Early Academic Theories

1 Psychological theses

Developed between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s, the first psychological theses made use of the ethogenic paradigm which they borrowed from social psychology. They are best set out in the work of the team led by Peter Marsh (Marsh et al. 1978; Marsh 1978; Marsh and Campbell 1982), which emphasized the symbolic nature of football hooliganism, seeing it as ritualized rather than actual violence. Such behaviour was thus a ritual display of violence, labelled by Marsh as *aggro*,¹ which allowed young football supporters to assert their virility by impressing their adversaries and demonstrating their membership of micro-cultures. Consequently, any crossing over from this ritual display to real violence would be accidental and infrequent, arising either because a minority of young football supporters within a particular group had failed to comply with its tacit rules or because the law enforcement agencies had intervened inappropriately.

This thesis also underlined the existence of a genuine order on stadium terraces which, behind their apparent disorder, were places where social identity was constructed. It argued that, far from acting chaotically, young football supporters, searching for a symbolic balance between group loyalty and their desire to be aggressive, embarked on an actual three-stage ‘career’² which, through peer recognition, could give them the reputation and status denied them by the rest of society. Openly carrying on from the work of Goffman on the construction of moral careers as a means of boosting personal reputation (Goffman 1968, 1973), Marsh did not explicitly rule out the influence of the interactionist current, but made it clear that he saw the career of a football supporter as being a process that was much less mechanical than other
types of delinquent careers described by some American criminologists (Becker 1963; Wolfgang et al. 1972).

These works, which shed light on the role played by context in defining the meaning football supporters attribute to their violent behaviour, had merit in that, using field research, they were the first to put forward a rational interpretation of football hooliganism by debunking preconceived ideas about the irrationality of the phenomenon. Although some scholars later considered the repertory of tacit rules drawn up by Marsh and his team to be incomplete (Roversi and Balestri 2000: 188–9), the strength of this thesis lay in its uncovering of what, from then on, became known as the ‘social order of the terraces’.

This theory nevertheless remains open to criticism because, on the one hand, it underestimates the extent of the actual violence and, on the other, the phenomenon is completely dissociated from its historical context. In the case of the former, it should be noted that incidents of real violence were much more frequent than Marsh’s team led us to understand, thereby calling into question their supposed accidental nature. Furthermore, the ritual violence thesis did not cater for the subsequent development of football hooliganism since it failed to explain the appearance of forms of violence which, given their nature, precluded any notion of ritual. Certain acts which, a priori, did not involve physical contact, such as the throwing of missiles, were thus left unexplained.

As far as the second criticism of the ritual violence thesis is concerned, the picture of football hooliganism it gave was not contextualized because no consideration was given to either the socio-economic and political profile of the actors or to the specificities of their social milieu. The thesis therefore remains loosely formulated, completely detached from any kind of space–time framework and, as a consequence, incapable of revealing the nature of football hooligans as social actors and the socio-economic and political factors that might be linked to the appearance of this type of collective violence.

2 Anthropological theses

The anthropological theories are, in some respects, similar to the psychological ones to the extent that they too focus on the meaning accorded to football hooliganism by young supporters, while stressing the highly ritualized and symbolic nature of their behaviour. Thus, in the early 1980s, Desmond Morris saw the football match as a major social event built on a system of symbols mainly centred on hunting, war, religious practice and collective representation (Morris 1981). According to this thesis, which was later taken up by many others