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## **‘You are always on our mind’: The Hillsborough tragedy as cultural trauma**

John Hughson

*University of Central Lancashire, UK*

Ramón Spaaij

*School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Australia, and Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

### **Abstract**

Twenty years have passed since the Hillsborough tragedy, which eventually resulted in the deaths of ninety-six supporters of Liverpool Football Club. This article draws upon the cultural trauma theory developed by Piotr Sztompka to provide a sociological understanding of the localized experience of public grief that has followed the tragic occurrence. The authors analyze the different stages of cultural traumatization with a particular focus on the conflicting emic and etic representations of the Hillsborough tragedy with regard to opposite constructions of ‘truth’ and the attribution of blame. It is shown that while Hillsborough may be a matter of recollection and regret for the wider, (inter)national public, the cultural trauma of Hillsborough for the people of ‘Liverpool’ is far from over.

## **Keywords**

Cultural trauma, football, Hillsborough, Liverpool, social change

## **Introduction**

[T]o experience something so terrible, to be accused of thieving and pissing on police officers when you were in the process of trying to save lives, or comforting people in their final moments, is an insult so deep in the psyche that honesty becomes the key not just to remembering but to anything that really matters in life. And it's honesty that allows me to look other survivors in the eye and know that we did what we could (Tempany, 2009: 20).

15 April 2009 marked the twentieth anniversary of Britain's worst sports event related tragedy. 96 Liverpool Football Club supporters attending an FA Cup semi-final match between their team and Nottingham Forest at the Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield on 15 April 1989 died on that afternoon or subsequently, and over 500 supporters were recorded as injured. Liverpool supporters had travelled to Sheffield by train, coaches, transits and cars. Delays on the journey meant that thousands of Liverpool supporters arrived in Sheffield in the hour before the 3 p.m. kick-off, making their way to their allocated sections of the stadium. The steady stream of supporters arriving at the Leppings Lane turnstiles created an intense build-up with more people arriving at the rear of the enclosed concourse than were passing through the turnstiles at the front. A serious crush ensued; even mounted police became trapped in the crowd and fans struggled to breathe (Scraton, 2004: 187). The police eventually decided to open the gates to relieve the life-threatening crush at the turnstiles. While this action provided instant relief around the outer concourse, it worsened the situation

on the central terrace area. Over 2,000 supporters were steered down a central tunnel leading into the areas known as pens and this led to the crushing and compression that caused death. The police failed to respond immediately and effectively to the disaster unfolding on the terraces and forced those trying to escape the crush back into the pens, from which there was no means of escaping the unfolding tragedy (I. Taylor, 1989: 95). The match was abandoned at 3.06 p.m. and fans and some police officers tried to resuscitate those who had lost consciousness. Restricted access prevented effective and speedy evacuation (Scraton, 2004: 188).

Previous tragedies have occurred at British football grounds, involving a large number of deaths. These occasions understandably result in considerable public upset, including questions about gross safety inadequacies. The initial grief response can be observed at a national level, even internationally to some extent given the spread of both football (the ‘world game’) and British émigrés. However, as time passes and other news items occupy media space, public grief tends to decline. But public grief, defined as collectively experienced feelings and cognitions of loss (e.g. Corr, 2003), can continue at local, civic or regional levels subsequent to the disappearance of any such grief in the broader national context. Such is the case with Hillsborough, where a localized or civic public grieving has continued since April 1989. There are a number of reasons for the continuation of a high level of public grief in regard to Hillsborough, including an ongoing dissatisfaction with a perceived failure of the justice system to hold the Sheffield police accountable for their handling of the crowd gathering on the tragic afternoon. The reason behind this view is addressed further into the discussion.

Localized public grief is suffered by a social group, usually difficult to identify in exact terms and composition. In this article we accordingly refer to the ‘social group’ of people from Liverpool, principally supporters of Liverpool FC,<sup>1</sup> who identify with the public

grief stemming from the Hillsborough tragedy. We regard the term ‘tragedy’ as more apt than ‘disaster’ in its reflection of the emotional pain stemming from the fatal occasion, particularly because the former conveys the idea of the feeling of loss. Hillsborough represents, in Scraton’s (2009: 96) words, ‘an unnecessary and debilitating tragedy constructed out of a foreseeable and reckless disaster’.

Towards a sociological understanding, this article draws upon the concept of cultural trauma to analyze the public grief associated with the Hillsborough tragedy. In particular, we use the cultural trauma theory developed by the Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka (2000, 2004) to explain episodes of social change that cause significant breakdown and dislocation to ways of living. Sztompka’s work – which has become associated with a collaborative project on cultural trauma (Alexander et al., 2004) – examines how cultural trauma impacts on public consciousness and memory. Relatedly, our analysis of the Hillsborough tragedy focuses on cultural trauma as it was collectively felt by those affected by the tragedy. We seek to show how the grieving over the Hillsborough tragedy provides a localized or civic example of cultural traumatization and collective remembering. In doing so, the notion of cultural trauma serves as an analytical lens through which we view local Liverpool culture, and specifically how a city (and Liverpool FC as a potent symbol thereof) and its image and reputation have been affected by the Hillsborough tragedy. Thus, we contend that the experience of public grief from the Hillsborough tragedy reflects a localized feeling of suffering, pertinent to a particular collective identity of Liverpool citizenry; an identity even more specifically associated with a historicized identity of being a Liverpool FC supporter.

The article examines this particular collective experience of trauma by drawing upon secondary and media-based resources, including newspaper articles, documentaries, autobiographies, fanzines and judicial inquiries. The different cultural accounts were selected because they revealed aspects of the cultural trauma experience, including conflicting *emic*

(insider) and *etic* (outsider) representations of the Hillsborough tragedy. As we will show, these conflicting emic/etic representations have a strong local/national axis with regard to opposite constructions of ‘truth’ and the attribution and experience of blame. This emic/etic divide alerts us to the fact that ‘the impact of the same potentially traumatizing events may be qualitatively quite opposite for various groups’ (Sztompka, 2000: 459).

The article proceeds with further discussion of the term ‘cultural trauma’. We then move on to consider how the Hillsborough tragedy has been inappropriately located within a public discourse of ‘football hooliganism’; our ultimate aim being to extricate Hillsborough from this discourse by applying a theoretical model more relevant to understanding what we have thus far referred to as the public grieving over the tragedy. Accordingly, the latter and largest part of the article is given to explaining the Hillsborough tragedy via reference to cultural trauma.

### **Cultural trauma and ‘cultural constructivism’**

Sztompka (2000: 449) deliberately lifted the term trauma from medical and psychiatric discourse as a means of unsettling the dominant view of trauma as an individual matter. As indicated above, for Sztompka, trauma can involve more than the emotional and mental anguish experienced by an individual. In this context, Eyerman (2004: 61) refers to cultural trauma as ‘a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion’. The analytical potential of cultural trauma in regard to Hillsborough and Liverpool culture is glimpsed from Sztompka’s related ‘cultural constructivist’ position. Sztompka’s interpretivism exhibits a direct interest in the roots of action stemming from cultural formations as materially existing entities. Accordingly, he refers to the cultural underpinnings from which the interpretation of events

occur and from which resultant action ensues. The meanings given to traumatic events are not invented, but are drawn ‘selectively from their surrounding culture’ (Sztompka, 2000: 457). This is not to propose a ‘downward’ conflation (Archer, 1988) whereby culture is privileged in the structure/culture theoretical nexus. To regard meanings as culturally constructed is not to deny the import of social structure. Indeed, material impacts stemming from social structure come to bear on culturally constructed meanings in particular ways relevant to groupings of people. For example, poverty may be at once socially derived and culturally constructed and have material attribution and lived significance in both senses. The conditions of poverty arise from external forces and are, inarguably, materially suffered. But they are also materially lived out when poverty becomes a dimension of collective identification symbolically expressed in cultural membership, including that of a football club.

Sztompka regards cultural trauma as a dynamic process that he explains according to a six-stage sequence. Firstly, the structural and cultural background of a group needs to be conducive to the particular traumatic situation. For Sztompka (2000: 453) a trauma inducing *cultural disorientation* occurs when people feel that an event shakes the ‘foundations of their collective pride’ and is often perceived as a challenge to collective identity warranting some type or another of confrontation. The related second stage identified by Sztompka (2000: 456) involves a dislocation for people in ways of routine, accustomed ways of acting and thinking. Such effects will vary according to not only the degree of trauma perception but also in regard to social context. Thirdly, traumatizing events or situations need to be defined, interpreted, framed or narrated in specific ways, drawing from a pre-existing pool of available meanings encoded in the shared culture of a given community or society. Sztompka (2000: 457) argues that individuals ‘do not invent meanings, but rather draw them selectively from their surrounding culture and apply them to the potentially traumatizing events’.

The fourth stage in Sztompka's (2000: 457) sequence involves the necessary occurrence of traumatic symptoms that disrupt 'normality and regularity'. Here Sztompka explicitly shows his Durkheimian hand, declaring cultural trauma a 'social fact'; its wounds affect people collectively and it must not, therefore, be diagnosed in terms of an 'individual psychological predicament'. Fifthly, Sztompka (2000: 459) notes that culturally traumatic events will be responded to differently according to the particular sensitivities of social groups. Such groups may be constituted by memberships with varying bases of communal identity, including identities of place based in region and locality. The final stage in the trauma sequence concerns how trauma is collectively coped with by sufferers. Sztompka (2000: 461) acknowledges that there can be a range of responses depending upon the perceptual outcomes of the interpretative process. Via Merton and Giddens he distinguishes active, constructive adaptations from passive adaptations, and focuses on the possibilities of re-adaptation to a feeling of normality.

### **Cultural disorientation: Hillsborough, Heysel and 'football hooliganism'**

Sztompka (2000: 453) notes that 'the conditions for cultural trauma are ripe when there appears some kind of disorganization, displacement, or incoherence in culture – in other words, when the normative and cognitive context ... becomes diversified or even polarized into opposite cultural complexes'. The Hillsborough tragedy caused a nationwide shock and outrage not only because of the objective severity of the event but also because it fed into a pre-existing climate of public fear and anxiety over football hooliganism. A moral panic about football hooliganism can be said to have existed in England since the late 1960s (Hall, 1978; Tsoukala, 2008). The moral panic pertinent to the perceived behaviour of English football fans reached a particular climax following the Heysel stadium disaster in Brussels on

29 May 1985 (Young, 1986; Spaaij, 2006). This occurred when Liverpool FC met the Italian football club Juventus in the European Cup final. Thirty-nine individuals in attendance of the match, mainly supporters of Juventus, died when a perimeter wall collapsed under the weight of people scaling it for the purpose of escaping rampaging Liverpool FC supporters, who had forced their way into a supposedly 'neutral' area that was almost totally occupied by Juventus supporting spectators.

In the aftermath of the tragedy Liverpool FC fans were held totally to blame for the deaths, their culpability decided by the European officiating football body UEFA and conferred by the British Prime Minister of the time, Margaret Thatcher, who pressured the English Football Association (FA) chairman to deny English clubs places within European based competitions. Subsequently, both UEFA and the world governing football body FIFA proposed bans, resulting in an agreement that English club teams would not compete in European matches for a period of five years. Liverpool FC was initially to be suspended for a further three years, but this penalty was subsequently reduced to an additional one year. By the end of 1989 manslaughter charges had been laid against over twenty Liverpool FC supporters for the deaths at Heysel. It is not for here to adjudicate on how justice was meted out to those deemed guilty, but undeniably, the alacrity with which they were brought before the law is consistent with a 'moral panic' process (Cohen, 2002) focussed on holding the deviant to public account. The reputation of Liverpool FC supporters and, indeed, the city of Liverpool, was dented by the Heysel tragedy. Although 'there were numerous untruths and small injustices in the official reactions and in the media coverage' surrounding Heysel, defending Liverpool at the time was not opportune; 'silence and condolence were the only appropriate responses' (Du Noyer, 2007: 178-9). However, this tended to establish a guilt precedent within the national consciousness and when the Hillsborough tragedy occurred, a

number of public commentators were ready to hold Liverpool accountable once again, as outlined further on in this article.

The ‘football hooligan’ discourse has not disappeared from the public domain (e.g. Tsoukala, 2008; Spaaij, 2006). The British press remains ready to remind readers, when opportunity arises, of the hooligan menace still lurking about the urban backstreets if not on the bygone football terrace. The FA’s quest to develop a formalized fan group, based in ‘disinfected commitment’ and ‘contained partisanship’ (Clarke, 1978), via a regulated screening process, also reflects fear of the lingering hooligan element. The FA’s initiatives to monitor and control who supports the England national men’s football team ‘reflect the tired stereotype of the English football hooligan’, which marginalizes an imagined rough, white, working class male as deviant, ‘symbolically guilty until proven otherwise’ (Hughson and Poulton, 2008: 517). The spectre of the hooligan, so imagined, played a role in the ‘societal reaction’ to the tragedy at Hillsborough; in particular the responses by the media and the police. In turn, the rejection of blame by those traumatically affected was a reasonable denial of hooliganism being applicable to what happened at Hillsborough and to the blanket stereotype implied for Liverpool FC supporters.

Although it cannot be argued that the football hooligan stereotype has a certain Liverpool ascription, it is relevant to reflect upon how the stereotype may have a particular Liverpool pertinence. This is to see the stereotype resonating with two dimensions of Liverpool’s social history, poverty and Irish ethnicity. In its Edwardian heyday, Liverpool was heralded as the ‘Florence of the North’ (Belchem, 2000, xi) but accompanying large-scale migration from Ireland the city suffered industrial and economic decline that continued throughout the twentieth century (Harris, 1969: xii).<sup>2</sup> The origin of the term ‘hooligan’ is assumed to be traceable to a notorious Irish family named Hoolihan that lived in Southwark, London in the late 1800s. Although hooliganism may be referred to as the ‘English disease’,

this original Irish association of the term may promote an unwitting readiness for the English to perceive the football hooligan variant as an enemy within. Liverpool, with its history of Irish migration provided a ready scapegoat for collective blame when the hooligan problem reached its perceived nadir in the 1980s. The involvement of football fans from Liverpool in the tragedy at Heysel gave perfect opportunity for the confirmation to this stereotype. When the tragedy at Hillsborough occurred some four years later, the collective psyche was prepared to receive the (etic) media representation of the deaths and injury being caused by hooligan-like behaviour. The anti-Liverpool media reaction to the Hillsborough tragedy is discussed further under the subsequent section pertaining to stage four of the cultural trauma process.

### **Hillsborough and cultural ‘dislocation’**

Sztompka’s second stage of cultural trauma, involving an experience of ‘dislocation’ whereby the ‘life-world’ of people is changed in ‘often dramatic ways’ (Sztompka, 2000: 456) is most relevant to the Hillsborough tragedy. The experience of dislocation varied from person-to-person, family-to-family and was influenced by their own particular association with the tragedy. Prior to the twentieth anniversary of Hillsborough, *The Observer Magazine* supplement (15 March 2009: 20-33) featured a number of interviews with people differently associated with the tragedy in which each discussed how their lives had been variously affected. Most of the interviews are emotionally challenging to read. However, although ‘dislocation’ is easy enough to identify in these personal accounts, identification of ‘dislocation’ in a collective way is more difficult. Relevant to the ‘dislocation’ of a cultural routine associated with football supporting is the impact that the Hillsborough tragedy had on the place of the sport within people’s lives. The immediate comments after the event about

the relative insignificance of football (e.g. *Sunday Echo*, 16 April 1989: 13) are indicative and some Liverpool FC supporters still claim to have never attended a match since Hillsborough. And even for those who have, Hillsborough has impacted on the routine nature of their experience. According to Williams (2009), the Hillsborough tragedy has ‘become embedded into the very identity of the club and its new generation of supporters’; Liverpool matches, home and away, involve the ‘ritual distribution’ of Hillsborough related items, notably those associated with the Hillsborough Justice campaign. Supporter led ceremonies of remembrance frequently occur on certain match days, particularly during FA Cup ties. In short, they have become part of a post-Hillsborough routine.

Viewed in relation to the nationwide moral panic over football hooliganism and the perceived anti-Liverpool discourse, cultural dislocation can be witnessed in relation to Hillsborough mainly in regard to the upset brought on by media reportage and the attack upon Liverpool identity, and reveals the polarization of etic and emic representations in the cultural framing of the Hillsborough tragedy. The ‘confrontation’ of this attack has been marked by a dignity bereft in the accusers. The concern has largely remained with honouring the deceased rather than announcing it was not our fault. That type of statement has been left to those well-placed such as the manager of Liverpool at the time of the Hillsborough tragedy Kenny Dalglish – an adopted son of Liverpool but not from or of Liverpool – who from the time of the event has not only defended Liverpool supporters and the associated community against blame for the tragedy but praised them for subsequent responses to the event (Dalglish, 1997). The public displays of mourning for the deceased immediately after Hillsborough and subsequently, have maintained a defiance of blame and also a symbolic display of the continuation of a ‘collective pride’ in the knowledge that such display may well result in rehearsed if unwarranted criticisms of ‘self-pity’ and mawkishness.

## **The cultural framing of Hillsborough: constructions of ‘truth’**

The third stage of cultural trauma proposed by Sztompka – emphasising ‘a pre-existing pool of available meanings’ – relates to the notion of collective memory. Original use of the term ‘collective memory’ is usually attributed to Maurice Halbwachs, who, writing in the 1920s, contended, ‘it is in society that people normally acquire their memories ... [and] that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories’ (Halbwachs, 1992: 38). Building of collective memory involves the trading of narratives, usually across generations. Some narratives may be purely folkloric in character, others connected to the ‘realities’ of external social impact as endured by group members at different points in time. Within the collective memory-making process, the narrative has ‘power’ in that it serves to ‘legitimize’ preferred interpretations of the present, be this at the group or societal level (Fentress and Wickham, 1992: 88). A particularized form of collective memory is the ‘vernacular memory’, as identified by Bodnar (1992: 14-15). Vernacular memory pertains to more localized memory formations through which holders perceive themselves as collectively marginalized from an apparent cultural consensus working at the level of nation via the mass media. The terms are very relevant to Hillsborough. The etic representation of the national tragedy conflicted with the localized feeling of suffering of people from Liverpool and triggered their pre-existing perceptions of an anti-Liverpool bias existing in other parts of England.

Considered accounts of the Hillsborough tragedy inevitably highlight the appallingly callous front page of the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* published on 19 April 1989, 4 days after the tragedy. Under a capitalized banner heading ‘THE TRUTH’, appeared the claims: ‘Some fans picked pockets of victims’; ‘Some fans urinated on the brave cops’; ‘Some fans beat up PC giving kiss of life’. This reportage so aggrieved in Liverpool that John Williams (2009) could write ahead of the twentieth anniversary of the Hillsborough tragedy, ‘*The Sun* is still

satisfyingly blackballed in the city'. Subsequent attempts by the newspaper to offer apology for 'the truth' claims and declare them a mistake have been unsuccessful, and not helped by the responsible editor's admission that any subsequent apology from *The Sun* is motivated by the want to revive market popularity in Liverpool (Herbert, 2006). Unfortunately, *The Sun's* account of the Hillsborough tragedy was not anomalous. Scraton (2004) notes a number of media commentaries in which fellow Liverpool FC fans were explicitly blamed for the deaths that occurred in the Leppings Lane end. The customarily controversial Brian Clough, who was the manager of Nottingham Forest, the Liverpool team's rival on the fateful afternoon, declared on national television that 'Liverpool people had killed Liverpool people'. A close to identical claim is made in his autobiography (Clough, 1994: 260). When Liverpool City Council called for a boycott of this publication, Clough responded dismissively, 'half of them can't read and the other half are pinching hub caps' (Scraton, 2004: 196).

Clough's claim was based on the unsubstantiated assumption that the fatal 'human crush' at Hillsborough was caused by ticket-less Liverpool FC supporters gate-crashing their way into the Leppings Lane end just prior to kick-off. This view was repudiated by Lord Justice Taylor (1989: 44) in his interim report into the Hillsborough tragedy. Taylor presented an appropriately worded, but nevertheless stinging, rebuke to both the media and the South Yorkshire Police for blaming the crush on late-arriving drunken Liverpool supporters and for venting the type of allegations that appeared on the abovementioned front page of *The Sun*. Liverpool supporters were exonerated from any blame for the tragedy, which Taylor attributed to both the safety inadequacy of the section of the Hillsborough stadium where the deaths occurred and to a complete mishandling of the emergency situation that quickly developed around match time.

Williams (2009) has recently warned against this public exoneration turning into a counter-glossing of the behaviour of Liverpool supporters, such as he recognizes in the

Jimmy McGovern written drama/documentary *Hillsborough*, which appeared on the ITV television network in 1996. Williams, who is himself a staunch Liverpool supporter but also a prominent academic researcher writing on football and football hooliganism for three decades, claims, ‘in McGovern’s account it seemed as if no Reds supporter had had a drink that day and that there were absolutely no problems at all concerning the behaviour of some supporters’. Williams goes on to suggest that the tight fencing of the terraced area that proved so injurious was there because of a real and not imagined problem with hooliganism. This, he says, ‘was also part of “the truth”’. Williams has a point, but McGovern’s *Hillsborough* must be read within the context of its creation and in regard to statements of intent by McGovern himself. *Hillsborough* presented a Liverpool perspective of the tragedy to a wider UK audience. McGovern was inspired to write *Hillsborough* after being approached by two mothers who lost children at Hillsborough (McGovern, 2004). McGovern tells of how he conducted long and ‘gut-wrenching’ interviews with the families of the deceased. He was so appalled during these interviews in rehearsing the ‘lies and incompetence’ of the South Yorkshire Police that he began to question his objective capacity to present a fair account of events in writing the script. As such, he called in an experienced producer to go over his writing and to challenge his portrayal with any ‘new evidence’ that could be found. This is not to suggest that McGovern’s key intention was even-handedness, he makes it clear that he wrote *Hillsborough* on behalf of ‘the victims or their families’, to ‘empower the powerless’. But in so doing, it was important not to exaggerate the malfeasance and calumny of the police, an appearance of balance was necessary.

Given his stated intention, it is not surprising that McGovern did not give view to the minority of Liverpool supporters who allegedly entered the Leppings Lane end in various states of alcoholic intoxication. Alcohol consumption, disputably (Dunning, 2000: 151), has been regarded as a behaviour associated with football hooliganism, so to feature it in

*Hillsborough* would have risked a semiotic triggering of the football hooligan stereotype, precisely the interpretation of events that McGovern wanted to help finally dismantle. As well as being concerned with honouring the deceased and the heroic efforts of those Liverpool supporters who did their best to help their fellows, *Hillsborough* is a polemic and in its preparation McGovern was also aware of the ongoing legal challenges being mounted in the pursuit of justice for the deceased. Such circumstances heightened the need for distance from any possible symbolic association with hooliganism. McGovern's polemical intent was sharpened by his view that by the 1980s, white working class football supporting males were readily adjudged as 'racist, homophobic and sexist', prior to any other consideration being given to their persona (Hari, 2002). Within intellectual life and the arts, this resulted in this social category becoming a 'neglected group', with more dire consequences extending to the inhabited social domain. According to McGovern, 'it was this neglect of working class men by both the right and the left that led to Hillsborough. You could have police treating them like utter shit...they thought we were scum, so they could get away with any lies.'<sup>3</sup>

McGovern's slippage in the above sentence from 'them' to 'we' is revealing. In various interviews McGovern identifies strongly with his own Liverpool background, within the Irish-Catholic, working class community and as a life-long supporter of Liverpool FC. As such, he is positioned as an ethnographic insider and this arguably results in a particularly empathetic rendering in *Hillsborough* of the grief suffered in Liverpool. *Hillsborough* went to air in December 1996 some five months prior to the election of the New Labour government. It created quite a media stir especially in regard to a revelation of further police deception involving CCTV camera surveillance of the 'pens' where the deaths had occurred at the Leppings Lane end (Scraton, 2009: 162). Police had claimed the relevant camera to be faulty but *Hillsborough* featured the account of a Sheffield Wednesday video technician employed at the ground – his original statement had not been presented to the Taylor Inquiry – who

contended that the camera in question was in full working order, therefore affording the police video monitoring of the imperilled location. The extent to which this ‘new evidence’ and the *Hillsborough* television program overall influenced the incoming Home Secretary to conduct an ‘independent judicial scrutiny’ is a moot point. The ‘scrutiny’ that transpired was of limited remit and, as it turned about, very unlikely to result in criminal proceedings against the South Yorkshire Police. But, as noted, *Hillsborough* presented a Liverpool perspective of the tragedy to a wider UK audience in a way that had not previously been registered (Scraton, 2009: 161).

### **Traumatic symptoms: Hillsborough and ‘Liverpool exceptionalism’**

In the fourth stage of his cultural trauma model, Sztompka (2000: 458) emphasizes, ‘trauma is a *collective phenomenon*’, a ‘social fact’ à la Durkheim. Although the experiential outcomes of the Hillsborough tragedy were different from person to person and family to family, the ‘cultural trauma’ which impacted upon these outcomes has a collective materiality. This is not to downplay the significance and peculiarity of personal ordeal but to identify the collective dimension of grief, articulated by very mention of the word ‘Hillsborough’, as a culturally suffered wound. The ongoing ‘Justice for the 96’ campaign and related communal displays evince the continuation of the *cultural* trauma of Hillsborough and collective forms of response. Brennan’s (2008: 341) study of condolence books shows that even the most personal of responses to Hillsborough – many making reference to Liverpool identity and related iconography – evince a social bond.

Indeed, Liverpudlians’ responses to Hillsborough give an indication of the deep sense of disruption of normality and regularity, as well as of a strong collective bond. Boyle (2001) explains the outpouring of public grief in the city of Liverpool in terms of the combined

influence of the traditions and rituals of its Irish-Catholic-descendant working class, the centrality that football occupies in the city's sense of identity, and the marginal position of the city in the political and cultural life of English society. For Boyle (2001: 44), 'one of the dominant characteristics of the mourning which took place in the city was that it was public, much of it spontaneously organized and centred around both traditional places of mourning ... and Anfield, the home of Liverpool FC.' Boyle argues that a particular devotion to a club and its ground was never more pronounced than in Liverpool in the days and weeks after Hillsborough:

The overwhelming post-Hillsborough sense in Liverpool was of a city pulling together to grief for its own: Protestants and Catholics attending services together, with the unique sight of professional football players and fans helping and supporting each other at services and funerals. It represented a unique moment in the history of the city, and, it could be argued, produced a city-wide solidarity the like of which is rarely seen in contemporary urban Britain (Boyle, 2001: 48).

However, the interpretation of Hillsborough as affecting the collectivity and as being experienced in the city of Liverpool again raises the issue of conflicting emic/etic representations which may aggravate the traumatizing effects of the tragedy and touch the core of Liverpool identity. The type of emic perspective presented by *Hillsborough* remains significant in light of an ongoing journalistic tendency to associate Hillsborough with subsequent public tragedies occurring in or related to Liverpool. Following the murder of two-year-old James Bulger by two ten-year-old boys in Liverpool in 1993 *The Guardian* (20 February 1993) ran the headline 'HEYSEL, HILLSBOROUGH AND NOW THIS' (Scruton, 2009: 251). Once the citizenry of Liverpool had been perceived to resent such depiction,

journalistic vitriol was turned upon them. Ian Jack (*Independent on Sunday*, 28 February 1993) accused Liverpudlians of evoking a ‘peculiar kind of martyrdom [which] has become part of the municipal character’ (Scraton, 2009: 251). Jonathan Margolis (*Sunday Times*, 28 February 1993) referred to Liverpool as ‘self-pity city’ and claimed ‘Liverpool culture seems ... to combine defeatism and hollow-cheeked depression with a cloying mawkishness’ (Scraton, 2009: 251). Although these articles – Jack’s explicitly – acknowledge that blame for the tragedy at Hillsborough is not attributable to Liverpool people, both promote a type of collective self-fulfilling prophecy that followed the appalling media reportage subsequent to 15 April 1989, whereby to respond with hurt or outrage to negative labelling can be interpreted as confirmation of that label.

Reason for the seeming desire by a series of commentators to lambaste Liverpool when opportunity arises can only be speculated upon. Perhaps Liverpudlians were deemed too cocky from the Edwardian heyday and resultantly, satisfied expressions of how the mighty have fallen, even if sometimes made subconsciously, prevail. Given the size and historical association of the Irish-Catholic community with Liverpool, anti-Irishness may lurk within the wont to criticize the city (cf. Davie, 1993). The possibilities are there to be seen in some of the public discourse related to Hillsborough. The staple racism of anti-Irish humour, the Irishman as idiot, found its way into a pejorative Liverpool stereotype as enunciated by Brian Clough in his post-Hillsborough rant quoted earlier. The self-pity theme may also be rooted in an anti-Irish mindset; the collective ‘self-pity’ of a city’s people regarded symbolically as a public expression of Catholic self-flagellation. Following the execution by beheading of Liverpool-born hostage Ken Bigley in October 2004, *The Spectator* magazine, under the editorship of Boris Johnson, ran an editorial critical of ceremonies of reverence in respect of Mr Bigley, citing them as yet another expression of public ‘victimhood’ in Liverpool (Scraton, 2009: 252). The editorial claimed that Liverpudlians ‘see themselves

whenever possible as victims...resent their victim status; yet at the same time they wallow in it'. It goes on to ascribe to Liverpoolians, a readiness to blame others for their problems and an accompanying reluctance to accept their own degree of responsibility for the same. In this regard, the editorial made explicit reference to the Hillsborough tragedy, rehearsing the contemptible allegations about drunken supporters causing the deaths. Although Johnson publicly apologized for the inaccuracy and bad taste of *The Spectator* editorial, that such a commentary was made highlights, as Phil Scraton (2009: 253) has argued, 'the depth and permanence of the myths of Hillsborough'.

The Liverpool 'exceptionalism' case put by Belchem (2000) and others suggests the existence of a 'collective memory' of that city and its people sitting apart from the rest of England. The outside, especially southern England, tendency of criticism as carried by both the broadsheet and tabloid press was somewhat anticipated following the Hillsborough tragedy. This was especially so given the blame attributed to Liverpool FC supporters for the deaths that occurred in the Heysel stadium tragedy in 1985. As seen in this article, the facile conflation of Heysel and Hillsborough as episodes in a 'football hooliganism' narrative has been irresistible to some critics. As further seen, the confrontation of these narratives, by those who felt targeted and obliged to take a defensive position against them, has led to the further criticism, in keeping with a pejorative stereotype, of characteristic Liverpoolian collective self-pity. However, the externally constructed prejudice is repeatedly met with an internally constructed response, which in some ways exhibits a reflexive reclamation of the stereotype. This is especially apparent on football match days when the Hillsborough tragedy is at once commemorated in communal displays that also exhibit pride in being 'Liverpool'.

## **Differentiated sensitivity and post-traumatic adaptations**

The fifth stage of Sztompka's cultural trauma model is relevant in that while the Hillsborough tragedy was an event of national (even international) significance, its culturally traumatic affect was experienced particularly, by a 'social group' defined in relation to its feeling of marginalization against perceived criticism, resulting in the need to both defend the honour of the deceased and their fellow Liverpoolians blamed for causing the deaths. As we have shown, accusations of blame and civic 'self-pity' have created suspicion of the outside and heightened an internal perception of 'Liverpool exceptionalism'. Since Hillsborough, distrust has largely surrounded the national print media and this has resulted in the local tabloid, the *Liverpool Echo*, taking on a uniquely enhanced status of civic representation.

The twentieth anniversary edition of Scraton's definitive book *Hillsborough: The Truth* includes a new concluding chapter titled 'Endless Pressure'. This title neatly captures the impact of enduring jibes that have come to bear on the people who feel targeted by them. Written comments made in newspapers and magazines are there for all to see, but verbal remarks, made in pubs, at football matches and other urban locales, go largely unrecorded. Enquiries made by one of the authors of this article have revealed a number of 'humorous' remarks pertaining to the Hillsborough deaths, being used by rival team supporters to goad the supporters of Liverpool FC. Less pernicious, but nevertheless potentially upsetting, are careless references in popular culture contexts, including the television soap opera *Eastenders*, which repeat the 'Liverpool responsible for Liverpool deaths' theme. However, there is some counterbalance, as Jimmy McGovern's television work indicates. Also relevant is the song 'South Yorkshire Mass Murderer' by the Manic Street Preachers, featured on their 1998 album *This is My Truth Tell Me Yours*. The song, which makes intra-textual reference to McGovern as inspiration, was described as offensive by a South Yorkshire Police

spokesman but seemingly favourably received by members of the Hillsborough Justice Campaign.<sup>4</sup>

On 15 April 2009, a memorial service to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Hillsborough tragedy was held at Liverpool FC's Anfield stadium and reportedly attended by in excess of 25,000 people. The occasion did not pass without controversy. During his address, the then Culture Secretary Andy Burnham (Labour) was constantly interrupted by boos and chants of 'Justice for the 96' and, following the service, video footage emerged showing Liverpool's reserve goalkeeper Charles Itandje laughing at one point during the ceremony. The subsequent uproar, conducted largely on internet sites, resulted in the Frenchman being suspended from playing duties for his disrespectful conduct. *The Sun* newspaper used the occasion of the twentieth Hillsborough anniversary in further attempt to rehabilitate its reputation in Liverpool, running a front page headline, '96 Tears' in full support of the mourners. However, this rehearsing of Liverpool's *Sunday Echo* front page headline from the day after Hillsborough – 'Our Day of Tears' – went little way to reconciliation and may even be regarded as a further display of bad taste.

Unsurprisingly, *The Sun*'s front page of 19 April 1989 remains the key symbol of media reprehensibility, subsequent negative reportage being traceable, in one way or another, to the deplorable allegations spuriously delivered as 'the truth'. The lingering recrimination against *The Sun* exhibited by its failure to sell in Liverpool, anywhere near in keeping with its standing as the nation's best selling newspaper, is indicative of the collective emotion involved in the cultural trauma over Hillsborough and the significance of that newspaper's role in the trauma process.

## **‘The scars will never ever be healed’: the prospect of overcoming cultural trauma**

The final stage of the cultural trauma process identified by Sztompka, involving the overcoming of trauma, prompts contrasting consideration of not overcoming; Hillsborough offering a particular example of enduring cultural trauma. Within the Mertonian model referenced by Sztompka, the collective response to the Hillsborough cultural trauma evinces ‘rebellion’ rather than ‘adaptation’. From the writings of the most informed authors on the topic, especially Scraton, it can be gathered that the inability to overcome trauma will remain as long the perception of the failure of justice remains. Primarily this involves a resolution to the legal retribution sought against those deemed truly responsible for the deaths that occurred. With the changing of government in 1997 it was hoped that Labour would deliver on pledges to hold an enquiry that could lead to such proceedings, but their failure to open an enquiry with requisite terms of reference, caused a collapse in already fragile political faith and heightened the traumatic impact close ten years after the initial event (Scraton, 2009: 179). Overall, the perceived failure of justice and the lack of a resolution in regard to the ‘societal reaction’ of blame have resulted in periodic ‘aggravation’ and an inability to ‘overcome’ the cultural trauma of Hillsborough. Interesting in this light is the comment by Liverpool FC captain Steven Gerrard on the twentieth anniversary of the tragedy: ‘time has gone by but the scars will never ever be healed and the fans and the players will never, ever forget’ (Taylor, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

The memorial service at Anfield on 15 April 2009 gave view to the rawness of collective emotions twenty years on since the tragedy at Hillsborough. While the solemnity of such an

occasion would also customarily involve observable expressions of grief, the hostile reception given to the Minister of State (a politician from the region, whose personal credentials were not under challenge) clearly showed the ongoing culturally traumatic impact of Hillsborough. Amongst other visual items displayed on the day, a flag-style banner was unfurled with the names of the deceased written into the numeral 96. The banner was headed by the words, similar to the title of a well-known pop song, 'You Are Always on Our Mind'. Although presumably not a laboured decision, the choice of the singular word mind over its plural minds is interesting in that it unwittingly testifies to the existence of a collective memory. For how long this memory endures cannot be known, but at this point in time there is no sign of the cultural trauma from the Hillsborough tragedy 'fading away' or becoming an 'obsolete cultural legacy through generational turnover' (Sztompka, 2000: 464).

Sztompka (2000: 464) concludes that 'in spite of the disruption and disarray of cultural order', cultural trauma can, with the passing of time, sometimes be viewed as a stimulus to positive cultural change. May Hillsborough be so viewed? As a number of commentators have noted, it was a watershed moment in the cultural history of football, leading to modernization in a number of ways including the major upgrading of the stadiums of higher division clubs. Hillsborough has also played a part in highlighting the propensity of branches of the British police force to obstruct investigation into their operational incompetence and might therefore have had an impact on improved and more ethical practice. Although various examples of media commentary in regard to Hillsborough have been criticized in this essay, it could also be speculated that the front page of *The Sun* on 19 April 1989 marked the nadir of British press standards, and a now tacit understanding holds that such appallingly inaccurate and inflammatory reportage is publicly unacceptable.

Although these outcomes may have occurred to a wider public benefit, this cannot be taken as a resolution of the cultural trauma associated with Hillsborough. Sztompka's

position on ‘cultural construction’ encourages an important focus on how trauma impacts on particular human groupings and can have considerable temporal duration. The Hillsborough tragedy provides a case in point. While Hillsborough may be a matter of recollection and regret for the wider, (inter)national public, the cultural trauma of Hillsborough for the people of ‘Liverpool’ is far from over.

## Notes

- 1 Two points are of note here. Firstly, we decidedly use the term ‘supporter’ in the manner specified by Giulianotti and Robertson (2009: 142), referring to those with ‘traditional’ and ‘hot’ forms of club identification that are commonly grounded in long-term emotional, personal and social ties to the team and its stadium. Strong supporter solidarity is often built around the club’s local, civic or ethno-historical identity. Secondly, although identifying the cultural trauma of Hillsborough principally in relation to supporters of Liverpool FC, this is not to exclude other people from the trauma experience. Hillsborough is often discussed more amorously in regard to ‘Liverpool’ in a collective personified sense. This is especially interesting in light of Du Noyer’s (2007) claim that Liverpool, more than other cities, is customarily referred to in personalized terms.
- 2 In 1989, the year of the Hillsborough tragedy, Liverpool City Council regarded the economic situation in some areas of Liverpool to be so parlous and the response by the Thatcher government so inadequate, that it made direct application for relief funding to the Third EU Poverty Programme (Moore, 1997: 162). Liverpool has struggled to shake off its impoverished image despite an upturn in fortune since the late-1990s. When awarded the honour of becoming the European City of Culture for

2008, jokes about the city's suitability for such title tended to predominate over congratulatory responses (Du Noyer, 2007: 280). The anti-Liverpool discourse of the London-based media persists despite local authorities' efforts to use tourism advertising to communicate positive messages about the city which contradict negative images of depravation and crime (Selby, 2004: 17).

3 McGovern reportedly wanted to introduce a Hillsborough related theme to the Liverpool-based television soap opera *Brookside*. Refusal for this resulted in him resigning as a writer of that program (Du Noyer, 2007: 160). The theme was raised controversially in an episode of the crime drama *Cracker*, 'To Be a Somebody', written by McGovern. This episode, featuring a disaffected white male working-class Hillsborough survivor turned vigilante, drew criticism and was influential to McGovern's decision to make the documentary-like *Hillsborough*.

4 See <http://www.contrast.org/hillsborough/symm.shtm>.

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