

Alan Davies has committed a thought crime against the post-Hillsborough cult of emotional correctness

by Brendan O'Neill

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Brendan O'Neill is the editor of Spiked, an independent online phenomenon dedicated to raising the horizons of humanity by waging a culture war of words against misanthropy, priggishness, prejudice, luddism, illiberalism and irrationalism in all their ancient and modern forms.

The furore over Alan Davies's perfectly sensible comments on Hillsborough raises a question: what are you allowed to say about that tragic event? All Davies said is that it is ridiculous for Liverpool FC to refuse to play a match on the anniversary date of the Hillsborough disaster, which is true. We don't normally hide away from the world on the anniversaries of terrible events. We don't all stop using the London Underground on 17 November (the anniversary of the King's Cross fire of 1987 that killed 32 people) or keep our children home from school on 21 October (the date in 1966 when a slag heap killed 116 schoolkids in Aberfan). So why shouldn't Liverpool, like every other team, play football on 15 April?

The Twitterstorm and media handwringing over Davies's comments confirm that Hillsborough is now surrounded by a forcefield of emotional correctness, by an extraordinary air of religiosity which demands that we all follow certain mawkish rituals and agree never to depart from the Hillsborough dogma. That is Davies's real crime – he didn't speak ill of the Hillsborough dead or make an offensive joke at their expense; he merely questioned the bathetic ideology that now surrounds the Hillsborough disaster, which insists that normal life must go into shutdown on 15 April every year as Liverpoolians once again weep their tears and whip their backs. He effectively committed a thought crime against the cult of emotional correctness, daring to ask why we must make endless performances of public mourning in response to terrible tragedies like Hillsborough.

The Hillsborough disaster was a key turning point in the development of the mourning sickness that has modern Britain in its grip. Of course, the initial response of Liverpoolians to this disaster in 1989, their expressions of shock and grief, were genuine and understandable. But since then, those reactions have become ritualised, robbed of their original intensity and turned instead into emotional dogma, which everyone is expected either to adopt or certainly to respect. Davies, in simply saying to Liverpool FC "What are you talking about, 'We won't play on the day'?", has committed the grave offence of failing to observe and correctly repeat the emotional Catechism of the Hillsborough religion. What he should have said, if he was a good, Scouse-fearin' individual, is: "Yes, of course, it is absolutely right that Liverpool should not play football on this sad and painful day."

In many ways, the reaction to Hillsborough was the prototype for later outbursts of emotional correctness, from the weird weepy reaction to Princess Diana's death in 1997 to the media hysteria that greeted the disappearance of Madeleine McCann in 2007. In all those instances of public mourning, in all the Shared National Experiences of ostentatious grieving, the rules and rituals set in motion after Hillsborough have come into play. Thou must make a public performance of sorrow. Thou must never deviate from the emotional script. Thou must not question why we weep, year in and year out, and just get on with weeping. Thou must wallow in one-off tragedies forever and severely chastise anyone who says "Life moves on". Those are the stifling, speech-restricting, thought-policing, miserable, mawkish rules of emotionally correct modern Britain, and they were written and made gospel on the back of the Hillsborough disaster 22 years ago. God help anyone who deviates from them, as Davies has discovered: he has received hate mail and death threats for daring to question the grief gospel.

Some people attribute the enforced emotional sensitivity over Hillsborough to the peculiar touchiness of Liverpoolians. Liverpool is "self-pity city", we are told, where they love nothing more than to play the victim card. Perhaps. But if that is true, then we are all Scousers now. Mourning sickness and emotionally correct hysteria are widespread in twenty-first-century Britain, stretching from Liverpoolian housing estates to the London eateries of the Guardian-reading set. It can be glimpsed in everything from the hunting down and imprisonment of an offensive drunken tweeter who refused to go along with the "Pray for Fabrice Muamba" trend to the broadsheets' haranguing of Jan Moir for not being sufficiently mournful following the death of Stephen Gately. The post-Hillsborough era is one of extraordinarily restrictive emotionalism and censoriousness.

Davies has now repented for his sins, making a public apology for his comments and offering to make a donation to the Hillsborough Justice Campaign – the modern equivalent of doing penance. He shouldn't have apologised. We need more upfront, unapologetic criticism of the backward modern idea that there is a correct way to feel, a correct way to grieve, and even a correct way to think.