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# The Safe Standing movement: Vectors in the post-Hillsborough timescape of English football

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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

Consumption, networks, relational sociology, social movements, sport

## Introduction

On April 15th, 1989, during an FA Cup semi-final football match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest at Hillsborough in Sheffield, the game was suddenly stopped after 5 minutes because of a human crush in one of the central standing pens in the Leppings Lane end terrace. Consequently, 96 Liverpool supporters lost their lives, with thousands of others suffering physical and mental injuries. In the immediate aftermath, the UK government set up a formal inquiry led by Lord Justice Taylor to investigate the causes of the disaster. Taylor's final report produced a series of recommendations on

the need for greater crowd control at football matches and concluded that football grounds should be converted to all-seating. Since 1994, all football matches in the top two divisions in England and Wales, have been played in all-seated stadia, and all UEFA European and FIFA International competitions followed suit in 1998. Lord Taylor acknowledged that whilst the practice of standing itself was not intrinsically unsafe, spectators, would he argued, ‘become accustomed and educated to sitting’. Whilst the Taylor report was in many ways, underpinned by socially democratic and Keynesian sentiments towards the universal provision of football and public provision of seating, it nonetheless, became a catalyst for the restructuring of the league’s political economy, and altering the possibilities for the ritualistic expression of supporter identity and solidarity (King, 1997).

28 years later in June 2018, the UK Government Sports Minister Tracey Crouch announced a formal review into the safety of modern standing areas and whether new developments in stadium safety and spectator accommodation, might justify changing the all-seating legislation to permit Safe Standing. Whilst continuing to expand football’s wider public appeal as a modern inclusive game, Lord Taylor was wrong when he suggested fans would become accustomed to sitting. Over the past three decades, thousands of fans at matches played in both the Premier League and Championship every weekend, continue to stand but in areas not designed for them to do so (Turner, 2017; Rigg, 2019). This ritual of persistent standing has become a source of conflict between supporters, clubs, stewards, the police and official safety bodies. Consequently, the imposition of all-seated stadia, became one of the most important issues which fans collectively coalesce around, and so recent small political wins, are the outcome of a 30year social movement, coordinated by the national Football Supporters Association (FSA). Together, these supporter networks, of often informal interaction, built collective action in English football from 1989-2019. Furthermore, characterised by transnational supporter relations and networks, Safe Standing connects with a longer-term culture of activism in countries such as Germany and Austria and protests such as *Europe Wants to Stand*. Indeed, leading UK activists with important transnational ties, helped switch the networked practices of supporter groups across Europe, and in doing so form the Football Supporters Europe (FSE) network which continues to campaign for Safe Standing at a transnational level.

In this article, I consider the relevance of the emerging body of research on eventful protests and temporality (Wagner-Pacifci, 2017; Della Porta, 2018; Gillan, 2018) in relation to football supporter consumption. In doing so, and by cross-pollinating ideas from relational sociology and social movement studies, I apply new theoretical vocabulary such as timescape and vectors (Gillan, 2018; 2020) to analyse how the Safe Standing movement is temporally located and what its key characteristics reveal about the socio-political environments of English and European football. This case is

sociologically important, because the restriction and partial exclusion of this social group in the post-Hillsborough timescape constitutes a profound social change (King, 1997). Indeed, as a public ritual in contemporary British society, standing at football remains central to the consumption practice and leisure habits of men and women across all parts of society. Moreover, football supporter culture offers sociologists a unique insight into both the origins and consequences of collective action, because few other forms of human behaviour are able to regularly gather these kinds of crowds (Goldblatt, 2014).

To do this, the article presents two different analytical angles; firstly, to consider 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 movements core conflict. By applying this recent set of theoretical vocabulary to a novel case in English football, the article demonstrates the relevance of this work in relation to consumption and the balanced role between consumerism and activism across time. The article thus argues that Safe Standing continues to reinforce the long-term impact and legacy of Hillsborough on supporters' modern consumption of the game and is engaged in what Gillan (2018) referred to as, a 'hermeneutic tug-of-war over Hillsborough', as a 'restlessness event' (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010).

## **Temporality, Social Movements and Relational Sociology**

The importance of temporality in sociology has been illustrated by recent case studies ranging from migration (Bass & Yeoh, 2018; Robertson, 2018; Ibanez Tirado, 2018), transnational family and long-distance marriages (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018), social class and labour (Seo, 2018), Queer studies (Baas, 2018), urban regeneration (Degen, 2018) and precarious work (van den Berk & Vonk, 2019). This body of research captures the importance of recognising the ways in which *time* is constantly negotiated in the lives of people through different, but interdependent, temporal strategies and mobilities. In social movement research, scholars have brought together ideas on temporality and the study of events, by paying attention to the ways in which movements and the socio-political environments in which they both act and move, produce moments of protests which 'shock' or 'punctuate' the cultural and material flows of social interaction (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017; Wagner-Pacifici & Ruggero, 2018; Della Porta, 2018; Gillan, 2018). Wagner-Pacifici & Ruggero (2018) highlight how contradictory ideas across different timescales often problematize interaction and coordination among movement actors, whilst Della Porta (2018) shows how particular 'eventful' protests, trigger 'critical junctures' which produce abrupt but also long-lasting transformations. At the heart of these analysis, is an attempt to understand the intersecting or relational dynamics which are relevant to the study of

social movements and time (Yates, 2015; Haydu, 2019; Ishkanian & Saavedra, 2019; Pellizzoni, 2020). This eventful approach to social movements, largely influenced by Sewell's call for an 'eventful sociology' (2005), is useful for considering how mobilizations on Safe Standing are relational to the complex temporal sequence of which they are a part.

These are useful analytical insights because they advance debates on movement mobilization by problematising the established importance placed on external political opportunity structures and the role of movement organisations, by recognising the importance of the cultural dimensions of structures (Polletta, 2004). Embedded within relational sociology, this approach enables us to focus on the socio-political environments of movements, as symbolic and discursive spaces in which interactions between activists and other agents, which may include the state, take place (Goldstone, 2004). For Gillan (2020), this socio-political context is important because it enables us to see more general processes of social change producing certain forms of movements, especially through the construction of new collective identities, than solely focusing on political opportunities. And this socio-political context is not static, rather comprises of multiple timescales and processes, and thus Gillan (2018) uses the term 'timescape' to capture both the sudden and gradual social changes, which over time, alter the contours and flows of power and counter-power in society. By focusing on timescape, instead of political opportunity structure, is to 'recognise that movements move within an uneven temporality encompassing both repeated patterns of interaction and the continent unfolding of historical events', which in turn produce interpretations, social action and new events (Gillan, 2018:4). To make sense of the balance of continuity and change amongst movements over time, Gillan (2018) introduces the term 'vectors', which signal important aspects such as the discourses, practices and inter-subjective meanings activists give to such movements and events. By presenting those two different analytical angles on Safe Standing, the article adds empirical value to the understanding of eventful protests and temporality by focusing on the storied dimensions of vectors, as interdependent actors and action. And in doing so, it becomes clear that whilst political opportunities remain important structures in English and European football, which both enable and constrain movement action, the creativity and coordination of small networks, are important to the meanings activists give to movements and events.

In this article, the theoretical and conceptual implications of this work for the study of activism and consumption become clear, because by showing the long-lasting impact of a 30year conflict, the longer-term empirical significance of events, ruptures and vectors to social movements is analytically illuminated. Much of the literature on movements, eventful protests and temporality is underpinned by ethnographic research into specific moments, or *momentus*, transformative events which take

place within waves of contentious politics concerned with movements such as Anti-War, Alter-Globalisation and Occupy. Across this research, is a focus on urban and street-based crowds who are engaged in moments of direct protest through the occupation of space. Whilst research has considered the ways in which various constituencies within such movements share many values but also disjunctive ideas about compelling time frames and orientations (Wagner-Pacifici and Ruggero, 2018), the opportunity remains, to deeply profile a movement across a longer-term timescape. What makes English football, and this case an interesting focus for the study of collective action and temporality, is that as a *lifeworld*, with a rich array of resources and networks, it is characterised by a longstanding historical tribal fan culture as a form of consumption, and a greater focus on club-based protests as opposed to national supporter movements (King, 2003). This offers an opportunity to examine the micro-level dynamics of supporter movements as interdependent networks (Crossley, 2002), and in doing so, provide a rich account of the ways in which events and critical historical moments, are played out within movements *as* networks, and sometimes produce long-lasting social transformations (Della Porta, 2018).

## Methodology

Since this research was concerned with the longer-term impact of all-seated stadia on supporters' consumption of the game, I analysed both the historical archives and the current practices of the Football Supporters Association (FSA). I was able to connect with the original founding members from 1985 in order to build up a wider network of informal contacts with various chairs, vice-chairs and leading regional branch members across 1989-2019. These networked supporters, some of which were also members of Independent Supporter Associations (ISAs), Supporters' Trusts and writers of football fanzines, were considered important because they helped coordinate collective action on national supporter issues. In doing so, I was able to code the data across four themes; the biography of the FSA from various conference minutes and newsletters, small coordinated campaigns against all-seated stadia, the role of important network recruiters and switchers, and the emergence of the FSA coordinated Safe Standing movement.

Fieldwork was also undertaken during 2014-2019 into the current practices of the FSA Safe Standing movement, which included attending various national conferences and events to establish myself within an informal network. This data was analysed using a small research diary containing descriptive observations of networks and interactions which took place at various Safe Standing breakaway workshops at the annual Supporter Summits. Analysis of these observations centred upon who was there, who talked to who, who worked with who, what events were taking place and what

strategies were being developed. I undertook different roles during observations ranging from ‘complete observer’, ‘observer-as-participant’, ‘participant as observer’ but never quite ‘complete participant’ (Watt and Scott Jones, 2010), and thus found myself located in the ‘space between’ *insider* and *outsider* (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

In 2016, I was invited by the FSA’s lead on Safe Standing, to join the core network in the form of an online Google Group Forum,. Over a period of 3 years, I was able to discover the discursive rhythms and patterns of communication (Millward, 2009), which helped me interpret the ways in which online discussions created new interpretative frames and strategies. Some of these observations again informed the data analysis of other written materials and qualitative interviews in a more reliable manner. This closed network, of 30 supporters, comprised of leading figures within the FSA, and other local supporter trusts or affiliated associations, and the online forum contained over 1600 topic threads and several thousand posts dating back to 2011.

Finally, I identified 26 supporters across the social world of supporter activism to interview as a type of activist life story (McCracken, 1998). I followed della Porta’s (2014) approach to analysing the interviews in a ‘restructured’ fashion by creating three stages of analysis as a type of summary for each life history. These were, a chronology of their story, a semi-codified scheme, examining how they became involved with the FSA, fanzines, ISAs, and various Safe Standing protests, 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, and their validity was affirmed by the fact that statements recorded, accorded with views and events, which I had both read and heard across the archival and fieldwork research.

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. With regards the online forum data, I contacted the moderator 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. In consenting to this, the moderator also affirmed his permission to use online forum posts which predated the research period.

## **Events and ruptures in the post-Hillsborough neoliberal timescape**

In English football, there have been three historically significant events which shaped many of the interpretative practices of football supporter networks and their consumption of the game. Together,

they produced the political economic vectors of this neoliberal timescape which have been most relevant to the contemporary wave of football supporter movements, in the generation of grievances against which they move (Gillan, 2018). First, in 1985, during a UEFA European Cup final between Juventus and Liverpool at Heysel in Brussels, 39 Juventus supporters lost their lives after a wall collapsed in the stadium, primarily as a consequence of a charge by some Liverpool fans (Gould and Williams, 2011; Williams, 2012; Steen, 2016). Consequently, all English football clubs were banned from European competitions for 5 years. Heysel became an event which agitated a small network in Liverpool to form the Football Supporters Association (FSA) movement, and in doing so, trigger a wider subjective strain felt by supporters across the various regions of English football.

This is post-Heysel, and anyone who was a football fan or who went to football was affected by Heysel and the coverage of it, and the studio debates which were coming out from the people, I mean to be fair to them, they were ex-footballers suddenly being asked to comment on quite complex issues, but those sort of discussions were setting the debate really and I think me like a lot of other people got angry and then 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 organise something in London. (Craig Brewin, 31/3/17).

As football fans we were caught in the middle, between issues of hooliganism and criminality at games, which we were also potentially the victims of, and on the other side was the authoritarian response of the authorities which restricted our freedoms going to football, and potentially put us in danger. (Steve Beauchampé, 16/2/18).

Second, for those in the FSA and football fanzine movements seeking to 'reclaim the game'<sup>1</sup>, the Hillsborough disaster became a *rupturing moment* (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017) creating a period of uncertainty and disorientation, at a time when differences political ideologies were beginning to emerge. Some activists felt that there was too much obsession with the administration and internal management of the FSA, and that it had become a Liverpool centered network.

The perception of politics did cause a bit of a problem on Merseyside because some had been involved with the far left such as Militant Tendency, particularly in Manchester, and Sheila (from Liverpool) hated that there was militant or ex militant members in the FSA, and she would ring me complaining about these people, because of her experience of Militant. (Craig Brewin, 31/3/17).

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This period of uncertainty characterised the FSAs response to Hillsborough and the Taylor Report, and whilst there were some attempts, led by supporter activists at Middlesbrough to protest through campaigns such as *Stand Up For Your Right to Stand Up*, ultimately, there remained little support in the game politically. This intersected with a vagueness on what the FSA, and those within the fanzine movement, were collectively arguing for. Initially, for some within the FSA, the core rejection of all-seated stadia focused on freedom of choice and the preservation of standing terraces, however, for others, this presented an opportunity to consult engineers on the design of new terracing.

You know, you went round, during the early 90s, there was some pretty ropery stuff, I think Hillsborough was a wakeup call for all of us in the supporters movement, we sort of realised there were massive issues there to address and I think the Taylor Report coinciding around the time the debate about the Super League was emerging as well, everything got a bit wrapped up in that and that whole idea of the gentrification of football, there wasn't much of a mature debate about whether or not what was proposed in terms of all-seater stadia was inherently safer. I remember writing to MP's who were football fans but there wasn't any great deal of support for what we were trying to say. The drive for change with all-seating was unstoppable. (David Lee, 26/617).

Third, the entry of BSkyB into English football was as symbolic as it was game changing, and in 1991, a proposal by the Football Association (FA) supporting a breakaway Super (Premier) League was accepted by the biggest five clubs who commanded the highest attendance figures, which in turn became the catalyst for a five-year television deal between BSkyB and the newly formed PL worth £304 million (Millward, 2011). For King (1998), it was at this decisive moment where English football, embracing the post-Keynesian free market, came to be irretrievably embodied by Thatcherism and neoliberalism. The formation of the Premier League, after Heysel and Hillsborough, characterised a period of profound social and political change, and were significant events which helped diversify the consumption of football and facilitate increasingly subdued and dispassionate forms of spectating, through less space for collective forms of expression and physicality.

However, the micro-level effects of football's expanding commercialization were most obviously felt amongst supporters at individual football clubs, and thus the emergence of Independent Supporter Associations (ISAs) were more effective in mobilising fan networks within increasingly deregulated environments (King, 1998). Despite this, ISAs, football fanzines and the FSA developed shared ways of working and influenced each other indirectly and produced the solidarities which bound core supporter networks together through a shared ideological commitment to a post-Thatcherite social democracy embraced by New Labour. Yet, together, they actively opposed many of the

conjunctural arguments for the reform and regulation of supporters, as the deepening of commercial pressures and establishment of free-market arguments which informed English football's transformation became dominant during the 1990s. In doing so, the FSA helped network 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 and the wider industry.

Adam Brown was another “tube of glue” if you like, because of the research he was doing, his own PhD and his ongoing research at Manchester Metropolitan University and the people he knew, like Professor Steve Redhead and the editor of the fanzine *When Saturday Comes*, he was going round the country and making all these connections and the fact that he was part of the ‘Independent Manchester United Supporters Association’ network meant that our connections were much quicker. (Andy Walsh 3/4/17).

As King (2003) argued, football supporter networks consist of a complex and diverse hierarchy of status groups which coalesce and unify at particular football clubs to develop relational fan cultures. And whilst these cultures do not embody specific ‘traditional working class’ values, they are in many cases concerned with the ‘working class’ consumption of the game.

During the late 1990s, Safe Standing emerged, from the switching of networked FSA and ISA practices, whom together, with the support of fanzines, coordinated support for protests against the all-seating legislation. These included, *Stand Up for Football*, *Stand Up Like We Used To*, and *Bring Back Terracing*. Switchers according to Castells (2013), are individuals who are successfully able to connect and ensure the corporation of different networks by sharing common goals and resources. In 1998, a small network of 11 supporters, connected by means of pre-existing networks within and around the FSA, fanzines, and ISAs, formed a ‘Coalition of Football Supporters’ (CoFS), as a hub-centred 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’ve got to say, that’s where it all started when I got in touch with Kev Miles at the Independent Newcastle United Supporters Association. You see fanzines were important but a lot of these activists had

all been involved in Militant Everybody knew each other; they'd been on anti-Poll Tax riots, and that's where it came from. (Mark Longden, 24/1/18)

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, for example, moving from the Dell to St Mary's for example became a key issue for Southampton fans and so these issues connected fans across ISAs and the FSA. (Andy Walsh, 3/4/17)

These standing protests were initially framed in a way which connected to an imagined discourse of authenticity, which in turn, helped generate a growing sense of 'moral protest' against the perceived draconian actions of clubs towards the persistent standing of supporters in all-seated areas (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). However, whilst the capacity of fans to build relational collective action was in part, due to the creativity and resources within supporters' networks (Jasper, 1997), this must be situated within the wider social transformations of contemporary British society and the third way political economy of the New Labour government. Indeed, central figures within the CoFS network became members of the UK government's formal Football Task Force working group in 1997, which aimed to assess the growing impact of football's commercialization. This was significant for three reasons; first, it ensured that supporters' calls for greater involvement in the regulation of the game became central to ongoing strategic interactions with the state. This was achieved in part through the development of the Supporters' Trust movement, which with the aid of government funding, encouraged the promotion of democratic supporter ownership. Notably, many of the initial Supporters' Trusts were commonly founded in response to the financial crisis' flowing from neoliberal globalisation (Starr, 2000). Second, whilst the deregulation of the football industry figured centrally as the economic vector of English football's neoliberal timescape, the significance of Hillsborough as an *event* which reconfigured the ritual of watching football, became Safe Standing's core conflict. More importantly, Hillsborough became an unfolding political semiotic process (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017) in which key agents, including, supporters, the state, the Premier League, the Football League, and the Football (ground) Licensing Authority, attempted to control interpretation. The performative feature of political semiosis for Wagner-Pacifici (2017), involves the mobilization of events which are constituted of speech acts, like 'the end of the terraces' (King, 1998), which materially change the social or political world, including the interactions between these players. Here, interpretation centred upon the perception of whether all-seated stadia had, or had not, enhanced the safety of supporters and whether modern terracing could be compatible with the Premier League's brand.

Whilst I understand the desire of some football supporters to stand at matches and had considered the case for a return to terraces in 1997, that review concluded that all-seater stadia are demonstrably safer than standing terraces, however those terraces are configured. Moreover, the Government's view remains what it has consistently been. Public safety is paramount and the Taylor Report had the last word on this issue. At all costs, we must ensure that Hillsborough cannot happen again. (Chris Smith, UK Government Culture Minister, 22/12/00).

Whilst it might be possible to create terracing of a reasonable standard, it would never be as safe as seating. Moreover, seating must be seen in the broader context of appropriate and effective crowd safety measures. (John DeQuidt, CEO Football Licensing Authority, February 1998).

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, so the association with the bad old days is something they will trot out. When I was on the Football Task Force there was quite a concerted attempt by the FSA to get it as one of the areas to be discussed and the government eventually ruled that was ultra-virus so it couldn't be considered. Behind the scenes, the Premier League had been lobbying very heavily, then following the Task Force when Kate Hoey was Sports Minister ... it was clear that she was sacked by Blair because of Premier League lobbying because they thought she was too sympathetic to this cause. (Adam Brown, 28/7/16).

When you said in 2001, but standing didn't cause Hillsborough it was the police, there was still an element of, kind of ... they didn't disbelieve you but they couldn't quite say yeah it's true but that argument can't 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 weren't ready to be that at that time just yet on this issue. (Dave Boyle 24/3/16).

Third, as Wagner-Pacifci notes on political semiosis, 'it is often in such discursive moments that the interplay of the performatives, the demonstratives, and the representations is at its most elemental and consequential (2017:31). And thus as 'safety' became the central discourse within those strategic interactions, supporter activists were embedded within such dominant social discourse, employing categories and ideas that itself provided (Steinberg, 1999). Here, the emergence of 'Safe' Terracing or 'Safe' Standing represented the legacy of Hillsborough as a *rupturing moment*, and perhaps more significantly, redirected ongoing vectors of critical movement discourse and action in ways which

responded directly to the neoliberalization of modern football (Gillan, 2018). In recognising the long-term vectors of Safe Standing operating both in the domain of culture and through the political and economic realities of English football's post-Hillsborough neoliberal timescape, the article turns to consider how Hillsborough continues to redirect, interrupt and impact these vectors across recent timescales (Gillan, 2020).

### **‘Abandoning the T word’: complimentary and countervailing vectors**

The acceleration of English football's post-Hillsborough neoliberal timescape over the past 20 years is further characterized by an economic transnationalism in which the Premier League operates in various ‘spaces of flows’ (Castells, 2004). Consequently, the contemporary consumption of football is both shaped and constrained by the emergence of a transnational capitalist class, and in turn, many of the movement practices of football supporters are thus characterized by transnational relations within the global network society. In his research into emerging transnational football supporter networks across Europe at the turn of the 21st century, King (2003) argued that the strengthening and cooperation of these networks would be increasingly significant for the future consumption of football. Indeed, central players within the CoFS, such as Kevin Miles and Andy Walsh, were, through their former Militant networks, tied to supporter activists at Schalke 04 and the *Bundniss Aktiver Fußball Fans* (BAFF, Association of Active Fans) in Germany. And leading activists like Miles, were able to successfully programme and switch transnational fan projects in Germany, Holland, Italy and Switzerland to build a Football Supporters International (FSI) network.

In the histories of Safe Standing, German football emerged throughout the course of 2001-2006, as a transformative space producing a *critical juncture* for future mobilizations. Critical junctures are according to Della Porta (2018), triggered by eventful protests which produce abrupt changes and develop contingently in ways which become path dependent. This in turn, produces a sequence of events which are characterised by ruptures which crack, vibrate and eventually sediment. After Hillsborough, supporter organisations including BAFF, with the support of most German clubs, refused to permanently replace traditional standing terraces with all-seated stadia. Indeed, none of BAFF's arguments, that all-seated stadia would price out many supporters, kill the atmosphere inside grounds, and drive many younger fans towards alternative cheaper pastimes were really contested (Hesse-Lichtenberger, 2001). In July 2000, Germany won the formal bid to host the FIFA 2006 World Cup, which in turn, posed a significant threat to the preservation of terracing as all FIFA organised competitions were required to be played in all-seated stadia. Innovatively, German clubs, in liaison with supporter activists, proposed a plan to install removable ‘Kombi’ or ‘Rail’ seats which, with a

removable barrier, allowed a rapid conversion from standing to seating when required for UEFA and FIFA matches.

As clubs like Schalke 04, Hamburg, and Werder Bremen began work on ground (re)developments in preparation for the World Cup, Miles, and others within the CoFS and leading ISAs, through their own transnational networks, learned of the ‘Kombi’ and ‘Rail’ seating technology and redirected Safe Standing protests towards German football as a new tactical opportunity. Moreover, Miles, and former Militant activist Stuart Dykes, who was also a member of the Independent Manchester United Supporters Association, the Schalke fan initiative, and BAFF, spoke fluent German, and together, with funding from the FSA, visited Schalke, Hamburg and Werder Bremen and produced a German Safe Standing report in 2001. Together with CoFS and Independent Manchester United Supporters Association activist Mark Longden, and fanzine writer Phill Gatenby, who was leading a SAFE (Standing Areas for Eastlands) campaign at Manchester City, they formed a small FSA led network, adapting the SAFE acronym, with a wider national focus towards German football. However, as Tavory & Eliasoph (2013:909) recognise, ‘different modes of future movement coordination may conflict with one another during dramatic moments of historical change’, which becomes central to the ‘puzzling out’ of new temporal landscapes (Della Porta, 2018). This was indeed characteristic of Safe Standing’s strategic interactions with both the state and wider disparate supporter networks during what was an initial ‘irruption’ on German ‘convertible seating/standing’ technology across 2001-06. Furthermore, initial excitement at the possibilities for collective action to create something different, only reinforced the power of the all-seating legislation, the discourse of Hillsborough, and the heterogeneity of football supporter networks across different levels of English football.

Many newspapers condemned the UK Government Sports Minister Kate Hoey for supporting our campaign. The Hillsborough Families Support Group (HFSG) attacked her for the same reason and her timing, a week before Christmas. Hoey stood firm and said at no point had she called for standing to be returned but that in light of new technology, the Government had a duty to look at any new evidence and act accordingly. (Phill Gatenby, 19/1/18).

The Football Licensing Authority report did not look at “German practice”. It was disappointing 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. The examination of whether this model could reasonably and practically be installed at Premiership or Football League grounds did not address the general arguments for and against all-seater grounds. This system could with certain modifications comply with the

safety standards required in England and Wales and could therefore be installed in a new stand or new ground. (Malcom Clarke, 12/08/01).

You just couldn't get anyone interested in German football, the clubs were at a low ebb and there was the historic England vs German rivalry which meant people were not ready to engage. So you talked to people about the whole German Safe Standing issue, I remember Stuart Dykes talking about how the German FA said we've got to keep standing in football because basically how else are you going to enculturate young people into adulthood in football stadia. They said it has pedagogical usage and you're like fucking hell the FA wouldn't even know what pedagogy is. But no one was interested. And also because football fans are divided between fans of big and small clubs, and because standing still exists in the lower levels it was seen as a soft Premier League fan campaign whereas we down here at Exeter were being screwed by wanker owners and anyway if they wanted to stand up why don't they come down here and watch lower league football. (Dave Boyle, 24/03/16)

Whilst literature on temporality and eventful protests has recognised both the immediate and medium-term impacts on activist networks involved in specific moments of contention (Wood et al. 2017), what is lacking according to Gillan (2018, p.5), is 'an identification of the ways in which these events form a vital part of the environment in which movements operate'. There are thus events within events and in some cases these events are shaped by one another. In 2006, the World Cup in Germany, became a historical event which also existed in an eventful world, because it both changed the perception of Safe Standing amongst wider supporter networks across the UK and Europe, and configured future interactions towards understanding the longer-term impact of Hillsborough. This was important because it involved building an 'ethical definition' of the Taylor Report across multiple time-scales (Turner & Killian, 1987; Gillan, 2020), and in doing so, helped sediment Safe Standing protests in ways which reconfigured German 'Rail Seating' as the master frame (Snow & Benford, 1992; Della Porta, 2018).

Whilst we couldn't get people interested in 2004, well after the World Cup, fans from England go over and suddenly they realise they've spent a lot of time ignorantly being dismissive of German football and there was an element of suddenly their model of Safe Standing started to become much more understood, partly through sedimentary accretion but also the turnaround in perception of German football (and stadia) after the World Cup. People saw these stadia and realised that they were fucking big great stadiums, they were brand new and better than English stadiums and they were built to incorporate standing. 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 didn't really happen until they saw it with their own free eyes in places like

Germany in 2006 and a lot of England fans are not followers of Premier League clubs and were arguably one of the groups who were blasé about the whole issue of Safe Standing. (Dave Boyle, 24/3/16).

Gillan (2018) recognises that such frames or names are themselves deeply political, and in the case of ‘Safe Standing’, this further highlights the fuzzy temporal boundaries of social movements, in which multiple timescales carry different (but relational) meanings, strategic preferences and tactics.

The national movement that people like Phill Gatenby had started with *Standing Areas for Eastlands* which morphed of course into Safe Standing, in hindsight is not a good title. If one was sitting down now as a marketing person to promote the name of a national movement to permit standing again you wouldn’t call it Safe Standing because that implies some form of standing is unsafe. After university I went into commercial radio and selling advertising, and one of the key things I learned was the best way to get a message across is to “keep it simple / stupid” and as I saw more of the way the FSA movement had been going, I thought one of the problems was not adhering to that principle ... they are saying they want Safe Standing, but the politicians and the media are saying they want terraces. (Jon Darch, 21/1/16)

The standing protests coordinated by the CoFS in 1998 moved *against* the increasing criminalisation of football supporters and the colonisation of the lifeworld of traditional supporter culture (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2012), and in doing so, moved *for* greater supporter democracy and rights to retain aspects of standing (terraced) culture. However, the *critical juncture* produced by events within and around German football as a transformative space, moved Safe Standing *against* the social, cultural and political legacy of Hillsborough and the persistent standing of supporters in all-seated stadia. And in doing so, moved *for* alternative, technical solutions which could be presented to opponents, as making standing as a modern cultural practice ‘safer’. Rail Seating thus emerged as a technological vector which enabled supporter activists to abandon the ‘T’ (terracing) word and change the imagery around standing in ways which made social change visible to those responsible for the governance of professional football. However, whilst this has been tactically important in trying to ensure Hillsborough as a discourse became less dominant in opposition, whilst also making the ‘business’ case to clubs and the Premier League and Football League, it characterises the modern consumption of football as paradoxical (Numerato, 2015). Indeed, the emergence of entrepreneurial networks to manufacture a Rail Seat demonstration unit<sup>2</sup> must be situated within a political climate in which leading



FSA activists continue to build stronger and mutually influencing diplomatic relations with key figures inside the football industry and government. Indeed, key political mobilizations across the past 10 years are characterised by important socio-political ties and networks which further evidence that English football is a *lifeworld* with a rich array of resources and networks. Together, these mobilizations ensured Rail Seating became both a complimentary and countervailing vector (Gillan, 2018).

Jon Darch must have been to every bloody club in the country over the last five years taking the Roadshow up and down and that has been hugely beneficial in showing a model which is palatably different to the terraces of the 1980s and so he's been working on that kind of thing on a very boots on the ground level whilst at the FSA, we've been concentrating much more on building relationships with all of the different stakeholders. (Peter Daykin, 20/1/16).

The references made to Rail Seating as 'Safe Standing' are very misleading. I think the FSA should really be clarifying all this – Safe Standing (Terracing); Alternate Seating/Standing (Rail Seats, where you have to choose the whole row/stand to be one or the other); and Flexible Standing, where you can have someone stood in front of someone sitting. (Adam Brown, 14/11/17).

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 its got to be Rail Seats, because they still have terracing which complies with the SGSA's Green Guide. And so they will say we know what constitutes Safe Standing already. (Malcolm Clarke, 3/2/16).

However, the sedimentation of Rail Seating induced by the eventful protests across these multiple timescales, is as Della Porta (2018) notes, embedded in the consolidation of collective identities and networks, which together, seek to balance and negotiate multiple targets and goals (Yates, 2015). Moreover, the ends or 'success' of Safe Standing are fundamentally shaped by the means that it employs and thus Rail Seating, or what has recently been termed 'barrier seating'<sup>3</sup> embodies or 'prefigures' the type of English football culture which activists seek to bring about (Leach, 2013). Namely, one which advocates a more sustainable form of governance, customer care, and greater supporter (stakeholder) choice.

Beyond this, European transnational activism remains important to understanding the wider significance of Safe Standing in ways which are often more direct than the hidden advocacy of supporters in England. However, the hermeneutic tug-of-war over Hillsborough as a restlessness event,

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is most commonly felt in the UK. Despite this, the tactic to reconfigure Rail Seating as *the* master frame and a corporate logic of fan engagement, has enabled Safe Standing to become internationally significant through the development of supporter networks in Australia, Holland and the USA. Consequently, PSV Eindhoven, Ajax, CSKA Moscow, SK Sturm Graz, Western Sydney Warriors and Orlando City have all incorporated Safe Standing in new stadium development plans. In England, this technology, which is now being implemented at high profile clubs in the Premier League is seen as compatible with the current all-seating legislation, and a key method of overcoming the dangers associated with the persistent standing of fans in conventional all-seated areas (SGSA, 2020). However, whilst operating within the parameters of the all-seating legislation, Safe Standing remains embedded within the neoliberalisation of modern football and continues to reinforce the long-term impact and restless indeterminacy of Hillsborough on supporters' modern cultural consumption of the game.

## Concluding remarks

The article used empirical snapshots of Safe Standing's key networks, tactics and mobilisations to show how events and ruptures shape the dynamics of a social movement, and how discursive vectors indicate the developing understanding of the stakes of the core conflict. In doing so, three conceptual implications for theoretical debates in relational sociology, temporality and eventful protests emerge. Firstly, this case reveals the power of long-lasting uncoordinated direct action, such as the persistent standing of supporters in all-seated areas, to be temporally significant, and characteristic of the restless indeterminacy of significant events. Whilst networks and tactics remain important to the emergence, mobilisation and consequences of movement vectors, the ritual of consumption itself becomes the most radical and powerful source of conflict (elaborate on this). Secondly, this case shows the ways in which the employment of dominant social discourse by activists, often happens immediately after the significant event, and in some cases, becomes an interpretative struggle lasting 30 years, across a series of interconnected timescales. And thirdly, whilst the organisation of horizontal networks are often used to explain the transformation of temporal orientations (Wagner-Pacifici and Ruggero, 2018; Gillan, 2020), this case reveals the power of small coordination networks and transnational ties, to be important to the emergence of multiple social movements, which themselves, are embedded within a discourse of an eventful timescape. Indeed, the intersections of rituals, consumption, collective action and temporality, reveal social movements to spring into life at specific points in time, and the power of small networks morphing across a timescape which is always in movement. Attention should thus be paid to the ways in which some movements not only move across an uneven

fuzzy temporality, but produce eventful protests which are embedded within discourse of an eventful world.

Whilst football is an emerging space for social movement research and relational sociology (Brandt, Hertel, Huddleston, 2017; Cleland et al. 2018; Garcia, Zheng, 2017; Hodge, 2018; Numerato, 2018), future research should consider the ways in which some contemporary supporter movements continue to negotiate with features of political semiosis such as ‘Supporters Not Customers’, ‘Football without Fans is Nothing’, and ‘Against Modern Football’, but do so across multiple time-scales which interact economically, culturally and politically (Gillan, 2020). In the case of Safe Standing, the micro-level analysis of the storied dimensions of activism and the vectors of action, reveal a complex and contradictory response to the neoliberal political economy in which English football has inhabited over the past 30years. This matters sociologically because it shows how protests and their discursive practices can both enhance and limit social change in temporally sensitive ways. This can be located in previous debates on eventful protests and temporality, by highlighting the balanced role between consumerism and activism across time. Indeed football supporter networks both produce and consume modern football culture, but subvert the dominant way of watching modern football by persistently standing in all-seated stadia. This complex interplay of cultural and technological vectors, and their manifestation across the compelling time-frames and orientations which make up the consumption of English football in a post-Hillsborough timescape, adds empirical value to our understanding of eventual protests and temporality in sociology.

## Notes

1. Reclaim the Game was an ideational vector and framing mechanism (it became the official title of the FSA magazine and was often referenced in different fanzines).
2. One activist developed a Safe Standing Roadshow to showcase the technology to clubs and supporters across the UK.
3. ‘Seats incorporating barriers’ or ‘barrier seating’ is now used by clubs like Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur who have both received approval from their local council to install them inside their stadia.

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