

Football fan communities and identity construction: Past and present of “Ultras Rapid” as sociocultural phenomenon

Philipp Budka & Domenico Jacono

Introduction

Eduardo Archetti (1992: 232) argues that “football is neither a ritual of open rebellion nor the much-mentioned opium of the masses. It is a rich, complex, open scenario that has to be taken seriously”. Archetti's argument is in line with the most recent research in fan and football fan culture (e.g. Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997, Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2007). Because to study fans and fandom means ultimately to study how culture and society works.

In this paper we are going to discuss, within the framework of an anthropology of football, selected aspects of a special category of football fans: the ultras. By analysing the history and some of the sociocultural practices of the largest Austrian ultra group – “Ultras Rapid Block West 1988” – the paper aims to show how individual and collective fan identities are created in everyday life of football fan culture.

“Ultras no fans!” is a slogan that is being found among ultra groups across Europe. Despite this clear “emic” statement of differentiation between “normal” football fans and “ultras”, ultras are, at least from a research perspective, basically fans. So we begin our examinations in the phenomenon of “Ultras Rapid” by briefly discussing anthropological and ethnographic research in football and football fans. We then set forth to present selected characteristics of SK Rapid Wien's largest ultra group that is also the oldest still active ultra movement in the German-speaking countries.

The authors themselves are fans of SK Rapid Wien and have been following the club and its fan culture for several decades (e.g. Jacono 2014). Building on ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, historical and archival studies, this paper intends to contribute to the anthropological and ethnographic understanding of the sociocultural phenomenon of football fan culture.

Anthropological and ethnographic research in football

As Richard Giulianotti and Gary Armstrong (1997) remind us, anthropology and ethnography came relatively late to the study of football and football culture. This was mainly because the first (academic) focus in this area was on controlling spectators and policing football hooligans. Research funding was given primarily to studies in hooliganism and violence in football, which were prominent issues in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the UK. Ethnography and ethnographic fieldwork as methodological approaches were mostly missing in the study of football culture despite their potential “to pay due attention to the voice of the participants, be they players or fans” (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997: 2). But since the 1990s “anthropologists have started to attempt a rapprochement, through the ethnographic investigation of sport's diverse social and cultural forms and meanings” (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997: 3). Thus anthropologists aim to be “credible witnesses”, trying to “decode presumptions and

prejudices” by pursuing the “imponderabilities of everyday life” (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997: 3).

In the context of football culture this means that “anthropology enquiry needs to show how the idealized communion of being a football player, spectator, or fan is attempted; and via this, to consider football identity amongst the various other notions of selfhood” (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997: 4). Doing ethnographic fieldwork means further to engage and meet with the “subjects” of study, for instance football fans, hooligans or ultras. The game of football “distils and plays out fundamental social questions, relating not only to class, gender, ethnicity and age, but also to moral, existential and ontological dilemmas, within delimited times and spaces” (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997: 28). Football and related phenomena, such as football fan culture, therefore cannot be ignored by anthropology.

Within an anthropology of football Giulianotti and Armstrong (1997) identify several promising research issues that we shall briefly present here before discussing a selection of them in detail and in relation to our case study of “Ultras Rapid”. These issues overlap and should not be seen as clear-cut categories.

1) Identity construction and formation is a key issue in the anthropological study of football. In an anthropological context uses of “identity” are basically ambiguous (Byron 1998: 292): “In one sense, the term refers to properties of uniqueness and individuality, the essential differences making a person distinct from all others, as in 'self-identity'. In another sense, it refers to qualities of sameness, in that persons may associate themselves, or be associated by others, with groups or categories on the basis of some common feature, ...”. In this paper we are going to use the notions of “individual identity” for the former and “collective identity” for the latter phenomenon.

2) Community, closely related to identity, is a research issue in which football might be seen as an activity that allow people to seek and create communities with people who actually do not belong to their private or professional social environment. Social relations in football context might be constructed and to some extent imagined across space and time to create what Benedict Anderson named “imagined community” and what Michel Maffesoli identified as “neo-tribe”.

The concept of “community” has been one of the widest and most frequently used concepts in the social sciences (Rapport 1998). In anthropology, three traditional approaches to the characteristics of a community can be summarized (Rapport 1998: 114): (1) a common interest among people; (2) a common ecology and locality; (3) a common social system or structure. More recent symbolic approaches add to these traditional approaches that community is basically a symbolic and contrastive construct: “it derives from the situational perception of a boundary which marks off one social group from another” (Rapport 1998: 115). Communities and their boundaries thus exist essentially in the minds of their members (e.g. Anderson 1983, Barth 1969, Cohen 1985). “Community” in this paper is considered to be a concept “of always positive evaluation and evocation, whose usage expresses and elicits a social group and a social environment to which people would expect, advocate or wish to belong” (Rapport 1998: 117).

3) Religion is another issues that has to be considered in an anthropology of football. Like religion “football involves a ritual around cultural artefacts, that generate symbolic communication with performative dimensions” (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997: 11). The game of football generally centres

on an “affirmation of faith” (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997: 11). And for some fans their club is like an “*Ersatz-religion*” (cf. “Go West” Fussballfankulturen in Wien 2007).

4) Another issue in an anthropology of football that we, following Giulianotti and Armstrong (1997), would like to briefly discuss here is pleasure, the emotional aspects of the game. In conceptualizing “pleasure”, Roland Barthes, for instance, distinguishes between *jouissance*, that is the sometimes violent and uncontrolled manifestation of pleasure which challenges the social order, and *plaisir*, the accommodation of the social order, that is in the European case the capitalist / neo-liberal system. In the football context “*plaisir* is therefore to be found in those who support successful teams, usually through the medium of television, ...” while *jouissance* can be found in the “magical play of Maradona” or in the joy of following and supporting a team irrespective of its success (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997: 26).

5) Football fans and fandom are, of course, an important research issue in an anthropology of football. Albeit “the fan may be an illusionary participant, and the managers, players and chairmen may be the real holders of power”; this does not hinder thousands of fans to enjoy “the feeling that they are important and 'belong'” (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997: 6). Masculinity, for instance, plays an important role in football fan culture throughout the world (e.g. Armstrong & Giulianotti 1999a); “the game provides an access to male credibility” by, for example, learning to use a vocabulary “which has football as an inspiration, and which does not need explanation in the local culture” (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997: 7).

25 years of “Ultras Rapid”: history, identity and community

Fans and ultras

Fans are part and parcel of football, the world's most prominent sport. No football game without fans and their multiple ways of supporting the team, from simply waving flags, clapping and chanting to elaborated songs and complicated choreographies. On the one hand, football officials, the industry and mass media understand fans as necessary part of staging the game, by creating live atmosphere for broadcasting as well as to promote the sport and its commercial products. Fans, on the other hand, are also seen as fanatics or hooligans who are interfering with the club's agenda, damaging it's reputation and causing troubles with authorities.

A survey in 2006 / 2007 among football fans of the two largest Viennese clubs SK Rapid Wien and FK Austria Wien found that football fandom is often reduced to violence and violent behaviour in public discourses (“Go West” Fussballfankulturen in Wien 2007). While violence in the football context is often overstated, the close relationship many fans have developed to the football club and through organized fan clubs is often understated. The survey concludes that differentiating views and approaches towards football fan culture through research projects are necessary to better understand contemporary football and its fans.

In the following we are going to introduce “Ultras Rapid Block West 1988”, the largest fan community of SK Rapid Wien and the oldest ultra movement in the German-speaking countries that is still active,

celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2013. “Ultra” is a specific form of football fan culture that developed in Italy (cf. De Biasi & Lanfranchi 1997). The ultra culture, according to Giulianotti and Armstrong (1997: 16) “combines local civic identity, extraordinary fan choreographies and pyrotechnics in the stands, and the nomenclatura of 1970s Italian paramilitaries and international youth cultures”. The ultras are a “firmly structured form of association” for which support is central and based on visibility (Dal Lago & De Biasi 1994: 80).

Ultras have a strong commitment to their own group also during the week and in everyday life by sharing an ultra culture and lifestyle. This ultra culture is also a “fighting culture” that needs opponents and enemies (Dal Lago & De Biasi 1994: 85). And these enemies are the police, football authorities and other ultra groups. But in contrast to hooligan culture, ultra violence is mainly ritualized. Ultra culture is moreover rich in terms of socialization, group solidarity, folk culture and artistic performance (Dal Lago & De Biasi 1994: 87). Ultras are thus an ambiguous and complex sociocultural phenomenon. Therefore, the relationship between ultra groups, the football clubs and the media is not without conflicts and misunderstandings, as Alessandro Dal Lago and Rocco De Biasi (1994: 83) argue: “journalists and chairmen of clubs call ultras wonderful spectators, when everything is going well, ..., but they call them hooligans when there is trouble. ... in both cases, they are talking about the same people.”

History

In the mid-1980s three young men started the first ultra-like activities within the SK Rapid Wien fan scene. Home made smoking pots, torches and flares were used during a football match for the first time. The Italian ultra culture was the role model for this new way of football support in Austria. In 1987 the first banner with the label “COMMANDO ULTRAS” was shown during an international fixture against PSV Eindhoven in Vienna. The name was inspired by SSC Napoli's “Commando Ultra Curva B”. During the same match, the first overhead banner was presented to the audience at the Gerhard-Hanappi stadium. To buy the fabric for this banner, more than 700 Euros (10.000 ATS) were collected among the Rapid fans at the west stand, the “Block West”. This new, very visible, way of football support caught the attention of some journalists and was later mentioned in a few print media.

Then, in 1988 five people – four men and one woman – officially founded “Ultras Rapid Block West 1988”. Their aim was to introduce and establish an Italian-style ultra culture in Vienna and for their football club SK Rapid Wien by creating choreographies and by supporting the team in an ultra fashion. But it took months and years before this new way of support was accepted by the majority of Rapid fans at the stand. At first, for many other fans these young people with their giant flags, banners and choreographies were nothing else than some nut cases.

In their early years the “Ultras Rapid” actively dissociated themselves from violent behaviour and all kinds of political activities that were both not unknown to the SK Rapid Wien fan scene since the 1980s. To continue their way of support and to establish an ultra fan scene in Vienna, it was necessary to create a constructive relationship to the club and the public alike. The Italian ultra and *tifo* culture was the declared role model for “Ultras Rapid” and its founding members who frequently travelled to football games in Udine, Rome and in particular Genoa. The first Rapid ultras were fascinated by the “Ultras Tito Cucchiaroni 1969” of UC Sampdoria and so they borrowed some of their features like the

bar pattern for scarves, flags and banners. These first connections to the Italian ultra culture resulted more than 10 years later in a friendship with the ultras of Venezia Mestre.

Identity and community

So what contributes to the construction and formation of an “ultra” identity? First, an ultra's individual identity is strongly connected to the collective identity of his or her group. In this paper, we refer to this collective identity of groups as community to which people wish to belong. By following a symbolic community approach we further understand communities here not as sociocultural systems or institutions but as “worlds of meaning in the minds of their members” (Rapport 1998: 115). Second, this individual identity does not differ to his or her everyday identity. To put it another way: an ultra is always an ultra, not only on match day or in the football stadium (cf. Dal Lago & De Biasi 1994).

In his attempt to create a typology of football fan style, Udo Merkel (1999) also contributes to the analysis of fan identity. He argues that certain aspects of football fan culture can be examined by utilising the following three categories:

- 1) “image”: this category includes the fans' outfits, considering the trend to uniformity in the football context, stickers, flags and everyday articles one can buy at football and fan shops;
- 2) “demeanour”: this means the expressions and postures of fans and their body style;
- 3) “argot”: including language, specific vocabularies, football chants and songs.

In the following, we are kind of travelling along some of this typology's categories, but in a rather loosely and open manner.

At least since the 1950s fashion and style have been of utmost importance in creating a sense of collective identity among young people. The fashion style of football fans has always been closely connected to the contemporary youth culture styles and trends. At the beginning of the 1990s, for instance, bomber jackets were worn by all kinds of youth and sub-cultural groups, and of course also by football fans and ultras. Fashion and clothing plays an important role for “Ultras Rapid”. They started to create and produce their own fashion – from scarves and hoodies to jackets and shirts – which can also be bought online. But there are also clothes that are reserved for members and the core group. Again it is the Italian culture that is the role model here; “Invicta” backpacks, for instance, have become an important fashion accessory for some ultras. Having their own fashion style and clothing production strengthens, on the one hand, the collective identity of the group and, on the other hand, create some revenue that can be reinvested in different projects, such as choreographies.

A sense of space, place and locality and the feeling of belonging to a community are important aspects of identity construction, re-construction and negotiation (e.g. Maffesoli 1996, Worpole 1992). The football club is related to a specific locality and this locality often becomes (a symbolic) part of the fan's identity. Fans and officials of SK Rapid Wien often speak of the “Rapid family” and of Hütteldorf, the ward in the 14th District of Vienna where Rapid's stadium and office is located for over 100 years, as the “home of SK Rapid Wien”. These are emotional connotations that become part and parcel of the club's and the fans' collective vocabulary and identity.

Ultras have been keen to revitalise the collective social identity of the locality and urban district where

their club was founded and their team used to play. Thus they continue the supporting tradition of the local fan base that has been influenced and fundamentally changed by different social and urban developments. SK Rapid Wien was founded in 1899 in the working class area at the “Schmelz” ward, today part of the 15th District. So there still is a connection between this specific locality, a working class and migrant environment, the identity of the club and the collective identity of its fans including the ultras.

This has been accomplished through a narrative tradition that contributes, besides different forms of written documentation, to the clubs' and the fans' history and historical interpretations across generations. When such “oral histories” are transferred from grandfather to father and then to son, family-relations and “tribal” characteristics, if you like, come into play. Maffesoli (1996) introduces the term “neo-tribe” which has become quite popular in football fan and fandom research (e.g. Alabarces 1999, Armstrong & Giulianotti 1997, Armstrong & Giulianotti 1999a, Finn & Guilianotti 2000, Stone 2007). In Maffesoli's understanding “neo-tribes” are not the same as tribes in an anthropological meaning; they rather can be friends at the office, sport clubs and also football fans. For Maffesoli (1996: 6) “tribes” are “micro groups” that develop in interaction to a “growing massification” of society. “Neo-tribalism” it follows derives from a loss in a collective subject and a lack of differentiation (Maffesoli 1996: 11).

Pablo Alabarces (1999), by following Maffesoli and by drawing on the Argentinian case, speaks of “tribal football” meaning the process of tribalization among football fans which works through the construction of self-identity, and the negative depiction of “the other”. This tribalization in football culture has an explicit negative connotation and leads according to Alabarces (1999: 81) to the shaping of “essentialised identities”.

The connection between locality, identity and fandom can also be found, for instance, in some football chants: “Die ganze Hauptstadt singt Rapid ...” (“The whole capital sings Rapid ...”) (to the melody of a popular Austro-Pop song by STS “Irgendwann bleib i dann dort ...”).

*Die ganze Hauptstadt singt Rapid,
alle Bezirke singen mit uns mit,
das Hanappi steht hinter dir,
erfüll den grössten Wunsch in mir,
noch einmal Meister werden mit dir.*

*(The whole capital sings Rapid,
all districts sing along with us,
the Hanappi backs you,
fulfil the biggest wish for me,
be champion with you again.)*

Within the stadium it is the west stand, the larger of two stands where the hardcore fans and the ultras reside, also named “Block West”, that is the local epicentre of collective identity and community building. Graffiti, banners and stickers are heavily used to mark this territory and its boundaries. And the ritualised occupation of the stand on match day also contributes to this territorial marking.

Collective identities and communities are also constructed and maintained through the “imaginary” of “the other”, the other football club, the other fan group, the other ultra group. “Ultras Rapid” have a vivid local rivalry with fans of FK Austria Wien. They also maintain rivalries on the national scale with ultra groups of SK Sturm Graz and Wacker Innsbruck, and in former days Austria Salzburg. But this doesn't mean that football fan enemies can also become allies for a period of time, as happened in Vienna in the early 1990s when FK Austria Wien and SK Rapid Wien hooligans joined forces to fight migrant street gangs.

The often conflicting representation of ultras in the mass media and the repressions by police and football officials also contribute to the collective identity construction of ultras as a sub-cultural movement or culture which attracts many young people. A pitch invasion in 2011, for example, resulted not only in massive oppression and bans from the stadium through official authorities, but also in the creation of the resisting “United We Stand” movement that supports fans and ultras. The football fan and ultra culture thus also represents an opposition to the “cultural hegemony” of the ruling system (cf. Vrcan & Lalic 1999). “The fan groups oppose the way in which the official culture presents a system of values, norms, and symbols through the mass media, as the only possible and legitimate 'project of living'” (Vrcan & Lalic 1999: 184). Ultras, in particular, try to safeguard and preserve their identities and autonomy as well as the identity of their football club.

Conclusion and discussion

“Fandom' produces forms of consciousness which are neither rational nor impartial in their modes of thought” (Giulianotti & Armstrong 1997: 8). Emotions are essential for fandom. Football allow men “to act out” a diversity of emotions, from joy and cheerfulness to grieve and aggression. Football further allows for the manifestation of antagonisms which often develop in a ritualised manner. Football fan communities are therefore bound together through the opposition of “the other”. And this also contributes to the repetitive representation of football fans as rowdies and hooligans by the mass media, for example. Football, in general, provides forums for construction, reconstruction and celebration of cultural practices contributing thus to the re-definition of identity (Merkel 1999).

If we look at the history, the different social and cultural aspects and characteristics football fan communities and groups, such as the “Ultras Rapid”, have developed, it is certainly hard not to speak of a distinct culture or at least a sociocultural phenomenon. And we find a diversity of theoretical approaches to continue further investigations into this phenomenon. From a performative approach to culture, which concentrates on the embodiment aspects in the process of identity construction (e.g. Butler 1990, Fischer-Lichte 2012, Stone 2007) to alternative conceptualisations of sociality, such as Maffesoli's “neo-tribes” (1995). The strong and urgent feeling of belonging, individual autonomy that is relocated to the “tribe”, specific rites, rituals and symbolism, solidarity, networks and the tendency to establish closed social units, which results in feelings of difference, inclusion and exclusion, all that suggests that football fan communities have a rich culture.

There are, of course, issues that could not be discussed in this paper, but would make interesting research projects. Among those are:

- 1) the globalisation of the game of football and its relation to local forms of fandom and fan culture, in particular the “glocalisation” of ultra culture and *mentalita*;
- 2) a deeper understanding of everyday life and sociocultural practices of fans and ultras, considering particularly the methodological challenges of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation;
- 3) fans and ultras in relation to media technologies and processes of mediation;
- 4) the commodification of football fan and ultra culture.

Let us conclude that there is obviously much more work to be done to understand the sociocultural phenomenon of football fan and ultra culture.

Bibliography

- Alabarces, Pablo. 1999. Post-modern times: identities and violence in Argentine football. In Armstrong, Gary, Giulianotti, Richard (eds.) *Football cultures and identities*, pp. 77-85. Houndsmills: Macmillan.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined communities*. London: Verso.
- Archetti, Eduardo. 1992. Argentinian football: a ritual of violence? *International Journal of the History of Sport* 9/2: 209-235.
- Armstrong, Gary, Giulianotti, Richard (eds.). 1997. *Entering the field: new perspectives on world football*. Oxford: Berg.
- Armstrong, Gary, Giulianotti, Richard (eds.). 1999a. *Football cultures and identities*. Houndsmills: Macmillan.
- Armstrong, Gary, Giulianotti, Richard. 1999b. *Football in the making*. In Armstrong, Gary, Giulianotti, Richard (eds.) *Football cultures and identities*, pp. 3-11. Houndsmills: Macmillan.
- Barth, Fredrik. 1969. *Ethnic groups and boundaries*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Byron, Reginald. 1998. *Identity*. In Barnard, Alan, Spencer, Jonathan (eds.) *Encyclopedia of social and cultural anthropology*, p. 292. London & New York: Routledge.
- Cohen, Antony. 1985. *The symbolic construction of community*. London: Tavistock.
- Dal Lago, Alessandro, De Biasi, Rocco. 1994. *Italian football fans: culture and organization*. In Giulianotti, Richard, Bonney, Norman, Hepworth, Mike (eds.) *Football violence and social identity*, pp. 73-89. London & New York: Routledge.

- De Biasi, Rocco, Lanfranchi, Pierre. 1997. The importance of difference: football identities in Italy. In Armstrong, Gary, Giulianotti, Richard (eds.) *Entering the field: new perspectives on world football*, pp. 87-104. Oxford: Berg.
- Finn, Gerry P. T., Giulianotti, Richard. (eds.) 2000. *Football culture: local contest, global vision*. London: Frank Class.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. 2012. *Performativität: Eine Einführung*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Giulianotti, Richard, Armstrong, Gary. 1997. Introduction: reclaiming the game – an introduction to the anthropology of football. In Armstrong, Gary, Giulianotti, Richard (eds.) *Entering the field: new perspectives on world football*, pp. 1-29. Oxford: Berg.
- Giulianotti, Richard, Bonney, Norman, Hepworth, Mike (eds.) 1994. *Football, violence and social identity*. London & New York: Routledge.
- "Go West" Fussballfankulturen in Wien. 2007. Endbericht der Lehrveranstaltungen "Forschungswerkstatt", WS 2006/7 – WS 2007/08. Wien: FH Campus Wien.
- Gray, Jonathan, Sandvoss, Cornel, Harrington, C. Lee. 2007. Introduction: why study fans? In Gray, Jonathan, Sandvoss, Cornel, Harrington, C. Lee (eds.) *Fandom: identities and communities in a mediated world*, pp. 1-16. New York: New York University Press.
- Jacono, Domenico. 2014. *Religion Rapid: Die Geschichte der Anhänger des SK Rapid Wien*. Göttingen: Verlag Die Werkstatt (forthcoming).
- Maffesoli, Michel. 1996. *The time of the tribes: decline of individualism in mass society*. London: Sage.
- Merkel, Udo. 1999. Football identity and youth culture in Germany. In Armstrong, Gary, Giulianotti, Richard (eds.) *Football cultures and identities*, pp. 52-63. Houndsmills: Macmillan.
- Rapport, Nigel. 1998. Community. In Barnard, Alan, Spencer, Jonathan (eds.) *Encyclopedia of social and cultural anthropology*, pp. 114-117. London & New York: Routledge.
- Stone, Chris. 2007. The role of football in everyday life. *Soccer and Society* 8/2-3: 169-184.
- Turner, Victor. 1969. *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure*. London: Aldine.
- Vrcan, Srdjan, Lalic, Drazen. 1999. From ends to trenches, and back: football in the former Yugoslavia. In Armstrong, Gary, Giulianotti, Richard (eds.) *Football cultures and identities*, pp. 176-188. Houndsmills: Macmillan.
- Worpole, Ken. 1992. *Towns for people: transforming urban life*. Open University Press.

Visual material

Choreography celebrating Ultras Rapid 25th birthday at the league game against Sturm Graz, 20th October 2013: <http://www.ultrasrapid.at/2013/10/20/sk-rapid-wien-sk-sturm-graz-33/>