

**THE OLD FIRM AND THE OLD PREJUDICE:
THE IMAGINED COMMUNITY OF FOOTBALL HOOLIGANISM AND RIVALRY**

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Ethnography of rangers v. Dundee match

The semi-final match of the Scottish Cup was never going to be a quiet event. Having never been to a British football match I was unsure of what to expect. I had hoped for a spectacle of football hooliganism and outrageous behaviour, which the fans seemed more than happy to provide. The opposing teams, Glasgow Rangers and Dundee United, have both been quite successful within the Scottish Football Association and thus have built up remarkably large fan bases. As I support neither of the teams myself, I made the mistake of not committing to one team and was one of only few not sporting face paint, scarves, jerseys, or the occasional offensive poster. Before even entering the stadium, the noise of the crowd was overwhelming as I waded through a sea of blue jerseys to find my seat in the Rangers section of the stadium. The match was planned to start at 12:45 but was delayed due to three smoke bombs that were thrown onto the pitch right before the start. Ground staff scurried over to put them out with buckets of sand and the crowd was reminded that the basic rules and norms of human social behaviour still applied within the Ibrox Football Stadium. Paying no heed to the disgruntled looking stadium staff, the crowd roared as kick-off finally began and the Rangers immediately gained control of the ball.

Throughout the match the two middle-aged Scottish men sitting in the stands next to me took some time to answer a few of my questions in between shouting jeers at the opposing fans, team, and referee. Originally, I had intended to research why fans supported their particular team, but as I found support was based largely on city loyalty, I became more interested in the basis of team rivalry. The Rangers Football Club in particular has been known for its intolerance towards Catholics and Irish, harkening back to its establishment in 1872 as a Scottish Protestant team intent on defeating the Irish Catholic Celtic Football Club (Murray, 1984: 17). The two men I spoke to were stout Rangers fans as they emphatically, and albeit a

little bit drunkenly, told me, 'We've been coming to Ibrox [the Rangers football stadium] since we were wee things.' As they did not have any hesitation in answering my most basic questions about their loyalty to the Rangers FC, I asked if they would be open to answering more personal questions. 'Aye, you're sure we will,' they said, as I dodged the beer spilling from their cups. I tentatively brought up the most frequently mentioned scandal regarding the Rangers, i.e., that since its foundation, the Rangers FC have only signed ten Catholic players, only four of whom played for the first team and only one of whom stayed for over two years (Murray, 1984: 81). After a loud cheer as the Rangers skillfully stole the ball from Dundee, the man closest to me responded, 'They've signed the Catholics haven't they? Can't make 'em stay now, this is football.' The two men affirmed they were Protestants themselves, and of Scottish descent but resisted any further prodding into whether this had anything to do with their loyalty to one of the most sectarian football clubs in the United Kingdom.

Post-match after the Rangers defeat 3-1, I loitered a bit outside the stadium, managing to find a few Rangers fans who were not too depressed to speak to me. Every one of them denied my inquires concerning religion as a factor in their loyalty to the club but a few did state, 'Rangers are a true Scottish football club,' as a point of pride. The smell of stale beer, sweaty men, and fried food was beginning to have a nauseating effect on me so I left the stadium more confused than when I had entered. The views I heard from the fans conflicted with the derogatory songs and chants I had heard during the match. Football rivalries seemed to be based on a long tradition of "anything goes" within the football stadium as both religious and racial insults were flung between two groups of people who were largely of the same social, ethnic, and religious classes. An undercurrent of social tensions was present throughout the match but as the Rangers FC and Dundee United rivalry has never been especially vicious, the tensions remained predominantly beneath the surface.

Ethnography of 'the old firm fans' forum' web page

Although I have to take the men at their word, I cannot help but think that perhaps they found the idea of admitting to outright bigotry a bit daunting. The religious and ethnic prejudices on which the Rangers FC was founded are still very much present in Rangers fan

culture. Unsatisfied with the responses I had received at the match, I joined a webpage dedicated to the esteemed Rangers-Celtic rivalry called 'The Old Firm Fans' Forum,' hoping that people might express their beliefs more frankly if we were not speaking face to face. As I had thought, the comment section of the page was riddled with derogatory insults and slurs. The further you scrolled down a comment thread, the less about football the discussion became, with everything from religion, ethnicity, class, and occasionally even someone's mother being thrown in for good measure. As I had suspected, without face to face contact many of the fans were much more willing to discuss the issue of religion and ethnicity that has fueled the old firm rivalry since its establishment in the late 19th century. Keen to see what people had to say, I created an account and posted a question: to what extent are the issues of religion, ethnicity, and class still present in the old firm rivalry? With over 200 replies in a matter of days, responses were heated with several comments even being reported and removed. "Ulsterscot" replied, 'Anybody who follows Celtic purely to watch the football games does not know what the club is all about.' Fellow Celtic fan, "Fatface," posted the lyrics to a common [but banned] Celtic song, "The Roll of Honour": 'To die an orange bastard, soon there'll be no Protestants at all, are you watching orange scum.' Rangers fans were not to be outdone as "Oleg" responded to the song, 'The number of amputees among the scum visitors before and after their next visit will be interesting.' "The Royal Blue Shirt" took a similar approach, 'The tarriers [meaning 'the great unwashed,' slang for the Irish] always find a way to cause disruption. I hope the police batter 'em.' The general consensus seemed to be that these issues were still very much present in the rivalry and many fans were proud of the religious and ethnic affiliations of their club. They saw their teams as representing something more than just football. While people have worked hard to reduce the poignant rivalries between the Catholics and the Protestants, the Irish and the Scottish, the lower and the middle class, these tensions remain strong beneath the surface of society. Some continue to express these tensions through football rivalry.

Curious as to the amount of traffic the site received, and how frequently comments had to be removed, I emailed the site's three creators. In response to my inquiry regarding how often they had to remove particularly nasty comments, they said they removed comments containing 'threats, terrorist glorification, insult towards the referee, blatant insults, or sick

posts that involve people that have been murdered or have been victim to criminal behaviour or accidents that have led to their deaths.’ The forum’s tagline is ‘Turning a negative into a positive with humor over hatred’ and most of the fans seem able to take the banter as an instrumental part of The Old Firm rivalry and give it back as good as they’ve got. The site’s creators informed me that they often had to ban members from the site after too many infringements of their “Ten Commandments” or forum rules.

Ethnography of the old firm u-17 match

The only Old Firm match of this season was between the Rangers and Celtic youth teams on April 28th, 2014. The two under-17 clubs met at Celtic Park in the Glasgow Cup Final with large outpourings of fans gathered to support the youngest members of their football clubs. As I did not expect an under-17 match to culminate in violence, rioting, and sectarian hatred I did not attend the match. Unfortunately, countless reports proved me wrong. From the very outset of the match Rangers and Celtic fans threw smoke bombs, lit flares, and bellowed sectarian songs, amongst them the ever-popular “Billy Boys” sung by the Rangers fans and “The Boys of the Old Brigade” sung by Celtic fans (Parks, 2014). A substantial police presence was able to keep fans from each other’s throats during the match, but with the Rangers defeat, 1-0, Rangers fans became heated, ripping up seats in the stadium and heaving them onto the pitch. Several fans from both teams were arrested and police escorted fans out of the park, trying to prevent any interactions between the two fan bases for fear they would erupt in riot (Dingwall, 2014). It can be suggested that such a display of behaviour from both Rangers and Celtic fans at an under-17s match is representative of just how deep these religious, ethnic, and class tensions run. These sectarian and racial beliefs continue to plague The Old Firm rivalry at every level of competition. The Daily Record quoted the Rangers Under-17s coach, Billy Kirkwood, as saying ‘What happens in the stands is nothing to do with us. There’s going to be a time when Rangers are going to play Celtic at first-team level and all I can say is, “Oh dear,”’ a sentiment echoed by many officials of the Scottish Football Association (Dingwall, 2014).

Theory

I came to the conclusion that the religious, ethnic, and class tensions both the Rangers and Celtic were founded on are still very much present today in each teams fan culture. Although not all fans share these beliefs, and others may be unwilling to admit to them, a surprisingly large portion of the fans see these tensions as an integral part of The Old Firm rivalry. This rivalry has not died out as many of the Protestant v. Catholics and Scottish v. Irish rivalries have. Whether this is simply a relatively benign anachronism, or an expression of the tensions people continue to harbour, the old hatreds are still very much present within football culture. In an attempt to understand why these two fan bases insist on clinging to sectarian and racist identities I have looked into theories of collective identity, imagined communities, and rituals of rebellion.

Collective representations – Durkheim

The persistence of sectarian beliefs in The Old Firm rivalry is more than just a reluctance to relinquish past tensions. To many of their fans, the Rangers and Celtic football clubs represent more than just football. They have created a collective representation within society for the Scottish Protestants and the Scots-Irish Catholics. Within this representation, fans can relate to one another on various social levels. Applying Émile Durkheim's theory of collective representation allows for analysis of why these beliefs might have persisted. Even fans who do not personally hold antagonistic thoughts of a sectarian or ethnically prejudiced nature continue to participate in supporting a team that represents these very ideals. This is not necessarily because they ascribe to them personally, but because their fandom is a separate reality in which these beliefs are accepted and promoted, creating and maintaining group cohesion. Durkheim referred to this type of social phenomenon as social facts, which are exterior to individuals, at times even exceeding their consciousness while directing their social action (Durkheim, 1984: 61). While these beliefs may seem to have been socially created and therefore possible to relinquish, Durkheim demands that we take these social phenomena as real and deal with them as facts as they have constructed the reality within which the fans exist (Durkheim, 1984: 39). The sectarian, ethnic, and class tensions that run through The Old Firm

rivalry are the fans representation of the way in which society works, i.e., their collective representation. These tensions have been institutionalized by many football clubs within Scotland and are maintained through their rivalries.

Looking at the collective representation of the football fan base rather than individual fans makes it clear why the two Rangers fans I spoke to at the game became uneasy when I inquired about the sectarian history of their team. Durkheim maintains that society exists *prior* to individuals and produces norms and guidelines for individual behaviour (Durkheim, 1984: 64). While under the protection of a collective identity, people on The Old Firm Fans' Forum felt comfortable to express any tensions they felt in regards to the other team. Usernames such as "Billy Boy" [in reference to the popular Rangers song], "James_Rangers Loyal", and "Celtic Ghirl" possessed the amenity of being completely anonymous. They were only pieces of the greater collective representation. When I approached the two men at the match as individuals, they lacked the social setting to support them. Any sectarian or ethnic prejudices the two men might have divulged would have appeared personal to them rather than the norms of the reality they perceived The Old Firm rivalry to exist within. While beliefs and ideas of a sectarian or racist nature should not be tolerated under any circumstance, the protection of a collective representation provides solidarity within society, allowing these beliefs to be proliferated through a social group as norms (Durkheim, 1984: 64).

Imagined communities – Anderson

Due to the collective representation projected by the Rangers and Celtic fans, they have developed a unique form of community. Benedict Anderson refers to this type of community as "imagined" in that it is not based on everyday interpersonal interactions as in a church or school community (Anderson, 1991). Within an imagined community it is impossible to know every member; rather individuals bond through a common identifying trait. Anderson developed this theory as it relates specifically to nations. Nationalism is a socially constructed identity under which members of the same country form societal ties with all other members based on their shared belonging to that state (Anderson, 1991: 6). The theory of imagined communities has since been expanded to include groups other than national communities. The

idea of fandom for any sport is based on the idea that fans bond with each other based on their shared support of a team. This is of course a socially constructed community, based neither in fact nor reality. However, as mentioned above in collective representation, Durkheim would disagree with one key aspect of this theory. Anderson classifies imagined communities as a social construct while Durkheim insists upon recognizing these communities as social facts, as they are *reality* for their members (Durkheim, 1984: 39). Through my own research, I recognize that these imagined communities and representations are very much a social construct but they are an undeniable reality for those involved. The previous religious and ethnic tensions that precipitated the foundation of these two teams are no longer applicable to modern day social life and yet they persist in the common identity of an imagined community.

The community of the nation has permeated the football world. The line between patriotism and racism is blurred within many football rivalries (Anderson, 1991: 141). Anderson grapples with the definition of nationalism, remarking that considering the immense effect it has had on the modern world, nationalism is an “elusive” concept (Anderson, 1991: 3). To so strongly relate to thousands of people you will never meet is a curious social construct that is replicated on a much smaller scale in the world of sports. However, it is not the concept of nationalism that I find so striking, but rather the vehement opposition to other nationalities so clearly expressed in the jeers and songs bellowed throughout the matches. The Scottish Athletic Journal in 1887 commented that ‘The Irish are nothing if not patriotic... People who never witness a football match are attracted to the scene by the political aspect of the game, and not because they are possessed of any enthusiasm for football’ (Murray, 1984: 19). Driven to the match by the collective representation of a political fervor rather than a keen interest in football, this sentiment persists today in many of football’s worst rivalries. The Rangers, branded by some as ‘a true Scottish team,’ emphasize their nationality vehemently when playing Celtic but distinctly less so when playing other teams, even when opposing English teams (Murray, 1984: 78). Scottish nationalism is markedly more present amongst Rangers fans during Old Firm matches due to the tradition of rivalry with the Irish rather than solely an expression of nationalist Scottish pride.

Rituals of rebellion – Gluckman & Turner

The last theory I will explore regarding football hooliganism is the concept of 'rituals of rebellion.' Developed by Max Gluckman and Victor Turner in the mid-20th century, rituals of rebellion are rituals used as a forum to express tensions within society (Gluckman, 1962). This step away from functionalism has provided an alternative view of ritual. This contrasts with the aforementioned theories of collective representation and imagined communities in that rituals of rebellion do not express group cohesion but rather allow for the release of tension in a controlled and previously agreed upon setting (Gluckman, 1962: 40). It is important to note that these rituals are in no way intended to resolve the conflict. The next time the ritual is performed or the match is played, the build up of social tensions will explode again just as fervently and will continue to do so in subsequent rituals (Gluckman, 1962: 46). Although football matches, particularly those between heated rivals, have been known to incite violence, they typically allow for the release of societal tensions without fear of retribution. While society in the UK today mitigates religious, ethnic, and class conflicts, football matches allow people to become disinhibited and express their frustration, anger, and even violence in a manner not immediately understood to be antisocial. Tensions manifest themselves within society until they build up, requiring some sort of release so that society can continue without major conflict. While Scottish and Irish, Protestants and Catholics, middle and lower class fans may jeer and provoke one another during the match, the following day they return to normality, many living and working side by side.

Conclusion

The Old Firm rivalry and football hooliganism in general are representative of the persistence of social prejudices in modern day society. Intolerances that should have been renounced decades ago still plague the sports world. As an avid sports fan myself, I understand the imagined community of a team's fan base. However, the sheer depth of the collective representation and identity many fans share with one another and their team was something I had not previously experienced. Every Rangers fan I spoke to shared the same fanatical support for their team, a common trait that is simply remarkable when viewing football as just a game.

A closer look into The Old Firm rivalry reveals that this is more than a game, more than vying to be the best football club in Glasgow. It is the persistence of religious, ethnic, and class struggles. This is not altogether surprising as Celtic were founded as “the Irishmen,” specifically for the Catholic community in Glasgow while the Rangers rise to fame as a Scottish, Protestant team was based on their rivalry with Celtic (Murray, 1984: 12). Modern society will no longer tolerate overt expressions of prejudice and violence in everyday life. However, attending matches and interviewing fans have made it quite clear: the old resentments and fears continue to pulse. Many fans under the refuge of a collective representation, cut adrift from societal norms while at a match, have no hesitation in hurling abuse at one another, and toward the pitch.

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