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Doing it for the team—examining the causes of hooliganism in English football

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Abstract

Football disorder has been prevalent in England since the sport was professionalised in the late nineteenth century. The phenomenon continues to occur in modern society, and has produced consequences of varying degrees of severity. As well as having been widely reported in the media, football hooliganism has also been examined extensively by academics since the 1960s. However, not all existing work is applicable to modern supporter subcultures. The English professional football industry has undergone significant developments in relation to political, financial, architectural, organisational and cultural factors in the past decade. This has had a considerable impact on the violent element of supporter groups. Much of what we know about football disorder however may now be based upon redundant theories and arguments which predate these alterations. Such work is also heavily reliant on data that draws from the opinions of hooligans themselves. The perspectives of non-violent football fans have consistently been overlooked in this context, and yet such supporters share many of the same experiences and identifications as hooligans. This paper explores fan attitudes on the phenomenon, specifically regarding the causes of modern hooliganism. Supporters offered opinions in focus groups and interviews in relation to personal factors, club affiliation, community, social and class explanations, as well as organisational and match-related aspects. It is argued in this paper that hooliganism is a diverse phenomenon that is not mono-causal. Involvement in football violence can be explained in relation to a number of factors, relating to interaction, identity, legitimacy and power. Football violence is also thought to reflect expressions of strong emotional ties to a football team, which may help to reinforce a supporter’s sense of identity.

Introduction

The violent behaviour of football spectators, commonly referred to as “hooliganism”, has been a worldwide phenomenon since the game was introduced (Dunning, Murphy and Williams, 1986). For decades supporters have caused disorder both inside and outside grounds in almost all countries where football is played. Developments in this subculture have also seen violence occur further away from stadiums, partly
to evade intensive policing (Giulianotti and Armstrong, 2002). The phenomenon has produced injuries and fatalities as well as damage to property both inside and outside of stadiums (Guttmann, 1986). The Heysel Stadium disaster in May 1985, in which thirty-nine Italian spectators died, is the worst hooligan-related tragedy Europe has seen in terms of the number of fatalities. Incidents have also occurred away from grounds. In March 1997 for example, an Ajax supporter was killed when Feyenoord and Ajax supporters met for a pre-arranged fight on a wasteland beside a motorway (Giulianotti, 1999). Also in April 2000, two Leeds United fans were stabbed to death in Istanbul on the eve of the club’s Champions League encounter with Galatasaray (Sugden, 2002). More recently, a policeman was killed in Catania in a riot prior to the Sicilian derby against Palermo in February 2007, which saw the Italian league temporarily suspended (Stead and Rookwood, 2007). Hooliganism has also resulted in deaths in England. For example, following a match at Gillingham in March 1998, a Fulham supporter was killed after suffering head wounds in a skirmish outside the ground (Hatherall, 1998). In addition, a Nottingham Forest fan was killed in Burnley in 2003 and a Charlton spectator died during clashes between rival fans at Tottenham in September 2006 (Payne, 2006).

As a result of such occurrences, the phenomenon has received widespread attention from the media. The publicising of hooligan activities has arguably proved unhelpful in that it may have exacerbated the issue, glamorising and reinforcing hooligan behaviour (Redhead, 2007). However, Welsh (1999) argues that the media’s influence has not been entirely unconstructive, as it has also succeeded in pressuring the government and footballing authorities to tackle the problem. Whilst Stott and Pearson (2007) justifiably claim that such ‘pressure’ has proven counter-productive, partly as a consequence of the media’s disproportionate coverage, governmental response has seen policing methods revamped and fresh legislation developed to enable stiffer penalties to be introduced to both deter and penalize unruly behaviour from football fans (Pearson, 2002). Despite such developments in policing and legislation however, supporters continue to engage in football violence.

Since football hooliganism emerged as a perceived “social problem”, the various attempts from both popular and academic perspectives to construct a diagnosis of the phenomenon have focused largely on explaining why it occurs, for as Dunning et al. (1986: 222) note, “...sociologically, the point is to explain why”. However, existing explanations for involvement in football violence are incomplete, a fact which served in part as the rationale for this study. As Williams (2002: 45-46) states,

“...So, who are the hooligans and why do they do it? Good questions. In fact, there is no useful precise definition of football hooliganism available, nor much agreement among UK academics about its seriousness or even its causes.”
Following a number of disasters in the 1980s, English football has experienced considerable political, financial, architectural and organisational developments. New legislation has been introduced and football stadiums have been refurbished and rebuilt, as the game has undergone dramatic economic restructuring. These kinds of alterations (and changes in political climate which have brought them about) have affected the socio-cultural element of fan culture or “fandom”, including violent supporter groups. The existing understanding about hooliganism is however, based primarily on the phenomenon as it existed before these developments. Also, just as the policing of fans has focussed on controlling disorderly supporters, so the majority of research has centred on the perspectives of hooligans, and to a lesser extent, the police. The plight and opinions of those who do not engage in violence has been largely overlooked in academic circles (Poulton, 2002), representing a potential gap in the knowledgebase. This may be true because experienced match-going supporters often share similar social characteristics and often share the same physical space as hooligans, and are therefore knowledgeable about aspects of “fandom”. Subsequently, it is necessary to develop a fan-based perspective on the causes of hooliganism, incorporating the views of spectators on events they may well be exposed to or witness to some degree. In this study interviews and focus groups were conducted with twenty fans from five English clubs during the 2006-2007 season, within both domestic and European competition. The clubs selected represent variance in terms of geography, league position, exposure to European competition, success achieved and fan base. This paper examines the attitudes of supporters as to what causes hooliganism, and assesses how these compared to ‘accepted wisdom’. Supporters offered opinions on a number of subjects, namely personal factors, club affiliation, community, social and class explanations, as well as organisational and match-related aspects.

The causes of modern football hooliganism

Numerous causal factors have been offered in previous literature in relation to hooliganism. In discussing the Heysel disaster for example, Young (1986: 259) makes reference to alcohol and irregular tickets sales, as well as the “…criminal insouciance (disinterest) of the organisers” and the “…cowardly ineptitude” of the police. However, Perryman (2002: 17) argues that the conditions should not be permitted to excuse the victim culture which he considers to be evident when accounting for hooliganism. He suggests that “…there is a pervasive tendency to blame everybody else. The usual suspects are, and remain, the media, the police, the football authorities and opposing fans” This research therefore sought to look beyond the existence and nature of “excuses”, and focus on perceptions of causality. Brimson (2002, 198) claims that sociologists, anthropologists and criminologists have sought to,
“...provide reasons for involvement relating to class, intelligence and family. Later, politics was to be added to that list, plus alienation and even rebellion, until eventually, the theorists came to the conclusion that most hooligans were right-wing, poorly educated products of broken homes looking for some kind of belonging”.

Whilst this is clearly not a reliable assessment of four decades of academic reflection, it does illustrate some of the factors that have been examined. Another summation of research-driven reflections is offered by Rowe (2002), who suggests that football violence is often explained by focusing on genetic and sociological theories. The former relate to physical mechanisms such as aggression, which produce violent behaviour. The latter present the football hooligan as a puppet controlled by certain features in society. A similar perspective was also expressed by participants in this research, with one interviewee claiming that, “Being a hooligan comes from within partly. But then it’s also to do with the society you live in and what you’ve been through in life”. However, the majority of supporters referred to more specific factors in explaining why hooliganism occurs. Two features considered by respondents in this research to have a causal impact on the phenomenon were the media and policing, “...In this country the media play a massive part, you could even say they cause problems. And the police definitely do. If they get it wrong, it can create trouble as well as just not stopping it”. Several participants argued here that the media are partly responsible for hooliganism, “...With all the hype that papers go in for, it can emphasise hooliganism. Writing about it makes people want to get involved to get in the press, or makes some fans angry and want revenge”. Poulton (2002: 131) suggests that “grand assumptions” about the impact of the media are, “…misleading since it invests the media with too much power. This denies readers and audiences the capacity for rejecting media content.” The participants in this research offered no ‘grand assumptions’ about the media’s coverage of football hooliganism, and although the majority noted that such content can be “rejected”, for many it clearly is not. Respondents believed that the newspaper industry in particular does misrepresent spectators, and for many this is perceived to cause further problems. The media was viewed here as a fundamental component of hooligan culture, which assumes a central role in forming public opinion of British supporters. Most fans considered the media’s representation of the phenomenon to be overly negative, overstated and disproportionate. Such representation was considered to be out of context and overly reliant on sensationalist language and the attainment of powerful images. One respondent commented that, “... A picture of one fan playing up under some over-the-top headline is used to tell the world that all fans are thugs. But most fans aren't hooligans. Papers just focus on the negative and make things out to be worse than they are”. Experienced football supporters are usually aware of the nature and extent of hooliganism nationally, and particularly at their club. Therefore, they may be well placed to assess the media’s coverage of such issues.
Supporters suggested that the way they are perceived and therefore treated, often mirrors the stereotypical image portrayed in British newspapers, documentaries and films. These are considered to partially inform public and police opinion. However, the lack of coverage of non-violent supporter culture was perceived to affect the way supporters were received by rivals in European competition, “…Films make out we're all hooligans. The fact we look vaguely similar in appearance gives boys on the continent the impression we're all game, which can make things very nasty”. However, although the media are credited with devising the label of “football hooliganism” (Dunning, Murphy, and Waddington, 2002), supporters did not perceive the media to be the sole cause of football violence. Respondents only considered the sensationalised coverage to be problematic according to the extent to which this impacts their match experience, “…You can blame the press for saying it’s worse than it is and sometimes hoolie films and tabloids can add to the trouble, but it’s not a problem in England. Abroad maybe, but not here”. Another interviewee claimed that reporting on football violence, “…doesn’t really tell you why it happened does it? You need to look at why it actually kicks off”.

Regarding the relevance of police response to hooliganism, participants suggested that this often reflects a lack of understanding of what causes and exacerbates the problem. For example, when managing large groups of supporters away from stadiums (particularly in European competition), the police were considered to act as if supporters are, “all hoolies up for it”. It was claimed that management tactics often imply that the police perceive themselves to be facing a uniformly violent crowd, when this is rarely the case. The psychology of the crowd alters when faced with both provocation from rival supporters, and indiscriminate and disproportionate policing. This creates a context in which those with no initial intention to engage in violence come to see such behaviour as legitimate or even necessary, “…When there’s loads of fans together and the police are out of order then the situation can quickly change. Fans can turn violent if they reckon the police are being over the top. Sometimes fans feel they need to fight back against the cops or rival fans”. Previous work, such as that conducted by Williams, Dunning and Murphy (1984) overlooked the role of the authorities in the formulation of violence. However, in doing so these authors may have contributed to the contention that the majority of supporters are the source of the problem. The findings of this research suggest that the police are thought to share a portion of responsibility, as suggested by Stead and Rookwood (2007). However, as with the media, the presence of the police is thought to in some way, incite football violence, but this does not explain in isolation why hooliganism exists, as one supported commented, “…the police don’t help sometimes. In fact, they can cause problems they should be answering, but it’s not always their fault. You'd have to ask yourself why fans get violent”.

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Supporters suggested that more personal reasons for involvement in football violence related to a number of other issues. For example, “...People get involved for lots of reasons. It's partly who you are as a person. You've got to like fighting, or the idea of it, and then you have to be in places where it will go off”. Participants argued that hooliganism is caused by innate characteristics, situational influences and the experiences they are subjected to, “...It’s who you are and what you’ve been through. Some fans just need to let their frustration out”. This partly contradicts the view of Stott and Pearson (2007: 45) who argue that such behaviour does not relate to the “need to manage aggressive tendencies”. However, these authors may not be best placed to discuss domestic football in these terms, as their data is derived entirely from observing supporters within the irregular framework of biannual international tournaments.

Conversely, the findings of this research reflect the contention of Armstrong (1998) in that involvement in hooliganism can be explained by its value in the context of urban cultures. Respondents also stressed the need for communal expression of collective identity in a violent context, claiming that hooligans react to the behaviour of their peers, “…When groups of lads are together, some seem to want to be violent, and some do it to look hard in front of their mates. Bravado is a big thing in British culture, especially in cities”. However, in isolation, such issues were not considered by participants to be adequate explanations for football violence, “…It’s not just about what an individual is like. There's loads of things that make someone a hoolie”.

Respondents also stressed that hooliganism often reflects the desire to ‘represent’ a particular club, identity and/or nation. The statement offered by Dunning et al. (2002: 2) that, “… hooliganism occurs simply due to having an allegiance to opposing football clubs” may be a narrow view to account for this issue. Similarly, Campbell and Dawson’s (2002: 66) claim that “…rivalries don’t always arrive from issues of locality” does not help us understand where they do “arrive from”. However, this current research has provided some specific findings on the subject from a supporter's point of view. Supporters claimed that social factors, relating to jealousy and the level of success a team or a rival team achieves can lead to hooliganism. One supporter commented that,

“...Fans fight because of where they’re from at times. Usually it’s against a rival or someone they’ve got a grudge against. If it’s against a team that wins everything, jealousy can be a massive factor, as some lads just take it too far”.

Respondents also argued that football violence is more likely to occur in the context of “grudge matches”. Hooliganism at such matches was thought to be caused by supporters wishing to express their strong emotional ties with a team, whilst excluding identities they considered to be in conflict with (or compete with) their own, that is, *when I am not at the match I am not a hooligan*. However, there was disagreement regarding the type and size of game that was likely to generate violence. Some felt
that “big games” were likely to see more problems, whereas others claimed that “…big games means big policing, so it’s usually quiet when it comes to hooliganism”.

Most supporters agreed that although club or national representation was a key contributing factor, violence can occur even when no apparent rivalry exists, which it was argued proves the existence of a hooligan’s “will to fight anyway”. Hooliganism was considered here to reflect the violent manifestation of hatred, jealousy or bitterness towards “an enemy”. This enemy can be a consistently bitter rival, or “just anyone”. In addition, Williams (2002: 41) argues that modern hooliganism is focused mainly on “smaller clubs”. Some respondents in this research disagreed with this argument with the suggestion that, “…on a national scale, bigger clubs are as likely if not more so to have problems with hooligans”. Furthermore, both Evans and Rowe (2002) and Dunning et al. (2002) suggest there is at least an indirect connection between alcohol consumption and football violence, although both state that not all hooligans drink. Conversely, the respondents here denied that there was any consistent connection between alcohol and the cause of football violence. It was claimed that such explanations were typically offered by those who do not “…understand the mentality of fans. Ale and drugs don’t really tell you anything”.

Research into the phenomenon during the 1970s and 1980s often emphasised the theory that football violence was primarily caused by working class supporters. This was quite an obvious conclusion to draw, given that most supporters during this era represented such social status. However, class-based explanations, such as those put forward by the Leicester School (Murphy, Williams, Dunning, 1990), imply that hooliganism is not particularly bonded by class divisions. Qualifying this, it was suggested by many interviewees that class division does not help to explain why hooliganism takes place at one game but not at another. “…I don’t think it’s just about class or what job you’ve got. You get a mixture who do fight and a mixture who don’t”. Instead participants focused on the “…smaller things that help explain why people fight”. Supporters noted the relevance of previous history between clubs, and rivalries between countries, cities and supporter bases. Duke and Slepička (2002: 55) discuss the “chain of revenge reprisals” in this context. However, whilst respondents discussed this issue, it was also argued that, “…it’s not always about revenge. Sometimes it’s superiority; just want to be seen as the hardest, no matter what’s gone before”. Regarding individual relationships between those from different clubs, participants suggested that it is important to look at the “…whole picture behind the rivalries”. It was argued that past events and disagreements between opposing supporters can serve as important reference points in sustaining hostility and triggering violence, “…When there’s been trouble against some team or fans then word gets out, and next time you meet it gets worse”. Several supporters noted that only after a detailed analysis of social and football-based rivalries can the causes of violent behaviour be properly understood,
a point also made by Dodd (2007). The main weakness of many existing sociological examinations however, is the tendency to underestimate the significance of “situational triggers”, as Williams notes (2002: 46).

Organisational, social and match-related explanations were also offered by respondents. Some participants contextualised their opinions by referring to the perceived causes of the Heysel disaster. A number of factors are considered to have contributed to the tragedy, including the events at the previous season’s European Cup final between Roma and Liverpool in Rome. Chisari (2004: 210) claims that there was “no significant trouble” at this game, a position the author explains by stating that “… the troubles were not comparable to other contemporary incidents of football hooliganism” (Chisari, 2004: 217). Conversely, one respondent argued that, “Heysel followed on from Rome the year before. No one died in Rome, but loads got stabbed. The bad feeling between the clubs exploded at Heysel”. Similarly, Scraton (1999: 25) emphasises the relevance of the Rome final, noting that in excess of forty Liverpool fans were subjected to serious knife wounds at the match, which Liverpool won on penalties. Consequently a “ legacy of antagonism” developed between Liverpool and Italian fans. Also Manchester United and Juventus supporters were involved in violence when the clubs met in the semi-final of the 1984 European Cup Winners Cup (Buford, 1991). The ill-feeling deepened after violence occurred between Liverpool and Juventus spectators in the European Super Cup in January 1985 (Ballard and Suff, 1999). Therefore, as quantitatively accurate as Chisari’s argument about the 1984 final may prove, (in relation to death toll for example), it completely overlooks the qualitative significance of the disorder that took place in Rome. Participants claimed that in order to understand the causes of this phenomenon, it is imperative to examine the root and nature of social and club-based rivalries and experiences.

Hooliganism was also perceived to be caused by those feeling marginalised, controlled or unimportant, with violence representing an attempt to reassert an identity, “Fans react if they feel they’re being pushed aside or ignored. Hooligans usually feel they’re the real fans and react when clubs don’t recognise that”. Football chants about social status, team success and disasters were also discussed, with the strength of feeling these subjects embody contributing to violent responses from some supporters. This was considered quite deliberate, for it was argued that the desire for such a response also helps explain “why fans sing them in the first place”. Frosdick and Newton (2006: 412) claim that the build up of tensions producing songs and gestures “are given freedom to erupt into violence”. However, these authors offer no indication of the significance or nature of this factor as a cause of violence. More specifically, Pearson (1999: 35) suggests that such songs often replace immediate in-ground violence rather than leading to it. However, he also points out that this is the case when spectators are “correctly segregated”. The argument that many supporters raised however,
was that this can lead to violence immediately after matches, where no such segregation exists; a point Pearson (1999: 35) fails to note, “…You come out of some grounds and songs can hang in the air. That can cause fighting as fans begin to mix after being separated in the ground”.

Furthermore, many respondents noted that a number of occurrences within a game itself such as a bad result can trigger violent reactions from supporters, “…A good result away from home can be dangerous. Some lads like to take it out on the away end”. However, most respondents did refute the idea that refereeing decisions and other minor details can cause violence, but claimed the outcome of matches and the significance of an encounter are key factors in spectator disorder. Violence was also thought to be generated when supporters feel dissatisfied with the running of their club, or if they sense injustice. The 2007 Champions League final between Liverpool and AC Milan in Athens was a notable example discussed by participants. Leading up to the final, supporters were angry about the role that Liverpool FC and UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) played in the distribution of tickets. Allt (2007: 92) also refers to this issue, criticising those responsible for “…handing out bundles of preferential treatment and tickets to other bloated ties, double-dealing suits and big-game glory-hunters… using nepotism, snobbery and power play”. In the build up to this game ticket touts, policeman and supporters were subjected to violent outbursts, with many claiming that disorder only occurred due to the “…unjust ticketing policies of Liverpool and UEFA and the greedy scumbags that took advantage”. Another respondent stated, “…We knew it would cause trouble out there. 17,000 tickets in a stadium that holds 80-odd wasn’t enough. It’s people’s anger at UEFA that’s caused the violence”.

Finally however, the data obtained in this study illustrates that most supporters do not engage in football hooliganism. For the majority of supporters, factors such as team affiliation, passion, community, social and class divisions, together with organisational and match-related aspects, do not result in violent behaviour. Participants argued that this is largely due to personal factors,

“…Most fans don’t fight as they don’t want to get caught, but more likely they’re just not violent. Most people are naturally against violence, unless something triggers it like, say war. But football isn’t war. You don’t get that amount of hate, that idea of an enemy. It’s a passion, not a war”.

Therefore, the causes highlighted here are only relevant for those who “like fighting or the idea of it, or take their passion for a club too far”. Most supporters, even those who are intensely passionate about their club or country, do not consider “fighting for it” to be a necessary or attractive activity to become involved in. Many of those who do however, have been discouraged by the threat of punishment, or the sense of being marginalised. What remains is a minority of supporters who want to fight, or
at least be seen to be involved in football hooliganism, together with those who get “caught up” in violence or feel their circumstances legitimise violent action. These behaviours and desires are generated by one of, or in most cases a combination of the factors discussed here.

Conclusion

Involvement in football hooliganism has been explained in relation to a number of factors, relating to interaction, identity, legitimacy and power. Crucially, it was seen to reflect a desire to be involved in, or at least be seen to be involved in a usually limited degree of violence. Brimson (2002: 198) claims that, “…in their quest to apply rational reasoning to an irrational problem”, the search for a “good time was the one factor that the theorists missed”. However, this may not be the case as a number of detailed and useful academic explorations of causality have noted the ‘pleasure’ associated with football violence, including Dunning et al. (2002) and Campbell and Dawson (2002). Also, Spaaij (2007: 330) discusses the “buzz of excitement”, stating that “…the hooligan experience (real or mediated) remains highly desirable to large numbers of prospective participants”. The findings from this research may substantiate the claim that hooliganism might be attributed to the search for excitement and pleasure.

In closing, detailing fan opinion has produced some useful insights, but in isolation, this work does not answer every question. It has opened up avenues for more work, which it is hoped, will further our understanding of the problem. For example, it would be useful to explore the phenomenon at a wider range of clubs and localities. It would also be beneficial to ascertain perspectives of the police and hooligans in the context of what fans think. Subsequent research could also examine domestic and international policing methods, and the extent to which the law and policing are perceived to be based on a sound understanding of the causes of modern football hooliganism.

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2. Paul is 23 years old and recently graduated with a degree in Sports Studies. He is a passionate supporter of football and a highly qualified coach. He has watched the game at a professional level, and coached at youth level in several countries spanning four continents. He is currently working as a Sport Development Officer for Sefton Council and also works for the coaching company, Merseyside Multisports.

3. Dear reader, if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic the authors can be contacted on, Paul Gow: paul_gow@hotmail.com and Joel Rookwood: rookwoj@hope.ac.uk.