


**Please cite the Published Version**

Turner, Mark  (2024) "Legalize Safe Standing" in English Football: Complicating the Collective and Individual Dimensions of Social Movement Activism. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 41 (1). pp. 81-89. ISSN 0741-1235

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2022-0055>

**Publisher:** Human Kinetics

**Version:** Accepted Version

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/631726/>

**Usage rights:**  In Copyright

**Additional Information:** This is an Author Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Sociology of Sport Journal*, by Human Kinetics.

**Enquiries:**

If you have questions about this document, contact [openresearch@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:openresearch@mmu.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

## Introduction

By the start of the 2021/22 Major League Soccer (MLS) season in the US, over 10 of the 27 clubs across the western and eastern conference divisions had installed, configured, or retrofitted specific parts of their stadia to include the construction of 'Safe Standing' areas for their supporters (West, 2020). These custom-designed spaces which use barriers or rails to prevent fans falling forward, allow for seats to be locked into position to enable fans to stand for domestic games, but then unlocked or folded down for international soccer and other sporting events which operate all-seating regulatory frameworks. The normalizing of Safe Standing in the MLS follows similar developments in Australian soccer, where 'A-League' clubs like Western Sydney Wanderers have incorporated 1260 convertible Safe Standing Rail Seats in their recently built 30,000 CommBank stadium (Guardian, 2016). These developments, whilst designed to enhance the safety of those fans wanting to stand at matches, are characteristic of burgeoning active fan culture seeking to generate, manufacture, and replicate aspects of the 'Ultra' counterculture which historically spread through parts of Europe during the 1980s and 1990s (Blumberg and Markovits, 2021).

Notwithstanding these trends in the US, standing at association football [soccer] matches, as a deep-rooted global and historic supporter ritual, has remained, until very recently, outlawed in many national leagues, and European competitions, notably the English Premier League and UEFA Champions League. Indeed, since 1994, all matches in the top two divisions in England and Wales have been played in all-seated stadia, following the Hillsborough stadium disaster in 1989. This represented a profound physical and spatial transformation of a leisure ritual which constituted the practice of watching football for the majority of men, women, and children in Britain throughout the twentieth century (Author, 2021). The end of traditional standing terraces and the political and economic transformation of football produced new architectural mechanisms of power through the advancement of stadia CCTV, policing and stewarding strategies and supporter ID card schemes (Giulianotti, 2011).

However, over the past 25 years, a hermeneutic struggle has unfolded in English football between those spectators who wish to stand at matches (and persistently do so), and the risks associated with this practice in all-seated stadia. Amid this tension, fans have had to negotiate, and been disciplined by an altogether more neoliberal and authoritarian regime (Author, 2021). Thus, the contemporary social world of football in late modernity operates as a securitized domain wherein the social group of fans are commonly the *subjects* of security-

related policies. However, the struggles of English supporters against social control in football, in the realms of their everyday lives, discourses, and identities, are characterised by the building of a long-term social movement against the all-seating legislation. In seeking to break down the state's disciplinary power and its neoliberal marketization of its institutions in football, this movement; 'Safe Standing', has achieved several recent policy-based 'victories' in the UK and Europe, which together, constitute, and prefigure, new regulatory reform in football.

In 2022, six clubs in England and Wales took part in the first Safe Standing trial in the UK which permitted a limited number of fans to stand in newly configured, licenced (Safe) Standing areas. Consequently, the UK government confirmed that any English Premier League (EPL) club wishing to introduce Safe Standing would be permitted to do so, from the start of the 2022/23 season, subject to strict conditions being met, including the enhanced use of CCTV, improved steward training, and fans being strictly limited to 'one person, one space' (O'Brien, 2022). Meanwhile, in July, UEFA announced it would trial Safe Standing during all competitive matches in the Champions League, bar the final, for clubs in UEFA's top five nations where it is already in place, including, England, Germany, and France (Bosher, 2022).

As a long-term supporter movement, Safe Standing raises important questions around the historical views on football fans as deviant. It thus reinforces the long-term impact and legacy of Hillsborough on supporters' global cultural consumption of the game by moving within the parameters of the all-seating legislation in the UK, whilst remaining embedded within contemporary sports stadia developments and demands of supporters across Europe, North America, and Australasia. This article builds upon recent empirical analysis of Safe Standing's contemporary mobilizations which helped create new political opportunities in the UK (Author, 2021; 2022), by historicising the networks and organizational culture of this movement across a long-term temporal landscape (1985-2019). In doing so, it contributes to key debates in relational sociology on the role and power of small networks in building [temporal] 'collective identity' (Edwards, 2014), which in this case, shape the future consumption habits of a leisure practice and ritual all over the world, as revealed by global developments in the US and Australia. Whilst these [different] global contexts are temporally and culturally sensitive, they are interdependently linked through relational timeframes and discursive practices which make up the modern consumption of football across a post-Hillsborough landscape.

By demonstrating the relevance of this work, the article suggests that the historical supporter-network changes and continuities which built the UK-based social movement organization; The Football Supporters Association (FSA)<sup>i</sup>, who coordinate Safe Standing at a national policy level, reveal collective identity to not always be a realistic feature of movements because they involve connections between diverse and disparate supporter groups (Edwards, 2014). Safe Standing is thus characterized by relational collective action which complicates both the individual, and collective, dimensions of activism. It encompasses professionalized activism and political lobbying, alongside more informal, diversified, and autonomous activism operating independently from football's institutional spaces. Whilst the switching of rhizomatic network coalitions across these fields seeks to challenge the capitalist logics of late modern football, the coalescing around Rail Seating as a dominant discursive [and now global] frame, prefigures the re-establishment of panoptic designed social spacing, through the regulation, individualization, and constraining of the traditional social ritual of watching football.

## **The End of the Terraces and the New Consumption of Football**

For generations of match-going supporters during the twentieth century, the stadium terrace served as a congregational space; a site of civic pride where fans could freely stand and support their team through the practice of singing and chanting. It was upon these terraces that distinct sub-cultures emerged, and a rich pageantry of anthems, colors, and banners, all specific to that club and its folk-heroes, became defining historical and contemporary features of football. (Author, 2022).

This deepening of commercial pressures as the dominant interpretation which informed English football's transformation, created feelings of social unrest and displacement amongst some supporters, and in doing so, agitated a relational culture of contestation which was mobilized through a burgeoning UK fan activist scene; characterized, by the forming of the national FSA, football fanzine literature, and a growth of Independent Supporter Associations (ISAs) at individual clubs (King, 1998). Indeed, the growing concern over football hooliganism during mid-late twentieth century, resulted in the UK government enacting repressive measures to further prevent spectator violence at matches. These included, considering the merits of all-seated stadia, the introduction of a national membership ID scheme, and the installation of perimeter fencing between supporters and the pitch. According to King (1998), these measures echoed then UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's attempt to move the focus of attention

from supporter safety to public order and were characteristic of the government's response to other social disasters which revealed a lax and negligent attitude towards health and safety, and a culture which prioritised profitability (Webber, 2017).

On 29 May 1985 during the UEFA European Cup final between Juventus and Liverpool at Heysel in Brussels, a wall collapsed in section Z of the stadium after a group of Liverpool supporters had charged towards the Juventus fans (King, 1998). Consequently, 39 Juventus supporters lost their lives and all English football clubs were banned from European competitions for five years by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). Four years later, the most critically fatal disaster in English football occurred on 15 April 1989 at Hillsborough in Sheffield which resulted in the deaths of 97 Liverpool supporters (Scruton, 2016). Consequently, the UK government set up an inquiry led by Lord Justice Taylor to investigate the causes of the disaster and in his final report, Taylor produced a series of recommendations on the need for greater crowd control, including all-seated stadia. However, whilst the Taylor Report maintained that 'spectators would [over time] become accustomed and educated to sitting' (1990, p.14), it also acknowledged that standing at football was 'not intrinsically unsafe'. Consequently, for King (1998, p.99), the report reflected Taylor's aim of encouraging the attendance of more 'disciplined families in place of violently disposed young males', but with concerns that traditional supporters might be excluded from football as a result of the financial constraints imposed by free market capitalism.

Whilst the Taylor report in many ways was 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 leagues' political economy and altering the possibilities for the ritualistic expression of supporter identity and solidarity (King, 1998). In 1990, the UK government enforced Taylor's all-seater recommendations, and a new body, the Football Licensing Authority (now Sports Ground Safety Authority, herein SGSA), would operate a licensing system for (all-seated) football grounds used for designated matches. However, whilst Taylor's interim report was rightly critical of the police officers in charge at Hillsborough in fulfilling their duty of care, the main thrust of the final report shifted responsibility towards Britain's decaying terraces. The opportunity was missed, therefore, to challenge the prevailing antipathy that existed then, and indeed continues today, towards football fans amongst those responsible for enforcing law and order (Webber, 2017).

Initially rolled out in the top two divisions in England and Wales by 1994, all-seating emerged across some parts of Europe several years later, most notably in preparation for football mega-events hosted between 1998 and 2008. Despite these transnational developments, some countries, notably Germany, did not introduce a ban on standing terraces, and whilst there were ground redevelopments prior to, and in the wake of, the 2006 World Cup held in Germany, many Bundesliga stadia retained different models of standing terraced areas, which Bergmann (2007) argued provided an important social and integration function, within an increasingly fractured German society.

Whilst the case of Germany was atypical, the introduction of all-seated stadia across other parts of Europe represented a profound social transformation of football stadia and became one of the critical hallmarks of the disciplinary society through sport. According to Pearson (2012), the removal of the terraces and the increased regulation within and around football stadia, reduced the capacity for younger fans to experience the more carnivalesque nature of watching football 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 strategies, represented a significant cultural transformation; this thus became one of the most important issues which supporters, across Europe collectively coalesce around.

Tellingly, Lord Justice Taylor overstated the extent to which fans in the UK would become accustomed to the all-seating legislation. The regulation of standing terrace culture, and the neoteric etiquette and acquiescent supporters to match, has according to Woolsey, (2021), created a rupture within football supporter communities. Central to this, has been a search for authenticity in the wake of such legislative interventions which disrupted and actively replaced traditional supporter relationships (Crabbe and Brown, 2004). Over the past 25 years, thousands of supporters at games played in the top two leagues in England and Wales, have continued to stand, but in areas not designed for them do so. Precisely therein lies the problem. The principal safety risk which exists when supporters standing in seated accommodation, remains the capacity for fans to fall over safety guarding which have not been designed for standing culture (Melrose et al., 2011). Consequently, the persistent standing of supporters in all-seated spaces has emerged as a particular source of conflict between football clubs, supporters, match attending police and safety officers, and both local and national sports stadia safety bodies.

The imposition of all-seating as an attendance modelled, on the other hand, led 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, informally networked supporter groups, and formal supporter organizations like the FSA, built the Safe Standing movement across multiple temporal periods post-Hillsborough. The diversity of the associative dynamics of this movement, and its national and international networks of influence, reveal a complex, and contradictory response to the neoliberal political economy which English football, and society, has inhabited over the past 30 years.

## **Relational Sociology, Networks, and Social Movements: A Conceptual Framework**

Relational sociologists seek to place the micro-level dimensions of social relations, networks, and interactions at the centre of theoretical and empirical analysis, arguing that individualism and holism resort to abstract conceptions of an underlying substance in their efforts to make sense of the social world (Crossley, 2015). A relational sociological framework enables us to investigate the social world, in this case association football and its supporter cultures, in ways which afford analytical primacy to social interactions, social ties, and social networks. This approach has become important for the study of social movements because it captures the specific networks of interactions and ties, of numerous types, and on various scales, between social actors who are themselves formed in those interactions (Crossley, 2015). These intersubjective networks may consist of dynamic family, friendship, political or neighbourhood ties, and it is through interaction that shared experiences and memories which give the social world [of football] its cultural meaning.

Social movements are often defined by the importance of collective shared beliefs and sense of solidarity, which become a ‘conscious, concerted, and sustained effort by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society using extra-institutional means which lasts longer than a single protest or riot’ (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003, p.3). However, this focus on *collective* identity often underplays the potential disagreements and subsequent schisms and conflicts which take place in movements, which are often characterised as having a ‘low degree of institutionalisation, high heterogeneity and a lack of clearly defined boundaries and decision-making structures’ (Koopmans 1993, p.637). For Crossley (2002), whilst solidarity might be evident within some movements, it should not be taken for granted that movements are stable and thus draws on the work of Blumer (1951) to show how the dynamics of movements work

*in-movement* and have a career through which their characteristics constantly change. The attempt to define social movements must thus recognise how sustained interaction by activists, and their collective creativity, are themselves temporally constructed, which further reinforces the importance of relational networks to differentiate movement processes from the various instances in which collective action take place (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). These relational networks, according to Gillan (2018, p.2) comprise of ‘individuals, informal groups and often formal organisations who coordinate voluntarily to pursue a range of values or interests that bring it into conflict with perceived systems of power’.

To unpack football supporter-based social movements, research must investigate how specific forms of protest are relational to the environment in which they move and are embedded, comprising of collective actors, associated with an overarching sequence of mobilization, (inter)action, and demobilization. To do so, we must pay attention to the multiple temporalities that are associated with movement emergence and action, and recognise a movements socio-political environment, in this case, English football, as a discursive space in which interactions between networked activists and other agents, take place.

The creative sociability of football fans and their connections are central to the social worlds of football. It thus makes little sense to study individual football fans in isolation, or the structures of contemporary football, without the networks which build or resist those structures (King, 2004). The connections between football supporters move beyond the production and consumption of modern football but are themselves significant to the ways in which power and counter-power operate. Indeed, as King (2003) argued, such supporter networks consist of a complex and diverse hierarchy of status groups which coalesce and unify at specific football clubs to develop relational fan cultures.

To thus understand how supporter identities are constructed in a way which is informed by the realities of social interaction with the post-Hillsborough neoliberal landscape of English football, relational sociology offers a hermeneutic framework through which contemporary supporters’ protests can be analysed. Consequently, research should seek to identify connections and coalitions between groups or networks across multiple temporal periods in order to understand how they build relational collective action, and create temporally sensitive discursive frames, which are normalized in new, and sometimes, very different, global spaces. This according to Edwards (2014) enables research to challenge existing conceptualisations of



social movements, both in terms of the desirability of collective identity, and the distinction between organised, collective protest, and unorganised, individual protest.

To address this empirical puzzle, that of the simultaneous power of professionalised activism coordinated by social movement organizations, and the more informal, loosely organised, protests within, and around, individual football clubs, social movements add value to relational sociology, because they capture the ways in which networks emerge, switch, coordinate, and mobilize, across temporalities which are always themselves, *in-movement*. This is an important analytical insight for the study of collective action in football because it demonstrates that different fan networks, whilst not totally independent, help constitute a critical mass of fan movement(s), which forms part of a wider football fan activism complex (Numerato, 2018).

## **Methodology**

The data was collected and analysed using four methods. First, historical archives of the FSA from 1985-2019 were researched, including newsletters, campaign documents, newspaper articles and fanzines. I was able to code the data across three themes: the biography of the FSA, small-coordinated campaigns against all-seated stadia, and the role of important network recruiters and switchers. Second, participant observation at FSA national conferences and events during 2014–19 and attendance at Safe Standing breakaway sessions to establish myself within the core network. This data was analysed using a small research diary documenting who was there, who worked with who, and what strategies were being developed. Third, having established myself within this core network, I was invited to join the small, closed, online Safe Standing network, enabling me to discover the discursive rhythms and patterns of communication in order to help interpret new interpretative frames and strategies. And fourth, 26 supporter activists were interviewed online using Skype, with each lasting between one and two hours, and their validity 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. I followed Della Porta's (2014) approach to analysing these as activist life stories, 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. The temporal nature of the research (both historical and real-time developments) meant that the data collection and analysis did not occur in a linear fashion; rather, the four different methods were used interchangeably throughout a five-year period. This interpretivist approach pays attention to the practices of elaboration of different socially constructed versions of the social world of football and the networks which build relational collective action across three decades. No data was taken directly from the online network beyond listing the names of those who were involved and documenting events which were discussed. To do this, permission was granted by the network moderator.

## **Results**

Applying relational sociology to analyze the contemporary mobilizations and successes of Safe Standing as a networked social movement, I first historicise the emergence of the FSA in Liverpool, and the role of homophilous networks, fanzines, and ISAs in coordinating relational collective action and building a UK fan activist scene. I then proceed to show how the professionalization of the FSA as a social movement organization, led by a small coalition network, helped pool resources, develop transnational relations, and draw upon activists' cultural capital to build an ethical definition of all-seating. This in turn, enabled activists to successfully reprogram European-based 'Rail Seating' as a dominant discursive Safe Standing frame in a post-Hillsborough landscape, and localize mobilizations at individual clubs, and across new online, and urban, spaces. This analysis shows that social movements often involve both formal, and informal, types of collective action, and with autonomous identities and frames of meaning, which, are linked together interdependently, and coalesce around such frames, as determinant stakeholders in value co-creation. In the case of Safe Standing, the long-term hermeneutic struggle between supporters persistently standing at matches, and the risks associated with this practice in seated stadia, prefigures a new regulatory regime in late capitalism; here, Rail Seating, as *the* [global] Safe Standing master frame, continues to surveille, individualize, and constrain the free movement and traditional ritual of watching football.

## **'You'll Never Walk Alone': The Liverpool Agitators and Reclaiming the Game**

On 8 August 1985, a letter to the editor of the Guardian newspaper, published shortly after the Heysel stadium disaster, was signed ‘yours faithfully, Rogan Taylor and Peter Garrett, The Football Supporters Association (FSA), Liverpool’. It noted that Taylor, an academic with a PhD in psychoanalysis, and Garrett, a Community Police Officer who occasionally policed football matches in Liverpool, had formed the FSA, with the support of a small network of Liverpool and Everton supporters. Together, they sought to build an organisation which would ensure supporter representation at every level of the organisation of professional football, with the hope that success might trigger the birth of similar groups in all the footballing countries of Europe (The Guardian, 1985).

The forming of the FSA was to some extent, successful in giving shape and direction to other supporters, through the forming of different regional FSA branches across the UK. In this sense, this small Liverpool-based network was responsible for agitating social unrest amongst wider supporter networks and inspiring emotional reactions to the social problems they collectively faced during the mid-to-late 1980s. As Blumer (1951) noted, agitation seeks to jar people loose from their customary ways of thinking and believing, and to have aroused within them new impulses and wishes. However, it was clear that Blumer had individual agitators in mind, and thus whilst Taylor and Garrett began the process of turning grievance construction into a form of collective action, Blumer underplayed the importance of social networks through which agitation, and coalition building, emerges relationally. According to Garrett, the positive relationship established between the FSA and football club chairmen in Liverpool was influenced by his own policing network, where they chair of the Council’s Police Committee was also the vice-chair of Liverpool F.C. As Garrett noted,

It’s not what you know it’s who you know, and in some cases, it’s who you know and not what you’re asking them, but what they think of you. Garrett (14 March 2016).

Scholars of social movements have also considered the world of symbolic meaning by how activists come to see themselves and collective action, and in doing so, suggest we need to ‘know about the ideas of activists, their interpretation and definition of the situation and the meaning they attach to things in the world around them’ (Edwards 2014, p.92). Whilst such meanings are temporally sensitive, the first national FSA newsletter in 1985, began the process of collective action framing, during a period of significant social and political change in football. Benford (1993) argued that to achieve this, activists’ try to ‘package’ or ‘present’ ideas in a convincing and culturally resonant way. In September 1985, the FSA presented itself as wanting to ‘Reclaim the Game!’ (FSA Newsletter, 1985), a term which became synonymous

within the Socialist Party, capturing the political left's concern with the impact of football's economic recession. Four years later, 'Reclaim the Game' became the title of the national FSA newspaper, resembling what Blumer (1951) referred to as the formation of group ideology.

One of the most important ways of communicating this sense of collective identity was through the football print fanzine movement. Fanzines, according to Jary et al. (1991), were produced by mainly white males, aged 30 years or younger and either college or university educated, with often left wing or liberal political views. They offered a radical interpretation of football, expressed by fans excluded from mainstream expressions. For supporter activist Craig Brewin,

Football fanzines were 'tapping into the same sorts of issues as the FSA, but in some ways, they had more power to do it', because as alternative football magazines, they had begun to produce a flourishing market (31 March 2017).

Together, the FSA and fanzines, shared overlapping members and ideas and thus developed important solidarity networks, through which activists could share incentives (for action) and achieve a sense of external consensus (Della Porta and Diani, 1999). Moreover, these indigenous social networks, already possessed a rich array of resources which helped the FSA and fanzine movements communicate, make decisions, and create networks of trust and reciprocity (Edwards 2014). The presence of a 'literature', notably through fanzines such as *Off the Ball* and *When Saturday Comes*, and the FSAs *Reclaim the Game* helped communicate those ideas constitutive of the politicisation of football fandom, to inspire, provoke and arouse dissatisfaction (Blumer, 1951). As activist Steve Beauchampé noted,

Goldberg [editor of *Off the Ball*] always had an agenda for the magazine, I think he was just a bit more politically clued into what was happening in football, so he always saw it as being part of some kind of movement. 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 (16 February 2018).

During the 1990s, the FSA, football fanzine, and emergence of club-based Independent Supporter Association movements (ISAs), developed shared ways of working together and in doing so, created a social movement dynamic. This produced the solidarities which bound core supporter networks together through a shared commitment to social democracy and what constituted the appropriate consumption of football post-Heyssel and Hillsborough. Whilst the FSA failed to attract a large supporter membership base, it was successful in networking a critical mass of highly resourced supporter actors who were able to communicate effectively across various regions in English football. In doing so, like fanzines, it served to preserve

‘vernacular’ football values, responding to an increasing assault on ‘traditional football supporter culture (Jary, Horne, and Bucke, 1991). This is both historically, and sociologically important, because these networks and coordination mechanisms helped switch the networked practices and organizational cultures of the FSA and ISAs in more professionalized directions at the turn of the twenty first century.

## **From Liverpool to North London: Building a National Social Movement Organisation**

Throughout the course of 1989-99, the core FSA network moved from Liverpool to other UK cities, notably, Manchester and Leeds, and developed homophilous clusters through specific academic, friendship, and political ties, which were largely, if not exclusively, the preserve of white men with a history of political trade union activism. Together these clusters formed the Coalition of Football Supporters (CoFS) network, which through the development of a ‘Charter for Football’, sought to strengthen the collective [relational] power of the FSA, fanzines, and ISAs. In the histories of Safe Standing and the UK supporter activist scene, the CoFS recognised, that to become an effective campaigning organization in football, the national supporters’ movement needed to speak with one voice. To achieve this, leading CoFS activists worked to strengthen ties between the FSA, and the other national supporter organization; the ‘National Federation of Football Supporters’ Clubs (NFFSC). To help operationalize the unification, the FSA moved its headquarters from Liverpool to North London, at a time when the Liverpool supporters’ network had become less influential at the national level.

In 2002, the FSA and NFFSC both passed motions supporting the establishment of one national movement organization: ‘The Football Supporters Federation (FSF)’, which aimed to professionalize communication and campaigning strategies through new funding streams (FSF news, 2002). According to McCarthy and Zald (1977), social movement organizations (SMOs) emerge when activists coalesce in ways which seek to build alliances with those in power. For the FSF, this meant developing coalition-based strategies characterized by higher levels of professionalization and bureaucratization. According to Paul Thomas, a Professor of Youth and Policy Studies at the University of Huddersfield and FSF activist who worked on the Leeds United fanzine ‘Marching Altogether’, the FSF became a more serious campaigning organization as a result:

In the early FSA days, one or two people were able to become chair’s quite quickly in retrospect, they were a mixed bag and I suppose that’s the downside of being quite a loose sort of

organization but I think it began to build itself successfully from the FSA to the FSF and I think it had more clout as a genuine organization and decision making body whereas it was a bit sort of ramshackle in the early days but then it takes time to build things. (15 February 2018).

Professional SMOs are also characterized by more formalized spaces and places of collective action. In English football, FSF-coordinated national supporters' conferences became what Crossley (1999) conceptualized as 'working utopias'; important meeting grounds for key movement activists and intellectuals to debate and discuss new tactics. Whilst the national conferences brought together hundreds of heterogenous fan networks representing club-based supporters' groups across all professional and semi-professional levels of the game, the key SMO strategic interactions were led by 'soft leaders' (Della Porta and Diani, 1999), who hail from the new middle classes or have developed high levels of cultural capital. Two such leaders, were Kevin Miles, a key activist within the CoFS and the FSF's International Coordinator, with a previous history of left-wing political activism, and Dave Boyle, a politics graduate, and former media officer at Rochdale Council, elected as the FSFs co-deputy chair. Miles and Boyle's positions here were unique; they moved between both formal, and informal roles depending on the nature of the FSFs collective action.

At policy level, Miles helped programme an international network; 'Football Supporters International (FSI)' which became Football Supporters Europe (FSE), consolidating positive working relations across fan projects in Germany, Holland, Italy, and Switzerland, and securing funding from the European Commission for an international FSI-led supporters' embassy (Miles, FSF newsletter, 2003). At a more informal level, Miles operated as a 'switcher', who according to Castells (2013), play a key role in programming and sharing the networked practices of different groups through communicative activities. Whilst Boyle, recognized that the football activist scene was characterized by networks and collective action across a multi-organizational field, whereby specific campaigns connect disparate movements or groups, forming a type of Social Movement Industry (SMI). In English football, these networks involved actors from the FSF, an individual rights-based supporter membership organization, and Supporters Direct (SD), a British government funded organization set up to provide support and assistance for Supporters' Trusts to secure a greater level of accountability and fan representation within clubs and the game's governance structures. Boyle recognized that to build relational collective action, both organizations needed to speak collectively on match-going issues and supporter ownership models. To do so, involved identifying German football as a new transnational context, which included political opportunities and innovations on Safe Standing. According to Boyle:

When working at Supporters Direct, we'd been trying to take the narrative away from ... when you thought of fan-owned clubs, you'd get 'oh like Barcelona?' And because we knew what we were talking about we'd always sort of go, yeah but Barcelona's not all that it's cracked up to be. There were some serious problems, but we did use German football. But in 2004, you just couldn't get anyone interested: there was the historic England vs German rivalry which meant people weren't immediately ready to engage and people just didn't think of German football as an example worth thinking about. 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, 'hell the FA wouldn't even know what pedagogy is.' But no one was interested. (24 March 2016).

However, as Edwards (2014) noted, social movements are often characterized by disagreements and different interpretations across coalition networks, which themselves, are marked by a lack of unity. Across the different levels of English football's political economy and football pyramid structure, building a clearly defined collective identity on Supporter Ownership and Safe Standing is markedly difficult. As Boyle expressed:

The whole issue of standing was sociologically an interesting because I was involved in Supporters Direct which is all about ownership and a lot of people who were involved in that world saw Safe Standing as a purely aesthetic issue ... it was a campaign which whilst they weren't against it, it didn't seem important enough to be the thing which should be campaigned on. In the same way politically, you've got revolution and reform, there were people who basically thought that the royal road to power in football was through supporter ownership and that's who I was working with, and therefore pretty much anything else was essentially a diversion. And, 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 bad owners and anyway if they wanted to stand up why don't they come down here and watch lower league football. (24 March 2016).

Despite this, the working practices of the FSF as an SMO involved building an ethical definition of the all-seating legislation, some years after the CoFS had unsuccessfully tried to persuade the UK government of the case for new [German] Safe Standing technology. Here, at a time of burgeoning political interest in football; namely, through supporters' strategic interactions with the Sports Grounds Safety Authority (SGSA) and Minister for Sport in Parliament, standing at football became part of a struggle around the production of meaning, and a puzzling out, of a post-Hillsborough, socially democratic, temporal landscape in England.

## **Professionalising Safe Standing activism**

As the FSF emerged as a SMO underpinned by more informal, interpersonal networks of ties between supporter activists across the UK fan activist scene, these ties were critical in developing transnational relations and networks with wider European supporter groups in Spain and Germany (King, 2003). This became an important mechanism to explore the new

Safe Standing technology in German football and trigger long-term strategic interactions between the FSF and both the DCMS and Sports Ground Safety Authority (SGSA).

Consequently, the emergence of club-specific campaigns against the all-seating legislation became a formal policy area for both the FSF and its transnational counterpart; Football Supporters Europe (FSE), evidencing the complex ways in which movements emerge and operate at the intersection of unorganised individual or small network protests, and organised collective action across a shifting political and cultural landscape (Edwards, 2014). Safe Standing then, emerged as an FSF-coordinated movement *in action*, from the networks, relations and interactions which connected FSA and ISA activists through the CoFS, across two temporal periods (1989-99, and 99-09). Consequently, Safe Standing protests evolved in ways which brought new networks, resources, and leadership against the all-seating legislation, and developed tactics which were culturally available and shaped by historical contexts (Gillan, 2018). Leading activists within and around the FSF recognised that ‘terracing’ and ‘Hillsborough’ had become inseparable in the minds of wider fan networks in England, and important political actors in professional football. As activist Dave Boyle noted,

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. (24 March 2016).

By abandoning a campaign for new safer terracing, in favour of exploring the ‘Rail Seating’ technology in Germany, the FSF achieved some success in mobilising political support from the Liberal Democrats in the UK Parliament, which in turn, ensured Hillsborough as a discourse, became less dominant in opposition (Author, 2021).

Today, nearly four decades after the FSA emerged in Liverpool as a movement to ‘reclaim the game’ and transform the landscape of fan politics in England, the organisation is now an effective campaigning SMO with some influence inside the football industry but receives funding from the Premier League (FSF, 2018). This political economic transformation is situated within the wider context of the legacy of ‘Third Way’ politics in the UK (Author, 2021). However, whilst new networks have played an important role in building corporate partnerships and commercial revenue streams, which in turn, enhanced the creativity and marketing of the Safe Standing movement, the small core FSF national committee network continues to be coordinated by activists who were either a leading member of the CoFS, ISAs,



or football fanzine writers across 1989-09. Together, these networks of networks, seek to produce movement action in ways which are patterned by past activities, and in turn, shape football supporter culture and capital. At the heart of this transformation according to FSF chair Malcolm Clarke, has been an effective attempt to build diplomacy with key figures inside the governance of professional football and in doing so, establish new political relationships with key stakeholders in the safety-security nexus in football.

I often try to say to people, well, being right isn't enough .... There's no point in being right if you can't actually change things. For a long time, we mistakenly thought that what the big priority for Safe Standing needed to be was to change politicians' minds so that we could get the legalisation altered. I think we realised that us trying to change politicians' minds was never going to be enough, so we did have to work more closely and talk to individual football clubs and key people in the football industry. And in a different kind of way. (3 February 2016).

However, whilst these macro-level strategic interactions played an important role in ensuring the Safe Standing movement made its way to the inside of English football's commodity structure and governance, this was also achieved by micro-level mobilisations within, and around, professional football clubs, during a changing political landscape on Hillsborough. Former FSF deputy chair Martin O'Hara explained:

We encouraged supporters of each individual club to test the water themselves at local level ... 'go and find out, ask your members, how many people want it' and every time we did a survey, club by club, each one would come back with a 90 per cent vote for yes, we want it. (29 January 2016).

What these mobilizations reveal, is whilst the state and its sub-actors are important political structures which both open and close opportunities for successful movement mobilisation, it is these micro-level human actions of networked supporter activists, which successfully created new political opportunities on Safe Standing over the past 10years.

## **Rhizomatic Networks and Late Modern Football Culture**

Despite some successes of professionalized football activism, the tactical dynamics of protest in late modern football culture, are often characterised by more decentralised, heterogeneous, multiple connections.

In their research into the Stand Against Modern Football (StandAMF) movement, Hill et al (2018) found that digital platforms now enable supporter activists to communicate in ways which transcend longstanding supporter rivalries and engender shared affective frames, which themselves, help unite diverse groups against the corporate logics of modern football. They argued that emerging networked supporter coalitions, like those on Safe Standing, often lack

firm identities or singular ideological claims, and that this lack of hierarchical leadership or constitutionalised goals sets them apart as a new species of social movement. Here, activists coalesce around Rail Seating, but are embedded within different social discourses; namely, ‘safety’, ‘choice’ and ‘consumer care’. According to chris (2006), these decentralized network structures are rhizomatic because they involve a mass of nodes and connections which shoot in different, complex, directions (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). However, in the histories of Safe Standing, what becomes clear is that contemporary mobilizations on Rail Seating are switched between the networked practices of both the FSF, as an SMO, and more loosely organized, informal [digitally based] groups which mainly operate in what Castell’s (1996) called the ‘space of flows.’ The tactic of localizing Safe Standing protests to make social change visible to those working at individual professional football clubs produced rhizomatic supporter networks and mobilizations, which in turn, have moved discursive [Rail Seating] frames into new, global, territories.

Indeed, over the past 15 years, some activists operating as movement entrepreneurs, have developed new transnational networks in Germany, Australia, Holland, and the USA, through the mobilization of a Safe Standing Roadshow, which enables clubs, and supporters’ groups to ‘see and feel’ the movement. Jon Darch, a core member of the FSF Safe Standing network, but who often operates independently of the FSF when mobilizing support for his Ferco sponsored Roadshow [Rail Seat demonstration block]<sup>ii</sup> noted:

The news that we're trying to introduce the rail seats concept to this country reached the product's homeland this week, as leading German stadium news website stadionwelt.de carried a report and an interview on the FSF campaign. Having kindly allowed us to use one of their photographs of rail seats, they became aware of our campaign and decided to spread the word in their domestic market. (August 2011).

In March 2016, PSV Eindhoven announced they would become the first Dutch club to create a Rail Seating area in their all-seated stadia, and shortly after, other European clubs including Ajax, CSKA Moscow, and SK Sturm Graz, announced their intention to introduce Safe Standing areas. Whilst in Australia and the USA:

Western Sydney Wanderers and MLS side Orlando City announced plans to install Safe Standing sections in their new stadia, and New York City FC began the process of consulting supporters on the proposal to incorporate Safe Standing in development plans for the club’s new stadium (FSF Annual Review, 2016).

Connecting these national, regional, and international spaces, is a new style of digital football writing and culture of fan engagement activities. In the UK, these include supporter networks unaffiliated with formal Supporters’ Trusts, including, the 1894 network at Manchester City

the Black Scarf Movement network at Arsenal; the 1881 network at Watford; the Holmesdale Fanatics network at Crystal Palace; and the Barclay End Projekt network at Norwich. Whilst these groups lack the more formal, democratic, and bureaucratic decision-making structures of official Supporters' Trusts and national SMOs like the FSF, they remain an important part of the multifaceted 'football activism complex' (Numerato, 2018) through their mobilizations on 'Atmosphere,' 'Safe Standing,' 'Pyro-techniques,' 'Banners,' 'Tifo Displays,' and 'Flags' (Numerato, 2018).

Producing a more leaderless type of relational collective action across online and urban spaces, these groups mobilized grassroots activism on Safe Standing, including the design of a large 'Legalize Safe Standing' banner initiated by 1894, and shared with other supporter networks at Oldham; Bury; West Ham; Watford; and Huddersfield, who with funding support from the 'STANDfanzine' and 'Football Action Network (FAN)', arranged to display the banner both inside, and outside, their stadia. Despite coordinating formal policy-based work on Safe Standing, the FSF learned of the banner via images shared by 1894 on the social media platform Twitter. Here, we see how independent supporters' networks often 'do collective action on their own' as a type of 'DIY politics,' but do so, believing they're contributing towards the wider goals of the movement (Edwards, 2014).

Such types of rhizomatic networks are switched between football-based SMOs and independent supporters' groups and expand the digitalization of late modern football culture and social entrepreneurship. Indeed, the digitalization of Safe Standing in late capitalism involves some supporter networks, including those at Brentford, Shrewsbury, and Wycombe, developing crowdfunding initiatives supported by global investment firms such as, *Tifosy*, *COPA90*, and *FansBet* (Darch, August 2017). Other loosely affiliated groups such as *StandAMF* and the *F.A.N.*, are producing rhizomatic-based coalitions seeking to challenge the logics of late modern [capitalist] football, yet the digital platforms, and networks through which they are embedded, both consume, and produce, late modern football culture. At *COPA90* [a network of filmmakers and bloggers interested in football], who have a digital platform subscription of over 115 million viewers and are building strategic partnerships with Soccer United Marketing in the MLS, such digital mobilizations on Safe Standing are reflective of an attempt to understand, and market, modern football culture through fan-focused media content. Safe Standing thus speaks to the corporate logic of late capitalism by becoming firmly embedded within the fan engagement industry. Here, the relational logic of collective action on Safe Standing is made in a context of interdependence between formal activists creating

master [Rail Seating] frames and political opportunities on enhancing spectator safety, and digital coalitions which operate within neoliberal [stakeholder] discourses and [consumer-choice] practices.

## Conclusion

In this article, the historical network changes, and continuities across the UK fan activist scene, highlight the limitations of SMOs in building large membership-based mobilizations, yet the networking of a critical mass of highly interested and resourceful supporter actors who can communicate effectively with one another, and in turn, build small network coalitions, is both possible, and effective. In the case of Safe Standing, a small network coordinated relational collective action across 1989-2019, and have achieved some degree of influence within the safety-security nexus of football governance and regulation in the UK and Europe. Through this lens, the strength of supporter movements and their capacity to mobilize successfully, lies not in the number of individual members or activists within national based movement organisations, but the coordination mechanisms and resources, of small networks *in action*. English football is a rich *lifeworld*, in which many of the solutions to the problems supporters often face, can be found within this *lifeworld*, based upon the knowledge, experiences, and resources, of highly skilled fan actors across multi-organizational fields. Consequently, the people with power to make changes or become important political actors in football, are fans themselves.

Across the temporal histories of Safe Standing, the localising of club-specific supporter mobilizations produced rhizomatic networks and tactical opportunities, across new online and urban spaces. This supports the work of Numerato (2018), who argued that football fans operate within what he termed, the ‘football fan activism complex’, which encompasses different standpoints and expressions of social unrest, and both formal, and more loosely affiliated, spontaneous networks. What connects them in this case, is the subversion of the dominant way of watching football in all-seated spaces, through individual, and collective, acts of non-compliance. Indeed, as Edwards (2014) argued, protests are what social movements organise and employ, but they can also be those unorganised bits of *misbehaviour* or disruption outside more formal, professionalized SMOs, which become important forms of counter-power. In English football, this *misbehaviour*, remains the long-term persistent standing of thousands of supporters in seated stadia, which despite new policy-based outcomes on Safe

Standing, continues to pose important questions on what is legitimate, and illegitimate, contemporary [standing] spectator conduct.

Looking ahead, as Safe Standing moves to Salt Lake City in 2023, the popularization and normalization of Safe Standing in English football is likely reconstituted through spatial organization seeking to control, and limit, the more unrestricted, and unsegregated, nature of standing culture, as an important supporter ritual. Where Safe Standing is yet to be introduced, the persistent standing of supporters remains ever increasingly subject to draconian measures, including the threat of stadium bans, as witnessed recently at Burnley FC. Here, the implementation of new government regulations comes with planning, time, and cost (Jones, 2022), and supporters' hermeneutic struggle with the all-seating legislation is revealed to be less about the socio-cultural and symbolic aspects of football, notably, stadium atmosphere, and supporters' human, democratic rights, and instead, focused upon widening the safety, security, and surveillance measures of those fans resisting regulation in the form of all-seating as a contemporary surveillance practice. The implication for social movements is thus, whilst the capacity exists for small networks to coordinate larger, powerful, and effective mobilizations, the longer-term successes produced by those mobilizations must consider potential movement disjuncture and unintended consequences.

## Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> In the article, this organization is refereed to both as the FSA and Football Supporters Federation (FSF) at different points in its history. In 2019, the FSF, upon merging with the Supporters Direct (SD) organization, renamed itself the FSA once again.

<sup>ii</sup> Ferco are one of the world's largest manufacturers of sports spectator seating and have been at the forefront of the movement to introduce Rail Seating areas at stadiums in UK and Europe for over 15 years.

## References

Australian Associated Press. (2016). 'Wanderers get green light for safe standing area in new stadium.' *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2016/dec/09/wanderers-green-light-safe-standing-new-stadium>

---

Blumberg, Z., & Markovits, A.S. (2021). American soccer at a crossroad: MLS's struggle between the exigencies of traditional American sports culture and the expectations of the global soccer community. *Soccer and Society*, 22(3), 231-247.

Blumer, H. (1951) Social movements. In: Lee AM (ed.) *Collective Behaviour' Principles of Sociology*. New York: Barnes and Noble.

Benford, R.D. (1993). 'You could be the hundredth monkey': Collective action frames and vocabularies of motive within the nuclear disarmament movement. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34(2), 195-216.

Bergmann, J. (2007). "Standing in the Bundesliga." *When Saturday Comes*. Issue 241. March 2007.

Bosher, L. (2022). UEFA to trial safe standing in the Champions League this season Retrieved from <https://theathletic.com/3453952/2022/07/27/champions-league-safe-standing/>

Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, M. (2013). *Communication Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chesters, G., & Welsh, I. (2006). *Complexity and Social Movements: Multitudes at the Edge of Chaos*. Oxford: Routledge.

Crabbe, T. & Brown, A. (2004). You're not welcome anymore: The football crowd, class, and social exclusion. In: Wagg S (ed.) *Football and Social Exclusion*. London: Routledge, pp. 71–81.

Crossley, N. (1999). Working utopias and social movements: An investigation using case study materials from radical mental health movements in Britain. *Sociology*, 33(4), 809–830.

Crossley, N. (2002). *Making Sense of Social Movements*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Crossley, N. (2015). Relational sociology and culture: A preliminary framework. *International Review of Sociology*, 25(1), 65–85.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2006 [1999]) *Social Movements: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell University Press.

---

Della Porta, D. (2014). In-depth interviews. In Della Porta, D. (Ed.), *Methodological practices in social movement research* (pp. 228–261). Oxford University Press.

Edwards, G. (2014). *Social Movements and Protest*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gillan, K. (2018). Temporality in social movement theory: Vectors and events in the neoliberal timescape. *Social Movement Studies*. Epub ahead of print 19 November 2018. DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2018.1548965.

Goodwin, J., & Jasper, J. (2003). *Rethinking Social Movements*. Oxford. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Giulianotti, R. (2011). Sport mega events, urban football carnivals and securitised commodification: The case of the English Premier League. *Urban Studies*, 48(15), 3293–3310.

Hill, T., Canniford, R., & Millward, P. (2018). Against modern football: Mobilizing protest movements in social media. *Sociology*, 52(4), 688–708.

HM, Government. (1990). Final Report of the Hillsborough Stadium Disaster. 15 April 1989. Inquiry by the Rt Hon Lord Justice Taylor. (Cmnd. 962). London: HMSO.

Jary, D., Horne, J., & Bucke, T. (1991). Football fanzines and football culture: A case of successful ‘cultural contestation’. *Sociological Review*, 39(3), 581–597.

Jones, A. (2022). Burnley, banning orders and a row with their fans who want to stand. The Athletic. Retrieved from <https://theathletic.com/3576349/2022/09/12/burnley-standing-fans-banned/>

King, A. (1998). *The End of the Terraces: The Transformation of English Football in the 1990s*. London: Leicester University Press.

King, A. (2003). *The European ritual: Football in the new Europe*. Routledge.

Koopmans, R. (1993). The dynamics of protest waves: West Germany, 1965 to 1989. *American Sociological Review*, 58(6), 37–58.

McCarthy, J.D., & Zald, M.N. (1977). Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(6), 1212–1241.

Melrose, A., Hampton, P. and Manu, P. (2011). Safety at sports stadia. *Procedia Engineering*, 14, 2205–2211.

- 
- Numerato, D. (2018). *Football Fans, Activism and Social Change*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Pearson, G. (2012). *An Ethnography of English Football Fans: Cans, Cops and Carnivals*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Scruton, P. (2012). *Hillsborough – The Truth*. Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing.
- The Guardian. 1985. *The Football Supporters Association*. 8 August 1985
- Webber, D. (2017). Playing on the break: Karl Polanyi and the double-movement ‘against modern football’. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 52(7), 875–893.
- West, P. (2020). MLS Safe Standing sections: Four more stadiums join the party in 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.mlssoccer.com/news/mls-safe-standing-sections-four-more-stadiums-join-party-2020>
- Woolsey, I. (2021). *Football Fans and Social Spacing: Power and Control in a Modernising Landscape*. Springer Nature.