Essay

The Politicisation of the Hillsborough Disaster

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Abstract

The Hillsborough Disaster which occurred on 15th April 1989 and resulted in the deaths of 96 Liverpool Football Club supporters was not only the worst disaster in British sporting history, but an event which has left a profound and unhealthy legacy in terms of how the event has been assessed in academia. Those who have published influential work on the tragedy have, for reasons set out in this article, generally been from the political left and have focused upon the blunders of authorities, in particular the police, on the day of the disaster itself. Whilst these criticisms are to a large extent justified, the result has been an unwillingness to put Hillsborough into the correct historical context and as a result a number of myths have been propagated regarding the long term causes of the disaster, with a politicised narrative emerging in which many of the arguments made cannot be sustained under closer analysis. This article argues that not only are many of these arguments incorrect, but that a new approach should be taken in assessing the long term causes of the Hillsborough Disaster and that the period after 1989, during which significant developments changed the face of football in Britain, should not be allowed to distort our views of these long term factors.

Keywords: Hillsborough disaster, sporting history, Britain.

Essay

On April 15th 1989, 96 supporters of Liverpool Football Club sustained fatal injuries on the Leppings Lane terrace at the western end of Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. In terms of

loss of life, it remains the worst disaster in British sporting history. The match in question was an FA Cup semi-final to be played between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest at 3pm. The Leppings Lane terrace had been divided into pens by a combination of perimeter fencing, which had been installed at the front of the terrace in 1977, and radial fencing, which had been installed in stages during the 1980s and ran at right angles to the perimeter fencing.

Between 2:30pm and 2:40pm, a large crowd built up outside the entrance to the Leppings Lane End and crushing ensued. Fearing fatalities, the police opened an exit gate designed to be used only in an emergency or in order to allow fans to exit the ground at the end of a game. An estimated 2,000 supporters entered the ground through the exit gate and a significant proportion of them proceeded down a tunnel that led directly into pens 3 and 4 in the centre of the terrace (Taylor, 1989: 12). These pens were already dangerously overcrowded, in stark contrast to the relatively empty pens towards the outsides of the terrace which could be accessed by alternative but less obvious routes. The additional numbers in the central pens, with no easy means of escape, created a deadly crush.

The Hillsborough Disaster also unhappily precipitated a blame game that has been played out between the supporters of Liverpool and the South Yorkshire Police and has legal ramifications even today (Kay, 2008). The discontent between the two parties results from their opposing views about who was ultimately responsible for the tragedy. The two views can be summarised as follows: version one, championed by Liverpool, consists of the claims that crowd control arrangements outside the Leppings Lane End were inadequate, resulting in a crush that could be relieved only by opening exit gate C, allowing large numbers of fans to enter pens 3 and 4. These had already been allowed to become dangerously overcrowded by the police and should have been closed off before gate C was opened. Version two, as supported by South Yorkshire Police, claims that fans that had drunk heavily and, in many cases, did not possess tickets, caused commotion outside the Leppings Lane End. This forced police to open gate C, resulting in a rush of impatient fans into pens 3 and 4 (South Yorkshire Police, 2005).

In the immediate aftermath of the Hillsborough disaster Home Secretary Douglas Hurd launched a public inquiry into the tragedy to be undertaken by Lord Justice Peter Taylor, a distinguished lawyer with a longstanding interest in football. The Taylor Final Report was published in January 1990 and became an important document that would help change the nature of football within the United

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Kingdom due to its recommendations regarding football stadia. But it did not look at the Hillsborough Disaster itself.

The more important document when considering the Hillsborough Disaster was the Taylor Interim Report, which was published in August 1989, and enquired into what took place at Hillsborough whilst providing short term recommendations for the 1989/90 football season. Taylor's verdict on the Hillsborough Disaster would prove significantly closer to the first version of the disaster outlined above than the second. Taylor (1989: 47) acknowledged the existence of 'an unruly minority who had drunk too much [and] aggravated the problem'. But it was the police who bore the brunt of his criticism, with the failure to seal off the tunnel leading to the already dangerously overcrowded central pens at the time of the opening of gate C identified as the immediate cause of the tragedy (Taylor, 1989: 47).

The most comprehensive analysis of the Hillsborough Disaster to have appeared since is that by criminologist Phil Scraton, who first published his book on the tragedy in 1999. Much of Scraton's analysis focuses on the aftermath of Hillsborough and the legal issues that arose. Scraton does, however, spend approximately the first third of the book looking at the problems of crowd safety and crowd control in the years leading up to 1989 and the events at Hillsborough themselves. But Scraton's work is significantly undermined by his political bias. When discussing Douglas Hurd's account of the reaction of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to the tragedy, Scraton makes clear his political agenda:

However sincere her compassion on the day, throughout the previous decade the policies of successive Thatcher administrations, driven by moral righteousness and rigid dogma, had contributed to the Hillsborough deaths. An unswerving commitment to the principles of free-market economy actively promoted a market-place unrestricted by the state and its institutions (Scraton, 2006: 239).

This analysis is incorrect for various reasons. Scraton goes on to cite a number of other disasters which occurred in the second half of the 1980s, such as the rail crashes at Clapham Junction and Purley, in order to justify his thesis of the negligent state. This analysis does not bear scrutiny as the railways lay within the public sector, whereas Hillsborough Stadium was maintained by Sheffield Wednesday Football Club, a private company. Additionally, regulation of football grounds

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had never been stricter following the introduction of the Safety at Sports Grounds Act in 1975, and the Thatcher governments did not abolish or amend this Act in any supposed attempt to 'deregulate' football.

In the case of Hillsborough, it is virtually impossible to blame an obsession by the government with free markets. The argument for free markets is that consumers possess the power to withdraw their custom if they feel their money could be better spent elsewhere, and this drives up the standard of the product as producers adapt. A problem with football is club loyalty, meaning that a fan is unlikely to stop watching one club in favour of one with better facilities. Scraton (2006: 240) himself implicitly acknowledges this: 'Loyal fans spent their money to risk injury, even death. They had no voice, no constituency and little support in high places'. But fans were able to withdraw their custom and pursue entertainment outside of football, as many did. The fact that Hillsborough was a full house for the 1989 semi-final does not detract from the fact that attendances at football matches had dwindled during the 1980s (Taylor, 1990: 6).

The problem was that most football clubs did not care. The Football League had long been run as a cartel of 92 clubs occupying the top four divisions with no opportunity for emerging clubs to enter this elite group. Promotion into and relegation out of Division Four from its subordinate league, the Conference, did not begin to take place until the 1986/87 season. In the period 1961-86, just five clubs left the Football League to be replaced by five new clubs. In all cases, such demises resulted from financial and administrative collapse. With the 92 league clubs having their status all but guaranteed, any incentive to innovate and modernise was stifled (*The Economist*, 1989).

The most admirable attempt to modernise football stadia in England in the period leading up to 1989 was the conversion of Highfield Road by Coventry City to an all-seated stadium in 1981. The fan power which Scraton insists did not exist was channelled into a local newspaper campaign at Coventry to bring back the terraces, and by 1984 it had proved successful (Williams et al. 1984). The Taylor Final Report (1990: 13) is unequivocal in ascribing the change in thinking over terraces to the Hillsborough Disaster itself, implicating supporters in the same lack of foresight as the authorities. This state of affairs changed in the aftermath of Hillsborough as clubs increasingly

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competed with each other in order to provide facilities that would become a model for stadia throughout Europe and the world.

Scraton (2006: 240) also attacks the law and order agenda of the Thatcher Premiership in no uncertain terms: 'It remains a dreadful irony that in relentlessly pursing policies of crowd control – supposedly geared to eliminate violent disorder – the government, the police and the clubs created the very conditions which, in part, killed people'. The problem with this sweeping statement is that virtually no role was played by central government in any of the arrangements for the safety of football fans at Hillsborough or any other football ground in Britain. In 1975 the Wilson government, acting on the advice of the 1972 Wheatley Report into Crowd Safety, which had been set up in response to the 1971 Ibrox Disaster, introduced the Safety at Sports Ground Act. The Guide for Safety at Sports Grounds, which provided non-statutory guidelines, was introduced in 1973 and was updated in 1976 and 1986.

The Act designated that Hillsborough, along with all grounds accommodating more than 10,000, needed a safety certificate authorised by the local authority (Taylor, 1989: 21). This became effective for Hillsborough from January 1st 1979, four months before Mrs Thatcher and the Conservative Party were even elected to office. The local authority in question was initially South Yorkshire County Council. On April 1st 1986, Sheffield City Council took over responsibility for the safety certificate. Both South Yorkshire County Council and Sheffield City Council were renowned for being radically leftwing and had little time for authoritarian policing policies. Yet both considered perimeter fencing and penning arrangements necessary at Hillsborough (Taylor, 1989: 23), despite these not being a pre-requisite for crowd arrangements at top football grounds (Smith, 1989). It remains an irony that a Ministry that has received criticism from leftwing commentators in particular (Hutton, 1995: 37-38) for acts of political centralisation, such as the abolition of the Greater London Council, is also criticised in relation to Hillsborough for leaving control in the hands of local authorities hostile to the government.

Scraton's argument is further undermined by the fact that he fails to even acknowledge the problem of hooliganism at football matches during the 1970s and 1980s. Instead he dwells on the over-policing of football matches and how there was no parallel in British society to the authoritarian approach taken by the authorities towards football supporters (Scraton, 2006: 30). Whilst Scraton

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may have a point that football supporters were, and to some extent still are, treated differently in these regards to other groups watching entertainment in the United Kingdom, he should perhaps consider which groups in society outside of football supporters have thrown coins that have been sharpened for the purpose at those entertaining them, as happened at football matches during the 1970s and 1980s (Taylor, 1990: 6).

In spite of these criticisms, one should bear in mind that Scraton's work is very much a symptom rather than a cause of the politicisation of the analysis of the Hillsborough Disaster. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the nature of the disaster and its immediate aftermath make it very difficult for those on the intellectual right to engage in the debate. Any rational discussion of Hillsborough and its causes requires acknowledgement of the conclusions of Taylor and the central role played in the disaster by the actions of the police. Criticising the police is not a position typically adopted by commentators from the right, and can be seen in their reaction to the Hillsborough Disaster. The most recent attempt by the right to engage in the debate came with an unsigned editorial in the conservative magazine *The Spectator* in October 2004, and it proved an infamous, ham-fisted farce. The section of the article specifically related to Hillsborough is as follows:

The deaths of more than 50 Liverpool football supporters at Hillsborough in 1989 was undeniably a greater tragedy than the single death, however horrible, of Mr Bigley; but that is no excuse for Liverpool's failure to acknowledge, even to this day, the part played in the disaster by drunken fans at the back of the crowd who mindlessly tried to fight their way into the ground that Saturday afternoon. The police became a convenient scapegoat, and the Sun newspaper a whipping-boy for daring, albeit in a tasteless fashion, to hint at the wider causes of the incident (*The Spectator*, 2004).

As a piece of journalism it is sloppy in the extreme. The reference to 'more than 50' supporters dying is insultingly vague given the ease with which the correct number could have been ascertained. In terms of substance the article is wrong in its assertions. The weight of responsibility given by Taylor to police incompetence as opposed to fan misbehaviour makes the central thesis of the article incorrect, whilst the claim that *The Sun* was attempting to look into the wider causes of the tragedy through its vulgar allegations is risible. The allegations made by *The Sun* that Liverpool

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fans picked the pockets of the dead and urinated on both victims and the police were not only highly insulting, but were firmly rejected by the Taylor Interim Report (Taylor, 1989: 44).

Another problem faced by the right in engaging with the issues raised by Hillsborough is the fact that the debate fits naturally into disciplines such as sociology and social history, both areas in which the right does not enjoy a natural constituency. This means that the right has tended to withdraw from the debate and the left has annexed the territory, with Scraton's work being a prime example of this phenomenon. It is significant that the three most influential ministers during the Thatcher Premiership (Mrs Thatcher herself, Sir Geoffrey Howe, and Nigel Lawson) all failed to refer to Hillsborough in their respective memoirs (Lawson, 1992; Thatcher, 1993; Howe, 1994). The Hillsborough Disaster has provided the left with a simplistic argument that attempts to vilify, respectively, the police for their supposed inhumanity and incompetence and the Thatcher Ministry for its dogmatic pursuit of law and order and free markets. I have already outlined why this view is flawed.

Ian Taylor, another commentator from the left, gives a much more considered response to both Hillsborough and the Taylor Report in an essay published in 1991. In contrast to Scraton, who seems content to strongly oppose any structure for football which incorporates even a modicum of capitalism whilst failing to supply an alternative, Taylor offers a solution along the lines of the corporatist European model which had proved relatively successful in Italy during the staging of the 1990 World Cup. Taylor (1991: 20-21) describes this as 'a planned, co-operative and modernising society with new and efficient institutions and a range of relatively safe and accessible opportunities and entertainment'. With the advantage of hindsight, it can be concluded that Taylor's hopes have generally been realised in British football, although not via the institutions and methods through which he thought they would be.

Football in England has undergone an extensive revolution since the Hillsborough Disaster. Three developments between 1990 and 1995 were crucial in determining its nature: the Taylor Final Report of 1990; the beginning of the FA Premier League in 1992; and the Bosman ruling in 1995. The Taylor Final Report made specific recommendations about the provisions that should be in place at modern football stadia. The legislation brought in by the government in order to implement the recommendations of Taylor changed the face of football grounds in Britain, with the most

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significant example being the statutory requirement that all football clubs in the top two divisions should play their football in all-seated stadia by the 1994/95 season. The Taylor Final Report (1990: 12) encouraged the adoption of all-seating stadia, concluding that: 'seating does more to achieve those objectives [good behaviour and crowd safety] than any other single measure'.

The second major development occurred with the breakaway of 22 clubs from the Football League to form the FA Premier League, which began in August 1992. This resulted in unprecedented efforts to market the game of football and the financial rewards for being part of the elite Premiership group, in the form of the money paid by British Sky Broadcasting for television rights, made survival in the top division a necessity for any aspiring football club. At a stroke, the Football League cartel had been broken. The re-admission of English football clubs into European competition provided additional financial incentive based on performance, with lucrative prize money available from European competitions which were accessed through strong domestic performance.

Such performance was predicated on the acquisition of high quality footballers and the third development, the Bosman ruling, effectively ended quotas in Europe and ensured free agency for players and the proliferation of transfer fees and player wages. To compete in such a transfer market clubs needed to market themselves effectively to both existing and potential supporters in order to maximise revenue, and the comfort and facilities on show at English football stadia from the 1990s onwards were a welcome departure from those seen previously. It was a change that owed as much to the ruthless competition and marketing at the top of English football as to the provisions championed by Taylor in 1990. In short, success on the pitch became strongly correlated with financial muscle off it. But the change was so sweeping that putting Hillsborough into its historical context from subsequent events exclusively becomes impossible.

Instead of looking to evidence from the 1990s to help explain why the Hillsborough Disaster took place, it is much more important to look at the years leading up to the disaster. Hillsborough was the result of long term factors as well as the mistakes and circumstances of the day. The politicisation of the disaster has prevented a rebalancing of the literature on Hillsborough towards these long term factors, with the political left reluctant to look beyond the day itself and the political right unwilling to look at the issue at all. Only by analysis of the decisions taken by the authorities

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in response to the various issues affecting the watching of football prior to 1989 can an appropriate conclusion be drawn to explain why 96 people died at Hillsborough.

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