. We devote this section to unfolding the relationship between vaccine resistance and civic obligations. This relationship is connected with the version of national identification at stake in the rise of commercial nationalism, which tilts away from civic commitment and toward the hypostasis of an incoherent version of individual freedom.

The goal of vaccines, of course, is twofold: to reduce the likelihood of an individual contracting a particular illness and to lower the incidence in the overall population. These are interrelated goals, and it is this connection that highlights the communal logic of vaccination. Without the high levels of vaccination required to maintain group immunity, outbreaks of preventable diseases emerge periodically in certain communities. For example, the reduction of a quarter of California schools' vaccination rates to below 95% was enough to contribute to the 2014 Disneyland measles outbreak, demonstrating the importance of near universal vaccine requirements and the significance of individual exceptions (Doll & Correia, 2021, p. 4211).

Framing the decision to receive or decline a vaccine solely as one of personal choice ignores this foundational social aspect of vaccines and likewise reinforces a view of the self as bounded by the contours of the individual. Watkin (2021) makes this point with respect to the decision to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, which has been demonstrated to reduce both the spread and severity of viral infection (Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021; Feehan & Apostolopoulos, 2021). Watkin compares getting vaccinated to obeying the speed limit, which, if disregarded, can have dire consequences not just for the driver but for others: "Unless I go and live a solitary life in the outback, my decision to get vaccinated or not will certainly have an impact on those around me" (Watkin, 2021, para. 13).

Djokovic's response to vaccine requirements subordinates this duty to a personal choice tethered to his commitment to his status as an elite athlete. As he put it in a highly publicized BBC interview—his first one after being ejected from Australia, "as an elite athlete, I am very mindful of what I put into my body and made the decision that I don't want to get vaccinated at the moment" (Cambers, 2022, para. 4). He worried—without evidence—that the vaccine might affect his performance: "I just don't have enough clarity of how the COVID vaccine will affect me and whether it's going to create a certain effect on my game and I wouldn't have the benefits that I would normally have" (Jevtic, 2022, para. 10). Djokovic's concerns over the vaccine are not on the level of a societal obligation but one element in a series of personal choices about how he polices the makeup of his body and, by extension, his identity.

Djokovic's decision is consistent with his statements in his book on nutrition, which reinforce his commitment to a holistic sense of purity. He is also, tellingly, highly skeptical of the food and drug industry. As he puts it, "The way I see it, pharmaceutical and food companies want people to feel fear. They want people to be sick" (Djokovic, 2013, p. 87). When asked in an interview whether these views could be seen as encouraging for the anti-vax community, Djokovic responded, "I say that everyone has the right to choose to act or say whatever they feel is appropriate for them. And I have never said that I'm part of that movement" (Rajan, 2022b, 03:40). However, Djokovic's refusal to engage with public-interest arguments for vaccination would surely resonate with those who identify with various flavors of vaccine skepticism (Telltale Research, 2021, p. 7). Indeed, his personal disavowal of the anti-vax movement only seeks to strengthen the value he places on the freedom and sovereignty of the individual as the most important value underpinning his personal health and, by extension, that of national freedom. It is precisely his rejection of government mandates that, somewhat paradoxically, makes him an avatar of national identity and a symbol of freedom for his supporters. As his father put it, invoking the trope of national identity, "the entire freedom-loving world should rise together with Serbia" (Stojanovic, 2022).

Sports and Nationalism

Given the nationalist response to his detention—both in Australia and overseas—Djokovic’s actions can be situated within the broader context of the relationship between sports and nationalism. How the nation is represented through sports, how its aspirations are formalized in sports, and how its origins and claims are narrated via sports have become key themes in diverse disciplines, including nationalism studies, media and cultural studies, history, sociology, and political studies of sports.

Scholars have provided theoretically informed research on the complex relationship between sport, nationalism, identity, and media (see, for example, Amara, 2012; Anderson, 1991; Arnold, 2018; Billig, 1995; Gellner, 2008; King, 2006; Koch, 2013; Watson, 2016). In particular, Silk, Andrews, and Cole (2005) demonstrate how sports were used by Western nations as a tool for encouraging popular identification with the nation-state. Scholars have also sought to locate the nation in banal, everyday routines (Billig, 1995) while arguing that many of the daily practices, including reading a newspaper, for example, should be understood as key for producing a sense of “imagined community” that holds together people who may never meet or even see one another (Anderson, 2008). Billig particularly demonstrates how nationhood is highlighted on newspaper sports pages. Sports writers searching for compelling angles to cover tennis matches frequently resort to placing individual players in their national contexts. This approach can overlook the fact that many top players spend most of their time living in countries other than those with which they are identified—sometimes for tax purposes and other times for ease of travel to international events. Djokovic, for example, lived in Monte Carlo for 15 years before moving to Spain in 2020 (Biswas, 2020). Thus, the national identity frame has more to do with the logic of branding and media publicity than with the residence of the players.

Sports coverage, perhaps more than any other section of the newspaper or facet of journalism, lends itself to the routine foregrounding of narratives of national identity. Ongoing international competitions in a range of athletic events provide more frequent and regulated opportunities for national identification than other forms of international competition. According to De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999), the idea of a specific national imagined community becomes a reality through public discourses disseminated by systems of education, media, militarization, and sports. This repeated invocation of national narratives has a deeply commercial logic, as do the constructed narratives that pit athletes against one another as proxies for their respective nations. In this respect, they participate in and benefit from the formation of commercial nationalism, which relies on the mobilization of national identification to build ratings, sell tickets and newspapers, and raise the value of advertising slots and sponsorship opportunities.

Anticipating how Djokovic’s body would become a symbol for Serbia itself, both as a symbol of its vitality and as the site of a national affront, De Cillia et al. (1999) describe how “the bodies of prominent top sportspersons who compete in international championships as living *partes pro toto* for a specific nation are conceivable as parts of a ‘national body’” (p. 160; emphasis in original). Djokovic, in particular, serves as a key reference when looking at the connection between sports and nationalism in a Serbian context, as Malešević (2017) noted. Spasić (2017) identifies Djokovic as a central figure in discussions of everyday nationalism in a Serbian context but notes the extreme focus on him in particular as a product of the nation’s

transition from the "hot" nationalism of the 1990s into its more banal expressions that Billig had previously framed as its counterpart.

Black (2021) draws on the work of Slavoj Žižek to develop a psychoanalytic approach to the links between nationalism and the commercialization of sports, arguing that the nation continues to evoke forms of enjoyment and desire for which sport provides an important locus of examination. According to Black (2021), "sport presents a key opportunity for sustaining national sentiments via a mediated consumption that proffers intense enjoyment (and pain) for national communities" (p. 3). The intense identification of Serbs with the figure of Djokovic—for better or worse—was a recurring theme in our interviews.

Sports provide the potential pathologies of nationalism with an alibi; it is not overtly political (in the way, for example, that violent forms of nationalist mobilization for political ends might be). In this regard, Sturm, Kavanagh, and Rinehart (2021) developed the concept of "pseudo-nationalism" within the promotional strategies of sporting franchises in New Zealand. The salience of commercial nationalism in this regard is that it mobilizes nationalism in the register of consumerism rather than that of civic life. As Sunstein (2007) observes, consumer sovereignty ignores the shared bonds of citizenship that highlight the interdependence of social life (p. 40).

This version of consumer sovereignty aligns with the logic of individuation associated with the contemporary media environment and, as we argue, with the framing of vaccination as purely a matter of individual choice. Far from contradicting the spiritually inflected claims about personal health made by Djokovic, this view of the self as primarily governed by consumerist values of choice and individuality strongly aligns with the new age-inflected version of lifestyle purity he promotes.

To the extent that nationalism is harnessed in commercial imperatives—as in the realm of the hugely profitable realm of international sport—it partakes in the logic of consumer sovereignty. The result is a paradoxically individualist formulation of collective identity. Nationalism becomes a matter of consumer choice, while personal choice becomes a symbol of the version of freedom championed by national identity. This set of connections is explored in the following sections, which draw on interviews with 12 members of the Serbian diaspora in Australia. The interviews explored competing responses to the public spectacle of Djokovic's detention and eventual deportation. In particular, we are interested in how Djokovic's public and brand identities become implicated in the versions of national identification that underwrite either support or criticism of his actions. We focused on in-depth interviews to elaborate on the tensions associated with competing versions of national identification.

We recruited participants by starting with contacts in the Serb-Australian community and snowball sampling. Our respondents ranged in age from 32 to 59 and represented a range of careers, including chefs, tax accountants, artists, and public servants. Their responses to the decision to deport Djokovic ranged from supportive to deeply critical, and these helped us explore the contours of the fate of civic identity in its relationship to commercial nationalism. We devote each of the following sections to the main themes that emerged during the interviews.

Brand Identification and the Figure of the Exception

Respondents who criticized Djokovic's expulsion from Australia described him in terms of his exceptional status, both physically and reputationally. Their allegiance to him was framed in terms of their pride in his success—the success that served as the basis for his brand recognition and wealth. As one respondent asked, "If a body is healthy, why mess with it? Do you represent danger if you are as healthy as Djokovic?" (Male, 56). The body is portrayed as a primary and hermetic container and, in Djokovic's case, an exceptionally strong one. The threat to it comes from without, in the form of various contaminants, whether these are gluten, refined sugar, or vaccines and the various chemicals used to create and preserve them. Suggestively, the virus itself is not constituted as one of these threats; the strong, healthy body is, on this account, equipped to resist it. The real threat is not the vaccine but the contaminants that might compromise its natural ability to fight. This version of the body as a self-contained entity threatened by the otherness on which it depends has its political correlate in the classical liberal version of individuality as primary, self-contained, and self-constituting. In this formulation, it is possible to discern the displacement of the threat of the other—of an irreducible heteronomy—from the vicissitudes of the virus to the claims of social and civic responsibility. The latter is framed as the real threat.

The virus served as a disconcerting reminder that even if we imagine ourselves to be self-contained biological organisms, we are irreducibly "contaminated" with otherness. We are always already moving through a communal bath of microbes, breathing one another's air, touching one another's traces, taking them into ourselves, and leaving behind further ones that are absorbed by others. Djokovic, then, is left facing the "lesser of two contaminants": the virus or the vaccine. That he chooses the former is perhaps telling, since it privileges his sense of individual fitness (and ability, presumably, to withstand the virus) over subordination to the collective good of reducing spread through widespread vaccination.

Djokovic is immensely popular in Serbia, where he is well known for his fastidious approach to personal health and fitness. One respondent was amazed, for example, that his elderly father had been inspired to change his eating habits because of Djokovic: "my father in Belgrade, 85 years old, loves him and is now gluten free!" (Male, 42). He attributed the widespread adoration of Djokovic to the role that the tennis star plays as a symbol of international success and respect in a sport that has a storied history in the country. As another respondent noted, Djokovic's fame and success take on particular resonance for Serbian Australians who negotiate their own hybrid identity in a country where sports is a national obsession:

Djokovic means something even more here than to Serbs in Serbia. You feel a bit lonely in Australia, so a lot of Serbs have intergenerational trauma—and they are pro-Serb and pro-Djokovic . . . trying to grab something positive . . . we don't like that there is still this large anti-Serb sentiment. . . because of the wars of the 1990s. (Female, 34)

The fact that Djokovic's reputation is marked by a commitment to clean living and good health, in addition to his fabulous wealth, further bolsters his image: "Serbia—it's so poor, and the situation is bad; so in Serbia he is like God. They love him so much. He is amazing to everyone there, he is like Jesus" (Male, 42). The comparison to Jesus was also made by Djokovic's father during his son's detention in Australia: "Jesus was crucified and endured many things but is still alive among us. Novak is also crucified . . . the

best sportsman and man in the world. He will endure" (Jaipurkar, 2022, para. 5). It is hard to imagine a more extreme invocation of Djokovic as an avatar for the figure of "exception"—and of the role he plays in the imagination of a nation closely identified with the Orthodox church. These aspects are reflected in Djokovic's own expression of devotion to the Church: "Before being an athlete," he has said, "I am an Orthodox Christian" (Isakovic, 2018, para. 4).

The religious rhetoric is not incidental because the invocation of the figure of Jesus implicates the forms of victimization associated with a corrupt and malign government. As with the displacement of the viral threat by the imposition of civic obligations on individual autonomy, the *real* threat is framed as that posed by state oppression. As one of Djokovic's supporters put it, expressing concern about how well the vaccine was tested, "The government is mandating you [to receive the vaccine]—which is not right. Would you buy a car, that has no warranty?" (Male, 56). Another supporter put it more strongly: "Now every day more and more people understand and know—they are awoken—and see how governments are horrible" (Female, 34). For his supporters, the decision to deport Djokovic was political—in the sense of the word that invokes overtones of corruption and oppression.

National identification, in this context, sidesteps civic obligation (and politics) as manifested in the apparatus of the state to get straight to what Žižek (1992) described as the "empty place of the Supreme Good [that] defines the modern notion of Nation" (p. 222). As the figure of the exception, Djokovic comes to occupy the place of the national "thing"—that figure of Serbian-ness *tout court*. It is not that he exemplifies separable traits that add up to some positive definition of Serbian identity; it is that he is, as his father put it, *directly* Serbia. This direct identification has the character of brand identification, not loyalty to particular traits or qualities per se, but directly with the aura of the brand itself. Such direct identification elides civic claims and the related recognition of interdependence that might complicate a consumerist version of nationalism.

Another interviewee, speaking of her most recent visit to Serbia, noted that "everyone identifies with Djokovic. The whole country identifies with him! My sister—she is a pharmacist—she is not into sports, but she loves Djokovic . . . He is a light in darkness" (Female, 34). His own "belief in his body as healthy and strong" (Female, 34) came to serve as a synecdoche for identification with the health and strength of the nation. Like Djokovic, his supporters focus on the threat to his own health and not the prospect of him passing on an illness to those who might suffer more dire consequences.

The Victim of Privilege

The specter of crucifixion invoked by the Christ comparison speaks directly to a sense of victimization associated with the threat of otherness. This sensibility has become an increasingly dominant characteristic of consumer sovereignty. A blindered adherence to a hypertrophied individualism renders everyone irrevocably a victim of others precisely because the inevitable fact of social interdependence poses a perceived threat to individual autonomy. The result is a familiar one: The default of citizenship to a neoliberal ethos of consumer sovereignty results in a resurgent politics of personal grievance.

Djokovic's supporters' invocation of this logic of personal victimization fits neatly into a set of historical associations that highlight a sense of victimization. As one of our respondents put it, "It seems that Djokovic just affirms to Serbs what they have been feeling throughout—that they are the victims; that everyone is against them. So of course they see this as a political issue, against them—not allowing Djokovic the Serb to play" (Female, 36).

Djokovic also found himself in the position of the outsider, aligned implicitly but not explicitly with the position of the renegade skeptic. He found himself in a tiny minority, as most elite tennis players, including his long-time, on-court rival Rafael Nadal, accepted the advice of medical experts and the Australian requirement to get vaccinated. In his first in-depth media interview after the Australian Open, Djokovic attributed his do-your-own research approach to his upbringing during the wars of the 1990s: "I became self-reliant from very early on. And I think that helped me to really, you know, establish my own character from very early on and just hold my ground, so to say, with whatever is happening" (Cambers, 2022, para. 7). The emphasis in this formulation aligns neatly with a focus on personal autonomy and individual freedom: His personal strength and hard-won independence become an alibi for backgrounding the claims of a broader sense of social responsibility.

Beyond Politics

Djokovic's success as a top international athlete in the commercial realm helped distance him from direct entanglement in the controversies of Serbian politics. Even his decision to live in a foreign tax haven could be framed in this light, as it allowed him to channel his money not through state coffers, but through his private charities. Known for his high-profile charitable giving, Djokovic earned the respect of Australians, including Serbian Australians, not just for his success in and affection for the Australian Open tournament, but also for donating—along with other professional tennis players—more than \$700,000 in 2020 to assist the victims of the Australian bushfires (Ramsay, 2020, para. 19). This is in keeping with an ongoing pattern of donations in Serbia, as his charitable foundation has given millions of dollars to causes, including fighting the COVID-19 virus, funding the Serbian healthcare system, and supporting Christian charities. Furthermore, by residing in Monte Carlo, he has avoided contributing millions in taxes to the nation's coffers. Nevertheless, as one of our respondents observed, "He brings joy and happiness to the Serbs. It's national pride for sure. Everyone mentions his charity. How he is a humanitarian. They appropriated him as a clean Serb; who is modest, strong, and honest" (Female, 37).

His charitable donations to Australia further endeared him to Australian Serbs: "there are 50,000 Serb Australians in Sydney—and I would say mostly they of course see him as a hero . . . they love him . . . he gives to charity a lot" (Female, 34). His supporters had ready recourse to the logic of exception: Djokovic should be given special treatment because he is a successful elite athlete who takes amazing care of his body, a cultural icon who has given back to his country, and a symbol of how Serbia would like to see itself. As with the king's body, it is his exceptional status that allows him to stand in for the state despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that he operated at a remove from the (implicitly or explicitly denigrated) realm of politics proper. The fact that he was not involved in the state apparatus allowed him to stand for all Serbia in a way that transcended politics yet partook of the passionate attachment to the nation. His

association with nationalism and national identity made it easy for his expulsion to be framed as an attack not just on him but on Serbia and its people.

Politics features as a dirty word in the context of commercial nationalism because it invokes the notion of a polity—something beyond the horizon of the sovereign consumer. With Djokovic's deportation, the framing of politics as merely disguised self-interest was bolstered by the obvious strategic calculus of an embattled Australian prime minister staring down an upcoming election (that he went on to lose). If the decision was political in the sense of attempting to demonstrate a defining democratic principle of the rule of a law, it was also political in the narrower sense of electoral calculation. During the pause between Djokovic's arrival and his deportation, political commentators observed that the government assessed public opinion to see which outcome would prove most favorable to its electoral prospects (see, for example, Crowe, 2022).

Both those who supported Djokovic and those who felt he should have been expelled saw the decision as political, although with different inflections. For those who supported Djokovic, the decision was perceived as being an attack on Serbia and as a vote getter for the Australian prime minister. On the other hand, those who sided with the decision to expel Djokovic from the country saw the decision as a civic one that upheld the rule of law and reinforced the shared efforts of Australians to combat the pandemic. As one of Djokovic's critics put it, "Well, when we were told to stay at home, we stayed at home, and as citizens, we have responsibilities, to each other. Where did he show it, this responsibility?" (Female, 56). The language of social responsibility was a recurring theme in the responses of those who supported his expulsion: "He just showed he cares only about himself, you know. It was a strange behavior from him . . . to behave like that in a country where we were locked down for 2 years" (Female, 36). As another respondent put it, "Anti-vaxxers are all about their own freedoms, but they do not want to hear about their responsibilities" (Female, 36). The same respondent made a direct connection to the theme of the democratic social contract: "I think people actually do not understand how democracy works . . . having choices is a good thing, but having responsibilities is actually something that keeps society together" (Female, 36).

In his post-deportation appearance on the BBC, Djokovic was presented with this formulation of democracy by the interviewer, who described the choice between individual freedom and allegiance to a common or shared good as "a classic tension in political philosophy" (Rajan, 2022b, 22:56). Building on this formulation, the interviewer asked Djokovic, "Do you accept that what might be good for you individually, may be harmful to the collective welfare?" (Rajan, 2022b, 23:01). Djokovic answered, in effect, that his free choice took precedence: "I understand that there's that kind of stance as well and everyone is entitled to their opinion, everyone is entitled and has a fundamental human right to choose whatever they want to put in their body" (Rajan, 2022b, 23:18). In other words, because, in his view, allegiance to a shared good is an individual choice, the latter trumps the former.

Conclusion

Our respondents' reaction to the Djokovic incident highlights key tensions associated with a post-civic view of citizenship that reflects the version of "the atomized human individual, a magical figure separated from the world by his mastery over it," served up for us by a surveillance economy that privileges customization and individuation over the communal relationships on which any conception of the individual necessarily relies (Bratton, 2015, p. 412). We do not consider the details of the ongoing discussion over the vaccine but rather

the attitude toward civic responsibility associated with the figure of the individual-as-brand characteristic of the social media economy. Djokovic's sports celebrity is inevitably channeled through the figure of the brand—the source of the majority of his income. At the same time, as a “brand ambassador,” he doubles as a representative of Serbia in a commercial rather than an institutionally political sense. He has no formal role in the state; he resides in tax havens, and yet, to his supporters, his brand identity is irrevocably tied to his nationality. He represents Serbia in a way potentially more compelling—in a commercial media environment—than whoever is the president and is indeed more widely recognized internationally.

As a commercial icon of the nation, Djokovic frames the sovereign individual as a generalizable figure of exception: the freedom to misrecognize the irreducible interdependence on which the fantasy of absolute individual freedom relies. In this respect, Djokovic becomes an avatar for the elevation of a consumerist version of citizenship in which the social contract features as a form of oppression from which the consumers-as-king can exempt themselves. It comes as no surprise, for example, to learn that overall vaccine rates are down in the wake of the anti-vaccine response to the pandemic (Mueller & Hoffman, 2022). The very fact that vaccination serves not just individual self-interest, but also a greater social good renders it suspect. However, the claim that this version of consumer sovereignty aligns with the hyper-individualization of the online surveillance economy (see, for example, Sunstein, 2001, 2007) focuses perhaps too narrowly on a particular media sector. This logic is one of hypercommercialism amplified and extended by the affordances of interactive technology. The trajectory of this version of anti-civic autonomy long predates the rise of social media but has been facilitated by the ability of online systems to enable ever more granular forms of nichification and specification (McChesney, 2000). Taken to the limit, every user doubles as both target and brand—every individual a sovereign exception.

Djokovic's expulsion—and the support it received from the Australian populace, including some of our interviewees—suggests that the conflation of citizen and consumer, nation and brand, remains strongly contested. Our findings explore the dimensions of this contest, highlighting the ways in which Djokovic's supporters outlined a very different version of national identification from his critics. Much is at stake in the contrast between these versions of national identification. Although we focus on a particular national example, the tensions in play characterize the rise of commercially inflected forms of populism more generally in the United States, Europe, Australia, and elsewhere. The threat posed to civic life by the ascendance of commercial nationalism is the prospect of a version of populism that trades on the elements we have identified: a misrecognition of fundamental societal interdependence, a hypertrophied sense of individualism, and an attendant sense of grievance—even (and perhaps especially) among the powerful and privileged.

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