The Role of Nationalism and Xenophobia in Football-Related Violence

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Though football is a global phenomenon that is enjoyed by millions worldwide, much attention has been given to the destructive and violent acts that have long surrounded the sport. According to Dunning, Murphy, and Williams (1988), violence has plagued the game that Americans call soccer since its very inception. Matches between countries can highlight existing political tensions and often lead to violent encounters between fans. In countries such as England, groups of fanatical supporters, known as “firms” (Asser, 2000), consistently engage in altercations with fans of rival football clubs. Many of these firms have significant ties to neo-Nazi groups, some of which specifically target young football fans for recruitment (Blaschke, 2009). In order to find the root of this violence and pursue a solution, the following questions must be answered: what underlying factors cause football-related violence, and how may we explain and understand this phenomenon?

To further understand the factors that led to rampant violence among fans, a phenomenological study was conducted through a great deal of secondary source analysis. The first step was the scouring of 22 articles from news outlets ranging from The Guardian and the BBC in Britain to USA Today and NBC News in the United States. Each offered insight into the factors that contribute to these violent incidents. Lindsey (2009) and Sinan (2009) discussed the role of religion and politics in the violence between Egyptian and Algerian fans at a World Cup qualifying match. Campbell (2000) addressed the deliberate targeting of black football players by neo-Nazi groups. Books on the history of football were also consulted (e.g. Witzig, 2006; Guilianotti, 1994), as were popular cinematic representations of fanatical football fans (e.g. Schaffer, 2004; Alexander, 2005). The information gleaned from these sources lead to books on nationalism and xenophobia by Billig (2006) and Gellner (1995), as well as Dunning, Murphy, and Williams (1988). This information was then used to create a comprehensive model that attempts to explain the root causes of football violence at both an international and intranational level.

Once the study was conducted, it became clear that much of the violence surrounding football was based on two interrelated factors: nationalism and xenophobia. Billig (1995) defines nationalism as the “national identity” formed by those who are “physically, legally, socially, as well as emotionally” situated within a nation (p. 8). Xenophobia is described by Gellner (1995) as a “dislike of the other” (p.6). While nationalism was found to contribute heavily to violence surrounding matches between national teams, xenophobia was the root cause of violence between fans of teams within a single nation. Thus, a model would show nationalism leading to xenophobia, which in turn leads to violence. International violence would encompass all three of these boxes, whereas intranational violence would encompass only the transformation from xenophobia to violence. Below xenophobia, a list of factors such as religion, race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location show some of the major causal factors revealed by the research.