

Nationhood, Violence and The Beautiful Game: Peronism, Football and Cultural Identity in Argentina

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Abstract: The political contexts and history of Football in Argentina is critical to an understanding of the game's growth and development in the country since its evolution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The political and class centred cleavages at the core of football's identity have framed an interlocking synthesis of nationhood, ethnicity and society which continue to impact upon the game's contemporary landscape, at both club and national levels. The Post-War phenomenon of Peronism, based on the controversial leadership of Juan Peron (1946-1955 and 1973-1974) defined a quasi-ideological nexus reflecting the volatile political tensions in Argentine society, spawning a rich cultural and political legacy. This article evaluates the relationship between the Mass Populism of Football and the Mass Movement of Peronism. It has four key themes. Firstly, it contextualises the historical and cultural development of Football within the rise of Peronism during the 1940s around the critical concepts of Mass Populism, Cultural Representation and Political Factionalism. Secondly, it considers the capacity of the game to shape and legitimise Nationalism, Identity and Political Culture in the period. The core of this analysis is an examination of the parallels and paradoxes between Peronism and the sub-cultural mores of football. The study then considers the impact of Peron's return to Argentina in the 1970s within the shifting dynamics of the cultural representation and political symbolism of the game. Finally, the article reflects upon the lasting legacies of Peronism within the contemporary vortex of Argentinian Football.

Key words: Argentina, Culture, Football, Politics, Peronism.

Resumen: Los contextos políticos y la historia del fútbol en Argentina son críticos para entender el crecimiento de ese deporte y su desarrollo en esta nación desde su evolución a finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX. Las divisiones entre los componentes políticos y de clase que se hallan en el centro de la identidad del fútbol han configurado una síntesis interrelacionada de nacionalidad, etnicidad y sociedad que continúa impactando sobre el paisaje contemporáneo de este deporte, tanto a nivel de club como nacional. El fenómeno de postguerra del peronismo, basado en

el liderazgo controvertido de Juan Perón (1946-1955 y 1973-1974) definió un nexo cuasi-ideológico que reflejaba la volatilidad de las tensiones políticas en la sociedad argentina, dando lugar a un rico legado cultural y político. En este artículo se evalúa la relación entre el populismo de masas del fútbol y el movimiento de masas del peronismo. Tiene cuatro temas básicos. Primero, contextualiza el desarrollo histórico y cultural del fútbol dentro del surgimiento del peronismo durante los años cuarenta en torno a los conceptos críticos de populismo de masas, representación cultural y faccionalismo político. Segundo, considera la capacidad del juego para dar forma y legitimar el nacionalismo, la identidad y la cultura política en ese período. El centro de este análisis se halla en el debate sobre los paralelos y paradojas entre el peronismo y las prácticas culturales del fútbol. El estudio examina a continuación el impacto del retorno de Perón a Argentina en los años setenta dentro de la dinámica cambiante de las representaciones culturales y el simbolismo político de este deporte. Finalmente, el artículo hace una reflexión sobre los legados duraderos del peronismo dentro del torbellino contemporáneo del fútbol argentino.

Palabras claves: Argentina, cultura, fútbol, política, Peronismo.

The Roots of Football Culture in Argentina: Key Themes and Contexts

The global and historic culture of Argentinian football is embellished by the contrasting images of Messi and Maradona, of Simeone, Di Stefano and Rattin. Its folklore is rich in the heroes, anti-heroes and villains which have fashioned the game's iconographic landscape. Football grew out of Europe, with the English roots shaping the game's genesis being particularly prominent in the late nineteenth century (Campomar 32). By the 1920s and 1930s, the contested and divisive growth of professionalism, passionate club rivalry with a vociferous, volatile fan base, and the evolution of a particular style of play (Nadel 44) had merged with the interlocking synthesis between football, politics and the representation of identities (Wilson 115). Within the Argentinian state and nation these forces gave rise to the seminal notions of *Argentinidad* and *La Nuestra*. The genesis of the former can be traced back to Argentinian independence in 1810 acting as a catalyst for the historic break with Spanish Colonial Rule. Real impetus was given to the concept and values of '*Argentinidad*' after the influx of European Immigration in the late nineteenth century, which created an ethnically diverse society. Fashioning a sense of national identity in an attempt to create cultural and political cohesion in a fragmented population became a key governmental objective. The start of football's boom period in the 1920s dovetailed perfectly so that pride in *La Nuestra*, the national team, became a major factor

in the shaping of *Argentinidad* (Guilianotti 30; Wilson 5). These pivotal cultural constructions around the game are at the core of the paradoxes of idealism and violence, creativity and negativity, football and anti-football, which have characterised the complex dynamics underpinning the frequent dislocation, at both club and national level, of football in Argentina (Wagg C3). The nexus between Football and Politics is crucial to a critical understanding of the historical and cultural development of the Argentinian game (Goldblatt 274).

The central tenet of this article is to consider the relationship between Football and Peronism in Argentina, both in respect of Peron's first period in power, from 1946-1955, and with regard to his return from exile in 1973-1974. The study has four main themes. Firstly, it examines the game's symbolic representation of the Peronist impulse, with all its ambiguities and contradictions, contextualised within the seminal cultural values of *La Nuestra*. Secondly, it considers the demise of the idealised concept of the Argentinian game in the post Peronist phase of the late 1950s and 1960s. It then evaluates the relationship between Football and Peronism during his brief return from exile during the 1970s, before reflecting upon the legacy of Peron in the construction of nation and identity within the contemporary Argentinian game. As the cohesive links between the regime and football became embedded in Argentinian Society, the shadow of Peronism was only partially eclipsed by the nation's World Cup victories in 1978 and 1986 (Wilson C29).

Football and the Struggle for Nationhood in Argentina

Football has played a key role in defining the shifting mores of national identity, or '*Argentinidad*'. The cohesion and symmetry of the development of the game's mass popular appeal has made it a potent vehicle for political exploitation and manipulation through its capacity to reflect and articulate collective populist sentiments (Goldblatt C8). The game's genesis and subsequent growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were inextricably interlinked with the demographic changes, urbanisation and industrialisation which defined the social and economic developments underpinning the rise of nationalist sentiments (Hedges C2; Wagg C3). The game was a focal point in the emergence of class centred politics in the 1910s and 1920s (Munck C5), serving both as a means to incorporate migrant workers, particularly from Southern Europe, within the sprawling urban communities of the game's heartland, and to fracture the middle and upper — class elitism which had been central to football's quintessentially

British roots in Argentina (Goldblatt C5). These roots had stressed football's amateur traditions and harked back to an earlier innocence (Giulianotti and Williams). With the rise of organised nation centred politics after the First World War, the game became an increasingly significant cultural and social force in defining '*Argentinidad*', not only representing the break with Europe but also in respect of articulating and framing distinguishing features of the sport as part of the struggle to define the Argentine nation, first expressed in the rivalry with Uruguay (Campomar 105). When the first World Cup Final was played in Montevideo in July 1930, it reflected divergent constructions of contrasting Latin American ethnicities on either side of the River Plate (Glanville C1).

By this time, the archetypal folkloric mores of Argentinian football were located as a cohesive set of myths and values to bind the male urban working class together within the burgeoning '*barrios*' of Buenos Aires and Rosario, tapping into a complex mosaic of local, class orientated and regional rivalries resonating in the boom of club football in Argentina from the 1920s to the early 1950s, with surging attendances and extensive media coverage (Wilson C17). Within this lexicon, *El Pibe*, *El Potrero*, *El Criollo* and *El Crack* (Galeano 33; Sibaja and Parrish 655) became identified with the nascent emergence of a distinctive way of playing the game and in establishing the indigenous characteristics of *La Nuestra*, which celebrated individualism, culturally rooted in the romantic escape of the poor boy, crafting the art of the Argentinian style of play in the urban wastelands of his local neighbourhood before escaping to enthrall the crowds by becoming a star (Nadel C2). This image of the game rejected comparatively dour European tactics and the organisational strengths of the European game (Campomar 72), underpinning the ideals governing the formation of the Argentinian Football Association in 1931, which was a highly politicised structure of governance from its inception, overseeing important cultural shifts such as the eventual adoption of Spanish replacing English as the game's linguistic *modus operandi* in 1934. This was part of a raft of developments during the 1930s, leading to the subsequent professionalization of the Argentine Game (Giulianotti and Williams), fashioning a hybrid mix of bohemian idealism and practical realism as the backdrop to Peron's emergence from the ranks of the military. The national team was the embodiment of the cherished values of *La Nuestra*, a potent symbol of national pride, a cultural representation of the Nation, cast in the same vein as the Tango in its manifestation of bravado, masculinity

and panache. (Archetti, Guilianotti 155). The actual history of the game's cultural roots was more fluid than these sacred myths and precepts suggest, with several ethnicities and identities shaping both football's cultural hue and its tactical diversity (Wagg C3). The concept and associations of *La Nuestra* were most significant in legitimising football as a central tenet of Argentinian statehood.

In the early 1940s, and the start of Peron's gradual rise to power, football had already carved a niche within the political and cultural fabric of Argentinian society. The hierarchical nature of the Argentinian Football Association, allied to the cohesive structure of club football, based on member associations, became fused with its capacity to harness mass populism. These factors made the game ripe for exploitation and manipulation by the key concepts underpinning the political predilections of *El Caudillo* (Wilson C13).

Football, Peronism and the Politics of National Identity 1946-1955

Juan Peron's rise to power in the early 1940s is well documented (Bolton C3). The evolution of the paradoxes of Peronism as a force for both inspirational unity and violent division in Argentinian society is profoundly etched within the political culture of the country (Hedges C7). Moreover, the cult of personality around both Peron himself and the international profile and publicity surrounding his relationship with Eva Peron Duarte engendered a plethora of aspirations, policy achievements and myths during his first presidency which have endured to fashion the most potent cluster of idealised images and symbols within the vortex of the nation's political history and cultural identity (Rock). For all its contradictions and ambivalences, Peronism shaped the development of contemporary Argentina, encapsulating the Revolution of October 1945, *El Caudillo's* two term Presidency and his fall from grace in 1955, followed by the mystique and drama of his exile and his brief return to power in the 1970s (Bolton C13). The factionalism and violence which permeated the Peronist/anti Peronist dichotomy defined both the internal dynamics of Argentine society and its international image and reputation for over thirty years, and left a lasting imprint on the juxtaposition of militarism and democracy which defined politics in the post Peron era (Hedges C12).

In common with other dictators such as Mussolini and Franco, Peron had little personal interest in Football (Wilson 118). However, he was quick to perceive the potential of Sport in general, and football

in particular as a potent political weapon within the axis of Class Identity, Mass Populism and Popular Culture (Campomar 264). Within the emergent quasi ideology and doctrine of Peronism in the late 1940s, the game's secure place within the cultural and sporting mores of a maturing sense of national identity suggested that it could serve the aims of the regime well as a focal point of cohesion between the diverse elements of Argentinian society whilst fostering a nexus of patriotism, pride and loyalty in the 'New' Argentina (Wilson C13). The complexities of Peronism as a force of social and cultural change made use of football in four seminal ways. Firstly, it utilised the game's latent power to promote the objectives of *Justicialismo* or Social Justice as a mode of social inclusion and citizenship in the sprawling communities of what had become a predominantly urban society (Bolton C2). Secondly, Peron's power base within the burgeoning power of the Trade Unions exploited the potential of football to permeate working class populism in Buenos Aires and other cities where support for the game was passionate and loyal (Wilson 122). Furthermore, Peron's rise to power and his first period in office coincided with a 'Golden Age' of Argentinian football, at both club and international levels (Campomar C7). This enabled the regime to maximise the game's popularity and success as vehicles for political legitimacy, containment and distraction in domestic economics and politics, as achievements, both real and imagined, were used in a censored sporting and non-sporting media to project positive iconography around both Peron himself, and significantly on Evita (Bolton C4; Wilson C13). Finally, the national team was used to project and legitimise Peron and Peronism internationally, being represented as a reflection not only of the special characteristics of *La Nuestra*, but also as indicative of the Peronist doctrine of the 'Third Way' as a key dynamic in the new post-war order in International Politics (Bolton C3; Hedges C7).

The relationship between Football and Politics under Peronism in the period 1946-1955 illustrates a scenario in which the fortunes of the game and of the regime itself reveal close parallels. Football mirrors many of the ambivalences, contradictions, successes and failures of Peronism per se whereas Peronism inculcates many of the illusions, folkloric myths and ultimate disappointments of the Argentinian game into its manufacture of cohesion and consent within a complex and politically volatile society. The fusion of Football and Peronism was emotionally charged; Passion, Rivalry, Patriotism and Idealism provide the coherent thread linking the game with the contemporary politics

of the period. The development of *La Nuestra* and other potent representations of football in the first Peronist period serves as a testimony to the contemporary interdependence between the game, the nation and political culture.

The volatile politics and mass organised protest which culminated in Peron's ascent to power coincided with a 'Golden Age' for Argentinian football at both club and national level in the 1940s and 1950s, in which the principles and values underpinning *La Nuestra* were critical in defining the concept of *Argentinidad* (Campomar 244; Wilson C16). The great River Plate team of the 1940s, spawning the mystical famous five; '*La Maquina*' of Muñoz, Moreno, Pedernera, Labruna and Loustau, immortalised the beauty and flair of the Argentinian game. Whilst the team did not always sweep everything before it on the field, given the intense competition within the domestic game at the time, the side's attacking football and charismatic players cemented its niche in the folklore of the nation's sporting heritage (Galeano 87, 89). The emergence of Racing Club, and the achievements of the national side gave full rein to the sacred precepts of *El Pibe* and *El Potrero*, releasing *Los Cracks* to exhibit the distinctive skills of *El Criollo*, the Argentine way of playing the beautiful game (Sibaja and Parrish 656). These values incorporated the aspirational nature of sport, idealistically allowing the underdog to escape from poverty within the collective power of football's mass populism. As such, during the 1940s there existed a close symmetry between the game's continued boom and the organised street politics of '*Los Descamisados*', the 'shirtless ones'; the forgotten underclass and unrepresented groups in Argentinian society as a working-class mass movement which enshrined the dual objectives of social justice and reform so central to Peronist doctrine and its popular appeal (Wilson C13). This found subsequent expression in the activities of the Eva Peron Foundation (Bolton C4; Hedges C8). By the late 1940s, aided by the increased mediatisation of the game through the radio coverage which reinforced the mass audience for the Sporting Press, particularly in respect of *El Grafico* (Wilson 40).

Football became increasingly perceived as a means of projecting national cohesion and identity within the traditional framework of local club rivalries. The regime was adept at implementing the twin strategies of direct involvement in the administration and structure of the domestic game, whilst carefully exploiting the values of nationalism and patriotism around the national team. The Political Patronage underscoring Peronism's links with the game found expression in the

development of infrastructure during the period, with funding and subsidy provided for stadium construction in return for compliance and support for the wider political aims of the Peronist doctrine. This close association between football and the state fuelled allegations of corruption and financial irregularities which subsequently became such a defining feature of the nation's football (Nadel C2). Moreover, the high public and media profile during the game's boom period secured both legitimacy and publicity for Peron and Evita, and allowed the regime to at least partially paper over the deep divisions and splits in Argentinian society.

The most direct link between Football and Peronism was reflected by the setting up of *Los Juegos Nacionales Evita* (Evita Championships) in 1949 (Campomar 264; Wilson 119). Peron himself had allegedly remarked that he had risen to power on the back of male support, that his second term would be based on the female vote and that a third term would be founded on children. In this way, primarily with football but also embracing other sports, the Eva Peron Foundation made use of the competition to promote the political goals of citizenship, social inclusion for girls, patriotism and a keen sense of morality (Goldblatt 274). Above all the prominent media coverage of the annual event provided the regime with a cluster of images of Evita as mother and saviour of the nation, and attempted to inculcate and legitimise Peronism as the nation's future.

Whilst the cultural heritage of football was exploited by Peronism to manufacture an idealised sense of nationalism, the reality of the game's development in the Peron era revealed ambivalences and contradictions. The battle for professionalism had largely been fought during the 1930s, but the consequences spilled over into the Peronist years. The fluid nature of '*Argentinidad*' rooted in immigrant stock had already witnessed the Italian ancestry of three cracks of the game in the 1930s, Monti, Guaita and Orsi, all of whom had played for Argentina in the 1930 World Cup Final representing the Mussolini regime's World Cup winning side of 1934, with Monti playing in the final itself (Glanville C2; Wilson C7). Even in the pioneering days of the international game, nationality and cultural identity was fluid, with football being exploited to legitimise Fascism in the fashioning of Italy's successful, winning national team. This established a pattern which was repeated by the loss of star players, labelled *il Oriundo*, to Italy and Spain in the post war years, and by the further exile of the so called 'deadly trio' of Maschio, Angelillo and Sivori to play for Italy

in the 1950s. This player exodus reduced the potency of *La Nuestra* as a sporting and cultural force, and was exacerbated by the frequent disputes around unionisation and player power in the late 1940s, underscoring a wider political turbulence, and clearly expressed with the poaching of star players by the incipient commercialism of *Los Millonarios*, Bogota, which paid huge salaries to a cluster of star players including Di Stefano, Rossi and Perdernera from the Argentinian game (Goldblatt 278).

The multiple associations of football under Peron manufactured images and illusions of cohesion and certainty whilst the reality was more indicative of factionalism and protectionism within a culture of insularity and defensive paternalism. The aura of invincibility, the mystique of *La Nuestra* is especially apparent in the fortunes of the national team at the zenith of the golden age for the nation's football. By the late 1940s Brazil had replaced Uruguay as the arch enemy, the eulogised victory over three turbulent matches in 1946 coinciding not only with Peron's first election success, but seeping into the myths of folkloric representations of identity (Hedges C5; Wilson C13). This pinpointed a less parochial and provincial attitude in the new international order of the post-war world, in which Argentina and Brazil would be in the vanguard of development and economic growth. The intensity of the football rivalry between the two nations gave contested cultural and sporting power a new edge and kudos. Yet for all the rhetoric surrounding the national team, its prowess was rarely tested outside South America. This demonstrated the innate pragmatism of the paradox between Internationalism and Insularity at the heart of the Peronist doctrine, in which the protective shield of isolation masked fragility and weakness within the nation's football. On the one hand, the heroic and noble defeat of the national team by England at Wembley in 1951 and the subsequent defeat of the supposed masters of the game in Buenos Aires in 1953 (Clack; Wilson C16) were portrayed in the Argentinian media as evidence of the new, confident, successful Argentina, displaying the skills of *La Nuestra* on the international stage, a fitting testimony to the third way of stable governance and a coherent political ideology (Bolton C7). Yet underlying this bravado, the insecurity of potential failure lay deep within the Argentine psyche. As a result, the national team did not participate in either the 1950 Brazil World Cup or in Switzerland 1954. A mixture of disputes with the AFA and FIFA, coupled with Peron's pragmatism, survival instincts and paranoia suggested that the political risks were too great,

that the enormous political and cultural capital of victory were offset by the passions unleashed by potential failure (Campomar C5; Nadel C2). Beneath the swagger and confidence of *La Nuestra*, the brittle nature of *Argentinidad* around the mass populism of football, the fear that the tactical and organisational shortcomings of the game would be exposed, most of all in Brazil's hosting of the World Cup, effectively jettisoned its involvement.

These paradoxes meant that football was largely cocooned within the self — promoting bubble of hyperbole encompassing Peronism (Taylor C2). It served the key purposes of juxtaposing authoritarianism, autocracy and populism to present a positive sense of cultural coherence in the Peron years. It left the potent legacy of romanticism, idealism and hope. The fragility of these notions was cruelly exposed in the period following *El Caudillo*'s fall from power in 1955, when they were eventually reduced to nostalgic memories of a glorious heritage.

Peronism in the Shadows: *Anti-Futbol* and Violence in Argentina 1956-1976

The life and death of Eva Peron was soon immortalised in a pastiche of myths, symbols and representations within the nation's cultural folklore, whilst Juan Peron's many years of exile, mostly in Franco's Spain, kept the idealised flame of Peronism alive, serving as a reference point for both his supporters and detractors to embellish the deep political divisions within the frequently violent and repressive fabric of the Argentinian nation and state (Bolton C6; Hedges C10). Consequently, although Peronism became a proscribed organisation shortly after *El Caudillo*'s overthrow in 1955, political battle lines were largely drawn along the lines of a Peronist and Anti-Peronist dichotomy for the following twenty years. A powerful mixture of an idealised revisionism of the Peron regime, focussing on its achievements but oblivious to its many darker elements, together with its overt or thinly disguised survival remained as important elements within the Argentinian State. Furthermore, the reassertion of those powerful factions in Argentinian society which had been eclipsed by years of Peronism, ushered in a lengthy period characterised by class centred political factionalism, unstable governments, and the increased involvement of the police and the military in Civil Society (Hedges C9, Munck C3). The cultural cleavages unleashed by this instability impacted both on the fragile nature of '*Argentinidad*' and frequently exploded into mass political protest quelled by the reactive forces of repression and violence, and

underpinned by an economic slowdown culminating in the hyperinflation of the early 1970s. Within the volatile politics of the 1960s, the nostalgic iconography surrounding Evita, and the clandestine activities of the Peronists plotting the return of *El Caudillo* as the nation's saviour meant that Peronism itself remained the defining reference point in Argentine politics, culture and society. The cultural and political significance of football meant that it continued to act as a metaphor for wider societal issues in the post Peronist era. Because the game had become inextricably bound up in the historic constructions of nation and identity, and had been a barometer of the mass populism of Peronism, it mirrored many of the cultural divisions of post Peron Argentina, whilst paradoxically acting as a fragile point of unity and cohesion within Argentine society.

The myths and illusions surrounding the fabled properties of *La Nuestra* were cruelly exposed when the national team emerged from isolation to participate in the 1958 World Cup in Sweden. In contrast to the vibrant success of arch rivals Brazil, with a youthful and effervescent Pele as the new international star, the national team performed abysmally in the tournament, culminating in the nadir of a 6-1 defeat to Czechoslovakia, the worst debacle in the nation's football history (Wilson C19). The success of the side in the South American Championship in 1957, based on individual flair, only masked the internal conflicts around coaching and tactics within the Argentinian Football Association and the malaise and disorder in post Peron Argentina. The team's displays in Sweden, coupled with the subsequent disappointment of the national team's performance in the Chile World Cup of 1962, presaged not only virulent criticism of adherence to the vaunted values of *La Nuestra*, which had produced a generation of tactically naïve, poorly organised and indulgent, even lazy players; it also led to more protracted debates within the football authorities and the sporting media surrounding the future direction of Argentinian football (Campomar 247). The restricted compass of the game in its alleged golden period, focussed largely on the limited competition of the *Libertadores Cup* and the South American Championship suggested that the politically centred protectionism of Peronism and its rhetoric of superiority had concealed the weaknesses of *La Nuestra*.

The failures of 1958 and 1962 punctured national pride and challenged many of the cultural certainties of the Argentinian way of playing the game. It seemed to produce talented individuals whom could become stars in the richer arenas of Europe; but it also resulted

in failure. The ideals and values encompassing *La Nuestra* mirrored the bloated assertions of Peronism itself. With *El Caudillo* in exile, the divided sensibility emerged which was to fracture the Argentinian game until the World Cup victory of 1978 and beyond. Whether to protect the traditional, pure values of *La Nuestra*, even if this resulted in heroic failure or to adopt a more pragmatic, tactically astute and well organised perspective which would project winning as the main objective, with the genesis of what became known as Anti-Football shaped and defined the debate for the heart and soul of the game during the 1960s and 1970s, when winning became more and more the defining motive at club and national levels (Campomar C7; Wilson C20).

This divided sensibility within Argentine football echoed the paradoxes of Peronism; the idealism and the violence going hand in glove. It also produced distinctive representations of the game in post Peron Argentina during the 1960s and early 1970s, as it articulated and mirrored the escalating violence of Argentine society in the period, and projected repeated negative imagery surrounding the nation's football to intense international media scrutiny, particularly in respect of television coverage (Archetti). The resort to the gamesmanship, sporadic violence and spoiling rationale of Anti-Football failed to produce the formula of success for the national team, when the raw promise of the side's performance in the 1964 tournament, which saw Brazil beaten in a style reminiscent of *La Nuestra* in their pomp, was abandoned in favour of a more cynical, negative approach. The side's performance in the 1966 England World Cup, in the matches against West Germany and the celebrated expulsion of Team Captain Rattin from the Wembley quarter final against England suggested the demise of *La Nuestra*, when the technical ability of the team was sacrificed in favour of an ultra-defensive professionalism (Clack; Wilson C26). For all the furore surrounding the allegations of conspiratorial refereeing against the South American sides, and the portrayal of the side as the victims and moral victors upon their return to Buenos Aires, the team's display matched the darker elements of lawlessness, repression and disorder within the fragmented politics of contemporary Argentinian society (Hedges C10).

The impact of Anti-Football at club level was more brutal and more successful. The latent and explosive violence which lay beneath the idealist protestations of Peronism found its most vibrant articulation in the participation of *Racing Club* and *Estudiantes* in both the *Libertadores* and the Inter-Continental Cup competitions. International television

and press coverage of these harsh, violent encounters reinforced the images of Argentinian football from the 1966 World Cup, and pointed at a moral and political societal decline (Glanville C8; Goldblatt C10). The brutality of the three matches between Racing Club and Celtic in 1967 was a bleak indicator of what was to come in the shape of Zubeldia's coaching of the *Estudiantes* side, which won three successive *Liberadores Cup*, and overcame both Manchester United and AC Milan in the Inter-Continental Cup in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Zubeldia became recognised as the high priest of Anti-Football, in which every type of provocation and intimidation was exploited to gain advantage in the ruthless pursuit of winning (Campomar C7; Wilson C27, 28). The *Estudiantes* side was tactically astute with a group of talented players; it broke the stranglehold that River Plate, Boca Juniors and the bigger clubs traditionally held over the domestic game, but at the cost of adding to the damaged reputation of Argentinian football. Few tears were shed outside the country when the national side failed to qualify for the Mexico World Cup in 1970, beaten by a resurgent Peru (Campomar 319). Both the nation and football were intertwined in a state of crisis, the one feeding off the other in a cauldron of instability and doubt. Within the game, the furore and internal debate surrounding its image and performance led to calls for a return to its more traditional values; within the political arena the clamour intensified for the return of Peron.

The massacre which marked Peron's arrival at Buenos Aires's Ezeiza Airport in July 1973 dramatically symbolised Argentina's descent into political chaos and economic crisis. His brief third period in power before his death in June 1974 coincided with the national team's preparation for and participation in the West Germany World Cup. The build-up to the tournament reflected the internal struggles for control and direction within the Argentinian game, as the Football Association, the clubs and a succession of coaches remained torn between the traditional values of *La Nuestra* and the aftermath of the success generated by the rationale of Anti-Football. The team's performance in failing to emerge from a group including Italy and Poland illustrated this ambivalence, in which a group of talented individuals once again flattered to deceive. Moreover, the side's failure was indicative of the undercurrents of political tensions, which even the mass popular appeal of the game was unable to disguise. The lack of any cohesive sense of '*Argentinidad*' and the rising tide of repression, torture and kidnapping increasingly came to characterise the crisis of the Argentinian state during the

1970s. Cast in this light the halcyon days of the 1940s and 1950s, when the cult of Peronism brought the panache of *La Nuestra* and the working-class attachment to football fully into the political orbit of the regime, became couched in the folkloric politics of nostalgia. The death of Peron left the power vacuum of a deeply divided society, with football reduced to mirroring these divisions in both on the field and off the field violence, particularly in the activities of the *Barras Bravas*, Argentina's Ultras, which suggested the degeneration of the game into the lawlessness permeating the state itself, although hooliganism had been a traditional feature within the patchwork nature of local and regional rivalry of Argentinian football (Galeano 190; Giulianotti 58; Paradiso 69). It came as little surprise when the coup of April 1976 ushered in an era of military rule, and an attempt to banish the spectre of Peronism from the political landscape, when the idealism of the Peron doctrine was replaced by the brutal authoritarianism of all the trappings of a police state (Hedges C10).

The Hand of God-Peron and Peronism: Enduring Legacies

The tickertape iconography of Argentina's hosting of the 1978 World Cup, and ultimate triumph of the host nation in winning the trophy took place against the backdrop of torture, disappearance, state censorship and the denial of fundamental human and political rights (Galeano 177). Whilst FIFA's decision to award the tournament to Argentina paid homage to the nation's rich football heritage, within the interwoven tapestry of football and politics it seemed to offer succour to a failed state and was subsequently exploited and manipulated by the governing junta to legitimise an oppressive regime in a panoply of mass distraction and patriotic fervour (Glanville C11; Wilson C29). Whilst concentration camps silenced and tortured within earshot of the celebrations of victory, the success of Menotti's team suggested at least a partial return and adherence to the traditional values of *La Nuestra*. The rejection of Anti-Football in favour of the fluent, organised team play of Kempes, Ardiles, Pasarella and Luque paradoxically restored some of the international prestige of the Argentinian game, and reawakened the spirit of Peronism in the fusion between the vaunted values of *La Nuestra* and national pride. Nevertheless, the victory was both tainted by its political and cultural context and by the allegations of corruption which tarnished the achievement of Menotti's side. The remarkable 6-0 victory in the decisive match against Peru, which denied arch rivals Brazil a potential place in the final, was accompanied by accusations of

bribery, match fixing, with the dark hand of *La Junta* directly involved in securing the right outcome for the regime (Nadel C2; Wilson C29). Furthermore, the 1978 success continued to embellish the paradoxes and ambivalences underscoring the football-politics synthesis within the Argentinian game. It reinforced the Peronist impulses of populism, patriotism and mass cultural identity within the framework of an autocratic military dictatorship, registering a pattern of similarity and divergence with the past (Goldblatt C 15).

The impact of Peron, Evita, and the myriad implications of the Peronist/Anti-Peronist dichotomy still casts a shadow over political and cultural life in Argentina, more than sixty years after his fall from power, and over forty years after his death. The debate surrounding football's politicisation and the divided sensibility which has characterised the game post Peron has continued (Taylor C2). The victory of Bilardo's team in the Mexico World Cup of 1986 constituted a return to a more pragmatic approach in which the dazzling individual skills of Maradona were harnessed to a tactically astute and organised team ethos which was not averse to resorting to some of the questionable gamesmanship and unsporting play evoking memories of the Anti-Football dialectic (Campomar C9; Wilson C45). The team's cynical defence of the trophy in Italy 1990, illuminated only occasionally by Maradona's brilliance suggested that the values of *La Nuestra* had been almost completely abandoned (Glanville C14).

During the 1990s when the neo-liberalism of the Menem Government struggled to contain mass protest and dissent, the social drug of football seemed to be the only form of cultural cohesion, constituting the counterbalancing safety valve of Banal Nationalism (Billig). By this time, the continued exodus of 'cracks' to the elite European Leagues, coupled with the violent image and reputation of much of the domestic game, resulted in a pattern of falling attendances for club football, pushing the live spectacle to the margins as the burgeoning mediatisation of the commercial impulse located the game within the fulcrum of mass popular entertainment (Wilson C53). The nascent globalisation of the 1980s and 1990s catapulted Argentinian football into the post-modern era of commodification and consumption, so that the traditional ethnic mores of the relationship between '*La Nuestra*' and '*Argentinidad*' became more culturally blurred and fluid in the global market place of contemporary sport. The most direct manifestations of political protests in a democratic Argentina surfaced in 2001, coinciding with the national team's qualification and preparation for the Japan/Korea World Cup

in 2002 (Goldblatt C18). In the tournament itself, in a display which has tended to define the side's performances in post millennium international competition; hazardous qualification campaigns, particularly in the bloated South American mega-group, have been followed by failure and underachievement, with Messi's inability to represent the essence of *La Nuestra* through winning the World Cup both signposting his inability thus far to emulate Maradona's success, and echoing the pattern of earlier disappointments for the national side (Campomar C10; Wilson C59).

The cultural legacy of Peronism survives in two main ways. Firstly, the Peron years explicitly legitimised the indelible link between football, politics and cultural identity. This is cogently articulated in the contrasting cultural imagery of the two main cracks, Maradona and Messi, whom have dominated the export of the heroes and villains of the Argentinian game to a global audience, though there are ripple effects of this iconographic landscape which continue to shape understanding of the complexities of the folkloric heritage of football's divided sensibility.

Diego Maradona constitutes the archetypal 'Pibe' (Nadel 46). The rise of the poor working-class street urchin from the wrong side of the tracks, perfecting his skills in the roughly hewn urban wasteland on the outskirts of his impoverished barrio, rising from nothing to become a crack on the global stage, dazzling millions with his skills. His story is that of the underdog, the rebel, the irrepressible individual whose rise to the top and fall from grace captures the very essence of *La Nuestra*, *El Criollo* and all the folkloric values endemic to the romanticised idealism of the Argentinian game (Galeano 232). His pivotal role in the defeat of England in the Mexico World Cup of 1986 captures the cluster of associations surrounding '*El Pibe*'. The culturally iconic 'Hand of God' goal, in which gamesmanship or even cheating is reconstructed as the morally justified revenge of the patriot defending the nation's honour after the abyss of the conflict over 'Las Malvinas' is quickly followed by the brilliance of his second stunning individual goal (Campomar C9; Wilson C45). The multi-layered complexities of '*Argentinidad*' are confirmed by Maradona's place in the nation's cultural iconography. The case of Lionel Messi, however, is rather more ambivalent (Nadel 58). His lower middle class roots in Rosario, coupled with his departure from Argentina at an early age to be incorporated into the academy of FC Barcelona, have raised questions around his patriotism, and his attachment to the country of his birth has created a paradox in which the skills of his football art fit coherently within

the compass of the values of *'La Nuestra'* thus defining him as a *'Pibe'*, whilst his presumed cultural conformity prevents him from having the wider cultural values associated with Maradona (Nadel C2; Wilson C65). These cultural mores around the game are rooted in the legacy of the Peron era.

This legacy found a contemporary expression with Christina Kirchner's reintroduction of the Evita Championships (Wilson C66). Not only did the democratic structures of the contemporary state tap into the politics of nostalgia emanating from the Peron years in a rather slick public relations exercise, the enduring mass populism of football, for all its paradoxes and contradictions, was exploited as a means of nation building and the promotion of citizenship whilst confirming its function as a distraction from economic and political problems (Hedges C13; Wilson C66). Some sixty years after her death, the mystique of Evita and the pastiche of cultural references surrounding Peron and Peronism were still being juxtaposed with the native hue of the Argentinian game in an attempt to foster national cohesion and unity.

The myths of Argentina's glorious past and the eulogising of the nation's footballing heritage and traditions are a lasting testimony to the powerful association between football, politics and national identity during the Peronist years. The first presidency in particular secured the cultural heritage of Peronism which shaped the nation's political identity for at least a couple of political generations. The reality of much of football's development both during *El Caudillo's* exile and after his brief return and death in the 1970s are often at sharp odds with the soaring rhetoric of its mythologised heritage. Violence, corruption, gamesmanship and failure have frequently been close to the core of the game at both domestic and international levels. Yet still the myths, the nostalgia, the symbols and images of Peronism resonate powerfully within the cultural representations of Argentinian football in the vortex of national identity.

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