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THE SOCIABILITY OF SPORT: Scotland Football Supporters as Interpreted through the Sociology of Georg Simmel

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**Abstract** Georg Simmel is one of sociology’s most influential early figures, although arguably his work has been under-utilized in many scholarly fields, including sport studies. Some of Simmel’s most important theoretical and substantive arguments are deployed to develop a sociological analysis of a specific sports subculture: the ‘Tartan Army’ of supporters that travels to Scotland football matches. Of particular interest are Simmel’s formal sociological standpoint, differentiation of social and cultural forms, development of dualistic thinking, analyses of human sociability, writings on ‘the stranger’ and ‘the adventure’, and his concern with individuality in modern metropolitan culture. In applying Simmel’s insights, I explore the formal emergence and organic development of the Tartan Army as a distinctive supporter culture. The Tartan Army, like many sports crowds, affords an outstanding study in Simmelian sociability, while providing adventure and a possible escape from our overwhelming modern culture. The article concludes by considering Simmel’s wider utility within the sociology of sport.

**Key words** • football • formal sociology • Scotland • Simmel • sociability

Spectators have provided the sociology of sport with a major topic for empirical research that has resulted in a range of critical findings. In particular, sociologists have considered spectators with reference to subcultures of violence and systems of social control; cultural politics, resistance and popular empowerment; demographic composition and the construction of taste communities; forms of gender or national identity; and media representation.¹ Much of this research has been concentrated on football spectators, notably in the UK. However, in addressing these questions, and rather unlike their anthropological colleagues,² sociologists have produced relatively few substantive analyses that focus principally upon the everyday social practices of sport spectators; that is, the actual patterns of sociability within these gatherings.
This article contributes to repairing that lacuna by focusing on the social practices of the ‘Tartan Army’, a distinctive group of several thousand fans/supporters that follows the Scotland national football team to matches in Scotland and overseas. The discussion draws on fieldwork and interviews with 10 different groups in the Tartan Army between February 2003 and September 2004. The interviews were conducted in different contexts: at formal and informal meetings of these supporter groups in Scotland, and before and after Scotland matches. The article develops and extends previous research on the Tartan Army (see, for example, Bradley, 2002; Finn and Giulianotti, 1996; Giulianotti, 1991, 1994, 1995). Here I concentrate on the dominant form of Tartan Army identity that applies principally at ‘away’ games, when thousands of fans travel from Scotland to support the national team. There are some secondary, circumstantial differences between the Tartan Army at home and away games. Home fans are more numerous, and the temporal predominance of their core identity qua Scottish supporters is far shorter (often only one evening) than for fans on overseas trips that last several days. Home fans are also less other-directed because they remain in Scotland and do not encounter large groups of rival supporters.

The theoretical framework for this discussion is provided by the sociological insights of Georg Simmel. As one of sociology’s most influential early figures, Simmel’s interdisciplinary work is particularly illuminating on the social and cultural nature of modern life. His studies of modern culture, social interaction, senses of alienation, and the fate of human individuality have served to guarantee Simmel a particularly strong following among action-orientated and cultural sociologists. Max Weber described Simmel as ‘simply brilliant’, and even for the more sceptical Durkheim he was ‘subtle and ingenious’ (Levine, 1971: xliv, xlv). Simmel exerted a particularly profound influence over the early Chicago school that helped establish North American sociology, and which prioritized the empirically informed analysis of social relations within diverse communities. In more recent times, Simmel’s work has been utilized by contemporary cultural theorists, notably in journals such as Theory, Culture & Society, although he has been relatively neglected by sociologists of sport.

Simmel illustrates his sociological discussions of modern life with particular reference to the playful social exchanges and dispositions within love, eroticism and coquetry. However, had Simmel lived in a slightly later epoch, he may have been drawn also to the social realms of modern sports, to examine such phenomena as sociability, the identity and meaning of strangers, the sociological nature of adventure, and the complexities of modern metropolitan life.
I do not propose an exegetical usage of Simmel, and I hold a commitment to conceptual plurality.4 When judged in its historical context, Simmel’s work possesses some noteworthy weaknesses, in particular its inevitable failure to theorize forms of stratification and macrosocial processes adequately. Nevertheless, when restricted to the specific social practices of distinctive recreational groupings such as sport spectators, Simmel's work does have explanatory utility. This point is demonstrated in regard to the Tartan Army in two ways: first, the formal characteristics of the Tartan Army are set out with reference to Simmel’s social theory; second, I show how the Tartan Army embodies some of the more substantive features of Simmel’s sociology.

Scotland’s Tartan Army: Formal Characteristics

Simmel advances a ‘formal’ sociological approach that is predicated on his analytical distinction between form and content. Content refers to the ‘drives, interests and purposes’ that produce social interaction and social relations. Form refers to ‘forms of sociation’, such as patterns of social interaction, aspects of socialization, or types of relationship. Contents represent the constituent empirical elements, the ‘raw materials’, of social forms (Lawrence, 1976: 9–10). In general terms, we may see forms as possessing ‘principles of unification’ as they direct various contents into a whole (Weingartner, 1959: 41).

The form-content differentiation assists in examining the basic sociological properties of sport crowds. Any sports crowd will display different emotional and practical contents among its members. Sports crowds display innumerable types of small interaction (or Wechselwirkung, according to Simmel), such as watching passively, remonstrating towards the officials, buying refreshments, talking with neighbours, and mingling with fellow spectators in walkways (cf. Featherstone, 1991). The sports crowd acquires a distinctive collective form when certain kinds of unification materialize. The unity of spectator subcultures, for example, is marked by strong patterns of common identification towards the sports club and other spectators.

In the case of Scotland’s national football team, many forms of fandom are evidenced at matches. Spectators acquire basic form by offering the team particular kinds of vocal and symbolic support. The supporters’ common description as the ‘Tartan Army’ underlines that unity. The Tartan Army seek to establish and project a distinctive, unitary form of fan identity that is gregarious, ambassadorial and consciously non-violent in relations with other social groups, while still retaining a general cultural pursuit of heavy drinking and raucous support for the national team.
What makes us distinctive? We have a good nature, a great capacity for booze, we have a pride in our country when we go abroad, we feel we represent it, and we sing in all circumstances. (Marjory, north-east Scotland)

My pride just oozes out of me when you go somewhere abroad, and there’s thousands in kilts, there’s no trouble, we fix whatever trouble there is, and we’re so well behaved, and people thank us for coming. That’s what makes the trips for me. (Stephen, Dundee)

Scottish football fans, media commentators and politicians tend to view the ambassadorial Tartan Army as indexing the dominant, internationalist form of Scottish national identity. Following particularly noteworthy games, Scottish politicians have passed parliamentary motions that laud the sporting conduct of the Tartan Army.

Fitting Simmel’s propensity for intensely dualistic thinking, there is clear evidence that modern Scottish cultural identity has been heavily dyadic. Much of Scottish popular nationalism, as expressed through football, has been expressed through a strong dislike or opposition towards England and symbols of Englishness (Holt, 1989). Until the 1990s, most Scottish international football fans prioritized the beating of England over any other form of competitive endeavour.

Simmel also indicates that we may differentiate forms in diachronic terms, giving rise to ‘preliminary’, ‘objective’ and ‘world’ levels (Weingartner, 1959: 46–7); and such an approach may be utilized to explain the Tartan Army’s dominant identity. The contemporary Tartan Army acquired its preliminary form in response to three practical circumstances. First, in other parts of the UK (notably England) during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Scottish fans held a typified reputation for disorderly, excessive, often violent behaviour. At overseas matches, however, Scottish fans were confronted with two novel circumstances: their foreign hosts both associated violent fan behaviour with English rather than Scottish supporters, and often mistook Scotland as a part of England rather than as a member of the United Kingdom. Thus, Scottish fans resolved these practical difficulties by presenting themselves, in binary terms, as ‘not hooligans, but friendly fans’ and as ‘not English, but Scottish’ (Finn and Giulianotti, 1998).

When you’re abroad, you’ve got to tell people about your identity. You don’t go up and tell people, ‘Excuse me I’m Scottish’. You sing a real patriotic Scottish song. Many people still think Scotland is a bit of England after Manchester. But you’ve got to tell people otherwise. You then start singing songs about, ‘We hate England more than you’. The songs aren’t against the whole of England because England is part of the UK and we’re all part of it. But they’re meant to display the fact that we’re not English, we’re Scottish. They’re to prove that we’re not an offshoot of England. (Tommy, Glasgow)
Second, the ‘hardcore’ formation of Scotland supporters began to appreciate the practical benefits of a friendly disposition towards other supporters and their overseas hosts. Some fans trace this realization back to one match in Israel in 1981, when Scottish fans partied in bars for several days and, to their pleasant surprise, received some highly favourable reports in local media. The general reasoning for such behaviour is typically pragmatic. As one fan explains in the simplest terms, ‘If you are nice to people, people are nice to you. You have a better time’ (George, Lothian).

Third, in the early 1980s, the Scottish Football Association and other relevant authorities (notably the Scottish Office and Scottish police) introduced specific practical procedures aimed at improving the supporters’ behaviour and reputation. The Scotland Travel Club was founded to control the distribution of match tickets. The Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980, banning alcohol consumption at games, came into force. The focus of Tartan Army fans shifted from the traditional match against England toward offshore international games. Scotland qualified for six of seven World Cup finals between 1974 and 1998, while the annual match against England was suspended indefinitely in 1989 (because of unruly fans). These practical measures and circumstances assisted in establishing the context for a new, distinctive and more consciously internationalist form of supporter culture.

In Simmel’s terms, the Tartan Army moved from a preliminary to a more objective social form when Scottish fans acquired, and consciously attempted to sustain, a positive reputation for nonviolent, boisterous behaviour at different international matches. At the 1982 World Cup finals in Spain, they were dubbed ‘Ernie’s Angels’ by the Scottish press. Generalized contrasts were routinely drawn between the gregarious demeanour of Scottish fans and the misdeeds of English supporters at the same tournament. Certain ‘codes’ of behaviour, such as not wearing attire relating to Scottish club teams (to reduce social division based on intense club rivalries) were cultivated and obeyed at later overseas games. Supporters began to engage in forms of ‘self-policing’ to prevent disorderly incidents breaking out among their own ranks. Later, from the early 1990s onwards, the kilt became a highly popular dress symbol of Scottish identity, heightening supporter unity.

Simmel indicates that worlds constitute a higher mode of form. Worlds are ideal types, and constitute ‘great forms’, ‘through which, as it were, each particular part of the content of the world can, or should, pass’ (Simmel, 1959: 288). Religious belief systems, for example, serve to organize all experiences and to locate the human condition within a totalizing world vision. The
Tartan Army has approached the heuristic model of a world form, both within and outside Scotland. First, the Tartan Army is viewed as an important representative element of traditional Scottish football culture. The latter is portrayed as containing players and fans who are highly nationalistic and passionate about the game; favouring fast, exciting, honest, and powerful forms of play; and who are ‘gallus’, gregarious, generous towards others, and ‘having a thirst’ for alcohol. These qualities of Scottish football culture provide the common critical reference points through which Scotland fans absorb and interpret football matches, the politics of the game, and their cultural experiences abroad.

Second, outside Scotland, Scottish fans attempt to convey a particular form of fan identity that is recognized and appreciated universally, to be ‘the best supporters in the world’. Their international status has been marked by their receipt of several prizes, notably the 1992 UEFA and 1998 FIFA awards for being best supporters at football tournaments, and the 2002 Fair Play Prize of the Belgian Olympic Committee. In this way, the Tartan Army function to define the best form according to which any group of supporters can be judged worldwide. More generally, the Tartan Army thus illustrate how the Simmelian concept of world forms has relevance to the sociology of globalization, at least in considering the global consciousness of participants in sport or other realms of popular culture.

One of Simmel’s most perceptive lines of dyadic thinking concerns his recognition of the essential interplay between social conflict and concord, repulsion and harmony, in order to ‘yield the actual configuration of society’ (Simmel, 1950: 315). Simmel (1955) appreciates that conflict itself can be functional to the social order, resolving tensions to produce fresh syntheses. In certain circumstances, oppositions represent the fundamental basis for the establishment and continuation of a social relationship (Spykman, 1964).

Football matches provide the Tartan Army with the cultural circumstances in which the sociable interplay of conflict and concord occurs pleasurably and peacefully. Certainly, there are strong forces of repulsion and categorical differentiation within these occasions. Rival fans are divided in strong symbolic terms through wearing different football shirts or forms of national dress, the use of different communicative codes and languages, and the shared subjective consciousnesses of being part of opposing groups. Such systems of opposition establish the expected configuration of social relations between the Tartan Army and other fans. Within the stadium, the opposing sides are caught in an antagonistic game (Kampfspiel, in Simmel’s terms). Rival supporters place different levels of emphasis on the roles of skill and luck in achieving the
desired result for their team. They harbour different social ethics in relation to the sports event. For Scotland fans, defeat should be met with grim realism and good grace, at best by customarily congratulating fans of the winning side, or at worst by refusing to view the victors’ celebrations as a provocation.

Yet there are also many ways in which forces of social attraction and positive concord take hold between rival fans. Scottish fans appear in central locations that are already popular with locals, promoting co-mingling with other people. During the evenings in particular, there are opportunities to share drinks and conversation with local people. Thus, on most occasions, overseas matches involving Scotland give rise to fresh social syntheses, out of the different types of interaction between Scottish fans and other supporters. Removing these opportunities for relationships between opposing fans, such as by banning one team’s supporters from specific matches, has the dysfunctional effect of destroying most of the pleasurable sociability and competitive tension surrounding football fixtures.

Simmel’s Substantive Sociology and the Tartan Army

The following discussion of the Tartan Army is organized in terms of sociability, the stranger and the adventure, and modern culture and the metropolis.

Sociability

Simmel’s (1949) insightful analysis of sociability prioritizes and illuminates the ‘proto-social’, expressive, liberating and artful forms of human interaction. His insights inspire the reader to imagine, as the exemplary forms of human sociability, a communal piazza culture in which there is a joking intermingling of individuals and crowds in holiday environments.

Across Europe, Latin America and Africa, football provides perhaps the strongest form of cultural life through which recreational sociability has been practised, particularly among males, since the early 20th century. Football typically provides a common subject matter for strangers to help ‘break the ice’, to engage in pleasurable conversation during social encounters. In international circumstances, where there is no shared language, basic forms of friendly sociability and interpersonal trust may be established through swapping, in heavily accented terms, the names of favourite football players, especially those belonging to the interlocutors’ nations. Major football tournaments — notably the World Cup finals — provide global referents for conversation among international peoples.
As the popular art form *par excellence*, football provides for creative informal discussion and argument that, given the nature of many club and national allegiances, can turn into disagreement or heated exchanges. Status in discussing the game is accorded to those with a ‘feel’ for football that is confirmed through intimate and long-standing personal participation. Those who have played at a particularly high level, or who display good skills, have high discursive standing, as do those with lengthy participation in spectator subcultures, and others who show knowledge of the game’s history and aesthetic complexities.

Simmel considers sociability to be the ‘play-form of association’ that is derived from the personal impulses and interests that push individuals into common association with others (Simmel, 1949: 255). In its ‘pure form’, sociability has ‘no ulterior end, no content, and no result outside itself, it is oriented completely about personalities’, and offers people ‘an emancipating and saving exhilaration’ (1949: 261). ‘Good form’ is at the heart of the most meaningful and stable forms of sociability (1949: 255). It is characterized by the ‘free-playing, interacting interdependence of individuals’, providing sociability with a defining unity. In contrast, personal moods are excluded from sociability: ‘It is tactless to bring in personal humour, good or ill, excitement and depression, the light and shadow of one’s inner life’ (1949: 256).

The dominant forms of interaction among the Tartan Army provide especially precise illustrations of Simmel’s analysis of sociability. In social terms, the Tartan Army is a ‘play-form of association’ *par excellence*. Supporters engage in playful, expressive, carefree and joking forms of social interaction with each other. New social acquaintances are made with fellow Scots:

> You get to meet folk that you’d never otherwise meet, like a Hearts fan or a Raith Rovers fan, or a Kidderminster Harriers fan. You have a banter [joking conversation] and a drink with them. (Neil, Kirkcaldy)

The best overseas excursions afford a potent feeling of exhilaration, of being part of this fun-seeking and powerfully unified community. Certain forms of informal status are acquired by participants in the fan group according to the number and diversity of ‘away trips’ that have been made. Status is also accorded to those who display particular ‘good form’ in enhancing the playful pleasures of the social gathering. The escapist appeal of the Tartan Army reduces the likelihood of Scottish fans bringing their troubles or moods from home into the gathering. Those unwilling to participate fully in the fans’ bacchic behaviour tend to be disparaged as ‘miserable bastards’ and interrogated as to their reasons for coming along in the first place. The Tartan Army produces figures whose chaotic exploits, bizarre behaviour, penchant for strange songs, unlikely drinking capacities, or gifts as raconteurs can serve to enliven further the nomadic
social carnival. The various autobiographies or ‘road books’ that have been written by hardcore figures in the Tartan Army are crammed with tales, sometimes apocryphal but usually all-too-credible, about anarchic characters (see, for example, Black, 1997; McArthur, 1998; McDevitt, 1999). Significantly, the practices of these fans are generally orientated towards heightening the sociable pleasures of the collective as a whole. Supporters tend to react unfavourably towards egocentric figures who seem more intent upon founding their own personality cults than on adding to the carnivalesque.

Simmel identifies within sociability a classless and democratic ethos or ideal. Sociability ‘demands the purest, most transparent, most engaging kind of interaction — that among equals’; it produces an ‘artificial world’ of ‘pure interaction, free of any disturbing material accent’ (1949: 257). Certainly, these defining democratic aspects of sociability are countermanded by practical problems. Without some kind of equalizing agent or general sharing of social standing, sociability across hierarchies can be awkward, uneven and embarrassing. Egalitarian sociability is an artificial or ideal-typical model, but one that inspires individuals to ‘strive to create an interaction so pure that it cannot be spoiled by material or individual wants’ (Duncan, 1959: 104–5). Thus Simmel provides an amended version of Marx’s communist slogan, to state: ‘The principle of sociability should be formulated thus: everyone should guarantee to the other that maximum of social values (joy, relief, vivacity) which is consonant with the maximum of values he himself receives’ (1949: 257).

As an ideal, Scottish fans pursue an egalitarian form of sociability that is free of material or other axes of inequality. It is part of the fans’ collective definition that social class is not relevant to anyone’s participation in playful interaction.

In terms of jobs, it’s across the spectrum — we have people in sales, professions, trades, you name it. That’s the great thing about the Tartan Army, it’s a great leveller . . . you still have barristers and street-sweepers . . . Once you are there, it’s a level playing field, the job or the money you have don’t mean anything. (Alan, Aberdeen)

We don’t discuss what jobs people do. It’s just not seen as important. That’s one of the appeals of the Tartan Army. It doesn’t matter how big the house or what car you’ve got, you’re just the same as everybody else. (Stewart, north-east Scotland)

Sociable interaction is often easiest among those who share similar backgrounds. Groups of friends typically travel and socialize together while interacting frequently with other supporters. Other, very informal patterns of association can arise in regard to geographical background, age
and social class. Nevertheless, the ethic of fan unification ensures that these informal differences do not produce distinctive dynamics of social differentiation or exclusion as one would find in many alternative recreational settings.

The Tartan Army is also committed to dissolving a crucial form of social division that arises in any football context: the intense rivalry between club teams, notably but not exclusively surrounding the Glasgow teams of Rangers and Celtic. The informal rule that club shirts should not be worn in the Tartan Army helps to ensure that rivalries and feuds between different club fans do not surface.

One thing that is missing is club football. There’s no great talk of who you support. That’s a big thing about this, meeting mates every so often, you catch up with them, have a laugh, but the club stuff goes out the window. Wearing your club shirt to Scotland games is a no-no. (David, north-east Scotland)

The Scottish supporters include a growing female cohort, rising to around 20–5 percent for some away matches. Certainly, much of the Tartan Army’s culture is traditionally masculine, oriented towards heavy drinking, loud carousing, raucous humour, and the pursuit of sexual adventure. Female supporters remain less likely to be full, public participants in some practices. Yet, for women, the Tartan Army represents a fun, hedonistic football space that was not available to previous generations of female Scots, and which is far more appealing than the routines and constraints of contemporary bourgeois domesticity.

Alison — The whole thing about Scotland’s support is that it’s much more inclusive than club football. But when you tell people you’re going, they say, ‘What, you’re following Scotland, I didn’t think you’d want to do that.’ There’s a perception that there’s things there that would put you off. The thing about being away with the Scotland supporters is that it’s fun.

Andy — Do we put women off with our chants? No. They’re clapping along and the ruder the song, the louder they sing it.

Mary — As a woman, you know before you get involved, that you can’t be too prim.

For Simmel, general conversation contains the crucial exchange units of sociability. Talk is ‘a legitimate end in itself’, and yet its content is not a matter of indifference; ‘it must be interesting, gripping, even significant’ (1949: 259). Moreover, sociability cannot be cut off from real life or it enters the realms of ‘caricature’, ‘empty farce’, and ‘a lifeless schematization proud of its woodenness’ (1949: 261). Conversation is strongest when the storyteller is ‘invisible’, so that ‘his own person may remain completely in the background’ (1949: 260).
Simmel points towards the role of ‘conversation’ in the fluid social exchanges of sociability. For the Tartan Army, terms such as ‘banter’ or ‘crack’ capture rather better the kind of talk within the playful gathering. Banter is by definition informal, engaging, entertaining and frequently joking. As a form of ‘phatic communion’, it functions to assist in binding those engaged in social interaction, but on the pleasurable surface banter is an end in itself that requires no external legitimation.

The best raconteurs in the Tartan Army are able to tell stories or generate debate on sports or other topics without presenting themselves as the egocentric *raisons d’être* of any sociable gathering. Moreover, the content of supporter communication does not deal with simple irrelevancies. The subject of football itself is sufficiently serious yet diverting to engage participants in lengthy dialogue. The topics and interactive practices of the Tartan Army should never degenerate into an empty ritualism, a self-caricature, that has lost its anchor in real life. Yet, the Tartan Army have been accused of portraying a caricatured form of sociability in two particular ways. First, there is the possibility that the ambassadorial nature of Scottish fans is reified into an embarrassing public relations exercise, a series of publicity-driven photo-shoots, with little of the original playful creativity that characterizes the Tartan Army.

Second, a more regular criticism is that the Tartan Army’s good-natured demeanour contrasts with the reality of some humiliating performances by the Scotland football team. On occasion, Scottish fans are seen as ‘revelling in’ or ‘celebrating’ defeat, rather than justly criticizing or disparaging the national team; as one Tartan Army song has it, ‘We’ll support you evermore, fuck the score’.

A lot of guys in the Tartan Army think it’s about getting pissed, but it’s really about the football. At the game in Vilnius, when we lost 1–0 to Lithuania, there was no singing from the fans and the game was crap. After the game ended, we got the bagpipes, and then the song, ‘We’re shite and we know we are’. But that’s infuriating. I want my team to win, not to revel in defeat. (Alan, Dundee)

For other critics, the Tartan Army’s dominant forms of interaction and dress are a self-regarding caricature or farcical representation of Scottishness, overly concerned with international pantomime rather than a means towards achieving a greater end (that is, supporting the national team).

I was all ready to go to a Scotland match, but I was out in Glasgow beforehand. And there they were, these Tartan Army guys with their tartan
kilts on, the giant hen-feathers in their caps. I had a look around and thought, ‘Nah, I’ll not bother . . .’ (Steve, Glasgow)

However, in defence, two arguments inter alia may be made. First, in more conceptual terms, the development of a distinctive, objective cultural identity, in the form of the Tartan Army, may be seen as an inevitable aspect of modernity’s tendency towards organic differentiation, as Simmel explained. A diachronic process characterizes this differentiation: forms weaken or lose their dependency on the practical circumstances that had inspired their genesis and nurtured them through infancy. In this instance, differentiation involves the Tartan Army developing greater autonomy vis-à-vis the Scotland team, hence the mood and behaviour of supporters are increasingly independent of actual football results.

Second, in more substantive terms, the Simmelian aspects of the Tartan Army may be reaffirmed. *Pace* their critics, the Tartan Army are only too aware of the very poor status of the Scotland football team; they are, in consequence, simply much more ‘realistic’ about the result that can be expected. If the team’s results became central to the Tartan Army’s mood and identity, then the number of supporters would decline. As John (London) puts it, ‘We recognize we’ve not got a great team, otherwise you’d walk out and really never come back.’ If such realism affected their mood, it would undermine or possibly destroy the playful sociability enjoyed by fans before and (in particular) after games.

*The Stranger and the Adventurer*

Simmel’s dualistic, formal sociology is particularly perceptive in analyzing two forms of social identity: the stranger and the adventurer. Simmel (1971: 143) considers the ‘stranger’, in some contrast to the ‘wanderer’, as the person who arrives today and who stays (rather than goes) tomorrow. Simmel understands the stranger in terms of ‘closeness’ and ‘remoteness’, as someone who is physically near yet culturally and socially distant.

When travelling to international matches, the Tartan Army arrive in other countries as collective ‘strangers’ in Simmel’s sense. At many individual games, and for all international tournaments, most members of the Tartan Army tend to stay in one location for more than one night, and so take up a form of temporary residency. For local people, the Scots have a dual ‘closeness’ and remoteness’. These visitors are in immediate physical proximity within familiar surroundings; but Scottish fans also are culturally remote through their strikingly ‘other’ forms of dress, song and patterns of social interaction.
Having few or no local factional ties, strangers tend to be accorded particular status as objective commentators and advisers. They are entrusted further with surprising levels of secret knowledge, notably in personal confidences and confessions that are unknown to other local interlocutors. Relationships with strangers are founded primarily on ‘abstract’ principles that serve to underscore both nearness and remoteness. Proximity to strangers may be seen as arising through the sense of sharing some ‘more general qualities’ with these visitors, such as in national identity or employment, rather than on more varied and differentiated kinds of association as one finds between more closely connected people. This principle for establishing ‘nearness’ to the stranger is counterpoised by the processes through which abstract forms of distancing are established. Here, the individuality of the stranger is ignored in preference to the classifying of the person according to type — as possessing a particular kind of alien origin, such as in region, nationality, ethnicity or language (Simmel, 1971).

Indeed, the Scots utilize this tendency to typify strangers by consciously emphasizing, in routine interaction with local people, their friendly and ambassadorial character as a people. In this way, a kind of virtuous hermeneutic circle is purposively set in motion by Scottish fans: particular forms of amicable social exchange are represented as accurate indices of the general good nature of Scots, thereby establishing the fruitful context for further episodes of positive interaction. Members of the Tartan Army are watchful too that a single episode of social breakdown or disorder may break this enchanted hermeneutic chain, tarnishing the supporters’ collective reputation and thus undermining future relations with their hosts overseas.

The Tartan Army seek to exploit some particular Simmelian openings that are afforded by their visiting status. Specifically, many Scottish male fans seek to maximize their exotic appeal to local women for engaging in short-term and confidential (if desired) sexual relations. More generally, as strangers, the fans may gain rapid insights into local society and culture from their interlocutors. Only a minority of Scotland fans speak other European languages fluently. However, since the late 1970s, the dominance of English for sociable relations across Europe has reduced the Tartan Army’s linguistic remoteness, to assist fans in establishing friendly relations with other nationalities. Similarly, the type of bars associated with the British Isles — notably themed Irish bars — have spread across Europe and accorded the Tartan Army with welcoming, familiar social spaces where many local habitués, by their very presence, appear open to other cultural experiences and encounters associated with the UK or Ireland. Yet, as one fan points out, the Scottish ‘strangers’ make the most of the social malleability of their local hosts:
‘The sad reality is that most fans expect other countries to bend to them, rather than for them to bend to these other countries’ (Bruce, Glasgow).

In his analysis of the adventurer, Simmel (1959) also identifies strong synthesizing qualities. The adventurer pulls the world inwards, to conquer or seize opportunities, while abandoning personal defences, taking risks and offering fewer defences to the world. The adventure possesses a precisely demarcated beginning and end, during which ‘continuity with life is disregarded on principle’ in order to enter ‘something alien, untouchable, out of the ordinary’ (1959: 244).

The adventurer ‘lives in the present’, and cares nothing for the past or future. Like the gambler, the adventurer wishes to establish some grasp over chance while never dispelling a pervasive sense of fatalism (1959). Yet adventure is not established simply by the instrumental ‘content’ of the experience, such as in winning a bet or having sex with a new partner. True adventure arises when there is a ‘certain experiential tension’, a ‘principle of accentuation’, that transforms the substance of life, and which is really found only among the young (1959: 257–8).

Travelling with the Tartan Army offers Scotland fans adventure in three Simmelian senses. First, the excursions overseas have a definite beginning and end, as they occur over specific time periods, and are often understood in terms of what is done before, during or after the football match itself. Second, during these excursions, the adventuring supporter, like any other sports fan, is living ‘in the present’, in terms of being engrossed in the occasion, while also being concerned with the immediate fortunes of the side that is supported. For spectators, the emotional engagement of sport does not fit well with a philosophy of deferred gratification. Third, being part of the Tartan Army, and travelling, living and drinking together with new and old compatriots, ensures that surrounding circumstances can be ‘pulled into’ the supporters’ collective orbit. On the other hand, supporters lower their defence mechanisms, and enter kinds of social space that would be avoided in ‘normal’ circumstances, such as red-light areas or ‘tough’ bars.

Modern Culture and the Metropolis

Despite these perorations on adventure, Simmel provides a rather pessimistic reading of modernity’s alienating impact upon individuality. In simple terms modern culture is marked by the predominance of objective over subjective development, by ‘the atrophy of individual culture through the hypertrophy of objective culture’ (Simmel, 1971: 338). Modern people typically feel
‘overwhelmed by this immense quantity of culture’, most commonly in the metropolis where there is ‘a tremendous richness of crystallizing, depersonalized cultural accomplishments’ (Lawrence, 1976: 254; Simmel, 1971: 338).

Simmel indicates that modernity is marked by an increasing psycho-social distance, between individuals, and also in the relations between people and cultural objects. A ‘fear of contact’ grips modern society, as indexed in the collapse of family structures and the rise of the money economy. Money represents an additional and separating form of mediation, promoting the valuation of people and cultural objects in purely objective (rather than aesthetic or ethical) terms (Simmel, 1968).

In the mode of the flâneur, we may glide along enjoying the easy diversions of urban life. On the other hand, the domination of life by ‘these impersonal cultural elements’ serves to ‘suppress peculiar interests and incomparabilities’ (1971: 338). The resulting incoherence of metropolitan life leads some analysts to see the modern individual as a bricoleur and not a flâneur. As a bricoleur, the disoriented and disembedded modern individual ‘must cobble together whatever meaning can be wrested from the irreducible and irreconcilable fragments of reality’ that are contained in objective culture (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991: 166).

Urban life promotes particular cultural psychologies of individuation and atomization. A pervasive blasé attitude is found in the generalized metropolitan indifference to the meanings, values and distinctions of things (Frisby, 2002). The social reserve of urban people strikes rural visitors as ‘cold and uncongenial’, being founded in part upon a ‘slight aversion’ or repulsion that can degenerate into direct conflict. Even within the urban throng ‘one never feels as lonely and as deserted as in this metropolitan crush of persons’ (Simmel, 1971: 331, 334).

Some evidence for this reading of modern culture is found among Scottish fans, although the Tartan Army does provide a significant kind of escape from these bleak contemporary forms. Invariably among the supporters there are forms of individual antagonism or repulsion. Some fans point to the Tartan Army’s Internet message-board to illustrate the occasional ‘bitchiness’ or vitriolic argument that may arise internally. Of course, such forms of virtual communication cannot facilitate the kind of playful interactive rapport that is associated with classic face-to-face sociability.

Among some of the oldest hardcore fans there are semblances of a blasé attitude towards overseas excursions. But the blasé attitude is liable towards self-negation, since most individuals
who display cultural indifference are likely to stop travelling on what seem to be rather routinized excursions. Moreover, the continuing influx of younger, less travelled supporters tends to ensure that the blasé attitude does not become hegemonic across supporters.

There are signs that globalization and rationalization processes have reduced the scope for adventure among the Tartan Army. As the world becomes more ‘compressed’, and previously little-known destinations in Europe become established tourist locations, so there are fewer opportunities to enter somewhere that is radically different in political or cultural terms. The openings for risk-taking, for exploring a certain ‘experiential tension’, have narrowed; it is now extremely easy to book flights and accommodation directly through the Internet, to enter nations without worrying about visa requirements, to drink familiar beer in Irish bars, to spend money using international credit cards or Euros, and to discourse with English-speaking locals.

And yet we may read the Tartan Army as a collective response to the modern perils of individuation. Within the throngs of the Scotland crowd, the supporter should never feel ‘alone’. The categorical intention of the support is to be warm and congenial towards compatriots and others alike. Within the group, individuality may be vitiated in part by limited toleration of personal idiosyncrasies that deviate markedly from collective norms. But the trade-off here is that the Tartan Army furnishes its individual participants with a common array of identity touchstones, a set of props and audiences, for the creative cultivation of fresh forms of meaningful (not egocentric) individuality.

The collective embrace of a single objective identity — with its relatively uniform array of songs, attire and representative institutions — may be seen as one escape from the ominous encirclement of individuality by the sheer diversity of modern cultural objects. The practices of the Tartan Army involve the persistent and deliberate breaking down of social distances that otherwise bedevil modern urban life. For example, buying a round of drinks involves the use of money as a means towards more important, sociable ends, such as the promotion of social bonds. The recipients of drinks do not have a simple monetary debt to the buyer; instead, they are engaged by an informal social tie founded on reciprocity, according to which the social favour ‘should be returned’. More importantly, sharing rounds of drinks serves to establish relationships on the non-monetary grounds of time, talk and intoxication. The drinkers spend time with each other, engage in some banter over their drinks, and share the common experience of moving into similar states of intoxication at approximately the same speed and intensity.
Sociability can be problematic in specific instances where individuals ‘can’t keep up’ with the speed of drinking, or must remain alcohol-free in the company of serious drinkers.

Buying drinks assists in establishing international forms of sociability for the Tartan Army. It helps to shape incipient forms of social relationship that are based on mutual approval and trust, which otherwise tend not to arise in non-football contexts.

In Saint Etienne, at the 1998 World Cup finals, we had our landlord buying us drinks. We’ve never had that before in France! Or in Holland, after we’d lost 6–0, we had the barman there saying, ‘We saw you on television, great support, that’s your bottle, please finish it.’ So when you are going to matches abroad, you get a reciprocation that you don’t get on ordinary holidays. (Bill, Glasgow)

Concluding Comments

Simmel’s theories evidently have strong utility for explaining a sports subculture such as the Tartan Army. Indeed, there are clear signs that the Tartan Army reflect public awareness of, and responses to, the issues and problems raised by Simmel in regard to particular social types and the vicissitudes of modern life. For example, Scottish fans promote an egalitarian ethic of sociability that seeks to transcend forms of internal polarization; they challenge their ‘stranger’ identity overseas through friendly dialogue and interaction, albeit by depending on the international hegemony of the English language; and, they have constructed their national identity out of a dyadic self-definition (as not English, not hooligans). Perhaps most importantly, the Tartan Army may be understood as an institution that affords regular sociable escape from the anomic individuation of modern culture, into a form of public life where no one is alone in the crowd.

It may be possible to extend this application of Simmel to other sporting subcultures, depending upon four particular observations. First, application of Simmel’s model can serve to map more systematically the cultural variations between different spectator groups. Obviously, we expect baseball fans in Korea to display some markedly different social practices than cricket fans in Sri Lanka or football fans in Spain. Comparative consideration of these groups’ patterns of informal sociality, their propensities for adventure, or whether they consciously suppress general forms of social stratification, can serve to map more precisely the nature and extent of their cultural differences.

Second, the Simmelian perspective lacks substantial structural force, as evidenced in its failure to account adequately for the disciplining or governing of spectator conduct. For example, there are
Foucauldian contexts wherein the disciplinary mechanisms of sport stadiums (all-seated stands, televised surveillance systems, proactive stewarding by police officers and security personnel) serve to pacify the crowds (cf. Giulianotti, 2001). Alternatively, Simmel’s century-old work is unlikely to lend itself favourably to explaining postmodern forms of sociality, such as those ‘artificial’ forms of spectatorship that cluster and thrive around television cameras or virtual forms of fandom that survive on mediated images of popular culture. This points to an underlying empirical flaw in the Simmelian imaginary in the context of postmodern sociological thinking. Whereas he tended to highlight the homology of social and cultural predispositions among individuals, more contemporary cultural sociologies frequently emphasize the diverse, ‘pick and mix’ identities that social actors continuously acquire and discard.

Third, Simmel’s model does have a particular relevance to informal social forms that maintain many of their preliminary features. Hence his model would certainly have explanatory value in regard to sporting communities prior to their commercial incorporation or mass diffusion, for example rugby union clubs before their professionalization, or among the early participants in alternative or extreme sports.

Fourth, it is important to consider whether Simmel’s model is meaningful to sport subcultures with a dominant public identity diametrically opposed to that of the Tartan Army. It would seem, for example, that in the case of football hooligans, their defining violence would render them incapable of sustaining Simmelian sociability. However, two particular findings from empirical research with hooligan groups suggest otherwise. On the one hand, in non-violent contexts (which, it should be stated, constitute the vast majority of occasions), participants in hooligan gatherings do possess noteworthy Simmelian characteristics: they engage in intensive banter, enjoy forms of social adventure, suppress forms of social stratification, favour practices that promote social reciprocity, and seem to offer an escape from the dizzying variety of modern objective culture. On the other hand, rival hooligan groups display forms of violent repulsion and concord towards one another. Indeed, regarding concord, perhaps unexpectedly, hooligan groups share subcultural values and even some friendly dialogue that may underpin a distinctive, if fraught, hooligan social order.

Inevitably, there are some weaknesses or lacunae in the Simmelian imaginary that may dissuade some sociologists of sport from exploring his thinking. Simmel’s propensity for interactionist approaches puts his work at odds with more structural understandings of asymmetrical power relations, although his observations on conflict illustrate how his work is cognizant of societal
inequalities. His assumptions regarding the intensive differentiation of social and cultural forms do not correspond well with greater sociological interest, particularly since the advent of postmodernism, in their interdependency or dedifferentiation.

Nevertheless, it is important to underline that Simmel’s work has wider relevance to the sociology of sport. His formalistic sociology provides us with methodological and epistemological foundations for examining the social histories of particular sporting forms. His substantive analysis of sociability could be illustrated through reference to almost any popular sport. His discussions of ‘outsider’ social types, such as the stranger or the adventurer, could be fruitfully applied to examine other nomadic sports subcultures or, given the intensified cosmopolitanism of sports teams, the kinds of identity assumed by professional athletes. Simmel’s arguments regarding the rise of objective culture have deep resonance in the sheer volume of contemporary sport, particularly the availability of immense quantities of sport-related media content.

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Notes

2 For example, see Armstrong (1998) and Kelly (1997, 2004).
3 For analysis of Simmel’s wider sociological influence, see Frisby (2002). See the ‘Special Issue on Georg Simmel’, Theory, Culture & Society, Volume 8, Number 3, 1991.
5 Ernie Walker was at that time the Secretary (and leading figure) of the Scottish Football Association.
6 ‘Gallus’ is a word more commonly associated with the central belt of Scotland, and refers to individuals who are cheeky, risk-taking, self-confident, inclined to rule-breaking or given to rascality. Legendary Scottish players — such as Hughie Gallagher, Jim Baxter, Jimmy Johnstone and Gordon Strachan — were known and revered as gallus characters.

References


