

Sensationalists United? Football hooliganism and the English press

Conservative politics, with its emphasis on possession – car, house, wife etc – is directly linked to male violence. To be a ‘real’ man, the male must have affluence and therefore power. Witness the rise of the Yuppie or the self-made millionaire held aloft as an ideal image: well-dressed, married, refined accent. If a man does not have these qualities, he must turn to that ‘essential’ characteristic: strength. Strength combined with deprivation means violence. This becomes the poor man’s only viable means of protecting his maleness. It is at football grounds that this problem may be seen, bound up in clannishness, uniforms, notions of territories, class and racial divides. Is it any coincidence that the profile of racist groups reaches a high at periods of economic depression and makes itself visible particularly at soccer games... The football then becomes a breeding ground for frustrated maleness (Michallat 1989).

It is greatly to Wendy Michallat’s credit that she should have expressed those compassionate views when she did (at the age of 18) rather than where (the Bradford City FC fanzine), or even that she expressed them as a woman. Laying the blame entirely at the door of Conservative politics might not be wholly just: most of the worst of English hooliganism was on parade from 1965 to 1979, a period when Labour were in power for all but four years. To depict what happened at the Heysel Stadium in Brussels on 29 May 1985 as an extreme consequence of ‘frustrated maleness’ might nevertheless be the nearest we ever get to a definitive explanation for that dreadful evening.

Under Margaret Thatcher, Britain ‘was given bitter medicine that left many young males feeling useless and alienated’, concurred David Thomson, the eminent Anglo-American film critic and author whose youthful adoration of football begat *4-2*, a moving, perceptive memoir of the 1966 World Cup final. ‘Maybe there was less violence on the pitch...and so

there had to be more in the crowd. Maybe the small Fascist element proved more effective at provoking disorder than ever they have managed in other arenas of British political life.

Maybe winning the World Cup, and the increasing exposure to Continental sides, had made Englishmen more xenophobic and worse losers.’ By the 1970s, he added, reflecting on the Ibrox disaster of 1971, ‘there was a feeling of poised violence that only made panic more likely’ (Thomson 1996).

‘Frustrated maleness’ could also be cited to explain why trepidation greeted the renewal of Old Firm hostilities in January 2015. ‘It is a special occasion, something I am looking forward to,’ enthused Anthony Stokes, the Celtic striker, about the first encounter between Glasgow’s finest for nearly three years. ‘Not everyone shares his enthusiasm,’ reported Paul Forsyth in *The Times* the day before police arrested 19 fans, ten for sectarian offences – all things considered, a relatively docile chapter in the life of Britain’s bitterest sporting rivalry, even if the songs from the Rangers faithful did cling to their customary anti-Catholic and anti-Irish vileness. Forsyth had been duly sceptical about Stokes’s sense of anticipation, anticipating the relief many would feel as Rangers failed, just, to gain promotion to the Scottish Premiership:

Try telling Glasgow’s accident and emergency units, who are stretched to the limit in the hours after an Old Firm game, that Scotland has missed it. Try extolling its virtues to the women who, according to a study by St Andrews University, are more likely to be the victims of domestic abuse in the hours after Celtic have played Rangers (Forsyth 2015).

There are a great many Britons who would like us to think that football-related disorder is a cancerous growth removed: the broadcasters who pay billions of pounds for transmission rights, the club owners and employees who benefit from those billions, and the journalists who risk losing access and media passes should they report anything that might conceivably

slow the flow of those billions. Fortunately for them, for all that reports of hooliganism are on the rise, the violence associated with the game is nowhere near as pronounced as it was in 1974, when ‘Frank’, a 26-year-old lorry driver and proud member of Millwall’s notorious F-troop, could blithely inform an interviewer (albeit possibly with more than a vestige of bluster): ‘I go to a match for one reason only: the aggro. It’s an obsession, I can’t give it up. I get so much pleasure when I’m having aggro that I nearly wet my pants – it’s true. I go all over the country looking for it’ (Harrison 1974).

In the course of researching the Heysel tragedy and its coverage by the media, I pored over dozens of dissections of hooliganism by renowned sociologists, almost all of whom charged the media with exacerbating the problem. Typical was the late sage Stuart Hall (1978), who assailed newspapers for using ‘the sort of language which suggests that there cannot possibly be any human rationale for or one reason behind the actions of the thugs...[rather] it must be the result of an entirely irrational collective spasm – animal instinct or the uncontrollable impulse of the insane – the “psychopathic” fans.’ In summation, he found the coverage ‘brutal, short-hand and simplifying’. As Gary Whannel (1979) saw it, the media created a ‘new folk devil’ and hence ‘a moral panic’. Thereafter, incidents ‘appear within the framework of this moral panic as evidence of a trend, which is increasingly newsworthy in its own right’.

At length, a realisation struck: none of the authors had interviewed the purported sensationalists - if for no other reason than to give them a chance to defend themselves.

Raymond Boyle, who approaches this fraught topic as a sociologist and media analyst as well as a spectator at Old Firm matches for four decades (he continues to root for Celtic), has also detected this curious void:

It is fair to say interviews with the journalists who covered these stories has been lacking. I haven't seen any academic papers or books that conduct or even draw on interviews with journalists or broadcasters related to Heysel or hooliganism in general. For some leading researchers there was their own ethnographic experience of course. But some academic researchers have relied on match reports and news stories, reconstructing events through printed accounts. At the time only a few academics were writing about this subject from the inside because it hadn't been part of mainstream sociological research, and to a degree the younger generation may simply reproduce those arguments and it all becomes self-fulfilling.

Most of the original and groundbreaking academic work on hooliganism was written in the 80s and 90s, and now the worst European excesses are more prevalent in Holland and Italy. What happened at Heysel was the result of a perfect storm but if it hadn't been for that charge the wall wouldn't have collapsed. In academia the weight of emphasis shifted to the stadium and police (Interview with author 2015).

Such are the dangers of academic consensus. Our comprehension of the hooligan phenomenon and its societal determinants has unquestionably been enhanced, invaluablely so, by John Williams and his tireless colleagues at the Norman Chester Centre, by Desmond Morris (1981), Rogan Taylor (1992), Mark Perryman (1999 and 2006), Steve Redhead (1991), Gary Armstrong, Frosdick and Marsh (2005), Giulianotti, Bonney and Hepworth (1994) and many more besides. Given some of the more extreme, blanket condemnations of the game's followers, deeper explorations were sorely needed. Perhaps the most poignant and succinct verdict, though, came from Alan Bleasdale's gripping, questing *GBH* (1991), a TV series written by a proud Liverpudlian about a fictional Northern town and its militant left-wing council leader, whom a goodly chunk of viewers took to be Derek Hatton, Liverpool's

militant council leader of the mid-1980s – including the somewhat erratic Hatton himself. Tellingly, it seemed, Bleasdale – a Liverpool supporter who stopped going to Anfield after Heysel - ensured there were no references to either football or his beloved club, much less the tragedies of Brussels or Sheffield. Instead, he satisfied himself with the presence of ‘boot boys’ hired to do MI5’s dirty work and their battle-cry of ‘Here we go, here we go, here we go’.

‘God I hate the people in this country, hate what we’ve become, having forsaken freedom for licence,’ proclaims Grosvenor, the hard-drinking holiday camp owner. His audience is Jim Nelson, the troubled Labour-supporting schoolteacher. ‘When I pay off my debts,’ continues Grosvenor,

I’m going to France, proper France, where the English don’t go. You know what they call us in France, Mr Nelson? They call us ‘les fuckoffs’. They see us staggering around, nasty and oblivious, drunk in charge of a limited vocabulary and a lager can...But tell me, tell me, why should the dregs of our unfair society act in a caring and decent manner when our self-seeking so-called leaders don’t even care about fairness and freedom?

Those largely compassionate scholarly explorations, however, have been accompanied, in my reading, by a widespread tendency to diminish the havoc wrought by criminal and profoundly antisocial behaviour inside and outside grounds, on trains, in city centres and on cross-Channel ferries. In essence, this is done by blaming a host of contributory factors, ranging from ‘frustrated maleness’, high unemployment and Thatcher’s divisive declaration that ‘there is no such thing as society’ to covert police surveillance - advocated by Morris in *The Soccer Tribe* (1981) as ‘an obvious strategy’ - and the excesses of a small, entirely unrepresentative minority. Surprisingly, I found few allusions to Britain’s post-Imperial decline and its impact on national identity. Instead, the prime scapegoats have almost

invariably been the media - especially the space-starved, time-pressed daily newspapers, as ever, the most inviting of open goals. Their alleged crimes: wilful, irresponsible hyperbole; in short, sensationalism. This paper addresses whether this is justified.

‘Hoolie watch’

Steve Redhead, who has devoted decades to chronicling and enumerating the hooligan gangs, is unusual in not condemning out of hand the genre known as ‘hoolie lit’, aka ‘hit and tell’ memoirs. To him, ‘if used carefully’, they are ‘essential to the task of the mapping of the contours of the histories of football hooligan gangs in Britain’. The 107 such memoirs he knows of, he suggests,

can be rigorously studied...There are many dozens of hit-and-tell published accounts by self-proclaimed ‘top boys’, with a variety of club firms involved. There are also A-Z volumes of hooligan firms, mapped historically and geographically throughout the nation. As one book’s dust jacket proclaimed, it ‘covers the whole spectrum of gangs from Aberdeen to Luton Town...the Barnsley Five-O and their vicious slashing at the hands of Middlesbrough...the combined force of Dundee Utility...the riots of the Leeds Service Crew...Benny’s Mob, the Main Firm, the Lunatic Fringe, the Bastard Squad – they’re all here, together with numerous photos of mobs, fights and riots’. (Redhead 2014)

The title of Redhead’s paper is ‘Towards a Study of 400 Hooligan Gangs’. This vast number, allied to the palpable relish with which the less creative episodes of those ‘hit-and-tell’ stories have been told, do much to explain the prejudices of those to whom attending football matches stopped being pleasurable long ago.

It would be dishonest to bypass my own relationship with a sport I once adored. When it came to deciding which club to support, family obligation defeated free will: shortly after the 1966 World Cup final, aged eight, I learned that my maternal grandfather's brother had died of a heart attack a decade earlier cheering a Chelsea goal against Arsenal. My first encounter with football-related violence came in 1967, in a primary school playground in the north London suburb of Stanmore, last stop on the Bakerloo Line. Chelsea were due to meet Spurs in the FA Cup final the next day, and the school bully and his henchmen were asking everyone, short-trousered or skirted, whom they would be cheering; the consequences for the wrong answer were explicit. Not being remotely courageous, I lied convincingly enough. Sixteen years later, I was living 600 yards from Wembley Way when, after attending the Milk Cup final between Liverpool and West Ham, my lifelong friend Andy, an implacably gentle soul (albeit quietly determined to wear a red-and-white scarf), was accosted by a young man in West Ham favours and punched in the face. I was too shocked to respond, not to say too timid.

To write about football, as I began doing a few months later, was still a dream fulfilled. The diet was almost unremitting: two or three matches per week, 10 months a year, mostly in London and invariably for tabloid or mid-market newspapers: *The Sun*, *The People*, *Daily and Sunday Mirror*, *Daily and Sunday Express*, *Manchester Evening News* and *Liverpool Post* among others. Such assignments instilled dread. For one thing, the workload doubled – the brief was to cover any crowd trouble in addition to the game. At the height of hooliganism's dispiriting reign, the former so sapped my passion for the sport that I gave up reporting matches for most of the next decade. I have not re-entered a football pressbox this century.

Divorce proceedings began at Stamford Bridge on 4 March 1985 – twelve weeks before Heysel. Though increasingly uneasy at sharing my affections with the nation's most

disreputable supporters, loyalty persisted until a riot erupted that night, its express (and thankfully vain) purpose to help Chelsea avoid defeat: not to convey discontent at an erroneous offside or penalty award but to induce the referee to abandon the Milk Cup semi-final second leg being lost to lowly Sunderland. Eleven years earlier, Newcastle fans had pursued the same course when their team were 3-1 down to Nottingham Forest in an FA Cup quarter-final; as then, the referee resisted the easy option at Stamford Bridge: play resumed once the pitch had been cleared of fans and mounted police. The final count was 104 arrests and 40 injuries, some the result of metal-framed seats being ripped off their hinges and flung at anyone seeking to impose order. Standing next to me in the pressbox was Suggs, the lead singer of Madness, a hardy Chelsea fan and a columnist for *Bridge News*, the club paper I helped produce. He was saddened but philosophical, feeling more empathy for the rioters; I was angry and ashamed. No longer, I told him, could we support the same club. Nor could (or would) I transfer my allegiance.

Despite this, defensiveness, not unnaturally, arises when reading criticism that the media were not only guilty of sensationalising hooliganism in the 1980s, but actively encouraging violence by reporting it. To allow such views to pass unchallenged would be an abrogation of responsibility. Just as it is wrong to even hint that all football fans of the era were hooligans, it is equally wrong to cast all football reporters as muck-rakers.

‘These young villains’

Much the worst excesses during those depressing decades emanated from my father’s home city, Glasgow. The first Old Firm match of the 1975-76 season, remembered Dr Stuart Cosgrove, the broadcaster, journalist and lecturer, ‘was fraught with tension’. Police reported ‘two attempted murders, nine stabbings, two cleaver attacks, one axe attack and 35 common assaults, all of which were connected to football. One Rangers fan was badly injured when he

was thrown off a bridge near Ibrox' (Cosgrove 1991, 112). To frequent Stamford Bridge, White Hart Lane, Highbury or Vicarage Road during that era, as I did, may not have risked quite the same exposure to human savagery, but it could still be an unnerving experience. To some degree, moreover, what the violent fringe saw on the pitch legitimised their own actions. The 1974-75 English professional season saw a record 110 sendings-off. It also marked a fork in the road. Sadly, nobody knew which path to take.

The legacy of the previous campaign's tribal wars had been apparent five days before the Charity Shield, when five Manchester United fans were sentenced to a month in jail for 'rowdiness' (Dunk 1975, 15-16); a fortnight later, their manager, Tommy Docherty, was so fearful of the potential dangers that he forbade his son from travelling to away fixtures. That same night, 135 'rowdies' were arrested in Bristol. Before the week was out, Blackpool FC was the focus of unwanted attention after Kevin Olsson, 17, was fatally stabbed. The following Monday, Denis Howell, the sports minister, declared that the Public Order Act should be enforced to combat hooliganism, reasoning that lengthy sentences 'might act as a deterrent'. Three days later he announced plans to deal with the problem, including dry moats, segregation of fans and identity cards to stop 'these young villains' from entering grounds (Ibid).

As 'firms' multiplied the length and breadth of England, Scotland and Wales, no club suffered more blows to its reputation than Manchester United, whose fanbase was easily Britain's biggest, and whose Red Army was among the most feared and reviled. In September, the players organised a bonding session with their younger fans. 'We, the players, are sick to death of listening to the complaints about a small section of our so-called supporters,' said the much-loved winger Willie Morgan. 'We do not need these villains – they should go somewhere else' (Dunk 1975, 16-17). When the Red Army rumbled into London for a match against Millwall, all police leave in the New Cross area was cancelled,

shops were boarded up and pubs shut. Come Christmas, at the behest of the FA and the Football League, United would become the first club to make away games all-ticket affairs, and insist on advance payment.

Hooliganism is not shirked in *Red Shirts and Roses*, a loving homage to the two distinct Old Traffords (tenants Manchester United and Lancashire County Cricket Club) written by the estimable Eric Midwinter, who named his son after Sir Matt Busby, the revered United manager. 'The self-restraint of the 1850-1950/60 era yielded place to the self-gratification of the succeeding period. In Jeffrey Richards' concise terms, the 'rough' element in society, for so long subdued by the 'respectable' element, became preponderant. In a sense, national character reverted to the pre-industrial free-for-all Hogarthian spirit of devil-take-the-hindmost...Now the crowd would be feared again' (Midwinter 2005, p. 180-1). Yet nowhere in this otherwise excellent book - notwithstanding a sound analysis of the prevailing social conditions - is there any mention of the incidents referenced earlier, much less the Red Army. Was Midwinter wilfully blind to the violent strain among his fellow supporters? Or did he merely deem it inappropriate to sully the mood of a celebratory book? The consequences are the same: denial.

During the course of a stern and far from unjustified critique of the way English newspapers and broadcasters have reported hooliganism (wherein the Old Firm are conspicuously ignored), Emma Poulton (2005) mentions Heysel twice in passing yet feels no compunction to state what happened in Brussels other than to concede that it was 'a tragedy' and 'the nadir of English hooliganism'. Missing are some salient details, such as the fact that 1985 had already been infected by the 'English disease' in unprecedented fashion; or that, on the same afternoon as the fire at Bradford City's Valley Parade, preceding Heysel by 18 days, another

wall had collapsed during an exchange of grudges between the home fans and their counterparts from Leeds, killing a 15-year-old Birmingham City supporter attending his first major match; or that Heysel had not only closely followed that riot at Stamford Bridge but the crowd battles at a live televised FA Cup tie between Luton and Millwall that yielded 47 arrests, 31 injuries, £20,000-worth of damage to the ground and destruction in the town centre. The last not only spurred the watching Thatcher to demand identity cards for supporters - a 'Big Brother'-style solution first mooted in 1975 - but persuaded many of her most virulent critics to applaud.

A £7,500 fine was slapped on Millwall, whose notorious fans, first brought to wider attention by a mid-1970s *Panorama* documentary (motto: 'No-one likes us, we don't care'), had been the aggressors, whereupon a successful appeal accentuated the governmental backlash.

Alcohol was banned from grounds (a step taken by authorities north of Hadrian's Wall following the savage denouement to the 1980 Scottish Cup final). Spectators were searched upon arrival. Long part of the pre-match unpleasantries, segregation of home and visiting fans was improved; police became ever more sophisticated in their vigilance, not least through the early deployment of CCTV. Having backtracked on a plan to erect fences, a strategy pursued at the bigger stadiums, Luton became the first English club to ban away fans.

Another solution was advanced by Ken Bates, the brash millionaire from Jersey who had saved Chelsea FC from liquidation in 1982: keep out the 'scum' with electric fences. The local councillors who refused permission to turn them on, in his similarly inflammatory opinion, were 'cretins' (Lightbown 1990). Before he bought Chelsea, Bates recalled, one of the directors, Martin Spencer, had reportedly said that 'electric shock treatment was essential

for dealing with the problem and the bad publicity was driving potential sponsors away'. Even though, as Williams et al assert, hooliganism had become progressively displaced from stadiums to streets since the 1960s, the rift between club and supporters, according to Bates, 'had never been wider' (1984). When I interviewed him in his office a few months after the mayhem in Luton, on the wall behind his desk loomed a framed copy of a newspaper cartoon satirising if not quite ridiculing his proposal. He welcomed notoriety, craved it. As with Thatcher, nonetheless, it was not impossible to see his point. Bates was the first to introduce closed-circuit TV and family enclosures; he also proposed a national police task force on hooliganism and advocated constraints on convicted hooligans travelling abroad long before such measures were introduced (Lightbown).

Poulton also states that the so-called 'English disease' is nothing of the sort: football disorder, she contends, is 'a global social problem, not just the 'English Disease''. Nowhere in her analysis is there any mention that, via the European club competitions, England exported football hooliganism to the wider continent. Spain, Holland and France took turns to bear witness:

- Madrid 1972: Glasgow Rangers fans celebrate winning the UEFA Cup by invading the pitch; 120 fans and 33 policemen are treated for injuries and two supporters taken to hospital in grave condition;
- Rotterdam 1974: Having spent the half-time interval assailing their Dutch counterparts with fists, boots and lumps of wood, Tottenham fans riot after Feyenoord won the UEFA Cup; 200 people are injured, 50 arrested. Dutch journalists and academics cite this as the catalyst for a significant upsurge of football-related

hooliganism in the Netherlands. UEFA order Tottenham to play their next two European home fixtures elsewhere; ‘Rioting Fans Shame Britain’ roars the front page of the *Daily Mail*;

- Paris 1975: Leeds United are banned from European competition for four seasons (commuted to two) after supporters rioted following some controversial refereeing in a European Cup final loss to Bayern Munich.

Two years later it was Luxembourg’s turn: as Williams, Dunning and Murphy note in the seminal *Hooligans Abroad* (published a year before Heysel), England followers caused £15,000 worth of damage to the Stade Josy Barthel during a World Cup qualifier and were reported as having gone on a ‘rampage’ through the neighbourhood. ‘There seems to be some justification,’ the authors admit – with masterly understatement - ‘for claiming that England supporters were largely responsible for the violence and destruction.’

Three decades later, Williams made no bones about why the term ‘English disease’ was warranted. ‘English hooligans were a role model in the 1970s and 1980s for young fans in Holland and Germany and for “radical” members of organised *ultra* fan groups in Italy and supporter *penas* in Spain’ (Williams 2013). Research by H. H. van der Brug adds weight to such a contention: from 1970 to 1975 he found 13 instances of violent spectator behaviour in Holland towards opposing supporters; over the next five years 54, over the next, 132 (Giulianotti et al 1994).

‘Sensationalists’

Reporting for *The Guardian* at Heysel was David Lacey, respected far and wide for his wit, gentle passion, astute observations and aversion to hype and hysteria. The tragedy could not have been covered by a more fair-minded journalist. ‘There is bound to be talk,’ he wrote, ‘of banning all English clubs from European competitions until our game puts itself in order. Yet only 24 hours earlier, members of the Football Association voted out a proposal to harden up the rules on club responsibility which would have fallen into line with Government thinking. After the Bradford fire, the cry went up: “Who pays?” In Brussels last night there was only one answer, and they were lined up in a makeshift mortuary outside the Heysel Stadium (Lacey 1985).

Accompanying Lacey’s match report was a commentary that brooked no doubt about where he felt the blame ultimately lay:

When the authorities hold their inquiry they will need to ask about crowd segregation and the strength of the barriers that were meant to separate the fans. However, to judge by the empty and broken bottles in the centre of Brussels and on the outside the stadium, drink was again at the heart of the problem. While it is premature to lay the blame wholly at the door of the Liverpool supporters it must be said that before the disturbances there had been little, if any, sign of trouble on the terraces occupied by the Juventus fans (Lacey 1985).

Twenty-six years later, I asked Lacey whether, having spent six decades covering one sport, he had ever wished he had chosen another means of earning a living? The reply required no contemplation whatsoever: ‘After Heysel you kept thinking, not so much I should give up as ‘Why am I doing this?’’ (Interview with author 2011).

If the media stereotyped fans, have academics stereotyped the media? The language Lacey deployed was sober, understated, controlled; remarkably so in the circumstances. With details

of the unfolding tragedy being updated as he typed, both pieces had to be composed - then dictated to a copytaker - within an hour or so of the final whistle. By no means, moreover, was he a lone voice of reason. Brian Glanville (*Sunday Times*), Patrick Barclay (*The Guardian*), Geoffrey Green (*The Times*), Hugh McIlvanney (*The Observer*), John Moynihan (*Sunday Telegraph*) and Ian Wooldridge (*Daily Mail*), among many others, were all sternly critical of - and often hostile to - those they saw as hooligans ruining the game they loved, the game to which they devoted their days, but they did not sensationalise either. There was no need. What they saw, and reported, needed no adornment or embroidery.

Green, the most venerable of these illustrious correspondents and hence always likely to be the most easily alienated, delivered his final verdict the year before Heysel: 'The violent behaviour of the British fans as they follow their teams abroad is an absolute disgrace. One feels ashamed of being a Briton...we are now tainted and unwelcome...Hooliganism, sadly, appears to be the unacceptable face of a free, democratic society (Green 1985). Splenetic? Yes. Generalised and sweeping? Yes. Sensationalist, as in reframing a small drama as a substantial crisis? Not to this admittedly partisan observer.

Moynihan, a romantic, poetic soul, had matters in firmer proportion than most. Misbehaviour on the terraces, he knew, had not been novel even half a century earlier. In *The Soccer Syndrome*, first published in 1966, he quoted 'the warning Millwall Football Club put out during the 1949-50 season after a bit of bother down at The Den...addressed to men, who out of habit, knew how to respond to military orders' (Moynihan, 164). Under the headline 'Don't Do It Chums' ran a series of Don'ts and Ifs, mostly related to abuse of the referee or opposing players but also to a growing trend: 'DON'T assemble in small or large numbers in the streets adjacent to the Den. IF you do you will be dispersed by the Police, and for certain alleged offences, such as obstruction, disturbance or breach of the peace, may render

yourselves liable to prosecution.’ In conclusion, fans were asked to ‘Think on this: “As a bird is known by its chirp, so is a man by his conversation”” (Ibid, 165).

The mid-1960s, with Britain under a Labour government, deference receding fast and teenage rebellion afoot, are commonly cited as the start of the surge in hooliganism that reached its apotheosis at Heysel. An ominous incident occurred in May 1966, shortly after a civic dinner in Liverpool to mark a city ‘double’ – Liverpool had won the League Championship, Everton the FA Cup. Brian Harris, the Everton left-half, and his wife were setting off home when, according to the latter, ‘a group of 30 or 40 fans wearing the Liverpool red and white recognised Brian and came up to our car. They draped a banner over the windscreen and began cursing and shouting. Then they started kicking and scratching the car. Somebody shouted “Let’s turn it over” and then began rocking the car from side to side. I was terrified.’ Her husband seemed just as shocked: ‘In his speech at the dinner the Lord Mayor said something about fans in this city not being hooligans. Then this happens’ (Wills 1966).

It would be wrong to suggest that the English press did not sensationalise hooliganism at all. ‘Shock! Horror!’ headlines sell papers, and there can certainly be no defence for Kelvin Mackenzie’s decision to emblazon ‘The Truth’ across the front page of *The Sun* with such callous abandon. Those responsible - editors such as Mackenzie and crafty sub-editors more than reporters - revealed the dirty deeds of politicians, pop bands, movie stars, radio DJs and TV presenters with every bit as much venom, disdain, snide mockery and schadenfreude: ‘Elton Takes David Up The Aisle’, ‘It’s Paddy Pants Down’, ‘Up Yours Delors’, ‘Freddie Starr Ate My Hamster’, ‘Glitter Wanted A Child A Night’, ‘Zip Me Up Before You Go-Go’. Where, though, do we draw the line between reporting the news and sensationalising it? Those offended by the George Michael headline now are just as likely to wax lyrical about the justice and wisdom of the Gary Glitter one.

If there is a case to be made that the media lumped hooligans together with the majority of supporters and thus implicitly damned all football spectators, it seems no less reasonable to suggest that academia's portrayal of the media during this period was similarly guilty of generalisation. 'I don't disagree with the point about the media as a whole being accused of sensationalism,' says Boyle, whose book *Sports Journalism: Context and Issues* (2006), co-written with the equally thoroughgoing Richard Haynes, benefits considerably from interviews with eminent practitioners. 'I also think it's fair comment to say that when academics criticise journalists often not enough attention is paid to the practical and organizational constraints on the latter. You have to recognise the context in which the material was produced. This is not to condone anything that was beyond the pale, but the pressures on those paid to cover the game by newspapers - of time and column space and practicability - were considerable, and still are' (Interview with author 2015).

One logical interpretation of such seemingly one-eyed coverage is to propose that its impact, together with personal experience, affected attendances. In 1948-49, more than 41m spectators clicked through the 92 Football League turnstiles; in the season following Heysel, that figure 'plummeted', record Gould and Williams (2014), to a postwar low of just 16.5m - a fall of nearly 10m in the space of a decade. In 2013-14, the 20 Premier League sides alone drew nearly 28m (worldfootball.net).

Whether substandard stadia influenced that decline is impossible to gauge, but that particular aspect of the problem - contempt for the customer - had been perennial. The advent of shopping centres and the decreasing disinclination of men to help with childcare, grocery shopping, and other household duties doubtless played a part too, but that was ever more the case come the new century, and the graph has gone the other way. Improvements to stadiums can be credited for those growing attendances, so too the perception that football is more exciting and glamorous (for which the unfortunate Paul Gascoigne should take a deep bow).

By the same token, it hardly seems outlandish to conclude that the rising numbers of women and families attending matches can also be attributed, at least in part, to an enhanced sense of safety and pleasantness.

How, one cannot help but wonder, would hooliganism have played out in the age when news winged across the world in seconds in tidy 140-character bulletins? However much damage a 500-word news story, an accusatory banner headline and a ninety-second spot on *News at Ten* about a riot at Elland Road might have wrought in 1985, one shudders to imagine how much distortion would have ensued now. The question nevertheless remains: how else, in the interest of dissuading copycats and fame-seekers, should the contemporary media have handled this endlessly fraught issue?

Two options present themselves most readily: either ignore what was going on or accord it less prominence. A combination of these responses is perceived to have been pursued in media coverage of England supporters during the early part of this century. While this has been characterised as patriotism – any hint that crowds could not be controlled would undermine the FA's bids to host the World Cup – it is hard to suppress the suspicion that the motivation of late, given the growing propensity for clubs to ban reporters who fail to pass muster as cheerleaders, has been protection of the Premier League brand. Have sports historians not called the Argentinian press to account for covering up the scandal of 'The Disappeared' during the 'Dirty War' that accompanied the country's staging of the 1978 World Cup? Can peddling a lie to cover up criminality ever truly be in the public interest?

'I felt sick, ashamed'

Now a senior lecturer in journalism at Liverpool John Moores University, Guy Hodgson began covering football in 1978 for the *Birmingham Post*, and continued to do so with

dispassionate distinction for *The Independent*. He remains conflicted about a sport that was once close to his heart:

I remember reporting the Crystal Palace v Birmingham game a few weeks after Hillsborough and there was a mass riot. They'd lowered the fences in the wake of Hillsborough and there was a 30-minute interruption after the pitch was invaded. Birmingham were going down to the Third Division for the first time and some of their supporters turned up in fancy dress as an ironic celebration. Five police officers and 16 people were injured (including a stabbing); there were 26 arrests; and 37 ejections. But the most chilling moment was seeing people dressed as clowns and animals being punched and kicked.

After the game there were 44 arrests at Toddington Services on the M1, where crockery was thrown and customers intimidated by Birmingham fans, and a train carrying 90 Birmingham supporters was stopped at Milton Keynes after a buffet car was broken into and damage inflicted on a carriage.

I left Selhurst Park feeling desperately depressed, but it got worse. On a train to Bath some loud and obnoxious Cardiff fans boarded my carriage at Paddington. They were unpleasant, there was an air of menace and several women left the carriage because they had to get away from them. Then, at Reading Station, the Cardiff fans saw a man on the platform wearing a football scarf for another team, so half a dozen jumped off, beat him up, then jumped back on. It lasted a matter of seconds, was completely unprovoked and utterly sickening.

By the time I got home I felt utterly disgusted, ashamed of the human race and football fans generally. I didn't want to go to football anymore. (Interview with author 2015)

In fact, Hodgson carried on reporting the game until 2009. He was surprised to discover that there had been so few arrests, comparatively speaking, in 1988-89. 'Six thousand-odd doesn't

sound much,' he accepts, 'but figures don't reflect how unpleasant it was going to football grounds back then.'

A sense of embarrassment was widespread among the journalists covering football. If you said you were a football fan at a party you were looked at as if you were something that had crept out of the drain – an absolute lowlife. The NFL is a violent game that attracts masses of people but it has never had a hooliganism problem. Look at the Wales v England rugby union international – it's a rough game and a fierce rivalry but there is no segregation, spectators from both sides are seated together and are well-behaved. (Interview with author 2015)

Since entering academia at the turn of the century, Hodgson, like Boyle, has been taken aback by how the media's coverage of hooliganism has been so consistently attacked without a dissenting view:

I don't think the academic community has tackled hooliganism with sufficient rigour. Hillsborough has clouded the vision of what it was really like to follow football as a supporter in the 1980s. I remember going to Old Trafford with a mate once and, realising the crowds were so large we wouldn't get in, we decided to drive off down the M62 to Leeds instead because Alex Sabella was making his home debut at Elland Road and we wanted to see this exotic Argentinian. By chance, my mate was wearing a grey and purple shirt – not quite Villa colours but close enough to get us beaten up. (Ibid)

The *Birmingham Post*, Hodgson recalls, 'was a business paper and similar to the *Daily Telegraph* in style and content. I was covering five Division One clubs and you always felt threatened. You knew there would be trouble of some kind. There virtually always was. Being at the *Post* and – from 1986 - *The Independent* meant that I was never under pressure to sensationalise hooliganism. There was no need to. In many respects we turned a blind eye because trouble at a football match became the norm. I think we should have stood up more

and made greater efforts to denounce football violence, especially after Heysel. We should have said, much more often, “This is not acceptable”. Perhaps there was an element of protecting the game: after all, it was something we’d loved in our youth and we spent a great deal of our time covering it. I don’t think the tabloids overdid it. The “Hoolie Watch” was justified. I didn’t like people thinking football fans were scum.

Sociologists’ criticism of the media for ‘sensationalising’ hooliganism is totally unjustified. They are looking back from a different perspective, not knowing what it was really like. I have studied British newspapers and their coverage of the Blitz, and the press made little or no attempt to hold authority to account, even if, by doing so, it could have benefited the war effort. Newspaper reporters became cheerleaders. They didn’t expose what really went on, albeit in the interest of maintaining morale. I don’t feel remotely the same about the way hooliganism was reported. (Ibid)

Shaming wrongdoers can be highly effective, Jennifer Jacquet reminds us in her recent book *Is Shame Necessary? New Uses for an Old Tool*, recommending, noted one reviewer, that it be ‘concentrated on a few transgressors’ (Finkelstein 2015). That, in effect, was the media’s tried-and-trusted strategy when reporting football-related hooliganism.

From a journalistic perspective, to have downplayed the abusive, dangerous and sometimes life-endangering behaviour at Football League grounds in the 1970s and 1980s – via shorter, less prominent reports, smaller headlines and photographs, fewer editorials and less televised footage - would surely have laid the industry open to accusations of making light of a genuine social problem affecting millions of people. To have swept the problem under the carpet, and hence decline to warn would-be spectators what might await them, would have been irresponsible as well as unprofessional. Did those screeching headlines, graphic photos and front-page rants sell papers? Quite possibly. But even if they did, given that the obligation of

journalism (pre- and post-Leveson) is to publish what is in the public interest rather than what (allegedly) interests the public, it seems absurd to say that it was not right to cover hooliganism extensively.

However inadvertently, the media alerted people to what attending matches now meant, what they might see, hear or feel, or even be an unwilling party to. There can be no denying that the largely right-wing press used hooliganism to demonise the working-classes, reaffirming what Malcolm McLaren, the Svengali behind the Sex Pistols, characterised as the English ruling classes' 'fear of the mob' (Temple 2012). Moreover, with far fewer pages to play with (the first English daily newspaper sports supplement, in the *Daily Telegraph*, did not arrive until 1990), there was clearly a decision to give bad news precedence over any balancing views that would today have been supplied by spectators and viewers.

Yet the question still nags: who would have benefited had the media relegated hooliganism to inconsequence, or understated its scale or the extent of the pain left in its wake? Only, surely, those who sought to evade punishment for their actions. Certainly not those who might otherwise have attended a match in innocence and suffered the consequences of those actions.

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