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FOOTBALL VIOLENCE: NOT ONLY A BRITISH PROBLEM

ABSTRACT. In this article several Greek studies on hooliganism are described. A research group was formed under the direction of the author of this paper to research different aspects of the problem. In view of this objective, seven particular projects were planned and carried out, the principal one being that which was set up to investigate the behaviour and attitudes of hard core fans.

KEY WORDS: attitudes, classification, football fans, hooliganism, socio-economic status

The aim of this article is primarily to present some results of field research undertaken at the University of Athens on Football Violence at Greek Sports Stadiums. The research was conducted between 1986 and 1988, in the aftermath of the Heysel Stadium disaster in Brussels (May 1985), in which 39 fans were killed and 425 were injured. The incident occurred not as the direct result of hooligan activities but as a consequence of a weak retaining wall suddenly crumbling after rampaging Liverpool fans charged the fans of Juventus. In 1985 a European Convention on Spectator Violence and Misbehaviour at Sports Events was hastily brought forward and delegates signed a declaration as a token that the Council of Europe was determined to bring the situation under control. At that time, although the problem of football violence and hooliganism in Greece could not be said to be threatening, the beginning of the 1980s saw a discernible increase and subsequent escalation of incidents involving fans; a phenomenon that needed to be approached systematically and addressed accordingly.

OBJECTIVES AND ORGANISATION OF RESEARCH INTO GREEK HOOLIGANISM

A research group comprising nine scholars (criminologists, sociologists, statisticians etcetera) and thirteen under- or postgraduate students was formed under the direction of the author of this paper to research different aspects of the problem. In view of this objective, seven particular projects were planned and carried out, the principal one being that which was set up to investigate the behaviour and attitudes of hard core fans. A total of 319 young persons were questioned, almost all of whom were active members of certain notoriously aggressive fan clubs affiliated to major football clubs



in Athens and Salonica (86.5%). The selection of subjects was thus based not only on their assumed participation in supporter activities, but also on the intensity of their emotional commitment to their clubs. Secondly, a project was set up concerning participant observation in major sports events. For this study, 84 football matches and thirteen basketball matches were attended over a period of twelve months, to examine the role that certain circumstantial factors (such as insufficient police vigilance) might play in creating conditions conducive to acts of violence. Thirdly, a survey (content analysis) of court cases involving sports violations was carried out, in which 72 decisions concerning violent incidents at sporting events over a five-year period were studied. In addition, a number of questions were put to persons professionally involved in the problem. Referees, football players, police officers detailed to maintain order in sports stadiums, and sports journalists were invited to comment and give their views on the subject. Thus, by delineating the main parameters of the problem and localising the factors attendant to it, the research team endeavoured to build up a global picture of football violence in Greece.

On completion of the main body of research, two additional Greek projects were carried out. The first, over the period of 1991–1993, was conducted by a team of sociologists and anthropologists at the 'Panteion', Athens University. Its principal object was to study hooliganism as a sub-culture and lifestyle frequently associated with heavy metal and rockabilly music in some of the 'rougher' working class areas of the Athens region. The second was undertaken between 1993 and 1995, by a team of researchers from the Technological Educational Institute, Department of Social Work, in Athens. Research material comprised interviews with 100 active members of fan clubs from Athens and Salonica, whose attitudes and behaviour were subsequently compared with an equal number of less involved supporters. Some of the findings of these papers will also be described here.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

Preliminary Remarks

While not outside the scope of this paper, it is perhaps unnecessary to repeat conclusions of the research conducted by the University of Athens on Hooliganism, the results of which are available (in English) in a report presented to the XIII Informal Meeting of European Ministers of Sport in Athens, May 1988. What would be interesting and pertinent in the limited space of this paper, is an attempt to compile a profile of the persons who

constitute the active clientele of some hard core fan clubs, the so-called 'gates', in Greece. While accepting that these findings may be of limited value in terms of time and place since they refer to a period ten years ago and to a country where hooliganism was not particularly well-defined or developed, they may be useful. In other countries, for example, and for newer generations the problem has different forms and impact. At the same time, a profile resulting from statistical evidence cannot always give a clear picture of the individual features and personality traits of the persons involved. Within the framework of such a profile, it is not always easy to pinpoint the different characteristics and mentalities of a hooligan, as opposed to those of an average committed fan or casual supporter. It is also difficult, when talking about violent behaviour, to take into consideration all the components which make the difference between a serious act of violence and one of a symbolic and ritualistic nature. These questions are certainly better explored not through statistics, but through ethnographic and anthropological methods. Yet while these reservations are undoubtedly valid, the 'profile' of a person exhibiting a typical kind of behaviour such as that identifiable with hooliganism, can always be useful as a means of understanding their social background and general behavioural tendencies. From this point of view, the profile of the Greek hooligan which follows can assuredly be of scientific interest even now.

Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics

The majority of persons questioned in the 'hard core fans' project comprise single males of, on average, twenty years of age, who were mostly born (58%) and raised (63.3%) in large cities (Athens, Piraeus, Salonica), where they still reside and where the questionnaires were completed. As far as their parents' occupations and incomes are concerned, most of them were in employment to a greater extent than the corresponding general urban population (fathers' unemployment: 4.1% against 7.4%; mothers' unemployment: 65.8% against 81.65%). Yet in comparison to the general urban population, these parents were less frequently employed in professional, scientific or managerial positions but were more likely to be salaried employees (fathers but not mothers) or in skilled labour (mothers but not fathers). Hence, their social position could be said to range between lower and higher working class. In addition, their average joint income seems to level out at about one third higher than that of the corresponding general population, due to the fact that both parents in these families enjoy a higher percentage of employment than that of the population in general. Thus, in a way, the parents of this sample of hooligans were in a position to offer

their family a better standard of living than average, but this at the cost of more time spent (particularly by mothers) outside the home, at work.

This remark, which is in itself significant as far as parental supervision and family communication is concerned, should be seen in the wider context of a hooligan's family life, which is indeed problematic. A significant percentage of the subjects responded that one or both of their parents had died (10.0%), or that their parents were divorced (7.3%) and that this had happened mainly before the subjects' twelfth birthday (59%). At the time of the survey, a large number of these young men, approximately one third, did not live with both parents (30.1%), and declared that their relationships with them were problematic (30.4% of the subjects questioned replied that they got on indifferently, or not at all well with their parents). In addition, 19.4% of them admitted that one or both of their parents had, at some time, been involved with either the Police or the Courts, as a result of some sort of criminal act or some form of public disturbance.

Regarding the socio-economic status of the subjects, their level of education does not differ significantly from that of their peers in the larger area of the capital, the only striking difference being that there were fewer University/College entrants among them (attributable to their comparatively young age) and more secondary school pupils or graduates. However, many of them (24.8%) had been obliged to repeat a school-year because of excess absenteeism and, as they themselves admitted, had sometimes or always had difficulty in getting on with their classmates (24.4%), and frequently or always had problems with their teachers (51.4%). Not surprisingly, the majority of young people questioned was not attending school but was in employment (71.4%), mainly in the private sector (37.8%) or as skilled or unskilled workers. (22.0%). However, only 31.9% had steady jobs, while the remaining 35.5% (of which 14% were students) stated that they worked seasonally. Thus, only 28% of the youngsters in the sample were employed or at least seasonally employed. Hence, the subjects who were questioned, were employed in greater numbers than the rest of the population and earned a monthly income (calculated as slightly less than that of the average worker of the same age), which could give them some sense of independence. On the other hand, the precocious way in which these young men entered the work force without first having known three or four years of carefree student life, may well have contributed towards creating conditions under which certain strains and tensions would almost certainly develop and which would ultimately need an outlet.

The Attachment to the Football Teams and to the Fan Club

This pent-up tension must be related to the more general problematic environment surrounding these people both at home and at school. A lack of understanding and a feeling of alienation in combination with the normal quest for excitement and stimulation among people of this age, incite them to search for psychological release among their peer groups. Hence they search for peer groups to which they can devote themselves utterly and completely, and where they can achieve an increased sense of self-worth and importance. Football games, with all the thrill and suspense of the match, the competition and conflict, the ceremony and rituals of spontaneously co-ordinated reactions en masse, such as flag waving, scarf displaying, loud clapping and rhythmic chanting, allow these young people to immerse themselves in an intensely exciting atmosphere, thus offering them, perhaps, the best way to escape the routine of their everyday lives. When one's team actually achieves victory, the humiliation of the rival team's supporters and the consequent recognition of one's own superiority may provide a dedicated fan with a chance to redress the balance.

Why these young people choose their peer groups from among the fan clubs and allow their whole way of life to be ruled by this attachment to a football team is quite understandable. Most of the fans stated quite clearly that they had belonged to these 'gates' for longer than two years (54.6%) and that they had joined them in order to support their team "more directly and more dynamically" (40.9%), or because at some time they had felt the need to meet with other people who 'believed' in the same team (17.2%). The percentage of non-respondents to this question was a quite substantial 26.9%, perhaps because these young people considered their reasons for joining a fan club as self-evident. They also said that they got together at certain gathering places at least two or three times a week (60.8%), that they read mainly those sports journals that supported their team (55.5%), that they supported their teams at away matches "frequently" or "very frequently" (58.0%), and that they went to watch their teams play at home, even when the match was going to be televised (89.3%).

Forms of Deviance

Quite revealing were answers to questions relating to the extent of their devotion to their team. In their own words, as many as 35.0% said they would be determined to get involved in actual fighting with fans of the opposing team, 16.8% would challenge the police and 8.5% would cause damage to private property. However, the percentage of persons who did not answer this question, for obvious reasons, was especially high (34.3%), and in actual fact, almost *half* of the individuals questioned (49.5%) admitted to

having personally had fist fights or having thrown objects onto the field. They also said that they had been involved in a fight(s) or in causing damage on the way to or from the football ground quite frequently (62.7%). More importantly, almost all of them had witnessed acts of hooliganism or vandalism (96.6%), and knew individuals who had participated in such acts (94.0%) or who had been tried and sentenced for them (85.0%). It transpired that a substantially smaller percentage of individuals in the sample admitted to having been convicted for one (7.5%) or two or more (6.9%) offences involving violence at sports-stadiums, or for other offences unconnected with sport (14.1%).

If these figures and their interpretation are accepted as reliable, it follows that not all of the members belonging to a hard core fan club behave in a similar, typical way. There is probably a fanatically obsessed nucleus of say 7–15% who are the *most violent*, having already been previously convicted for their provocative and aggressive behaviour. Involved to a lesser extent, there are another 40–50% who are *prone to becoming involved in violent incidents* of minor importance (e.g. throwing objects) or even major ones (e.g. fist fighting), especially if they are induced by the anonymity and swayed by the emotional outbursts of the crowd. Finally, there seems to be an equally large group of young people who, although they belong to these hard core fan clubs, seem *happy enough to experience the exhilarating atmosphere of the football ground* without feeling the need to do more than put up a ritualistic show of violence, with insulting chants and charges against their opponents. Two other facts revealed by this research, were also interesting. The first is that a large percentage of subjects (48%) had tried and (83%) had acquaintances, albeit few (83.4%), who *had tried addictive toxic substances* such as narcotics, stimulants and pills. This percentage is excessively high, particularly in comparison to the number of students who, according to estimates at the time, were using such substances all over Greece (just 3–6%, slightly higher in Athens). The second fact is that, according to the opinion of the subjects, there were many individuals who could be characterised as ‘rockers’ (34.2%), ‘freaks’ (16.3%) and ‘pill poppers’ or ‘junkies’ (14.2%) among the members of a typical ‘gate’. Additionally, they believed that members of a typical ‘gate’ also comprised *neo-nazis* (5.4%) and *anarchists* (10.2%), a fact which should not appear as especially surprising, considering these two extremist political groups have long been attempting to penetrate the circles of the hooligans, in order to win them over and have them join their cause.

A further analysis of the sub-cultural characteristics of fan club members was undertaken, as was mentioned, by the research team of the ‘Pantheon’, Athens University, under the direction of Dr. A. Astrinakis and Dr.

L. Stylianoudi. It must be said here that justice cannot be done to this extensive 600-page study in just a few lines. Yet it is interesting to note that, according to the remarks made by these researchers after participant observation and interviews with some fans from 'rough' working class areas, there is a marked distinction between the attitudes of hard core and less involved fans towards participation in violent incidents. Nevertheless, all these groups put *an emphasis on resoluteness and fighting ability against opposing fans whom they tended to incite*. In addition, they considered it an obligation to defend both the team of their place of origin and that of their place of residence. They usually consumed alcohol, pills and soft drugs (even inside the sports grounds) and, in some cases, they adopted a 'casual life-style', or regarded heavy metal music as definitive of 'tough guy' mentality.

Factors Which Contribute to the Incidents

That the negative attitude of fans towards the supporters of the opposite team verges on barely checked hostility has also become clear in our own research, where the subjects declared that their opinion of these people was principally 'bad', ranging from 'almost bad' to 'very bad' (71.2%). Equally negative was their opinion of the police (80%). According to the subjects, then, the factors that contributed to the occurrence of incidents, were mainly: the provocative behaviour of the opposing team's fans (25.8%); decisions taken by the referees that were, in their opinions, 'unjust,' (14.2%); and the presence of and/or provocative attitude of police officers present (13.7%). Similarly, according to the findings which were obtained from the project of participant observation, the high degree of volatile tension in football and basketball matches was attributed to a combination of the following circumstances: the prevalence of fanaticism among the opposing teams (e.g. for reasons of retaliation, prestige or because of provocative statements made by sports officials to the Press); the extent to which the rating of a match was critical for either one or both of the teams playing; when a rumour to the effect that the result of the match has been predetermined (fixed) because either the referee and/or the players had been bribed; and the incidental triggering off of passions such as that provoked by a referee's bad or wrong decision.

In view of the above findings, a seemingly unjust decision by a referee during a decisive match is not sufficient in itself to spark off violent incidents, unless it functions as a sort of fuse that ignites an already existing potentially explosive situation. Besides, these young people are not always in a position to judge whether the referee's decision is unjust or not, as their knowledge concerning the technicalities of the game seem to be limited

(this research shows that only 38.9% of them could answer a relevant technical question correctly). In any case, it appears that beyond chance errors made by the referees, a continuously latent cause for triggering off violent incidents is the hostile fanaticism harboured against the opposing team's fans; a fanaticism which has far less to do with provocative behaviour, 'paid off matches' and the like, than with deeper socio-economic, cultural and/or geographical differences (e.g. between the Greek teams of Salonica and Athens, or between teams of England and Scotland) – differences that merely find an outlet and manifest themselves at these football confrontations.

Responsibilities Related to the Incidents

These remarks also suggest that young people belonging to hard core fan clubs cannot be considered as solely responsible for violent incidents. It is more likely that they constitute the last link in a chain of responsibilities or, to use another metaphor, the visible tip of the iceberg. Questionnaires completed by people professionally involved in the problem of football violence, show that a number of other factors, which are not directly visible, play an important role.

In Greece the *administrative heads of football clubs* are usually successful business people who tend to regard football as a business proposition capable of generating financial gain, albeit not necessarily to them. Hence, in most cases, they have no scruples about encouraging the attendance of hard core fans who, thanks to their enthusiasm, can in turn exert a positive influence on their team, so that the match acquires more intensity and effectiveness (ergo financial success!). Such irresponsible gambling, given the unpredictability of these fans' reactions is undeniably playing with fire, especially when their team falls foul of the referee's whistle.

An equally large share of the responsibility for violent incidents goes to *sports journalists*. In recent years the sports press in Greece (and this is true of both political and sports journals) has avoided instigating fans to displays of emotional fervour and exciting their fanaticism through large front page titles with provocative statements from sports officials or by revealing some apparent or real conspiracy. However, there is a recent tendency in Greece (particularly on Greek television) to place great emphasis on the kind of violent incidents that occur during demonstrations or other crowd gatherings. This type of sensational spectacle is doubtless cheap for television management and healthy for ratings. The way in which these incidents are presented is not necessarily negative, although it can instil a form of mild hysteria and moral panic in more vulnerable viewers. More important is the fact that this kind of publicity may encourage young fans

to indulge in provocative behaviour simply to bask in the limelight and add, in this way, to their status within their fan clubs or acquaintances. Interestingly, the results of the research of the Technological Educational Institute of Athens, show that about 91% of the hooligans questioned would turn on the television to watch violent incidents that they had themselves taken part in or witnessed on the terraces and would feel, by watching these incidents, a sense of anticipation, interest, pleasure and recognition. Another 87% of the subjects said that they would feel socially important in cases where a third person commented on these incidents. The press may thus provide reinforcement for future acts of hooliganism and this should be taken into consideration by those responsible for monitoring news programmes.

A smaller share of the responsibility also goes to the other professionals involved. *Referees* can purposely or by chance take wrong or seemingly wrong decisions. In fact referees in the study admitted that to a large extent (34.1%), the objectivity of their decisions is 'partly' affected by their psychological state during the match. In recent years *football players* appear to have acquired 'star status' psychology and are eager to change teams for higher pay (31.1% of them admitted to playing football solely 'for the money!'); they also commonly fall short of the expectations of the sports fan, thus creating a well-grounded feeling of bitterness or even infuriation at the disproportionate gap between their excessive high pay, expensive tickets and poor performance, such as delays, laxity and inaccuracy of aim exhibited in the game.

The members of the police force entrusted with maintaining order in sports stadiums are also sometimes responsible for the escalation of violent incidents, especially when they intervene either with less and/or with greater delay than the circumstances call for, or, more than and/or earlier than necessary, thus contributing to the aggravation of a still latent climate of violence and annoyance. The police stated in our questionnaires that it is possible for them to get carried away 'very often', 'often' or 'sometimes' (49%), by psychological states such as fear, nerves and anger. Responsibility for these incidents can be further attributed to the *sports ministers and officials*, who have neither taken measures to prevent the negative side-effects of football professionalisation and commercialisation, nor drawn up a substantially preventive policy to cope with hooliganism (e.g. organising alternative forms of risk-taking activities for young fans).

Finally, responsibility for incidents is also borne by *society as a whole*, mainly in view of the general indifference and lack of understanding of its members towards the ever increasing problems of its youth. The stress of their daily lives and the lack of long-term aims or values, without, however, being given the opportunity to participate actively in social life are seen as

contributory factors. This situation becomes even worse for social outcasts or deviants, who, instead of being heard and understood, are principally confronted with repressive policing measures and/or social reprobation, which eventually leads to their fulfilling the negative prognostics made of them. It must be noted here that in our research 75% of police and sports journalists said that they had a "very low opinion" of hooligans.

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