

The Sociological and Psychological Aspect of Football Hooliganism

Robert Zimniak

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1424-3209>

PhD student,

Faculty of Law, Administration and International Želatinos

Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Cracow University (AFMKU)

Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego 1, 30-705 Kraków, Poland

Phone: +48 504041884

Email: robertzimniak@gmail.com

This article deals with the phenomenon of football hooliganism as an example of deviant subculture with its psychological and sociological complexity.

Keywords: football hooliganism, subculture, sociology, psychology, criminology.

Sociologiniai ir psichologiniai futbolo chuliganizmo aspektai

Šis straipsnis skirtas futbolo chuliganizmo, kaip deviantinės subkultūros, pasižyminčios psichologiniu ir sociologiniu kompleksiskumu, pavyzdžio analizei.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: futbolo chuliganizmas, subkultūra, sociologija, psichologija, kriminologija.

Introduction

It is beyond any doubt that football hooliganism became a worldwide phenomenon. It exists almost every place where football is professionally played. We know much about the acts of the hooligans, full of violence, creating disorder, causing damage to both public and private property, being a significant concern for the local communities, society at large, and the authorities. Some of the hooligan groups have stepped into organised crime, as their resourceful leaders realised they have a lot of recruits at their service. From a scientific perspective, we may say we do know the effects of this phenomenon, and in some countries the authorities have even learned to deal with it.

Unfortunately, there is no such wide knowledge about its causes, as there is no one comprehensive theory.

Therefore, the key questions seem to be:

- why do so many young men (predominantly) are joining their ranks?
- why do those who join fit in so well, expressing themselves through football hooliganism?
- what social or/and psychological needs may be satisfied by being a member of the football hooliganism subculture?
- should football hooligans groups be considered to be subculture groups?

This paper gives an effort to answer the above questions.

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1. Historical Insight

Before a further criminological analysis will be presented, some light needs to be shed on the history of the sport's spectator behaviour. People sought entertainment watching various games since classical antiquity. The famous Latin phrase *panem et circenses* ("bread and games") signified the two elements crucial for appeasing the Roman people, but it related to emotions as well. Emotions as referred to sports are among other issues subject to the author's interest. Different sports events in ancient Egypt, Rome, and the Byzantine Empire quite often concluded in riots or even revolts. This paper does not focus on the historical aspects of spectator violence; however, providing a certain level of historical insight would be very helpful to understanding the phenomenon.

Therefore, if one considers the modern fights of football fans as violent and bloody, one for certain has never heard of the Nika Riots (Nika Revolts). They took place in Constantinople in 532 A.D., taking Emperor Justinian I as the target. At that time football had not been invented yet, but chariot racing filled that role perfectly. Competitors had their factions (teams) as well as supporters. There were Blues, Greens, Reds and Whites, with the Blues and Greens being the most well-established among the competition. Emperor Justinian I was a high member of The Blues. The team associations had become a focus for various social and political issues for which the general Byzantine population lacked other forms of emotions outlet. They combined aspects of street gangs and political parties, taking positions on current issues, notably theological problems or claimants to the throne. They frequently tried to affect the policy of the emperors by shouting political demands between races. The imperial forces and guards in the city could not keep order without cooperation with the circus factions, which were in turn backed by the aristocratic families of the city. These included some families who believed they had a more rightful claim to the throne than Justinian. There is no need of more details on Byzantine politics in this paper, enough to mention that riots ended with nearly half of Constantinople burned and about thirty thousand people killed. "Nika" was a phrase used by shouting rioters attacking the emperor's palace and encouraging themselves by doing so.

It is clear that sports-related violence or spectator violence is not a modern phenomenon. Why then does it erupt across stadiums during different sports events?

Given the historical introduction, one may suggest a mixture of theories. Sport arenas give unique occasions as emotional outlets. Anyone feels free to release their reserved emotions under the excitement of competition and the anonymity of the crowd. Another factor that determines how the assembled people are going to behave is the crowd itself. It is a very specific social structure that generates very specific psychological processes.

2. Subculture

The most famous person who studied these processes as a pioneer of social psychology was Gustave Le Bon, in his most popular work *Psychology of Crowds* first published in 1895. He defined the crowd as much more than simple sum of individuals. From his perspective, it can be described using its key features. Then, members of the crowd lose their sense of individuality as well as responsibility because of the crowd's anonymity. The process of the self-organising of a crowd is mainly driven by such subconscious factors as instincts and emotions. These factors are primal for everyone. Therefore, even if there are no many similarities between those of whom the crowd will be composed, it will present itself as unified because primal instincts are common and uniform for everyone. It does not matter that each one person in the crowd is very different than the other because, in the eyes of Gustave Le Bon, the crowd seems to be an agglomerate of savages.

It is not all what could be said about the crowd in terms of its social psychological analysis. G. Le Bon noticed two more of its fundamental features, namely of being susceptible to suggestion and being “contagious”. Le Bon explained susceptibility to any suggestion by comparing it to a state of hypnosis. However, in that scenario, the crowd performs hypnosis by putting under its control all individuals within it, enabling them to commit acts they would never do if isolated.

As a consequence of the lost sense of individuality, and being driven by the most primitive instincts in a hypnotized state of mind, the crowd acquires another key feature. It becomes contagious, meaning that emotions and ideas within the crowd spread incredibly fast.

The abovementioned theory explains why groups of people such as sports spectators (including football fans) may behave differently. Certainly almost every element is different in that kind of situation, i. e. the place, circumstances, emotions, and finally the crowd as a new psychological entity. Depending on many factors, the behaviour of sports spectators is conventional (complying with the rules of such events) or unconventional/deviant. It would be a mistake at this point of analysis not to mention spontaneous crowd leaders. They have the power to direct the crowd’s emotions as they exploit its susceptibility to suggestion using mainly some type of natural charisma. There is much more in G. Le Bon theory; however, some space needs to be left for other theories as well, remembering that he was the first to see the difference between isolated man and the “man of the crowd”.

It is clear then why people can behave in an unexpected way as a spectators on sport arenas. Nevertheless, it only concerns people who do not plan to follow the crowd in its ferocious acts. After all, not all of the football fans (or sports fans in general) are hooligans. Hooligans usually intend to behave aggressively and resort to violence. That is what they are, what they are up to, or one could even say, what is expected of them.

Why do they decide to become hooligans? Is it a lifestyle choice made for social reasons, a great idea for spending spare time, or something at all different? Who or what is to blame that some young men find a new home in hooligan ranks?

There are many criminological theories explaining the causes of deviant behaviour, crime included.

However, football hooliganism is not like most crimes, and hooligans are not like most criminals. The trait that makes the difference is the collective way of conduct as well as an unwritten code of values. Thieves, murderers, sexual offenders, and the like may all act as loners. If such a criminal decides to commit a crime with a “colleague”, that is being done only to facilitate the act of acquiring the current profit. There is certainly a code among thieves, but it does not compel them to work side by side or to spend their spare time together and does not consider all thieves as a hermetic collective bound by a unique bond that precedes having the same image of the outside world.

The author is eager to establish a hypothesis that groups of football hooligans represent a subculture. In supporting this claim, some light first needs to be shed on general subculture theories regarding delinquency and crime.

3. A Cultural Group within a Larger Culture

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a subculture as “a cultural group within a larger culture, often having beliefs or interests at variance with those of the larger culture” (Subculture, online). When a subculture is concerned, there is always reference to a “larger culture”, without which there is no such concept as subculture. At this point, a distinction of subcultures can be made using the criterion of reference to the larger culture’s values. Thus there would be non-deviant and deviant subcultures. The

former present a new set of values not opposed to those in a larger culture, proposing a rather different system of norms. The latter are based upon values and beliefs notably at variance with dominant culture. Quite often deviant subcultures build the validity and legitimacy of their systems on the conflict with the larger culture. Before any closer look will be taken at deviant subcultures, it is crucial to understand the process of the emergence of all subcultures and the forces that regulate them. Simply speaking, how does it happen that certain people create a subculture?

The theory that cannot be ignored at this point is proposed by Albert K. Cohen in his fundamental work *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*. Cohen argued that behavior is a constant problem-solving process and that all problems came from both the “situation” or “frame of reference”. The first is, simply put, the human world provided as it is, with its given capacities and certain time to utilize them before passing away, but there are, most importantly, human habits, expectations, demands, and other humans around that are socially organised in many different ways. The latter consist of “interests, preconceptions, stereotypes, values we bring to the situation” (Cohen, 1955, p. 52–53). It depends on the frame of reference how a person perceives various dilemmas or how are they going to act in certain important, and at the same time confusing, situations. Cohen noted that for everyday action there are quick and fixed solutions not involving any change in the frame of reference. However, given bigger and stressful issues, change in the frame of reference is inevitable; in short, an action taken entails change in the actor’s values or perspective (ibid.). For instance, telling a lie may help avoid taking responsibility; cheating on a test may help pursuit career goals; undermining the reputation of a certain company would ease getting over failure of recruitment. These types of behaviour psychologically can be qualified both as mechanisms of adjustment and defence. Cohen emphasised status problems as dominant among those of adjustment. “[...] certain children are denied status in the respectable society because they cannot meet the criteria of the respectable status system” (Cohen, 1955, p. 121). Not only young people but generally all of them build their status in relation to an image of themselves in the eyes of others. This in turn depends on what criteria others use to assess and what system of values (mentioned frame of reference) they put to evaluate one another. If an individual does not have a skill or asset desired by the dominant culture, one does not fit in that culture, experiencing the very serious adjustment problem putting him, not literally but more mentally, out of the group, community or even society. Subculture solution to such situations occurs when people with those problems unify themselves in order to “innovate”, as Robert K. Merton says, their frames of reference, to create new system of norms upon which their merits, talents and ways of behavior would be the ones that give status (Cohen, 1955, p. 65–66).

There is more than one theory explaining deviancy, even more than one that refers to subcultures. However, the above presented general model of pressures toward subculture solution appears to be coherent enough to give an understanding of both deviant and non-deviant subcultures.

Is it then possible to explain the phenomenon of football hooliganism by only Cohen’s theory or subcultural theories at all? Without going into great details, it can be concluded that according to most of the subcultural theories, football hooligans would be mainly young men from lower social classes whose expectations, success goals, and advancement tracks are blocked by the social structure and mechanisms created by the dominant culture. For Cohen, it would be no access to middle class means, and by this a problem of adjustment upon commonly accepted criteria; for Richard A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin, it is a sense of having no opportunities for achievement, “which produces a sense of unjust deprivation: and highly visible barriers to the achievement of aspirations, which give rise to feeling of discrimination” (Cloward, Ohlin, 1960, p. 113).

Stuart Hall and John Clarke, scholars of contemporary cultural studies at Birmingham University, argued that subcultural styles are ways in which youngsters deal with their subordination problems to adults and working class identity (Clarke, 1973, in: Frosdick, Marsh, 2005, p. 90). Clarke used similar sociopolitical arguments as Ian Taylor, indicating that working class young males tried to oppose the process of the increasing commercialisation of football and thus decreasing its integrating role for local communities (Taylor, 1971, p. 352–377; Taylor, 1971). Clarke explained the violence related to such an opposition to football becoming more commercialised by indicating it as a model of “supportership” inherited from older generations, which, however, lacked the “tacit social controls” of aggressive behavior that fathers of the hooligans had (Frosdick, Marsh, 2005, p. 91). From his perspective, there is a mirror reflection in the observed behavior between what is happening on the field where players compete, and the terraces where fans and hooligans have their own “fight”:

Their own collective organisation and activities have created a form of analogy with the match itself. But in their case, it becomes a contest which takes place not on the fields but on the terraces. They have created a parallel between the physical challenge and combat on the field in their own forms of challenge and combat between opposing ends. Thus, while the points are being won or lost on the field, territory is won or lost on the terraces. The “ends” away record (how good it is at taking territory where the home supporters usually stand) is as important, if not more, than their team’s away record. Similarly, the chants, slogans, and songs demonstrate support for the team and involve an effort to intervene in the game itself, by lifting and encouraging their team and putting off the opposition...The violence between the sets of fans is part of this participation in the game – part of the extension of the game on the field to include the terraces too (Clarke, 1978, p. 54).

4. Education

United Kingdom was not only a cradle of football, it was by that fact the first country where football hooligans became subject of serious scientific research. Leicester University was one of the most respected and crucial scientific centers in this regard. In recognition of such contribution, the doctrine formulated by scholars from Leicester University is commonly called the Leicester School. Their explanation was based on the sociology of Norbert Elias and his concept of “civilization process”. There is much complexity in this theory, considered as an example of “figurational sociology”, however it would be a mistake to ignore it in this paper. In short, it can be stated that through civilization process – throughout history – increasingly civilized forms of behavior penetrated almost all social classes of states around the world. Nonetheless, it could not fully reach the lower working class, which, for this reason, was called the “rough” working class. So that “rough” working class preserved much of its, one could name it, primal character. Members of this class are allegiant to subcultural values of masculinity and aggression (Frosdick, Marsh, 2005, p. 95). Scholars of the Leicester School argued that there is a “positive feedback cycle which tends to encourage the resort to aggression in many areas of social life, especially on the part of males” (Williams, Dunning, Murphy, 2005, p. 95). Activities and capacities such as gambling, “street smartness”, heavy drinking and most of all fighting are available means of reaching status and earning respect. Youngsters from “rough working class”, on the other hand, usually have no access or ways of getting status or success in educational or occupational fields that the middle class are profiting from (Williams, Dunning, Murphy, 2005, p. 95).

Conclusions

The mentioned perspectives on the phenomenon of football hooliganism shed a brighter light upon where to find the exact causes of this form of social deviancy. No doubt there are many gaps to fill, as much of the theories are not up to date, especially since forms of deviancy are prone to constant change. A critical analysis of the fundamental works in the field of football hooliganism provokes us to take a closer look at other groups characterized by their own sets of values and codes that lie on the outskirts of, or even beyond dominant cultures or societies. It would perhaps go beyond the desired capacity of this paper. Therefore, the age of adolescence proved to be a key factor in football hooliganism, and there should be special attention directed to this particular age when individuals build self-esteem based on their interaction with others and, generally speaking, with society. This is when a mixture of pressures, expectations, and aspirations challenge the young individual and makes them susceptible to diverse influences, including the deviant ones. Thus, there still is much to determine for scholars and researchers, and even more for the prevention of these processes by official authorities and agencies.

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Robert Zimniak

(Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Krakow University)

S u m m a r y

Football hooliganism is a worldwide phenomenon with its origins in ancient times. It has evolved in recent times, even stepping into organised crime in many cases. There is a vast knowledge about the effects of hooligan behaviour as well as the probable means to deal with them. The causes of the phenomenon, however, are far less known about, namely the social and psychological mechanisms that induce mainly young people join hooligan ranks. This article shed some light on these factors, considering them crucial to fully understanding the phenomenon.

Sociologiniai ir psichologiniai futbolo chuliganizmo aspektai

Robert Zimniak

(Krokovos Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski universitetas)

S a n t r a u k a

Futbolo chuliganizmas yra visuotinis reiškiny, kilęs dar senovėje. Pastaraisiais metais jo vystymasis daugeliu atvejų siejamas jau ir su organizuotu nusikalstamumu. Mokslas sukaupė nemažai žinių apie chuliganų elgesio padarinius ir apie galimas jų prevencijos priemones. Kita vertus, daug mažiau žinoma apie šio reiškinio priežastis, ypač apie tuos socialinius ir psichologinius veiksnius, dėl kurių futbolo chuliganų gretas dažniausiai papildo jaunimas. Straipsnyje siekiama nušviesti šiuos veiksnius, kurie yra labai svarbūs šiam reiškiniui suprasti.

Robert Zimniak is a PhD student at the Faculty of Law, Administration and International Relations at the Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Krakow University (AFMKU) and a graduate of the Jagiellonian University, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Kraków University, and Abertay University (Dundee, Scotland, United Kingdom). Zimniak completed an internship at the General Consulate of the Republic of Poland in Chicago, USA (2007). His main interests and research areas include criminology and deviant subcultures.

Robert Zimniak yra Andrzejaus Fryczo Modrzewskio Krokovos universiteto (AFMKU) Teisės, administravimo ir tarptautinių santykių fakulteto doktorantas. Baigė Jogailos universitetą, Andrzejaus Fryczą Modrzewskio Krokovos universitetą, Abertay universitetą (Dundee, Škotija, Jungtinė Karalystė). Atliko stažuotę Lenkijos Respublikos generaliniame konsulate Čikagoje, JAV (2007 m.). Jo tyrimų sritys – kriminologija ir deviantinės subkultūros.