

**NOT SO FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD:  
SPECTATOR VIOLENCE IN BRITAIN AND  
AUSTRALIA. A REVIEW ARTICLE**

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Chris Cunneen *et al.*, *Dynamics of Collective Conflict: Riots at the Bathurst 'Bike Races* (Sydney: The Law Book Company, 1989).

Eric Dunning *et al.*, *The Roots of Football Hooliganism: An Historical and Sociological Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988).

Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

National Committee on Violence, *Violence in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 1989).

National Committee on Violence, *Violence: Directions for Australia* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 1990).

Brian Wenn, *Violence in Sport (Violence Today No. 4)* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 1989).

Spectator disorder is no new phenomenon. Dunning's study shows clearly that in the late nineteenth century the wrath of dissatisfied elements of the crowd at British soccer matches was often directed against the referee or players, with pitch invasions and missile throwing often becoming the overt expression of their dissatisfaction. Yet until recently we knew little about the behaviour and composition of these early football hooligans. Fortunately, research in Britain, particularly by Dunning and his Leicester colleagues, has ended this lacunae. Interestingly their historical endeavours enabled a crucial change in the behaviour of fans to be identified. From the beginnings of gatemoney soccer through to the early 1950s, fighting between football fans was the exceptional form of crowd disorder rather than the rule, with aggressive behaviour generally being directed against property and symbols of football

authority. However, from then on fighting between organised, mutually hostile groups of spectators has become institutionalised. Concurrently, clashes with police have also increased, leading the Leicester School to argue that, as the repressive force of state action has increased, so has the aggressive response of hooligans.

Dunning's group places special emphasis on identifying the social background of soccer hooligans. Typically they were males, in their early twenties, and employed in manual, working-class occupations. This raises doubts as to the role of unemployment in provoking hooliganism: in fact the Leicester School argues that there is a consumer aspect to crowd disorder, with a large proportion of the hooligans' wages being spent on group paraphernalia and weaponry. Although modern hooliganism has taken new forms, a key historical ingredient stressed by Dunning and his colleagues is the aggressive masculinity of these young men, culminating today in verbal emasculation and physical clashes with rivals, especially over territorial domination, (not necessarily within the ground).

To explain this behaviour, the Leicester School has utilised the developmental sociological theory of ordered segmentation. It is argued that the structure of lower working-class communities tends to lead to the formation of fighting gangs of adolescent and young adult males. In families from this socio-economic background there has been less inhibition upon physical and verbal aggression, even to the point where such behaviour has been openly sanctioned by the parents of young boys as a means of achieving status. With few power resources and essentially narrow life experiences, these youths seek identity and self-esteem through group and territorial solidarity. The local football ground, in particular, assumes immense symbolic significance and the practice of winning 'ends' from groups of rival fans becomes of paramount importance.

Dunning and his co-researchers wisely adopted an interdisciplinary approach to the study of football hooliganism, incorporating historical, psychological and, of course, given their

original research interests, sociological analysis. Unfortunately their theoretical emphasis at times results in historical speculation rather than explanation, particularly in their treatment of hooliganism prior to the second World War, where ‘probabilities’ become asserted facts. Nevertheless, their book has gone a long way towards overturning popular and superficial analysis of the origins and existence of football hooliganism.

Inevitably Richard Holt has to devote a section of his masterly *Sport and the British* to the problem highlighted by the Leicester School. His research is less detailed but is supplemented by wide reading and historical insight. As in other themes developed in the book, he sees both continuity and discontinuity operating side by side.

Holt points out that critics have always seen disorderly juvenile elements in society and, almost as often, have contrasted their conduct with the better behaviour of the younger generation some two or three decades previously: clearly the Whig theory of history is not applied to some members of society. He also reminds us that ‘street-fighting and village brawls at football matches were so much a part of “traditional” society that we tend to forget how relatively civilised modern social life has become’ (p. 343). However, Holt accepts that the nature of crowd behaviour has changed. Although no clear reconstruction of pre-1914 crowd behaviour can be made, nowhere in the widespread press coverage of the time is there any reference to the development of a violent, organised youth subculture within football. Casual, individual violence was more common throughout society then, but there was relatively little orchestrated rowdiness. He concludes his discussion of discontinuity by noting that prior to the 1960s football crowds were not segregated by age, and that adolescents and young men at that time shared with older male relatives a territory and community much larger than the soccer ground or club.

Holt argues that two major socio-economic developments have contributed to this change. First, growing affluence has enabled

more intercity travel to be afforded by the club followers. Second, and more significant, has been a transformation of the adult working-class male who, after marriage, no longer attends matches as frequently as his counterpart a generation or two ago, thus weakening the behavioural controls which such mature fans exerted over the younger supporters. Like the Leicester school, he too downplays the role of unemployment in producing soccer hooligans, noting that the contemporary problem emerged in the 1960s at a time of unprecedented prosperity and low unemployment levels, and has continued through recession in the depressed north alongside relative good times further south. Soccer hooligans, or, as Holt would prefer it, hooligans who go to soccer matches are not necessarily the most marginalised members of British society.

Unlike the confrontational violence between rival fans which typifies British soccer crowd disorder, the most long-running spectator problem in Australia has been an almost annual Easter battle for many years between motorcyclists and police at the Bathurst races. This is featured in the research of Chris Cunneen, Mark Findlay, Rob Lynch and Vernon Tupper, and is a much needed contribution to 'social conflict at leisure events'. (p.54).

With backgrounds in leisure studies, psychology, sociology, social policy, law and criminology, the authors were well qualified to conduct an interdisciplinary investigation into the Bathurst riots. Their varied research experience served to provide the analytical toolbox for an understanding of the collective conflict at Bathurst. Although the mechanics of the disorder were detailed by an ethnographic approach under which trained researchers were placed in the riot zone as 'participant observers' (p.17) with 'action-sheets' (p.18) to record the happenings, the material collected by these war correspondents could not explain the origins of the conflict. This required analyses of historical development, subcultural strife, class relations and state power.

Cunneen and his colleagues demonstrate that collective conflict between police and 'bikers at Bathurst has occurred regularly for over twenty years, and that such conflict has increased and become institutionalised. This process occurred in tandem with an increased police presence on the Bathurst mountain, where 'bikers traditionally camped for the weekend's racing. The erection of a police compound surrounded by cyclone fencing and barbed-wire, and increased police patrols in the camp area, are evidence of what the authors describe as the 'colonisation' of public space by state authorities. *This* increased bureaucratisation and regulation of Bathurst clashed with the carnival atmosphere and spontaneity of working-class leisure forms on the mountain. The territorial nature of conflict was exacerbated by police intolerance of 'biker rituals such as 'doughnutting' in 'bullrings', and claims of police harassment as Random Breath Testing Units routinely pulled over 'bikers but ignored car drivers.

The Cunneen group is strongly critical of the lack of causal analysis by police and governments into riotous behaviour. The authors produce a powerful and disturbing argument which links increasingly repressive measures by the state with increasingly violent responses by 'bikers. Moreover, this cycle of violence has been exacerbated by sensationalistic and provocative media reporting, often using militaristic rhetoric implying a 'showdown' looming between 'bikers and police. Cunneen *et al.*, are deeply concerned that specialised state apparatus such as the paramilitary Tactical Response Group has emerged without public debate, and that the framing of policy by authorities has been undemocratic and exclusive.

One of the great strengths of the authors' approach is to take the reader on an historiographical journey through an immense body of literature which analyses collective behaviour historically, psychologically and sociologically. In the process, Cunneen and his fellow writers identify their position, which perceives rioting as essentially rational action seeking to redress specific grievances.

They reject notions that the 'mob' is 'mindless' and 'animalistic', and they stress that newspaper descriptions of rioters as sub-human are inflammatory. On the other hand, some 'bikers brand police as 'pigs and goad them to fight, attacking the police compound with missiles. But, unlike the authorities, Cunneen and his colleagues claim that this action by 'bikers is designed for a specific purpose, namely as a protest aiming to reclaim the public space in which the 'bikers act out the game and ritual components of their subculture. Nevertheless, the conflict with police has inherent entertainment value for many participants. 'You pay sixteen bucks a head (entrance fee) to . . . knock some copper on the head' (p. 98).

Cunneen et al., argue that one of the key ingredients of working-class subculture and the conflict on the mountain is an overtly aggressive masculine style. Although women are present, the conflict essentially resides between the male 'bikers and the male police. In crude terms, Bathurst can be seen as a conflict between two groups of aggressive, antagonistic men, virtually 'locked into' an annually repeated ritual of violence and counter-violence. Nevertheless, the authors stress that arrested 'bikers were not members of a 'criminal class' with lengthy police records. What they had in common, like the British soccer hooligans, was being male, aged in their twenties, and employed in working-class occupations. Bathurst 'bikers have been a reasonably homogeneous collective with good relations and a shared identity. Moreover, the anti-police protests by 'bikers have incorporated elements of both hostility and play. The 'biker crowds seem to have mediated between instrumental and expressive forms of collective behaviour.

Clearly, as Cunneen and his co-authors rightly stress, an end to the conflict at Bathurst would require changes in the policies pursued by governments, police and the media. However, they also argue that the motorcycle community has a role to play if the violence on the mountain is to cease. They suggest that, because there has been no apparent conflict between 'biker groups, then perhaps

self-policing by 'biker-appointed stewards could succeed where official policing has failed. Events have overtaken the authors. The Bathurst violence was actually ended by a vote of the City Council to cancel the races because of what was described as chronic institutionalised violence by spectators. Yet, interestingly, a new violence prevention strategy was adopted for the Australian Motorcycle Grand Prix at Phillip Island which aimed to reduce frustration, boredom and excessive alcohol consumption, to increase the 'bikers' role in policing the event and to encourage police toleration of 'bikers' activities. By all accounts minimising frustration and having the crowd accept responsibility for good behaviour was remarkably effective.

The success of this new-style crowd control mechanism was documented in *Violence: Directions for Australia*, the final report of the National Committee on Violence. This group had been established as a result of a joint agreement between the Prime Minister, the State Premiers and the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory in December 1987. It followed on from the massacres in Melbourne's Hoddle and Queen Streets earlier that year and was, in part, a response to the climate of profound community anxiety about the state of violence in Australia.

Prior to its final report the Committee published several papers, two of which made special reference to sports violence. First came the broadsweep *Violence in Australia* which lamented 'the dearth of research into sporting violence in Australia' (p.23) but noted that 'Australia on the whole is not plagued by the level and frequency of spectator violence which occurs overseas' (p. 25). However, it was admitted that 'outbreaks of violence do occur from time to time in Australian sports and at all levels of competition' and the examples given would lead the reader to believe that crowd disorder was on the increase.

Brian Wenn, the Manager of Policy and Planning at the Australian Sports Commission, a body with a major interest in

promoting a clean image for sport, was then invited to prepare a discussion paper specifically on *Violence in Sport*. He argued that 1985 was a watershed for increased violence in Australian sport, both on and off the field. Far more research needs to be done before such a statement can be accepted unequivocally. He also suggests that the level of crowd violence could be associated with that of unemployment, something with which both Dunning and Holt would take issue.

Nevertheless Wenn is certainly correct when he argues that the socio-economic problems of Australia are outside the control of sports authorities whom, he suggests, should focus instead on palliative measures such as restricting the availability of alcohol at sports events, improving the standard of spectator facilities, and using video cameras not only to identify offenders but also to pinpoint and nullify possible disorder before it breaks out. One major problem with these and other suggestions is that if the current level of crowd violence is unknown, then it is difficult to know whether stratagems to combat it have been successful: subjective judgments are no substitute for empirical data.

The final report of the National Committee on Violence is wide-ranging in its coverage of violence in Australia. It is written in three parts: the first assesses the prevalence of violence in Australian society, the second examines alleged causes of violence, and the third makes recommendations concerning its prevention and control. Sport features in all of these, but, as in previous studies, no measurement was made of the extent of crowd or, for that matter, player violence in Australia.

Nevertheless the Committee was concerned that 'unruly crowds can create a most unpleasant atmosphere and effectively discourage families from attending sporting events' (p. 48). No specific reasons for crowd disorder are put forward, but it is possible to pick out a potpourri of possible explanations from the review of literature relating to societal violence. The recommendations of the

Committee relating to spectator violence focus on what sports promoters could do, although the media is also urged to condemn crowd misbehaviour, presumably in a rational way rather than the hysterical outbursts of the British media which are criticised by both Dunning and Holt. Significant attention is paid to the discouragement of 'irresponsible consumption of alcohol' (p. 235) through such means as restrictions on bringing alcohol into sporting venues, beverage pricing policies, the provision of low alcohol beer, and the use of light plastic or paper containers. Sporting organisations are also asked to devote attention to stadium design and the provision of facilities such as fixed seating which, it is argued, will discourage spectator violence. What emerges from the report is that a violent society will have violence permeate many of its social activities and institutions including sport. What remains to be tested is the strength and trend of the relationship.