

Beyond the stadium: how “ultra” supporters fit into the urban space

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Based on an ethnographic survey conducted in Saint-Étienne, in south-eastern France, Bérangère Ginhoux shows how the activities of “ultras” groups extend beyond the stadium and are very much present in the urban space. She describes their quest for visibility in the public space and reveals how the city becomes the object of a symbolic competition between different groups.

Claiming to be part of a movement that emerged in Italian football stadiums in the 1960s and present in France since the mid-1980s, “ultras” are fans who are members of organized groups, most of which are non-profit organizations formed in accordance with France’s 1901 Associations Law. The most active members are mostly young men (typically aged between 15 and 35) from the middle classes.¹ Each ultra group has a name and emblem of its own. Unlike traditional supporters’ associations, they strongly assert their autonomy with respect to the club. They have hierarchical structures and their operations are essentially built around organizing activities – first and foremost, creating a lively atmosphere on the stands at matches with chants, gestures (waving and raising arms, jumping, linking shoulders) as well as drums, flags, banners and streamers, often used as part of *tifos*.² Furthermore, the main ultras groups produce fanzines³ and “gear”⁴ that they sell during matches. These activities are prepared at each group’s premises, where active members meet daily. All the French ultras groups share this culture, with the same values and forms of organization. They occupy the (historically) working-class stands of their grounds, which are almost always situated behind the goals⁵ (Bromberger 1995; Mignon 1998; Hourcade 1998).

But, beyond this space that they consider their territory, ultras also cultivate forms of territorial attachment that structure the competition between groups and effect a “symbolic marking” (Kokoreff 1988) of space using tags, graffiti or stickers. Their integration into the city is also visible in their practices and uses of public space and some specific places such as bars. How do ultras occupy and become integrated into urban territories? How are the competition and rivalries between different groups of ultras formalized within cities? In order to consider how ultras’ practices extend beyond the space of the stadium and the context of matches, this article is based on an ethnographic

¹ In French, the term used is *classes moyennes*, which literally means “middle classes”; however, this typically corresponds to the “lower middle class” in many English-speaking countries.

² This term, imported from Italian, designates the various displays and choreographies organized in the stands using different types of materials (plastic boards, fabric or plastic sheets/banners, cards, balloons, confetti, torches, smoke bombs, etc.)

³ Fanzines are small-format magazines (typically A5) that contain illustrated accounts of matches and trips (to away fixtures), as well as articles on the activities of the group, the club and/or the city.

⁴ This term mainly designates the objects produced by the group featuring its emblems and sold at the stadium on home-match days and at the group’s premises: scarves, clothing (sweatshirts, T-shirts, knitted hats, caps, polo shirts, etc.), lighters, badges and stickers, for example.

⁵ These stands – also known as Kops – were traditionally terraces where spectators watched the match standing. These sections of football grounds were home to the cheapest tickets.

survey⁶ conducted among the two ultras groups that support AS Saint-Étienne football club (Ginhoux 2013): the Magic Fans and the Green Angels.⁷

The forms taken by ultras' territorial attachment

Ultras groups belong to a social world whose activities, sites and discourses (Strauss 1992) are based on a common cultural background, while being influenced by links and perspectives shared with other worlds (e.g. musical, political or judicial). The world of ultras is thus marked by a significant degree of “cultural complexity” (Hannerz 2010), full of signs, symbols and slogans whose references and meanings are far from limited to the world of football and are often difficult to understand for the uninitiated. Being an ultra is therefore not just about being a football fan but also about being part of a social world whose practices and discourses extend beyond matches.

First of all, ultras groups are engaged in a competition based primarily on the quality of the displays and actions they organize within their stands in the stadium: they compete in terms of numbers of fans, the volume of chants and how spectacular their displays are (*tifos*, movements, banners, etc.). While this rivalry is especially strong between groups supporting various clubs, it can also exist between ultras groups supporting the same team: at home fixtures, for instance, each has their own repertoire of chants and each strives to produce the best *tifo*. The messages contained in the ultras' displays essentially fall into one of two categories: either they glorify their team, club, city and/or group; or they denigrate those of the “enemy” fans. Moreover, many *tifos* and chants pay tribute to the city, often representing the most prestigious monuments or events. On these occasions, a real “urban patriotism” can be observed (Ginhoux 2011), with ultras groups appearing to act as guardians of the history and values of their home town. Indeed, all of these groups identify strongly with the local area, which requires significant knowledge of the city (its history, its territory and its emblems). In their various means of communication (*tifos*, banners, chants, fanzines), groups seek to promote those things for which their city is (or was) famous (Hourcade 2008) – for example, the prosperous industrial and mining years for ultras based in Saint-Étienne (in the Loire coalfield) and Lens (in the extensive Nord-Pas-de-Calais coalfield) (Fontaine 2008). Moreover, in the context of their respective local derbies,⁸ we witness the staging – through *tifos* and chants – of a rivalry between these medium-sized cities with strongly working-class values on the one hand (Saint-Étienne and Lens), associated with feelings of solidarity, closeness and friendliness, and larger, more bourgeois, more individualistic and more impersonal cities on the other (Lyon and Lille, respectively).

Beyond these values and these emblems, ultras also maintain and claim a special connection with the territory of their city, and it is for this reason that the competition between ultras groups spills over from the stadium into the public space. The city, considered an extension of their territory, becomes a space to be protected, in particular against “intrusions” by “enemy” fans. Indeed, ultras prove to be particularly vigilant with regard to the presence of other supporters in their city: “We're

⁶ This field study was conducted between 2007 and 2013 as part of work for a PhD thesis in sociology, primarily through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with ultras, as well as with personnel in charge of safety and security at matches (ground staff, police, stadium safety managers).

⁷ Created in 1991, the Magic Fans (MF) occupy the lower north stand of Stade Geoffroy-Guichard, known as the Kop Nord (“North Kop”). Their main emblems are a skull and crossbones and the head of Alex from Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange*. The Green Angels, created in February 1992, use the head of the Native American chief Cochise as their main emblem, and occupy the Kop Sud (“South Kop”). At home fixtures, the two groups lead sequences in their respective stands in their own distinctive ways, each displaying their own emblems, although they do sometimes chant together. At away matches, however, the groups coordinate their chants.

⁸ The *derby rhônalpin* (“Rhône-Alpes derby”) denotes matches between the football clubs of Lyon (Olympique Lyonnais) and Saint-Étienne (Association Sportive Saint-Étienne Loire); the *derby du Nord* (“Northern derby”) denotes matches between the football clubs of Lille (LOSC Lille) and Lens (Racing Club de Lens). In the case of Saint-Étienne and Lyon, the two cities are only about 55 km (35 miles) apart, while Lens and Lille are closer together still (30 km/20 miles).

from Sainté,⁹ and we don't want Parisians, for example, to think they can come and raise hell in our city, just like that, as if they own the place!" (Fabien, a Saint-Étienne ultra). On home-match days, ultras will patrol the areas around the stadium and in the city centre, ensuring that no "enemy" ultras are there. They will also be on the lookout for any signs that opposing ultras might have left.

The city as an extension of ultras' territory

While the stadium is still the primary location for confrontation and demonstration between ultras groups, these supporters are also very much present in the urban public space. When they go to other cities to support their team, for instance, they will make sure to leave traces of their visit in some way. Imposing their presence in "enemy" territory and getting themselves noticed, by singing, occupying prominent city-centre locations (such as main squares, bars, railway stations, parks) and moving in procession is an important element of the competition between ultras groups – and, indeed, such noisy and overwhelming urban occupation is perceived as an offence by home supporters. While tags, graffiti and stickers are used by ultras first and foremost to "symbolically mark" (Kokoreff 1988) their territory, they are also used to "violate" the territory of "enemy" fans. As Quentin (another Saint-Étienne ultra) explains, "when someone comes to your city and tags it, it shows a lack of respect."

Accordingly, the frequent use of stickers symbolically contributes to maintaining competition between groups, which helps to build a symbolic arena of confrontation outside the stadium, in which ultras fans "eye each other up" from a safe distance and measure their respective dominance by signalling their presence in this way. This involves "fighting" each other with tags and stickers, removing those of "enemy" groups and sticking their own over them (denoted using the verbs *sursticker*, "to stick over", and *toyer*, "to obscure by writing over"¹⁰). We see here a circulation of practices, associated with a specific vocabulary with links to the social worlds of tagging and graffiti on the one hand, and of ultras on the other. And, just like crews¹¹ of graffiti artists, ultras groups participate in a veritable "war of signs", the aim of which is to pervade the public space while eradicating traces of other groups, so as to be more visible and symbolically gain the upper hand.

While, ideally, all urban public space is considered a potentially legitimate target to be covered, in particular with stickers (lamp posts, traffic lights and signs, parking meters, electricity meters, public transport shelters, etc.), certain places are especially heavily targeted: those that are most often frequented by local ultras, but also those potentially frequented by "enemy" ultras. The stadium and its immediate surroundings are the main places to be covered in stickers, which can usually be found on all the streets leading to the stadium, marking out the path to the ground. In this space, there are also tags intended to be read by "enemy" fans. For instance, the Saint-Étienne ultras make sure they welcome those they consider their worst "enemies" – that is to say Lyon supporters – with belligerent inscriptions and insults. The section of motorway linking Saint-Étienne and Lyon is also increasingly a target for this: walls, bridges and signs are regularly tagged. The number of tags, their messages (typically insulting or reflecting the perpetrators' local identity) and their visibility (location, size, type of lettering) determine their degree of offensiveness and elicit different responses accordingly. Ultras from both cities therefore are constantly on the lookout for tags and regularly organize groups trips to go out cover them up with their own tags, only for new ones to appear a few days later, prompting another trip out with the intention of making more successful and more visible tags.

⁹ "Sainté" is truncated form of "Saint-Étienne", frequently used by people in the local area to refer to the city.

¹⁰ Typically using a permanent marker pen.

¹¹ In this context, the term "crew" has been borrowed from English into French.

Ultras' hang-outs in the city

Within the city, some areas are more “marked” than others, revealing a specific integration of ultras culture into the urban space. These include areas in the vicinity of groups' premises and certain spaces designated as “hang-outs” of a particular group. In Saint-Étienne, we could distinguish between members of the two ultras groups according to their neighbourhood or town of origin or residence. Many Magic Fans, for example, are originally from small and medium-sized towns in the suburbs of Saint-Étienne. In these towns, it is rare to find Green Angels stickers. Similarly, certain areas of the city centre are full of stickers and tags from a particular group. The city of Saint-Étienne is therefore shared, segmented into multiple spaces that are frequented to a greater or lesser extent by one or other of the ultras groups: the “symbolic marking” of these areas reflects a particular use of these public places (streets, squares, parks, bus shelters, car parks, etc.), that may extend to some private locations. Because, in addition to being ultras from Saint-Étienne (their local identity), the Magic Fans and the Green Angels, like other ultras groups, are passionate about their respective group identities, each of which has its own history and mentality. Moreover, this group identity sometimes takes precedence over their local identity.

For example, the most active members of both of Saint-Étienne's ultras groups categorically refuse to enter certain places – mostly bars – identified as “hang-outs” of the other group. This avoidance is particularly visible on away-match days, when group members who have not made the trip to see the match (sympathizers, former members now less heavily involved in the group, members with stadium bans¹²) often get together in a bar to watch the game. But this avoidance can also extend beyond match nights, sometimes involving other types of events, such as theme nights, concerts or the opening nights of art exhibitions. Regardless of their interest in or links with the theme of the event in question, some ultras may refuse to go to a particular bar in order to avoid rubbing shoulders with members of the other group. These places thus become new “territories” to be defended (from potential attacks by “enemy” supporters, vandalism, damage, etc.), while also adding to the list of spaces that need to be monitored by police officers specialized in supporter liaison and management.

In sum, ultras' practices and uses of the city continue beyond the context of the football match, the stadium and other “places of action” (Goffman 1974). Their role and position within the city superimposes the rules of their social world on to the territory of their home town: competition between groups comes first, against a background of defending their identity and their honour. Finally their concerns extend far beyond the world of football: witness the banner unfurled by the Magic Fans¹³ in response to an article published in French daily newspaper *Le Monde*,¹⁴ in which Saint-Étienne was described as “the capital of the slums”, which retorted: “Come down to the slums and we'll show you how we put *Le Monde* [the world] to rights”.¹⁵

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¹² In France, stadium bans (*interdictions de stade*), also known as “football banning orders” in the UK, are issued following a legal or administrative decision. Recipients are forbidden from entering the ground(s) in question for a period (ranging from six months to five years) determined according to the seriousness of the offence committed (possession and/or use of smoke grenades, use of projectiles, fighting, vandalism, incitement to hatred or violence, etc.). Certain ultras groups have as many as 15 members with stadium bans. These members tend to form a subgroup and organize activities together, such as meeting up to watch matches.

¹³ During the Saint-Étienne v. Évian match that took place on 20 December 2014.

¹⁴ Article published on 8 December 2014 in the online version of *Le Monde*, by Sylvia Zappi. See here (in French): www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2014/12/08/a-saint-etienne-le-centre-ville-mine-par-la-pauvrete_4536458_3224.html.

¹⁵ The original message in French read: “Descends dans le taudis, on va t'apprendre à refaire *Le Monde*.”

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Stickers for greater group visibility: on this road sign, located in the neighbourhood of the Saint-Étienne ground (Stade Geoffroy-Guichard), stickers from both the Green Angels and the Magic Fans can be seen (photo © B. Ginhoux)



Graffiti by the Green Angels (photo © Green Angels)



Graffiti by the Magic Fans on the edge of a dual carriageway in Saint-Étienne (photo © B. Ginhoux)



“Green Angels” tag on the edge of a road leading from the motorway to the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard (photo © B. Ginhoux)



The stadium as primary “place of action”: a lamp post in the car park of Stade Geoffroy-Guichard, covered in stickers from both of Saint-Étienne’s ultras groups (photo © B. Ginhoux)



Ultras beyond the stadium: among the stickers covering the front of the counter in this Saint-Étienne bar, two Green Angels stickers are visible (photo © B. Ginhoux)



The city centre as another place of ultra action (photo © B. Ginhoux)



The *tifo* performed by the Green Angels during the local derby (2011/2012 season), highlighting the fact that AS Saint-Étienne had a better league position than arch-rivals Olympique Lyonnais (photo © Green Angels)



Part of the *tifo* performed by the Green Angels for their 20th anniversary (2011/2012 season), which features the Saint-Étienne city crest, the club crest, and the group's main emblem (photo © Green Angels)

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