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The Safe Standing movement in English football: Mobilizing across the political and discursive fields of contention

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Abstract

This article draws upon archival and fieldwork research to analyse the longer-term impact which all-seated stadia have had on football supporters' consumption of the game in England. Consequently, 26 supporter activists identified as important in building a rich social history of activism were interviewed as a type of activist life story. By analysing empirical snapshots of a 30-year social movement against all-seated stadia, the article cross-pollinates ideas from sociology and social movement studies on eventful protests and temporality, to show how events and ruptures shape the dynamics of a social movement, and secondly, to show how discursive vectors indicate the developing understanding, by networked actors, of the stakes of a movement's core conflict. In English football, historically significant events like the Hillsborough disaster continue to shape many of the key mobilisations of supporter networks, and their collective, but also complex and contradictory consumption of the game. This movement, Safe Standing, is sociologically important, because it evidences the complex interplay of cultural and technological vectors and their manifestation across the compelling timeframes and orientations which make up the consumption of English football in a postHillsborough timescape. By engaging in a 30-year struggle over Hillsborough as a restlessness event, Safe Standing sought to gain control over the interpretation of this timescape and is characterised by the complex struggle supporters face over the ritualistic expression of identity and solidarity

Keywords

Introduction

This article analyzes the contemporary sociological ritual of watching football in England. For most supporters throughout the twentieth century, this ritual involved standing on football terraces as a cultural practice. And this became important sociologically, because it constituted a public ritual in contemporary British society through which new supporter solidarities emerged. Standing together, football supporters and the social networks they formed, produced the atmosphere and spectacle which are

built into the collective memories and social histories of generations of men, women and children in Britain. What bound them together, according to Wagg (2004), was the mythic sense of freedom to actively express support in ways which were not over-regulated or over-constrained.

Despite this, by 1985, English football was generally played poorly in front of dwindling crowds of **violent** and often racist men in unsafe and unsanitary football grounds which had little market value (King, 1998). Consequently, the British media and UK government began to increasingly demand that football be brought into line with the direction of broader social and economic change. After the Hillsborough stadium disaster in 1989, from which a total of 96 Liverpool supporters lost their lives as a result of a human crush on the terraces, the free market demands for the new consumption of football became dominant and this was achieved in part through the development of all-seated stadia in the top two divisions. In his final report into the Hillsborough disaster, Lord Justice Taylor, who led the public inquiry commissioned by the UK government, stated:

'Whilst there is no panacea which will achieve total safety and cure all problems of behaviour and crowd control, I am satisfied that seating does more to achieve those objectives than any other single measure', and that over time, 'spectators would become accustomed and educated to sitting'. (Lord Justice Taylor, 1990, p.12-14).

Pearson (2012) argued that the removal of the terraces and the increased regulation in and around football grounds, reduced some capacity for younger fans to experience the carnivalesque nature of home fixtures in traditional ways. Moreover, whilst continuing to expand football's wider public appeal as a modern inclusive game, the imposition of all-seated stadia and the subsequent increases in admission prices and surveillance of supporters, represented a significant assault on fan culture and became one of the most important issues which supporters collectively coalesce around. Lord Justice Taylor overstated the extent to which fans would become accustomed to the all-seating legislation. Over the past 25yrs, thousands of supporters at games played in the Premier League and Championship, have continued to stand, but in areas not designed for them do so. This persistent standing in all-seated stadia has been a sustained source of conflict between football clubs, supporters, stewards, police officers and various safety bodies.

In this article, I examine the longer-term impact of the all-seating legislation on supporters' consumption of the game, reflecting on the management policies of fans in football stadiums in England over the past 30yrs. The imposition of all-seating as an

attendance model, led, on the other hand, to processes of mobilization and association of supporters in the new arenas, a reaction to such policies, and to the interruption of traditional ways of supporting clubs. Together, individual supporters, informal supporter groups, and formal supporter organizations, networked together by way of social ties, built a social movement which now stands to potentially impact and shape the consumption habits of a leisure practice and ritual all over the world. This movement, 'Safe Standing', seeks to bring about a change to the all-seating legislation by arguing that alternative technologies would now allow clubs to create purpose-built Safe Standing areas. Clubs would thus decide, in consultation with supporters, what mix of standing areas or permitted standing in existing seated areas would be most suitable for them (Football Supporters Association (FSA) 2020). The research is of strong political relevance given that all three main UK political parties 'manifestos at the 2019 General Election pledged that they would work with supporters to now introduce Safe Standing.

Cross-pollinating ideas from relational sociology and social movement studies, the article tells the story of this movement, and studies the working tactics and structure of a small network across different temporal periods post-Hillsborough. By examining the diversity of the associative dynamics of this movement, its national and international networks of influence, and its ability to reverse, to some extent, neoliberal processes of standardizing the behaviour of football fans as "consumers", the article seeks to answer the following question: in what ways has the Safe Standing movement, and the intersubjective strains, tactics, and mobilizations of supporter networks, evolved across 30yrs? To help operationalize this, the article investigates when, how and why, the movement emerged, and the specific tactics through which its mobilization could be driven. By examining the speeches of activists and their strategies for action in the long duration after Hillsborough, attention is thus paid to the complex struggle supporters face over the ritualistic expression of identity and solidarity. This adds empirical value to our understanding of how movement meanings are produced across both the political and discursive fields of contention in sociology.

'Football Without Fans is Nothing': Unpacking Contemporary Fan Protests

In Sociology, 'traditional' football fandom is often conceptualized as having emerged during the mid-to-late twentieth century, as a predominantly male expression of local identity, and one which developed through standing terrace culture (Taylor, 1971; Mason,

1980; Giulianotti, 2002). During the 1970s and 80s, English football witnessed an intensification of supporter violence, often referred to as 'hooliganism', which became ingrained within British societal consciousness as a social problem (Dunning, Murphy and Williams, 1986). Consequently, professional football came to define supporters as 'deviant'. The subsequent moral panic which emerged during a period of economic recession, was characterized by an evolution of football safety legislation in the wake of a series of terraced stadium disasters, notably, Heysel and Hillsborough (Greenfield and Osborn, 1998). Together, they strengthened the role of the state and an ideological commitment to neoliberal, free market economics (Webber, 2017). And thus, the legacy of Hillsborough, became the core conjunctural argument for the reform of football and its supporters (King, 1998), whilst the negative reputation ascribed to them, was exploited within popular discourse.

The political economy of English football during the 1990s, was according to King (1998), characterized by the motivation of new entrepreneurial club directors, to diversify the consumption of football through the concept of fan as 'customer'. Whilst this helped attract more women and families to the game, it also encouraged a more restrained form of consumption, thereby acting as a Foucauldian disciplinary measure and governing rubric for the management of supporter behaviour (Pearson, 2012). This in turn, facilitated increasingly subdued and dispassionate forms of spectating, and less space for collective forms of expression and physicality associated with terrace culture (Crabbe and Brown, 2004). However, the deepening of commercial pressures and establishment of free market arguments as the dominant interpretation which informed English football's transformation, created feelings of social unrest and displacement amongst some 'traditional' supporters (Pearson, 2012). As a result, some supporter networks, across the national Football Supporters Association (FSA), Independent Supporters Associations (ISAs), and football fanzines, were agitated into developing a relational culture of contestation against various aspects of 'modern' football which were both compliant with, and resistant towards, the neoliberal landscape in which they were situated (King, 1998, Nash, 2000). These networks, were according to King (1998), characterized by a culture of 'new football writing' as a distinct style of fandom, informed by boyhood memories of a 'golden age' of football, and founded largely upon socially democratic principles. And these memories shaped fanzine writers' response to the neoliberal timescape of football during the late 1980s and 1990s. Central to this was the publication of print fanzines which enabled a supporters' view and often radical interpretation of popular cultural forms to be expressed by fans excluded from

mainstream expressions about the new consumption of football (Jary et al. 1991). According to Millward (2008:300), 'fanzines sought to provide fans with a liberal voice and were partially created as a form of cultural resistance against the 1980s conflation of football with the racist-hooligan couplet'. And these were mainly produced by white males, aged 30 years or younger and educated beyond a compulsory educational standard with left wing or liberal political views (Jary et al. 1991).

The reading of fans' interaction with modern football then, should consider the potentially shared interests between both dominant and subordinate supporter groups, which texture social relations in often complex ways. Indeed, these supporter networks according to King (2003), often consist of a complex and diverse hierarchy of status groups which coalesce and unify at specific clubs to develop relational fan cultures. But whilst some contemporary supporters' groups seek to escalate carnivalesque activity in order to differentiate themselves from more consumer and tourist-based fan networks, their motivations are often at odds with those attempting to manage and control contemporary football crowds (Pearson, 2012).

However, football supporters' social networks are usually divided by established lines of club rivalry (Hill, Canniford and Millward, 2018), and thus the mobilization of club-specific supporter networks is often more effective within increasingly deregulated environments. And whilst these networks continue to be important to the consumption and production of modern football, the integration of such groups, and their capacity to become powerful actors lies in the collective. Recognizing this, sociologists have moved beyond club-based social movement research to consider the ways in which diverse groups unite against the corporate logics of modern football across online and urban spaces (Numerato, 2015; Hill, Canniford and Millward, 2018). However, the socio-cultural origins of supporter networks involved in opposition initiatives against the all-seating legislation over three decades, requires further sociological inquiry. Indeed, contemporary movements like *Against Modern Football* (Numerato, 2015), often reference the role of important 'switchers' within supporter groups like the FSA, but do not empirically investigate the histories or mechanisms of the networks seeking to transcend and change contemporary football culture.

This is a challenge I pick up in this article by showing how, whilst contemporary supporter movements continue to articulate reflexivity towards *Against Modern Football*, the mobilizations of supporter networks and their consumption of the game, are characterized by repeated patterns of social interaction, and the legacy of historical events in football, namely the Hillsborough disaster. Across these temporal periods, the

imposition of all-seated stadia, as a key feature of modern football, has agitated a longer-term process of mobilization. Indeed, recognizing this temporal sensitivity, often underexplored in other academic research into football supporter movements, is critical if we are to understand the ways in which networks mobilize, navigate and negotiate the contours of periods of profound political, economic and social change. Over the past 30yrs, the emergence of a new wave of supporter movements sought to break down the power of the state in order to achieve more effective involvement and representation in the running of clubs and the game more broadly. Indeed, these actions and demands of supporters and their relationship to broader social, cultural and political changes must be situated within the wider context of contemporary Britain and social transformations.

Relational Sociology, Networks and Social Movements

Whilst there are different approaches to relational sociology, they share a common focus, that being, sociologists, and indeed sociologists of social movements, should place the micro-level dimensions of social relations, networks and interactions at the centre of analysis (Powell and Depelteau, 2003). Recent empirical cases adopting relational sociology, include work on student political worlds (Crossley and Ibrahim, 2012), the construction projects of the Qatar 2022 World Cup (Millward, 2017), and coexistence within urban neighbourhoods, (Felder, 2020). This literature seeks to overcome the well-established dichotomy in which individualism and holism resort to abstract conceptions of an underlying substance in their attempts to make sense of the social world (Crossley, 2015). Relational sociology then, explicitly rejects this dichotomy, arguing what are often termed structures, are reducible to mutually influencing and interdependent networks or worlds of social relations in particular locations (Crossley, 2011). For Crossley (2015:16), sociologists should seek to investigate social worlds as 'comprising of networks of interactions and ties, of numerous types and on various scales, between actors who themselves are formed in those interactions.' These intersubjective networks may consist of dynamic family, friendship, or political ties, and it is through interaction, that shared experiences and memories give the social world its cultural meaning.

Applying this relational framework to map the territories of social movements in a way which affords analytical primacy to social ties, relations and interactions, Edwards (2014) argued that, by approaching movements *as* networks, enables us to understand the ways in which formally independent actors, are linked through various forms of cooperation. Social movements then, which seek to bring about some type of social, cultural or political change, are according to Della Porta and Diani (1999:16), 'informal

networks, based on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest'. And thus, by focusing on social movements *as* relational networks, research should seek to analyze the interpersonal networks of interactions between groups, in order to understand how a movement emerges, recruits, and mobilizes across time (Crossley, 2002). These are useful analytical insights because they advance debates on movement mobilization by problematizing the established importance placed on external political opportunity structures and the role of movement organizations, by recognizing the importance of the cultural dimensions of structures (Edwards, 2014). This relational approach enables us to focus on the socio-political environment, in this case, English football, as a symbolic and discursive space in which interactions between activists and other agents, which may include the state, take place (Goldstone, 2004).

Method

Archival research was undertaken into the historical networks of the FSA, which remains the most high-profile national supporter organization in England and Wales, since it emerged in 1985. This was important because it detailed key networks across the FSA, but also ISAs, Supporters' Trusts and fanzines. Data coded included the FSAs response to the Taylor Report and emerging campaigns against all-seated stadia, coordinated by a small Coalition of Football Supporters network (CoFS). Whilst archived materials themselves are not cited in the discussion, they were used to complement other empirical data collection and analysis, both in terms of contextualizing events discussed, and networks investigated.

Fieldwork was also carried out throughout the course of 2014-19 at FSA national conferences and events to establish myself within an informal network of supporters. This data was analyzed using a small research diary recording key observations and discussions at breakaway Safe Standing sessions. Analysis centered upon who was there, who worked with who, what events were taking place and what strategies were being developed. Different roles were undertaken during the research, ranging from 'complete observer', 'observer-as-participant', 'participant as observer' but never quite 'complete participant' (Watt and Scott Jones, 2010). Whilst I attended these events as a football supporter, supportive of the argument that fans should have a democratic choice to stand or sit at matches, ultimately, the network accepted me as an academic researcher. Despite this, I sought to avoid the most obtuse error of unselfconsciousness by approaching the research in a way which would not uncritically adopt and reify the views of those both

supportive of and involved in the Safe Standing network. In doing so, I adopted reflexive standpoint which recognized the separation of Safe Standing as *the* subject, and networked football fan movements as *an* approach.

In 2016, I was invited by the FSA's lead on Safe Standing, to join its core online network of 30 supporters. Over a period of 3yrs, I was able to discover the discursive rhythms and patterns of communication which helped interpret the ways in which discussions created new interpretative frames and strategies. The online forum contained over 1600 topic threads and several thousand posts dating back to 2011.

Finally, I identified 26 supporters to interview as a type of activist life story. Sampling techniques varied throughout the course of data collection, ensuring I moved beyond core members of the FSA, to access broader segments of the movement's participants that were represented in the archives. The interviewees were broadly characteristic of three mutually influencing social worlds. First, the FSA between 1985-2019. Second, three documented campaigns to permit standing. And finally, coalition-based networks connected across the FSA, ISAs and Supporters' Trusts. I followed Della Porta's (2014) approach to analyzing the interviews in a 'restructured' fashion by producing a chronology of their story, a semi-codified scheme examining how they became involved, and a synthesis of those main themes. This approach, grounded in interpretivism, pays attention to the practices of elaboration of different socially constructed versions of the social world of football and the networks which build collective action. Each interview lasted between 1-2 hours in length.

All interviewees were offered the right to anonymity in the write up, but all chose to be named and were informed that others within their network(s) were being interviewed. I contacted the moderator of the online forum to ask permission to document some of the events discussed, but in a way which ensured no direct posts themselves were used. This meant that I avoided taking any material directly beyond listing the names of those who were involved in that network.

The Moral Shock: Networking a Coalition of Football Supporters

In order to understand the initial impact which Hillsborough had both on the perception of standing terraces and the ritual of watching football, attention must be paid to supporters' interaction with the game across a neoliberal landscape which was in movement. Central to this analysis, are the mechanisms which produced mobilizations against the increasing criminalization of fans, and in doing so, sought to transform the landscape of fan politics in England. These mechanisms were the product of coordination

between three relational social movements from 1985-99. In their analysis of social movements, Meyer and Whitter (1994, p.277) argued that movements 'are not distinct or self-contained, rather they grow from and give birth to other movements, work in coalition and influence each other indirectly'. To achieve this, four mechanisms of transmission between movements occur. Firstly, organizations form coalitions. Secondly, movement communities often overlap. Thirdly, movements share similar personnel. And finally, they connect to broader changes in the external environment. Consequently, movements influence movements and often create spillovers during periods of widespread change. During the late 1980s, in the wake of the Heysel disaster, the FSA, ISAs, and football fanzines, shared an ideological commitment to a post-Thatcherite social democracy and what constituted the appropriate consumption of football. Whilst having their own dynamics, they addressed themselves to overlapping socially democratic policies, interests and participants, and together, actively opposed many of the conjunctural arguments for the reform and regulation of supporters.

> Anyone who went to football was affected by Heysel and the coverage of it, and the studio debates which were coming out from the people, they were ex-footballers suddenly being asked to comment on quite complex issues, but those sorts of discussions were setting the debate really and when I read Rogan's letter saying we need to stand up and allow supporters to have a voice, I thought yeah, I could help organize something in London. (Craig Brewin, 31/3/17).

Whilst the FSA failed to become a mass movement in terms of national supporter membership, it was successful in networking a critical mass of highly resourced actors who were able to communicate effectively across the various regions of English football, notably from cities such as Liverpool, London, Sheffield, Birmingham, Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester and Southampton. Together, they constituted a critical mass because as Crossley (2015) argued, in larger populations the connecting of resources, communication, capital and collective effervescence is more successful. And many of these supporters, hailing from the middle class, and having attended university, included academics, police officers, trade union activists, businessmen and journalists, and held prior social ties to key people inside individual football clubs. As King (2003) noted, whilst this diverse hierarchy of status groups do not embody traditional working-class values, they are in many cases concerned with the working-class consumption of the game.

In 1998, a small network of 11 supporters, connected by means of pre-existing networks within and around the FSA, fanzines, ISAs, and the more conservative fan association, the National Federation of Football Supporters Clubs (NFFSC), formed a *Coalition of Football Supporters* (CoFS), as a hub-centered network and homophilous cluster with most sharing similar political tastes.

> Andy Walsh said do you fancy seeing if you can get this ISA network going and contacting other clubs and see what they have to say, that's where it all started when I got in touch with Kev Miles at Newcastle. You see fanzines were important, but a lot of these activists knew each other having been involved with Militant and the anti-Poll Tax riots. (Mark Longden, 24/1/18).

Leading members of the CoFS helped switch the networked practices of the FSA and leading ISAs to coordinate support, through fanzines and public banners, for small-scale protests, against the all-seating legislation, which included *Stand Up for Football*, *Stand Up Like We Used To*, and *Bring Back Terracing* in 1998. Switchers according to Castells (2013), are individuals who successfully connect and ensure the corporation of different networks by sharing common goals and resources. These standing protests were framed in a way which connected to an imagined discourse of authenticity, which in turn, helped generate a growing sense of moral protest (Polletta and Jasper, 2001).

> My sense was that when the big cross cutting issues emerged, it made sense to tap into a network with shared perspectives. I had first-hand experience of how this could work through my leadership of the *United Colours of Football Initiative* which had lent on ISAs and fanzines for help in the distribution of materials in support of the *Let's Kick Racism Out of Football Campaign* (Tim Crabbe, 15 February 2018).

> We saw the need to pull those different ISAs together. The issues around standing were very much about the experience of the match going supporter and what the match day was like, and in terms of collective action, that easily transferred into discussions about ground redevelopment which were going on during the 90s post-Hillsborough. (Andy Walsh, 3/4/17).

To understand the mobilizations of these networks in seeking to build a collective identity against the all-seating legislation, Blumer's approach to collective behaviour (1951) provides one useful framework. Blumer argued that social movements form through a

process of agitation when people's normal lives are disrupted or when they experience rapid social change. However, individuals, in this case, individual football supporters, do not recognise these social conditions as problematic alone. They become agitated, when convinced by others, that some form of collective action is necessary. Jasper (1997), referred to this as an emotional reaction, producing a 'moral shock', which in turn, arouses peoples' interest in the cause. However, the importance of networks was underplayed within Blumer's account of collective behaviour, and in line with this analysis, I argue that the CoFS network, in 1998, was successful, to an extent, in agitating wider supporter networks, through fanzines and FSA regional and national conferences. According to Crossley (1999), these interactive places become 'working utopias' which bring people together to share ideas and strengthen political ties and in doing so, provide 'foci' where a movements culture is reformed and reproduced. Consequently, the CoFS, helped build an 'esprit de corps'[1] against the increasing heavy-handed tactics of security firms, hired by clubs, to deal with an emerging problem of fans persistently standing in all-seated areas. And in June 1999, 26 supporter groups attended the first CoFS national conference and agreed a *Charter for Football*, which included a shared commitment to building a national movement for new (safer) modern terracing.

The collective claims made about terracing post-Hillsborough, were themselves coordinated by leading figures within the CoFS network. This stretches Meyer and Whitter's (1994) analysis, because it shows how the emergence of a social movement against all-seating, grew not from another movement, but the networks and interactions themselves which produced those coalitions, overlaps, and spillovers between the FSA, ISAs and fanzine movements.

Safe Standing and the Struggle around the Production of Meaning

During the mid-late 1990s, the creation of all-seated stadia threatened a particular practice of fandom, in the way it restricted the masculine ecstatic solidarity of the terrace and transformed the modern consumption of football. In 1995, the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association (IMUSA) emerged after a group of supporters standing in the all-seated K-Stand at Old Trafford, were threatened with eviction from the ground. King (1998) argued that the development of ISAs, like IMUSA, were characteristic of New Social Movements (NSM), wherein a socially diverse group, becomes united around

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[1] Defined by Blumer (1951) as the organizing of feelings on behalf of the movement.

an issue of consumption as opposed to traditional employment. Indeed, Habermas (1987) conceptualized NSM's as reactions to what he argued was a 'colonization of the lifeworld' evidenced by specific strains or grievances which emerge in post-industrial societies. Through this lens, the building of supporter coalition networks was led by former trade union activists who had shifted their interest in workplace conflicts into the lifestyle and identity politics of modern football. And in 1998, leading members of both IMUSA and the CoFS, along with representatives from the FSA, were invited to give evidence to the New Labour government's *Football Task Force* on the main commercial and regulatory issues, seen as fundamental to the game's future. It might be added here that the mobilization of the CoFS network, at a time when new political opportunities were emerging within the governance of English football, offers an interesting reading of both the cultural and political dimensions of movements and their interaction with the state. What made standing a political issue, was the power of the state to actively oppose any change to the all-seating legislation, and because standing and Hillsborough, were considered inseparable, both in the minds of many politicians, but also wider British society.

In addition to their switching of ISA's within and around the FSA, leading members of the CoFS, who were also members of IMUSA, including Adam Brown, Andy Walsh and Mark Longden, recognized an opportunity to mobilize support for new safer terracing, after a being contacted by a Manchester City fanzine writer, Phill Gatenby, who was campaigning for *Standing Areas for Eastlands* (SAFE) at City. IMUSA were important for Gatenby, because those fan actors had prior experience of political activism and knew to organize a movement.

> Some City fans took delight in the fact that United fans were being threatened with stand closures and bans on fans for persistent standing. I also got a little stick from City fans for working closely with IMUSA. I was told IMUSA were using me to hide behind fronting their fight against Trafford Council. The truth was I was using IMUSA more than they were using me. They were very politically astute, and I learnt a lot from them in using the media to get the message across and how to run the campaign (Phill Gatenby, 19 January 2018).

Whilst it became clear that the capacity for fans to build mutually influencing coalitions, was in part, due to the creativity and resources within their own networks (Jasper, 1997), this must also be situated within the third way political economy of New Labour.

Moreover, the emergence of *Supporters Direct* and the *Supporters' Trust* movement in 2000, coincided with the FSA becoming a more professionalized social movement organization (SMO). This provided supporters with an avenue through which more formalized movement activities and conventions could be channeled and mobilized. In doing so, the FSA adopted Gatenby's campaign as a formal policy area but with a wider national focus, renaming it, *Standing Areas for England*.

Another important 'soft leader' who emerged within the FSA, was CoFS chair, Kevin Miles. And as a former Militant activist and chair of the *Independent Newcastle Supporters Association* (INUSA), Miles was close friends with other leading supporter activists within the CoFS, including Walsh and Longden. Soft leaders, according to Aronowitz (2003) and Della Porta and Diani (2006), have high levels of cultural capital. Using the loosely organized grassroots activism of the CoFS alongside the more organized institutional resources of the FSA, Miles, who also held a degree in German, formed a small network with Brown, Longden and Gatenby, to investigate new Safe Standing technology in German football, which they had learned of through their own transnational networks. Significantly, Miles was networked with a supporter group at Schalke 04 in Gelsenkirchen through another former Militant activist and member of both IMUSA, and the German *Bundniss Akitver Fußball Fans* (BAFF, Association of Active Fans), Stuart Dykes. After Hillsborough, supporter organizations in Germany like BAFF, with the support of most clubs, refused to permanently replace traditional terraces with all-seated stadia, arguing it would price out many younger supporters and kill the atmosphere inside stadiums. However, in preparation for Germany's bid to host the 2006 FIFA World Cup, clubs, in liaison with supporters' groups, developed a convertible standing/seating model which allowed a rapid conversion from standing to seating when required for all-seated UEFA and FIFA matches.

Through these transnational networks, Miles was able to consolidate the positive working relations established across fan projects in Germany, Holland, Italy and Switzerland to build an international network; *Football Supporters International*, in 2003. The importance of German football as a new transnational context for both supporter ownership and a movement against all-seating produced both open and closed political opportunities, through emerging strategic interactions with the state. Across different temporal periods, movements adopt new frames, meanings and strategic preferences. This is important because it evidences the ways in which supporter activists are often embedded within such dominant social discourses and often employ categories and ideas that they provide (Steinberg, 1999). However, upon returning from an FSA

funded trip to Germany, where Miles, Longden, Gatenby and Dykes were able to learn more about the convertible standing/seating technology at Werder Bremen, known as Rail Seating[2], they, and others within the FSA, became suspicious of both the state and Premier League's response, and thus SAFE Standing became part of a struggle around the production of meaning.

> In terms of the obstacles, you need to understand the power of the Premier League's lobby with government; Safe Standing or Safe Terracing has never been part of what they envisaged or what they see as their brand and what they are selling, so the association with the bad old days and things like that are something they will trot out (Adam Brown, 28 July 2016).

> The Football Licensing Authority (FLA) report did not look at "German practice". It was a disappointment that the fans delegation to Germany, on a shoestring budget, were able to visit three grounds, whereas the FLA, a public authority charged with this responsibility, only visited Hamburg which is not the model preferred by many of those who have looked at all three (Malcolm Clarke, 12 August 2001).

The immediate rejection of SAFE by the FLA (now SGSA) and the Secretary of State, centralized them as a key opponents', helping construct a narrative of 'we versus them' (Melucci, 1980). As Cleland et al (2018) note, often, contemporary fan mobilizations coalesce around specific causes or symbolic targets, and consequently supporters discuss, debate and decide upon a proposed course of action in order to succeed (Cleland et al. 2018). These interactions sometimes produce movements as 'fields of contention' which are often populated by networked organizations and are shaped through interaction with other external fields (Crossley, 2005). Whilst the state, as a political field, has been an arena in which interactions between supporters and the state have taken place across the past 25 years, the discursive field has played an important role in the key mobilizations of Safe Standing.

Subverting the Dominant Way of Watching Football

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[2] Rail Seating refers to seats folded up against a barrier which run the length of every two rows allowing fans to stand for German Bundesliga games where the legislation does not apply. And during UEFA competitions, the seat is unlocked and pushed down to comply with all-seating legislation.

Whilst it is important to understand both the internal and external environments in which movements constantly move, attention must be paid to how networks create new meanings, which themselves are relational to wider social and political discourses. For Safe Standing activists, there was a recognition of the power of what was a lasting public and political rawness on Hillsborough.

> When you said in 2001 but standing did not cause Hillsborough it was the police, there was still a kind of they did not disbelieve you, but they could not quite say yes, its true, but that argument cannot be made publicly. To actively advocate standing in 2001 set you against the police's official version of events that was accepted a conventional opinion and so whilst people might have intuitively been pro-standing, to be pro-standing was in some way to be anti-police, and lots of people were not ready to be that at that time just yet on this issue (Dave Boyle, 24 March 2016).

In seeking to deconstruct this discourse, a small network, initially coordinated by Gatenby, Longden, Miles and others within the FSA, built two important counter-tactics. First, they sought cooperation with wider club-based networks and emerging Safe Standing protests, such as *Stand Up Sit Down* at West Ham United, to localize strategic interactions at club-level. This was important for both testing demand and building relationships with club executives and stadium managers, in order to highlight the ritual of fans persistently standing in all-seated areas, as a safety and customer care issue.

> There is no point in being right if you cannot change things, so it is also about tactics and being politically clever, we mistakenly thought that what the big priority needed to be was to change politicians' minds so that we could get the law altered. We realized that trying to change politician's minds was never going to be enough, so we did have to work more closely and talk to individual football clubs (Malcolm Clarke, 3 February 2016).

Second, the move of some activists to abandon the 'terracing' word and reframe Safe Standing as a Rail Seat movement, became what Gamson and Meyer (1996) described as a 'rhetoric of change'.

> One of the problems Safe Standing had was perception, fans are saying they want Safe Standing, but the politicians and the media are saying they want terraces (Jon Darch, 21 January 2016).

> A long time was spent trying to persuade people with sweet reason and its bollocks. People needed to feel that standing was better and was possible and that did not really happen until they saw it (Rail Seating) with their own free eyes in places like Germany at the 2006 World Cup. And a lot of England fans are not followers of Premier League clubs and arguably, are one of the groups who were blasé about the whole issue of Safe Standing (Dave Boyle, 24 March 2016).

However, whilst this sought to ensure Hillsborough as a discourse became less dominant in opposition, it poses important sociological questions regarding what Safe Standing now moves *for* and what it moves *against*, and the ways in which it further characterizes the modern consumption of football as paradoxical (Numerato, 2015).

> There are people in the lower divisions who are nervous about the emphasis on Rail Seats because they don't want anyone to turn round and say standing is fine, but it has to be Rail Seats, because they still have terracing which complies with the SGSA's Green Guide. (Malcolm Clarke, 3/2/16).

Despite this, the reconfiguring of Rail Seating as the 'master-frame', became a tactic to make social change visible to key figures within individual football clubs. As McAdam, Tilly and Tarrow (2001) noted, social movements often adopt new tactics and frames because of changing external influences and connections amongst interpersonal networks and collective perceptions. The small-scale standing protests coordinated by the CoFS in 1998, moved *against* the increased regulation of football supporters, and in doing so, moved *for* greater supporter democracy and rights to retain aspects of standing (terraced) culture. But as Rail Seating became more central within supporters' strategic interactions with the state and football clubs, Safe Standing evolved as a movement operating within the parameters of the all-seating legislation, and *for* alternative technical solutions to overcome the problems associated with fans persistently standing in all-seated areas. To understand both the impact of this tactical shift and its wider sociological importance on modern football consumption, it is necessary that we are aware of both the changes and continuities within core supporter networks. Kevin Miles, in his current role as the Chief Executive of the FSA, has important cultural and political capital in football. Over the past 15yrs, Miles established stronger diplomatic relationships with key figures inside the football industry. This was primarily achieved through Miles' England supporters' network and connections across Newcastle and Sunderland, including former fanzine writers of *A Love Supreme*, *Sex and Chocolate* and the *Blizzard*. Together, these

networked actors, hailing from the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002) held important technological capital and were effective in building new corporate partnerships and commercial revenue streams. One of these actors, Peter Daykin, is the now the current FSA leading coordinator of the Safe Standing movement.

> For eight years you had this kind of almost cold war where nothing was changing, nobody was listening and both sides of the debate were completely entrenched and Phill Gatenby must have written a million letters and got really angry why nobody was listening and so when I took over, the first thing we did was to try and make relationships with people and engage them in dialogue, do a bit of listening and slowly help them understand we're trying to change the game for the better (Peter Daykin, 21 January 2016).

However, whilst the core network evolved to include new supporter activists, such networks, are as Crossley (2012) observed, a product of a history of previous networks. And so key mobilizations over the past 10 years, are a consequence of the coordination mechanisms which helped build the CoFS and FSAs coalition-based collective action. This is sociologically important, because it shows that some networked actors are linked across a wider temporal landscape. Indeed Andy Walsh, like Miles, is currently employed by the FSA, as the Head of Community Ownership, the National Game, and Women's Football, and Amanda Jacks, a key activist on West Ham's '*Stand Up Sit Down*' campaign 15 years ago, is the current Director of Casework at the FSA.

Despite both these network and tactical changes and continuities, Safe Standing and Hillsborough remain inextricably linked both culturally and politically. Indeed, both the focus of the recent UK Government review and the SGSAs findings are characterized by technical arguments which seek to make the management of standing safer. Consequently, Safe Standing is sociologically important because it continues to reinforce the long-term impact and legacy of Hillsborough on supporters' modern cultural consumption of the game by moving within the parameters of the all-seating legislation. Through this lens, Safe Standing, whilst now a more effective movement with technological and political capital, raises important questions around the historical views on football fans as somehow deviant. Moreover, the normalization of Rail Seating in English football, may, inadvertently, lead to a more draconian policing of standing fans in non-Rail Seating areas. Likewise, should football authorities seek to control the carnival nature of standing in limited Rail Seated areas, the capacity for standing to transgress the norms of accepted behaviour within the modern consumption of football,

may be limited (Pearson, 2012). Indeed, it could be argued, that it is the ritual of fans, who continue to stand at matches in all-seated spaces, which gives the movement its power, because by doing so, fans subvert the dominant way of watching modern football.

Conclusion

This article reinforced the contemporary sociological relevance of football fans and their consumption of football by showing how Safe Standing reveals the capacity of fan networks to build and sustain protest interactions across a wider temporal landscape. An in-depth socio-historical analysis of the social and symbolic mechanisms surrounding this movement, suggests that Safe Standing has been co-opted by different constituencies within the same movement. Like other protest movements which start out as anti-neoliberal initiatives and embrace the coordination of a diverse hierarchy of status groups, the reflexive discursive practices which they demonstrate are temporally sensitive, and both inhibit and enhance social change (Numerato, 2015). Safe Standing reveals contemporary supporter movements and the neoliberal transformation of English football, against which many of them move, to be intimately related.

Similarly, as with the case of *Against Modern Football*, the processes of formal network institutionalization, often leads to an overemphasis on the technical dimensions of protest under the pressure of neoliberal forces (Numerato, 2015). As such, new supporter solidarities which helped keep Safe Standing moving, sought to gain control over the interpretation of standing, terracing and the Hillsborough disaster. In doing so, important questions emerge on how best to estimate the effective impact of these mobilizations and how future 'success' might be defined. Whether the organizational decisions of the Premier League will be the result of the tactics and mobilizations of Safe Standing remains unclear, however, the role of supporter networks with political capital to build diplomacy and strategic interactions with those responsible for the governance of professional football, do create new negotiation possibilities with decision-making spheres of power. Furthermore, the long-term power of supporter coalition networks to bring dominant social discourses into both national and transnational spaces, and in doing so, become effective political actors, is clear. Recognizing the power of small networks and their movement practices, is important for the study of longer-term social processes and change within the sociology of football. Whilst political opportunities remain important structures which both enable and constrain movement action, the creativity, coordination and innovation of what are often small networks and their social ties, are

also important to the new meanings and interpretations, which in this case, wider football supporter networks give to the ritual of watching modern football.

Extending research that explores mainstream sociological issues through contemporary football supporter movements (Cleland et al. 2018), these empirical snapshots demonstrate that the emergence and key mobilizations of movements like Safe Standing, are of interest to general sociology. Further research should examine the intersections of rituals, consumption and collective action, to understand the ways in which movements spring into life at specific points in time and how small-networked movements morph across a ground which is always shifting.

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