

## The importance of research on the ultras: introduction to the ultras special issue

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### Abstract

The ultras have become the most spectacular form of football fandom in the early twenty-first century. Thanks to global media, social media and increased travel, fans view, engage and interact with a range of fans from across the globe and bring various local dimensions to their fandom. This volume brings together a range of articles into the ultras style of football fandom. Whilst the ultras phenomenon began in Italy, then spread across Southern Europe into Northern Europe, it has now become truly global. This volume is designed to be an introduction; a first account of ultras for the uninitiated. What follows are analyses and accounts of ultras in Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Turkey, Israel, North America, Australia, Indonesia and Croatia. Not only does this demonstrate the prevalence of the ultras style of fandom across the globe, it shows how football becomes an important cultural arena to see the intersections of globalisation and localism.

Ultras frequently make the news for their actions inside and outside the stadium. Often this is for their disruptive and antisocial activities. The 2014 Coppa Italia final was disrupted after some Roma ultras attacked and shot Napoli fans prior to the match. In order to disrupt the kick off, Napoli ultras threw flares onto the pitch and order was only restored when the capo, or head, of the Napoli ultras, Genny 'a Carogna, negotiated with Napoli's captain Marek Hamsik that the game could go ahead. Genny 'a Carogna was banned for five years, not for the disturbance, but for wearing a 'Speziale Libero' t-shirt that called for the release of Antonio Speziale, an ultra from Catania who was imprisoned for the death of a policeman during a riot between police and ultras of Palermo and Catania in the Sicilian Derby seven years earlier. In 2015, Standard Liege ultras were criticized for displaying a large banner of the serial killer Jason Voorhees from *Friday the 13th* holding the severed head of Steven Dufour, the player who had played for Liege but was now playing for their rivals Anderlecht. Alongside the graphic picture was written in English 'Red or Dead'. The Liege fans got their wish as Dufour saw red after he was sent off for kicking the ball into the fans in frustration at the abuse he received. Whilst these are examples of some of the more antisocial aspects of fan culture, ultras were also prominent in displaying banners declaring 'Refugees Welcome', in Germany, Greece and some

Italian clubs in particular. Other ultras groups have shown support for earthquake victims or expressed solidarity and love for players and managers, such as Borussia Dortmund ultras displaying a large choreography of their departing manager, Jürgen Klopp, with an image of the coach and the words ‘danke Jürgen’.

Violence, rivalry, politics and powerful displays of fandom are some of the unifying themes that describe the ultras form of fandom and are explored within this volume. What unites ultras is their passionate and unwavering support of their club. The ultras originated in Italy in the late 1960s (Roversi 1992; Podaliri and Balestri 1998; Testa and Armstrong 2010; Doidge 2015a). Originally they were political as the groups took the political banners, flags and chants of the protests into the stadium. By the 1980s, new groups were less ideologically political and focused on violence as they took their influence from British hooliganism. By the 1990s, Italian ultras maintained their rigorous support of their clubs, but were willing to unite with their rivals in order to challenge state repression (Podaliri and Balestri 1998; Contucci and Francesio 2013; Doidge 2015a). The ultras style spread across south-eastern Europe, into the former Yugoslavia, southern France, Greece and Turkey during the 1990s. Part of this was geographical proximity, but it was also influenced by the popularity of Serie A on television and fans could see what Italian ultras were doing. Television and social media have helped the ultras style spread in the twenty-first Century into Northern and Eastern Europe, particularly Germany, Austria, Czech Republic and Poland. Ultras in Cairo played an instrumental role in the Arab Spring (Tuastad 2014). They used their experience of challenging the police in the political arena and effectively became the armed wing of the revolution. Ultras have also spread worldwide, as this volume shows. Social media, television and migration have helped the phenomenon emerge in North America, Australia and South East Asia. For this reason, this style of football fandom is worthy of a further investigation.

This volume came about through a series of conversations at conferences and (of course) football matches. It became apparent that many people across Europe, in particular, were researching different aspects of fan culture. The ultras have become the dominant form of fandom in Europe and scholarship was reflecting this. Case studies have been undertaken in a variety of European settings including Italy (Testa and Armstrong 2010; Contucci and Francesio 2013; Doidge 2013, 2015a, 2015b), Germany (Merkel 2012; Gabler 2013), Poland (Antonowicz, Kossakowski, and Szlendak 2015, 2016; Kossakowski 2015), ‘Croatia (Hodges 2014, 2016), Turkey (McManus 2013; Nuhurat 2013), France (Ginhoux 2015a, 2015b) and Denmark (Mintert and Pfister 2014a, 2014b). Yet there had not been a single edited volume or special issue that brought ultras scholarship together. Whilst no special issue can hope to cover the range and depth of scholarship, we hope to provide an introduction to this fascinating form of football fandom.

The range of articles in this volume demonstrates how prevalent the ultras style of fandom has become across the globe. We were inundated with requests to be part of this volume, even after the deadline had passed. This shows how ultras are a popular and fascinating topic of study. The intention of this volume was to be inclusive and provide an overview of ultras across the world. In the future there is the potential for themed special issues around violence, media representations, gender and methods to name a few. This volume is designed to be an introduction; a first account of ultras for the uninitiated. What follows are analyses and accounts of ultras in Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Turkey, Israel, North America, Australia, Indonesia and Croatia. Whilst the ultras phenomenon began in Italy, then spread across Southern Europe into Northern Europe, it has now become truly global. Thanks to social media and television, fans from around the world can watch what other fans are doing and incorporate their style into their own repertoire. The beauty of studying football fans is that they give us insights into how global and local cultures intersect.

### **Ultras: global–local conflict and influence**

Each of the articles in this volume draws out their own conclusions and locally specific issues. Yet certain themes emerge throughout. Readers may spot their own themes, but we have identified a small number of recurring topics. These relate to the global influence and style of ultras, and their incorporation of different global influences. Many authors have identified how the groups take their influences from the Italian ultras and British hooligans and casuals. This occurs in forms of clothing and the brands that are worn. Kossakowski, Szlendak and Antonowicz emphasize the performance of ultras in Poland. These performances are rooted in class-based religious traditions. Much of this is directed towards a rebellious, anti-authority form of activity. As elsewhere in this volume, localized traditions are incorporated into wider global trends of ultras being ‘against modern football’, commercialism and regulation. Yet in Poland, most of the focus is on regulation of the ultras’ way of life, rather than commercialism as the latter has not occurred to the same extent as in other nations. Performance is central to the presentation of the group and delimits who ‘we’ are in relation to the weaker ‘other’. Like the Dresden ultras in Ziesche’s article, many fan groups in Poland revel in their rebellious, dangerous image. In order to do this, Polish ultras draw on various historical, anti-Communist and nationalist slogans and images that reinforce a particular historical and political narrative and emphasize the ultras as being at the vanguard of unpopular views.

Whilst we can see the influence of Italian and more general ultras culture, it still adapts to local influences. In the case of Ultras Dynamo, Ziesche shows how a specific club identity based within the former GDR can combine with ultras culture to form a specific localized identity. This identity is rooted in being seen as outsiders – chaotic, dangerous, potentially violent and ironically East German. This self identity is carefully presented. Banners are stylized to look threatening and group names refer to hooliganism and violence. It is also presented through social media as the group uses videos to directly address members and attempt to control some of the extreme elements of the group. Social media can act as a way of disciplining ultras, as well as of self-expression away from the match.

Knijnik locates the ultras of Western Sydney Wanderers in the cultural milieu of Western Sydney. Playing and supporting football signified the players and fans as outsiders and immigrants to the older Australians who preferred rugby, cricket and Aussie Rules foot- ball. Significantly, Knijnik argues that ultras provide one of the few spaces for a critical engagement with civil and commercial society. This cultural pedagogy ensures members understand and locate themselves in the broader social world. Being an ultras member is a communal and social event which helps to determine who 'we' are compared to others. The group is constituted through the physical performance in the stadium. The collective effervescence of emotional energy in the stadium helps produce social cohesion and collective identity, not only for the Red and Black Bloc, but also for the region as a whole. This helps reduce ethnic difference within the group, whilst emphasizing the regional difference to Sydney and the rest of Australia.

The ultras presentation of self also relates to the way that ultras present themselves in the stadiums. Rhythmic clapping, chanting, pyrotechnics, banners and choreographies are all incorporated into the ultras repertoire. This approach is demonstrated in Fuller and Junaedi's beautifully written insight into ultras culture outside of Europe. Through their anthropological account of Indonesian football, they take the reader on a familiar journey in a potentially unfamiliar terrain. What can be seen from their account of ultras at Persis Solo and Bonek are many recognizable patterns of ultras culture. There is the passionate devotion to the football club using a variety of chants, flags, flares and gestures, all led by a capo. This broadly masculine group expects loyalty and solidarity. They are politically active and actively protest against the Indonesian Football Federation, FIFA and 'Modern Football'. Their account also shows how global culture is appropriated. Football, music and fashion are all incorporated into this style.

Conflict is another recurring theme. Ultras have become synonymous with violence, particularly as they became influenced by British hooliganism. The role of conflict helps account for the ways in which ultras differentiate themselves from others. The performance in the stadium helps to separate them from their rivals, both local and political. The antisocial elements of ultras culture have provoked the ire of those in authority – clubs, football federations and police. Although many ultras groups consider themselves to be ideologically apolitical, they frequently engage in 'football politics'. This means that groups will protest and campaign against laws and regulations that are affecting their enjoyment of the game. This is coming from two perspectives. The first is the economic transformation of football over the last 30 years that has seen unprecedented levels of sponsorship and television deals that have resulted in changes to player recruitment and many more global supporters of global teams.

Ginhoux's excellent exploration of violence and masculinity within the ultras of St Etienne gives an insight into the hierarchy and roles within a group. The 'openers' look for targets, with 'witnesses' looking on. In the 'background', the gendered aspect of the group sees female ultras on the periphery of violence and adopting 'feminine' roles, such as caring for the injured. The violence is predominantly done by the 'first line' of 'good guys'. Not only are these the most skilled fighters, they embody a specific masculinity exhibited in their clothing, comporment and demeanour. There are unwritten rules within the ultras groups. They may fight for pride, to hurt, but not to maim. Groups who don't play by the rules are not respected. There is no honour in using weapons. Trans-cultural confrontations can cause confusion as different 'rules' are used. Drawing on the work of Randall Collins, Ginhoux identifies how much of the confrontation is about emotional domination of the situation. There have to be significant numbers to retain honour. But most of the confrontation is a performance that attempts to minimize the potential of violence.

Nuhrat's insightful account of çArşı, the most prominent fan group of Beşiktaş in Istanbul, demonstrates the paradox at the heart of ultras fandom. In the globalized corporate world of contemporary football, ultras provide a vital part of the mediatized spectacle. Their colourful choreographies and passionate support help create an enhanced televisual product. Silvio Berlusconi, the owner of AC Milan, who suggested that fans should be admitted into the stadium for free to improve the media product, observed this (Doidge 2015a). Ultras add a touch of edginess to the spectacle – the threat of violence, the aggression and rivalry. This 'fear and fascination', as Nuhrat calls it, ensures that ultras are tolerated by clubs. In spite of, or maybe because of this, there is an intrinsic suspicion of authority, especially the police, football federations and a dislike of 'modern football'. As Nuhrat argues, 'Wishing to be in total control of football as a spectacle, administrators praise or rather tolerate fervour and passion so long as they have the final say in relation to how they can be packaged – in a way that can generate profit for the club'. The capitalist consumption of football will permit those aspects of fandom that facilitate profit, whilst criminalizing behaviour that does not. The desire to differentiate themselves from rivals helps sharpen each group's identity.

Ziesche also reiterates the way Ultras Dynamo attempt to distance themselves from the influence of the Far Right. In doing so, they argue that they are apolitical and their capo, Lehmi, explicitly said that 'all political chants can be left out of the stadium'. Within this call to be apolitical, anti-discriminatory positions are seen as being left wing and therefore have also been pushed out of the stadium. Whilst racism and anti-Semitism have been pushed out by the ultras, sexism and homophobic chants continue and attempts to challenge this are seen as 'political'.

Despite this, the Dynamo ultras are active in 'football politics'. Yet this is not done in a leftish, anti-consumerist approach, but in an antisocial aggressive manner. The stylistic *mélange* of the US is reflected in the reflexive discussion and utilization of various cultural forms of fandom. Influences from Europe, particularly Britain and Italy, and South America are adopted and adapted in the football stadiums of North America. The 'rebellious' aspect of ultras culture permits a different form of sports' consumption. Gerke observes how it sits in 'stark contrast to the unilaterally regulated space of American Football, basketball, baseball and hockey stadiums in the US and Canada'. Like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, the ultras at New York Red Bull have a complicated relationship with their owners. There has been open protest at the way the club is run by the energy drink manufacturer. Forms of protest taken from ultras traditions help reinforce the fans' identity. For some, they protest by only wearing clothing and colours of the Metros era, before Red Bull took over and changed the name, badge and colours. Ultras use consumption as a form of resistance to global corporate football. But this resistance is tapered by the ownership structure of football. The fans only have so much power and this leads to a more pragmatic approach.

Perasović and Mustapić's insightful ethnographic study observes the presence of an ultras' subculture and highlights how it incorporates certain uniform aspects of style, whilst being a heterogeneous group. They discuss the growth and role of Torcida from Hajduk Split, the oldest fan group in Europe, and how it has adapted to the changing political-economic development of Croatian football. Unlike many ultras groups across Europe, Torcida has not fragmented and remains resolutely strong when protesting. The 'against modern football' slogan is often used by Torcida to encapsulate many different aspects of contemporary football including politics, regulation, ownership and commercialism. 'Against modern football' is also involved in images within the subculture, such as flags and t-shirts. Images like old leather footballs and retro images invoke a 'golden age' of football before police surveillance and commercialism. This is all celebrated in the carnivalesque atmosphere around the stadium.

The inspiration of ultras culture is not the only cultural influence on ultras groups. Hooliganism has influenced over the years and the 'No To Modern Football' movement continues to exert a powerful attraction. Another contemporary form of fandom is supporter democracy and this is covered in the case study of Hapoel Katamon Jerusalem. Once again, football politics is a key factor of HKJ. The fans grew disillusioned with the owners of Hapoel Jerusalem and established their own club with democratic structures. This allows the fans a voice to discuss their traditions and strategies.

The group is explicitly anti-discriminatory and runs projects with local Jewish and Arab communities. This political identity is reflexive and rooted in local social relations, yet it is performed through the global culture of ultras fandom. This style helps to create an 'authentic' and 'dedicated' group of fans. Yet this is debated and discussed through various forms of social media that seeks to have an inclusive voice, which in itself, reinforces the political traditions of the fans.

Last but not least, Guschwan provides the only methodological article in this volume. The volume finishes with an article about the ultras where the phenomenon began: Italy. Guschwan gives the reader a practical, reflective journey about being an outsider within the ultras. So much of the ultras is about clearly stating who 'we' are, and dividing from outsiders – rivals, non-ultras, police and authorities. As an ethnographer, Guschwan was not simply an outsider to the group, but to the whole sporting culture. As the dominant methodology in studies of ultras, Guschwan's reflections constitute an important consideration for those interested in the study of ultras. Whilst also highlighting some of the pitfalls associated with this method, he provides an outline of some areas of consideration that will be useful to future ethnographies and hopefully allow others to get a sense of what ethnographic studies of ultras can do.

### **The future of ultras scholarship**

This collection of articles demonstrates the vitality and range of scholarship being undertaken into ultras culture. They allow us to compare and contrast different case studies and see how a global ultras culture, a *mentalita ultras*, is emerging (Doidge 2015a). Yet this is adapting to local circumstances. Like other forms of football scholarship, there is a wealth of opportunities to explore. Perhaps it is the nature of football fandom that encourages a certain commonality in methodology. Ethnographic and participatory methods provide colour and depth to groups. Interviews and focus groups help unpick some of the contestations, paradoxes and conflicts within football fan culture. Yet these are not the only methods that can be used, particularly, as these methods will be influenced by the gender and ethnicity of the researcher. Moving forward, academics need to move on from the predominantly ethnographic approach to fandom and explore other ways of accessing football fans and presenting their world. Social media was a recurring theme amongst the articles in this volume. Discourse analysis of forums and twitter can provide an insight into public debates. The visual performance captured through videos and photos lends itself to visual methods where we can understand the aesthetics of choreographies and protests. Meanwhile, analyses of political and media discourses can provide some critical reflections on the growing criminalization and repression of ultras. Finally, much scholarship into football fandom in general, and ultras in particular, is sociological or anthropological. We need to embrace other disciplinary approaches, such as history, political science, criminology, media studies and gender studies. This will deepen our understanding of ultras and develop

football studies as a discipline.

Despite the popularity and importance of research into the *ultras*, it will not escape the notice of many readers of this special edition that many of the contributors are male. The editors were aware that this could have been an issue and expressly invited contributions from female academics. Some of these were unable to contribute, for a variety of reasons. But what this shows is that there is a clear gender gap in the study of *ultras*. This is particularly true of football fandom in general (Cere [2002](#); Dunn [2014, 2016](#); with Welford [2015](#); Pope [2014, 2015](#)) but seems more acute when looking into a global phenomenon like the *ultras*. Undoubtedly, some *ultras* groups are predominantly masculine. Researchers should be aware of this aspect and acknowledge the gendered dynamic. Masculine fan groups will generate specific forms of interactions, emotions and cultures that arise from their masculine assumptions of fandom. These need to be analysed in order to fully understand and articulate the *ultras* way of life.

The fascination with the *ultras* ensures a rich and colourful fan culture. This volume captures a small number of the great research undertaken and gives an insight into groups from around the world. Despite the local differences, certain recurring themes emerge, particularly politics, both ideological and 'football politics' within the 'No To Modern Football' movement. Other aspects emerge including violence, performances, rivalries with other groups and challenging authorities. We hope you enjoy these accounts and that they stimulate readers to do their own research into this fascinating phenomenon.

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