

P·O·N·T·O D·E V·I·S·T·A

**Football hooliganism in England from the late
1950s to 1990****“Hooliganismo” no futebol na Inglaterra dos
anos 1950 a 1990**

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INTRODUCTION

What is football hooliganism? In a word, it is what is held to be disruptive and violent behaviour in the broad context of match day. It is a term usually reserved for a section of the fans. It is not normally extended to take in aspects of the behaviour of players, although the example set by some players has sometimes been linked to the broader problem. It is behaviour that can involve individuals, but normally involves gangs who are organised to greater or lesser extent. Football hooligan behaviour can range from verbal abuse – swearing, questioning the manliness of the opposition team and their supporters – right the way through to actual physical assault that occasionally can result in death. It is principally directed at opposition fan groups of a similar disposition. Police officers and innocent bystanders have been injured, but such a turn of events tends to be the exception rather than the rule. The central targets are the opposition hooligans. These events can take place inside the ground or at some distance from it, in the pre and post-match contexts – on trains, motorway service stations and in distant towns and cities.

**THE RISE OF FOOTBALL HOOLIGANISM TO THE
STATUS OF A SERIOUS SOCIAL PROBLEM**

How has football hooliganism come to be perceived as a serious social problem in England? Prior to the late 1950s, the football crowd disorders that did occur in the U.K. tended to go unreported. The only disorders that were given more extensive coverage in the English media occurred abroad and these seem to have been report upon for their novelty value. The reporting style was smug and took the tone – ‘what will these crazy foreigners do next?’ These disorders occurred in South America and Southern Europe, they tended to be explained in crude stereotypical terms as a product of the ‘Latin

temperament’. Such a characterisation is irony, given that it later came to be depicted as the ‘English disease’.

The media’s benign approach to English football crowd disturbances began to change in the later 1950s. In this period, great concern was expressed over youthful violence in other social contexts and, in particular, focused upon the disorderly behaviour of teddy boys. And concern about hooliganism in one area of social life generated a more generalised anxiety on the part of the media and the public at large. In consequence, one of the areas of social life that received closer scrutiny was Association football. The disorders that had to varying degrees long characterised the professional game in England began to be reported in more dramatic relief.

An early peak in this concern occurred during the built-up to the 1966 World Cup Finals. The newly emerging tabloid press worked itself up into frenzy over the possibility that disorder would tarnish England’s reputation under the full glare of the world’s media. Also around this time, the popular press began sending reporters to matches to focus not upon the game rather than the crowd. Not surprisingly, more and more incidents began to be reported and, with this increased reportage came the establishment of new thresholds of sensationalism by the press.

In the course of the 1960s, this consistently dramatic presentation of match-days and football grounds as times and places in which fighting and could be engaged in and aggressive masculinity displayed attracted in growing numbers of young males bent on making an aggressive contribution to the proceedings. This was a gradual process. In fact, it was not until the later 1960s that English football hooliganism began to take on its distinctively contemporary form with the establishment of more organised skinhead gangs.

Over the period from the late 1960s to the end of the 1980s, media treatment of football hooliganism has been characterised by two overarching tendencies – a predominant

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one and a weaker, countervailing one. The predominant tendency has been for the media to depict football hooliganism as meaningless behaviour and to characterise hooligans themselves as mindless morons, beasts and animals. No doubt that this kind of reaction provides some emotional comfort. It does not, however, advance our understanding of the phenomenon one iota. On the contrary, it closes off any possibility of greater understanding. To define something as meaningless is to render it incapable of being understood. From time to time, another characterisation of football hooliganism emerged in the media. This one explained it in terms of a conspiracy orchestrated by extreme right-wing groups. While this characterisation contains a germ of truth, it remains a crude over-simplification. However, in this context, the point to stress is the way in which the media over this period happily swung from a position which depicted football hooliganism as mindless to one which characterised it as highly rational. This willingness to embrace inconsistent explanations is partly indicative of the superficiality with which the problem is treated, it is also understandable in terms of the commercial interests of the media and, in particular, the desire to sell newspapers in the context of a circulation war. Both approaches lend themselves to sensational headlines. It is beyond question that over this period the reporting style of the tabloid press in particular made a substantial contribution towards the escalation of the phenomenon in the 1970s and 1980s and to shaping its distinctively contemporary form.

The upshot of these media presentations has been to bring considerable pressure to bear on the football authorities and successive governments. The cry has gone out that something must be done to control this threat to public order. The culprits must be caught, brought to justice and severely punished. Politicians often find themselves under considerable pressure to respond to a particular problem when they are not always quite sure what to do. For the most part, this official reaction has taken the form of control and containment measures. In this context, it is appropriate to pick up the story in the late 1960s/early 1970s when, in response to a recommendation of the Lang Report, football clubs install a system of fences and pens in their grounds in order to control the rival hooligan groups and provide greater security for orderly fans. These new arrangements certainly made grounds safer for peaceful spectators. They were far less likely to be engulfed by marauding hooligans charging across open terraces. However, these same policies also had important unintended consequences. Concentrating the rival hooligan groups in particular parts of football stadia, enhanced their feelings of solidarity and capacity to organise. These emerging characteristics found expression in a greater level of disorder outside the ground in the pre and post-match phases. Thus, we begin to see the emergence of the process of displacement, that has come to be a central characteristic of the police/hooligan dialectic.

The police responded to the greater level of disorder and violence outside the ground by meeting the visiting fans at the local transport terminals, marching them to the ground, penning them and then escorting them back at the end of the game. However, those hooligans who were determined to continue their involvement in serious disorder began to discard their flamboyant styles in favour of less conspicuous fashions. To avoid police surveillance they began to travel on ordinary scheduled train services rather than football excursions. They would arrive in the host town or city hours before the kick-off and make their way to city centre pubs, seek out the local hooligans and engage in hostilities. These tactics also enabled them to evade the home club's segregation arrangements and cause further disorder in the ground. The central frustration for the authorities has been that every attempt at containment has squeezed the problem into another phase of match-day and from the mid-1970s, this process of displacement took a new turn. Groups of English hooligans began to follow their clubs and the national side into continental Europe with the disorderly consequences that culminated in the Heysel disaster of 1985 when 39 people were killed.

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

Alcohol has been more or less continuously cited as the cause of aggression of football hooligans. It is certainly the case that alcohol has been a central dimension of the culture of those groups engaged in football hooliganism. The ability to drink a great deal is seen as a mark of manly status. However, it cannot be said to be a deep cause of these disorders because not all the hooligans drink, while many non-hooligans do drink in the context of match days. It is also the case that some hooligans claim to abstain from drinking during match-day manoeuvres because a clear head is essential if they are to outwit their rivals and the police. The fact is that many members of these groups are relatively aggressive without drink. Of course, alcohol can put an edge on this aggression, but it is only an element in a more complex explanation. The hooligans themselves have in some respects fostered the attraction of alcohol consumption as an explanation of football hooliganism. If, for example, a football hooligan finds himself in court charged with assault and is asked to explain his behaviour, he has to make a decision. What sort of explanation is more likely to have some resonance with the magistrate's bench and be more likely to lead to a lesser sentence: 'I was out of my head because I'd drunk too much' or 'I get a buzz out of violence'?

VIOLENCE ON THE FIELD OF PLAY

Another popular explanation for football hooliganism has been in terms of player violence. Again, some evidence can be provided to support an apparent cause/effect link between a violent incident during the match and a violent response from some of the fans. Yet it is more appropriate to see violent play

as a pretext for a hooligan response. After all, only a minority of fans react to violence on the pitch in this way. In any case, many incidents of disorder occur in the pre-match context and, therefore, cannot possibly be causally attributed to particular incidents during the match itself.

ADOPTING A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

In addition to attributing football hooliganism to a single cause, the above explanations see the problem of football hooliganism as being rooted specifically in football. In contrast, let me offer a highly condensed version of the explanation my colleagues and I constructed as a result of our research. Let me begin by identifying two persistent and obvious characteristics of football hooliganism in England.

First of all, football hooliganism is overwhelmingly a male preserve and, secondly, hooligans are not peaceful citizens. They derive satisfaction from engaging in aggressive activities. If these two characteristics are drawn together, we are in a position to establish a provisional definition of football hooliganism. It is a form of aggressive masculinity; it is expressive of an aggressive masculine style. Moving on from this definition, what else do we know about these hooligans? All the systematic evidence that has been compiled on the social class background of football hooligans in England indicates that they come, not exclusively, but predominantly from lower class communities. It's predominantly working-class character gives rise to a question – what is it about the structure of certain lower-class communities and the position they occupy in the broader society that generates this by no means unique, but in many ways distinctive and intense aggressive masculine style? It's a style that finds expression not only at football matches, but also within their communities, in pubs and clubs, down town on a Saturday night and in other venues, such as popular holiday resorts.

Let us reflect at greater length on these particular communities. They seem to exert relatively little pressure on individuals – and in particular, males – to exercise self-control over recourse to physical aggression. The higher levels of aggression characteristic of relationships within these communities in turn foster and sustain higher levels of tolerance towards this aggression. In addition, other aspects of these communities seem to work in the same general direction. For example, the relatively rigid division of labour between the sexes and the dominance of men over women tend to minimise any potential that there might be towards softening female influence. Indeed, since many women in this type of community grow up to be relatively aggressive themselves and to expect relatively aggressive behaviour from their men-folk, this serves to compound the aggressive tendencies of the males. These standards of behaviour find expression in a range of conflicts within these communities, such as the regular occurrence of family feuds, but they probably find their strongest

expression in what are sometimes colloquially referred to as 'street corner gangs'. These gangs or alliances seem to have their origins in the comparative freedom from adult control experienced by many lower class children and adolescents – in particular males. Pushed out on to the street at an early age, they inter-act relatively violently with one another. For defensive and aggressive purposes, they develop dominance hierarchies based on age and physical strength. The conferral of prestige on males who can fight encourages them to develop a love of fighting and to come to see fighting as a central source of meaning and gratification in their lives. Indeed, for many, it is one of the few sources of status available to them.

While a range of conflicts characteristically internally divides these communities, they, nevertheless, have the capacity to gain a degree of overall unity as a result of a threat or perceived threat from outsiders. This can be more powerful outsiders, such as authority figures, but more particular concern here is the threat, perceived threat or manufactured threat posed by similarly placed outsider groups in adjacent lower class communities – communities with members who have undergone similar processes of socialisation and are subject to similar social constraints. So while they are characteristically divided, these communities do possess a capacity to combine in the event of 'an external challenge'. Indeed, it is the nature of this threat which seems to determine the level at which alliances are formed.

Let me illustrate this point by returning to the issue of football hooliganism. Just as otherwise hostile groups in a community combine in the event of a dispute with a rival community, in the context of football matches they are prepared to combine in the cause of football club solidarity. If the challenge is perceived in regional terms, club enemies have been known to join forces. At international level, these community, club and regional rivalries tend to be subordinated to the defence of the national reputation. Finally, in the context of international tournaments, hooligan groups from different countries have on occasions formed alliances. At the same time, at each of these levels, particularly if the opposition groups do not turn up in sufficient strength to constitute a credible challenge, then lower level rivalries are apt to re-emerge. The general point to grasp is that it is the nature of the opposition which tends to determine the level at which the temporary alliance is formed.

Football crowd disorders occur in many countries throughout the world. In some countries they have political dimensions. In others they coalesce with religious conflicts. In yet others they are an expression of ethnic divisions. In addition, there are also societal variations in the social origins of the participants and this can only be understood in terms of the particular histories of these countries. However, the common core of these variations on the form taken by football hooliganism seems to be that they are predominantly a male activity, an expression of aggressive masculinity.