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N.A.J. Taylor a

a School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland

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Football Hooliganism as Collective Violence: Explaining Variance in Britain Through Interpersonal Boundaries, 1863–1989

N.A.J. Taylor*

School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland

Football hooliganism is a subculture in which ‘us-them’ boundaries are constructed, sharpened and contested both within and between participating groups. Applying Charles Tilly’s concept of collective violence, I argue that a historical analysis of violence surrounding football in Britain between 1863 and 1989 indicates that football hooliganism is best viewed as a violent ritual triggered by similar processes to the coordinated destruction of international conflict. I then pose two questions that often plague students of collective violence: what causes variations in the level and form of violence over time, and how and why do participants vacillate between peaceful and violent social interactions? Adopting a relational approach, I argue that a small number of causal mechanisms such as nationalism have served to activate us-them boundaries which create, escalate and sustain variations in violence. By refocusing on the social interactions of hooligans rather than their identity, this paper seeks to renew opportunities for inter-disciplinary research into the social significance of violence at football matches.

Keywords: Collective violence; interpersonal boundaries; football hooliganism; international conflict; nationalism

Réimaginer le hooliganisme en tant que violence collective : l’explication des variations à travers les frontières interpersonnelles (1863–1989)

Le hooliganisme du football est une sous-culture dans laquelle les frontières entre ‘nous’ et ‘eux’ sont construites, mises en formes et contestées entre et à l’intérieur des groupes participants. En appliquant le concept de violence collective de Charles Tilly, je soutiens qu’une analyse historique de la violence dans le football en Grande-Bretagne entre 1863 et 1989 démontre que le hooliganisme est plutôt perçu comme un rituel violent déclenché par des processus semblables à la destruction coordonnée de conflits internationaux. Je pose alors deux questions qui touchent souvent les étudiants en violence collective : qu’est ce qui provoque des variations dans les niveaux et les formes de la violence selon les époques et comment et pourquoi les participants hésitent-ils entre des interactions sociales pacifiques et violentes ? En adoptant une approche relationnelle, je soutiens qu’un petit nombre de mécanismes comme le nationalisme a servi pour activer les frontières du eux-nous - en créant, intensifiant et supportant des variations dans la violence. En se centrant à nouveau sur les interactions sociales entre hooligans plutôt que sur leur identité, cet article s’attache à renouveler les opportunités de recherches interdisciplinaires sur la signification sociale de la violence dans les matches de football.

*Email: info@najtaylor.com
El hooliganismo futbolístico como violencia colectiva: una explicación de las variantes a través de las fronteras interpersonales, 1863–1989

El hooliganismo futbolístico es una subcultura en la cual las fronteras “nosotros–ellos” se construyen, se acentúan y se disputan tanto dentro de los grupos participantes como entre ellos. A partir del concepto de Charles Tilly de violencia colectiva, sostengo que un análisis histórico de la violencia vinculada con el fútbol en el Reino Unido entre 1863 y 1989 indica que el hooliganismo futbolístico se debe interpretar más bien como un ritual violento desencadenado por procesos similares a la destrucción coordinada en los conflictos internacionales. A continuación planteo dos preguntas que a menudo obsesionan a los estudiosos de la violencia colectiva: ¿qué es lo que provoca las variaciones en el tiempo de los niveles y las formas de la violencia, y cómo y por qué los implicados oscilan entre interacciones sociales pacíficas y violentas? A partir de una perspectiva relacional, sostengo que un reducido número de mecanismos causales, como el nacionalismo, han servido para activar las fronteras nosotros–ellos que crean, intensifican y mantienen las diversas variantes de la violencia. Al centrarse en las interacciones sociales de los hooligans y no tanto en su identidad, este artículo pretende señalar nuevos caminos para la investigación interdisciplinaria sobre el significado social de la violencia en los partidos de fútbol.
Football began as a violent pastime of the British peasantry in the thirteenth century. Hundreds of men would crowd the playing field in order to represent a particular cause, such as land rights or the prosperity of a village. For the players, football was ‘a kind of ritualised fighting...generating, in a relatively pleasurable form, excitement akin to that aroused in battle’. However, from the 1800s football underwent a series of civilising ‘modernisations’ to ensure it became the preserve of the British public school system. First, in 1828 codified rules were developed by the British middle class, most notably at Rugby School. Second, in 1857 Sheffield Football Club devised a set of laws independently of those adopted in the public schools, which served a small number of clubs in the region. Third, under the national stewardship of the London-based Football Association, in 1863 ‘Association Football’ (football) split from ‘Rugby Football’ (rugby) since a minority thought that the abolition of hacking (an action intended to cause injury, particularly contact on or above the knee or with the heel) from football would render the game ‘unmanly’.

Despite these efforts, violence merely shifted from the playing field to the spectator stands, such that from 1863, spectator violence towards players and officials (‘football-related violence’) became widely reported, and that from the 1960s, violence centred mostly between sets of supporters (‘football hooliganism’) quite independently of the game itself. In particular, unlike football-related violence to the 1960s, violence was becoming equally commonplace inside and outside grounds as well as both highly organised and ritualistic. Though football hooliganism is traditionally viewed as a sociological phenomenon, here I argue that British hooliganism is best located among other types of collective violence such as brawls, scattered attacks and international conflict – and more specifically, as a ‘violent ritual’. For students of collective violence, violent rituals occur when ‘at least one relatively well-defined and coordinated group follows a known interaction script entailing the infliction of damage on itself or others as it competes for priority within a recognised arena’. It is Tilly’s view of ritualistic violence, rather than that of the traditional sociological accounts that incorporate non-violent descriptions such as chants and taunts, that is useful here in re-imagining football hooliganism as collective violence. These observations raise a set of questions that, according to the late Charles Tilly, continue to plague students of collective violence. First, why does collective violence tend to ‘concentrate in large waves – often with one violent encounter appearing to trigger the next – then subside to low levels for substantial periods of time’? I argue that, by focusing on the social roots and social identities of hooligans and hooligan groups, existing explanations have tended to diminish the importance of social interactions in explaining variations in the level and form of violence over time. And second, ‘how and why do people who interact without doing outright damage to each other shift rapidly into collective violence and then (sometimes just as quickly) shift back into peaceful relations?’ Here I argue that interpersonal boundaries – such as nationalism and masculinity – act as a key causal mechanism that serves to create, escalate and sustain violence in a variety of settings. As I will argue, the basis of these general explanations of football hooliganism stem from conceptualising it as a type of collective violence, rather than a sociological epiphenomenon.

The following study will therefore proceed through five sections. First, I will explore an application of Tilly’s concept of collective violence to British football hooliganism. In the second section I will discuss the relationship between football
and international politics, in particular moments of heightened inter-state tension and conflict. Third, I will analyse the fluctuations in the level and form of violence surrounding football from the time of its civilising in 1863 to the heightened regulation of football grounds and spectator behaviour in Britain from 1989. The final two sections discuss interpersonal boundaries as one possible narrative for such variations, which lead to the paper’s conclusion and implications for future research.

Football Hooliganism as Collective Violence

To answer questions of collective violence, however, football hooliganism must first be understood in its many forms. According to Charles Tilly, the existing scholarship into collective violence may be classified into three alternative approaches: ‘behavioural’, ‘ideational’ and ‘relational’. The relational approach elevates the influence of conversational transactions between people and groups, such that ‘collective violence therefore amounts to a kind of conversation’. To advocates of the relational approach then, interactions, motives, impulses and opportunities inherent in social relations go some way in explaining the variability of violence over time. The ideational approach, most commonly adopted by those formulating preventative policy to combat football hooliganism, emphasises the ideas and actions of the individual in instigating and maintaining violent incidents such that targeted, aggressive policies might ‘suppress or eliminate destructive ideas’. While the behavioural approach stresses the role of the individual, factors such as the primal instincts inherent within masculinity, the pursuit of respect from peers and a sense of belonging are considered as core drivers of collective violence. The behavioural approach is evident in the existing sociological accounts of football hooliganism, whereas the ideational approach is predominant in government and inter-governmental policy responses to combat violence at football matches.

This study continues along relational lines, focusing on the social interactions that cause variations in the level and form of football hooliganism over time; in particular, the activation of national boundaries and the incorporation and polarisation of participants in a highly coordinated script. Locating football hooliganism along Tilly’s typology in Figure 1, the various types of collective violence are positioned depending on the extent of coordination and the salience of short-run damage – where the higher values mean the violent actors are highly organised and the prevalence of damage is central to those interactions. In this view, football hooliganism would most commonly present as a violent ritual, where ‘at least one relatively well-defined and coordinated group follows a known interaction script entailing the infliction of damage on itself or others as it competes for priority within a recognised arena’. Defining football hooliganism in this way is beneficial given it ‘is not so much a scientific sociological or psychological concept as a construct of politicians and the media’, and so it has historically been said to be difficult to define with any precision. Ultimately, approaching football hooliganism as collective violence illuminates three core possible explanations for its variation in level and form over time. First, it is the extent of coordination and salience that best identifies causal mechanisms behind collective claim-making. This finding advances further the existing explanations of football hooliganism, which have generally sought to locate its social roots and the social identity of hooligans and
hooligan groups. Second, while different types of collective violence might have similar motives, it is their own unique causal mechanisms and processes that may best explain why they occur. Third, ‘where brokerage and boundary activation loom large. . . they commonly override previously existing social relations among participants’ such that participants may shift between peaceful and violent interactions rapidly. And so while the following typology serves to frame this examination of football hooliganism, it also emphasises both the importance of violent processes, and the interconnectedness of different types of collective violence such as international conflict (i.e. coordinated destruction) that have been inadequately explored by the existing explanations of football hooliganism.

The following typology locates different forms of interpersonal violence in terms of their extent of coordination among actors and the salience of short-run damage. It includes personal violence, since collective violence is often triggered by a single incident of individual aggression, which may escalate into a brawl or opportunism. Violent rituals involve the greatest level of coordination and salience, thus emphasising us–them boundaries and brokerage more than any other form of collective violence.

**Football and International Politics**

The social impact of international politics is often contextualised in reference to football. It has only been more recently, however, that the social inquiry of football has been used to understand events in international politics. Fewer studies still
extend their analysis to international conflict. Central to this innovation is Benedict Anderson’s (1983) concept of an imagined political community, where one feels a sense of belonging to a particular nation despite no real connection to its people. In this view, the relationship between international politics and sport is thus: sport, second only to war, offers ‘one of the clearest and most tangible indications of a nation’s very existence’, providing the ideal theatre in which ‘masses of people become highly emotional in support of their national team’. This occurs since ‘the social definition of sport is an object of struggles’, and so comes to embody, as well as arguably serve, the nation. Notwithstanding the sensationalist role of the media in promoting the similarities between football hooliganism and war, few studies have systematically examined the limits of this relationship. The neglect remains surprising, however, given sport is known to provide a ‘natural laboratory’ with which to look at the group dynamics of competition and cooperation systemic in international relations, ‘not on the dynamics of one side or the other, but of both together as a single configuration in tension’. In this way, the tensions intrinsic in football hooliganism are viewed as characteristic of other types of collective violence, particularly, I argue, the coordinated destruction of international conflict. An examination of the evolution of violence surrounding football in the proceeding section suggests that the relationship is both: war as sport, as is often implied by the use of sporting metaphors on the battlefield, and sport as war, as is inherent in the structural dynamics of the game. Therefore, as it has been argued elsewhere, ‘more often than not football events have anticipated, or even precipitated, political ones’. There are four reasons for this observation. First, as the sport with the most participants in the world, football is one of the few truly global social activities, and, along with science, may be described as one of the very few global idioms. Over time, it has become evident that violence surrounding football has also proliferated internationally, with one study locating incidents across more than 30 countries between 1904 and 1983. Second, many argue that both football and international relations function by way of controlled, built-in tensions that balance states of: interdependence, cooperation and we-group/they-group formations. Third, both ‘arouse pleasurable as well as painful emotions’ and simultaneously contrast the ‘rational and irrational tendencies of men’. Fourth, as Anderson’s imagined community thesis suggests, national cohesiveness is strongly felt in times of war as well as during international football matches, and thus from football ‘emerges a bond that can only be understood with reference to the idea of the nation’. On Christmas Day in 1914 for instance, British and German soldiers on the Western Front spontaneously played a football match that resulted in an isolated, momentary truce. It must be conceded, however, that there has only been one instance where football has directly led to international conflict: the football war following Honduras’s victory over El Salvador in July 1969 which led to over 3,000 deaths in five days – although it would be disingenuous to suggest that the match was the only factor.

Commonly the relationship between football and international politics has proved far subtler. Following the Second World War, for instance, it was with football that the first bilateral exchanges took place between Axis and Allied nations. While England, Germany and Italy cooperated to establish a European governing body – the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) – in 1954, England declined membership of a number of formal multilateral bodies that were formed to promote regional economic development. At other times, though, it appears football
has been used quite openly to provide legitimacy to a government or as ‘a vehicle of
national values and policies’. For example, both Palestine and Bosnia–
Herzegovina were registered by International Federation of Association Football
(FIFA), the world’s governing body, prior to being formally recognised as
independent nations, while it has been argued that Mussolini used the 1934 and
1938 World Cups as vehicles to promote Fascism and demonstrate the strength of
Italy’s totalitarian regime. It is therefore understandable when football is referred to
as ‘an instrument of social policy, capable of encouraging and fostering the respect of
cultural diversity, needed in each country as well as for the construction of
Europe’. Appreciating the utility of football for the understanding of international
politics, and having characterised football hooliganism as a form of collective
violence, I will now examine the history of violence surrounding British football
from 1863 to 1989.

A History of Violence: 1863 to 1989

A chronology of spectator violence since football’s modernisation via codified rules
in 1863 makes apparent a familiar trend to students of collective violence: its form
has changed through time, its variability has fluctuated and a small number of causal
mechanisms have been ever-present. In this way, ‘collective violence resembles
weather: complicated, changing, and unpredictable in some regards, yet resulting
from similar causes variously combined in different times and places’. Adopting a
historical approach employed previously, in this section I discuss the variations in
violence surrounding football through six time periods which flank the century’s two
major international conflicts: from the dawn of football-related violence in the 1870s,
through to the birth of football hooliganism in the 1960s and its relative decline
from 1989. This analysis finds that, prior to the 1960s, violence surrounding football
grounds was largely a function of the drama of the match itself, as well as
disorganised, confined to inside the stadium and directed towards both officials and
players (‘football-related violence’). Though the level of reported violence appears to
have dropped between the wars, from the 1960s a number of factors resulted in
violence occurring among opposing sets of supporters in a highly organised fashion,
both inside and outside football grounds (‘football hooliganism’).

1863–1914: The Dawn of Football-related Violence

The level of violence surrounding football matches before the First World War is
highly contentious. Extrapolating data from local newspapers of a single region,
some prominent figurational sociologists contend that for the whole of Britain,
approximately 4130 cases (197 incidents per annum) have occurred between 1885
and 1914. Similarly, a more recent study of Millwall FC found that ‘violence
permeated all social relations’ at football matches and in surrounding areas from
1901. However, a number of historians have since criticised the developmental
findings of the figurational sociologists, asserting that the level of violence of
spectators at football matches was either small-scale or infrequent before 1914.
Richard Giulianotti is especially scathing of the implications of the figurational
sociologists’ methodology, claiming that by focusing disproportionately on British
working-class youth, the level of violence is markedly overstated.
Despite disagreement over the level of spectator violence that prevailed at this time, it is more widely agreed that its form had shifted such that the participants were now increasingly violent towards players and officials. Following a structural shift in news media editorials, both the frequency and intensity of media coverage of football grew rapidly in Britain, though reports of violent incidents tended to be expressed in ‘unsensational terms [so that] the readership was, for the most part, left to draw its own conclusions’. Although many reporters were stationed among the crowd during this period, a number of studies reason that incidents in the depths of the crowd were likely to be overlooked. Indeed, Dunning contends that a greater proportion of violence may have resembled football hooliganism, since the media were not focusing on the behaviour of the crowd at this time.

1915–1945: Football-related Violence Ebbs and Flows Between the Wars

The inter-war years are regarded as one of only two periods where football-related violence declined, despite an escalation in industrial disputes throughout much of Britain between 1910 and 1927. Figurational sociologists contend that violence fell during the wars due to the generally rising affluence of participants and the commensurate incorporation of ‘dominant values’. Similarly, a study of South Wales found that ‘soccer falls into this pattern of a society that was gradually becoming more orderly as the interwar years progressed’ as it was in other social spaces. Contrary to many reports, however, violent incidents were not entirely absent at this time. For instance, a journalist at a Millwall FC match in 1920 reported that ‘the great bulk of the orderly supporters can do something to assist the officials in stamping out this creeping paralysis’. Nevertheless, violence surrounding football ‘had not (yet) been elevated to a cause of national or wider political concern’ as it was to be by the 1960s.

Interestingly, however, unlike earlier reports of football-related violence, there appears to be a tendency for media reports in this period to condone, inflame and/or dismiss acts of violence. One analysis of newspapers in Leicester reasoned that as the reliance on advertising as a source of revenue increased, editors sought stories with greater newsworthiness, adopted larger headlines and used more photographs to capture the reader’s attention. As a result, media representations became less matter-of-fact and highlighted instances of order and restraint, despite indications of violence and disorder persisting elsewhere in society and in the lower leagues, where media coverage was less detailed. The greater level of violence evident in official match reports further illustrates the tendency for the media to downplay the prevalence of football-related violence at this time, and for the government to largely ignore it as a social problem. For instance, in reference to the game involving Millwall cited above, the media did not report that the Football Association punished the club after a spectator threw a missile at the referee.

1946–1959: A Decline in Football-related Violence

The period immediately following the Second World War saw, for the first time, crowds congregating and violently interacting outside football stadiums before and after matches, arguably due to the marked rise in wages and match attendances at this time. An analysis of media and match reports between 1946 and 1959 found 238 incidents of spectator disorder, of which only 138 occurred inside the stadium,
as had previously nearly always been the case. As a result, the conclusion was drawn that ‘the decade or so following the Second World War is crucial for understanding the development of English football hooliganism as a national cause for concern’, where football-related violence evolved into a highly ritualised form of collective violence – football hooliganism.

More broadly at this time, ‘Britain was gripped by a “moral panic” over youth and violence’, it has been said, due to the decline in the size, scope and power of the British Empire following the Second World War, as well as the instability felt by the upper middle classes following the Suez Canal crisis. Figurational sociologists have tended to argue that the rise in violence as opposition supporters began attending matches away from home with greater regularity, and as matches ‘came to be portrayed, albeit inadvertently, as times and places at which fighting could be engaged in and aggressive masculinity displayed with relative impunity’. More recently, postmodernist accounts have argued that ‘the cultural and ideological constitution of male football fans arose in response to the transformed social conditions of the newly affluent working-class from the late 1950s’. Regardless of its causes, during this period, football-related violence was changing form in spite of its level having stagnated.


The 1960s was a unique period in the development of violence surrounding football matches in that, for the first time, both the level and form of violence had changed significantly. As well as becoming more organised both inside and outside of football grounds, violence was also more commonly occurring among sets of supporters. As football hooliganism became rampant throughout Britain, match attendances hit all-time lows and several clubs began to struggle financially. In direct response, in 1968 the Football Association charged the Chester Committee of Enquiry with recommending strategies to assist the financial position of many clubs. Highlighting many of the problems facing the league, the committee found an average of 25 incidents of crowd disorderliness per season between 1960 and 1966, up from 13 incidents per season between 1946 and 1960. Ignoring the recommendations of the Harrington Report that same year, which had advocated a role for government, football hooliganism remained ‘primarily the concern of the football authorities’ until deep into the 1970s.

Although opinions vary, reviewing the existing sociological explanations of British football hooliganism points to five widely held developments that arose in the 1960s causing such violence to become a national cause for concern. First, the accelerated incorporation of the upper working class into mainstream society was most evident at football matches, where their civilised behaviour contrasted with that of the lower working-class. Second, the attention afforded football hooliganism from the 1960s followed a more general moral panic within mainstream society towards youth subcultural fashions such as the mods, rockers, hippies, beatniks and radicals. For some, these subcultures represented a public attempt for working-class youth to either resolve conflicts in their lives, obtain a form of identification or to act as a coping mechanism for members of the ‘subordinate class’. Third, the advent of televised matches, intensified media coverage and greater match attendances away from home were both heightened and combined during this period, thus rendering matches as spectacles that Porro and Russo...
classified as either ‘competitions’, ‘conquests’ or ‘coronations’. In addition, the media were now portraying football as an arena where conflict could take place with ‘relative impunity’, thus providing hooligans with a ‘national attention in a way denied them’. Indeed there is some evidence that the media actively sought out violent acts associated with football in the mid-1960s by briefing journalists to focus on the ‘militaristic’ dimensions of crowd activity rather than the actual game itself, thereby serving to amplify the violence.

Fourth, the sharpening of us–them boundaries and the tendency for incidents of violence to occur both inside and outside the ground became more prevalent at this time. This development is attributed, in part, to ‘a consequence of the official policy of segregating rival fans’ from 1939, which meant that, for spectators after the war, ‘opposition is inherent . . . on two distinct levels: that of the match itself and that of the “territorial invasion”’. In addition, actual and imagined drama was escalated in the period following the war, which further activated this us–them configuration and polarised participants. For instance, while floodlights were introduced from 1950 to accommodate televised matches in the evening, the positioning of floodlights around the perimeter of the spectacle may, I argue, arguably have heightened the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ as the Nazis purposefully did at the Nuremburg rallies from 1936. Lastly, football hooliganism is ‘fuelled and contoured by . . . the major fault-lines of particular countries’, which were sharpened following the Second World War. In this view, football hooliganism is seen as ‘part of a wider social phenomenon’ that led the existing explanations to focus on identifying the social roots and identity of hooligan groups as opposed to their interactions.

1970–1979: Football Hooliganism Rises at ‘Home’ and ‘Abroad’

It was not until the 1970s, however, that football hooliganism was evident at significant levels elsewhere in Europe, such as in Italy and Germany, which further called into question the concept of football hooliganism being the ‘British disease’. Meanwhile in Britain, racist chants and violence became more frequent, and preventative measures keenly debated in Parliament. Commissioning a report in 1978, the football authorities publicly ‘maintain[ed] that its causes and cure lie outside their control . . . [and urged] tougher action by the courts and harsher penalties to be made law’. Indicative of the frustration of many clubs and their managers at the lack of government response, some are quoted as suggesting to the media that the problem may be solved with ‘the introduction of the Special Air Service’, ‘public floggings’ or, as the then England coach Bobby Robson suggested, perpetrators should be ‘burned alive with flame-throwers’.


By the 1980s, after more than two decades of continual and escalating violence, match attendances began to fall to new lows, and the financial state of the game in Britain became dire. In an attempt to moderate spectator disorder and violence, between 1981 and 1987 the governing Football Association withdrew the use of yellow and red cards to caution and eject miscreant players, and the televising of football matches was banned for a brief time in 1985. Both of these measures, however, proved unsuccessful, and so the European Convention on Spectator Violence of 1985 advocated a raft of measures that promoted: prevention,
cooperation and repression. Two reforms adopted in Britain arguably reduced the incidence of violence from the late 1980s. First, the reconfiguration of football from a zero-sum game in which winners were awarded two-points, drawing sides a point each and losers nothing, to a positive-sum game where winners would instead be given three points for a win and one for a draw from the 1981–2 season. By reconfiguring the dynamics of the game in this way, authorities intended games to endure less frequent stoppages as well as become more entertaining in order to simultaneously promote a rise in attendances and improve the economic standing of the clubs.

Second, following the Taylor Report in 1990, the Football Association formally addressed the configuration of spectators inside the grounds. Initiated following two high-profile incidents at games involving the British team Liverpool FC, the report highlighted the need to better manage fans’ attendance at football matches as well as to directly combat hooliganism. The first incident occurred hours prior to the 1985 European Cup Final kicking off at Heysel Stadium in Belgium, where 39 supporters were killed as Liverpool FC supporters attacked their Italian rivals, Juventus – an incident that was later found to have been the result, not of football hooliganism but of preventative measures. The second incident occurred at a domestic FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool FC and Nottingham Forest FC in 1989, when 96 Liverpool fans were crushed to death as they entered Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield. Among other things, Taylor recommended that all fans should be seated at British football grounds, the consumption of alcohol inside grounds should be reviewed and that all barriers prohibiting fans entering the field of play should be removed and replaced with more stringent patrolling by authorities and a fine structure for violators. The changes occurred almost overnight, thereby pricing many hooligans (and other fans) out of the game and diluting the fans’ main source of solidarity and anonymity, the standing terraces.

It is from a historical understanding that I make two key observations. First, while football has had a violent history, it ‘has not only taken different forms but has also had different meanings to the participant, and been the product of different social forces’. Second, consistent with Charles Tilly’s collective violence thesis, we found that violent incidents surrounding football matches were evident in ‘waves’ – peaking and subsiding – over long periods. These findings suggest that a small number of causal mechanisms were triggering violent interactions between and among football spectators.

**Boundary Activation in Violent Rituals**

For all types of violent rituals, boundaries are activated as participants and settings are incorporated and polarised by way of causal mechanisms and social processes. As this occurs, social interactions shift such that they rather sharply ‘organise around a single “us–them” boundary . . . and differentiate between within-boundary and cross-boundary interactions’. What triggers the activation of a boundary is most commonly ‘brokerage’. According to the relational approach to collective violence adopted here, brokerage connects two social sites more than they were previously through social interaction – as in a conversation. In violent rituals, brokerage consists of shared understandings where ‘the attitude we take toward the phenomenon is partly constitutive of the phenomenon, such that societies are eventually made and remade’. Of all the types of violent ritual, ‘both on and off
the field, team sports provide spectacular illustrations of the organised us–them boundary activation'. Isolating football hooliganism to one causal mechanism has its limitations: not all spectators are nationalistic, and not all matches are between clubs from or teams representing two different countries. Interpersonal boundaries, I argue, do not confine our thoughts to football matches and violent incidents between sets of fans of different nations and/or ethnicities. Rather, it is bound up in the configuration in all games of football which function by way of controlled, built-in tensions that serve to balance states of: interdependence, cooperation and ‘we-group’/’they-group’ formations. In addition, following the globalisation of football, domestic teams do not consist of entirely native players; rather they now commonly resemble an international ensemble. Hence interpersonal boundaries such as nationalism – given they are not fixed phenomena – require an explanation that accommodates these transformations over time.

Nationalism as a Causal Mechanism

The era of independence following the Second World War became a time when ‘sport played a major role in helping mould the perception of a single, national identity in recently created nation-states and bolstered it in more established countries’. Football in particular came to validate claims of nationhood, and so in a number of instances, nations have registered national football teams before being recognised as sovereign states, so that there are now more national football teams than there are members of the United Nations. Through football, communities of people could get behind their local or international team to display patriotism and/or obtain a sense of belonging to the nation. While patriotism is considered to arouse a positive ‘inward orientation’, nationalism generally has a character ‘which embraces a comparison with other countries, and the desire to best those other nations’. In this way, football ‘can be interpreted as a microcosm of political, social and cultural behaviours’, where both the players and spectators forge a bond that resembles the national culture.

Football reproduces and reinforces nationalism via this imagined community. For instance, the postmodernist writings of Anthony King contend that football supporters’ behaviour and relational practices have resulted in them realising this state of belonging. Following the importance afforded by Anderson to the style in which nationalism is imagined, to King, ‘fans’ songs demonstrate why they invest themselves as a nation, adopting the style of imagining typical of that community’. This practice is disarmingly similar to that of the soldier at war, who must use scripts and symbols to forge national bonds, thereby making real an imagined us–them boundary. In this way, football spectators are seen to polarise us–them via competitive displays of their solidarity and the living and reliving of certain collective memories, such that ‘while political history considers wars as the founding events of nationhood, football fans organise history around “epic events” related to football’. Others take Anderson’s thesis a step further, and so to them, ‘in sport as in war, people can develop a real community of interests, something which is not simply imagined and which can, to some extent, transcend the class, regional, ethnic and gender differences which separate them on other occasions’. Such approaches therefore run contrary to positivist notions of nationalism, ‘which connects a people to its state and in which nationalisms which are not connected to states are somehow false’. 
Here, football is conceptualised as a social pastime that is amenable to nationalism in three ways. First, as ‘the nation-state recedes, international sporting contests appear to represent one of the last arenas of nationalism’ since they provide a ‘theatre for the working up and expression of national identity, and its mobilised form, nationalism’. This occurs since football offers an accessible, popular public sphere for the living and sharing of nationhood that is potentially denied many participants elsewhere.

Although it has been argued that it is ‘difficult to construct coherent and unified national identities on the basis of sportive nationalism’, since ‘it is a complicated socio-political response to challenges and events, both sportive and non-sportive, that must be understood in terms of the varying national contexts in which it appears’. Second, sport enables a nation to realise prestige, legitimacy, the overcoming of deficiencies in other areas or the pursuit of international rivalries peacefully. For instance, once recent study found that 80% of the European Union explicitly feature sport as a means of fostering multicultural understanding and integration. Third, sport may also promote a sense of ‘social and ethnic nationalism’ that serves to challenge dominant cultures as well as determine who belongs to the nation and who does not.

It must be acknowledged, however, that nationalism affects football fan behaviour in a number of ways across different countries and settings: while English football hooligans are often violent at the international level, German and Italian ultra groups are often relatively pacified. For instance, at the 1990 World Cup in Italy, many Napoli fans abandoned their support of the national side in favour of their club hero Diego Maradona’s Argentina – whereas, in preparation for the 1982 World Cup in Spain, authorities planned to control the English spectators by constructing ‘the black hole of Bilbao’ to cage miscreant fans underneath the stadium. Despite this, politics and religion play a much more central role in the formation of the ultra groups in both Italy and Germany than for the British hooligan.

A Narrative of Boundary Activation at Football Matches: 1945–1989

One possible narrative of boundary activation surrounding football matches involves actualising nationalism through social practice. Before the Second World War, football was configured in such a way as to offer a vehicle for forging and expressing social identities. While the drama of the game had some affect on spectators, the activation of boundaries among and between participants is what caused most violent interactions. This process of national and masculine boundary activation persisted largely uninterrupted throughout the First and Second World Wars in Britain, as it did elsewhere in Europe. Following the Second World War, the social role of nationhood had changed markedly; after decades of nationalism being thrust upon those at war and the home front, individuals were now increasingly left to define their own national identities so as to locate a ‘sense of belonging’. Although it was not for an entire generation after the war until a raft of youth subcultural fashions and social movements had emerged.

From the 1960s, football hooliganism emerged as an alternative to other youth subcultures for young males with sufficient means to attend football matches as well as travel to both away matches and international fixtures. More than a decade of moral panic surrounding youth subcultures and violence gave the violent hooligan a national attention denied them. Indeed this young working man was not dominated
by antisocial ideas or a violent disposition as a result of any civilising process. Rather, football provided him with a social setting where camaraderie and friendships were sought, and a quest for excitement could be lived, relived and shared as collective memory. As a direct result of more spectators attending both home and away matches, overcrowding before and after games became more common both inside and outside of grounds, and so the arena of claim making had changed. Collectively, this pursuit of national identity through football produced an imagined community within and between football fans, at international and club level, in which one’s sense of belonging was linked to one’s ability to support and defend the symbolic and physical representations one’s team as though it were one’s own territory. By the 1970s, the politicisation of society had meant that, to some, ‘in the modern world everyone can, should, and will “have” a nationality, as he or she “has” a gender’. The nation state and nationalism had declined in social importance such that ‘territory, represented by the local football club, was and is, acutely regional’. Given this territory does not exist to anyone but the hooligan, nor is it under threat (per se), the hooligan’s concerns about his identity were, at best, imagined. Nevertheless, for the hooligan a football match became a setting in which territorial claims could be made (or defended) and their allegiance showcased (or derived). Following a number of high-profile disorders and heightened public attention, both the structure and governance of football matches was reconfigured such that the behaviour of supporters became regulated by enforced seating, by surveillance, by crowd segregation within and outside the ground and so on. The media, after amplifying violence in the decade’s prior, now de-amplified it by publicising the greater number of crowd controls and tougher penalties. Thus, while the same us–them boundaries were present, their role in social interactions had declined, and the social setting in which they could take place had evolved. In essence, the conditions and territory necessary to act like a football hooligan had been denied them (the hooligan).

Conclusion

The emergence of football hooliganism in the 1960s and the subsequent variations in its level and form over time is understandable when conceptualised as collective violence. Following Tilly’s typology of interpersonal violence, I demonstrated how the ‘extent of coordination’ and ‘salience of short-run damage’ best identifies causal mechanisms of collective claim making. In this view, football hooliganism was re-imagined as a violent ritual in which interactions take place in a recognised arena, are well defined across and within ‘us–them’ boundaries and involve a high degree of coordination among actors and settings. Nationalism, in particular, acts as a causal mechanism that informs football hooliganism following the Second World War since it was agreed football, via the concept of respectability and the pursuit of social status, resembles an imagined community that is made real through social practice. This constitutes a significant departure from the existing explanations of football hooliganism, which have tended to focus on its social roots and the social identity of hooligans and hooligan groups, thereby undervaluing the importance of social interactions and boundary activation in creating, escalating and sustaining violence since its modernisation in 1863.

A continual process of forming and traversing such us–them boundaries explains much of the variation in the level and form of violence over time, as well as the
tendency for participants to vacillate between peaceful and violent social interactions. In addition to providing a general explanation of football hooliganism, conceptualising it as collective violence also emphasises both the importance of violent processes and the interconnectedness of different forms of collective violence such as the Second World War that has not been adequately explored by the existing explanations. To do so, one must overlook a small number of differences between violent rituals and destruction: in violent rituals such as football hooliganism, the stakes are usually fixed and finite, the incident is confined to a well-defined setting and participants differentiate between both proper/improper behaviour and combatants/non-combatants (monitors and ordinary spectators).103

In relating football hooliganism and war in this way, some may argue that I’ve approached football hooliganism with little appreciation of the ongoing debate on the role of the media in its amplification. Not so; the connections suggested are related to social processes, and ultimately the arguments presented have served to show that, via social interactions, ‘scripted violent practices (e.g. contact sports) look something like coordinated destruction, like contained versions of war’.104 Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the connection between football and war is often drawn crudely. For instance one hooligan memoir recalls that ‘most of the English fans travelling saw themselves as a sort of reincarnation of Winston Churchill’.105 These findings are intended to provide a framework for future cross-national, comparative research that may be used to further probe national differences in expressions of football hooliganism as well as the data complexities often associated with sociological studies of crowds. Ultimately, then, while football hooliganism may be best viewed as ‘part of a wider social phenomenon’,106 I argue the dominant explanations have approached the issue without drawing on the rich literature of collective violence.

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Note on Contributor
N.A.J. Taylor is a PhD candidate in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, and casual lecturer in the Faculty of Law and Management at La Trobe University.

Notes
1. Dunning, ‘Sport as Male Preserve’, 81.
2. For noteworthy historical analyses on this era, see also: Green, A History of the Football Association; Marples, A History of Football; Magoun, History of Football; Shearman, Athletics and Football.
3. Tilly, in The Politics of Collective Violence, asserts on page 4 that non-violent incidents, unless proceeding from or part of actual incidents of violence, may confuse our understanding of collective violence. See also Wagg, The Football World, who applies this approach to football hooliganism specifically.
5. Ibid, 5–6.
6. This is a methodology adopted most notably by Spaaij, ‘Football Hooliganism as a Transnational Phenomenon’ in relation to football hooliganism, given it highlights certain interpersonal dynamics such as masculinity and nationalism that, he argues, tend to be universally evident.
7. While Tilly’s model of collective violence has been adopted here, the relational approach shares some commonalities with the ‘inter-group dynamics’ approach which attributes conflict to ‘crowd pathology’; see Appelbaum and McGuire, ‘Models of Suggestive Influence’; McPhail, The Myth of the Madding Crowd; Reicher, ‘Crowd Behaviour as Social Action’; Reicher and Potter, ‘Psychological Theory as Intergroup Perspective’; Waddington, Contemporary Issues in Public Disorder.
10. For a discussion of the definitional confusion football hooliganism endures with other forms of spectator disorderliness, see Andersson, ‘Swedish Football Hooliganism’, 2; Carroll, ‘Football Hooliganism in England’, 77–8; Frosdick and Marsh, Football Hooliganism, 27–8; Murphy et al., Football on Trial; Roversi and Balestri, ‘Italian Ultras Today’, 185; Spaaij, ‘Football Hooliganism as a Transnational Phenomenon’, 412; Trivizas, ‘Offences and Offenders’, 276.
12. An innovation claimed by Missiroli, ‘European Football Cultures and their Integration’, 2 – despite earlier works such as Elias and Dunning, ‘Dynamics of Group Sports’; Houllihan, Sport and International Politics; and Taylor, ‘Sport and International Relations’. See also Kissoudi, ‘Sport, Politics and International Relations’.
17. Dunning, ‘Notes on Some Recent Contributions’, 137.
20. Williams, Dunning and Murphy, Hooligans Abroad.
27. See Murphy et al., ‘Soccer Crowd Disorder’.
33. Murphy et al., ‘Soccer Crowd Disorder’, 653.
37. Dunning, ‘Sociological Reflections on Sport’, 77. Although the historian Lewis, ‘Football Hooliganism in England’, 219–22, found that fans were largely drawn from the skilled working class and were not ‘roughs’.
41. Ibid., 604–6.
42. Murphy et al., ‘Soccer Crowd Disorder’, 656.
44. The 1968 Harrington Report criticised the inaction of the government at this time following advice from both the 1924 Shorrt and 1946 Moelwyn Hughes reports, which had both highlighted rising levels of football-related violence.
46. Murphy et al., ‘Soccer Crowd Disorder’, 662.
47. Ibid., 661.
59. Dunning, ‘Sport as Male Preserve’, 86. See also Johnes, ‘Hooligans and Barrackers’, 24.
64. Spaaij, ‘Football Hooliganism as a Transnational Phenomenon’, 415.
66. Social Science Research Council, Public Disorder and Sporting Events.
69. See ibid.
74. Ibid., 21.
75. Searle, The Construction of Social Reality, 341. See also Durkheim, The Elementary Forms, 422.
76. Tilly, The Politics of Collective Violence, 82. See also Elias, What is Sociology, 122; King, ‘Outline of a Practical Theory’, 641. In contrast, in Ritual and Religion, 116, Rappaport excludes sport from his analysis since he believes it may neither unify social groups (by way of the win–lose paradigm) or offer predictable outcomes.
77. For an alternative view, see Smith, ‘Bataille’s Boys’.
79. See King, ‘Football Fandom and Post-national Identity’.
80. Levermore and Millward, ‘Official Policies’, 144. See also: Duke and Crowley, Football, Nationalism and the State; Giulianotti and Williams, Game Without Frontiers;

85. To figurational sociologists, football spectatorship is often militarised; see Murphy et al., *Football on Trial*, 36–9.
94. See Hargreaves, ‘Olympism and Nationalism’; Jarvie, ‘Sport, Nationalism and Cultural Identity’.
95. Amara et al., ‘Sport and Multiculturalism’.
99. Gibbons et al., ‘“The Way it Was”’.
102. Gibbons et al., ‘“The Way it Was”’, 36.
104. Ibid., 86.

References


