Hooliganism: on social anomie and determinism

Dominique Bodin, Stéphane Héas and Luc Robène
To speak of hooliganism in France is apparently quite a challenge in itself, for the question has been denied recognition, eluded and avoided to the point where the French football scene would seem to be the only one in Europe to be spared by a phenomenon that affects the sport throughout Europe. To look at French hooliganism one must often go beyond the social representations, prejudices and value judgments prevailing on the subject. In people’s imagination, hooligans are: English, young, poor or socially poorly integrated, delinquents in everyday life, “foreign” to the world of football and only go to the stadium to misbehave, constantly drunk, militantly, ideologically on the extreme right or belonging to small neo-nazi groups (Bodin, 2000, 2002, 2003). An archetypal portrait thus comes out, naturalizing and sociologizing the violence of crowds of sports fans, and turning hooligans into the “bidochons” of today’s stadiums, expressing populism in the Poujadist sense of the term – that is, the involvement of the most underprivileged in extremist excesses aimed at discriminating individuals according to their ethnic and cultural origins and calling for national preference in order to retrieve legitimacy and status within a society that tends to exclude them. These representations are usually derived from studies based on police statistics, done in English-speaking countries in the 1980s. They are actually false and truncated (Bodin, 1999a). The scene in French football stadiums is a far cry from these collective representations. First of all, we must accept the idea that hooliganism, essentially characterized by physical violence among supporters or with the police and the deterioration of personal property and of the facilities inside and outside of the grounds is not an English specialty. French hooliganism produces just as many clashes, just as frequent and as violent as in Great Britain, but these acts are simply less visible. The main reason for this is the efficiency of social control, which has exiled violence far from the stadiums (Bodin, 1999b, 2002). The recent suggestion made by Paris’ chief of police (préfet) (October 22, 2002) – which I was asked to comment on a national radio station (France Info) –, that the high-risk Paris-Saint-Germain (PSG) matches be played away from their home base, the Parc des Princes, is definite proof of the existence of this particular phenomenon. In addition to all the causes
susceptible of explaining this belligerent behavior (social reasons, sports-related reasons, age, etc.), there are the definite ideological oppositions visible in many French stands. There are hooligans just about everywhere in France. Inspector General Rouibi (1989), for instance, thinks that Boulogne’s “red” PSG stand has become totally “hools”, following the PSG-Strasbourg encounter on January 16, 1993, and Marseille’s Olympique team has France’s most violent group, the South Winners.

The origins of hooliganism

A brief historical reminder is called for here. The introduction of the notion of hooliganism corresponds to a change of paradigm. The notion developed in Great Britain in the 1960s, marking the shift from ritualized, Dionysian violence applied to the logic of the game to premeditated, organized violence. The word itself, hooligan, was coined by a journalist who played on the name of a particularly violent Irish family of the Victorian era – the Hoolihans – to designate the violent behavior then observed. After the word-play, a printing error slipped in, replacing the h by a g, the two letters being side by side on the keyboard, and the term hooliganism was born. For the anecdote, only the French, Belgians and German still use the term, while English-speakers prefer to speak of thugs, a word that also designates a bloodthirsty Indian sect worshipping Kali, so this is a many-sided allusion, and a stigmatizing word in itself. Acts of hooliganism were studied, essentially in the English-speaking countries, the first to experience this kind of problem, successively in terms of modifications in the social space of the stadium (Ehrenberg, 1991; Sansot, 1990), of the growing autonomy of youth in the 1950-1960s, of the development of youth cultures or subcultures (roughs, skinheads, punks and so on), of the destructuring of the working class (Taylor, 1971; Clarke, 1973) and as the outcome of the segmental bonding produced by the social functioning of the working class (Elias and Dunning, 1986), and last, the extension of the phenomenon to the rest of Europe by imitation, following the dramatic events at the Heysel stadium in 1985. Hooliganism is too often analyzed, then, like ordinary delinquency, exclusively in terms of social determinism: exclusion alone cannot account for delinquency and deviant behavior. It is only one risk factor among others. It is only “when social disadvantages accumulate – low family income, deteriorated housing and neighborhood, large family – that a significant statistical correlation is found between poverty and delinquency” (Filleule, 2001, 66).

Football, anomie and hooliganism

Anomie and deviance

The sociology of deviance showed, long ago, that anomie, the absence of norms (from the Greek a-nomos), or the disintegration or loss of meaning of the latter, may generate violent or delinquent behavior. The concept of anomie, which represented an attempt to put substance into “the vague notion of social disorderliness” (Boudon and Bourricaud, 1982) is in fact “a nest of concepts” (Boudon and Barricault, op. cit.) as shown, for example, in the different uses made of it by Durkheim in two different books: The Division of Labour in Society (1893) and Suicide (1987). Merton (1965) introduced the notion of “social disorder”, with deviance viewed as the complete break with the customs and usual rules of social exchange, in some individuals. Certain individuals, rejected by other
members of society although they pursue the same goals, end up developing deviant, oppositional conduct. Anomie is viewed, then, as an amplifying process reinforcing the inability to participate in action through licit means, and therefore leading some individuals to “rebellion” or “protest”. Irrespective of the position adopted, anomie basically expresses the idea of disturbed social relations between an individual or group of individuals and society at large.

**Young football fans are denied recognition**

4 The numerous researchers (including Harrington, 1968; Clarcke, 1978; Elias and Dunning, 1986; Taylor, 1971; Zimmerman, 1987; Mignon, 1993, 1995) who have focused on hooliganism come from a number of different disciplines, but all stress two essential points. Firstly, hooligans are definitely fans, and not people with nothing to do with football. All belong to structured groups. To use the drug metaphor, we may say that although 100% of supporters will not become hooligans, 100% of hooligans are definitely authentic supporters. This is definitely, as Ehrenberg (1991) suggests, “the extreme abuse of supporterism”. “More accurately, what differentiates hooliganism from support in the traditional sense is the shift of action to the stands. While the match is being played on the field, it is paralleled by physical competition between two teams of fans. . . . Hooligans’ behavior is grounded in cultural and sporting traditions but goes beyond these by transforming them. Their violence is an attempt to shift the poles of visibility from the field to the stands.” (Ehrenberg, op. cit., 58) As early as 1968 Lord Harrington pointed out in his report that the hooligans arrested were authentic fans, young and knowledgeable. Their characteristics are still the same today (Bromberger, 1995, 1998; Mignon, op. cit.; Bodin, 2003): they are under 21, know all about football, their club, players and technique, and frequently sport the distinctive insignia of their particular group. That early study should, then, have put an end to a debate that is still waging in Great Britain as well as in France: hooliganism definitely involves authentic fans and not people with nothing to do with football and who go to the stadium just to make trouble.

5 However, hooliganism only involves a limited number of fans (Dupuis, 1993a/b; Zimmerman, op. cit.; Clarcke, 1973): the hard core of the group is mostly composed of its leaders and those individuals who attend all of the championship matches, be they on the home grounds or elsewhere. This may represent from a dozen to 2 or 300 members, as is the case for the South Winners in Marseilles. The definition of the term ‘hard core’ is not comparable to the same term when used in studies of juvenile delinquency. The outcome is the same, however. It is clear that acts of hooliganism are committed by an “overactive nucleus” of individuals. According to a confidential internal intelligence (Renseignements Généraux) report dated December 17, 2001 entitled “Hooliganism, supporter violence”, the phenomenon is spreading. The number of incidents and of people injured grows from one season to the next. While this is mostly a Parisian phenomenon, it also affects fan clubs in Bordeaux, Lille, Lyons, Marseilles, Saint Etienne. . .

6 But how, then, can we account for the fact that this violent behavior is essentially, if not to say exclusively, found in football, irrespective of the country, and even of the continent? There are certainly a few fights during basketball matches in Greece and Turkey, and at cricket meetings in India, but nonetheless, the violence remains sporadic there. Moreover, although there are organized clubs of basketball fans, there has never been the slightest incident at any match within the European Union.
When observing the organization, the structure of clubs and the relations between clubs of players and of supporters in basketball and in football, one is immediately struck by the absence of relations between football players and their fan clubs, the latter being denied any recognition. Basketball and football fan clubs differ in their position with respect to institutionalization, officialization and recognition.

A matter of age?

Several explanations may be offered. Firstly, the question of the supporters’ age, mentioned above, combines with the will to act and decide independently, at the turning point between adolescence and adulthood. Age influences the desire for independence in groups which are often created with no help whatsoever from any football club. This aspiration to be autonomous and successful on one’s own with no outside help is in fact particularly strong in groups whose members are very young or come from underprivileged neighborhoods or problem areas. In our first encounter in Marseilles, for instance, RZ, one of the leaders of the South Winners, a group whose members are primarily youths from northern Marseilles and the Panier neighborhood, both problem areas, proudly showed us the group’s meeting place and the work they had done on it, stressing the fact that it was achieved through collective work, with no help from the club, by members who are often rejected by society and were capable of doing things on their own, things other people thought them incapable of achieving. He also stressed the fact that the same is not true of the Ultras, who collaborate with the club and often receive subsidies. The opposition between “young” and “old” fans is very clear-cut when we look at membership in the various national organizations whose creation was instigated by the football federations. The CCS in Marseilles, the Violets in Toulouse, belong to the FAS (Fédération autonome des supporters), but their members are much older, on the average, than the “norm” – 48% of “Violet” fans are over 40 – and the Violets even refuse to accept any young fans since their unfortunate, tragic experience in 1991. Whereas over 61% of football fans are under 25, the same is only true of 28% of basketball fans. Membership in a federation is a deliberate decision in which age, often tied to greater social integration and more respect for social norms, is primordial. According to Galland (1997), for youths, differentiation from and opposition to the previous generation take place within the spaces where adolescents find freedom and independence, and “as they grow older, young people gradually adopt adult roles and statuses” (Galland, 1998, 28). Adolescence may thus be viewed in Parsons’ perspective (1955, 1963) as an uncertain period of life, a sort of in-between time conducive to anomie as well as to the construction of an identity, prized by oneself and by others, however outrageous it may be, as in hooligan violence. As Michel (leader of the Yankees group in Marseilles) puts it: “it’s a question of age too. It’s true that as you get older, OK, you think . . . there are things you did when you were 20, and now at 30, I think, I never should have done that. You have more distance, more restraint, too, it’s a question of maturity. At 30 or 40 things don’t seem as serious as when you’re younger.” We must be careful not to assimilate “youth” with violent behavior, however, in the case of fans. That would be tantamount to naturalizing and sociologizing violence, or at the least, to reactivating the myth of the “dangerous classes” in another form, viewing youth as a homogeneous social class characterized as violent on the whole.
Growing distance between supporters and players

The constantly increasing distance between football players and supporters, observed by Wahl (1990) and other workers, is also evidenced in the lack of relations between the managers of the players' clubs and the fan clubs. Broussard points out that “the widening gap between fans and the rest of a club necessarily accentuates feelings of isolation in the most extremist individuals. The fact that they are ignored or disdained by the leaders of their own club corroborates their beliefs, and they end up convinced of being the only ones who really love the team and defend it in adversity.” (1990, 210-211). Individuals with a shared object and a shared focus lead independent existences, with each person proclaiming the validity, relevance, interest and primacy of his actions. Two worlds clash: those who possess decisional and financial power, representing the established order and the bourgeoisie and the others, often of working class origin, who proclaim their passion for Football and the importance of their activity and unconditional support for the team, in contrast to a merely commercial approach. Clubs actually have two presidents: the owner of the capital and a “shadow president” (Broussard, op. cit.). This constantly widening distance between supporters and official football (players and managers) may be viewed as an additional factor in the development of violence. Clarke (1978), Veugelers (1981) and Taylor (1982) perceive “the middle-class turn in football” as gradually dissipating the congenial atmosphere surrounding playing in the old days, and the growing distance between the different actors in this sport as the reason for some hooliganism, viewed as a “conservative fight” to preserve football within its own social space and original values. Like ordinary social violence, hooliganism may thus be seen as a danger signal, sent out to the community as a whole, but also as a sign of social dysfunctioning, according to Coser (1956, 1967). The heads of French basketball clubs such as the Pau-Orthez club maintain genuine relations with their supporters clubs. L'Elan Béarnais, for instance, aims at helping, favoring and even financing the activities of its supporters, but also at controlling them so as to avoid incidents and prevent fans from getting out of hand. In football, the same relations may be found in Toulouse's Violets, who represent the category of supporters who rarely or never take part in clashes. They entertain very close ties with the club, although the Toulouse Football Club does not help its supporter groups financially or materially. These various relations, which may be termed contractual, both in the moral and the literal, written sense, do seem instrumental in moderating the behavior of supporters. Some safety wardens note that things go better when they themselves “manage” the travels of their supporters. Relations between the clubs and their extremists, susceptible of preventing some incidents and modifying the belligerency of some fans, are actually often non-existent in football, both because of the age of the fans and because of lack of recognition by the club officials, as Broussard suggests (op. cit., 210): “many presidents, but also most of the officials of these respectable supporter associations represent no-one but themselves, and actually do not view these youths as legitimate spokespeople.”. But there is also the supporters' own lack of constancy, partly due to the fact that no real contractual relationship is established. A makeshift course is steered, in an attempt both to protect the “commercial activity” and to prevent incidents of all sorts, rather than a concerted policy consisting of viewing supporters as authentic partners interested in developing the clubs: “I think that in one way or another, the dice are loaded, inasmuch as the goal to be reached is not called “safety”, but there are so many commercial implications that they
rub them [the fans] up the right way. I am not at all sure, however, that if we balanced out what these kids contribute with their songs and chants and their activity, and what they cost us in terms of problems of all sorts, I’m not sure we really come out on the winning side. It’s much more a question, for our managers, of warding off the jeering, the booing and the hostile jibes, rather than any real will to establish contractual relations.” (A safety warden for the Bordeaux Girondins).

The object of football is changing, and it is most probably no longer simply a sport, or even a sporting event in which spectators may really participate and be concerned with its future. It is something else today, much more than a simple praxis. The gulf is widening between clubs, players and the public, which is increasingly being asked to pay, sit down and shut up, and some managers are mistakenly forgetting, it seems, “by dint of focusing on the money brought in by advertising and by television broadcasts of matches, by dint of giving priority to their own personal promotion . . . that after all, football belongs to those ‘ticket-paying bastards’.” (Broussard, op. cit., 211).

The shift from ambiguous relations to ambiguities within relations

One question is all-important if fan group violence is to be controlled, and even more, prevented: is hooliganism the consequence of social disorganization and social vacuum, used by supporters, or is it the product of certain clubs?

Supporterism developed in France in the 1980s and 90s. This was the period when the Kop of Boulogne became structured, the CU84 (the Ultra Commando of Marseilles in 1984) and the UB85 group (the Bordeaux Ultras in 1985) were created. The economic situation was difficult at the time, with unemployment as well as inflation on the rise, and young people were plagued with tremendous doubts as to their social integration. For most of the young people who participated in the world of the Ultras – the extremists – this was a way of escaping societal uncertainties, as well as an outlet. Football was the main focus of their passion. A simple, popular sport, easily comprehensible and practiced by many of them, it extols success and the meritocracy. They identify with the players, with the club, with their successes and failures. At the time football was being deeply transformed. It did not yet have a monopoly on media coverage, and needed to attract ever-larger numbers of spectators so as to take in more money, increase its credibility and become more professional. By enlarging its public and offering cheaper seats, by providing a higher quality spectacle, football quite logically attracted growing numbers of increasingly passionately involved people. When these groups began to organize, the managerial spheres of football did not cope with the passions they had created and elicited, either because they were unable to do so, since that was not their objective, or did not want to because the subject had nothing to do with their own goals, or else they tackled the question too belatedly. The officials were able to manage the sporting activity and its economic fallout, but none of its “pervasive effects” (Boudon, 1977), for which they denied or feigned to ignore their responsibility.

Whereas they did not necessarily or directly cause the launching of any form of supporterism, then, they did leave a social vacuum in which the phenomenon was able to develop on its own, and to structure itself with no counseling, assistance or
communication, but also with no landmarks and no limits. This situation is problematic, for from the outset these fans were young people (aged 15 to 18) whose attitude toward social norms is not only traditionally more permissive than their elders, and who are “often much less critical of deviant or uncivil behavior . . .” (Galland, 1998, 27) but also socialize in spaces distinctly different from those occupied by adults, within peer groups devoid of norms or rules. Belonging to a group led some of these youths to adopt violent behavior in a process of defiance, opposition, the construction of an identity, vendettas, and status and role achievement (Linton, 1936; Goffman, 1961). In some cases, however, police reports go further, alleging that managers were totally negligent until the most violent forms of supporterism developed within their club. Inspector General Rouibi, for instance, points out that the heads of the PSG “seem to be overwhelmed and terrified by this trend, considerably encouraged in the past by their laxness and mercantilism . . .” (1989, 4). Some football fans unhesitatingly consider hooliganism as entertaining real connivance between some club leaders, who they do not name, and groups who clearly resort to violence more often than the others. Inspector General Rouibi actually says very much the same thing in his report, when he claims that “ . . . the officials in charge of security in the clubs are generally torn between two contradictory objectives. Sensitized to the risks of abuse represented by the hooligan element, they clearly admit that the whole football team needs that kind of supporter to ‘put pressure’ on the players” (op. cit., 39). Irrespective of whether such statements are exaggerations, they do show how difficult the position of the “supporter movement” is, in that it was originally inspired by love of the game, and given the lack of any real collaboration with the clubs from the outset it has now become deviant and violent from time to time, and under certain conditions, owing to increased competition between groups, the catalytic effect of some media and the development of political supporterism.

To ambiguities within relations

But the relations between clubs and fans may also be full of ambiguities. Some examples suffice to illustrate this. The first instance is a club that hired as steward supervisor an ex neo-nazi whose picture, in Panzer attire and doing the nazi salute, recently circulated throughout French fan clubs. It is one thing, understandable, to try to comprehend these violent political excesses, but can an individual of that type have any credibility whatsoever among his former henchmen? The second example involves a security officer of a first division club who asked the commissioner in charge of Lescure Park to drop charges against two supporters prosecuted for violence in the stands: he “preferred to take care of the matter within the club” in this warden’s own words. A third and last example, again in Lescure Park, where a supporter seized by stewards from Bordeaux for having molested another fan, and who turned out to be the son of a former minister, was not prosecuted although a summary procedure is prescribed for such cases and the deputy public prosecutor was present in the stadium. These are just a few examples among the many we might mention. For instance, the sports newspaper L’Equipe (on April 18, 1996) reported the prosecution of the General Director of the PSG club for “complicity with a person introducing smoke bombs into a sports facility during the March 30, 1996 match between the PSG and Metz”, for which he was acquitted. What meaning can we adduce from this kind of violence? The social significations of the political and racist violence found in the PSG are a combination of domination and segregation, according to Wieviorka’s typology (1998), rather than the expression of the increasing
impoverishment of some strata of society. It is indeed a fact that “the founders of the Kop of Boulogne, and especially the skinheads among them, come from the upper classes (lawyers and upper class professions)” (Mignon, 1995, 31). The Boulogne stand has become a political platform used to recruit new elements, but also serving as a showcase. There are no longer any Celtic flags in that stand, but we may nonetheless legitimately wonder what led the managers of the PSG to allow that sort of organization to develop. When a club recruits a former extreme right wing hooligan to supervise its stewards what, indeed, does that mean? He knows the scene, but does that make him credible in the eyes of his former henchmen? Some Ultra leaders maintain that club officials may have something to gain from the excesses of their most violent, most extremist supporters. They succeed both in winning the favors of a “sensitive” public, and in frightening and exerting pressure on the opponent’s public, which no longer dares to attend matches. Is this a pure fabrication, or defamation? The transgression of norms is sometimes the outcome of this sort of converging interests: perhaps football derives some benefits from the deviant action of its supporters, or at least some compensation in the form of a lively, entertaining atmosphere and a supportive system. “The norms are transgressed with complete impunity because two groups . . . find it mutually advantageous to close their eyes to these transgressions.” (Becker, 1963, 150). How else can we explain the fact that supporters bring large quantities of Bengal lights and smoke bombs into stadiums without being punished, although that is prohibited by the Alliot-Marie Act?

Anomie partakes of the complexity of hooliganism

The non-enforcement of norms may be viewed as “a vector of violence” (Bodin, 1999a), however, as shown by a statement made by the safety warden of the Bordeaux Girondins: “when the act was published, things calmed down again in the stands and around the stadium, but when they gradually realized that nothing had changed, that they could go on the way they used to and the law was not enforced, they carried on worse than ever.” This firm, lucid, coherent assertion contrasts with the examples mentioned above, and shows, if need be, how the transgression of norms is a social construct within the framework of subtle, complex interactions, the outcome of inter-group competition, personal and group identificatory constructions – identity is positioned by opposition – integrating rituals and also, quite simply, of play, at that transitional time of life when these supporters, leaving adolescence, have not yet donned the roles and statuses of adults. The instructions issued by the Central Direction of Public Security (the DCSP) are extremely explicit in this respect: “it is clear that this phenomenon – hooliganism – may be contained, provided each partner takes its responsibilities. The police . . . . The organizers, who must commit themselves unreservedly . . . and adopt inflexible positions toward supporters who commit offenses. The judges in charge of enforcing the legislation . . . .” (DCSP, 1995, 5). Although we definitely do not call for “safety first”, and are totally aware that our assertions imply a utilitarian conception of punishment in which the threat of repression is often sufficient to avoid acting out, it is undeniable that violent action must be sanctioned. Such punishment must however be fair and appropriate, to avoid an aggravation of oppositional attitudes that may trigger “the onset of an endless chain of transgression/punishment/aggressiveness” (Debarbieux, 1992, 23). Socialization necessarily entails a repressive dimension, barring which there can be no will of the
individual to control himself, “the common condition of humanity” (Elias and Dunning, op. cit., 58). This “social disorder” is certainly not the only explanatory factor. It is a fact, however, that this violent behavior is preferentially rooted in the social vacuum left by the club managers. For it is not by helping “violent” or “deviant” fans to avoid being convicted for their acts, or by closing their eyes to some abuses, or again, by helping people break some taboos that the problem will be solved. That attitude simply accentuates the no man’s land in which or thanks to which abuses are committed, thus reinforcing the supporters’ impression that the stadium is some sort of extraterritorial social space in which conflicts may be solved among protagonists. This void, this negligence, or “laissez-faire”, or again, the indulgence of officials, are the underlying factors in at least some of these violent acts. Under the pretext of “the controlled liberation of emotions” (Elias and Dunning, op. cit.) and the expression of passion, stadiums and football matches cannot be allowed to be the scene or the pretext of every imaginable kind of abuse. Without being excessively security-minded, we are obliged to accept the idea that the non-enforcement of the laws and norms on security, as well as the leniency of many officials toward the most dangerous supporters in some cases, are quite simply a threat to any preventive policy. There is, indeed, a risk that this social disorderliness may induce “a decivilizing spurt, induce sections of a population to find violence enjoyable” (Elias and Dunning, op. cit., 54).

Translation : Helen Arnold

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bodin D, 1999a, Football, supporters, violence : la non application des normes comme vecteur de la violence, Revue Juridique et Economique du Sport, 51, 139-149.


Clarke, J. (1973). Football, hooliganism and the skinheads, Birmingham, Center for contemporary cultural studies.


Goffman E, 1961, Role Distance in Encounters, Bobbs Merrill, Indianapolis.

Harrington, J. (1968). A preliminary report on soccer hooliganism to Mr Denis Howell, Minister of sport, Londres, HMSO.


The violence exhibited by crowds of sports fans around stadiums and sometimes even far from them, commonly known as hooliganism, is mostly committed by young people. Contrary to beliefs, this violent behavior does not correspond to the logic of social determinism. Its source is to be found in the “period of psychosocial latency”: these young hooligans have not yet assimilated the roles and status of self-controlled adults, nor have they donned them, and their behavior partakes of the logic of inter-group competition and the construction of identity. One of the main factors in the development of this juvenile violence is the context of social anomie in which these supporters act.

INDEX

Mots-clés: hooliganism, Hooliganism, sociale anomie, sociale anomie., youth, Youth

AUTHORS

LUC ROBÈNE

Maîtres de conférences à l’UFR de Rennes2, membres du Laboratoire didactique, expertise et technologie des APS