Unpopular Sport Teams and the Social Psychology of ‘Anti-Fans’

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It is one of the most peculiar phenomena in sports cultures worldwide that the most successful team with the most fans in any given country or city is often at the same time the most unpopular among everybody else in the country, city, or league. The New York Yankees, for example, continue to maintain a love-hate relationship with baseball fans across the USA and even with fans in their hometown New York City, where in the past the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Mets used to fascinate urbanites with their image of the likable though unsuccessful underdog. The top European soccer teams with a comparable magnitude in their respective leagues, such as Juventus F.C. in Italy or Bayern Munich in Germany, experience the same. Fans who usually find it hard to agree on anything (be it referee decisions, the likability, or the talent of certain players) because they are emotionally attached to different teams come together in the same blog or Facebook group to agree on one thing: that Juventus, the Bayern, or the Yankees are simply despicable. Sport teams thus represent a simple, yet most fitting example of Lüthe’s and Pöhlmann’s assessment that today, cultural products are often popular and unpopular at the same time (cf. 21).

Why, then, do fans from across the country unite in their overt contempt for a specific team? What is the psychological setup and the sociocultural rationale of the ‘hater fan’? Why do people fervently and outspokenly assign to themselves the role of a non-member of a certain fan group, instead of simply ignoring that which they do not care for?

The Sociology of Sport Fandom

Sports fandom and the social psychology of people who are interested in sports, who cheer and care for the team of their hometown or alma mater, and who choose to come together in small self-selected collectives to amplify their emotional attachment to that sport and team, are fairly well-understood cultural phenomena. Sociologists and anthropologists in the late twentieth century have identified the most significant sociocultural reasons, motivations, and mechanisms behind fan cultures
in sports. Landmark studies that defined the theoretical framework in which sociologists understand sports fandom include Bourdieu's essay ‘How can one be a sports fan?’ (1978), in which he both asked and answered the question in its title by applying one of his core concepts, the ‘habitus’, to different types of sports. Bourdieu concluded that different social strata are fascinated by different types of sports, which mirror and reinforce social cleavages by being relatively exclusive for members of different social classes. Fiske's influential work on 'The Cultural Economy of Fandom' (1992) adopted Bourdieu's fundamental idea of sports participation and fandom as a production and accumulation of non-monetary ‘capital’ (cultural, social, or ideological), while overcoming some of the oversimplifying dichotomies that divided sports into either working-class or bourgeois pastimes without any leeway for ambiguity. Still, for Fiske fandom continued to be ‘associated with cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people [...] particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class, and race’ (30). Empirical studies in sociology, psychology, and communication that prove Fiske's point exist in abundance (e.g. Carrington, Miller, Kay, to name only three representative examples). Yet today, 22 years after Fiske's insightful argument, it appears necessary to re-evaluate Bourdieu's and Fiske's central idea that sports fan communities are always spawned by a deficit in official forms of cultural capital of those involved. As I will show later, it appears as if the identity construction as a sports aficionado and a knowledgeable sports small-talker, even about sports that used to imply the habitus of a lower class (such as soccer in Europe and American football in the USA), has become a form of socially acceptable, even beneficial behavior also for those who are flush in money and education, i.e. forms of official cultural capital.

In a different branch of social theory, but with clear relevance to the dynamics of sport fan groups, Maffesoli's hypothesis about a new *Time of the Tribes* (1996) in postmodern urban societies can be readily applied and connected to the Bourdieuian approach. As I show elsewhere, several core characteristics of sports teams (the relevance of ritualized chanting and singing, sport's ability to produce heroes and induce nostalgia, their being rather stably tied to their respective urban centers, thus spawning local patriotism) in fact render them potent foci of crystallization for post-modern ‘pseudo-tribes’ (Maffesoli x; cf. also Senkbeil, *Ideology*).

Numerous empirical studies affirm some of the core arguments of said scholars, while at the same time differentiating and nuancing the complexities of sports fandom, and sometimes cultural differences in different parts of the Western world (cf. for example Sugden and Tomlinson or Whannel).
The established lines of argument of Bourdieu, Fiske, and Maffesoli therefore form the foundation for the argument outlined in this paper. Yet, it appears as if the phenomenon of a collective disdain or even 'hatred' towards certain teams in modern team sports represents a distinctive subcultural phenomenon, which the work of the scholars mentioned above fails to fully account for. Fiske argues that being an active fan ‘is functional, it must be for something’ (35, my emphasis), indicating that participation is mostly purposeful on a social level; now it stands to argue whether one can be a fan against something, and whether the social functions are still comparable then. Sports sociology shows that ‘normal’ sports fans seek moments of joy and strong emotional involvement as central motivations for their participation in the stadium, particularly as modern life has increasingly become emotionally stale (cf. Dunning and Elias 16). Furthermore, prestige within one’s peer group belongs to the strong social functions of participatory fandom. At first glance, being a fervent hater or anti-fan seems to make less sense, as hatred, anger, and continued frustration (because the hated team usually continues to dominate the league financially and athletically) seem to be neither psychologically nor socially desirable effects.

Thus, departing from those landmark texts that have been introduced here, I attempt to show how anti-fan-culture can be seen both as an extension of and in opposition to more ‘normal’ fan culture in today’s Western societies. In a second step, a tentative qualitative study of the social semiotics within said anti-fan groups online will sketch a typology of anti-fans, and attempt to extract three central reasons for why people choose to acquire and perform an anti-fan identity. Firstly, I argue that class dynamics in developed capitalistic societies are central in pushing certain fan groups to the margins, thus ‘producing’ hater fans while consumerism woos the normal ones. Secondly, I intend to show how an almost ‘mock-bourgeois’ form of traditionalism informs much of the scorn and insult towards hated teams. Finally, I will discuss how anti-fan performances serve social functions whose motivations go beyond class but rather include power dynamics on the axes age and gender.

Anti-Fans vs ‘Normal’ Sports Fans: A Comparison

First, it appears necessary to shortly recapitulate the reasons that the Bourdieu-Fiskeian school of thought defines as decisive for ‘normal’ sports fans’ performances and identity constructions. Then, based on qualitative empirical research, it will be possible to test whether the same arguments
hold for hater fans and their loose collectives that can be found on Facebook and other forums online. Why do ‘normal’ sports fans—those who cheer fervently for their favorite team at every home and many away games—do what they do?

Bourdieu’s theory of sports participation differentiates between cultural tastes and competences common among the privileged members of a society versus cultural tastes of those deprived from economic and official cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu 352–53). As the lower classes lacked access to those institutions that taught the competences and tastes for official cultural forms (such as opera and the fine arts), they founded counter-cultural forms of ‘non-official’ cultural and social capital among the peer group of likeminded fans. This countercultural habitus included rougher, more physical forms of behavior, which is why physically aggressive sports were long considered typical working-class pastimes (such as for example boxing, soccer, rugby, and, though to a lesser extent, American football), as opposed to culturally more ‘refined’ but less physical sports (such as golf and tennis). When spectatorship of popular (in the sense of ‘non-elite’) sports developed into fan culture, the commitment to that particular form of habitus thus always formed outside of official institutions and usually with an implicit rebellion against established official culture.

The ‘shadow cultural economy’ (30) of fandom, as Fiske calls it, picking up the Bourdieuan train of thought, usually expropriated certain mechanisms and characteristics of that official culture to which it was (allegedly) opposed. To name just the strongest parallels: the gate-keeping and policing of the borders between the community of fans for team A (versus those of team B) continues to work remarkably similar to gatekeeping practices and processes in ‘higher’ cultural forms. Also, the background knowledge of historical events, personalities, and ritualized forms of behavior that an ‘initiate’ or ‘newcomer’ needs to show before he or she can be accepted among the ranks are as strongly marked as (maybe even more pronounced than) those within the communities of official culture. Also, it needs hard work and dedication to become a leading figure within a sports fan group, just as it needs hard work and lots of practice to be accepted as a knowledgeable arbiter of official culture. Moreover, ‘authenticity’ remains an essential criterion in the accumulation of official cultural capital, as the authentic sound of a particular orchestra, the authenticity of a painting, and the competence to recognize and ultimately own said authenticity remains at the core of official culture connoisseurship. This is reflected by the authenticity of one’s emotional involvement as a sports team fan: among ‘ultra’ fans, it is met with the greatest amount of scorn when non-ultras (or
politicians, or the media, or advertisers) try to fake the emotional highs and lows of the ‘true believer’ (cf. Langer 54–66).

Moreover, despite the fact that early sports fan cultures (in the twentieth century) were considered grass-roots movements opposed to the upper class, the social return of investment of sports fans strongly resembled the usual forms of social capital. Being an accepted member of a fan collective grants a young man the esteem of his peers, respect and social status within the group, a feeling of solidarity among his ‘pseudo-tribe’ (Maffesoli x), i.e. with people who are neither his family nor close friends, but rather a ‘self-selected fraction’ (Fiske 30) of the people, whose commonalities are often restricted to comparably small details.

For Bourdieu and Fiske, the huge difference between official culture and the shadow economy of fans’ cultural capital was that subcultural capital within the sports fan peer group could not (or only with a lot of difficulties) be translated into real economic capital. If anything, being a deeply involved fan of a working-class sport more often than not encumbered social upward mobility up until the late twentieth century. In opposition, official cultural capital, and this included the cultural capital acquired through membership in upper-class sports circles, usually produced social privilege and distinction, enabled networking with likeminded members of the upper class, and thus often represented an important step towards more economic capital down the road.

Bourdieu strongly emphasized this class dimension, and in the last decades both theoretical and empirical works have made the point that this simple dichotomy of bourgeois vs working-class sports fandom must be problematized and extended (cf. Sugden and Tomlinson, for example). We know today that fandom in almost all popular cultural forms is just as dynamic with regard to the axes of ethnicity, gender, and age. A look at the demographics of sports fandom shows that age appears to be a particularly significant variable for sports fandom. The most dedicated fan groups in stadiums mostly consist of young men (and few young women) intent on differentiating themselves from the official cultural norms of their parents and teachers (cf. Langer 51). At the same time, age is the one dimension of difference that inescapably changes over time for each and every one of us. From that perspective, it comes as no surprise that the self-proclaimed counter-culture of sports fans emulates and reincorporates many characteristics of official culture: in fact, the quasi-bourgeois mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion mirrored in sports fan groups prepare their participants for similar mechanisms in later life. Not coincidentally, a large fraction of the most devoted, enthusiastic, noisiest sports fans are in fact students at
high school or university (aged 15–25)⁴ (cf. Schwier), i.e. young people who are currently preparing themselves in official educational institutions to later in their lives become parts of the official culture they (think they) are symbolically opposing in their youth.

Testing the outlined arguments about ‘regular’ sports fans for a certain team with regards to those who call themselves ‘haters’ of a certain team, we find only little differences in the social-psychological rationale that probably motivates that self-identification. The policing of borders and mechanisms of exclusion may be less strict: becoming a member of, for example, the Facebook group called ‘Because I’ll always hate F.C. Bayern’⁵—which has more than 86,000 followers—is voluntary and unrestricted,⁶ but group founders and administrators keep an eye on which posts are deemed appropriate. For example, hateful remarks about single players of that despised team are acceptable, even celebrated, unless overt racism plays into them: even hater fans have to obey some of Facebook’s norms about political correctness. Those group members with the most cutting or witty remarks acquire high amounts of ‘Likes’, today’s common currency for desirable yet non-transferable subcultural social capital. Others put in hard work and effort, photoshopping the colors or jerseys of the hated teams into images of pigs (or other unfavorable animals), players’ heads onto animal bodies or into photos with humiliating sexual contexts, to gather ‘Likes’ and praise for their ‘artwork’. Participants are most often young and male, their sense of humor (often) decidedly adolescent and intentionally ‘tasteless’—a hint at the fact that hater fans position themselves as opposed to the mainstream, though probably subconsciously (as opposed to punk rock bands, for example, who intentionally make ‘bad taste’ a part of their agenda). In that sense, the social psychology of the hater fan mirrors to a large extent that of the normal fan—if maybe a bit more extreme in their neglect of the standardized rules of politeness and political correctness. In fact, it appears very likely that both groups significantly overlap.

Particularly when it comes to the ‘rowdiness’ and ‘bad taste’ of anti-fan groups, it is most worthwhile to recapitulate Fiske’s statement from 1992, in which he discussed the same kind of behavior among (normal) soccer fans in Great Britain and concluded that those fans,

many of whom are socially and economically disempowered males, can, when wearing their colors and when in their own community of fans, exhibit empowered behavior that only rarely really becomes violent and dangerous, but which more typically confines itself to assertiveness. (38)
Today, the internet seems to be a prime medium to enable said symbolic assertiveness and rudeness, which never becomes really dangerous for anyone because of the spatial distance between the aggressor and potential retaliators who might feel insulted. This symbolic act of aggression, Fiske continues, is willfully ‘socially offensive, and deliberately challenges more normal social values and the discipline they exert’ (38). This behavior is, in fact, intended to ‘call forth considerable adult disapproval’ (Fiske 38). On the one hand, this idea echoes Lüthe’s and Pöhlmann’s remarks about intentional unpopularity as a means to define an ‘underground’ aesthetic (cf. 8). In that respect, deliberately tasteless noisecore bands and rowdy soccer fans share some characteristics. On the other hand, the term ‘adult disapproval’ in the quote above draws our attention back to age as a significant dimension of difference. ‘Adult’ probably need not necessarily be taken literally; we should consider it a metaphor for ‘the powers that be’ in society. Most rowdy soccer fans are young, but in fact of age; many of them are well-off, young, middle-class men at university (cf. Schwier) who behave like responsible adults in their day-to-day lives. Thus, differentiation along the axis of age—the (real or metaphoric) conflict between teenagers and adults—may be one key to understand anti-fans. I will return to this idea later.

So, even though the Fiskean-Bourdieuian argument holds not only for ‘normal’ soccer fans but also for hater fans, it appears necessary to expand on one dimension in which the justifications and reasoning in these groups are not congruent: their entanglement with consumerism. As mentioned earlier, Fiske and most other Cultural Studies scholars today agree that a clear distinction between the so-called popular as clearly distinguishable from and opposed to official or high culture is an oversimplification. Also, the definition of ‘subculture’ has become increasingly difficult, since in virtually all fields of popular culture we can observe mainstream culture’s power to absorb any new subcultural forms after a while, incorporating them into the hegemonic system, adapting them to mainstream aesthetics and values, even ‘inventing’ or creating high-cultural validity to draw the socially and economically privileged towards the trend. There exist various theoretical superstructures with which to explain this; one of them, the hegemony-theoretical approach based on the neo-Gramscian school of thought would argue that cultural hegemony (of modern mainstream consumer capitalism) is a form of dominance that is founded on the consent of its subjects to prevent their opposition. The smartest form to ensure the consent of the young and potentially rebellious (here: sports fans) may be to include their subcultural forms and practices (here: highly emotionalized
participation in the stadium) into the midst of mainstream consumer culture.

A look at media communication in sports (cf. for example Senkbeil, Ideology; Sage) shows how for a few decades, sports fans, particularly the most passionate ones, have become the target of consumer culture: they are wooed and flattered by advertising, welcomed by TV producers as ‘intense background noise’ to their sports broadcasts, applauded by cultural critics for their ‘authenticity’ and ‘loyalty’, and increasingly accepted and pursued as customers by big business.

A case in point is the emergence of the so-called Fanmeilen in German city centers during every big international soccer event following the FIFA world cup in 2006. There, the possibility to communally watch the games on a huge screen with thousands of others is cleverly surrounded by venues selling official merchandise and FIFA-licensed food and drink. An American example is the trend towards centrally organized and brand-sponsored ‘tailgating parties’ around American stadiums. Tailgating, after all, was ‘invented’ as a reaction to the lack of reasonable public transportation to many American stadiums (which is why American fans go to the stadium by car) and, particularly, as a reaction to the outlandish prices for food and alcoholic beverages within stadiums. Thus, American fans used to barbecue and party out of the trunks of their cars before games to specifically avoid the excessive consumerism in stadiums. Today, brands (barbecue grill producers, beer brands, etc.) sponsor ‘official’ tailgating parties, a perfect example of the assimilation of a countercultural form into consumer culture.

This process is observable in the sports cultures of all wealthy (post-) industrial countries today, and it usually goes hand in hand with higher ticket prices, more VIP boxes, a growing amount of ‘pay-per-view’ TV broadcasts, and other developments subsumed under the term ‘gentrification’. England serves as a prime example: the ticket prices for the stadiums (or arenas) of the top soccer teams in London or Manchester (Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester United, Manchester City) often start in the three-digit numbers (of pounds), available only to those with plenty of actual monetary capital. Subcultural capital among the fan community alone will not suffice to participate actively in fan culture in England.

If we connect these developments with the Fiskean theory, it appears as if what Fiske called the ‘shadow cultural economy’ (30) of sports fans has thus lost its ‘shadow’ aspect. Sports fan culture today is part of official culture, a regular and acceptable part of an upper-middle-class citizen’s life, both in the USA and Europe. Still, while the status and prestige of being a sports fan has drastically changed, large parts of young, poor or
otherwise disenfranchised social strata certainly retain the inherent wish
to differentiate themselves from official culture and the powers that be. Consumerism’s grasp of sports fan culture cannot extinguish the fact that people with little or no access to official cultural capital still exist, and that they are still interested and emotionally invested in sports. The growth of hater groups or anti-fan communities may be connected with the need of a new, symbolically rebellious cultural form for these groups. In a way, I argue, the disenfranchised have migrated to a ‘sub-subcultural’ form—hating a certain team—because ‘only’ loving a team has become too mainstream, too middle-class, too ‘official’ in Bourdieu’s terms, and too much part of the hegemonic system that some experience as unjust and exclusive.

As the mainstream certainly considers hatred a most irrational, intrinsically negative, and thus the most unpopular of emotions, it appears to be particularly ‘unsexy’ for, maybe even inherently opposed to, market capitalism. This renders hate the ‘weapon of choice’ for young, mostly male individuals who feel disregarded or disrespected by official culture, including official sports culture. It should appear as if passionate spite against a popular cultural phenomenon could hardly be packaged or sold. Still, the mechanism of consumerism may find inroads into the domain of hater communities as well. As of recently, fan scarves—a standard accessory for European soccer fans—that feature scornful, though not very creative messages targeting the opponent (e.g. ‘Scheiß-Bayern’ as the main slogan on a blue-and-white Schalke 04 scarf) are sold by unofficial, unlicensed, ‘semi-legal’ vendors around the stadium on match day. In the United States, one can order a rib-knit baby one-piece (for age 3–6 months) by American Apparel online, carrying the slogan ‘I can’t even talk yet, and I already hate the Yankees’ (Skreened.com). There seems to be a niche target group for said items, another proof for the difficulty, maybe even impossibility of subcultures to be and remain completely unpopular and outside of ‘the system’.

A Typology of Anti-Fan Motivations

After the deductive approach to the question at hand—applying existing theories of fan societies to this new phenomenon—a brief inductive, qualitative study concludes this paper. For that, I have conducted a discourse-analytical examination of the contents and discussions in hater communities online. The dataset included freely accessible texts, comments, and images in comparably large Facebook groups that deal with the
hatred towards certain clubs in the USA (New York Yankees, LA Lakers), Germany (TSG Hoffenheim, Bayern Munich), and England (Chelsea F.C.). Obviously, users in said groups use different languages, i.e. Hoffenheim and Bayern haters communicate in German, which is certainly a point in case of the assumed restrictedness to national leagues or cultures. Soon during research, it became clear that visual elements—photoshopped images and ‘internet memes’ to mock or insult players or opponent fans—also play an important role in these groups, which is why a combination of methods that pay close attention to pragmalinguistic details (such as outlined in Wodak and Krzyzanowski, for example) with a method that addresses the semiotics of visual media (cf. Van Leeuwen and Jewitt’s edited volume) was applied, while keeping in mind the communicative particularities of multimedial, ‘Web 2.0’-based discourses (cf. Hinton and Hjorth). The result is a tentative typology of hater fans, which reflects some of the prior arguments well, while extending others.

The first and very central reason for the overt contempt of one team across a whole country or sports culture can of course still be found on the axis of class. Teams that dominate a certain league over a longer period of time usually do so because of their financial dominance; naturally, their continued success often leads to an even larger gap between ‘poor’ and ‘rich’ teams. One of the central problems of capitalism—‘the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer’—seems to be mirrored in sports. Though of course the market logic in sports is actually much more complicated (cf. Sage; Senkbeil, Ideology), young men may have their first contacts with the injustices of the capitalist order through sports. Professional team sports are easy to understand, and they blatantly show how ‘inherited’ wealth and success are inseparably interconnected, which some consider unjust and in seeming opposition to the ideal of a ‘level playing field’. This makes it relatively easy to hate the ‘fat-cat capitalists’ in New York, London, or Munich. The fact that this first underlying principle of fan hatred seems to have a clearly anti-capitalist dimension should by no means be mistaken with the idea that all hater communities are politically left-leaning. In fact, I have demonstrated elsewhere that discourses of anti-commercialization in sports cultures surprisingly often stem from conservative, even reactionary political stances (cf. Senkbeil, Ideology, 136–48).

As a counterpoint to success through financial dominance, anti-fans usually argue that poorer teams have more authentic emotions and ‘passion’. For instance, a widely bought and worn baseball fan T-shirt from Boston reads that any game against the New York Yankees is a contest of ‘Passion vs Payroll’ (cf. Facebook.com; community ‘The Boston Red Sox Block’). Ironically, the
Red Sox from Boston are not a team with a particularly small payroll either; their self-proclaimed image of a team from and for the working class is a clever PR invention rather than an accurate representation of reality. A look at this and a large number of other statements and images online reveals that hater fans do not need logical reasoning or factual evidence for their claims. This observation is largely congruent with Maffesoli’s argument that postmodern pseudo-tribes often celebrate irrationality (cf. 143–45), hence defining a counterpoint to the rationalized work-ethic-driven everyday life in Western capitalist societies. Also, a related study has shown that overly emotional, irrational, ‘passionate’ behavior and statements belong to the characteristics that many sports fans (‘normal’ fans and haters alike) cherish most, not only among themselves but also with regard to their heroes on the field (cf. Senkbeil, ‘Apollo’).

The second pattern that can be found among hater groups, complicating the prior argument a bit, has to do with a differentiation of ‘old money’ versus ‘new money’. Recently, the newly found wealth and success of some teams stem from external sources, i.e. billionaires who bought themselves into a leadership position of a sports team and now support that organization with money they earned in non-sports-related businesses. Leading examples from Europe include Dietmar Hopp, software mogul and one of the richest men in Germany, whose funds helped the village club TSG Hoffenheim join the top ranks of German soccer. The largest community of ‘Anti-Hoffenheim’ fans blames that club for being ‘without tradition, without values, whores of commercialization’ (cf. Facebook.com; community ‘Anti-Hoffenheim’). The choice of words here, in its offensiveness and explicitness, is in fact quite representative; many insults directed at players and managers of the hated clubs include sexualized overtones, sometimes interwoven with misogynistic or homophobic tendencies. I will revisit how gender intersects with hater fans performances later.

Another example is Roman Abramovitch, a Russian billionaire who owns Chelsea F.C. and whose money transformed it from a mediocre working-class club into a UEFA Champions League winner. English fans of teams without such external support hence consider Chelsea the ‘scum of the land’ (cf. Facebook.com; community ‘I hate Chelsea, scum of the land’). In the USA, Mikhail Prokhorov, another Russian industrialist billionaire, was the key figure behind the recent transformation of the notoriously unsuccessful basketball franchise New Jersey Nets into a cool, hip, urban brand, the Brooklyn Nets. Not only local communities were skeptical of the consequences of the influx of external money on the borough of Brooklyn and on American basketball in general. This development marks the most
recent one (the Nets have played in Brooklyn since 2012), and it will be most interesting to observe the reaction of American basketball fans across the nation when the Brooklyn Nets actually start winning championships.

Either way, newly found success based on external funds often generates strong condescension from the self-ascribed traditionalists within a sports community. In this respect, supporters of notoriously underfunded but traditional teams (a German example would be 1. F.C. Nürnberg) interestingly come to fully agree with fans of traditionally big, rich, and successful teams (e.g. Borussia Dortmund). As mentioned above, popular cultures’ fan communities often adapt the mechanisms of ‘social hygiene’ from the official culture that they are allegedly opposed to. From that perspective, the traditionalists’ backlash against nouveau riche teams does not come as a surprise: traditionalism and discrimination against newcomers—and particularly towards the nouveau riche—is and was one of the core strategies and practices of gatekeeping and exclusion in aristocratic and later bourgeois forms of high culture. With that argument—‘they don’t belong here; only we do, because we have a long tradition of being here’—anti-fans showcase a logic and behavior that is decidedly conservative and ‘petty bourgeois’. It stands to argue whether this second set of reasons for hatred towards a certain team is more prominent in Europe than in the USA. It would not come as a surprise if the different cultural and social histories on opposite sides of the Atlantic have rendered overt contempt towards the nouveau riche a European, and not a typically American reaction.

The third type of reason that I would like to discuss here functions outside the realm of economic realities and envy. Examining the discourses and semiotics in stadiums and online indicates that overt hate towards virtually all of the teams mentioned so far crystallizes around powerful men, whose name is inseparably interwoven with the rise to power of the hated team. Dietmar Hopp from Germany and Roman Abramovitch from England have already been mentioned. Uli Hoeneß, former president of F.C. Bayern, one of the most successful soccer clubs in Europe, fits into the same category. In the USA, George Steinbrenner of the New York Yankees, and Jerry Buss of the Los Angeles Lakers played a similarly singular role over a span of several decades. A closer examination of these public personalities reveals striking similarities, even though they functioned in geographically and culturally very distant places. These parallels thus deserve close attention.

Obviously, these owners and managers are all male, white, comparably old, and rich. Neither of them was born rich, but they all stem from a lower social class and became self-made millionaires. A look at their public performance and personas reveals that all of them are widely known as
strong-willed, uncompromising, bold, and sometimes brash in their way of doing business. When they appear in the media, they are portrayed as highly self-confident—their opponents often call them arrogant—as they like to showcase their power and influence in the sports scene and beyond. They seem to enjoy letting their fans and opponents know that they are convinced of their own managerial qualities, and have only little respect for opponents who show less talent and willpower than they themselves have shown in their careers. Within their clubs, their power and leadership is rarely questioned; in fact, these men often talk about their organizations in terms of ‘a family’, in which loyalty and mutual care play a central role, of course under the watchful eye of the powerful patriarch.

Let us connect these striking parallels with the observations about age and gender made above. Sports are today’s prime field in which societies negotiate and define their desirable and undesirable types of masculinity (cf. Whannel 159–72). Symbolic rule-breaking and rebellion is not only a characteristic of hater fans, but, in fact, typical of a certain type of idealized masculinity (cf. Senkbeil, ‘Apollo’). Young fans (normal ones and haters) are at a stage in their lives in which their masculinity is yet to be fully defined; many of them are still testing their limits and play with identity choices. Traditionally, adolescents (particularly males) have had to rebel against their fathers during that period, i.e. against older men, whom they experience as wealthier and more powerful than themselves, and who—to a teenager—appear arrogant and unwilling to compromise. In other words, I argue that sports fans ‘love to hate’ these powerful men and the teams they represent because they symbolically rebel against imagined father figures. I hold that this may be a particularly meaningful practice today, because we live in an era in which the real fathers of these young men often do not qualify as crystallization points for teenage rebellion. The old-school patriarch, i.e. a domineering, overpowering, sometimes tyrannical father, who only demands discipline and obedience from his children and otherwise totally inhibits their freedom, may still be a trope in popular culture, but is luckily rare these days in Western societies. The fathers of today’s sports fans in their teens and twenties themselves grew up in the 1970s and 80s, i.e. in a period in which the biggest battles against the traditionalistic tyranny of family patriarchs had been already won, both in North America and Europe. Simply put, many young men at college age today probably have rather nice dads, on average.

This is where a virtual ‘straw man’ father figure (the old man at the top of the opponent team) may serve a collective psychological function in that he invites fans to communally join in rejecting this overpowering
male and his cause. This symbolic rebellion, which never becomes really violent or dangerous,9 may (still) be part of growing up and of defining one's masculinity. Ironically, this behavior is marked as rejection of adult behavior on the surface, but on the level of the peer group it prepares young men to be accepted into the ranks of male domains in official adult culture later in life. Specifically, this may mean becoming a father yourself later, or becoming a successful, career-oriented, self-confident man at some point later in your life. The degree of aggression that these powerful men in the sports business have had to face is always caused by a mix of envy and pseudo-adolescent rebellion, but also by a fair share of (secret) admiration.

To conclude this tentative typology of haters based on an inductive analysis of Facebook group contents, it is probably safe to say that the three outlined rationales intersect at various points and influence each other. Jealousy towards the rich, a ‘mock class struggle’, and the mechanisms of a shadow cultural economy as an extension of and opposition to mainstream sports culture remain in place as strong motivations to hate a certain team. Yet, also in terms of the sociocultural work that this unpopular strand of fan culture is able to do, we should not underestimate the psychological undercurrents that deal with the negotiation and definition of young men’s masculinity in opposition to real or imagined father figures.

Conclusion

The assessment of whether anti-fan groups are more or less comparable to ‘normal’ sports fans has shown that many typical characteristics of fans of any type of pop culture can indeed be applied to anti-fans as well. The parallels between anti-fans and other sub- or youth cultures included the distinction against the larger mainstream (here: of so-called ‘fair-weather fans’), the active participation and creative work of individuals within the group, the accumulation of an elusive type of social capital (though on a smaller scale and nowadays mostly virtual, in social media), and also first attempts of consumerism to commodify the signifying processes of that subculture. To gather a full picture of the motivations and rationales of hater fans, who on the one hand find unpopular what the mainstream sports consumer finds popular, and on the other hand hope to make themselves unpopular with this ‘mainstream other’, we probably have to combine ‘classic’ economic reasons (symbolic class struggle, traditionalism, and jealousy towards the nouveau riche) with the dynamics of gender, particularly in the complex sphere of masculinity during adolescence.
Notes

1. In this chapter, I specifically focus on successful teams that are met with overt contempt throughout a nation, or more specifically the leagues in which they play (whose borders usually but not always coincide with national borders). That is to say, heated rivalries that are locally restricted to two cities, regions, or parts of town are explicitly not part of my argument here, as they usually follow more ‘reasonable’ rationales than those of the ‘united haters’ from all over the league. Bipolar sports rivalries often resemble remnants or aftermaths of serious political, ethnic, or religious conflicts in the past, such as in the rivalry of Glasgow Rangers and Celtic, or in the Madrid vs Barcelona rivalry in Spain (cf. Mandelbaum; Dunning, Murphy and Williams). Other traditional city rivalries seem to follow a Freudian psychological pattern, the ‘narcissism of small differences’, in their partly playful, partly serious teasing and mutual ridiculing, such as in the New York vs Boston rivalry, or the feud between Dortmund and Schalke in Germany. Hater fans, as I hope to show here, cannot be explained by either line of reasoning though, but follow different social psychological patterns.

2. For lack of a better term, I use the expressions ‘anti-fans’ and ‘hater fans’ synonymously throughout this paper, though clearly both are neither very precise nor satisfactory in explaining what these people do, and why. The English language in fact provides no clearer or more precise term for this phenomenon, a case in point of the general irritation that spawned the research for this paper: an ‘anti-fan’ is first and foremost an inherently paradoxical entity (much like the title of this volume, ‘unpopular culture’).

3. The term ‘official culture’ (a translation of the French ‘culture officielle’, describing the culture of the elites in French sociological discourses) may strike us as a bit imprecise from today’s perspective. Cultural Studies scholars today might opt for more exact labels such as ‘currently dominant’ to describe the same practices, hinting at the ambivalence and mobility of what is deemed ‘official’ and institutionalized in a given time and place. I will nonetheless use the term ‘official culture’ in the discussion of Bourdieu’s and Fiske’s arguments in this paper, as it reflects the original diction of those foundational works most precisely, but also because it is exactly the shifting status of what used to be and what is today ‘official’ and ‘ unofficial’ about sports fan culture that will prepare my later arguments.

4. In the U.S., the college sports system of course is a strong influence: college football and basketball games are known to draw much noisier and sometimes rowdier crowds than professional games, often due to the fact that those crowds largely consist of fellow students of the athletes. Still, in Europe, which does not have a comparable college sports scene, many leading figures of ‘ultra’ fan groups in soccer are eloquent and well-organized young men attending university (cf. Schwier 26–27).

5. ‘Weil ich den FC Bayern für immer hassen werde’ (trans. KS. Facebook.com)
6. It is one of the ironies of the Facebook age that its members cannot simply indicate their ‘hate’ for anything but can only ‘like’ or ‘become a fan’. A thumbs-down icon does not exist. The mentioned process of declaring oneself a hater of the Yankees (for example) thus only works via a logical detour (‘I like that I hate the Yankees’), which is, on the one hand, syntactically quite revealing, and on the other hand highlights the unpreparedness or unwillingness of Facebook (today’s main stage to define what is currently popular) to account for countercurrents and anti-fans of popular culture.

7. For reasons of space, the details of this multidisciplinary methodological approach cannot be fully elaborated here; I refer to the mentioned original theoretical and methodological works. In this essay, an overview of the qualitative results will need to suffice.


9. To my knowledge, none of the mentioned team owners and presidents have ever been really physically attacked or hurt by opponent fans. Aggression towards them is always limited to verbal abuse in stadiums or online.

Works Cited


