

THE PREVENTION OF FOOTBALL HOOLIGANISM: A TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE*

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Introduction

Three decades after football hooliganism first began to arouse major international concern, the so-called ‘English disease’ continues to generate official and public anxiety. In spite of all the efforts made and resources invested over the past decades, it seems that football hooliganism remains, to varying extents, a disturbing social problem.¹ However, important variations exist in the level and nature of football hooliganism in different localities. Although international structures and concerted responses are required, prevention strategies should ultimately be based on local practices and designed to fit local needs. The prevention of football hooliganism requires the continuous and long-term commitment of a variety of institutions and agents, including local clubs and fan communities. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it aims to provide some insight into the main cross-national and cross-local resemblances and dissimilarities in the patterns and forms of football hooliganism. Second, the paper attempts to stimulate the transnational exchange and dissemination of prevention strategies by discussing some of the ‘good practices’ carried out in different countries and at different clubs.

Football hooliganism: a conceptual analysis

There is no precise definition of ‘football hooliganism’. It lacks legal definition, precise demarcation of membership and is used to cover a variety of actions which take place in more or less directly football-related contexts.² To account for some of the phenomenon’s main features, a distinction should be drawn between spontaneous, relatively isolated incidents of spectator violence and *the behaviour of socially organized or institutionalized fan (hooligan) groups which engage in competitive violence, principally with other hooligan groups.*³ This distinction is historically observable through a shift from a pattern in which attacks on match officials and opposing players predominated over attacks on rival fans, to a pattern in which inter-fan group fighting and fighting between fans and the police became the predominant form of spectator disorderliness.⁴ This shift has taken place in various European countries, but at different times.

Regretfully, the ideal typical distinction cannot account for the complexity and versatility of the phenomenon with regard to the nature of the violence as well as the degree of organization involved. At least five conceptual dilemmas can be identified. First, while football hooliganism primarily consists of competitive violence between rival fan groups their violent behaviour is not restricted to inter-group fighting, but may include missile throwing, vandalism, attacks on the police and regular fans, or racial abuse. Second, the violent behaviour of hooligan groups takes places not only at or in the immediate vicinity of football grounds, but also in other contexts, for example city centres, pubs, clubs or railway stations.⁵ Third, football hooliganism involves a

great deal of symbolic opposition and ritualized aggression which is easily confused with 'real' violence.⁶ For many fans identifying with football hooliganism, violence 'is not as central to their association as is sometimes assumed and rather the result of the "game" of confrontation and their willingness occasionally to turn symbolic opposition into physical encounter'.⁷ Fourth, even if self-declared hooligans are committed to the use of violence, their behaviour is often triggered by more spontaneous elements, for instance aggressive policing or an unfortunate match result. The term 'organized' is, in this sense, misleading. A popular approach to collective violence, for instance within journalist and police circles, is to stress the degree of formal organization involved. This view projects hooligan groups as paramilitary organizations in which 'ring leaders', 'generals' or 'lieutenants' initiate and coordinate riots. In reality, the degree of organization involved in football hooliganism appears to vary across cultures and localities. In fact, even within British football the degree of organization involved in football hooliganism tends to vary significantly, as is suggested by the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS):

The amount and quality of this organization varies greatly between groups, from a highly disciplined, hierarchical criminal group that associates continuously throughout the week to a more casual grouping that comes on the occasion of a football match with the intention of committing violent acts.⁸

Fifth, transnational dissimilarities complicate the conceptualization of football hooliganism. Self-declared hooligan groups have equivalent counterparts throughout Northern and Central Europe. Quite distinctive fan subcultures exist in more southern and eastern parts of Europe and in Latin America. In countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal and the south of France, ultras are militant fan groups but their violent proclivities vary substantially.⁹ Ultra groups usually feature a comparatively high degree of formal organization including official membership and recruitment campaigns.¹⁰ Their basic function is to provide expressive and colourful support to the team. Therefore they are not necessarily concerned with defeating or humiliating their cultural peers through intimidation or violence.¹¹ Although militant fan groups in Latin America ('barras bravas') resemble in some respects European hooligan groups, there are also important differences. The barras bravas engage in political activity and, in addition, they orchestrate violent confrontations with rival groups.¹² Configured like paramilitary task groups, the barras bravas 'carry out illegitimate tasks by means of violence and compulsion, and are used by sporting and political leaders for that purpose'.¹³

Patterns of cultural resemblance and dissimilarity in football hooliganism

Football hooliganism transgresses national boundaries. The transnational subcultures surrounding football hooliganism historically evolved around British terrace culture. On the continent, the British subcultures underwent a process of cultural creolisation as indigenous fan groups merged the adopted patterns with their own distinctive cultural forms.¹⁴ The transnational diffusion of cultural practices also occurred in a reverse direction, as for example the introduction into British fan culture of continental designer clothing styles in the early 1980s. The ultra subcultures dominant in countries such as Italy, Spain, and parts of France have come to influence supporter groups in Northern and Eastern Europe, with similar fan groups being formed, to varying extents, in countries such as Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, the former Yugoslavia and parts of Scandinavia. British fan cultures of the late 1990s have also started to experiment with aspects of the south European model, through the use of Latin chant patterns and musical bands.¹⁵

Notwithstanding the apparent transnational dimensions of football culture and hooliganism, I would argue that most academic studies underplay important cross-national and cross-local dissimilarities in the patterns and forms of football hooliganism.¹⁶ The intensity and rapidity of today's global cultural flows contribute to the misleading belief that the world is becoming a more singular place.¹⁷ The technologies of mobility have changed and a growing range of media reach across borders. More specifically, recent changes in the football industry, for example the expansion of the Champions League, are believed to enhance the homogenization of football cultures. However, transnational cultural flows have not affected different countries to similar extents.¹⁸ Football is one of the social spheres in which the dynamic intertwinement of the local and the global can be observed par excellence. The fan cultures of particular clubs share ritual elements, but at the same time each fan culture exhibits distinct forms of prescribed formal ritual behaviour and symbolism.¹⁹ Local historical and cultural traditions and legacies continue to exert a strong influence over patterns of behaviour. Variations in the level and forms of football hooliganism need to be understood in terms of the way hooligan subcultures 'are nested within the ritual and collective symbolism of each fan culture'.²⁰ We should therefore take into account not only variations in football hooliganism *between* cultures, but also dissimilarities *within* countries, regions, cities or fan communities.

Within this local context we should also examine the interactional dynamics of football hooliganism. Local patterns and forms of football hooliganism evolve through the continuous interactions between authorities, club, fan community, and 'hooligans'. One way of approaching these inter-group dynamics is to focus on the effects of official attempts to curb football hooliganism. Murphy and his associates argue that:

as the controls imposed by central government, the football authorities and the police have grown more all-embracing, tighter and sophisticated, so the football hooligans in their turn have tended to become more organized and to use more sophisticated strategies and plans in an attempt to evade the controls. At the same time, football hooligan fighting has tended to become displaced from an immediate football context and to take place at times and in situations where the controls are, or are perceived to be, weak or non-existent.²¹

Approaches of this kind tend to highlight the large number of measures designed to curb football hooliganism: the segregation of home and away fans, fencing, closed-circuit television (CCTV), conversion to all-seater stadia, identity card schemes, intelligence gathering, and so on. In recent years social psychologists have developed a more dynamic approach to the interactions between police officers and football fans. Where most scholars tend to concentrate on explaining football hooliganism in terms of the macro-social origins of conflictual norms, these authors emphasize more the ways in which understandings and behaviours develop in context, such that even those who initially and ordinarily eschew violence may come to act violently.²² I would argue that while cross-national differences in policing in Western Europe appear to have diminished,²³ police/supporter interactions still vary considerably across localities, depending, among others, on police professionalism and culture, and fans' perceptions of the police. Analysis of cross-national and cross-local variations in football hooliganism should also include other forms of interaction, notably the relations between hooligans and clubs, and fan-based activities and initiatives. The former type implies, for example, that important dissimilarities exist with regard to the extent to which, and the forms in which, football clubs engage in the prevention of football hooliganism.

Levels and forms of prevention: some 'good practices'

Over the past decades a large number of international, national and local initiatives have been carried out to advance the prevention of football hooliganism. Regretfully, lack of space prevents me from examining in depth a substantial number of these strategies. Instead, I will briefly outline some good practices developed at national or local levels. These practices reveal that successful prevention depends on the efforts of a variety of institutions and agents. They also highlight the importance of continuous, locally grounded commitment to the prevention of football hooliganism.

A. Police forces

Police are regularly criticized for their aggressive style of policing at football matches. Certain police forces in particular, notably those in parts of Eastern and Southern Europe and Latin America, hold a reputation for their indiscriminate use of violence. Policing football matches often seems to amount to nothing more than reacting to problems as they arise.²⁴ On the other hand, the last decade has witnessed the growing popularity of proactive and intelligence-led policing. National police units increasingly cooperate in the coordination and dissemination of football intelligence in preparing for European Cup matches or international tournaments.²⁵ It is likely that in the near future international cooperation will be reinforced due to the expansion of the European Union and international football competitions. In this process the British, Dutch, German and Belgian experiences can function as role models for other European countries. These countries' intelligence operations are comparatively advanced, with national and local football intelligence officers closely monitoring the activities of hooligan groups. This style of policing appears to have been, to some extent, a successful strategy in the containment of football hooliganism. Nevertheless, significant variations exist in the investments made in intelligence-led policing in different countries and in different localities. These variations can be strikingly large, depending, among others, on political priorities, police cultures and personell skills.²⁶

Good practice: intelligence-led policing in British football

From the mid-1980s the British authorities have been investing considerably in safety and security management at football grounds. All-seater stadia have replaced the anonymous crowds of the legendary youth ends. The movement of supporters is closely monitored by closed-circuit television (CCTV), safety officers, stewards and police. This has made it substantially easier to identify those engaging in violent behaviour inside football grounds. British intelligence operations have advanced through trial and error, as for example the largely failed court cases against alleged hooligan leaders in the mid-1980s, when dozens of hooligans were acquitted due to unreliable police evidence. In the aftermath of these cases the British police began to concentrate more explicitly on the documentation of intelligence and the protection of sources. The police now uses a variety of inter-connected databases and the cooperation between the various institutions (police units; clubs; Football Banning Order Authority) has improved significantly. On the street level, spotters and intelligence officers monitor the activities of groups of football hooligans, gathering information on their membership, whereabouts and intentions.

Surveillance and the use of technology have meant that committed football hooligans have had to go greater lengths to fulfil their desire for violent confrontation.²⁷ Occasionally they succeed in circumventing police surveillance by confronting their rivals at unusual locations or

times. These violent encounters usually take place away from football grounds and are difficult to prevent. Responding to the increasingly sophisticated strategies of football hooligans, the British police have invested in the collection of evidence. Intelligence is now recorded on paper and sources are coded to enable the use of pieces of intelligence in court. The police also uses camera recordings at train stations or in city centres as evidence. The Home Office facilitates extra fundings for the investigation of unsolved cases. Based on new evidence, dozens of hooligans were recently convicted for crimes committed in the late 1990s.

In some respects the uses of football intelligence are limited. First, intelligence gathering concentrates almost exclusively on known hooligans and organized hooligan groups while much spectator violence at football matches appears to be relatively unorganized and not the product of hooligan groups.²⁸ Intelligence-led policing largely fails to prevent this type of violence. Second, although national intelligence practices have advanced, important variations exist with regard to regional and local investments and successes. Such variations also occur *within* police districts, as illustrated by the varying degrees of proactivity of police units within the Metropolitan Police Service.²⁹

B. Cooperation between local governments and football clubs: fan projects

A belief prevails in parts of Europe that the prevention of football hooliganism requires the promotion of consciousness among kids and the strengthening of their ties with football clubs. Football, in this sense, is viewed as an important site for socialization and a means for crime prevention. In Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and parts of Scandinavia this belief is reflected in structured and institutionalized efforts to prevent football hooliganism through fan projects.³⁰ The local interpretation and emphasis of the fan projects vary substantially. The *Fanprojekte* in German football attempt, among others, to prevent football hooliganism by improving the relations between fans, clubs and police.³¹ Belgian fan coaching mainly concentrates on the prevention of violent confrontation and offering young hooligans alternative means for self-development.³² In the Netherlands, fan projects aim to improve the relations between clubs and militant fan groups, and the social skills and career opportunities of convicted hooligans.³³ In the late 1980s, local fan coordinators were installed to contact (potential) hooligans, organize fan activities and provide services to young supporters. At the same time police began to invest in the deployment of ‘supporter attendants’ – plain-clothes officers engaging in community policing among football fans in order to establish social control and to gather intelligence.

Fan projects are commonly praised for their contribution to the prevention of football hooliganism; yet, at the same time, they are also criticized for their ‘soft’ approach. The main dilemma surrounding the projects is, arguably, the difficulty of assessing their preventative effects. Evidence suggests that certain projects have improved the relationship between hooligans, clubs, youth workers and the police, and have prevented young fans from identifying with football hooliganism.³⁴ It is unclear, however, to what extent fan projects can exert influence on committed hooligans. The more organized hooligan groups increasingly distance themselves from ‘regular’ fans and relocate their activities to other sites. For some hooligan groups, violent confrontation has become an end in itself and their ties with fan communities have loosened. They have developed an ‘elite self conception’ based on physical prowess and style. This development obstructs the fan projects’ ability to build a fruitful relationship with these groups.

Good practice: fan projects at FC Groningen and Cambuur Leeuwarden

In the north of the Netherlands two distinctive local fan projects are being implemented. The first project, at FC Groningen, incorporates the local government, youth workers, club, police and the Public Prosecutor. The project concentrates on measures to prevent violence and criminal activity among (potential) hooligans and on improving the atmosphere and safety at home matches. A distinctive method is the deployment of former hooligans in order to influence the behaviour of risk supporters. Furthermore, the project offers banned supporters alternative activities and the opportunity to report themselves to the police. By reporting to the police on a weekly basis their banning orders are curtailed. An evaluation of the Groningen fan project suggests that it improves fan behaviour and decreases the number of police officers required at home matches. The interventions of fan coaches appear to have a positive influence on some (potential) hooligans.³⁵ Despite these positive results, it is difficult to assess to what extent the fan project alone can explain changes in fan behaviour or if other factors should be taken into account.

The second fan project, at Cambuur Leeuwarden, also incorporates a variety of institutions but instead it concentrates explicitly on three different levels of prevention. First, the project aims to improve local youth prevention policies by organizing guidance campaigns at elementary schools. Second, project members accompany banned football hooligans in order to prevent recidivism and to improve their career opportunities. The fan coach attempts to develop a fruitful relationship with risk supporters. Third, the project aims at developing a safe and pleasant atmosphere at home matches. A distinctive feature of the Leeuwarden fan project is that it provides banned hooligans the opportunity to apply for the ‘buddy-mentor’ programme, designed to improve the fans’ career opportunities. Participation in the programme is awarded the curtailment of the banning order. The Leeuwarden project appears to prevent (potential) hooligans’ recidivism.³⁶ The number of violent confrontations involving Cambuur fans has decreased significantly over the last few years. None of nineteen banned supporters participating in the project have yet relapsed into crime. In 2002, the fan project won the Hein Roethof award for the most successful crime prevention initiative in the Netherlands.

C. Football clubs

Football clubs are often criticized for their lack of commitment to the prevention of football hooliganism. Southern European and Latin American clubs in particular have been enduring such criticism. In certain countries, football clubs have long been providing favours to militant fan groups: exclusive territory within the stadium; free tickets; travel arrangements; and an office or storage room within the premises of the stadium. These favours have contributed to the expansion of the groups, enabling them to attract new members through the exhibition of spectacular displays and by offering them reduced prices or free tickets.³⁷ Few clubs have taken action to prevent football hooliganism, partly because they fear reprisals of hooligans.

Good practice: zero tolerance at FC Barcelona

FC Barcelona suffers from the violent behaviour of a minority of its fans. In recent years, members of radical fan group Boixos Nois – most notably the subgroup Casuals FCB – have assaulted rival fans, other Barça fans, journalists, police officers and bystanders. Football hooliganism at the club is closely intertwined with other forms of criminal behaviour such as drug trafficking, extortion and violent robbery. At the heart of the problem lies the club’s historical lack of interest in preventing or reducing football hooliganism. The club long supported

the violent elements within Boixos Nois by facilitating free tickets and travel arrangements. Club directors also employed notorious hooligans in their private businesses, for example as security staff. The relationship between club and hooligans has produced a situation in which criminal elements flourished and few external controls were imposed.

Joan Laporta's victory in the 2003 club elections caused a seachange in the club's security policies. The club applies a zero tolerance strategy which intends to eradicate all violent elements from the Camp Nou stadium. FC Barcelona is, at present, the only Spanish club that actively combats football hooliganism, although others – for instance Real Madrid – have gone to some length to prevent the growth of radical fan groups. Since the start of the campaign Laporta has received numerous death threats and attempts have been made to assault the chairman. The club nevertheless continues to impede the violent elements within Barça's fan community. Local and national media have reinforced the campaign's public profile by emphasizing the urgency of the problem.³⁸

Despite FC Barcelona's pioneering campaign, the zero tolerance strategy exhibits some flaws. At the start of the campaign Laporta emphasized that the club would distinguish between violent and non-violent fans within Boixos Nois. In reality, the club's commitment to eradicating football hooliganism appears to affect all members of the fan group. Other fan groups, notably *Almogàvers* and *Sang Culé*, have also suffered from stringent security policies. Members of these groups have regularly been threatened and assaulted by Boixos Nois section *Casuals FCB*. The fan groups claim that the club misjudges their passionate, non-violent approach to football fandom. The club has made no effort to draw leaders of these groups into the conversation on the prevention of football hooliganism and the future of youth support at FC Barcelona, thereby failing to appreciate the groups' positive social functions within Barça's fan community.

D. Football fans

Football fans are potentially powerful agents in the prevention of football hooliganism. Numerous national supporters' organizations have rallied against violence and racial abuse at football matches. Initiatives have also been conducted at a local level, for example by fan groups in the south of Europe. Their overt condemnation of violence and racism enables constructive collaboration between fans, clubs and governing bodies. Various ultra groups contribute to conferences, debates or educational programmes promoting the positive social functions of sport. The constructive fan model advocated by certain ultra groups has become an important point of reference for many young football fans and is comparatively accessible to women and ethnic minorities.

Good practice: the *Curva Jove* at RCD Espanyol

The *Curva Jove* project unites a number of larger and smaller fan groups supporting RCD Espanyol de Barcelona. The main functions of the project are to unite and stimulate the club's youth support and to provide unconditional (yet critical!) and expressive support to the team. The *Curva Jove* opposes to the violent behaviour of the ultra group *Brigadas Blanquiazules*. Spatially, the two factions occupy different sections of the ground, mainly to prevent inter-group conflict. One of the ultra groups participating in the project, *Eternos*, mainly consisting of ex-members of *Brigadas Blanquiazules*, was founded to promote a non-violent and non-political fan culture: 'We've been there, it's now time to move away from violence and politics towards a model with

which young fans can identify.³⁹ The ultra group refuses to allow politics to overshadow football and to transform individual political beliefs into a collective symbol of identity.

Within the Curva there are a lot of people who would love to use political symbols, but the problem is that it would offend the rest of the home crowd. So you have a choice: you either use such symbols and evoke resentment, or you leave your banners at home. We choose the latter option. Our aim is to cooperate with the rest of the fan community and not to isolate ourselves.⁴⁰

The Curva Jove has gradually grown from 200 to over 2,000 affiliates, among which a substantial number of women – around 20 per cent – and young boys. Additionally, the projects appears to ‘convert’ a section of Brigadas Blanquiazules that is now willing to abandon its violent and political proclivities. Nevertheless, the Curva Jove fails to incorporate Brigadas’ most violent core. Intimidation and physical conflict between the two factions are, in fact, a regular occurrence.

Conclusion

The good practices highlighted in this paper indicate that the prevention of football hooliganism depends on the efforts of a variety of institutions and agents. The prevention of football hooliganism requires a concerted and continuous response. Cross-national and cross-local dissimilarities in the patterns and forms of football hooliganism reveal that, despite important transnational resemblances, football hooliganism is nested within particular (local) fan cultures. Prevention strategies should therefore be designed to fit local needs. The good practices discussed in this paper may help to promote a more profound understanding of possible strategies for the prevention of football hooliganism. To advance such an understanding, the transnational exchange and dissemination of local knowledge and practices are required.

Notes

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