

POLITICO

The Linesman

Tunku Varadarajan on Euro 2016 through the lenses of culture, politics, anthropology and the love of the Beautiful Game.



England fans throw bottles and clash with police ahead of the game against Russia on June 11 in Marseille | Carl Court/Getty Images

THE LINESMAN

Why are the English being hooligans again?

Look to present British politics for answers — and also to history.

By **TUNKU VARADARAJAN** | 6/12/16, 9:29 PM CET | Updated 6/12/16, 11:07 PM CET



There was a time when you took it for granted that a crowd of young Englishmen at a football match would cause mayhem. In the 1980s, in particular, the English football hooligan was a species dreaded across the Continent. He roamed in packs, often shirtless in hot weather. He consumed oceans of beer and posed a threat to public order unmatched by the urban fauna of any other land. He held everyone else in contempt, and believed that there was no fighting man on earth to match the English fighting man. He was a Kipling subaltern

of the Thatcher-era, with a buzz-cut and a beer-gut and the cross of St. George tattooed on meaty forearms. Hardness was an end in itself, and was cultivated as a moral virtue. Those who fled from him, those who buckled under his fists and kicks, were beings of a lower order — dagos, wops, frogs, krauts, wogs, kebab-munchers.

Bill Buford captured the world of the English football hooligan in his chilling book, “Among the Thugs,” an account of the soccer violence of the 1980s. His is a book that is worth re-reading after the events in the past week in Marseille, when English football supporters cut a piratical swath through the old port city, drinking, brawling, vomiting, swearing, smashing things (bottles, heads, etc), and giving the French riot police a run for their funny money.

Buford spent months embedded with different groups — or “firms,” as they called themselves — of English football hooligans. “The supporters did not like the stranger,” Buford explained. “The foreigner was the one they really hated.”

“ The English had rampaged through Marseille for two whole days before they encountered any Russians.

The English hooligan — a word in which these men gloried — “wanted an England to defend.” “They wanted a war.” “They wanted a nation to belong to and fight for.” (There is an excellent essay on Buford’s book by David Rudin, published last year in *Howler Magazine*).

The advent of the Premier League in 1992 brought a great whoosh of money into English football, and with that changed the character of England’s football stadiums: new fans began to come in numbers, middle-class and civilized. They no longer jostled beerily in terraces, crushing each other and pissing on the folks in the tiers below, but sat, instead, on numbered seats. With this new money — and lucrative global broadcasts — came the need for new policing. Hooliganism became harder to afford, and harder to pull off. In 1990s Britannia — cool and multiculti — hooliganism also became deeply unfashionable.

So why, after such a long and lovely lull, has English hooliganism made a sudden comeback in France? Only part of the answer lies with the presence in Marseille of other thugs from Russia, with whom the English hard men may have been goaded into combat. And certainly, in the hours before the England-Russia game on Saturday, louts from both lands did engage in urban warfare.

But the English had rampaged through Marseille for two whole days before they

encountered any Russians. So what was it that brought out their atavistic habits? I sounded out two friends of mine who are astute observers of the English condition, one a distinguished novelist, the other a much-lauded Queen's Counsel.



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"They just hate the French," said the novelist, "and have done so for 800 years." This may be in part "because the English ruling classes are French...or Normans," and have lorded it over the country's lower orders — the hooligan demographic — for centuries. The barrister had another explanation. "There are now very few outlets for British male tribalism. Although the economy is doing very well, it is not based on hard, physical work in communal environments reliant on teamwork. The State no longer recognizes any virtue in masculinity."

Britain, he continued, "has always had world-class jobs. The British Empire was built because it was its jobs who could mine coal and make steel, and who could fire guns on ships faster and fix bayonets more effectively, than anyone else in the world."

Britain is not alone in boasting the presence of young male trouble-makers in its midst. A cult of vapid male "hardness" is prevalent in many parts of the world. But only in England is it linked to the thugs' own sense of global superiority. Call it English Exceptionalism. And this exceptionalism explains the slogans of the English yob, which rest almost exclusively of the ethnic and national disparagement of others. "Raise your hand if you hate the French!" chanted the English mobs in Marseille. Can you imagine groups of French or German or Spanish thugs trying such a stunt in the middle of Liverpool, or Manchester? Of course you can't. But the English fan feels quite entitled to abuse the locals right in the heart of the locals' den.

That this is happening now is no accident — and the return of English hooliganism is



An English supporter injured after a street brawl is helped by a rescue squad | Christophe Magnenet/AFP via Getty Images

most interesting, politically. Not for many long years has English nationalism hung so thickly in the air as it hangs right now in Britain. The debate over Brexit has brought out some ugly impulses and even uglier stereotypes. The tabloids — the reading staple, apart from porn and comic books, for the average English job — have stoked a resurgence of ill-will toward the foreigner. It is permissible to say things, and anathemize entire nations — Turks, Poles, the Roma, Bulgarians, Latvians — in ways that had fallen completely out of fashion in modern British discourse. Plumbers, scroungers, prostitutes, gypsies, beggars, terrorists, NHS-parasites, wage-undercutters ... they're all the fault of the EU, which is, after all, in the English demonology, a FRENCH project.

So with beer in their bellies, rolled-up tabloids in their arse-pockets, sun on their heads and Brexit on their minds, the English football fans are ready to riot, to stage their unkempt nationalist theater. It happened in Marseille. It will happen next in Lens, where England plays Wales; and then in Saint-Étienne, unless the French raise their woeful policing game — or England are disqualified from Euro 2016 because of their hooligans.

That would be the most ignominious Brexit of them all.

Tunku Varadarajan, contributing editor at POLITICO, is writing The Linesman column during Euro 2016.