The General Acceptance of ‘Otherness’

Although football hooliganism’s transformation into a serious public order problem was the result of many factors, the media coverage given to it, as has been pointed out, seems to have been mainly determined by the impact of the Heysel tragedy across Europe. Unfairly attributed solely to English football hooligans,¹ this event, which received huge media coverage, in a way confirmed the image of football hooligans as ‘monsters’ and justified the implementation of whatever measures might be deemed appropriate to take against them. My own analysis of the British, French and Greek quality press,² together with existing studies of the Italian press, shows clearly that, from then on, social construction of ‘otherness’ was consolidated in those places where it had already been apparent, namely in the UK, and introduced permanently into countries where it had been weak or even nonexistent. Thus, while the Greek press still resembled the Italian press of the 1970s, the French and Italian press began to represent the issue by using discursive methods hitherto employed mainly in the UK. Although this tendency had been evident in Italy since the early 1980s, it only began to appear in France in 1993 after extensive media coverage was given to an attack on members of special police units at the Paris Saint-Germain stadium.

The growth in the spread of the social construction of ‘otherness’ was not only quantitative, it was also qualitative. All the main methods by which this had been done during the preceding period were now reinforced, not only because they were employed more often, and in more countries, but also because they became commonplace in the press and were increasingly frequently used even by representatives of the authorities. The political affiliation of the newspapers studied does not seem to have significantly influenced whether or not this approach was taken – which indicates that general acceptance of the social ‘otherness’ and
dangerousness of football hooligans existed over and above the usual political divisions. Furthermore, the adoption of this approach does not seem to have been influenced by the specific ways in which football hooliganism manifested itself in the countries concerned. Thus, since French, Italian and Greek football hooligans were hardly ever involved in incidents abroad, these ways of representing the issue were adopted mainly with regard to its manifestation at home. On the other hand, in the UK, after the initial reaction to the Heysel tragedy had died down, football hooliganism gradually disappeared from the press as a domestic issue, only to reappear whenever incidents broke out abroad. Reflecting in part the gradual restoration of calm to stadia in the then First Division and in part a concern to minimize the problem in order to speed up the return of English football clubs to European competition, the position of the press seems well summed up in the following statement: ‘Soccer hooligans are has-beens, as dead as a pop group who haven’t had a hit for five years. Until they go abroad’ (*The Times*, 16 June 1992: 14).

1 Football hooliganism in the British press

The British broadsheets of course continued to avoid using the war-like rhetoric so beloved of the tabloids but, following the example of the prime minister who, the day after Heysel, called football hooligans ‘thugs’ (*The Times*, 31 May 1985: 1) and a sports minister who, five years later, called them ‘louts’ (*Guardian*, 11 July 1990),³ they no longer hesitated to label them ‘thugs’ and ‘yobs’, even in main headlines (*The Times*, 21 June 1988: 14). Spreading disorder within whichever country they were visiting, once they were abroad football hooligans, who were a real ‘disgrace to civilized society’ (*The Times*, 15 June 1988: 10),⁴ regularly sullied the country’s international reputation (*Guardian*, 16 June 1992: 6),⁵ thereby making their compatriots feel ashamed of them (*The Times*, 15 June 1988: 10).

The spread of this anti-social image of football hooligans was reinforced by one of irrationality which, from then on, predominated. Following on from the key patterns of representation employed during the previous period, football hooligans were often portrayed as being mentally deficient or irresponsible because they were under the influence of alcohol. They could therefore be called ‘stupid’ (*The Times*, 21 June 1988: 14), a ‘moronic minority’ (*Independent*, 17 June 1992: 32) or ‘drunken Neanderthals’ (*The Times*, 16 June 1992: 14). Not confined solely to journalistic discourse, this form of representation could be found in the political domain. Thus, while a sports minister saw them