

FROM DEATH TO SPECTACLE: FOOTBALL'S NEOLIBERAL REVOLUTION

CHRIS W. HENDERSON, THOMAS P. OATES & TRAVIS VOGAN

Stuart Hall's work is foundational, as it is in many fields, for critical sport studies. Although Hall did not direct sustained attention to sport, his theoretical tools continue to make new interventions possible. These interventions help deepen our understanding of the links between the popular and the political. Though sport, like many other aspects of contemporary life, has been, in Hall's (2007) words, "invaded and transformed" by neoliberalism, it does not merely reflect larger cultural trends. It is a site of cultural and political innovation where strategies are worked out in new ways that often lead to change.

Another of Hall's most significant interventions was the insistence on the importance of context for any theoretical intervention. In this brief essay, we attempt to build on the context Hall provided in "The Neoliberal Revolution." Focusing on transformations in commodified football in 1980s and 1990s England, we are guided by Hall's (2007) question: "But what does this have to do with everything else?" We highlight how sport had a central, indeed, constitutive role in this larger cultural and political shift.

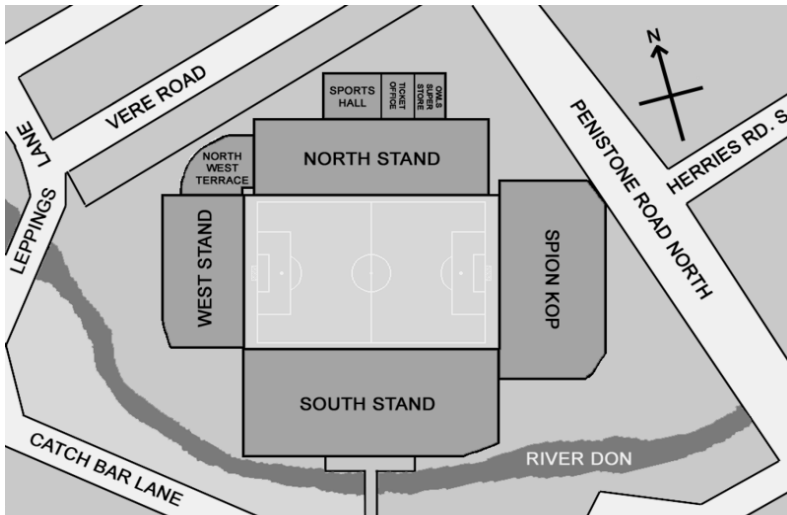


Figure 1. Hillsborough Stadium Plans. Wikimedia Commons License. 27 May 2006.

The 1989 Hillsborough stadium crush that killed 96 football (soccer) fans is commonly marked as the titanic shock that transformed the English game from its insular, violent, and distinctly working-class 1970s and 1980s version to the corporate international spectacle it became in the 21st century. In the crush, at the start of a FA Cup semi-final, dozens of fans suffocated, trapped between fences at the front of the stands and the weight of the fans behind them. It was the most catastrophic of a series of fatal crowd incidents in English football stadiums in the 1980s that were caused in part by authoritarian police tactics and poorly-regulated infrastructure. As popular historian David Goldblatt (2014) writes, the disaster became, “a summation of the many changes that football and the nation had undergone” (44). Hall’s “The Neoliberal Revolution” allows us to consider the crush and its aftermath not as a radical shift, but part of an expansion of a larger hegemonic project enacted by the state and its corporate allies to gain more control over public spaces like football stadiums. As state strategies steeped in violence became less tenable, powerful neoliberal entities re-envisioned the stadium as a class-stratified profit center with the potential to serve their ideological purposes.



Figure 2: Tributes at Hillsborough Stadium:

Thousands of tributes were placed at the gates to the Leppings Lane end in the days following the tragedy of 15th April 1989. © Copyright Graham Hogg and licensed for reuse under this Creative Commons License.

Hall theorizes British neoliberalism as a cultural project dating to the post-war period in which the state ensures the uninterrupted movement of private capital and shifts social control strategies, from 1970s law and order tactics—which he calls “authoritarian populism” (325)—to an efficiency-driven and

inclusive managerial model. When read in the context of this larger conjuncture, the crush at Hillsborough appears as a culmination of two decades of repressive law enforcement and lax government oversight, and as a crisis that opened the way for a new, hyper-commercialized, and more elitist vision of England's most popular sport. Fan violence and crumbling stadium infrastructure would be addressed by the privatization of football grounds through combining enhanced surveillance with novel commercial strategies. The state inquiry into Hillsborough resulted in a mandate that clubs build all-seater stadiums, outlawing standing areas for spectators. This allowed clubs to raise ticket prices astronomically while providing more sponsorship opportunities to corporate and media partners. New construction projects included the installation of advanced CCTV systems, reducing the need for more overt forms of policing. The British state and the game's organizers actively recreated the football stadium as a "safe" place characterized by unfettered capitalism.

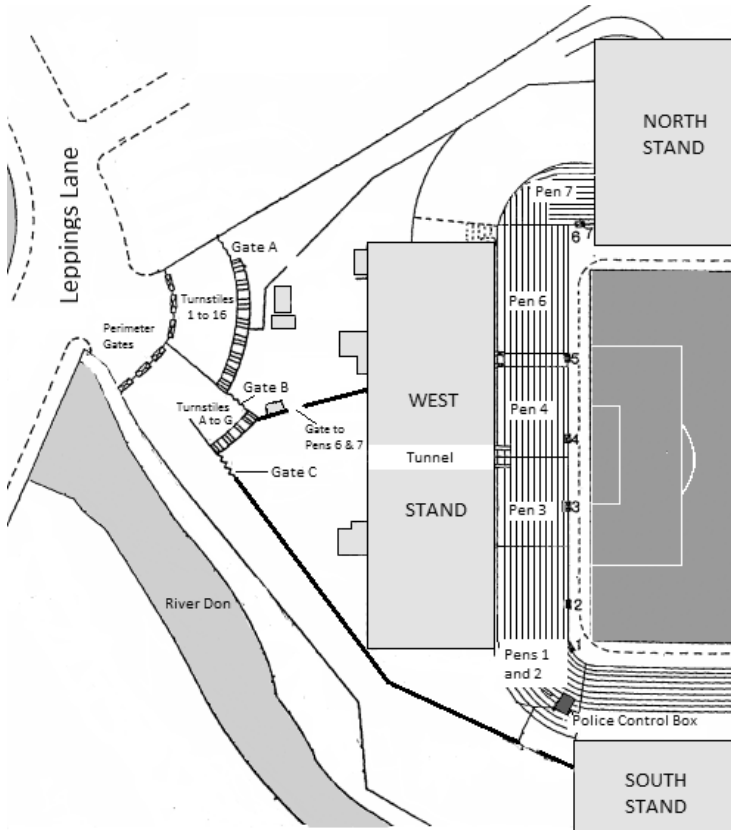


Figure 3: Hillsborough West Side. Created in a Graphics Program by Lord Mauleverer. Wikimedia Commons License. 3 May 2014. URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hillsborough_west_side_1989.png

Authoritarian Populism

Prior to Hillsborough, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government had already identified football as a potent political lever to bring the working classes to heel. The Thatcher government compared football fans with unions and political activists, framing working class collectives in general as, "the enemy within,"—illegitimate threats to public order and individual freedom. As Thatcher's Home Secretary informed the House of Commons in 1985, "People have the right to protection against being bullied, hurt, intimidated or obstructed, whatever the motive of those responsible may be, whether they are violent demonstrators, rioters, intimidatory mass pickets or soccer hooligans."

Authoritarian populism's attempts to contain the working classes found literal expression in the football stadia of the 1980s, as clubs installed fences to keep fans off the field and separated from each other. In stadiums like Hillsborough, clubs created pens in the stands to prevent fan movement. They made little investment in creating safe grounds, and security tactics focused less on the protection of the crowd, and more on restricting its activities. The state did almost nothing to regulate football facilities, even as ground-related fan injuries became commonplace. Most starkly, the state inquest into 56 fan deaths in a fire at Bradford City's Valley Parade found the club had allowed detritus to build up for years, yet its recommendations focused primarily on crowd control.

Police tactics and infrastructural neglect played a significant role in the Hillsborough crush. Overwhelmed by the capacity crowd, the police first forced too many people into two penned sections of the Leppings Lane end stand rather than diverting them into adjacent sections. Once it was clear a crush was underway, officers on the field obeyed pre-match orders not to let people out of the pens. Within the pens, two separate barriers collapsed, contributing to several of the 96 fatalities. The head of the state authority charged with overseeing Hillsborough's safety compliance later testified that regulatory disinvestment played a role in the disastrous circumstances that led to the crush. "The addition of further statutory responsibilities to the already heavy workload of a local authority with curbs on expenditure creates problems," he allowed. "But it is clear that the attention to this important licensing function was woefully inadequate" (Hartley 2000, 67).

Managerial Authoritarianism

The Hillsborough public inquiry, led by Lord Justice Taylor, and the implementation of its recommendations took place as state policy began to shift from authoritarian populism to what Hall calls "managerialism," or, more colloquially, "Thatcherism With a Human Face" (302). Thatcher resigned as prime minister in 1990 and the Tories lost control of Parliament in 1997. When

the re-branded Labor Party assumed power it sustained the steady reduction of the welfare state and accelerated the deregulation of financial markets while quelling some of the more overtly violent actions of the state against its citizens. "The aim," Hall writes of "New Labor's" actions, "is to adopt social democracy from above into a particular variant of free-market neoliberalism" (303). This included privatizing public assets, lowering corporate taxes, and adopting an approach to law enforcement that prioritized enhanced surveillance over brute force.

This shift was well underway in English football prior to the election of New Labor. Goldblatt (2014) argues that three changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s "turned the old theater of English league football into a globally attractive spectacle" (4). First, the clubs moved "the common property of football clubs' identities into private hands in the form of holding companies." Second, by founding the Premier League in 1992, the top clubs freed themselves of the revenue-dampening regulations of the quasi-public Football League. Last, the Taylor report mandated clubs renovate or rebuild their grounds into all-seater stadiums. The report argued that seats would prevent unrestricted movement, guard against overcrowding and make it easier to locate "troublemakers" with the assistance of CCTV.



Figure 4: Arsenal's Emirates Stadium, 22 October 2016. Royalty Free Image from Pixabay.com

The holding companies and the formation of the Premier League exemplify neoliberal financial and legal maneuvers designed to escape regulation and consolidate wealth upward. The neoliberal genesis of the Premier League also provides context for how the clubs complied with the Taylor report. Clubs – with financial assistance from the state – transformed grounds in ways that increased commercial and surveillance opportunities while making it more difficult for

low-income fans to attend. With corporate forces now deeply invested in the sport, clubs increasingly emphasized individual consumption practices at stadiums to provide sponsors with greater visibility and themselves with more revenue. Clubs leveraged their status as representatives of localized collectivity—the deep community investment in rooting for the home side—to sell a rigidly segregated experience.

Following Taylor's recommendation, stadium renovation involved public funding. In the early 1990s, more than £100 million from betting taxes was invested in stadium construction across the country, about 25% of the total cost. Despite this public funding, and although television and non-ticket revenue increased, clubs increased ticket prices well beyond inflation. Fourteen clubs raised tickets prices by more than 100% between 1988 and 1995, topped by Manchester United, which increased them 240%. As the new Premier League altered schedules to maximize television revenue, they further privileged more affluent fans whose flexible schedules and greater access to leisure made them more likely to attend rescheduled matches.

Although fans, particular working-class fans, bore the brunt of Hillsborough and the repressive police tactics in preceding decades, the stadiums built ostensibly to protect them from harm acted as an economic barrier to their participation in collective fandom. After Hillsborough, the British state could have regulated ticket prices, stiffened its public facility safety codes, or given the Football Association support to ensure equal financial footing among clubs. Instead, faith in "free markets" led Taylor to limit recommendations to measures that could further ensure crowd control: seats and CCTV. Many clubs leveraged these mandates to increase revenue. In the process, they removed large numbers of working-class fans from the grounds, not by force, but through subtle changes to the game's commercial architecture. The state assisted private capital's assertion of control over the contested public terrain of the football ground to maintain the trajectory of neoliberal ideological revolution.

With the help of Hall's reading of post-1970 Britain, then, it is clear that the Hillsborough disaster and the founding of the Premier League were neither accidental nor inevitable. Rather, the disaster and its aftermath, including the construction of hyper-commercialized stadiums, were the result of a larger cultural project by the British state and its allies. Hall interrogates neoliberalism by both detailing the particularities of the historical moment in the 1990s when authoritarian populism pivoted to managerialism *and* by making clear the deep-seated ideologies of anti-welfare state individualism and deregulated markets that tie the two eras together despite the change in political regime.



Figure 5: Royalty Free Image from Pixabay.com.

As he writes, “Each crisis since the 1970s has looked different, arising from specific historical circumstances. However, they also seem to share some consistent underlying features, to be connected in their general thrust and direction of travel” (325). Hall helps sports scholars to grasp the cultural context of neoliberalism and therefore understand, how sport, as popular culture, both reflected and helped to maintain neoliberal power through this period.

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