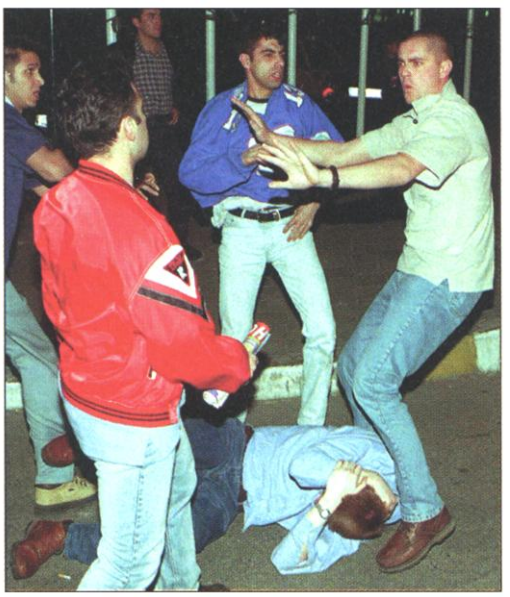
In Europe, Hooligans Are Prime Subjects for Research

CAMBRIDGE, U.K.—When fans of two of the largest Dutch soccer teams (or football clubs, as they're called in Europe) met on 23 March 1997, it seemed at first like business as usual: a great many flying fists, a few cars set ablaze. Then a fan stabbed a supporter of a rival club to death. The public responded with shock to the first football casualty on Dutch soil, but for behavioral biologist Otto Adang, the murder, though tragic, wasn't unexpected. "This was bound to happen sooner or later," he says.

Adang has studied football hooliganism and riot behavior since the mid-1980s, using observational methods that he developed when studying aggressive behavior in the Arnhem Zoo's chimp colony. In what Menno Kruk, a behavioral neurobiologist at Leiden University, calls "the first big field study on hooliganism," Adang says he "traveled around in the Netherlands for 3 1/2 years looking for trouble." All told, he attended 225 football matches and protest demonstrations, recording the behavior of protesters and hooligans on more than 700 hours of audio tape. Such a systematic approach, says Adang, allowed him "to compare various situations ... to answer why some of them turned into riots and others didn't." The 1997 stabbing death, he says, was foreseeable because not only had football hooliganism become more violent, but it had also moved away from the football grounds, making it harder for the police to anticipate where clashes were going to erupt.



Twist and shout. Scientists are studying fighting between football fans, such as this scuffle before a match in Istanbul last April.

Research into football hooliganism is one of the few burgeoning areas of violence research in Europe. The University of Leicester in the United Kingdom even established an entire research unit—the Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research—on the topic in 1987 (although the center has broadened its scope since). In contrast, other types of violence studies are languishing here, researchers say. With lower homicide rates than in the United States and fewer incidences of killing sprees such as the Littleton school shooting, Europeans are less concerned about violence than Americans are—and that translates into less money for research on the topic. Moreover, some scientists argue that strict regulation of animal studies has dealt a severe blow to a once-proud European tradition of behavioral research on animal aggression.

"The number one fear of Americans is becoming the victim of a violent crime," notes Terrie Moffitt, an American expatriate developmental psychologist at King's College in London. That's something Europeans worry about much less, even though international surveys from some 20 different countries show that "the probability of being assaulted is not that different in the U.S. and [Great Britain]," Moffitt says. The big difference is in the outcome: "The homicide rate is indeed quite a bit higher in the U.S.," Moffitt notes. Says Patricia Brennan of Emory University in Atlanta: "If Europe had the same number of guns, they probably would have the same number of homicides."

Although they don't envy Americans their homicide rates and Littleton headlines, European violence researchers can't help but envy the attention and funding such tragedies bring. "In the U.S. it's possible to get grants in the million-dollar range to do big science," from agencies such as the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), says Kruk; private U.S. foundations also make significant contributions. In most European countries, however, there is no equivalent of NIMH, and philanthropic support for violence research is virtually nonexistent. As a result, European violence projects usually "get a grant of maybe $20,000," says Kruk.

With funds so scarce, "a lot of violence researchers moved on to different fields such as depression, anxiety disorders, and such," says German-born psychopharmacologist Klaus Miczek of Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. The consequences of this exodus are plain to see. The attendees at a recent meeting in Britain on severe antisocial personality disorders "all fitted in one small room," says Moffitt. "At any given American Society of Criminology meeting you'll have about 5000 people—and that doesn't even include the psychiatrists."

That hasn't always been the case. In the 1960s and '70s, says Miczek, "the Netherlands and Britain were the mecca of aggression research [in animals]. The Europeans really were trendsetters, introducing new and quantitative ethological methods" to study animal behavior, following in the footsteps of founding fathers Niko Tinbergen and Konrad Lorenz and their disciples. But more recently, aggression research has met with severe criticism from animal rights activists, who object to experiments in which animals attack and injure one another.

"The animal rights movement entirely shut off aggression research in animals" in the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe, says Miczek. The Max Planck Institute for Psychiatry in Munich, for example, once ran a large program to decipher the neuronal circuitry behind aggressive behavior using tiny electrodes to stimulate various brain areas in primates. "This is all but gone now. I don't know of anybody who's still doing [this kind of] primate aggression research," says Miczek.

A few areas of research other than hooliganism are managing to remain relatively strong here, however. Among them are longitudinal studies, in which groups of people are followed from early childhood into adulthood to pinpoint factors that might help foster violent behavior. Such studies originated in Scandinavia, where governments keep a wealth of social records, making it an El Dorado for this kind of research. The findings often are picked up by American researchers, who have a tendency to "want to fix the problem and come up with prevention programs," says Kruk.

Importing this philosophy is Adang, who is now pursuing his research at the Dutch Police Academy in Apeldoorn. With funds from a European Union grant, Adang sent observers to every city that hosted matches during EURO 2000, the European football championship that took place in the Netherlands and Belgium last month. "There's a lot of opinions but very few hard facts about the value of preventive police tactics. We wanted to use [EURO 2000] as a street lab of sorts to test some of our hypotheses, predictions, and recommendations based on earlier studies." One of those recommendations was that police should mingle with the hooligans and talk to them—"really anything that destroys their anonymity," says Adang. So far, he's cautiously optimistic: "The number of serious incidents was very small. It seems to work." —**MICHAEL HAGMANN**

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