

CONSTRUCTING THE THREAT IN A SPORTS CONTEXT: BRITISH PRESS DISCOURSES ON FOOTBALL HOOLIGANISM

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Though occasionally criticised¹, the constructionist approach has become an increasingly powerful tool for analysing various aspects of social life. Beginning in the 1960s, the study of the social construction of public problems has thus established that not only the construction of social enemies is important in political terms but also it is essential to the very defining of the mainstream society and to the further maintenance of its cohesion². These two functions are so strongly interrelated that it is not possible anymore to address the political aspect of the process while ignoring its social one. In other words, the political benefits that may result from the implementation of hard coercive policies on allegedly threatening social figures should not be dissociated from the fact that ‘civilized’ societies may confirm their own sense of unitary consensus on the grounds of their contemplation of outcasts³.

Yet, these socially constructed outcasts cannot be efficiently excluded from the mainstream society unless they become the object of a rupture process, liable to draw a clear line between the perpetrators of the allegedly threatening acts and the rest of the community⁴, as part of a process of establishing guilt. This rupture process allows, moreover, expelling all the moral ambiguity from the coercive measures to be adopted against the wrongdoers and from the values thus defended. It is the exclusion of the ‘other’ from the mainstream society that allows the unreserved implementation on him/her of a series of coercive measures, going from various control devices to detention, torture and even death⁵. Moreover, the binary logic this exclusion rests upon is also a useful hegemonic device due to its ability to simplify complex issues. In setting up the ‘other’ as a “hyper-signifier of all that is bad and immoral”⁶, it hushes the complex causes of his/her actions and, hence, avoids putting any possible blame on the mainstream society.

Studies on the social construction of public problems have furthermore drawn attention to the important place held by the media in the framing of these problems⁷. Far from playing a mere informational role, the media are actively involved in the shaping of the public debate on social issues, as part of the circle of primary and secondary definers and claims makers out of which public problems are socially constructed. Therefore, the media coverage of public problems can be seen as “a socially constructed representation of reality and as an arena of problem construction in which struggles to designate and define public problems are waged”⁸. Media discourses on controversial social issues are thus integrated into a process of social construction of public problems that, on the one hand, involves various social groups and institutions struggling to promote their own values and interests, while, on the other, it obtains its optimum effect when it implies the mutual reinforcement of public discourses and policies.

In the specific case of the press coverage of sports crowd disorder, many scholars have highlighted how the regular adoption of a deviance amplification process has contributed to the construction of a threatening-football-hooligan figure that, in turn, justified the increasingly hard policing of football fans⁹. Observed in many European countries¹⁰, this process has been widely put into practice in the UK, where ever since the 1970s one of the

main features of the press coverage of the football hooligans has been the adoption of a deviance amplification process and the subsequent representation of the wrongdoers following a strictly binary logic¹¹.

However, the ‘otherness’-related media discursive strategies this process rests upon have not been extensively studied yet. This paper aims therefore to address this issue by analysing the current media representation of the football hooligans in the UK. For this purpose, it will rely on a series of elements borrowed from a thematic content analysis of the British press discourses on football hooliganism during the 2000 European Football Championship. This tournament is chosen because it was characterized by a low degree of violence, as first acknowledged the authorities of the host countries¹² and, later on, pointed out one scholar¹³. The data come from all articles published on this issue by the following daily and Sunday nationally distributed upmarket newspapers: *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times*. Tabloids are not included for they are not believed to be important in the shaping of the decision makers’ opinion. The aforementioned newspapers have different political affiliations, constituting thus a representative sample of the information offered by the broadsheet press on that matter. Among them are two centre right newspapers (*The Times*, *The Sunday Times*) and three left-wing/centre left ones (*The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Independent*). The sample includes articles published in both the Main and Sports sections of the aforementioned newspapers during the tournament (10 June-2 July 2000). A total of 222 articles were identified and analysed. Most of them were referring to the incidents that had occurred in Brussels and Charleroi.

The previous framing of the issue

Since the mid-1960s, the football hooliganism has become the object of a regularly media-fuelled moral panic and a subsequent claim for hardening the repression of the wrongdoers. Reflecting the growing concern of the conservative people about the working-class youth’s anti-social behaviour and their demand to re-establish law and order¹⁴, the claim for stricter social control was relayed and eventually legitimised by the press through the adoption of some stereotyped modes of representing the football fans. This specific representation of the issue sought mainly to establish the necessary to the introduction of any new coercive policy us/them dichotomy.

The ever since widely used binary representation of football hooligans has namely relied on the broad and repetitive diffusion of the irrationality and bestiality themes as well as on the total dissociation of football hooligans from their historical context¹⁵. In the former case, football hooligans were seen as particularly dangerous for either they were acting under the influence of conscience-altering substances (alcohol, drugs) or they were simply denied full mental faculties. Therefore, their dangerousness was not solely linked to the outcome of their acts, with regard to human victims and/or material damages, but also, and above all, to the very origin of their behaviour, which was believed to result from an unknown irrational impulse that made it incomprehensible, unpredictable and, ultimately, uncontrollable. When it became widely accepted, the irrationality thesis, which excluded any possible sensible communication between football hooligans and the rest of the community, made any long-term preventive policy pointless and inevitably led to the admittance of security policies as the only possible answer to such a social threat.

The binary representation of football hooligans was further strengthened due to the regular use of the bestiality theme, according to which football hooligans were not belonging to the human race because their behavioural patterns were seen as closer to animal rather than

human norms. The subsequent denial of any possible ingroup status implied also the destitution of the right to have any right at all¹⁶. Rights cannot be possessed by animals for they are intrinsically linked to human dignity. As long then as they are presented as unable to think, feel and react like ordinary humans, football hooligans can be easily excluded from the rest of the community and denied even their civil rights and liberties¹⁷. Henceforth, these animal-like wrongdoers can be either subjected to harder than usual coercive measures or can even be excluded from the ordinary legal framework to fall under exceptional rules without raising any critics at all.

To draw even more firmly the line between football hooligans and the rest of the community, the press have usually dissociated them from their social context. On the one hand, the press reports have regularly sought to distinguish football hooligans from the allegedly 'genuine' football fans. On the other hand, this denial of group membership went beyond the sports world to cover the whole society. Not only journalists avoided mentioning the prevailing working-class origin of the football fans but also they avoided establishing any causal link between the socio-economic position of the football fans and their violent behaviour, while trying to cast doubts on the very possible existence of such a link. As the credibility of such a position required the hushing of any counter-argument, the reported in the press sociological explanations of the phenomenon were limited to simplistic approaches, according to which football hooliganism was due to the weakening of family control, to urban reforms in the post-war British cities, to the increase in the wages of football players, or to the fact that football hooligans simply loved fighting¹⁸.

The present representation

The analysis of the British press discourses on football hooliganism during the 2000 European Football Championship uncovered that the football hooligans keep on being the object of a discursive construction of the 'otherness' following a strict binary logic.

Presently, the us/them dichotomy relies on a double rupture, i.e. a cultural and biological one, which creates the impression of a multilevel pathological state. The stigmatization of the divergence from the dominant behavioural pattern, expressed through the frequent use of terms such as "thugs", "yobs" and "louts", is therefore integrated into and eventually reinforced by the stigmatization of the divergence from the mental health standards. Hence, football hooligans are constantly presented as irrational, either because they act under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or because they suffer from some vague mental deficiency. They are thus qualified as "idiots"¹⁹, "mindless"²⁰, "warp-minded", "simpletons and cretins" or "sots and oafs"²¹, who form a "drunken thuggery"²² that is furthermore "fuelled by drugs"²³.

The analysis did not reveal any coupling of the irrationality theme with the bestiality one. However, the dangerousness of this irrational behaviour is further strengthened by another strategy that seeks to put forward a 'Dr Jekyll and Hyde' image of the football fans. The press reporting focuses then on the "surprisingly middle-aged and well-heeled" fans²⁴ to denounce the regular transformation of allegedly respectable and comfortably off citizens into violent thugs. In the 2000 European Football Championship context, this image relied heavily on information released by British senior police officers with regard to the occupations of the English fans expelled by the Belgian authorities. It was thus mentioned that amidst these deported fans were some barristers, bankers, public-service workers, firemen, accountants and insurance clerks²⁵. The fact that this image should be considered as mere evidence is further corroborated by another columnist reporting the view of a Turkish migrant living in Brussels:

“I think that many of the British hooligans have good jobs and education. I cannot understand why [they are involved in violent incidents]”²⁶. Yet, this apparently solid image of the social position of the football hooligans is highly problematic. First, the presence of such ‘respectable citizens’ among the football hooligans cannot be fully assessed unless we know the rate they represented among the deported fans. But this information is not revealed. Furthermore, though almost all newspapers studied here mention the heavy-handed tactics of the Belgian police, denounced for deporting even innocent fans²⁷, no association is made between the two facts²⁸. Even when the ‘wealthy hooligan’ thesis is called into question by a journalist pointing out that “most [of football hooligans] were unemployed or in unskilled jobs”²⁹, this remark does not imply any further analysis for it is finally assumed that “hooligans indulge in violence because they find it exciting”³⁰. Yet, the diffusion of this image accredits implicitly the irrationality thesis as this violent behaviour seems to mark a rupture in an otherwise normal life, representing thus the inmost fear of every single person, i.e. to become victim of uncontrollable impulses, and the extreme threat to every social group, i.e. to regularly become victim of such a ‘meaningless’ violence.

However meaningless it may be perceived, this violence is linked to some aggravating factors. Apart from the omni-present heavy-drinking one, the most frequently mentioned factor is the downmarket press discourse that constantly fuels the nationalist and racist beliefs of the football fans, “who, regretting that we no longer rule the world, want us to control the penalty area”³¹. The alleged negative influence of the “columnists who write of football as a matter of life and death”³² is further reinforced by the role played on that matter by politicians: the Thatcher era “legitimised macho yobbery” while excessive liberalism contributed to the “breakdown of social respect and the collapse of the principle of duty”³³. It is noteworthy that the reporting of these allegedly aggravating factors is never coupled with any socio-political analysis of the phenomenon. Football hooligans remain cut off their historical context. At the best, they are seen as passive instruments of a tabloid-diffused chauvinist and xenophobic ideology. Sports crowd disorder is thus dissociated from the widening socio-economic exclusion of several social strata and its subsequent effect on urban violence. The omission of the socio-economic facets of the phenomenon and the focussing on external aggravating factors, such as the consumption of alcohol and the nationalism-fuelling downmarket press discourses, allow the upmarket press to reject any broader social responsibility for the genesis and/or the development of the phenomenon. Football hooligans remain thus ‘social aliens’ and football hooliganism is nothing more but a threatening behaviour that must be put under control by all means.

The abovementioned findings reveal a significant continuity between the previous and the current press coverage of the issue. Most of the key strategies of representing football hooliganism in 2000 were already featuring in the previous framing of the issue. The first major difference, i.e. the absence of the bestiality theme, should be arguably related with the fact that this theme has been usually put forward by tabloids and, therefore, was not expected to be found here. The second difference, i.e. the denouncing of the tabloid press nationalist discourses, is indeed a recent feature of the upmarket press coverage of the issue but its impact is fairly limited. As a matter of fact, it does not call into question the previous framing of the issue insofar as the inclusion of a new external aggravating factor strengthens the dismissal of any possible causal link between the phenomenon and the very functioning of the mainstream society.

What is striking, however, is the fact that the 2000 press discourses are not related to any significantly violent incidents. It seems, therefore, that the press have adopted a static representation of the issue over the last forty years, regardless of the effective dangerousness

of the phenomenon. Furthermore, as the analysis did not reveal any significant differences between the newspapers studied here, this persistent reproduction of the socially-alien-threatening-football hooligan image is to a great extent independent from the political affiliation of each newspaper. Arguably, this trans-political, stereotyped representation of the issue cannot be dissociated from the increasingly important place held by internal security issues in general in both domestic and EU political agendas. In this respect, the 2000 press discourses on football hooliganism should be closely associated with the current public discourses on several internal security issues, such as immigration, petty crime, juvenile delinquency and urban violence, being thus part of a broader process of securitization of many societal issues in the EU countries³⁴. Yet, at the same time, the maintaining of a social enemy beyond any effective threat assessment cannot be fully understood unless it is seen as part of an identity defining process of the contemporary British society. Already highlighted by many scholars³⁵, this ongoing process seems then to impede any revising of the pre-established domestic threatening figures for the calling into question of what is arguably one of the key oppositional patterns of this collective identity may end up jeopardising the internal cohesion of the community.

¹ See, for instance, Velody, Irving & Williams, Robin (eds.): *The Politics of Constructionism*. Sage Publications, London, New Delhi 1998.

² Erikson, Kai T.: *Wayward Puritans*. John Wiley, New York 1966; Becker, Howard: *Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. The Free Press of Glencoe, New York 1963.

³ Foucault, Michel: *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Random House, New York 1965.

⁴ Girard, René: *La violence et le sacré*. Grasset, Paris 1972; Edelman, Murray: *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1988.

⁵ Cohen, Stanley: *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Routledge, London, New York 1972/2002; Foucault, Michel: *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*. Gallimard, Paris 1975; Hall, Stuart, Critcher, Chas, Jefferson, Tony et al.: *Policing the Crisis. Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 1978; Goode, Erich & Ben-Yehuda, Nachman: *Moral Panics. The Social Control of Deviance*. Blackwell, Oxford 1994; Critcher, Chas: *Moral Panics and the Media*. Open University Press, Buckingham 2003.

⁶ Lazar, Annita & Lazar, Michelle: "The discourse of the New World Order: 'out-casting' the double face of threat", in: *15 Discourse & Society* 2-3 (2004), 223-242, pp. 239-240.

⁷ Hall: *Policing*; Cohen, Stanley & Young, Jock (eds.): *The Manufacture of News. Deviance, Social Problems and the Mass Media*. Constable, London 1981; Van Dijk, Teun: *Communicating Racism. Ethnic Prejudice in Thought and Talk*. Sage Publications, London 1987; Ericson, Richard V. et al.: *Representing Order: Crime, Law and Justice in the News Media*. Open University Press, Buckingham 1991; Champagne, Patrick: "La construction médiatique des 'malaises sociaux'", in: *90 Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* (1991), 64-75; Jenkins, Philip: *Intimate Enemies. Moral Panics in Contemporary Great Britain*. Aldine de Gruyter, New York 1992; Goode & Ben-Yehuda: *Moral*; Dal Lago, Alessandro: *Non-persone. L'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale*. Feltrinelli, Milan 1999; Cotesta, Vittorio: "Mass media, conflitti etnici e identità degli italiani", in *135 Studi Emigrazione* (1999), 443-470; Lawrence, Regina: *The Politics of Force. Media and the Construction of Police Brutality*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles 2000; Cohen: *Folk*; Tsoukala, Anastassia: "Le traitement médiatique de la criminalité étrangère en Europe", in *26 Déviance et Société* 1 (2002), 61-82; Peralva, Angelina & Macé, Eric: *Médias et violences urbaines*. La Documentation française/IHESI, Paris 2002; Critcher: *Moral*; Tsoukala, Anastassia: "Looking at immigrants as enemies", in Bigo, Didier & Guild, Elspeth (eds.): *Controlling Frontiers. Free Movement into and within Europe*. Ashgate, London 2005, 161-192.

⁸ Laurence: *Politics*, p. 3.

⁹ On the evolution of this policing in the UK, see Armstrong, Gary & Hobbs, Dick: "Tackled from behind", in Giulianotti, Richard, Bonney, Norman & Hepworth, Mike (eds.): *Football, violence and social identity*. Routledge, London, New York 1994, 196-228; Tsoukala, Anastassia: *Sport et violence. L'évolution de la politique criminelle à l'égard du hooliganisme en Angleterre et en Italie (1970-1995)*. Sakkoulas/Bruylant, Athens/Brussels 1995, pp. 127-132; Mignon, Patrick: "La lutte contre le hooliganisme. Comparaisons européennes", in *26 Cahiers de la sécurité intérieure* (1996), 92-107, pp. 92-100; Armstrong, Gary & Young, Malcolm: "Legislators and Interpreters: The Law and 'Football Hooligans'", in Armstrong, Gary & Giulianotti, Richard (eds.): *Entering the Field*. Berg, Oxford, New York 1997, 175-191; Tsoukala, Anastassia: "La gestion

policière du hooliganisme en Europe: Angleterre, Italie, Pays-Bas”, in Basson, Jean-Charles (ed.): *Sport et ordre public*. IHESI/La Documentation française, Paris 2001, 159-174. For a recent analysis of the policing of football fans at the EU level, see Tsoukala, Anastassia: “Les nouvelles politiques de contrôle du hooliganisme en Europe: de la fusion sécuritaire au multipositionnement de la menace”, in 51 *Cultures & Conflits* (2003), 83-96.

¹⁰ See, for instance, De Leo, Gaetano: “La violenza fra rumore e messaggio. Un itinerario di ricerca sulla rappresentazione del tifo nella stampa”, in Salvini, Alessandro (ed.): *Il rito aggressivo*. Giunti Barbera, Florence 1988, 274-299 ; Tsoukala: *Sport*, pp. 169-172; Tsoukala, Anastassia: “La construction médiatique de la figure du hooligan dans la presse française”, in Société de Sociologie du Sport (ed.): *Dispositions et pratiques sportives. Recherches et débats actuels en sociologie du sport*. L’Harmattan, Paris 2004, 345-360.

¹¹ Whannel, Gary: “Football, Crowd Behaviour and the Press”, in: 1 *Media, Culture and Society* (1979), 327-342; Tsoukala: *Sport*, pp. 144-152; Weed, Mike: “Ing-ger-land at Euro 2000”, in: 36 *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 4 (2001), 407-424; Poulton, Emma: “Tears, Tantrums and Tattoos: Framing the Hooligan”, in: Perryman, Mark (ed.): *Hooligan Wars*. Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, London 2002, 122-138; Crabbe, Tim: “The public gets what the public wants”, in 38 *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 4 (2003), 413-425; Bishop, Hywel & Jaworski, Adam: “We beat ‘em’: nationalism and the hegemony of homogeneity in the British press reportage of Germany versus England during Euro 2000”, in 14 *Discourse & Society* 3 (2003), 243-271.

¹² *Le Monde*, 29 June 2000.

¹³ Weed: “Ing-ger-land”, 407-424.

¹⁴ Hall: *Policing*, pp. 34-37; Wagg, Stephen: *The Football World*. The Harvester Press, Brighton 1984, p. 212.

¹⁵ Whannel: “Football”, 327-342; Tsoukala: *Sport*, pp. 144-52.

¹⁶ Burgat, Florence: “La logique de la légitimation de la violence: animalité vs humanité”, in Héritier, Françoise (ed.): *De la violence II*. Odile Jacob, Paris 1999, 45-62, p. 45.

¹⁷ Françoise Héritier: “Les matrices de l’intolérance et de la violence”, in Héritier: *Violence*, 321-343, p. 330.

¹⁸ Whannel: “Football”, p. 337; Tsoukala: *Sport*, pp. 147-150.

¹⁹ *The Observer*, 18 June 2000.

²⁰ *The Guardian*, 20 June 2000 (statement of one government member).

²¹ *The Guardian*, 20 June 2000.

²² *The Guardian*, 19 June 2000 (statement of the Home Secretary, Jack Straw).

²³ *The Sunday Times*, 18 June 2000.

²⁴ *Independent*, 19 June 2000.

²⁵ *The Times*, 19 June 2000.

²⁶ *The Independent*, 20 June 2000.

²⁷ *The Independent*, 19 June 2000; *The Guardian*, 20 June 2000.

²⁸ Poulton: “Tears”.

²⁹ *The Sunday Times*, 25 June 2000.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *The Guardian*, 20 June 2000.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Idem.*

³⁴ Dal Lago: *Non-persone*; Sainati, Gilles & Bonelli, Laurent (eds.): *La Machine à punir. Pratiques et discours sécuritaires*. L’Esprit frappeur, Paris 2000/2004; Mary, Philippe & Papatheodorou, Theodore (eds.): *Crime et insécurité en Europe*. Bruylant, Brussels 2001; Mary, Philippe: *Insécurité et pénalisation du social*. Labor, Brussels 2003; Tsoukala: “Looking”.

³⁵ Cohen: *Folk*; Hall: *Policing*; Pearson, Geoffrey: *Hooligan. A History of Respectable Fears*. Macmillan, London 1983.