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# Violence and Racism in Football: Politics and Cultural Conflict in British Society, 1968-1998

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This is a decent book, in my judgment. That?s to say, it?s morally on the side of the angels, but it is not always on the side of the readers. Going through it was sometimes a bumpy ride and an appreciation of the merits of the book was too often baulked by one or other of a range of difficulties.

One of the things to recommend this book is its chosen topic. Football violence in the United Kingdom (particularly England) generated several years of tedious in-fighting among British scholars in the 1980s that had two inescapable ironies: in its inward-looking vehemence it had invariably paralleled the phenomenon it claimed to illuminate and it had (too often) revolved around the existence or otherwise of a ?civilising process?. Now, in this book, an American historian, who, according to his early pages, was fully conversant with the debate hitherto, had addressed the topic. Could he do for football hooliganism what the masterly US-born writer Mike Marqusee had done for English cricket (1), and produce the definitive political account of this episode? After all ? and this is another of the book's strengths ? he?d been into the archives of relevant bodies, including the government. Well, not quite; the author had some good ingredients, but they weren?t always properly combined and the cake, as a consequence, didn?t altogether rise. This, in my opinion, is why.

Even at the stage when you?re fishing the book off the shelf, you sense a project not fully thought through. The cover is dull and conveys almost nothing of the contents; it has an abstract design which looks, to be frank, as if someone has spilled tea over it. It is billed as part of a series called ?Perspectives in Economic and Social History?, which suggests historiography and a sampling of different intellectual approaches, but the inside cover reveals simply a list of wholly disparate topics ? *Female Entrepreneurs in Nineteenth Century Russia*, for example, or *Financing India?s Imperial Railways, 1875?1914*. These sound very interesting and no doubt resulted, as Brett Bebber's book seems to have done, from doctorates written in the History departments of the English-speaking world. But they aren?t what I understand to be ?perspectives?. Confusion is compounded by the fact that Brett?s sub-title does not appear on the cover ? so that the book is billed vaguely as *Violence and Racism in Football*, with no cultural or historical specificity ? and by the words ?Number 16? printed in the bottom right hand corner, implying that the book is logically preceded by 15 other volumes in some kind of sequence.

Getting to the contents of the book, a principal difficulty for me was that in its structure it too strongly resembled the dissertation from which it was derived. There are, for example, 37 pages of introduction. This is a necessary chore in a PhD when the aspirant has to show that s/he has read the relevant literature and is conversant with appropriate theory and method. But in a book one needs more readily to cut to the chase, for fear perhaps that the reader will weary of perpetual recourse to phrases like ?X cannot be understood without Y? and lectures on the necessity to contextualise, historicise, ?re-think sport history? and so on. In addition, the first 1,000 words or so of each chapter are devoted to telling the reader what the chapter will consist of; this (to my mind) excessive academic decorum inevitably gives the narrative a disjointed feel.

Nor is the fluency of the book always heightened by Brett?s choice of language. Often the style is very readable and humane, but at others it can be a bit pompous, sometimes straining for an unduly formal or convoluted way of saying something. For example (p. 33), drawing on a survey of police in 1967 in which many respondents commented on how many football fans tried to prevent their mates being arrested, Brett reports that ?fans were unwilling to help procure their violent or disorderly companions?. The fusty and archaic nature of the language here jumps off the page. Besides, ?procure? is hardly a synonym for the more customary ?arrest? or ?detain?. And what fan in the world would not try to prevent one of his pals being bundled into a police van? Similarly, on the matter of ?race? and racism ? the locus of many of the book's greatest strengths ? the reader has some unduly awkward theoretical language to negotiate before encountering some rich historical insights. I, for one, was not much the wiser having been informed that ?the signifiers ?white? and ?black? were discursively employed by racists and anti-racists alike with the intention of recognizing and identifying characteristics of race, nationality and ethnicity, often with unintended epiphenomenal outcomes? (p. 206). Surely, as I have often written somewhere on a student essay, there was a more straightforward way of saying this.

The more one delved into this book, the stronger was the sense that this intermittent recourse to clunky, over-academic writing was a kind of comfort blanket ? that the author wasn?t quite as sure of his ground, either in regard to post-Second World War British history or to the culture of the English football world, as he could have been. Certainly some of his central assertions were startling ? as, for instance, with the suggestion (p.

21) that ?[t]hrough the 1966 World Cup victory football became primarily a working class bastion apart from other public school sports like cricket and rugby?. Most observers would say that the opposite was the case. Association football had, in effect, been a working-class bastion since the late 19th century when working-class teams began to win the FA Cup. Although ?soccer? continued (and continues) to be played at the most prestigious English public (i.e. private) schools, high status amateurs had long since withdrawn to compete for their own cups ? the FA Amateur Cup (begun in 1893), and the Arthur Dunn Cup specifically for public school old boys? teams (started in 1902). Such men left the Football League, the FA Cup and the England team to the working class. It was precisely with the 1966 World Cup win, seen (by the standards of the time) by a huge television audience and generating great popular enthusiasm, that football?s standing as a working-class bastion actually became *threatened*. This was the first step on the road to the football-saturated corporate, global media culture that we have today. After all, nobody had taken much interest in the previous (minimally televised) World Cup in Chile in 1962. Indeed, as Brett himself acknowledges (p. 4), one scholarly interpretation of football spectator violence held it to be an angry working-class reaction to the commercialisation and *embourgeoisement* of the English game ? the hovering around it of middle-class entrepreneurs and consumers .

There are also some noticeable errors of fact. There is a baffling assertion (p. 22) that the Labour Party ?removed Clause Four? of its constitution in 1964. ?Clause Four? refers to the party?s undertaking: ?To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service?. This had been adopted in 1918 and, although it had often been a bone of contention in the Labour movement, its wording was not changed until 1995, at the prompting of the ?New Labour? coterie by then steering the party. Similarly, the Conservative cabinet minister ?Henry Munro? referred to (p. 79) is actually Hector Monro, Margaret Thatcher?s first minister for sport (1979-?81); moreover Monro was not a cabinet minister ? no British government minister responsible specifically for sport ever has been. And Bermuda-born West Ham footballer Clyde Best, who graced the Hammers? Boleyn Ground between 1968 and 1976, was not a full back (p. 208), but a forward.

None of this is to be picky. It?s simply to suggest that the author might have been more comfortable with, and suitably immersed in, his material ? the theory and the research data ? before writing the book. (After all, Mike Marqusee ? admittedly, in my view, the acme of writers on sport and politics ? seemed to know everything there was to know both about cricket and the British class system.) This point is all the more important when one considers the raw material of the book, which is eye-opening and, as a political document, extremely valuable. The contents of papers relating to government deliberations over football hooliganism and the subsequent racist and anti-racist activity at football grounds that greeted the emergence of English Afro-Caribbean players onto the English League scene are recounted at length.

The statements privately made, and the positions privately embraced, by some of the leading players on the issue of football violence are set out in some detail and Brett?s tendency occasionally to over-interpret their already largely self-evident political implication doesn?t minimise their impact. There are, for example, the unenlightened musings of Denis Howell (Minister for Sport 1964?70 and 1974?9). Howell, a former Birmingham councillor, official of a clerical workers? union and football referee was typical of many Labour MPs at the time. A populist and bureaucrat, rather than a visionary or a socialist, he was on the right of the party and his bizarre analysis of football violence was that it resulted from working-class mothers going out to work (p.1 33). Similarly, Walter Winterbottom, coach to the England football team between 1946 and 1962, and now at the Sports Council, supervised some grim scientific research on possible ?corporeal damage? to spectators on the football terraces, which among other things calculated that humans needed little more than 2.25 square feet of space on which to stand and could withstand a maximum of 206 pounds per square foot of pressure. Winterbottom strongly favoured the physical confinement of supporters and these calculation were to determine how tightly human beings could be packed without crushing them to death. There was much talk of cages. Another plan was to have a fence which would collapse in time of danger but to install sprinkler systems so that, if supporters encroached onto the field of play, they would be

sprayed with dye and, thus colour-coded, be rounded up by the police. This plan was only abandoned when someone pointed out that the wind might carry the dye in the wrong direction (pp. 80?5). Bebber is similarly critical of FA officials such as Denis Follows, who called for a greater involvement of police dogs, of police brutality and of the Labour MP Walter Johnson, whose baleful contribution to this whole fiasco was to call for the return of military conscription (pp. 130?1). He rightly points to the callousness of government calculation and to the inherent dangers to spectators which they posed. He also has bursts of eloquence, as when he quotes some of the indignant football supporters who wrote to government departments objecting to being treated ?as an undifferentiated population of thugs? (pp.90?1). But one feels that too often he does not see the wood, despite his sensitive appreciation of the trees; he does not give due weight to the emergence of the law-and-order state in Britain in the 1970s so acutely observed by Stuart Hall and others in their influential *Policing the Crisis* (2) ? something to which much of his evidence points. The football hooligans were an early example of the ?enemies within?, identified by the propagandists of successive Thatcher administrations, and would be succeeded by, among others, ?welfare scroungers?, single parents, trade unionists, miners, muggers and migrants.

The section on racism and anti-racism in football is similarly valuable. Once again there are lapses into unnecessarily cumbersome language but, as with the whole hooligan affair, the greatest merit is in the personal testimony of those involved at the time. Take, for instance, the footballer John Colquhoun, who recalled playing for Heart of Midlothian against Glasgow Rangers and hearing his own supporters chant monkey noises at Rangers? winger Mark Walters. Colquhoun professed himself ?disappointed in my own performance ... because I let this go on. I didn?t do anything?. (How typical Colquhoun was is hard to say. He was politically minded and was later elected rector of Edinburgh University. He?s now a successful football agent.) Similarly Mark Bright, now a television football pundit, was instrumental in challenging the notion that the ?professional? way for black footballers like him and Walters to deal with racist taunts was to ignore them; Bright insisted that these taunts themselves represented a (disgraceful) lack of respect for fellow professionals and, as such, must be challenged (pp. 214?15).

So this book contains important research, and the documents Brett Bebber has read and brought to light are a real contribution to our understanding of some parlous times in the post-war history of British society. I hope, and expect, that his next book will have a smoother and more gently analytical narrative. Historians, I think, should take a great deal from sociology, but emphatically not their characteristic mode of self expression.

## Notes

1. Mike Marqusee *Anyone But England* (London, 1994).Back to (1)
2. Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London, 1978).Back to (2)

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