

The Italian ultras: From local divisions to national co-operation

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The Italian *ultras*: from local divisions to national co-operation

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Abstract

Since their emergence in the 1960s, the *ultras* have become the dominant form of football fandom in Italian football. Their visual style has been adopted across Europe, particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe and North Africa. The early development of the *ultras* was characterised by political involvement. Later the identity incorporated violence and extreme localism. Since the 1990s, *ultras* have been co-operating across traditional political and local divides in order to challenge legislation and assert 'their' power over football. Yet this is only in relation to their perceived idea of fandom, not on issues of governance. Drawing on ethnographic research in Italy, alongside interviews with leading fan-activists across Europe, this paper will highlight the development of the *ultras* and argue that the traditional divisions based on politics and localism are beginning to be eroded. This is being replaced with a more co-operative '*mentalità ultras*'. Affirming Maffesoli's (1996) argument that society is not becoming more individualised, but in fact new forms of association are emerging. More importantly, these 'neo-tribes' are tied to consumption. Fundamentally, these changes are tied to the rapid globalisation of football that took place through out the 1990s. Increasing commercialism tested the *ultras*' notion of football fandom. This has also been challenged by an increasingly draconian approach from the Italian government attempting to control the excesses of the *ultras*. The unintended consequence of these approaches have made it harder for non-*ultras* to attend the stadium and merely reinforced the *ultras* feelings of persecution and justification that they are the authentic voice of football fans. Despite this unified mentality, they are not challenging the

authorities on governance aspects. They are continuing to engage in the forms of protest they have always engaged in, rather than begin a dialogue.

Key Words: ultras; fans; activism; neo-tribes



<http://www.cinquequotidiano.it/cronaca/periferie/2014/05/06/daspo-5-anni-per-genny-a-carogna-napoli/#.VC1mpUvAods>

In July 2014, the *Gazzetta dello Sport* journalist Andrea Monti (2014) suggested that Italian football was at ‘year zero’; it had to start again. This introspection was instigated by the Italian national team’s early exit from the World Cup in Brazil. The day after the Azzurri was eliminated in the first round, a Napoli fan, *Ciro Esposito*, died in hospital. A Roma fan had shot Esposito before the Coppa Italia final between Napoli and Fiorentina. The final is intended to showcase Italian football. Coming at the end of the Serie A league season, it brings together to leading Italian clubs in the Stadio Olimpico in Rome. Unfortunately the final on 3rd May 2014 showcased another side of Italian football. A

confrontation occurred between a Roma fan, Daniele De Santis, and some Napoli fans, including Esposito. Shots were fired in the clash; three Napoli fans were injured, with Esposito dying from his wounds two months later. As a result of this violence, Napoli fans in the stadium became restless. There is a longstanding rivalry between Napoli and Roma fans, and many Neapolitans were concerned for their own safety and the wellbeing of their fellow fans. In the absence of official information, the Napoli fans started to agitate for the game to be delayed or abandoned. Various missiles, including flares, were thrown onto the pitch in order to disrupt the start of the match. The central symbol of these disturbances became the head of the Napoli *ultras*, Gennaro De Tommaso. Nicknamed, Genny 'a carogna (Genny the swine), the capo-ultras was seen sitting astride the security fences. The authorities attempted to negotiate with Genny 'a carogna in order to allow the game to commence. In the end, the Napoli captain Marek Hamšík persuaded the *ultras* to stop, and the game kicked off forty-five minutes late.

These scenes were reminiscent of a similar incident ten years earlier. In the 2004 Rome derby between Roma and Lazio, rumours circulated that the police had killed a child. The leading ultras of both teams pleaded with the players that the rumour was true and that they should not play the match. The Roma ultras (who included Esposito's alleged killer, Daniele De Santis), entered the field and publically tried to persuade Roma talismanic captain, Francesco Totti. Eventually the referee abandoned the match. After the match, ultras of both Lazio and Roma joined forces to attack the police.

These two events highlight a significant shift in the development of the ultras. What is occurring is a *Mentalità Ultras* (Doidge, 2015), an ultras mentality that is unifying members of groups who would traditionally have been considered rivals. Although the traditional local and traditional divisions continue, an overarching ultras identity is forming. This *Mentalità Ultras* is emerging in opposition to various changes in football, particularly commercialisation and state '*repressione*'. It is difficult to suggest all ultras are homogenous; there are many internal contradictions and interpretations (Numerato, 2014). Despite this, there are some broad umbrella protests. Even though they claim to represent the 'authentic' voice of football fans, they are uniting to maintain their own privileged position within the patrimonial structure of Italian football. Ultimately they

are continuing to engage in the forms of protest that are familiar to the movement – banners and violence – rather than constructive dialogue.

The governance of Italian football

In order to understand the events that preceded the Coppa Italia final, it is important to place it in context. Many of these issues relate to the ownership structure of Italian football clubs. The family approach to capitalism in Italy is replicated in football. Early in the sport's development, clubs were incorporated into the corporate family of leading industrialists. This allowed them to extend their patronage to their workers, the local community and wider political society (Doidge, 2015). This is clearly illustrated with the Agnelli family. Giovanni Agnelli established the car manufacturer Fiat in 1899. His son, Edoardo purchased Juventus in 1923. The club has been in the family ever since; the current president is Andrea Agnelli. Elsewhere, Olivetti and Pirelli became involved with AC Milan and Inter respectively in the 1930s. It is clear that through Pirelli's sponsorship of Inter's jerseys today that they remain part of the corporate structure.

The emergence of Silvio Berlusconi in the 1980s extended this football-industrial patronage model. Berlusconi made his money from housing developments, television and advertising. In 1986 he purchased AC Milan. He transformed the operation of the club by utilising his other business to incentivise fans and promote the club (Scalia, 2009). This signaled the entry of many new family business groups to purchase football clubs. The Tanzi family who owned Parmalat purchased Parma. Sergio Cragnotti, the owner of Cirio, became president of Lazio, while the oil tycoon Franco Sensi bought Roma. These new industrialists utilised their football clubs to extend their political connections and to promote their other businesses. The extent of this entangled network was exposed after Italian football encountered a widespread financial crisis in the early twentieth century. The financial collapse of companies like Parmalat and Cirio directly affected their clubs. More importantly the crisis exposed the fraudulent and accounting methods used by clubs and the weakness of the federation at regulation (Porro and Russo, 2004; Foot, 2006). As a result of the familial nature of Italian capitalism, foreign

ownership has not had the same impact as in England (see Millward, 2011). Only Roma and Inter have seen foreign investment.

Unlike the ‘new directors’ (King, 1997) in England, Italian football has not been driven purely by the profit motive. Instead, football provided an important vehicle for political patronage (Doidge, 2015). This has led to an interesting relationship between fans and owners in Italy. Portelli (1993) has highlighted how Italian fans valorise the owner who provides them with success. Paradoxically, they also resent the fact that they are dependent on this owner. Worse, is the fact that the owner does not love the club as much as the fans. This ‘love-hate’ relationship directly impacts the role of the *ultras*, as well as their approach to governance. Furthermore, Numerato (2014, p4) argues that ‘the relationship between supporters and institutions of ‘modern’ football is dynamic and blurred’. This is particularly apposite in the Italian case as owners have incorporated leading *ultras* into their patrimonial networks (Doidge, 2015). They have provided concessions to sell club merchandise or free tickets to *ultras* groups in return for their compliance. In some cases, *ultras* have been used in power struggles between directors (Scalia, 2009). Others, including Berlusconi, buy players as gifts to the fans. The result is that the *ultras* have gained strong legitimacy with the clubs. This led to the former England manager, Fabio Capello, to declare that ‘In Italy the *ultras* are in charge’ (*La Gazzetta dello Sport*, 2009).

The development of the *ultras*

The *ultras* are the dominant image of Italian football. They are organised groups of predominantly young male fans. Although significant numbers of female *ultras* exist in Italy, they do not dominate in the organising committees (*direttivi*) or group leaders (*capo*) (Cere, 2002). *Ultras* support ‘their’ team with spectacular choreographies of banners, flags, flares, and chanting. These features derived from their early development. *Ultras* groups grew out of the supporters clubs in the 1960s. Podaliri and Balestri (1998) distinguished four broad phases of development. The original groups developed in the politically turbulent years of the late 1960s and 1970s. Members took the banners and chants from the political protests into the stadium. By the late 1970s the

ultras started to fragment. New groups emerged in the 1980s that were influenced by English hooliganism. The tragic death of a Genoa fan, Vincenzo Spagnolo, in 1995 signalled a new form of collective mentality, *Mentalità Ultras* that has united disparate groups (Doidge, 2015). Although Testa and Armstrong (2010) call these new groups UltraS to delineate them from previous incarnations of the ultras. This suggests that there is something fundamentally different with these new groups. As the following paragraphs on the historic development of the ultras phenomenon, there are many features that continue from previous eras. Whilst they emphasise difference, the similarities are also being utilised into a collective identity.

Despite the newly formed collective identity, difference is central to the *ultras* way of life. De Biasi and Lanfranchi (1997) call this 'the importance of difference'. This is reinforced by, Archetti (2001, p.154) who argues that 'no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives and contradictions'. Central to this is *campanilismo*, a form of localism. *Campanilismo* literally means the love of the local church's bell-tower. As the most prominent aural and visual symbol, it delineated the local community (Sanga, 1996). Football consequently has become 'a form of extended municipalism' (Dal Lago and De Biasi 1994, p.72). The football club symbolises *campanilismo* and the image of the city. Significantly for Italy, political identity is also important; the political identity of some *ultras* groups reflects the politics of the city (Podaliri and Balestri, 1998; Doidge, 2013a). The local and political influences become entwined within the identity of the *ultras* groups and these help structure the interactions of fan groups across the nation. Dal Lago (1990) argues that team sports divide participants into friends and foes. The 'extended municipalism' has led to friendships and rivalries extending across the peninsular. Consequently, *ultras* exhibit what Murphy et al (1990, p.90) calls 'Bedouin Syndrome' where 'the friend of a friend is a friend; the friend of an enemy is an enemy'. The result is in the early days of the *ultras*, they had enemies who have longstanding *campanilistic* rivalries with the city (for example, Vicenza and Verona, Livorno and Pisa), or political foes (for example Livorno and Lazio).

The differences intensified in the 1980s. New groups appeared who were focused on

violence (Podaliri and Balestri, 1998). The growth of right-wing politics in wider Italian society also saw an outlet on the *curve* ('terraces'). Although the political banners of the 1970s were disappearing, racism and right-wing slogans increased. *Campanilismo* ensured that the city became a small 'mother country' (Podaliri and Balestri (1998, p.95). Outsiders were open to be abused. This was prominently seen in relation to teams from the south of the peninsula. Reflecting the anti-Southern rhetoric of new political parties like the Northern League, *ultras* groups declared that the south was another country.

It took the tragic death of Vincenzo Spagnolo to stop the divisions magnifying. The *ultras* were publically demonised after the murder and the backlash led to the *ultras* of traditional rivals of Genoa and Sampdoria to organise a meeting of leading *ultras* groups (Ferreri, 2008; Stefanini, 2009). This signals a move towards what Maffesoli (1996) calls a 'neo-tribe'. Rather than society becoming more individualised, Maffesoli argues that although old political and social groups are fragmenting, new ones are forming. Significantly for the *ultras*, these neo-tribes are forming around consumption and 'tied by culture, communication, leisure or fashion, to a commodity' (Maffesoli 1996, p.81). Melucci (1989) and Touraine (1981) have also argued that new forms of political identity are forming around consumption. No longer are they based on class-based politics, but are often temporary and coalesce around a singular issue. In England these single-issues were related to economic changes, stadium renovation, and new forms of ownership (King, 2003; Millward, 2011).

In Italy, the *ultras* have also united in opposition to the commercial development of football. Under the umbrella 'no to modern football', the *ultras* are vocalising their opposition to what they see as 'modern', commercial football. Opposition under the banner of 'no to modern football' has taken many forms; including protest banners and supporters' strikes. This provides, as Numerato (2014, p7) argues, 'a common vocabulary and shared experiences enhance the supporters' sense of solidarity and contribute to the development of tactics of protest'. This was reinforced through the development of the 'Against Modern Football Manifesto' that circulated the internet forums of various *ultras* groups in the early twenty-first century. Whilst the manifesto was a significant development in the movement, the majority of the protests continued 'traditional' *ultras*

forms of protests. This draws on the performative aspects of the ultras style of support without entering into dialogue with clubs, federations or government. Ultimately, however, the the authorities' *repressione* of ultras activities strengthen the collective *Mentalità Ultras*, but this helped to focus attention away from issues of governance.

Repressione and the *Mentalità Ultras*

The authorities have helped to help create the image of the *ultras*. Since the 1970s, violence has been a part of some *ultras* repertoire. This has enabled them to be constructed as a 'folk devil' (Marchi, 2005). After the 'derby of the dead child', the media speculated whether the *ultras* had pre-planned the move to protest against new laws that could have led their clubs to enter administration. Similarly, the head of Rome's police, Achille Serra, stated that he suspected that the violence was premeditated. As Cohen (1972) has argued, the moral panic creates a self-perpetuating cycle that necessitates a hard-line approach from the police and government.

Draconian legislation was imposed after the death of a policeman, Filippo Raciti, during a riot between Catania and Palermo ultras in 2007. The Pisanu law was imposed in an attempt to clamp down on the excesses of the ultras. Additional security barriers were erected around stadiums and new regulations were imposed on purchasing tickets. The rules governing football banning orders, Daspos (*Diffida ad Assistere alle manifestazioni Sportive*), were also expanded. The problem with these new laws was that they were imposed under the *Decreto Legge* (Decree Laws). These laws are permitted in the constitution to impose emergency legislation. Testa (2013) argues that these laws bypass parliamentary debate and have created an ad hoc approach to the problems in the stadium. An AS Roma fan and lawyer, Lorenzo Contucci (2010) has argued that a thorough debate in parliament would produce a more beneficial result. In a personal interview he made a similar point about the 'emotional', reactive approach to Decree Laws:

In Italy when there is *confusione* you know, when there is an accident in the stadium, after two or three days you have a new law. It is an emotional law and

sometimes it is not fair and it is not correct. In Italy the Daspo it is done directly by the police and there is no control over it. While in England there is a proposal I think, by the police, and then there is the judge that gives the banning order.” (Lorenzo Contucci, AS Roma and lawyer, personal interview, January 2014).

The authorities also attempted to impose a supporters’ identity card, *la tessera del tifoso*. The idea for the *tessera* was to make it easier to purchase tickets, to verify that fans with Daspos could not enter the stadium, and to allow clubs to market their products. An unintended consequence of the introduction of the *tessera* was to facilitate the continued unification of the *Mentalità Ultras*. Fans of rivals groups put aside their political and local differences to unite in opposition to the card’s introduction (Guschwan 2013). The teamwork culminated in a national protest held in Rome. Despite this collaboration it has not translated into constructive challenges over governance, but focussed on the state and the police.

In an attempt to break the power of the *ultras*, the state has unintentionally helped provide the focus for them to unite as outsiders. As Stott and Pearson (2007) argue in relation to hooliganism, fans that expect a negative response from the authorities unite to protect themselves. This ‘Outsider’ mentality is reinforced through slogans and banners prominently displayed by *ultras*. The police have become the central focus of the *ultras*’ ire. As witnessed after the ‘derby of the dead child’ between Lazio and Roma in 2004, the fans of both sides united to attack the police. This hostility to the police can be witnessed in ‘ACAB syndrome’ (Stefanini 2009). The acronym for the English term ‘All Cops Are Bastards’ has become a standard banner amongst many *ultras* groups across Europe. Others include ‘*libertà per gli ultras*’ (‘Liberty for the *ultras*’), the slogan that appears on T-Shirts and graffiti (Doidge, 2015). The authorities help reinforce this approach. In 2008, the derby between Napoli and Roma was preceded by violence. 2000 Napoli fans without tickets were permitted to travel to Rome and were met with ‘zero tolerance’ from the police. The police reinforced their approach by releasing figures stating that eight hundred of the two thousand fans had criminal records, including 27 with links to the Camorra. At the next match, hundreds of Napoli fans demonstrated

their 'Outsider' status by sporting T-shirts stating, 'I've got a criminal past' (Hawkey, 2008).

The authorities' approach is not just uniting *ultras* who support the same team. As occurred after the 'derby of the dead child', rival fans are uniting and displaying solidarity with one another. This is not helped by the perceived persecution of the *ultras*. Not only are the security measures called '*repressione*', but perceived injustices are reinforcing the animosity felt by *ultras* groups. Nine months after Filippo Raciti was killed, a Lazio fan was shot and killed by a policeman. Gabriele Sandri was asleep on the back seat of a car parked in an Autogrill. Elsewhere there was a confrontation between some Juventus and Lazio fans. As it resolved itself, a policeman ran towards them, gun drawn, and accidentally fired. The bullet passed through the car and killed Sandri. Whereas all games were cancelled after the death of Raciti, the authorities only cancelled the Lazio match. In Bergamo, Atalanta fans attempted to have their game cancelled and started attacking the Perspex security walls that spate the fans from the pitch. Ultras of different club were showing solidarity with Sandri and Lazio; they realised that it could have been them accidentally shot by the police. On the anniversary of Sandri's death, Parma fans displayed a banner stating 'A year has passed, but we have not forgotten: justice for Gabriele'. Similar scenes were witnessed in Livorno. On 5th September 2014, seventeen year old Davide Bifulco was accidentally shot by a policeman as he ran a roadblock in Napoli (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 2014). Even though this was not related to a football match, Livorno fans displayed a banner at their match the following week declaring, '05-09-2014 un altro 'colpo accidentale' in questo stato criminale' ('05-09-2014 another 'accidental shot' in this criminal state'). Livorno ultras were clearly showing solidarity with the deceased, whilst reinforcing the culpability of the state. This solidarity was also clearly on show in the Coppa Italia final. Genny 'a carogna was sporting a T-Shirt emblazoned with 'Speziale Libero'. This makes declares that Genny wants Antonino Speziale freed from prison. Speziale, was one of the *ultras* jailed for the murder of the policeman Raciti. 'Speziale Libero' is beoming a trope of the *ultras* that reinforces 'ACAB syndrome' and unites the *ultras* in opposition to the police.

The state '*repressione*' has clearly not improved conditions in the Italian game. Since the death of Raciti, there have been several security incidents in Italian stadiums. In addition to the Atalanta fans attacking the stadium after the death of Raciti, the ticketless Napoli fans attending Rome, and the delay to the Coppa Italia final, there have been other incidents. In particular, Genoa ultras disrupted their match with Siena in 2012. Genoa was losing to the Tuscan side 4-0 and the ultras decided that the players were not fit to wear the shirt. They started throwing flares on the pitch which led to it being abandoned. The captain of Genoa, Marco Rossi, went over to negotiate, and was ordered to remove his shirt. After discussion with the club's president, the players all removed their shirts. It was only after the intervention of the player Giuseppe Sculli, who allegedly has links to the Camorra, that the impasse was resolved. Genoa's president helped reinforce the authority of the *ultras* by sacking the manager after the match. The Italian approach is confrontational. The state seeks to impose its authority over the *ultras*, who in turn, resist this *repressione*. There is little attempt to engage in a dialogue. The ultras are engaging in the forms of protest that has characterised the movement since the 1970s. Whilst this can reinforce feelings of solidarity amongst participants and engender a collective emotional energy, it does not automatically translate into constructive change.

Other forms of fandom

This confrontational approach has minimised the focus of fans. As the most established and powerful form of fandom, the *ultras* dominate discussions about the governance of Italian football. Consequently, the issues that they consider to be important are the ones that attract resistance. In recent years, the various forms of *repressione* have united the *ultras* to challenge the authorities. More often than not this is directed at the police. Issues like racism are not seen as important in relation to the police and government's approach (Doidge, 2014). The 'no to modern football' movement has built some momentum away from the ultras, however, and this is nurturing a new approach to governance in Italy.

Supporters' Trusts could be a way in which the confrontational approach is broken down. As Russo (2013) argues, 'it will be necessary to work on the football culture to see fan involvement as 'normal', and realise a virtuous model in which the trust movement could be a solution to this crisis'. Supporters' Trusts are a relatively young movement in Italy. These trusts originated in the 1990s out of the Independent Supporters' Association movement in the UK in response to a financial crisis affecting many clubs, including Plymouth Argyle, Portsmouth, and Northampton Town. In a short time, a number of trusts have been established, from myRoma and Verona col Cuore at Serie A clubs to smaller clubs such as Taranto, Arezzo, Modena, Venezia. In 2013, Supporters in Campo was initiated to act as an umbrella organisation for supporters' trusts in Italy. This organisation provided the practical and legal support to those establishing trusts. Significantly, the organisation also lays down its guiding principles to make community involvement central (Doidge, 2015). *Campanilismo* remains strong within Italian fandom.

The challenge for the trust movement in Italy is sustaining a national focus. As witnessed with the ultras, shared issues affecting ultras across the nation has brought them together to contest the changes in football. King (2003, p.184) observed this in relation to supporters' movements elsewhere in Europe when he argued that:

While it is possible that fans can be mobilised on a national level for certain critical developments such as the introduction of all-seater stadiums, it is almost impossible to sustain national fan groups beyond a period of crisis.

Groups like *Supporters in Campo* can provide the centralised resources and the emotional space to share information and encouragement to localised trusts. Significantly, the supporters' trust movement did not emerge from the traditional Italian forms of support; they were established through interaction with European fans in similar situations. This pan-European collaboration is vital in maintaining the focus on governance issues at a local level.

Conclusion

Civic engagement builds on national and local political traditions. The ultras reflect the forms of protest that were originally brought into the stadium in the 1960s. These positions have become entrenched in the face of government *repressione*. Supporters in Campo, meanwhile, reflects the new European influence. Fans are engaging in European networks and sharing ideas. The danger is that the group identity becomes the reason and focus of any form of political action. As Numerato (2014, p14) argues:

formal institutionalization and expertization can enhance the recognition and credibility of protest initiatives. At the same time, the transformative potential of the opposition initiatives risks being weakened as the protests become ends in themselves.

The problem with the ultras is that the *Mentalità Ultras* has become an end in itself. The groups are more focused on maintaining what they consider to be an 'authentic' form of fandom, rather than look to the wider governance issues that are impacting all fans.

The *Mentalità Ultras* is becoming a self-reverential trope that exemplifies and valorises the ultras style of support. Yet this mentality has been solidified thanks to government *repressione*. Fighting the government and police to maintain their own style of fandom has ensured that other issues impacting football are not considered important. Crucially, governance doesn't enter into their idea of ownership. When asking the question, 'whose game is it anyway', the ultras already think they own it and want to continue to assert their approach. As Portelli (1993) argues, they have a 'love-hate' relationship with the owners of their club. They welcome the success they bring, but hate being reliant on someone who does not love their club as much as them. Yet this has never been translated into actually taking ownership. Only with a constructive dialogue, in collaboration with supporters across Europe, can Italian football start to overcome its seemingly inherent state of crisis and begin to build from 'Year Zero'.

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FIISC? And official supporters clubs and Supporters Direct?

Resistance

Outcomes? None Tesserà

Argument.

Coppa Italia final

Ultras Uniting

But in face of government opposition

Casual fans not going (Contucci and Francesio quote) – reinforces ultras conception of themselves as authentic

But they are not trying to challenge governance structures – just maintaining their own space.

Few supporters trusts