



Contestations over risk expertise, definitions and insecurities: The case of European football

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Abstract

This article advances sociological debates which, since the 1990s, have proliferated over the nature of ‘risk’ and ‘insecurity’ in modern societies. Central here is Ulrich Beck’s work, dealing with questions regarding which expert systems and institutions possess the ability to define what constitutes a risk or not. For Beck, hegemonic relations of definitions are central in the identification and construction of risk. However, risks are contested by wider publics, sub-political groups and movements. Notwithstanding, existing literature predominantly explores these contestations through techno-scientific contexts. Through a case-study of European men’s football (1985–2023), this article extends Beck’s work into the field of sport, by examining how supporter movements have contested expert claims on risk, insecurity and its management in leisure and sporting cultures. The article argues that reflexive cultures of contestation have matured and enabled a small section of ‘recognized’ supporters to become ‘counter-experts’, thereby blurring the expert/public distinction within Beck’s theories. It thus contributes to sociological debates on risk and citizen-expert contestations in contemporary social contexts.

Keywords

Beck, counter-hooliganism, relations of definition, risk, social contestation, sport

Introduction

Since the 1990s, and particularly 9/11, academic work on ‘risk’ and ‘(in)security’ has advanced considerably. Here, sociological debates have predominantly revolved around authorities’ turn towards exceptional security measures or technologies, and their impact

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on citizens' civil liberties (Bauman, 2005; Bigo, 2008; Haggerty and Ericson, 2000), counter-terrorism practices (Mythen and Walklate, 2008), the market for, and consumption of security goods (Loader, 1999), and the general politicization of risk, insecurities and expert systems and institutions (Beck, 1992, 1999, 2005). This growing line of sociological inquiry can be analysed in light of two key issues. First, contentions that current societies are characterized by risk (Beck, 1992), surveillance (Lyon, 2001) and security (Loader, 1999). Second, the *intersection* and *co-existence* of institutions' attempts to navigate through and deal with insecurities, unknowns and uncertainties. Under such conditions, following Ulrich Beck (2008), a crucial task for social scientists is to address the question of '[w]ho decides in a world of manufactured uncertainties [. . .] what is and what is not a risk?' (p. 8).

In the sociological literature, important questions about *which* institutions or groups define 'risk' and 'insecurity' have been raised. Some highlight neo-liberal marketplaces that (re-)define and capitalize on the *need for* safety and security (Loader, 1999). Others emphasize the importance of the social relations and everyday practices of 'security professionals' entangled in bureaucratic, transnational networks (Bigo, 2008). Resonating somewhat with the latter, Beck's (1992, 1999) sociology of risk highlighted the importance of expert institutions and their knowledge. For Beck, the public's knowledge on risk depends on experts who, in turn, become central, hegemonic institutions in uncertainty-filled societies. Accordingly, experts define and steer public debates on risks (Mythen, 2004). Importantly, however, in risk societies where citizens are marked by a heightened reflexivity and awareness of 'a generalized "climate of risk" [. . .] in our daily activities' (Elliott, 2002: 293), the public is also increasingly sceptical of experts, whose knowledge they regularly contest (Wynne, 1996 [1994]). This suggests that, concerning the power to define what *is* (or *is not*) a risk (Beck, 2008), existing social theory holds that institutions possessing 'expert knowledge' represent one key to understanding how 'risk' and 'insecurity' are managed in the modern social world. Notwithstanding, experts' management, definition and understanding of risks are deeply political, contested and span diverse domains and public/private institutions.

So far, sociological work on public-expert contestations and debates has predominantly focused on techno-scientific social contexts like environmental campaigns (Teo and Amir, 2021), genetically modified foods (Wales and Mythen, 2002) and health/illness (Cable et al., 2008). Meanwhile, the contestations between risk managers and citizens, occurring in social contexts *beyond* scientific and environmental fields, including sport and leisure cultures, remain under-explored despite the assertion that football – as examined here – 'is not alien to the concept of risk control' (Testa, 2018: 69). To clarify this puzzle, and develop this analysis, this article addresses Beck's contention that the institutions tasked with managing risks occasionally become the *source* of risk and insecurities, and how members of the public increasingly *contest* expert knowledge and claims, by utilizing European football (1985–2023) as a case-study to analyse the politics of risk in modern society. First, focusing on social fan movements, it explores why risk contestations in football must be analysed in a historical context and traced back to socio-political events of the 1980s. Second, it examines how supporters, against the backdrop of an important, contemporary case in European football, actively disputed, contested and countered 'risk experts' discourses and claims – that is the high-profile

events surrounding the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) men's Champions League final, 28 May 2022, at *Stade de France*, Paris. Here, thousands of fans' safety and security were placed at risk on a night that nearly ended in disaster after a breakdown of risk assessments, dangerous congestion at the stadium gates and the police's deployment of tear-gas and pepper spray against fans (UCLF22, 2023). The case's importance is encapsulated by how it renewed political interest in, and generated a momentum for, policy reviews into risk and safety management at major cultural and sporting events across Europe, including a Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) committee inquiry in 2022 (UK Parliament, 2022). It also powerfully demonstrated how 'the risk of violence is often given more attention than the risk to the safety of fans' (Pearson and Stott, 2022: 11), rendering it an important case for sociological investigations on the contested character of 'risk' in societies; and how supporters – a large social group in transnational societies – call for changes to European football's commercialized, securitized, globalized, mediatized and postmodern nature (Numerato and Giulianotti, 2018).

The data underpinning this article's analysis is drawn from four qualitative sources: first, from 15 semi-structured stakeholder interviews carried out for two separate, but inter-linked research projects between 2019 and 2023,¹ including with European-wide and national fan representatives and Supporter Liaison Officers (SLO); second, document analysis of available, comprehensive policy-documents from UEFA, the Council of Europe (COE) and 'post-*Stade De France*' independent reports containing fans' testimonies; third, football fanzine material accessed from the British Library's fanzine collection; and fourth, key stakeholder or spokesperson interviews given/quoted in mainstream media sources. Overall, by arguing that reflexive cultures of contestation have matured, thus enabling a small section of supporters to become recognized 'counter-experts', thereby blurring the traditional expert/public distinction from Beck's work, this article contributes to sociological debates on contestations in risk societies. It reassesses the roles of citizens/experts in the definition of risk and insecurities, and how European football's expert systems' claims are contested by citizens – in this case, critically engaged supporters. It engages with the following research questions: How do football fans engage in, make sense of, and contest risk expertise and definitions in modern football? What does the *Stade de France* case tell us about this? To contextualize these questions, key theoretical and socio-historical considerations are unpacked next.

Beck's risk society, expert systems and social contestation

A complete account of Beck's work and critics cannot be given here (see Mythen, 2004), but it is necessary to contextualize Beck's (1992) seminal risk society, before situating the role of experts and social contestations over the definitions of risk. At the risk society's core, one can locate insecurity and the diagnostic observation of an epochal shift from a 'relatively safe and ordered industrial society, to an insecure and fragmented risk society' (Mythen, 2004: 32). The risk society, following Beck, was detectable from the 1970s and onwards, as modernization processes, globalization and techno-scientific developments contributed towards new sets of risks that, unlike the risks of industrial societies, are uncontrollable, unpredictable, potentially disastrous and geographically

unfixed. Famously, Beck (1992) defined risk as ‘a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernity itself’ (p. 21). These ‘man-made’ or ‘manufactured’ risks – representing consequences of an increasingly complete modernist project – can no longer be fully insured against. Social institutions and organizations are therefore unable to manage and provide security when facing the new risks that ‘evade established systems of security and welfare’ (Mythen, 2007: 797). These climates of risk, wherein the central issue is ‘how to feign control over the uncontrollable’ (Beck, 2002: 41, original emphasis), have produced increasingly *reflexive* citizens and propelled wider social transformations.

New sets of risk require social and political intervention (Domingues, 2022). Here, and throughout Beck’s (1992, 1995) work, much space is given to the role of *experts* dealing with diverse risks. He particularly focused on experts located in techno-scientific fields (e.g. nuclear or environmental domains) and their complex relationships to citizens or ‘lay publics’ whom, Beck argued, had grown increasingly sceptical of, and disenchanting with, expert systems due to their failure to ‘effectively contain and deflect risks’ (Mythen, 2007: 798). This, however, reveals an underlying dynamic of risk definition in (risk) societies. The centralized position of science after the 20th century meant that ‘scientific experts have traditionally been cast as the talking heads through which environmental risks are articulated to the public’ (Mythen, 2004: 56). In turn, this renders experts – including those ‘outside’ scientific communities – as ‘gatekeepers of risk’ who serve as mediators between individuals and risks, ‘because to be deemed at risk an expert has to intervene’ (Hanlon, 2010: 214). This remains important, as the public turns to experts who are positioned to *define* risk and *re-programme* the public debate on various risks that were previously unknown (Mythen, 2004). Subsequently, risks are not exclusively objective nor apolitical. As Beck (2005) emphasized, ‘Risks are not things. They are social constructions in which expert knowledge as well as cultural values and symbols play a key role’ (p. 106). As Beck’s (2009, 2016) later work argued, experts – assisted by the mediated ‘staging’ of risks – are therefore central power institutions whom citizens’ knowledge about (global) risk depends upon.

While Beck assigned a special position to experts, he was also critical of, and problematized, the expert role, because expertise is contingent rather than definite (Mythen, 2004) and mitigating certain risks is *impossible*. Importantly, in this article’s context, Beck (1992) observed that experts must not merely be analysed as ‘a source of solutions to problems, but also as a cause of problems’ (pp. 155–156). He argued,

key institutions of modernity such as science, business and politics, which are supposed to guarantee rationality and security, find themselves confronted by situations in which their apparatus no longer has a purchase and the fundamental principles of modernity no longer automatically hold good [. . .] They are no longer seen only as instruments of risk *management*, but also as a *source* of risk. (Beck, 2006: 336)

This pronounced concern with risk has transformed crime control policies, policing strategies (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000) and security governance (Mythen and Walklate, 2008). In these contexts, too, it is possible to detect the contested nature of expertise and knowledge, and the schism between citizens and experts’ rationalities (Hanlon, 2010).

Not only are expert voices competing and heterogeneous, but this has led to a *separation* between experts and citizens (Beck, 1995). For instance, activists, social movements and political groups increasingly challenge expert systems and their authority. Illustrative points of this are the contested illness claims by workers at an American nuclear reservation (Cable et al., 2008); or the Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis where official expert claims were discredited, distrusted and scrutinized by the public (Levidow, 1999). Recently, Teo and Amir (2021) demonstrated how climate-focused civil society groups' contestations challenged the state's expertise on climate risks and contributed towards climate-oriented sub-politics in Singapore.

Risk societies are characterized by the rise of *from-below* sub-political actors, which

leads to the widening of what counts as expertise and the political system is required to become one that is more participatory, with a reliance on networks between state and civil society, and decision-making and negotiation processes being opened to the public. (Teo and Amir, 2021: 203–204)

Therefore, what Beck (2010) called 'relations of definition' – that is, 'the rules, institutions and capabilities which specify how risks are to be identified in particular contexts' (p. 259) – become a source of contestation between *sub-political* and *political* actors. The relations of definition explain who can define what constitutes a risk, who is responsible for these and how they should be responded to (Teo and Amir, 2021). Thus, relations of definition are possibly 'best understood as an arsenal of interconnected social institutions, which are involved in the definition and construction of the social meaning of risks' (Wales and Mythen, 2002: 123).

It is these contestations of risk, relations of definition and expert systems which this article addresses. Considering the above, however, Beckian insights are unclear on how exactly these contestations, over a temporal period, play out *outside* techno-scientific domains and, specifically, in leisure fields like European football which, for decades, has been characterized by a precautionary, risk-based logic in the institutional attempts to minimize disorder, violence and 'undesirable conduct by football spectators' (Spaaij, 2013: 178). Furthermore, sociological literature suggests that football fans can be understood as reflexive, sub-political actors who *critically question* modern football's repressive developments (Numerato, 2018; Turner, 2023). Beck's own writings focused on contestations within scientific, ecological and technological fields. Importantly, however, expertise is no longer confined to 'the traditional sphere of science, but is socially distributed in society' and must not be reduced to 'purely scientific and technical matters' (Lidskog, 2008: 75). Wynne (1996 [1994]) highlights the tendency within sociological work to adopt a 'top-down' approach to expert knowledge, and thereby underplay the role of lay knowledges, social rationality and social groups' expert contestations (Hanlon, 2010). Others maintain that the applicability of Beck's risk-informed sociology must be demonstrated on a *case-by-case* basis (Bulkeley, 2001). This invites research committed to *stretching* Beck's thinking beyond its conventional settings. Football composes one sociologically illuminating dimension of the risk society (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022a) and, by adopting Beck's thinking,² while addressing contestations of risk in a novel context, this article contributes theoretically and empirically to the sociology of risk through the European football exemplar. In what follows, it employs the above analytical framework to place these contestations in a historical context.

Programming and contesting risk rationalities and insecurities in 'modern football' (1985–2023)

Following Numerato (2018: 3), borrowing from Beck's vocabulary, football fan activists are *reflexive citizens* in late modernity, who are confronted by the consequences of football's modernization processes and increasingly critical and knowledgeable 'about the political, social and cultural aspects of football' (see Hill et al., 2018). To fully understand fans' contestation over relations of definition, risk strategies and mechanisms seeking to manage European football's spaces and cultures, it is argued here that it is imperative to avoid a 'top-down' approach, and critically unpack the historical situation of the relationships between fans and the relevant risk managers and experts of this context – namely, political and football authorities, policing and security actors (Turner and Lee Ludvigsen, 2023). As such, the next sections argue that, as the risk society's logics have become implanted (and concretized) in European football since 1985 (illustrated by national and pan-European policies, legislation and security practices), this has been paralleled by *reflexive cultures of contestations* and opposition towards football and political authorities' adopted risk rationalities involving the categorization of fans according to 'risk' (Pearson and Stott, 2022) and discourses about fans as 'social enemies' (Tsoukala, 2009).

Throughout the 1980s, in the United Kingdom and across Europe, anxieties over football-related violence and disorder (and so-called 'hooliganism') proliferated. Especially after the high-profile, tragic events of the Bradford fire, Heysel disaster (in 1985) and the Hillsborough disaster (1989). These anxieties, however, were also largely fuelled by media coverage across Europe; amplifying the threat of 'hooligans', thus discursively constructing their 'otherness' (Tsoukala, 2009) and position as a 'social problem' (Murphy et al., 1988). This resulted in several politicians, media outlets and police authorities perceiving football as a *social problem*. In the United Kingdom, for example, one of the first institutional attempts to mitigate the 'risk' posed by football supporters in the 1980s involved the Thatcher government's proposed, nation-wide supporter ID cards which – although eventually dropped – sought to deter spectators from attending matches (Cleland et al., 2018). Indeed, following Heysel and Hillsborough, the authorities quickly pointed towards 'hooliganism' as the cause of these disasters (Scruton, 2013). If we approach policy-makers, football authorities and law enforcers as the possessors of 'expert knowledge' in football's social world, then a myriad of repressive responses seeking to minimize the risks of violence and disorder in and around the football stadia were initiated and adopted by these institutions. In addition to law enforcers and policing bodies with particularized specialities (cf. Bigo, 2008), football's expert systems are, therefore, composed of policy-makers and football authorities (e.g. UEFA) with decision-making and regulative authority, in football (Tsoukala, 2009). While the *nature* of their expertise is contested and political, their *expert position* still remains activated and central because the management of European football events *depends* on their regulations.

Given the continued European-wide 'hooligan' insecurities 'post-Heysel', a key supranational moment on the European level was the passing of COE's 1985 'European Convention on Spectator Violence and Misbehaviour at Sports Events and in particular at Football Matches' (Tsoukala, 2009). The Convention was, on national levels, followed

by a whole raft of new, football-oriented legislation, security and surveillance technologies and policing tactics. In the United Kingdom, specifically, following the Hillsborough disaster where 97 Liverpool fans lost their lives, one may detect a ‘juridico-political transformation’ that was visible, first, through the ‘post-Hillsborough’ Taylor Report published in 1990, recommending that English football stadia should be all-seated and equipped with CCTV systems. Second, by way of increasingly precautionary social control policies and legislation ‘directed increasingly towards “policing the future” through preventing or pre-empting violence’ (Giulianotti, 2011: 3300). Third, through discourses prioritizing the identification of labelled, categorized and profiled enemies like ‘football hooligans’ or ‘risk supporters’ (Giulianotti, 2011). Importantly, such anticipatory trends were not exclusive to English football. From 1985, the political consensus around public security and mediated versions of ‘hooliganism’ has, across European contexts, led to converging moves across the legal, policing and media responses to ‘football hooliganism’ (Tsoukala, 2009). Significantly, the mentioned 1985 Convention came into force shortly after Heysel, accelerating both new national policies, and European institutions’ involvement, in ‘counter-hooliganism’ throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Tsoukala, 2009). Research from, for example, the Polish (Kossakowski et al., 2020), Italian (Doidge, 2015), and Dutch contexts (Spaaij, 2013) collectively underline how ‘fans, both on the individual and group level, have become subject to security system control unprecedented in the modern industrial era’ (Kossakowski, 2014: 46). Hence, across Europe, supporters attending stadia are routinely subjected to various risk-management techniques including dataveillance and surveillance from CCTV or other technologies, police and stewards and physical separation (Spaaij, 2013). While introduced for ‘public safety’, some of these techniques also contribute towards maintaining the stadia’s consumption circuits (Giulianotti, 2011).

First, collectively, and returning to Beck (2009), this is relevant because it reveals how, from the 1980s onwards, hegemonic relations of definitions amplified by ‘media staging’ worked to convey images of football fans as potentially ‘risky’ or ‘dangerous’ populations.³ Second, this essentially affirms that, over a four-decade period, a series of futuristic, precautionary and pre-emptive principles, legal restrictions and mindsets have become embedded and matured across European football seeking, broadly, to minimize the prospects of disorder and violence. Ultimately, these measures target specific events and social groups that are, from the experts’ viewpoint, categorized according to *risk*; as it has become usual in present-day societies to differentiate between ‘risk’/‘non-risk’ supporters and fixtures on European and national levels (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022a). Pearson and Stott (2022) argue,

While ‘non-risk’ fans will be treated as ordinary citizens enjoying their leisure time, seen as deserving of rights and policed proportionately, those categorised as risk would typically become the focus of a more ‘robust’ policing operation. ‘Risk supporters’ were more likely to be subject to restrictions on movement [...] and the ongoing surveillance that characterises the policing of risk. (p. 154)

Risk, therefore, is not merely binarily defined, as risk assessments and grammars are deeply embedded in European football (Spaaij, 2013). Notwithstanding, the emergence of risk management techniques, technologies and definitions, as produced by risk experts

has not solely had far-reaching social consequences in football, but been subjected to processes of social contestation between fans and ‘experts’, acknowledging that fans *and* experts do not compose homogeneous social groups (Cleland et al., 2018). Thus, their reflexive views on different (in)security and risk management issues (cf. Numerato, 2018) are also likely to generate heterogeneous interpretations, making it imperative to emphasize that all experts (or fans) are not possessing the same view on, for example, the threatening nature of supporters.

Unpacking the emergence of alternative risk framings: from fanzines to the meeting tables

Having established the *programming* of risk rationalities in European football, this article contends that it is crucial to adopt a ‘bottom-up’ approach to holistically understand the consequences of European football’s ‘risk-based mindsets’ (Tsoukala, 2009: 70) which, importantly, have been characterized by a contestation over relations of definition in the relevant time period (1985–2023). Returning to 1985, Cleland et al. (2018: 22) hold that an increase in supporter activism is traceable to the Heysel disaster’s aftermath, since this led to a ‘negative portrayal of fans by the government and the media’ and towards the responses unpacked above. Advancing this further, it is argued here that reflexive cultures of contestation have developed *in parallel with* football’s risk rationalities. This argument matters because it captures, in a novel context, how sub-political civil society groups and individuals (re-)produce alternative risk framings and seeks to shape the legitimization and definition of risk (Teo and Amir, 2021).

In risk societies, the media represents a dialogue space where the public may voice their concerns (Mythen and Sørensen, 2019). Before social media, one of the first ways in which critically engaged fans at club level began to voice their opposition to the risk-based processes outlined earlier was through fanzine production. As a medium through which fans could express their political and cultural contestations through ‘humour as well as a resistance to the government and football authorities’ (Cleland et al., 2018: 23), fanzines must be approached as a key medium through which fan social movements emerged, and the ‘hooligan-fan’ conflation and social control mechanisms were resisted post-Heysel and Hillsborough, along with football’s wider commercial transformations (Lee Ludvigsen, 2023).

Following Beck, modern societies are characterized by rifts between expert and lay knowledges, and contested expert fields (Hanlon, 2010). In European football, examples of this appear in the fanzine movements’ response to the Hillsborough tragedy and its aftermath. As stated, after Hillsborough, football and political authorities immediately blamed ‘drunken’ and ‘violent’ fans for causing the crowd crush, although these versions were later disproved by the mentioned Taylor Report concluding that police failures and an unsafe stadium were the main causes of the tragedy (Scruton, 2013). One Liverpool fanzine from Hillsborough’s aftermath, describing fans as the ‘people who are the REAL EXPERTS in football’ (*Eh Mate . . . What’s the Score*, 1989: 2), demonstrates how football’s expert systems are challenged in risk societies:

We feel that Hillsborough was not the result of a ‘freak’ accident but that it arose from years of neglect by the football clubs and football authorities and from the actions of a police force more concerned with crowd control and restraint than safety. (*Eh Mate . . . What’s the Score*, 1989: 9)

In another article, questioning whether football terraces could ‘ever be safe’, the fanzine authors conclude that ‘As long as clubs are content to herd us into enclosures with little regard for safety and absolutely no regard for comfort then no’ (*Eh Mate . . . What’s the Score*, 1989: 8). A similar sentiment appears in Merthyr Tydfil fanzine *Dial M For Merthyr* (1989/90: 4), where those tasked with managing football fans are urged to ‘take a good look at their football tactics and ask whether they are causing more problems than they are solving’. Significantly, these excerpts exemplify how expert claims, discourses and the risk management techniques deployed by clubs, authorities and the police were contested and opposed in written form early on.

Importantly, most supporters seek no participatory role in collective action (Cleland et al., 2018). However, among the critical minority of fan activists, Hillsborough – due to the controversies in the official investigation and the ‘post-Taylor Report’ legal transformation – became a symbol of football’s security measures and the criminalization of fans (Numerato and Svoboda, 2022). Heysel and Hillsborough also represent formative moments within UK fan network’s social history; accelerating the fanzine movement and the associated rise of fan movements like Football Supporters Association (FSA) and Independent Supporters’ Associations (Numerato and Svoboda, 2022; Turner, 2023). The FSA appeared as ‘a particularly potent example of the existence of continued “contestation” over cultural institutions’, and responded largely to the ‘excessive police presence and often indiscriminate police action’ in English football (Jary et al., 1999: 581, 585). Although the FSA did not attract a large membership base, it created a network of highly resourced individuals who sought to preserve ‘traditional’ fan values across England from, inter alia, new, restrictive legislation and policies which they perceived to sanitize supporter cultures (Turner, 2023). Therefore, these British examples illustrate how collective action – which resisted expert systems containing the fused knowledge from political and football authorities and the police – directly materialized from, and centred around what were contestations and conflicts about who defines risk, how risks in football should be managed and whether risk authorities were actually the source of risks (cf. Beck, 2008).

Transnationally, from the 1990s and throughout the 2000s, European supporter networks emerged in parallel with the national fan associations described earlier. Indeed, supporters became ‘increasingly aware that they [were] having similar shared experiences with fans across Europe’ (Cleland et al., 2018: 173). Importantly, one key point of contestation that bound supporters together relates directly to football’s repressive and future-oriented risk and security management techniques. Concerns over these policies’ impacts upon match-day atmospheres, fans’ civil liberties and their disproportionate nature led to a critical section of supporters actively challenging and resisting them, as seen through campaigns such as ‘*Watching Football Is Not A Crime*’ and fan congresses with panels where fans discuss the (over-)policing of fans in Europe (Numerato, 2018). Moreover, while fans’ contestations do not automatically have an impact or generate social change, several key, institutional developments responding to fan activism are identifiable. This involves the

‘observer status’ of supporters’ networks like Football Supporters Europe (FSE) and SD Europe (since 2009 and 2016) on the COE’s Committee of the 2016 Saint-Denis Convention,⁴ the introduction of SLOs as a requirement in UEFA competitions, and the FSE’s involvement in the delivery of ‘pan-European’ football policing training (Numerato, 2018). Although FSE does not comprise fans with homogeneous viewpoints, as previously shown (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022b), fan representatives maintain that fan organizations’ participation in these processes allows for greater information-exchange. As one representative commented, this meant that FSE had ‘been really active with the Council of Europe, working together with them, especially around this Saint Denis Convention’ and on SLO and police training (Stakeholder 5, February 2023).

Hence, throughout the late 2000s and 2010s, fan activism has become increasingly professionalized, sophisticated and recognized at policy level (e.g. UEFA and COE recognize FSE; Numerato, 2018). The recognition of the need to engage supporters following the COE’s 2016 ‘Convention on an Integrated Safety, Security and Service Approach at Football Matches and Other Sports Events’ was described by a European fan representative as a turning point in that respect:

The [2016] Convention, because it was completely different to the 1985 Convention, which came after Heysel, which was just totally repression-based. It was only repression. But you know, many countries, many practitioners have come to realize that the [1985] Convention was way out of date. The important thing about the [2016] Convention was, it introduced the third pillar. So, we no longer purely spoke about safety and security, but we also started talking about service. And in that, if you don’t get the service right, you can have the best safety and security measures, but if you’re still not treating supporters like they should be treated, you’re going to have problems. So, service became an integral part of the integrated approach to safety and security and service at sports events [. . .] So, we’re talking about liaison and engaging with supporters involving feeding the views of supporters into match-day organization. (Stakeholder 4, February 2023)

Another fan representative also expressed that, increasingly, fans’ contestations had led to changes in how supporters across Europe were perceived by some experts:

JL: Around the meeting tables, do you feel fans’ voices are increasingly being taken seriously?

Stakeholder 6: Increasingly, yes. I wouldn’t say that by every stakeholder they’re taken as seriously as by other stakeholders. But then again, playing kind of devil’s advocate, that’s the same in every walk of life. You’ll have some stakeholders that are valued more by other stakeholders, and vice-versa (March 2023)

Building on Turner (2022, 2023), Numerato (2018) and Turner and Lee Ludvigsen (2023), it is possible to locate football supporters’ contestation of risk and insecurity within the ‘post-Heysel’ and ‘post-Hillsborough’ timescape. As Beck (2016) maintained, risk can create new forms of ‘communities’ and, as argued here, as risk-based mindsets and precautionary principles have embedded and concretized themselves in European football after 1985, it is apparent that *reflexive cultures of contestations* towards risk management policies and insecurities have emerged in European fan cultures and

matured significantly in line with digital and transnational trends. This evolution stretches from fanzines; to national fan organizations; towards European-wide networks (e.g. FSE), formally recognized as what we might understand as ‘counter-experts’, by European authorities like UEFA and COE.

However, despite providing an intensified counter-hegemonic voice recently, it is important to note that no *monolithic* European movement against restrictions in football existed throughout the 1990s and 2000s, when, often, restrictions were introduced in the *absence* of counter-hegemonic voices (Tsoukala, 2009). Beck’s (2005) proposition that social movements hold limited power, but higher levels of legitimacy, may thus be transported to European football as, despite critical fans’ increased sophistication, their influence or impact (in)security cultures has remained limited, whereby ‘successes’ are sometimes authorities co-opting fans’ suggestions (Numerato, 2018).

Notwithstanding, subscribing to a ‘bottom-up’ approach, it appears that in the interconnected UK and European contexts, between 1985 and 2023, football supporters have emerged as sub-political movements advocating the need for inclusion of fan voices on security and policing matters and by creating *alternative* risk framings. These alternative framings are important as contestations against the dominant narratives in football ‘around “managing risk,” “safety” and “security”’ (Webber and Turner, 2023: 14) emanating from expert systems who, as this and next sections reveal, have been a source of insecurity.

The events surrounding *Stade De France* (May 2022) and the aftermath: disputing expert claims

This section examines the high-profile case of the Champions League final chaos (28 May 2022), to explore what this case reveals about fans’ engagement, sensemaking and contestation of risk and insecurity in European football. The events before, during and after the UCL final between Real Madrid and Liverpool at *Stade De France*, Paris, saw fans crushed outside the stadium gates, some injured and unable to access the stadium. Some fans were also subjected to attacks by local gangs, and heavy-handed policing, including the use of tear-gas and pepper spray, by French police. The pre-match chaos, in turn, caused a 36-minute delay to the final’s kick-off which UEFA and French authorities initially blamed the alleged ‘late arrival of fans’ and subsequently counterfeit tickets and ticketless fans for (Delaney, 2022).

If we understand UEFA and French authorities’ accusations here as ‘expert claims’, it is evident that these, in a ‘new media’ age, were quickly disputed by match-goers, supporter networks and mobile phone footage, *as well* as other competing ‘experts’, including journalists, the relevant football clubs and politicians who pointed towards institutional and organizational failures and rejected the emerging narrative stemming from UEFA and French authorities blaming supporters for the chaos. For instance, in dismissing the authorities’ claims, Ronan Evain, FSE’s Executive Director, stated, ‘There is a cheap, very old prejudice against Liverpool fans, and I think it has been used for political gain by the French government’ (quoted in Delaney, 2022). Hence, not only were ‘objective facts’ articulated by experts subjected to intense scrutiny by reflexive groups (cf. Wales and Mythen, 2002), but the events made it questionable how

key principles of crowd safety, venue management, personal security and duty of care become compromised by stadium managers, stewards and police? [. . .] What led to such a prestigious event becoming the site of extensive personal suffering, trauma and harm? (Scraton, 2023: 25)

Three months after the final, 1700 Liverpool fans had reported physical injuries or psychological trauma after attending the final, and initiated the process of taking legal action against UEFA (Conn, 2022).

There is insufficient space here to cover all the responses from French authorities and football bodies. However, 2 days after the final, UEFA confirmed that they had commissioned an independent report into the events surrounding the final. The final 219-pages long report from the independent review panel led by Tiago Brandão Rodrigues was published on 13 February 2023, and concluded that 'UEFA, as event owner, bears primary responsibility for failures which almost led to disaster', and that it was 'remarkable that no one lost their life' (UCLF22, 2023: 182, 10). The panel, which included two members from FSA and FSE, respectively, also highlighted the undynamic risk assessments and errors of the French police, whose 'outdated policing model was based upon flawed assumptions about risk and was over reliant on the reactive use of munitions' (p. 182). In fact, as one interviewee explained, 'there are still too many people in the French police who have this attitude that football fans are troublemakers, hooligans, criminals and that you don't enter into dialogue with them or discussion with them' (Stakeholder 4). The panel's report also disproved the mentioned claims concerning 'ticketless fans' and 'counterfeit tickets', maintaining that such claims were made 'to deflect responsibility for the planning and operational failures of stakeholders' (UCLF22, 2023: 170).

For Beck (2005), the *perception* of transnational risk opens up spaces where authorities' power can emerge. Here, this can be seen as UEFA and French authorities employed their power to enhance control measures against supporters (as one 'transnational risk'); as justified by *their own* definition of 'risk' and 'risky populations'. Yet, given these authorities' definitional power, even their own mismanagement could be (and was initially) framed as *risk mitigation* until sub-political counter-arguments emerged and challenged this. Concerning Beck's risk society, there are also two other dynamics warranting discussion here. First, the independent panel's findings, in many ways, paint a picture of a paradigmatic case of institutional failures, whereby those institutions (here UEFA, French authorities) ensured with the management of risk were unable to do so, and thus became the very source of risk and insecurities (cf. Beck, 2006). Second, it can be argued that the *Stade De France* final and other, recent security and safety issues at European football events⁵ could become a catalyst, on sub-political level, for the mobilization of supporters across Europe, and for greater demands of a 'democratisation of the hegemonic relations of risk definition' (Wales and Mythen, 2002: 138):

Stakeholder 6: [. . .] In a safety and security setting, we have seen that all three UEFA competitions have really poor finals and organisation for finals last year [2022] which, straight away, *unites everybody across Europe*. We had people from six different nations in the three male European competitions [finals], so *that's six different nations there, where you have a united front*

- because they all experienced poor service at a major European final. And then obviously we saw the stuff at the Euros [2020] for the international football.
- JL: Yeah, there's been quite a few issues?
- Stakeholder 6: Yes, high-profile issues. And then, if you throw in the [European] Super League, then that unites everybody because nobody is in support of it. *Stakeholders need fan engagement now, more than ever, too.* (emphasis added)

The reference to high-profile issues that 'unites everybody across Europe' is worth highlighting. This passage touches the surface of the reflexivization that makes supporters increasingly critical of football's social, political and economic aspects (Numerato, 2018) encapsulated here by 'poor service', safety issues and the European Super League.

Following publication of the independent panel's findings, UEFA have confirmed its intention to maintain dialogue with club-specific and national supporter organizations (FSA, 2023). In March 2023, UEFA's President, Aleksander Ceferin, apologized and stated, 'We [UEFA] are doing everything we can and we will not let it happen again' (quoted in The Athletic, 2023). Meanwhile, FSE (2023) expressed their commitment to work with UEFA to implement the report's 21 recommendations. Although this suggests an increasingly democratic and participatory risk debate (Beck, 1999) where expertise becomes widened (Teo and Amir, 2021), as some fan representatives maintain an a priori access to European football's political structures, it should simultaneously be remembered that the recognition of fan networks as 'dialogue partners', or even 'counter-experts', 'does not necessarily mean that they will be listened to' (Cleland et al., 2018: 171). Notwithstanding, this remains important because where Beck's thesis 'underplays the importance of [expert/public] social relations' (Hanlon, 2010: 215) and 'depicts experts and the public as two relatively homogeneous and polarised groups' (Mythen, 2004: 153), this article argues that the *Stade De France* episode and the reflexive culture of contestation that exist in European football means that this distinction becomes somewhat blurred. Adding to this, the earlier discussion maintained that supporters' struggles of the past, in some way, have influenced contemporary football risk practices. While fans are a socially heterogeneous group, it is evident that supporters are framed dualistically. On one hand, fans are framed as 'risky groups' subjected to a raft of legislation, risk management techniques and technologies and therefore excluded from the expert system. On the other hand, a small section of supporters is frequently framed, and even enter the role as legitimate 'counter-experts' or 'expert non-experts'. Overall, the *Stade De France* case underlines this, and how supporters were, in part, central in countering the unfolding 'expert claims' of UEFA and French authorities.

Conclusion

This article makes an original contribution by using a case-study to unpack and advance Beckian insights on risk, expertise and contestation. Since the 1990s, institutions and individuals' responses to, and management of, risk and insecurity have generated much sociological debate (Bauman, 2005; Beck, 1992; Bigo, 2008; Mythen and Walklate,

2008). Here, significant issues that have retained continued interest are the contradictory and reflexive nature of risk expertise and knowledge in contemporary societies (Teo and Amir, 2021), who ultimately defines or categorizes what constitutes a risk or not, and how this is contested between experts and publics (Beck, 2008). One important dynamic here is the emergence of expert authorities and institutions claiming to possess ‘superior abilities to anticipate and manage risk [which] are increasingly suspect in public perceptions’ (Reddy, 1996: 222). Against this backdrop, this article illuminates the political dynamics and consequences of the contestations over the relations of definition, by exploring *one* dimension of the risk society – namely, the case of European football. Sociologically, this remains highly important in a period where safety and security risks at sporting events are currently reviewed at political and policy levels after the discussed *Stade De France* final (UK Parliament, 2022), which was described post-event as a ‘near-miss’ and a ‘moment of suffering’, and intensified the political imperative of avoiding similar, future disasters (UCLF22, 2023: 6–7).

Beck’s (1992, 2006) risk society theory holds that the public have started to see expert systems not solely as the *solutions* to risks, but as the *causes* of risks, while acknowledging how citizens engage with, and oppose, risk definers and managers. Accordingly, this has led to contestations between citizens and experts vis-à-vis relations of definition, the social institutions which define and attach social meaning to risks (Wales and Mythen, 2002). Therefore, citizens ‘have the ability to contest and renegotiate the boundaries of expert knowledge, and to create alternative meanings’ (Lidskog, 2008: 83). Notwithstanding, Beck’s work, and the related literature, remain unclear on the nature of public-expert contestations *beyond* technological, scientific and environmental settings and institutions (Cable et al., 2008; Teo and Amir, 2021; Wales and Mythen, 2002), such as sport and leisure cultures. This article clarifies this puzzle, utilizing Beck’s theories to elucidate a theoretical but empirically layered analysis of football fans’ contestations over risk and insecurity in European football, which culminated with the high-profile *Stade De France* case. This case powerfully demonstrates how authorities in charge of risk management *caused* insecurity (cf. Beck, 1992); the ‘strategic use of the truth’ by states and corporations (Beck, 2005: 242) and; finally, how expert claims were immediately disputed and disproved.

By addressing fans’ engagement with, and contestations over risk, this article produces two key, interlinked arguments. First, as risk-focused mindsets, grammars and precautionary principles have increasingly underpinned the politics and organization of European football since 1985 (Tsoukala, 2009), so has the democratic legitimacy of the relevant relations of definition been heavily contested by supporters across a four-decade long timeframe. Building on Numerato (2018) and Turner (2022), it is argued that reflexive cultures of contestations around risk and insecurity have matured *within* supporter cultures over these decades. This remains important because it reveals that sport cultures have brought about similar reflexive contestations detectable in scientific or environmental fields (Teo and Amir, 2021). Second, through mechanisms whereby recognized supporter representatives participate on consultative visits and monitoring exercises, working groups and independent review panels, it appears that small sections of supporters can be considered legitimate ‘counter-experts’ or ‘critical friends’ (Numerato, 2018: 46). This underlines how, over time, sub-political movements acquire

access to, and might even penetrate the more formalized procedures and meeting tables around which they become ‘counter experts’ through formal recognition by states and international organizations.

This article theoretically stretches Beck’s work by revealing, within a novel case setting, how experts and publics are not necessarily poles apart, thus it problematizes Beck’s depiction of expert/public as homogeneously distanced (Hanlon, 2010). Rather, a specific and small section of fans, like those participating in working groups, consultative visits, independent panels and SLO procedures, are legitimized stakeholders and ‘counter-experts’ that can access, interact with and relativize ‘conventional’ expert systems. These insights, added together, are important because they contribute to sociological debates on citizen-expert contestations in risk societies by clarifying the puzzle of what exactly contestations over relations of definition look like beyond those contexts that Beck and the subsequent literature have predominantly analysed in sociological debates on risk over three decades.

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Notes

1. The first of these projects evaluated security policies and meanings at football Euro 2020 (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022b). The second project examined the role of fan engagement and Supporter Liaison Officers (SLOs) in European football. All interviewees gave consent and are, if cited, anonymized.
2. Giulianotti (2009) is surprised over Beck’s limited impact on risk-oriented analyses of sport, noting that Beck provides the ‘most sophisticated and stimulating work on risk for sociologists of sport’ (p. 552).
3. See Tsoukala (2009) for a study of media coverage of ‘hooliganism’ across Europe.
4. In 2022, SD Europe and Football Supporters Europe (FSE) merged (and retained the FSE-name).
5. For example, during Euro 2020’s final in London, July 2021, some ticketless fans forced their way into the stadium and disorder ensued.

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Author biography

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Résumé

Cet article fait avancer les débats sociologiques qui se sont multipliés depuis les années 1990 sur la nature du « risque » et de « l'insécurité » dans les sociétés modernes. Le travail d'Ulrich Beck, au sujet de questions relatives aux systèmes experts et aux institutions ayant la capacité de définir ce qui constitue un risque ou non, occupe ici une place centrale. Pour Beck, les relations hégémoniques de définition sont essentielles dans l'identification et la construction du risque. Or les risques sont contestés par des publics plus larges et des groupes et mouvements subpolitiques. La littérature existante explore pourtant ces contestations dans des contextes principalement techno-scientifiques. À travers une étude de cas sur le football masculin européen (1985–2023), cet article étend le travail de Beck au domaine du sport, en examinant

comment les mouvements de supporters contestent les affirmations des experts sur le risque, l'insécurité et sa gestion dans les cultures des loisirs et du sport. L'article soutient que les cultures réflexives de contestation ont mûri et ont permis à une petite partie des supporters « reconnus » de devenir des « contre-experts », brouillant ainsi la distinction expert/public dans les théories de Beck. Ce travail contribue ainsi aux débats sociologiques sur le risque et aux contestations entre citoyens et experts dans des contextes sociaux contemporains.

Mots-clés

Beck, contestation sociale, lutte contre le hooliganisme, relations de définition, risque, sport

Resumen

Este artículo avanza en los debates sociológicos que han proliferado, desde la década de 1990, sobre la naturaleza del 'riesgo' y la 'inseguridad' en las sociedades modernas. Aquí resulta central el trabajo de Ulrich Beck, que aborda cuestiones relativas a cuáles son los sistemas expertos e instituciones que poseen la capacidad de definir qué constituye un riesgo o no. Para Beck, las relaciones hegemónicas de definición son centrales en la identificación y construcción del riesgo. Sin embargo, los riesgos son cuestionados por públicos más amplios, grupos y movimientos sub-políticos. No obstante, la literatura existente explora predominantemente estas contestaciones en contextos tecnocientíficos. A través de un estudio de caso del fútbol masculino europeo (1985–2023), este artículo extiende el trabajo de Beck al campo del deporte, examinando cómo los movimientos de aficionados han cuestionado las afirmaciones de los expertos sobre el riesgo, la inseguridad y su gestión en el ámbito de las culturas del ocio y el deporte. El artículo sostiene que las culturas reflexivas de contestación han madurado y han permitido que un pequeño sector de aficionados 'reconocidos' se conviertan en 'contra-expertos', desdibujando así la distinción experto/público dentro de las teorías de Beck. De esta forma, el artículo contribuye a los debates sociológicos sobre el riesgo y las confrontaciones entre ciudadanos y expertos en los contextos sociales contemporáneos.

Palabras clave

Anti-hooliganismo, Beck, contestación social, deporte, relaciones de definición, riesgo