

# Contemporary issues in sport – football hooligans uk essay sample

[Sport & Tourism](#), [Football](#)



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The main issue that I have chosen is hooliganism in football. The article to be analysed is that of Eric Dunning: Soccer Hooliganism as a world social problem, (in Sport Matters- sociological studies of sport, violence and civilization (2001). Other works will also be looked at to highlight wider understanding of soccer hooliganism from different social thoughts. What will follow is an essay that will try to cover issues raised by Dunning in his article. It is worth noting that Dunning in his quest to understand soccer hooliganism comes from a figurational perspective (this will be discussed later).

Official explanations of football hooliganism

There has been some popular explanation of football hooliganism made by the media and politicians. These explanations have often been refuted by sociological academics such as Dunning, Giulianotti, and Kerr. One popular belief is that excessive alcohol consumption is a cause of football hooliganism. Dunning in his article rejects this explanation simply as he states: “ Drinking cannot be said to be a deep cause of football hooliganism, for the simple reason that every fan who drinks, even heavily, takes part in hooligan acts. Nor does every hooligan drink” (Dunning 1988: 13). This rejection of popular belief is further reinforced by Kerr (1994) who says that hooligans are not drunks before engaging in violence, simply because they need to have a clear head to co-ordinate activities and fight.

Much of the past speculation concerning the violent behavior often associated with English and European football cultures has attempted to explain such behaviors as the result of excessive drinking or fans imitating the violent antics of the players on the field (Dunning, Murphy, and Williams 1984). As pointed out by Eric Dunning and his associates, this thinking is incorrect. The majority of fans who drink

do not engage in violence, and single violent acts perpetrated by players rarely instigate violent behavior among fans. These authors contend that the realm of football spectatorship provides a catalyst for the manifestation of the aggressive masculinity present in the young male working class of England. This subculture values disorderly conduct and violent activity as a means of self-expression (Dunning, Murphy, and Williams 1984).

Other official explanation to understand football hooliganism were raised, included violence on the field, unemployment and permissiveness which contributed to increase in hooliganism.

The popular belief that unemployment is a reason for increased hooliganism is favoured by the political left. However, Dunning in his article rejects this explanation. He states that at times when unemployment was at its highest (1930s), hooliganism was at its lowest. He found out that there were no direct correlation between unemployment and hooliganism.

The final popular belief that society has become more permissive was favoured by the political right such as Norman Tebbit and Edward Grayson. However Dunning (1988, 2001) has rejected such theory by proving that hooliganism is not a modern phenomena and has existed before the First World War.

Having looked at the official explanation it could be said that it is very much in line with structural perspectives (Marxism and functionalism) in its explanation of deviance (hooliganism) in sports. The official explanation is structural because it contextualises hooliganism within the total social structure. This is because the official explanations look at social problems such as unemployment, alcoholism and permissiveness as factors that influence hooliganism. For structuralists hooliganism is not seen as a problem of football itself but the society as a whole . Structural

perspectives, mainly functionalism, have come under criticism from social action theorists who believe that such explanations on hooliganism are not qualitative. The official explanations don't look at delinquent subcultures and individuals who actually enjoy hooliganism. Dunning in his article goes on to explore some academic theories on football hooliganism which give us more qualitative understanding.

Marxists and Sub-cultural theories

From a Marxist perspective Ian Taylor argued that the emergence of football hooliganism reflected the changing nature of the sport itself and, in particular, the changing role of the local club as a working class, neighbourhood institution. As professional football became increasingly organised after the Second World War, the role of the local club became less part of the community and more a commercial sports arena aimed at paying spectators (Giulianotti 1999 and Dunning 2001).

Taylor argued that football hooliganism was caused by young, working class fans, who were showing resistance to the forces of modernization in football. Taylor wrote about the attempt to bourgeoisify football, and argued that the so-called 'football hooligans' were actually expressing a form of resistance to this take-over of a working class game.

The explanation of Taylor was rejected by many academics such as Dunning (2001) and Giulianotti (1999). Taylor's analysis of the phenomenon was, and still remains, rather speculative. There is evidence from 1980 onwards to show that a significant number of those involved in violence at football matches do not come from stereotyped working class backgrounds but from the recently expanding middle class sectors (Giulianotti, 1999). The implied underlying motivation of football hooliganism has also been absent from the accounts of football fans

themselves, few see themselves as part of a proletarian army seeking to erase the inequalities in their national sport.

Approaches to understanding football fan behaviour in terms of sub-cultural styles were promoted principally by Marxist sociologist John Clarke. Clarke has a similar line to that of Taylor, emphasising professionalisation and spectacularisation as bringing forth a corresponding alienation among the supporters (Berridge 1988). Clarke argued that specific sub-cultural styles enabled young working class people, and males in particular, to resolve essential conflicts in their lives – specifically those of subordination to adults and the subordination implicit in being a member of the working class itself. Post-war sub-cultures, such as those of the Teddy Boys, Mods and Skinheads have all been examples of these symbolic attempts to resolve structural and material problems.

Dunning (2001) in his article offers criticism to work of Clarke and Taylor by stating that the authors do not carry an in-depth research into soccer hooliganism and both apparently fail to grasp the significance of the fact that hooliganism principally involves conflict between working-class groups and does not involve the state or those who control football.

Ethnomethodology approach

This approach was favoured by social psychologist Peter Marsh and his associates in the late 1970s. In contrast to sociological theories, with their heavy emphasis on class and political changes, Marsh's work focused much more directly on qualitative observed behaviour and on the accounts provided by fans themselves.

This approach was very simple, instead of conducting laboratory experiments and treating people as 'subjects' of empirical enquiry to understand their behaviour, one should simply ask them. Thus, for three years, Marsh spent

his time at football matches, on trains and buses full of football fans travelling to away games and in the pubs and other arenas where supporters spent the remainder of their leisure time. The principal aim was firstly to obtain an 'insiders' view of football hooliganism and secondly to use this to establish an explanatory model (Giulianotti 1999).

On the basis of this work, Marsh saw fighting as an aggressive ritual, symbolic and rather tribal with no seriously violent intent. He suggested that the apparent disorder was, in fact, highly orderly, and social action on the terraces was guided and constrained by social rules, according to this view, the violence of hooligans was by no means central to their concerns. These enabled the display of 'manly' virtues but, through ritualising aggression, enabled the 'game' to be played in relative safety. Being a 'football hooligan' enabled young males, with little prospects of success in school or work, to achieve a sense of personal worth and identity through recognition from their peers (Marsh in Dunning, 1988).

Giulianotti (1999) has questioned Marsh's study by implying there was no attempt to develop a social context or root for this behaviour. Also the group of fans being studied (Oxford United) were hardly the most notorious football hooligans in the UK. Dunning et al (1988) critiqued Marsh, not for arguing that terrace behaviour was ritualistic or rule governed, but rather for understating the amount of 'real' violence which occurred at matches.

The reversal theory

John H. Kerr (1994) uses the reversal theory to explain football hooliganism. Reversal theory is an approach in psychology to understand human motivation and personality (Kerr, 1994). It is a phenomenology based theory as it gives special emphasis on the complexity, changeability and inconsistencies of individual

behaviour and experiences. Kerr suggests that emotionally there are numbers of metamotivational states' that people can be in as he writes:\n\n“ The metamotivational state combination operative during most types of soccer hooligan activity is paratelic-negativism-autic-mastery. The paratelic-negativism element within this combination (with accompanying high levels of felt arousal and felt negativism) gives rise to the type of provocative, playful paratelic aggression that characterizes so many examples of soccer hooligan activity. Hooligan behaviour in these circumstances is not necessarily malicious, but is engaged in with the major purpose of generating excitement and the pleasure of release from rules.” (Kerr cited in Dunning 2001: 142)\n\nPut simply, Kerr argues that for the hooligan, the hooliganism is fun, and it is this fun factor that Kerr explores using the idea of reversal theory. Dunning in his article has criticised Kerr by suggesting that Kerr uses psychological jargon to cover up some relatively simple sociological ideas.\n\nDunning's explanation of football hooliganism\n\nDunning during the first part of his article offers criticisms of official explanation and explores academic explanations and provides a critique of it, as mentioned earlier in the essay. Having looked at approaches from other social perspectives (Marxists, structuralists etc) that try to explain reasons for football hooliganism, it's essential to look at Dunning's explanation which forms the bulk of the article. It is important to note that Dunning is part of the Leicester School of thought.\n\nIn his major work, *The Roots of Football Hooliganism* Dunning et al (cited in Giulianotti, 1999) drew upon press reports, official documents and some arrest figures to argue that:\n\nFootball hooligans tend to come from the lower-working class social groups.\n\n

Violence at football is not a new phenomenon. However, the general public do not tolerate violence as much as in the past, because they have become more 'civilized'.

Football violence is predominantly an expression of male aggressiveness, predominantly found in rougher section of working class areas.

Hooliganism is not just problem for football but other sports have similar problems.

Dunning bases his work and findings on the sociological philosophy of Norbert Elias, which has come to be known as 'figurational sociology' or 'process-sociology'. Elias developed the theory that individuals formed different interdependent figurations (i. e. family, school, friends etc) which influence individuals in different ways. For example, the individual who exists within a family figuration, a school figuration, an industrial figuration and as part of local and national figurations will adjust to the values and norms of that group. Therefore, in order to understand social behaviour it is necessary for its study to be within the context of these complex interdependencies (O'Donnell, 1997).

The figurationalists started their work on football hooliganism, at a time when English fan violence was reaching its peak. One of its major assumptions is that throughout recent history public expectations of a more 'civilised' world, and more civilised behaviour, have gradually passed through the social classes in Europe. The civilisation process in the world meant there was a growing intolerance towards public acts of violence and aggression (Giulianotti, 1999: 45). Such values, however, have not fully penetrated areas of the lower working class – what Dunning and his colleagues refer to as the 'rough' working class. This is due to what Elias called 'decivilising spurts' (violence, crime, social upheaval etc) which temporarily reverse the civilising process.

Dunning



(2001) goes on to explore the work of an anthropologist called Suttles, especially via the concept of 'ordered segmentation' (which looks like a 'figuration' – or is certainly compatible with it). Suttles' work is about how different communities in Chicago, divided usually by age, gender, ethnicity or territoriality, can come together to form larger alliances (street corner gangs) and systems, especially when threatened by rivals. These one off alliances arise as outcomes of certain generative rules, such as the old idea that an enemy's enemy becomes my friend etc. Conflicts between these segments are deferred in favour of wider conflicts with other larger groupings outside.

According to Dunning (2001) social behaviour in this section of society (the 'rough' working class) is largely mediated by sub-cultural values of masculinity and aggression. In order to account for contemporary football violence, therefore, we need to pay attention to the structural aspects of this section of society and the traditional relationship between members of this strata and the game itself. Dunning felt that England's decivilising spurt of the 1960s was the growth of deliberate gang violence around soccer, which drove middle-class spectators away and produced a moral panic that only attracted more of the rough young working class. Dunning was influenced by the Chicago sociologist Gerald Suttles and drew analogies between the Chicago ghetto neighbourhoods and the alienated and under-socialized youth of the housing estates.

Dunning's account lays emphasis on the long, if patchy, history of hooliganism at football in England and the generation and reproduction of a particular form of aggressive masculinity, especially in lower class communities. In these 'rough' neighbourhoods young males are socialised at home, at work, in peer

group gangs etc into standards that value and reward publicly assertive and openly aggressive and violent expressions of masculinity.

The figurational approach, with its emphasis on the dynamics of the lower working class, has much in common with the perspectives taken by Taylor and Clarke. In the work of Dunning (2001) there were, however, some subtle differences. On the issue of class the focus was not on the relative deprivations of the lower working class, with violence being a consequence of alienation and embitterment, but on specific subcultural norms and values which provide a legitimisation of violent behaviour.

Strength and weaknesses of the article

The article by Dunning is very well written researched piece of work, however there are some limitations which need to be outlined.

The figurational perspective has been criticised on several grounds:

- Empirically – hooligans in England don't come, simply, from the lower-working classes.
- Cross-culturally – their arguments don't hold very well in relation to football fan violence outside of England.
- Theoretically – their arguments are too strongly dependent upon the work of Elias.

(Giulianotti, 1999).

One would expect that a work from a post-modern figurational perspective to be qualitative and subjective in its study of football hooliganism. However, Dunning's study is not, because he seems to rely too much on official statistics, press reports and arrest figures from the police (all positivist secondary research). Dunning has used quantitative methods to understand football hooliganism from an objective point of view, this contradicts some of his earlier theory that human behaviour should be studied from both objective and subjective point of view. The Elisian theory tries to integrate both sociology and psychology, however Dunning seems to

have only concentrated on sociological aspects of deviance. Dunning's understanding of hooliganism seems to come from a societal point of view (it could be argued to be very structural/ functionalists), rather than that of the hooligans themselves.

Dunning's belief that hooliganism is a learnt behaviour (uncivilised socialization) of the rough working class male, has come under criticism from various academics such as Armstrong and Harris in Giulianotti, (1999). By claiming that modern hooliganism is a male working class problem, he ignores evidence that hooliganism is a classless act. Evidence from academics (Armstrong and Harris), who have suggested that hooligans don't just come from lower class but middle class too. Furthermore Marxists theorists (Ian Taylor) have argued that hooliganism is a form of resistance against the bourgeoisification of the game.

Giulianotti (1999: 46) has pinpointed that there are major methodological weakness in Dunning's work. According to Giulianotti The Leicester group were unwilling to engage with hooligans, and most research was done analysing traditional working class fans i. e. West Ham United. A better test of their argument would be to investigate the class background of other hooligan groups, such as the Chelsea Headhunters (Giulianotti 1999).

From a personal perspective I believe that Dunning relies too much on historical data (hooliganism of the past) and structural quantitative methods, hence he does not give a good account of modern day hooligans. His study needs strengthening by an exploration of psychological factors such as the role of individuals in becoming hooligans (maybe his study could have been more anthropological). Dunning offers a weak functionalist argument to explain football hooliganism, he tells us that hooligans are uncivilised, yet he does

not explain why these people are uncivilised or what is the cause of this uncivilisation. I believe that Dunning's work remains an interesting analytical device which still has a few strengths. His exploration of social factors such as the role of masculinity (football hooligans are predominantly male) and expressions of masculine identity such as violence and loyalty, the role of identity and the role of social networks of belonging (hooligan gangs as 'communities') are good and valid sociological accounts on hooliganism. Personally I believe on its own, figural theory is considerably weaker as an explanatory device than other sociological and anthropological theories, but combined with them it may well be stronger and valid.

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