NEW ETHNOGRAPHIES OF FOOTBALL IN EUROPE

PEOPLE, PASSIONS, POLITICS

Edited by ALEXANDRA SCHWELL,
NINA SZOGS, MAŁGORZATA Z. KOWALSKA
and MICHAŁ BUCHOWSKI

FOOTBALL RESEARCH IN
AN ENLARGED EUROPE
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New Ethnographies of Football in Europe

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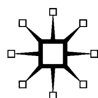

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Foreword

Ethnography and the Study of Football Fan Cultures

Geoff Pearson

Illuminating football fan cultures

The football crowd is a complex, misunderstood and much maligned entity. Its reputation throughout much of the world, and particularly in Europe, is of being loud, disruptive, difficult to manage and prone to disorder and violence. Football fans are treated by the legal systems and policing strategies of many countries in a completely different manner to those following other sports; football spectators are frequently segregated and contained, kept under constant and intrusive surveillance and other intelligence-gathering techniques, denied access to alcohol and subjected to routine interventions by heavily armed riot police. And yet such blanket methods of crowd management are too readily based on prejudices, misunderstandings and occasionally deliberate attempts by those in authority to exaggerate the threat posed by football supporters.

The truth is that there is no such thing as the 'typical' football crowd. In terms of size, constitution, motivation and behaviour, football crowds vary widely. This variation can be seen between different clubs, cities, localities and countries, but it can also be seen between different fixtures in which the same clubs are playing each season. Most importantly, football crowds do not consist of the same 'type' of person in terms of demographic and motivation. Research on football spectators in England alone has identified many different sub-cultures of fans; families, tourists, anoraks, corporates, carnival fans, and of course that small much-researched group of 'hooligans' or 'risk fans'. Elsewhere in Europe we see those labelled (or self-labelled) as Ultras, a term which means many different things to different people. Many of these sub-cultures are fluid, and a spectator may attend different matches in different 'guises' even during the course of a single season. Aside from having a desire (which may vary in enthusiasm between individuals and fixtures) to

watch a particular sporting spectacle, football spectators are not a homogeneous group and any attempt to understand them, manage them or commercially exploit them as such is likely to fail.

In the United Kingdom, ethnographic study of football spectators has played a fundamental role in illuminating the complexity of the football crowd. One of the early ethnographic studies of English fans, by Marsh et al. (1978), drew attention to the different sub-groups that would gather together on a single terrace supporting a single team, as well as casting a critical eye on the threat of 'football hooliganism'. The work in the 1980s of the 'Leicester School' (1988; 1989; 1990) sought to understand football disorder and violence through participant observation and interviews with those groups it identified as risk, looking to locate them in their socio-economic context. In the 1990s the depth of ethnographic study on British football supporters increased as Armstrong (1998) lifted the lid on the reality of football 'hooliganism' in Sheffield, King (2000; 2002) considered English football fans in a changing football landscape and Giulianotti (1991; 1995) looked at Scottish fan behaviour abroad. More recently, the work of Stott et al. (2001; 2012) has used ethnographic methods to great effect to understand the dynamic between crowds and those managing them, and to roll out across Europe best practice in terms of policing strategies and methods. And ethnographic work on football crowds continues apace in the UK from disciplines as varied as social anthropology, sociology, criminology, socio-legal studies and social psychology.

None of these studies, no matter how thorough and authentic, can by themselves account for football fan behaviour, but each places a new piece in a jigsaw that is helping us gradually to understand football spectator and football crowd behaviour. Ethnographic study of football crowds helps us to overcome the prejudices and misunderstandings that may result from 'outsider' research, particularly that carried out by those in authority with vested interests, or by media outlets searching for the sensational. Furthermore, by immersing themselves in the field, ethnographers of football spectators are also able to peer through layers of deception, presentation, 'bluff', fear of authority and reputation management that many football spectators create in order to protect themselves, their fellow spectators, and their clubs.

A personal ethnographic journey

I 'entered the field' of football crowds in the mid-1990s when I embarked upon a PhD at Lancaster University's Law Department, in

the North-West of England. I carried out research with fans of a lower-league club, Blackpool FC, standing on the terrace behind the goal for every term-time home game for three years and attending the majority of away matches to investigate the effectiveness of legal responses to football crowd disorder or 'hooliganism'. My intention was to evaluate the impact of legislation, policing responses and court judgments upon football crowd behaviour, and to assess the effectiveness of these interventions in reducing public disorder and also on fan civil liberties and human rights.

The research was ethnographic, based on covert participant observation within crowds of football fans at home and away matches. The reason for adopting this methodology was that I did not trust the reliability of data that I could obtain by interview or survey techniques alone. As my primary focus was on spectators committing criminal offences, I was concerned that those engaging in the more serious offences might hide their behaviour from me, whereas others might attempt to exaggerate the extent of their involvement. Ethnographic research (for example, Armstrong, 1998) and the accounts of so-called 'self-confessed hooligans' indicate that football 'hooliganism' is a phenomenon constructed upon reputation; in the UK in particular, the activities of the 'firms' appear to be based upon the desire to enhance their reputations in terms of their ability to defend their own territory and also to lower the reputation of rival firms by humiliating them (either by 'taking' territory at away matches or overcoming them in group confrontation). Furthermore, the reputation of individuals *within* firms is also important; those engaging in these social groups need to be seen to be engaging in violence and disorder at appropriate times and with appropriate opponents in order to gain respect from their peers. As a result, there are agendas at play that can lead to misleading data if research is carried out without observation; those claiming to be 'hooligans' may have an incentive to exaggerate their own involvement, but equally importantly, both 'hooligans' and fans expressing positive attitudes about the value of 'hooliganism' (see Rookwood and Pearson, 2011) may see social value in exaggerating the threat posed by the 'firm' representing their team.

Accounts in hooligan 'confessionals', or those posted on social media, of the same incidents of football disorder frequently disagree upon the outcome of the confrontation and whose reputation was enhanced. Furthermore, even without a deliberate intention to mislead the researcher, qualitative research based completely on interviews or surveys in this area may still lead to inauthentic data. The problems of how football

fans can construct their match-day reality in different ways is set out in this account from Marsh et al.'s *The Rules of Disorder*:

> (I)t is quite clear that fans are capable of giving two very different accounts concerning what happens in conflict situations. At one level (...) they present a picture of violence and destruction – fans get 'booted', 'nutted' and generally beaten up and bottles and flying bricks result in bloodied victims. At a second level, a picture of orderly conflict is presented in which fans make a lot of noise, put on a big show but are really trying to stop the opposition 'giving it a lot of mouth' rather than seriously trying to injure them... (F)ootball fans construct not a single reality but two distinct realities. On the one hand they view events on the terraces as being bloody and dangerous, and on the other they see the same events as orderly and safe. (1978, p. 95)

We can therefore see the dangers of reliance on 'white-room' interviews (although in this case the researchers were able to pick apart the inconsistencies and challenge the initial account presented to them), and the advantages of the researcher actually going into the field, 'getting their hands dirty' (van Maanen, 1983, p. 280), and observing (and experiencing) the events with their own senses. The above example does, however, also demonstrate that good ethnographic analysis is *possible* without complete immersion in the field.

In the days before institutional research ethics committees were commonplace, I was able to adopt the method of covert participant observation with little opposition. I chose this method primarily to avoid distorting the field so that I could gather more accurate or 'natural' data, but also because I was fearful for my personal safety should I admit to being an academic researcher. British football supporters had to this date not had particularly good experiences with people 'going undercover' – the undercover police operation 'Own Goal' led to several alleged 'hooligans' receiving long custodial sentences for conspiracy to commit violent disorder in the 1980s, and journalists were accused of writing sensationalised reports of violent football crowds that demonised match-going fans (for example, Buford's much maligned *Among the Thugs* [1992]). The year I began my research coincidentally saw the release of the film *ID* (Polygram, 1995) about a team of undercover police officers infiltrating the fictional 'Shadwell Dogs' football club and using the strapline, 'When You Go Under Cover, Remember One Thing... Who You Are'.

In retrospect, the justifications for choosing the ethically dubious method of covert research were overstated (see Pearson, 2009). Some fans would have undoubtedly refused to assist in my research for fear of being reported to the authorities or being the victims of a media exposé, but the experience of non-covert researchers in football (even following teams they did not personally support) suggests that, actually, football crowds are quite open to academic researchers (see Spaaij and Geilenkirchen, 2011). Likewise, while distorting the field would have been a problem to a certain extent, three years in the field should be enough to gain the trust of research participants and gather enough good quality data to provide findings that were accurate to the reality of what was occurring 'in the field'.

However the problem I was facing when determining my methodology is one familiar to many PhD researchers. For contemporary academics, the PhD is often the best opportunity to engage in an intensive and immersive research project. Doctoral students are usually new academics who are largely free from the pressures of leadership/administration and the pressure to deliver research funding. But they also typically lack the experience that would assist in making methodological decisions. This can be alleviated by the advice of a good supervisor, and guidance from ethics and research committees, but in stark contrast to normal employment practice, in academia one of the most significant career decisions an employee will make is made by those with the least relevant experience.

The other issue with my first ethnographic project was that it was not an ethnography. In fact, the words 'ethnography' and 'ethnographic' were not mentioned once in my thesis. The research was certainly ethnographic, but approached from a critical-legal perspective, it was couched in terms of 'descriptive approaches' and phenomenology. Fundamentally, my thesis was not an ethnography; instead it merely borrowed ethnographic methods and description to achieve its aims of evaluating legal measures and practices. It only set out to describe or explain the culture of the research participants insofar as this behaviour had direct relevance to the legal tools and policing approaches that were the primary focus of my research. As a result, large amounts of ethnographic data were put to one side for well over a decade.

Following the completion of the thesis and joining the University of Liverpool's Football Research Unit, I continued to use participant observation, both covert and then increasingly overt. First, I undertook a study assessing the policing of English fans abroad (both supporting the national team and various club sides). I already had experience of

carrying out ethnographic research with fans of the England national team abroad, having travelled to France for the 1998 World Cup and experiencing one of the most sustained football 'riots' in Europe, involving England fans, local gangs and French riot police over two days in Marseilles. In 2000, I undertook ethnographic research amongst England fans in Belgium at the European Championships, and again witnessed major disorder, this time in Charleroi when England fans in the town square were water-cannoned by Belgium riot police.

More significant for my research on this trip was that in the same town square (and shortly before the water-cannon was deployed), I met Dr Clifford Stott, a social psychologist who also utilised ethnographic techniques to gather data on the effectiveness of public order methods used against football fans. This was to be the start of a large-scale pan-European project investigating best practice in terms of the policing of English fans that in its first stage was funded by the UK Home Office. The primary methodology for this project was again to use immersive ethnographic techniques to uncover how fans experienced the forces of public order, only this time focusing on policing strategies and tactics throughout Europe. Social psychologists from the Elaborated Society Identity Model (ESIM) school led by Stott were able to demonstrate the key importance of policing in terms of whether or not large-scale disorder involving England fans occurred. Ultimately Stott and his colleagues were able to use the data, primarily drawn from ethnographic observations, interviews and qualitative surveys, to persuade the Public Security Police (PSP) in Portugal to adopt a low-profile 'friendly but firm' approach in their management of fans at the 2004 European Championships. Despite initial ridicule in the English-speaking media about the approach, it proved a dramatic success, with only one arrest of an England fan for disorder and no major incidents in any of the PSP-controlled areas. The story of the development of the project is set out in *Football Hooliganism: Policing and the War on the 'English Disease'* (Stott and Pearson, 2007) and demonstrates that although ethnography is of course descriptive, it does not lack the power to influence and change social policy.

The final stage of my ethnographic research focused on match-going supporters of Manchester United. I was a Manchester-based United fan, but for the purposes of my research I started attending matches with a new group of match-goers, attempting to reduce the risk of 'going native' at the outset of my research. Two years into this final stage I finally stepped out of the covert role, satisfied that I would be able to identify any major field distortion and that I would not lose my research

position. This enabled me to gather the type of rich ethnographic data from verbatim conversations and interviews which had been lacking in my covert work. For this final stage, encouraged by colleagues with whom I had established the annual Ethnography Symposium (which in 2015 celebrated its 10th anniversary), I also looked further than the issue of the law, policing and crowd management and started to pay more attention to the culture and behaviour of the fan groups under observations. These I labelled 'carnival fans' because the primary reason for their match attendance was to engage in Bakhtinian 'carnivalesque' activity (Bakhtin, 1984) – transgressions from the norms of everyday life, the gathering in large groups and the heavy social consumption of alcohol. Combining this with shelved data from my work with Blackpool and England fans, I set out my understanding of this supporter sub-culture in *An Ethnography of English Football Fans: Cans, Cops and Carnivals,* which was published by Manchester University Press in 2012.

Ethnography and the ethnographic

Ethnography is currently one of the popular buzz words in social scientific research, at least in the English-speaking world. However, its appeal is going far beyond the academy; companies selling goods and services are increasingly likely to employ 'ethnographers' to help them understand their consumers and how they use their products. The extent to which these employees are bona fide ethnographers is debateable; indeed, there is still considerable disagreement about exactly what constitutes ethnography. 'Definition of the term *ethnography* has been subject to controversy. For some it refers to a philosophical paradigm to which one makes a total commitment, for others is designates a method that one uses as and when appropriate' (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994, p. 248). The latter of these positions is, I believe, untenable: there is an important distinction between ethnographic research and ethnography.

The term 'ethnographic' refers to research methods and approaches that are employed to understand culture. There are a number of methods that are considered ethnographic, most often observation and unstructured or semi-structured interviews. Methods considered to be ethnographic take place 'in the field' – ethnographic researchers normally enter into the cultural space of those they are researching to gain an understanding of how those people live, behave and interpret the world around them. The extent to which research methods that take place outside the field can be considered ethnographic has also been

challenged. Qualitative 'white-room' interviews, surveys and questionnaires, and the use of CCTV or video technology can of course be used to try and understand complex social phenomena and put forward descriptive accounts of culture, but for many researchers (particularly those from the anthropological tradition) the failure to enter the field reduces the claim of these methods to be considered ethnographic.

But even in the case of 'genuine' ethnographic fieldwork, where researchers immerse themselves in the culture they wish to study, we should not assume that the product of these labours will be an ethnography. Ethnographic methods can be used to produce many different types of research; they may, for example, be used to inform or assess the effectiveness of social policy or to support or test a particular theoretical standpoint. However, an ethnography is a very particular outcome and as such may be closer to a research discipline than a methodology (and it is certainly much more than a mere collection of methods): 'Ethnography is not a research method. It is a way of writing about and analysing social life which has roots in both the sciences and the humanities' (Watson, 2011, p. 210).

There are differing opinions on what makes an ethnography, and I would not presume to suggest my own view is definitive or even persuasive, but for me, an ethnography must consist of the following:

1. It must be a written representation of culture (Atkinson, 1994; van Maanen, 1988). Ethnography by definition means quite simply writing about people; ethnographies record accounts of specific communities, social groups, cultures or sub-cultures. The development of so-called 'netnography' also raises the question of whether ethnographies can be written of online or virtual communities, although if so, researchers need to take care that they are describing 'merely' the online rather than attempting to look behind the screen.
2. The account must provide 'thick description' (Geertz 1973, 1983; Ryle 1971) of the social environment. Description is *the* key element of an ethnography. While ethnographers will inevitably look to analyse and theorise, the account should first provide detailed description that goes beyond merely detailing what is apparent on the surface or to the outsider. The understandings, interpretations and motivations of the actors in the field must be understood and form part of the account: ethnography is 'concerned to make sense of the actions and intentions of people as knowledgeable agents ... and attempts to make sense of their making sense of the events and