Robert Schuman Centre

The Policing of Mass Demonstration in Contemporary Democracies

The Policy of Hooliganism in Italy

ROCCO DE BIASI

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De Biasi: *The Policing of Mass Demonstration in Contemporary Democracies*
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ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE

The Policing of Mass Demonstration in Contemporary Democracies

The Policing of Hooliganism in Italy

ROCCO DE BIASI

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Police and Public Order

Both from an institutional point of view, and from the point of view of practical knowledge gained and used by the Italian police, the term 'public order' has a very specific meaning. My intention here is not to discuss the issue of the collective representation of public order in the common sense,[1] but I will investigate the meaning that Italian police give to this term. For this reason, 'public order' will be given a rather different meaning than that usually employed by the social sciences, especially in Great Britain.

Some examples of definitions found in the interviews will clarify this point:[2]

> The problem is that public order may have a wider meaning or a strictly technical one. We say 'public order' when we speak about demonstrations. The *Digos* is essentially concerned with demonstrations. Public order is the stadium and mass demonstrations. (Interview Milan, 29.12.1994)

> There are many shades and facets here. With public order we always mean a service in the open, in the *piazza*. Public order is demonstrations, concerts, stadiums. The grounds take up a big share of our time. These are the main 'public order' issues: concerts, demonstrations, stadiums and whenever people assemble in masses ... participating in political or sporting events. (Interview Milan, 18.10.94)

> For us, in a technical sense, public order is the control of demonstrations which assemble a great number of persons. I don't make scientific distinctions, my distinctions are practical. In the police, when we say public order we are speaking of demonstrations, marches and football matches. (Interview Florence, 17.11.94)

> If we go looking nowadays for people who are a dangerous threat to public order, they can be found in the world of sport. I'm talking about the problems linked with football matches, where we find both large numbers of people ... and special features which depend on the game being played (...) However, it is a fact that between the problems

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[1] On the collective representation of public order related to citizens' demands for safety, see Palidda (1993, 1995).

[2] In the case of Florence, interviews were carried out with seven officials from the *Questura*; in Milan, interviews were conducted with five officials from the *Questura* and ten from the *Reparto Mobile* as well as the head of the centre of study and research into the police run by the SIULP (the police trade union). The interviews in Florence were done by Donatella della Porta; those in Milan by Rocco De Biasi.

> of the 1970s and those of the 1990s, there is, as far as I can see, a difference in the type of disorders involved (...) The problems then were essentially connected with political protests of 'opposition', whereas now they are above all connected with sport. (Interview Florence, 10.11.94)

While the tension and uncertainty typical of the 'Italian case' have recently shifted our attention to more strictly political problems, it should not be forgotten that violence connected with the 'ultras' phenomenon has been, and remains, one of the principal public order problems.

For although mass demonstrations pose a thorny set of problems, particularly given the political repercussions they may provoke, the violence of football fans at the stadium - or the 'ultras' as they are called - regularly requires large numbers of men and intense activity by the police forces each week. This phenomenon is often underestimated by observers because it is not related to great economic and political processes. However, when we refer to public order in research on the police forces in Italy, we have to keep in mind that the most frequent experience of crowd management, including violent engagements with crowds, takes place in the football grounds, with the ultras. Football hooliganism has also resulted in deaths, which has not occurred for a long time in the context of mass demonstrations of a political nature. Thus, the phenomenon of violence in football is one of the major public order problems, not only from the perspective of observers or sociologists but also in the opinion of the police force itself. To understand the scale of the problem, we need only think about the large numbers of police deployed each Sunday just to check supporters going in and out of the football grounds: in the 1993/4 championship, police reinforcements (*Reparto Mobile*) assigned to the *questure* numbered, on a national level, over 88,000 persons (more than 150,000 when the *Carabinieri*[3] and *Guardia di Finanza* are included). The total cost for one championship amounts to 70,000 million Italian liras, at the expense of the state. In England, where the hooligan problem first appeared, the costs involved in protecting public order are much lower and a large part of the expense is charged to the football clubs. In Italy, in contrast, each day of a championship costs the state 6,000 million liras (to which transport costs and lost work days due to injuries should be added).

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[3] Small villages normally only have *carabinieri*. The *polizia di stato* (state police) are found in larger towns and cities. For an analysis of the historical duality of the Italian police forces see Collin (1985). See also Canosa (1975, 1976) and Corso (1979).

Police forces at the stadium are organized on the basis of the same criteria as are used for other public order activities. In each province the *Prefetto* has the basic responsibility for public order, while the *Questore* is the senior police official with technical responsibility.

For operations of a public order nature the *Questore* deploys his policemen as well as officers of the *Reparto Mobile* (a division of the *Carabinieri*) and the *Guardia di Finanza*, who are assigned to the *Questore* from the Ministry of the Interior. An official from the *questura* has responsibility for police actions and interventions during each specific public order operation. This pattern of institutional organization, well-tested in the context of mass demonstrations, is also applied to the policing of football grounds.

While public order duties in the stadium - and investigation and prevention activities aimed at controlling ultras groups - are not the main task of the *questura* (because this structure deals more specifically with the political consequences of problems relating to public order), football matches represent for the *Reparto Mobile* their most exacting activity and the most frequent and risky occasion of crowd management. In comparison with mass demonstrations, football matches frequently require recourse to means of forcible intervention, such as batons, tear gas, and so on. Added to this high level of potential and actual violence are problems relating to safety in the stadium, a closed and crowded place, where the police have the tricky job of protecting ordinary spectators while controlling the ultras.[4]

As some of the interviewed police officers remarked:

> About the stadium, I can say, if I think about the past years, that public order duties have radically changed. At one time only a few policemen were needed because nothing happened. The fans watched the match, enjoyed their team's performance and then went home. Now there's the match and the aftermatch! Because now there are these ultras. (Interview Milan, 10.11.1994)

[4] One of the main concerns of the police during football matches is to avoid the involvement of ordinary spectators in incidents, particularly as the outbreak of panic in a crowd can have disastrous results. A dramatic example of this type of situation was the Heysel disaster of 1985, where English hooligans came into contact in the *curva* not with the ultras but with normal civil Italian supporters. Seized with panic, the Italians tried to run away. Tragically, unable to find a way to escape and pushed back by the police, 39 spectators died from being crushed or by suffocation.

> In terms of frequency, the situations that can most easily give rise to trouble are certainly football matches. There's always a risk factor and we try to prevent problems as much as possible. (Interview Milan, 9.11.94)

> Every three days we are at the stadium. On Sundays we know that we have two matches because the *Reparto Mobile* takes care of public order throughout its territorial area, which is all of Lombardia; so we keep public order in Bergamo, and in Brescia, Como, Monza ... We have five teams for the first and second divisions. This means that last Sunday, for instance, we had 30 men in Monza, which is a third division team... It is the stadium, essentially, that accounts for 90 per cent of the public order problems we usually cover: that's 80 per cent stadium work and 20 per cent public demonstrations. (Interview Milan, 19.10.94)

In order to analyse the policing of football hooliganism in Italy, it is necessary to clarify that Italian ultras represent a very specific case of *organized* aggressive spectators. Sociologists from other European countries often find it difficult to understand the Italian case because they do not have sufficient ethnographical information about the specific context of football-related disorders. Thus, the first part of this working paper describes the distinctive identity of Italian hooligans, before going on to examine the relationship between police and ultras. The second part offers a critical assessment of the problem of negotiation and the policing of football grounds.

The 'Ultras'

While football hooliganism is a universal phenomenon in Europe, it assumes different forms in each country. The picture I shall draw of Italian football spectators is quite different to the analysis of football and popular sports carried out by renowned scholars like Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning. For these observers, the social roots of English hooliganism lie in the male aggressiveness of small gangs of the lower working class.[5] Perhaps football is today an important prism through which we can view *different* societies. In my opinion, however, the main difference between English and Italian football cultures does not lie in the social class distribution of supporters, but rather in the presence or absence of a strongly structured form of association. The Italian football culture is not only locally based and independent of social stratification, but is also tightly organized.

[5] For further details see Elias and Dunning (1986); Dunning, Murphy and Williams (1988).

In Italy there are two kinds of supporters' associations: the official supporters' clubs and the 'ultras'. The basic characteristic of the official supporters' clubs is its recognition by the favoured football team. Official football clubs represent the respectable side of Italian '*tifo*' (football supporting). On the other hand, there are the ultras groups. From the very beginning, groups of ultras in Italy (wrongly considered the equivalent of English hooligans) reflected a more heterogeneous youth movement than that which populated the British grandstands. According to several sociologists, when English hooliganism was at its peak, the fans in the stands were linked by a common social class or lifestyle as well as by shared youth subcultures.[6] In Italy, the 'ultras' style of support has never been dominated by any particular social stratum or any specific youth style. The unifying element for the Italian youth in the *curva* (the rounded end of the stadium) has always been support itself, and not social consumption, or class status, or political belief, or musical fashions, and so on. Thus, in the case of Italian ultras, it is crucial to investigate the peculiar autonomy of the cognitive *frame* of rituals inside the stadium.[7]

If a member of an official football club can be regarded as a citizen of the football world, so to speak, an ultra must be considered a militant. This does not mean that every ultra is fully involved in all the group's activities. Many young people who usually watch the match from the *curva* do not have any commitment to the ultras club in their everyday life. For them, ultras act more or less as a reference group, and the ultras club also provides a structure of services. These young spectators are supporters who go into the *curva* on Sundays - with the ticket they have bought at a special price with their membership card of the *Brigate Rossonere* or the *Fossa dei Leoni*, in the case of AC MIlan - and there they find a scenario and a choreography already prepared by a few more committed ultras.

The cultural task of the ultras, in the ecology of the stadium, is to conduct a spectacular display as part of the football spectacle, with a lively and relentless form of collective support: choreography, big banners and flags, fireworks, choruses and chants which at times involve the whole stadium.

Altough ultras have been able to create a specific form of supporting, which changed the image and style of *tifo* in Italy, some of their attitudes and behaviour are often compared to those of English hooligans. For instance, some Italian sociologists speak of 'assimilation and imitation of the forms of the

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[6] See for instance Taylor (1985); Dunning, Murphy and Williams (1988).

[7] See Dal Lago (1990, Chapter II); Salvini (1989).

British hooligan style of support and aggression'.[8] Nevertheless, it seems to me that violence among Italian fans is manifested in forms that are different to those of British hooligans. This is especially evident if we take into account the organized forms of behaviour of Italian fans in the *curva*, as well as the different attitudes and repressive tactics of the Italian police and *carabinieri*, within a context which is very similar, from a formal point of view, to that which emerged during the political violence of the 1970s. An ultras group should be regarded as a tightly structured form of association, in which some individuals may have a particular disposition towards aggression. But such associations base their own existence on the organization of a spectacular event: the choreography and the barracking typical of the *curva*. It is a kind of youth association which, strangely enough, Italian sociologists have long neglected. But, despite this, for many young people, participation in the rituals of the *curva* on Sundays, or commitment to the ultras group during the week (in the case of the *militanti*), is one of their most significant social experiences.

The ultras style of support is based upon visibility, and this is also of significance in terms of hooliganism. If we consider that in England, several years ago, some hooligans even travelled incognito to an away match (by train and well-dressed) so that the police could not identify them, Italian ultras, on the contrary, want to be visible. The issue of visibility is very important from a sociological point of view, and, of course, for the police as well. Ultras travel in large groups and, in the case of any trouble, they often adopt very similar strategies to the types of fighting evident in political riots.

In order to understand the social dimension of Italian 'hooliganism', it is necessary to consider Italy's political protest movements and disorder during the 1970s. The incidence of political riots led to the introduction of more powerful equipment and more severe repression techniques used by the police and *carabinieri*. In turn, the intensification of police control inside and outside of the stadium led the ultras to adopt a military mode of organization and a war-like attitude against the police. As a result, football hooliganism as a social problem must be regarded as the legacy of such political policing. Some of the tactics that police normally adopted against political extremists during the 1970s are now employed against the ultras. For example, on 4 March 1992, at the match between Genoa and Liverpool, there were more than 1,000 policemen and

[8] See Roversi (1990).

carabinieri in Genoa. How many police officers were in Liverpool two weeks later for the return match?[9]

This legacy of political conflict also influenced the associations of young supporters occupying the *curva* of the Italian stadiums, but only in a formal sense. I am not referring here to the political symbols displayed on supporters' banners. Such symbols and emblems, in the cognitive *frame* of the *curva*, assume another meaning and lose their original reference. (I am using the term 'frame' as defined by Erving Goffman, 1974). In the early years, ultras groups did not take any political commitment with them to the stadium. However, there has been a transposition of the firmly structured organizational dimension of some extremist political youth associations, as many of the characteristics of these groups illustrate: the presence of a *direttivo*, a sort of political bureau; the assembly-like or democratic style of decision-making in the ultras groups; the strong commitment of some members during the week (meetings, preparation of banners and choreography, distribution of leaflets); and even the use of flagpoles as weapons. These are all elements which formed part of political extremism. This is not to imply that those political riots have moved from the schools or the factories into the stadium. It is indeed worth underlining that the political groups of the extreme left or right have constituted a *form* of association which, despite the crisis in political commitment among young people in Italy, tends to present itself again in new contexts.

If we analyse the case of English society, the subcultures related to phenomena like teddy boys, skinheads and punks, assume a more important role than political associations. And, in the more specific case of football fans, the informal character of some of these kinds of groups was reflected in the groups of supporters in the grandstands, whether hooligans or not. In the early days of the Italian ultras culture, on the contrary, the issue of commitment, (or 'militancy') involved the most active members of the ultras groups.[10] So too the pattern of fighting among rival groups or between ultras groups and the police recalls to some extent the political violence linked to the extremism of left or right. Among the types of transgressive behaviours witnessed in Italy, it is true that there are phenomena (including vandalism, machoism, exhibitionism) that are typical of youth mobs rather than of political groups. However, in the Italian case, those elements that are typical of the British experience blend in

[9] See Taylor (1992).

[10] See Segre (1979); Roversi (1992); Eurispes (1994).

with other dimensions of group life, which, at least initially, remind us of the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The *direttivo*, an institution typical of the ultras organization, is a group of members, all of whom have specific tasks to perform (delivering tickets, organizing travel to away matches, selling club memorabilia, administrating the budget, speaking or negotiating with football club representatives or sometimes with the police, coordinating the chorus and chants, and so on).

English fans in the stands are not organized to this extent. The ultras phenomenon shows, on the contrary, a strong ambivalence, based on the coexistence of the spectacular and expressive elements on the one side, and a hooligan attitude on the other. Journalists and club chairmen call the ultras fabulous spectators when everything is going well, such as in a celebration after a good win, but they become hooligans when there is trouble. Yet in both cases they are talking about the same people.

Today not even the football clubs themselves can ignore the importance of the ultras and the influence they exert on the game. Relations have been established between the football clubs and ultras groups, which necessarily lead to negotiation. It does not appear that English hooligans, in the past, had this sort of relationship with the club.

The general *frame* or dominant metaphor of the ultras culture in Italy is that of war. A general war, mainly symbolic and theatrical but sometimes real and bloody, is fought by organized groups of young football fans, the so-called ultras. It is a war in which temporary or permanent alliances (*gemellaggi*, from the Italian word *gemello*, 'twin') are formed, maintained or broken; a war that has been going on since the 1960s, when the first ultras groups were created, and that will probably last as long as football remains the main interest for large strata of Italian teenagers and youngsters.[11]

Politics and Football Hooliganism

In various European countries (such as England in the 1970s and Germany later on) a convergence between right-wing political extremism and hooliganism has appeared. The peculiarities of the ultras phenomenon in Italy means that interferences between 'political extremism' and football hooliganism extend in different directions, even though the relationship between football hooliganism and the extreme right wing has been emphasized the most. To claim that the

[11] The general frame of the ultras world is analysed in Dal Lago and Moscati (1992), Chapters 6 and 7.

ultras culture is 'of the right' is a serious error in judgement. The vulnerability of the ultras culture to penetration or to political exploitation is a known fact which, however, has nothing to do with the specific, original matrix that produced a phenomenon involving, for the last 25 years, such a large number of young, as well as older, people.[12]

Apart from the gravity of the episodes of violence, the associative reality, the rituals and aggressiveness of football hooliganism are for the main part unpolitical or, within a certain perspective, metapolitical phenomena. The ultras culture has its own particular autonomy, its own definite rules, specific rituals and codes that go beyond, or 'above', the ideological orientation of a minority number of supporters or really politicized militants. It forms a universe into which opposing and extremist political values can circulate from time to time, while the unifying factor remains football supporting - or a certain mode of intending support which is common to all the ultras in the stands and is *beyond* any sense of political belonging. All the ultras militants, who in the majority of cases are scarcely politicized, know the repertoire of rules to be followed by fans supporting any club, are socialized to certain values - including the acceptance of violence or of physical fighting with opponents - and have learned specific forms of behaviour and expressive rituals that can be observed in the stands during football matches. In sociological terms, it may be said that each ultras militant has specific role expectations defined by the situation.

Now, all of these specific characteristics of the ultras universe precede any political drift - real or presumed - of the phenomenon. The large-scale political vulnerability of football hooliganism is, without a doubt, a recent fact and this vulnerability is not exclusively political. Ultras organizations are experiencing a process of fragmentation: created in the 1970s, and well-established in the 1980s as highly structured organizations, they are now in a state of deep crisis. Symptoms of this crisis include the absence of a generational turnover of the old leadership, fragmentation and splitting into different groups,[13] the emergence of violent 'non-official' groups that elude the control of the recognized leadership, predominance of physical engagement with opponents (increasingly

[12] Not all football fans of the *curva* are teenagers. For the main part, ultras groups aggregate youths in the 14-25 age group, but there are still, especially among the leaders, many over-35 year olds.

[13] See Roversi (1992).

less ritualized and more 'acted'[14] in comparison with other associative activities (such as the choreography, emotional involvement in the match, playful aspects of the stadium rituals, etc.). Ultras organizations risk becoming weaker and more changeable and, precisely for this reason, more dangerous. In the opinion of a *Digos* officer in Milan:

> If these groups of fans come together under a particular flag or label, under a symbol of some significance, and if there are people at the head of this group who are recognized as leaders, let's just say it all makes our life much easier. If, on the other hand, it can be seen, as is the case in recent times - at least this seems to be the tendency - that there is a splintering of groups and gangs, our police work becomes more difficult. This is because these groups and gangs can move around and hide during the course of a season, and you then have difficulties in your police operations to stay on top of these continual developments. Whereas when the phenomenon was more marked out and more stable, it was much easier for us. When you talk to the people, and intervene when it is necessary to intervene, and therefore keep things stably within the limits of certain possibilities, then that is a situation that is evolving in a positive manner. That is, try to speak to these people, to make them sensitive to the situation, and do it in a way that makes them understand that Sunday is a day for entertainment, not for fighting. But when you start to see groups and gangs of all kinds forming, that are difficult to mark out because they move around and hide, then your work, when there is splintering, becomes more difficult. And that's true whether you are talking about mediation, confrontations, investigations or interventions. (Interview Milan, 5.12.94)

During the recent debate on appropriate norms against violence, sparked by the killing of Vincenzo Spagnolo, a young supporter of the Genoa team, who was stabbed by an ultra A.C. Milan on 29 January 1995, even the SIULP, the main police trade union, asserted that dissolving ultras groups would be a dangerous mistake, as it would mean dissolving the already slight 'endogenous' control that these associations still have on the extremist fringe groups or on the *cani sciolti* (stray dogs).

What gave strength to the ultras culture for two decades was precisely its unpolitical or metapolitical nature, and what makes it so weak nowadays is precisely the deterioration of the organizations and associative realities that embodied it. There has been an escalation in the level of violence (from simple fights to knives, and then to the hooliganism of spontaneously formed small

[14] On the distinction between and relation between violence and aggressive ritual, Marsh Harre and Rosser (1979) is still a key essay. On the subject see also Salvini (1988).

groups, which is more dangerous and similar to the English hooligans[15]): in addition to this type of violence, *internal* to the *extremist tifo* (football fanaticism) but still part of the culture of the grandstands, episodes of exploitable violence have recently occurred as a result of well-defined political plans of the subversive right wing. The most significant of these episodes took place in Brescia on 13 November 1994 during a match between Brescia and Roma when a *vicequestore* was knifed and a police inspector badly injured. From the judicial acts, it appears that the assault was premeditated and directed against the police force itself (and not against other hooligans as is normally the case). Some of the youths who went to Brescia for the day are not regular match-goers but were rather members of extreme right-wing groups. A similar episode occurred two weeks later in the north end of the Olympic stadium of Rome, during the Roma-Lazio match. In this case, again, the trouble was not simply a fight between ultras hooligans, but instead took the form of a cold-blooded attack against the police force.

Fifteen minutes of madness: eight policemen injured
UNITED AGAINST THE POLICE
A bond between the hooligans of Roma and Lazio:
they wave the same black flag[16]

In Goffman's terms, social situations 'place a "frame" around a spate of immediate events, determining the type of "sense" that will be accorded everything within the frame'.[17] Now, if we consider football a phenomenon which is not reducible to a single *frame*, we can observe that at the stadium, as in the collective representations of football which transcend the match event, there exists a kind of interference between provinces of meaning, or realms of being, since the dominant playful cognitive style is menaced by events that can, to use an expression coined by Goffman once again, 'poke through the thin sleeve of immediate reality'.[18] In other words, the *frames* are not rigid or firm, and can fail to constitute a barrier by means of which participants in a social situation can cut themselves off from external matters. This metaphoric

[15] See Dunning, Murphy and Williams (1988); Murphy, Williams and Dunning (1990).

[16] *Corriere della sera*, 28 November 1994.

[17] Goffman (1961: 20). See also Bateson (1972, Part II).

[18] Goffman (1961: 81).

membrane, enclosing the playful reality of the football spectacle and the stadium as a social universe, may turn out not to be a barrier, but something frail instead. In this sense, the barrier, in its external attributes, is more like a sieve than a solid wall, and this sieve not only selects, but also modifies what it filters. This is also true in the case of political symbols that can assume another meaning and lose their original reference.

The ultras universe, apart from the exploitable presence of radical right-wing elements with definite political plans (that in the final score destroy the ultras logic, breaking the *frame* somehow or realizing actions outside the *frame*), experiences an equivocal and conflictive relationship with politics. The dominant logic, then, still appears to be a conception of the *gratuitous* or unpolitical conflict, involving the symbolic opposition between competing ultras groups in the context of stadium rituals. From this point of view, the phenomenon of football hooliganism is considered by the police leadership to be not 'politically motivated'. In this way, ultras became part of the worst class of 'bad' demonstrators.[19] Football hooliganism is seen as a pure problem of vandalism, or 'violence pure and simple'.

The Problem of Negotiation

Although the phenomenon described here presents some analogies with political disorders, the fact that football hooliganism is not the result of *serious* motivations led the police to underestimate for a long time the importance of intermediation, dialogue and negotiation with the ultra groups.[20] For the *Digos* at least, the presence of extreme right-wing infiltrators in the ultras groups certainly constitutes a complicating element in the hooliganism problem; but from the general point of view of the police force, the issue seems to remain that of 'pure and simple violence'.

The difficulty to accept - or simply to understand - the existence of unpolitically-oriented forms of organized and mass violence delayed police efforts to institute precautionary measures. Nevertheless in Genoa, a successful experiment was tried out for a short period; namely, extending to the stadium

[19] Della Porta (1995).

[20] In contrast, as is well-known to the *Digos*, the football clubs have always sought to negotiate with the ultras groups, and to develop a good relationship in order to obtain their consent and support.

those precautionary measures usually employed in the political context. As explained by a *Digos* officer in Genova:

The first typical thing about a sporting demonstration is that supporters are usually always the same. I'm speaking of course about ultras supporters (...) The second rule we set ourselves was to enhance the internal hierarchies of the group. This is a phenomenon that also tends to happen when there's a mass meeting. When we follow a march or demonstration of a political or trade unionistic nature, we [the police] guarantee the maintenance of public order first of all by contacting the leaders, the factory delegates, the trade union representatives. Now, all this doesn't usually apply to ultras because there's a moral prejudice that says that the ultras are not worth this kind of consideration. Ultras are something negative and the police tend to simply resort to authority with them. We decided to set aside those moral values; anybody can make his own, but in the specific reality it was our responsibility, and it still is, not to do that. We thought instead that it was important to appreciate the leaders of the ultras but not, I repeat, to obtain information from them ... only because we believed that they were able to control the phenomenon directly, so that we could control it through them. This is for me a basic rule: to reduce to a minimum the need for *manu militari* interventions, to really keep armed intervention as an ultimate resource. If a minor fight erupts in the stands, two plain-clothes policemen find the leaders of those ultras, accompany them to the place of the fight and try, with them, to calm down the opponents[21].

In Genoa the negotiations with ultra groups became problematic again when the officer who had promoted this type of intervention was transferred. Innovative ideas are seldom assimilated by the police structure and generally remain the property of the individual officer. This model, as described by the police officer, works for political demonstrations but is rarely used for stadium troubles. In Florence, for instance:

> Yes, the ultras belong to organized groups, but when problems arise they distance themselves from each other and all become like stray dogs. Theoretically there are many organized groups of supporters, all professing their willingness to collaborate. But these groups are made up of people that can leave the fold at any time, and when they do nobody will assume responsibility for them. (Interview Florence, 10.11.1994)

[21] Volta (1994: 73).

The Policing of Football Grounds

The problem of controlling ultras groups first emerged at the beginning of the 1980s. At that time, control was mainly needed *inside* the stadium and the principal police task was to segregate the home and away supporters. In England, where these problems appeared earlier, stadiums are usually built on a quadratic plan and the stands are structurally separated (often different parts of a stadium are separated because they were built at different times[22]). In Italy the football stadiums are nearly always multi-sports arenas constructed on an elliptical plan (thus the term *curva* - curve - to describe the ends), and structural barriers do not exist. Consequently, the police had to compensate for this deficiency by deploying lines of men. The first problem to be confronted therefore was to prevent physical contact, *inside* the stadium between rival ultras groups. Ultras permanently occupied a territory in the stadium (the *curva*) and considered it 'sacred' and inviolable. One of the main duties of the police was, and still is, to prevent rival ultras from invading the opposing *curva*.

It is important to mention that the police surround the *curva* but avoid entering that territory as much as possible. The entrance of police in a *curva* usually provokes a highly combative reaction from the ultras, the consequences of which are unpredictable. The *curva* becomes, within its own boundaries, a place for tolerated transgressions: fireworks are employed in choreographies, banners insulting the enemy team are waved, light drugs are consumed and the police themselves are offended with abusive songs.[23] Objects smuggled in are often thrown on the field or against the police. But the rule is to tolerate as much as possible in order to avoid incidents in a place as closed in and potentially dangerous as the stadium. Television cameras are still seldom used, but should theoretically have a deterrent function: in the Milan stadium, for instance, before the beginning of the match, and during the break, a giant screen projects footage taken by the police television camera as a warning to ultras that they can be easily identified.

[22] See Englis (1984).

[23] The police confiscate banners before a match begins only in the extreme case that they bear racist messages. In the English stadiums, on the other hand, no banners are allowed.

During recent years, due also to the massive deployment of policemen, the risk of fights arising in the stadium has significantly decreased.[24] As in the English case (and notwithstanding the great differences), the most violent ultras learned ways of escaping police control and provoking trouble outside the stadium. Consequently, for the police, the hardest part of their work shifted from that of controlling the crowd during the match to keeping a close watch on visiting supporters for the entire length of their stay in the town: from their arrival at the railway station to the stadium, and from the stadium back to the station or the motorway. From the police observations I gathered it appears that these are the trickiest moments in police activities. Police duty in the stadium may be for as long as 11-12 consecutive hours, to the great annoyance of the trade unions.[25] It is during these moments that clashes similar to political riots may occur, during which the police use tear gas (which cannot be used in the stadium), or baton charges[26] to scatter the ultras. But unlike the case of public demonstrations, control in this situation is very up close, never at a distance. In addition, there are occasions when the ultras organize protest demonstrations (for instance, against the transfer of a player from one club to another). These demonstrations usually take place during the week, in the streets of the town, and are very similar to political demonstrations. For some years, the only urban guerrilla warfare episodes in Italy that the newspapers reported on were of this type.[27]

Hooligan control remains, especially for the *Reparto Mobile* operators, the main opportunity they have to test their forcible intervention techniques. This is not to say that the stadium has become a sort of military training field; but there is no doubt that the experience of violent clashes - just as the learning of

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[24] TV news programmes often show images of brawls in the *curva*, but these are usually shortlived ritual clashes, after which order is soon restored. The most serious incidents take place outside of the stadium after the match.

[25] In 1993 the SIULP fought a tough dispute over this issue with the head of the *Reparto Mobile* in Milan; the outcome was the removal of officer. See SIULP (1994).

[26] Some policemen complained during interviews that their colleagues, the *carabinieri*, did not have appropriate uniforms for public order duties (they are forced, for instance, to use their rifle butt instead of a baton).

[27] Disorders provoked by the ultras in cases such as the transfer of Roberto Baggio (1990 in Florence) or Luigi Lentini (1993 in Turin), even though directly motivated by the transfer, proved to be more exacting for the police than many demonstrations organized by the extreme left wing.

self-control in difficult situations - is related to the frequency of conflicts with the ultras. Finally, the fact that up to 1,200 policemen can be deployed during a single football match is in itself indicative of the type of commitment required by the ultras phenomenon.

Some Critical Observations on Football Crowd Disorder and the Italian Police

The relatively widespread notion of a continuous shattering of public order occurring in the *curva* of Italian stadiums is definitely misleading. Events which take place in the stands depend not so much on a failing within the social order but on a meaningful action structured by a set of rules. These rules are often hidden but become at least partly visible in practical experience. In a well-known essay (criticized by some scholars for being too indulgent with hooligans), Marsh, Harrè and Rosser (1978) showed how a hidden social order governs events that are traditionally defined as 'dangerous' and 'anarchical':

> We find more reasonable to seek for the actual possibilities of controlling the violence mechanisms instead of simply hoping that they will dissolve. If we accept the existence of *rules* in the disorder, we can develop control strategies certainly more effective than those adopted so far.

It is true that the police had to develop a tacit knowledge of the rules governing and marking the different types of situations in the stadium. But the process has been slow, largely due to the belief that experience in the field is more important than a theoretical coding of knowledge on public order.

In the second half of the 1980s, in a period of relative social peace, the stadium became the main public order emergency situation. For some time, football hooliganism generated a new form of 'moral panic' in the public opinion (this term was coined by Stan Cohen, 1971). From the post-war period on, English society has experienced a certain variety of 'moral panics', each one with a specific 'object' (Teddy Boys, Punks, Skinheads, etc.). The same process occurred in relation to hooligans, described by the mass media as a senseless and destructive phenomenon. So too in Italy, it may be seen that the absence of a 'serious' motivation for violence led the police to consider the ultras phenomenon in these terms. Some of the police interviews express acknowledgement of a certain dignity inherent to the political extremism of the 1970s, motivated as it was by specific ideals. In that period, political demonstrations were often extremely dangerous for policemen themselves, and

resulted in some very serious incidents. However, in the opinion of many of the persons interviewed, the present time is definitely worse.[28]

As a *Digos* officer from Genoa commented, a 'moral prejudice' within the police force prevented the possibility for a long time of seeing the ultras as an organized subject, as had earlier occurred with extremists in political organizations. Thus, they did not develop, as had been the case with political extremists, appropriate repressive techniques as well as negotiation and dialogue strategies. This type of mediation strategy could be acknowledged nowadays by the police (and to some extent it has been), but the change of context and the deterioration within the ultras organizations themselves now make this form of negotiation more difficult.

The escalation has been symmetrical: as the control measures and physical presence of the police were strengthened, so too did the aggressiveness of the ultras and their ability to outwit protection measures. Violence in the stadium became violence outside the stadium. This type of confrontation, referred to as 'symmetrical schismogenesis' by Gregory Bateson,[29] produces a potentially unrestrainable escalation unless external factors intervene to modify the relationship.

There have also been remarkable delays in the area of disciplinary measures at the penal level. Anti-violence norms were only tightened after the murder of a young supporter, Vincenzo Spagnolo, in Genoa in March 1995. At the beginning of the current season (1995-96), 3,000 supporters were issued warnings not to go to the stadium; but it is quite obviously not possible to solve the problem simply by penal means. The SIULP has been alone in presenting draft bills on the issue, and in so doing has gone beyond its technical role as a trade union to fill the vacuum left by other political actors. Using the British experience as an importable model, it has proposed, (1) that the police be replaced with a civil control service performed by ordinary stewards of the football club; and (2) that numbered seats be installed in the *curva*. However as already noted, the Italian case is markedly different to the British situation, and hooligans are markedly different to the Italian ultras. While the hooligan

[28] In the opinion of some of the police officers interviewed, this evaluation is also valid in relation to the dangerousness of leftist extremists today in comparison with those of 20 years ago. See also della Porta (1995).

[29] See Bateson (1972, Part II).

problem has to quite a large extent been harnessed in Britain,[30] we cannot infer from this that the same results can be achieved by the Italian police using the techniques adopted by their British counterparts, for at least two reasons. Firstly, part of the order control service in British stadiums is carried out by club stewards rather than by the police. The police intervene only in the case of serious disorders. However, it would not be possible to introduce this type of order control service in Italy because it is unreasonable to expect that unqualified operators could control large masses of organized supporters (the only alternative would be to resort to the services of private security officers, a step which would be politically dangerous).

Secondly, with regard to the SIULP proposal to make numbered seating compulsory in all-seater grounds, we must keep in mind that all-seater grounds were introduced in England in the first place to avoid disasters of the kind which occurred in Sheffield in 1989 - a tragically preventible situation where 95 spectators died in the Hillsborough stadium due to the overcrowding caused by the sudden entrance, as a result of police negligence, of a mass of Liverpool fans without tickets.[31] In Sheffield, as also happened in Brussels, escape for the large numbers of trapped people proved impossible because of the structure of the installations: the high fencing separating the stands from the field prevented spectators from seeking refuge there. The Sheffield disaster was more significant than the one in Brussels as a turning-point in the anti-hooligan policy of the Thatcher government. As noted by Waddington (1994), the problem became 'to avoid a public disaster of the scale of the Hillsborough tragedy'. However, the heated debate which took place in England on the need to modernize the stadiums bears no relation to the ultras problem in Italy: Italian stadiums are far newer and safer than the English equivalents. Now, in Italy, even when there are numbered seats in the all-seaters ends, the police are unable to force ultras to sit down during the match and to stay in their numbered seats. This is because the ultras are not individual spectators, but members of an organized group; it is the ultras organization that decides who should sit where in the *curva*. The police can only surround the stand with a line of men, trying to intervene as little as possible in what happens there. This 'right' of the ultras to rule their own territory has been tacitly obtained after years of clashes with the police. The

[30] It should be stressed, however, that the decreased violence in England is not only due to disciplinary measures taken; it is also the result of the development among supporters of a culture and of association forms alternative to the hooligan culture.

[31] See Taylor (1989).

only way it could be withdrawn would be to dissolve the ultras groups themselves. But it is worth restating here that every policeman interviewed opposed this idea of dissolving the groups, while noting that particular individuals are possibly responsible for the disorders.

The problem in Italy is of a different nature. The football clubs need the support of the ultras: they buy large chunks of season's tickets and guarantee support and barracking, thereby influencing the outcome of the match. (This may seem absurd, but anyone who has attended even one football match can understand the difference between a game played in a silent stadium and one with the lively support of the fans.[32]) The police (including the *Digos*) have always been informed of the negotiations taking place between clubs and ultras. This certainly never happened in England between hooligans and clubs. But the issue is one of a complex and difficult nature in the Italian case. No police officer would ever admit, beyond a certain point, to knowledge of the relationship between clubs and ultras, knowing that this would amount to an acknowledgement of the clubs' penal responsibilities. However, when it comes to the high costs of maintaining public order in the stadiums, and to the fact that these duties take too many men away from other activities, all the interviewed officers were in agreement. But the solution is in the hands of politicians.

A last important facet of the issue which emerged during our interviews was that although the police have gradually and empirically developed a knowledge system concerning football hooliganism, they do not seem interested in systemizing this knowledge. Work in the stadium is viewed as a public order duty, *among others*. Even in the case of the policing of football grounds, special in-service courses have no real weight. As the interviewees explained, *the police profession cannot be theorized.*[33]

In conclusion, while foreign observers are usually shocked by the massive militarization of the Italian football stadiums, for Italian spectators, and police officers too, this is a matter of simple routine, a part of the event. From an ethnographical perspective, this event reveals a highly theatrical and dramatic element. We could describe football - the match event, and the function of the public in the stadium - as a 'deep play', to use the expression coined by Geertz (1973). In this *frame* some forms of behaviour may seem useless or irrational

[32] With regard to stadium rituals, the difference between the attitude of ultras and common spectators lies in the fact that the ultras always support the club, even in the most difficult moments.

[33] On this aspect of police operational practice and knowledge see also Palidda (1993).

because the prize at stake is symbolic to such an extent as to not be rationally justifiable. As in the Balinese cockfight described by Geertz, during a football match in Italy all the actors involved seem to perform a sort of ritually dramatized self-portrait. And the police are also part of the drama or *sceneggiata*.

This interpretation may appear to be overly anthropological. Yet it is true that in the symbolic, or ritual, behaviour of the young supporters in the *curva*, the playful dimension does not necessarily exclude violence. The police also consider this context not as serious, but equally dangerous and tricky, as a political riot. As Triani[34] remarks:

> It becomes almost legitimate to think that there is not a real will after all to reach a real conclusion on hooligan violence. Perhaps this happens because in a hidden and unconfessable way, disorders, devastations, injuries and a few deaths, represent a reasonable and acceptable cost when they are ascribable to a sporting event, that is, to a definite context which is not critical to the integrity of the social system. "Better to be violent there, than somewhere else" wrote Raymond Aron.

But let us take this analysis one step further by situating our results in the general context of public order in Italy. Having moved on from the *consociativismo*[35] phase, the general climate is now one of heavy political tension, and the country seems to be split in two. This tension is undoubtedly of considerable concern to the senior police officers responsible for public order, more so than football hooliganism is. Moreover, the *reparti mobili* are now faced with new forms of disorder, due for instance to the influx of large groups of *extracomunitari* immigrants in the big cities. Control duties in the territory have taken the place of more traditional tasks, such as protest policing. Changes such as these in the larger cities produce forms of disorder whose underlying rules are still unknown.

If the stadium constitutes a lesser concern than other control-related problems, but at the same time remains such a difficult and costly job, we may wonder whether the Italian police have not at least partially failed in the slow process of learning the rules of football-related disorders.

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[34] Triani (1994: 61).

[35] On the concept of '*consociativismo*' see Pizzorno (1994).

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