



The social, political, and economic causes of violence in Argentine soccer

Eugenio Paradiso

Dalhousie University, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In recent years, the changing character of Argentine political culture has influenced the ways in which groups of soccer fans organize themselves around political and economic goals. Argentine soccer clubs have always had strong ties to local and national politics. In this article, I examine the relationships between Argentine political culture and corruption in soccer since 1976, the year in which the last military regime took power. During the dictatorship, acts of violence were unregulated. The so-called Grupos de Tarea (death squads) found themselves in a position of absolute power, meaning that they had the freedom to act independently without having to justify their actions in front of a centralized authority. Present-day barrabravas (Argentine hooligans) have copied the behaviour of the death squads. Contrary to what happens in other national contexts, the spread of violence in Argentine soccer is encouraged by social leaders through corrupt political and economic arrangements that benefit all parties involved. Being a barrabrava is a full time job based on the use of violence. By using a comparative approach, I emphasize the need to understand local specificities when examining soccer violence in different national contexts. The structure of Argentine soccer allows fans to penetrate the political sphere of soccer clubs. This, in turn, creates an environment where organized groups of fans develop strong ties to club officials. By contrast, soccer violence in Italy and Holland remains apolitical. Soccer hooliganism has no universal causes and no universal solutions.

Introduction

Until recently, academic studies of sport have been regarded as trivial and irrelevant by many social scientists. Sport has often been imagined as an autonomous realm with little or no connection to the broader social and political aspects of society. In this article, I argue that far from being an isolated and apolitical institution, sport permeates politics.¹ More specifically, my aim is to highlight the political nature of soccer violence

in Argentina, where the relationships between soccer, politics and social structures follow a particular pattern. To this end, I will use a comparative approach. In order to understand the relationships between sport and politics, it is first necessary to examine the historical development of modern sport.

From “games” to “sports”

The transformation of “games” into “sports” took place during the late nineteenth century in England. According to Bourdieu, this transformation was the result of class differences. In his words, “it seems to be indisputable that the shift from games to sports in the strict sense took place in the educational establishments reserved for the ‘élites’ of bourgeois society, the English public schools, where the sons of aristocratic or upper-bourgeois

¹ Allison states: “it is not easy to see what outside recognition of the importance of sport amounts to or even what significance its practitioners think it has. Both often start with a banality, that ‘sport reflects society’. How odd, even inconceivably odd, if it did not and nobody would have bothered to assert this were it not for the existence of an elite myth that playing games was about getting away from the problems of ‘society’ and that it gave you, temporarily at least, more in common with the ancient Greeks than with non-sportsmen in your own society” (1998, 710).

Author correspondence should be directed to eparadiso@dal.ca (Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University, 6135 University Ave., Rm. 1128, Halifax, NS, Canada B3H 439)

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families took over a number of *popular* – i.e. *vulgar* – games, simultaneously changing their meaning and function” (1993, 342, emphasis in original). For the working classes, *vulgar* games such as boxing and motorcycling represented ideals of effort, pain and suffering; the élites, on the other hand, equated sports with ideals of leadership, discipline, courage, and manliness (Bourdieu 1993). Bourdieu explains that “the constitution of a field of sports practices is linked to the development of a philosophy of sport which is necessarily a *political* philosophy of sport. The theory of amateurism is in fact one dimension of an aristocratic philosophy of sport as a disinterested practice, a finality without an end, analogous to artistic practice” (1993, 343, emphasis in original). This somewhat abstract definition of the political philosophy of sport, which saw sport as a means of “improving character” in accordance with the Victorian belief (Bourdieu 1993, 348), will become more tangible when I discuss the political connections between sport and Peronism in Argentina.

Soccer and social mobility in Brazil

Gordon and Helal (2001) highlight the political nature of sport by describing the ways in which the professionalization of Brazilian soccer allowed members of the working classes to move up the social and economic ladder. During the early twentieth century, soccer “was absorbed by sectors of the new urban elite, who disdained the participation of the popular classes, particularly of blacks and mestizos. The first few decades of the Brazilian game are characterized by a struggle between the two forces: one set on keeping soccer restricted to the educated European elite and the other favourable to the idea of opening and expanding the game to the rest of society” (Gordon and Helal 2001,142-143). The binary opposition here was between the European elite and amateurism on the one hand, and the popular classes and professionalism on the other hand. Thus, the political implications of professionalism for the European elite became apparent. The professionalization of Brazilian soccer in 1933 meant the opening of a social and economic sphere that had been traditionally tied

to the wealthy elites. In the words of Gordon and Helal, “professionalization in 1933 meant that the lower echelons of society could find a job that did not require long periods of study or years of formal education. Soccer became a means of social mobility” (2001, 143).

In South America, soccer stadiums have often been used as public political arenas where people would gather in support of a candidate. This has been especially true when it comes to populist candidates. In 1940, Brazilian president Getúlio Vargas’ “public addresses, aimed at workers, often attempted to capitalize on soccer’s popularity by taking place at São Januário Stadium.... It was at São Januário, for example, that the government announced the establishment of a minimum wage” (Gordon and Helal 2001,145). In other words, it was through public speeches at soccer stadiums that Vargas transmitted his nationalist message of social integration, portraying Brazil as a socially advanced country with no major racial and economic disparities. As a result, soccer became “the opium of the people” (Oliven and Damo 2001,42).

Sport and nationalism

Hitler also took advantage of the social and political role of sport. The strong, healthy, and athletic bodies of sportsmen were promoted by the Nazi propaganda system as the prototype of the “new man” (Oliven and Damo 2001). Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Minister of Propaganda, once said that “a victory on the soccer field is more important for the people than the conquest of a city in enemy territory” (Oliven and Damo 2001,42, translation mine). Clearly, the role of sport in the development of national identities cannot be ignored. In this sense, sport acts as a divisive force, creating imagined communities that define themselves in terms of their physical and moral achievements in opposition to perceived rivals.² In the eyes of

² When examining Anderson’s notion of the imagined community, Roseberry states that “we need to extend Anderson’s insight to other forms of community.... especially ethnic, religious, and regional associations, and examine their social and discursive construction

extreme nationalists, these rivals are equated with lower moral and political standards.

In Northern Ireland, hostilities between nationalists (Roman Catholics) and unionists (Protestants) have permeated the world of soccer. As Bairner and Shirlow explain,

It is undeniable that Protestants can be made to feel unwelcome at certain soccer grounds in the province. The best example is that of Derry City's Brandywell, particularly since 1985 when the club began to play in the League of Ireland, having resigned from Northern Ireland's Irish League in 1972. Supported in the past by Protestants in the city, the club's following is now almost exclusively nationalist. The entire west side of the city, where the Brandywell is located, is nowadays regarded as a hostile environment by the overwhelming majority of Derry's Protestant inhabitants and to venture into it for the sake of attending a soccer match is virtually unthinkable. Here is a soccer club that now quite literally plays 'across the border' and which symbolises the estrangement of nationalists from Northern Ireland as a political entity. (2000,12)

Far from being "just a game", soccer reproduces and reinforces the social hostilities that are part of the larger Irish society. In this case, the Brandywell club plays the role of a politically autonomous entity, ideologically removed from its Northern Irish environment. In other words, Brandywell fans act as "ambassadors" of nationalist and republican values within Northern Ireland. The case of Peronism will further illustrate the relationship between sport and nationalisms, but first, I will discuss some of

and imagination. As such communities are imagined, symbols of distinctiveness and authenticity are selected and appropriated, within a social field marked by inequality, hierarchy, and contention. Languages of ethnicity, religion, and nationalism draw upon images of primordial associations and identifications, but they take their specific and practical forms as languages of contention and *opposition*. They typically involve movements for "our" people, "our" culture, "our" region, the true faith, progress, or democracy; *against* the intruders" (1996, 83). Sport has often been used by dictators as a language of contention and opposition.

the theories advanced by social scientists on the causes of hooliganism.

Theoretical approaches to hooliganism

Giulianotti (1999) describes three approaches to the study of hooliganism. These are the Marxist perspective of Ian Taylor, the social psychological position of Peter Marsh, and the figurational explanation advanced by Eric Dunning and his Leicester contemporaries. Taylor argued that, in England, soccer hooliganism must be explained in relation to wider social and economic changes. In his view, soccer was a traditionally working-class sport. Members of the working class perceived soccer clubs as participatory democracies where their voices could be heard, at least to some extent. According to Taylor, "club officials had sought to undermine this deeply affective (but ultimately unprofitable) tie by promoting the game among a wealthier, more respectable, middle-class audience.... The commercialization of 'their' sport alienated working-class fans, particularly the young, 'sub-cultural rumps' which began to assemble regularly at matches" (Giulianotti 1999, 40). Thus, Taylor's Marxist approach highlights class differences. In this case, hooliganism as a result of class differences does not translate into political involvement because English soccer clubs are not politicized. It is important to note that Taylor's argument lacks empirical grounding. He admitted that his writings were speculative and not based on real fieldwork (Giulianotti 1999).

Peter Marsh bases his social psychological explanation on the concept of "aggro", or social aggravation. According to this approach, "the media, police, magistrates, school teachers and politicians were criticized for dehumanizing young fans by referring to them as 'animals' and 'savages', and thereby 'amplifying' the seriousness of their 'aggro'" (Giulianotti 1999, 43). As a consequence, young fans came to identify themselves with their socially ascribed identities. This created a positive feedback cycle through which relations between hooligans and authorities became polarized and difficult to bridge (Giulianotti 1999). According to Marsh,

the solution would be to show more tolerance to the young fans. Clearly, this explanation does not account for the rise of soccer-related violence in the Argentine context, where stigmatization is not a significant factor leading to violent behaviour. This becomes even more apparent when we consider the fact that, in Argentina, *barrabravas* are often members of the upper middle-class.

The “Leicester School”, with Eric Dunning as one of its most prominent members, developed the most controversial approach to the study of hooliganism. Using Norbert Elias’ theory of the civilizing process, Dunning’s figurational approach states that “throughout recent history values of ‘civilized’ behaviour have penetrated the social classes in Europe; however, they have not yet fully penetrated the lower strata of the working class.... Fighting is one of the few sources of excitement, meaning and status available to males from the lower working class” (Spaaij 2007, 416). This somewhat reactionary model resembles Edward Burnett Tylor’s model of cultural evolutionism with its stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilization. Interestingly enough, Dunning never describes the characteristics of what he calls “civilized behaviour”. In my opinion, Dunning’s figurational approach is obsolete and more speculative than Taylor’s Marxist approach. In order to refute counter-evidence contradicting the idea of a civilizing process, Elias introduced the concept of “decivilizing spurts” which temporarily reverse the civilizing process (Giulianotti 1999). Giulianotti rightly states that “it is impossible to test the ‘civilizing process’ if one falls back on ‘decivilizing spurts’ to ‘refute’ counter-evidence” (1999, 46). Furthermore, “historians and anthropologists have argued that Elias’s civilizing process is historically inaccurate, evolutionist and ethnocentric, and that it implies that earlier or non-industrial societies are underdeveloped, savage and barbaric” (Giulianotti 1999, 46) To my surprise and disappointment, the work of the “Leicester School” seems to be “the most widely known and consulted body of enquiry into the causes and nature of football hooliganism” (Spaaij 2007, 417). The British approaches

described above cannot be transplanted into the Argentine context. The causes of hooliganism can only be understood in local terms.

Comparative perspectives on hooliganism

In order to understand the causes of hooliganism as they manifest themselves in different national contexts, it is necessary to examine the social, political, and historical specificities of any given country. Contrary to other cases, hooliganism in Argentina is politically motivated. By examining the causes of hooliganism in Italy and Holland, it will become apparent that soccer-related violence in these countries remains apolitical. In other words, groups of fans are not organized around political and economic goals, and access to the managerial level of soccer clubs remains restricted. By contrast, the structure of Argentine soccer allows fans to penetrate the political sphere of soccer clubs. This, in turn, creates an environment where organized groups of fans develop strong ties to club officials. *Barrabravas* and officials depend on each other.

In the words of Duke and Crolley, “what is distinctive about Argentina is that sport and politics are inextricably linked. *Fútbol* is an extension of politics; it is part of the political system and anything that begins as a sports issue rapidly becomes politicised” (2001, 93). The connection between Peronism and soccer, which will be discussed in detail, illustrates this point. More importantly, Duke and Crolley (2001) explain that the development of soccer in Argentina preceded democratic politics. Despite the fact that the first democratic election took place in 1916, “the newly formed political parties had no adequate organization of their own so they borrowed the infrastructure of *fútbol* and its neighbourhood-based clubs” (2001, 99). Of particular interest is the fact that Argentine soccer clubs are member associations, meaning that the members (anyone who pays a monthly fee) elect club officials. This is not always the case in Europe. The political sphere of European soccer clubs remains hermetically sealed, preventing fans from organizing themselves around political goals.

In Argentina, there are four key elements that make up the social networks that allow *barrabravas* to thrive: the state (represented by politicians), the AFA (Argentine Football Association), the clubs, and the fans (Duke and Crolley 2001). Their interdependency generates ties of complicity. All parties involved benefit in one way or another. It is interesting to note that *Argentine fútbol operates a hierarchical structure that is common to many other institutions. The AFA is responsible for the running of fútbol and is answerable only to the state. The clubs, whose chairmen and directors double as politicians, are governed by the AFA's structures and rules. Most of the club presidentes and dirigentes are associated with a political party. A well-known example... is that of Pedro Bidegain at San Lorenzo de Almagro, who was also a leading figure in Unión Cívica Radical. In many countries, the fans traditionally have little power in the formal structures of football; they are merely the masses that constitute the crowd and provide the gate money. However, in Argentina, because of the unique ties between politics and fútbol, the role of the fan is of utmost importance in the running of a club and to a politician's career (to this day rival political lists appear in club elections)* (Duke and Crolley 2001, 99-100).

Although physical violence is not always a prominent feature of soccer violence, it is the *threat* of violence that maintains certain relations between *barrabravas*, politicians, and club officials. In other words, organized groups of *barrabravas* resemble Italian-style mafias. Their repertoire includes intimidation, extortion, blackmailing, physical violence, use of firearms, use of knives, etc. These elements of coercion are directed at soccer players, club officials, and rival *barrabravas*. In some cases, internal conflicts within a group of *barrabravas* cannot be avoided. In August 2007, Gonzalo Acro, a *barrabrava*, was killed as a result of internal conflicts within the group known as the *Borrachos del Tablón* (River Plate's organized group of violent fans). The conflict originated when Alan Schlenker, one of the leaders, refused to distribute money in equal parts among the

group's members. Adrián Rousseau, second in command, created a new faction within the group to challenge Schlenker's monopoly on power. Under circumstances that are still pending investigation, Acro, a friend of Rousseau's, was shot at close range from a motorcycle after leaving his neighbourhood's gym. Clearly, *barrabravas* have specific targets. This mafia-like structure is not present in other national contexts. Furthermore, Duke and Crolley claim that

it is not uncommon for clubs to sort out their problems on the pitch via the barras bravas. If they want to get rid of a player or sometimes a manager, it is easy for them to pay for the barras to gain information on his private life and then use that information to blackmail him. So the barras bravas make sure it is their responsibility to know which players are taking which drugs (they might even be involved in supplying them) and all about their sex lives (2001,109-111).

As I have mentioned above, European fans are not directly involved with club officials and soccer players. The structure of European clubs prevents this from happening. I will now examine the specificities of hooliganism in Italy and Holland.

Hooliganism in Italy

Soccer fandom in Italy is linked to the "traditional" love for one's club. In other words, local clubs are more important than the national team and the nation. Dal Lago and De Biasi state that "for a supporter, whether or not he lives in the city of the team, the team colours are the most important symbol of his football faith, dominating any other symbol or cultural meaning such as nation, class or political party. What we are suggesting is that in Italy the realm of football is quite independent from class stratification, political conflicts or religious values" (1994,75). This statement points to the specificities of soccer cultures in different contexts: in England, soccer culture has been linked to class stratification; in Argentina, it has been linked to political conflicts; in Northern

Ireland, it is tied to religious values. And here we have Dal Lago and De Biasi claiming that soccer culture in Italy is completely independent from all of these factors. When comparing English hooligans to Italian *ultras*, they say that

from the very beginning, Italian ultra groups (wrongly considered the equivalent of English hooligans) reflected a more heterogeneous youth movement than that which populated British terraces.... In Italy, the ultra style of support has never been dominated by any particular social stratum or any specific youth style. The unifying element for the youth of Italian curvas (stadium ends) has always been support itself, and not social consumption, or class status, or political belief, or musical fashion, etc. (1994,79).

In the Italian context, the actions of the most violent groups of fans (the *ultras*) are attributed to an unconditional love for their respective clubs. Their violence tends to be more symbolic than real, but in some cases, confrontations between *ultra* groups can be very real indeed. Still, *ultra* violence does not have the political connotation of the manipulative violence of the *barrabravas*. *Ultra* violence is symbolic in the sense that Italian fans fight to “protect” the colours of their clubs. It is all about honour and pride. In Argentina, *barrabravas* do not usually care about their teams’ colours. Being a *barrabrava* is a full-time job based on violence and coercion. As I have previously mentioned, *barrabravas* are motivated by political and economic goals, not by honour and pride. Soccer in Argentina is a profitable business for violent fans; this is not true of other national contexts.

Despite the fact that the dominant metaphor of *ultra* culture is war, “the war cannot be too violent and bloody. Like medieval warriors who shared a common code of chivalry, despite their loyalty to king, baron or feudal chief, Italian *ultras* share a common *ultra* culture. They sing the same songs and shout the same slogans” (Dal Lago and De Biasi 1994, 85). By arranging an impressive display of flags and fireworks on the terraces, *ultras* can claim a

moral victory over their rivals. *Ultra* culture does not concern itself with politics. While *barrabravas* accumulate political and economic power, *ultras* arrange public exhibitions of symbolic power.

Hooliganism in Holland

According to van der Brug (1994), there is a relationship between individual downward mobility and participation in soccer hooliganism in Holland. He claims that hooliganism “shares the same causes as vandalism and juvenile delinquency: the absence of effective parental control and a problematic school career” (1994, 179). This contradicts Spaaij’s (2007) description of the socio-economic status of Siders (Dutch hooligans). In his view, far from being associated with downward mobility, the socio-economic composition of Siders is heterogeneous. When describing the defining characteristics of the Sparta Youth Crew (Sparta Rotterdam’s group of Siders), he mentions that its members see themselves as being more sophisticated and fashionable than Siders from their rival club, Feyenoord. Members of the Sparta Youth Crew regard hooliganism as a temporary lifestyle. As one hooligan puts it, “Feyenoord hooligans have very different backgrounds. I mean, many of them have no education, both parents on drugs, brought up in a culture of violence. Our group is completely different. We come from stable families, quite well-off, have certain values in life, an education. They will probably still be doing their business when they’re 35. I certainly won’t” (Spaaij 2007, 425). Spaaij explains that these “sophisticated” hooligans reject the use of violence in everyday life, but are addicted to the adrenalin rush they get from soccer-related violence. Unfortunately, Spaaij and van der Brug do not explain the causes of Dutch hooliganism in detail. Van der Brug (1994) himself says that the current knowledge in this field is very limited. Still, he insists on the issue of downward mobility related to unemployment, short-run hedonism, alcohol, and drugs as one of the main causes of violent behaviour among soccer fans. In any case, it is clear that soccer hooliganism in Holland is apolitical. Siders do

not have the level of organization found in groups of *barrabravas*. More importantly, Siders do not require a sophisticated level of organization because being a hooligan in Holland is not a full-time job. Dutch hooligans do not make a living out of being violent. By contrast, Archetti and Romero explain that groups of *barrabravas* “are evolving into kinds of elite military regiments dominated by the formation of small well-trained commando groups with a material infrastructure which includes weapons and cars. Operations are planned. It seems a task for professionals” (1994, 68). Indeed, *barrabravas* are professionals. Dutch hooligans, on the other hand, are “amateurs”. Their motivations are neither political nor economic.

The particularities of soccer hooliganism in Argentina

Soccer and violence in Argentina: A case study

During Juan Perón’s first term as president of Argentina (1946-1955), sport became a political tool for the propagation of nationalist values. Perón was eager to project a positive image of Argentina to the world. Not surprisingly, his political manipulation of sport as a social institution through which “average” men and women could become model citizens resembled Hitler’s idea of the “new man”. Perón valued healthy bodies and the notions of leadership and discipline inherent in sport. He would highlight the importance of sports as a component of national identity by encouraging citizens to participate in them: “I want my country to be a nation of athletes, with educated minds and strengthened bodies.... We’re on our way – getting there will depend on the Argentines and on the public authorities’ support and promotion by all possible means” (Perón in Rein 1998, 55). The issue of social mobility, a fundamental aspect of Brazilian soccer during Vargas’ presidency, was also crucial to Perón’s populist politics. In the words of Rein, sport “served as a medium for glorifying the concept of social mobility that was so important in Peronist Argentina. Outstanding athletes of humble origins, encouraged and

supported by the regime, proved through their achievements that in ‘the New Argentina’ talent rather than social position determined one’s standing” (1998, 56). While the possibility of social mobility was understandably appealing to many people, the truth is that sport acted as a mechanism of social control, ensuring that the masses continued to perform their productive role and eliminating their revolutionary potential (Rein 1998). Under Perón’s manipulative tactics, the masses would fight for sports trophies, putting political confrontations aside.

Despite the fact that Perón was not particularly interested in soccer, he recognized the political potential of the sport. The presence of thousands of spectators at soccer stadiums every week provided him with a good opportunity to disseminate his political ideals. Stadiums, sports facilities, competitions, championships, teams, and trophies were often named after Juan or Evita Perón or concepts associated with the Peronist movement (Rein 1998). Adults were not the only ones influenced by Perón’s ultranationalist policies. As Rein explains,

the combination of nationalism, patriotism and sacrifice also featured strongly in the sports competitions for children organized by the Eva Perón Foundation. Besides soccer championships, children participated in ‘patriotic’ activities such as ceremonies honouring or commemorating various national heroes, notably the ‘Liberator’, General José de San Martín. Here, too, the use of sport as a means of pursuing the goal of national unity and uniformity was conspicuous (1998, 59).

Clearly, the Eva Perón Foundation served the interests of the government by brainwashing children in order to perpetuate the propagation of Peronist values among future generations. Many of the teams competing in championships organized by the Foundation had names such as ‘Argentine Malvinas Islands’, ‘Argentine Antarctica’, ‘San Martín’, ‘Perón’, ‘Evita Morning Star’, ‘17 October’, etc. (Rein 1998). Furthermore, “the games always opened to the

strains of the national anthem, while the anthem of the games themselves was a paean of praise to the Peróns” (Rein 1998, 60).

The manipulative nature of Perón’s regime permeated the national media. *El Gráfico*, Argentina’s most popular sports magazine, had failed to mention the “accomplishments” of Perón in the world of sports. As a result, the government created a new sports magazine called *Mundo Deportivo*. Rein (1998) mentions the fact that the magazine’s editorials often used the metaphor of the nation as a sports team, emphasizing notions of solidarity, cooperation, organization, discipline, and obedience. In 1954, one of these editorials portrayed a father explaining the importance of sports to his son:

It’s a group game, a team effort, a joint effort; meaning you have to combine all your strength with that of your comrades. Within the group, you have a mission: to defend, attack, or advance... you’ll see the beauty of harmony... you’ll see what tremendous force the collective effort has as a result... You will also learn to listen to a coach who will assess your playing or tell you what you should do, often even against your own wishes, against your own will. In this way you will find the discipline that is so vital when you want to win. (Rein 1998, 61)

Perón’s less-than-subtle message reveals his paternalistic attitude. Through the institution of sport, he could convince people to follow his lead. As has been mentioned above, discipline was encouraged insofar as it served the interests of Perón, the “coach” who was leading the team to victory in the international scene. The Peronist government not only rewarded those who promoted the ideals of national unity and national pride, but it also stigmatized those who did not. Many athletes who refused to participate in sports under Peronism were considered traitors to the national cause. Furthermore, many of these athletes, including the racing driver Eusebio Marcilla and the track and field star Alberto Triulzi, were forced to terminate their careers. A few journalists and broadcasters also lost their jobs (Rein 1998).

The legacy of Peronist nationalism survives to this day. Sociologist Roberto Di Giano (2005) claims that, after the fall of Perón in 1955, liberal groups started a “campaign of cultural devaluation” guided by an anti-Peronist modernizing impulse. Loyal to the Peronist ideology, Di Giano makes constant reference to the loss of traditional Argentine values as a consequence of foreign modernizing agents. He uses soccer to describe differences between Argentine “traits” and foreign values. When referring to the Argentine character, he uses the word “traditional” repeatedly. According to him, transformations in the name of modernity have sterilized the cultural heritage of the Argentines. He equates Argentine soccer players with spontaneity, mischievousness, individuality, and joy, while European players are seen as rigid, “boring”, and overly organized. Di Giano seems to fall into the trap of the nationalist imagined community. He constantly uses the term “our” when he describes an aspect of Argentine culture. Thus, instead of saying “Argentine soccer”, he says “our soccer”. This language of opposition (Roseberry 1996) relies on sport as a politically charged category. Di Giano (2006) also believes that the Peronist movement could help develop soccer in a more autonomous and autochthonous way by emphasizing the affirmation of a national project based on a strong sense of national identity.

Sport and politics share strong ties. Vargas, Hitler, and Perón have used the institution of sport to promote their political views. Extreme nationalists such as Perón have used sport as a tool for social mobilization. Soccer provided a public arena where men and women could learn and “absorb” social values such as solidarity, cooperation, discipline, obedience, effort, and teamwork, among others. In other words, the institution of sport allowed “average” citizens to become “virtuous” citizens. In Northern Ireland, Germany, Argentina and, to a lesser extent, Brazil, soccer has been used to promote nationalism. International matches have been used as stages where a nationalist government could exhibit the glory and magnificence of its people. In the eyes of nationalist leaders such as Perón, the national soccer team and the nation-

state became one and the same, blurring the distinctions between sport and politics.

In recent years, the changing character of Argentine political culture has influenced the ways in which groups of soccer fans organize themselves around political and economic goals. Argentine soccer clubs have always had strong ties to local and national politics. However, it should be noted that the unregulated use of violence by organized fans in and around soccer stadiums has not always been a defining characteristic of soccer fandom. Acts of violence were relatively rare during the first half of the twentieth century. Organized fandom, with its “privatized” use of violence, emerged during General Videla’s military dictatorship. I will now concentrate on the relationships between Argentine political culture and soccer fandom since 1976, the year in which the last military regime took power.

The privatization of violence during the process of national reorganization (1976-1983)

On March 24, 1976, having overthrown President Isabel Perón, a military junta under the command of General Jorge Rafael Videla, Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera, and Air Force Brigadier Orlando Ramón Agosti, assumed power. Through the so-called Process of National Reorganization (popularly known simply as the Process), the junta sought to eliminate the political violence of far-left-wing groups such as the Peronist *Montoneros*. When defining totalitarianism, Lefort states that “a new political category was being formed; the transition from an epithet applied to enemy states to a noun created in order to designate a new socio-historical type took place when, and only when, Soviet communism seemed to threaten the existence of the democracies” (1986, 274). While the junta’s objective was indeed to eliminate the “threat” of communism, in Argentina there was no real democracy to begin with. Even though Isabel Perón, who was very inexperienced when it came to politics, had not risen to power by force, her actions were heavily influenced by the right-wing minister of social welfare José López Rega, who was also one of the founders of the Triple A (Argentine

Anticomunist Alliance). As Romero explains, “the economic crisis of 1975, the crisis in leadership, the factional struggles and the daily presence of death, the spectacular actions of the guerrilla organizations.... the terror sown by the Triple A, all created the conditions for the acceptance of a military coup that promised to reestablish order and ensure the state’s monopoly on violence” (2006, 215). The Triple A was a far-right-wing death squad linked to the military junta. Needless to say, the Triple A and the *Montoneros* were natural enemies. Political violence in the form of terrorist attacks carried out by extremist political groups such as the Triple A and the *Montoneros* took place outside the state’s “legal boundaries”. In other words, acts of violence were unregulated and therefore illegal and undemocratic. In his historical analysis of the causes of soccer-related violence in Argentina, Alabarces (2004) introduces the concept of “privatization of violence”. This concept refers to the fact that the so-called *Grupos de Tarea* (death squads) found themselves in a position of absolute power, meaning that they had the freedom to act independently without having to justify their actions in front of a centralized authority. Historian Luis Alberto Romero explains that during the 1970s, paramilitary groups were “drawn from union thugs, the ranks of Peronism’s fascist groups, and paid gunmen of the ministry of social welfare – who operated under the name of the *Alianza Anticomunista Argentina* (Anti-Communist Argentine Alliance) or simply the Triple A” (2006, 212). These death squads or paramilitary groups were supported by the government as a means of coercive social control. Following Alabarces’ definition, “privatization of violence” refers to the illegitimate use of violence which is both uncontrolled and implicitly encouraged by the state. Romero rightly states that the political discourses of the dictatorship “divided the world into two opposing camps: friends and enemies” (2006, 189). Diplomacy has not been a defining characteristic of Argentine politics throughout the country’s history. He goes on to say that “because everything stemmed from power, the sole purpose of political action was to capture it ...

By one or another route, everything led to an interpretation of politics as an extension of war; naturally, those who best adapted themselves to that logic prevailed in the debate among activists and left their mark on popular mobilization” (Romero 2006, 189). Alabarces (2004) relies on Romero’s analysis to claim that present-day *barrabravas* (Argentine hooligans) have copied the behaviour of the death squads. In other words, *barrabravas* seek to acquire power through political action. While the popular media label *barrabravas* as social misfits (*inadaptados sociales*), a historical analysis reveals that these groups of organized fans have in fact adapted themselves successfully to the political mechanisms of power. Alabarces states that “having acquired symbolic power, they dedicate themselves to obtaining economic power” (2004, 26, translation mine). In spite of the state’s apparent intention to restore its monopoly on violence, Alabarces explains that

the violence of the dictatorship means.... a perverse prolongation: the rupture of the modern contract through which the only legitimate violence is monopolized by the State, which must use it rationally and democratically. That rupture creates a frame of interpretation in which violence is privatized and can be legitimated by different actors for particular goals. Also, State violence not only loses legitimacy as a result of the dictatorship: its anti-democratic practices are prolonged to the present-day in the form of police violence. And all of this can be seen, amplified, in soccer (2004, 27, translation mine).

Thus, as Alabarces shows, the privatization of violence during the dictatorship permeated the world of soccer, where fans could organize themselves and carry out acts of violence with impunity.

Romero (2006) identifies the existence of a clandestine terrorist state and a “visible” state. While the clandestine state was in charge of repression, the “visible” state was subject to the norms established by the military government, meaning that its actions were scrutinized by the legal system. This was true only in theory, but in practice “this distinction was not maintained,

and the illegal clandestine state was corroding, corrupting the state institutions in their entirety and the state’s very juridical foundations” (Romero 2006, 233).

The manipulation of the Argentine press during the 1978 soccer World Cup (played in Argentina) provides a good example of the ways in which the junta attempted to promote a positive image of Argentina by exalting the quality of the national soccer team while at the same time censoring dissenting journalists. César Luis Menotti had been Argentina’s coach since 1974, two years before the junta rose to power. Ironically, Menotti was a communist. Still, he was a popular character in Argentine society, and the junta sought to exploit his popularity by arranging interviews where Menotti would praise the actions and policies of the dictatorship. A very curious incident

involving control of the press and pointing towards some sort of partnership between Menotti and the junta, involved desaparecido and noted Argentinian journalist Raúl Lisandro Cubas who, while being held clandestinely, obtained a temporary release from the detention centre. Under supervision from a naval officer, his task was to meet with and interview Menotti and to get him to speak favourably of the junta so that the regime might benefit from a positive association with the popular coach (Smith 2002, 72).

Thus, the junta had no hesitation in manipulating political rivals to their advantage. Despite the fact that many Argentines criticized Menotti for what they saw as his participation in the right-wing nationalist propaganda of the state, the truth is that, in his situation, he could not have escaped the influence of the junta. Open rebellion against the state was not a realistic option. Smith attempts to explain the incident involving the junta, Menotti, and Cubas by claiming that “the most likely reason for this is that a story linking the world-renowned coach, the controversial government and a supposedly missing journalist had the potential to create a wide-ranging public relations coup for the junta” (2002,73). Going

back to Romero and Alabarces, it is important to note that the state *did* have a monopoly on violence (with the only exception of the terrorist activities of radical leftist groups). Still, both authors would agree on the fact that the junta's violence was far from rational and democratic, meaning that it did not serve the interests of the citizens. Hegel explains that "the formal subjective freedom of individuals consists in their having and expressing their own private judgments, opinions, and recommendations on affairs of state. This freedom is collectively manifested as what is called 'public opinion'" (in Habermas 1989, 117). Clearly, the repressive and extortive violence of the dictatorship severely limited the extent to which public opinion could bring about social and political change. Hegel goes on to say that "what is to be authoritative nowadays derives its authority, not at all from force, only to a small extent from habit and custom, really from insight and argument" (in Habermas 1989, 117). His statement contradicts the nature of the junta's authority, which undoubtedly stemmed from the use of coercion and intimidation. In spite of the junta's manipulative tactics, insight and argument were not the preferred methods of social control.

It is possible to draw a parallel between the actions of the junta and the actions of *barrabravas*. While the junta manipulated Menotti, forcing him to show his support for the government, *barrabravas* manipulate coaches, players, and club officials in order to achieve their goals both inside and outside the stadiums. This privatization of violence by *barrabravas* was not present in the world of soccer prior to Videla's military dictatorship.

Corruption in Argentine soccer

The literature on corruption in Argentina's recent past emphasizes the negative effects of the privatization of the economy during Menem's presidency. Menem's neoliberal policies created an atmosphere of social impunity. His government exercised a form of economic oppression that widened the gap between the rich and the poor. Corruption and the privatization of the economy were the

defining characteristics of his two consecutive presidential terms, which lasted from 1989 to 1999. Still, Weyland (2006) argues that neoliberalism was not, by itself, the main cause of corruption. In his own words, "the cancerous growth of malfeasance has depended instead on the type of government that executed market reforms. Where neopopulist outsiders such as Menem... spearheaded this great transformation, cases of graft multiplied and the amount of bribes reached unprecedented levels" (2006, 84). Not surprisingly, these types of corrupt economic arrangements were adopted by soccer clubs. According to Weyland, "the privatization of public enterprises proved especially susceptible to corruption. In exchange for kickbacks, presidents and their aides often agreed to excessively low sales prices and favored one bidder over competitors" (2006, 85). Similarly, soccer club officials sell players to Europe for more than the publicly advertised price, meaning that they are often paid thousands of dollars in undeclared money. In other words, they are paid "under the table".

Far from investigating cases of corruption, the police are deeply implicated in corrupt agreements. Hinton (2005) believes that the 1976 military government left an indelible ideological and tactical legacy on the police. She claims that in order to eliminate the threat of communism, "the police were used by the military as cheap labour for their worst activities" (2005, 80). This has provided the police with a sense of authority and impunity that persists to this day. Not surprisingly, many Argentines believe that police officers are simply criminals in uniform. In fact, in the 1990s, "extensive economic privatization was followed by a wave of assaults, muggings, bank robberies and other violent crimes. The sensation of public insecurity in Buenos Aires and its surrounding metropolitan area... was further augmented by relentless media exposés of police involvement in such crimes as car theft, prostitution and drug rings" (Hinton 2005, 83). The police are accountable to no one. Police officers often form "alliances" with *barrabravas*. Through these alliances, they agree not to interfere with the actions of the *barrabravas*

inside and outside the stadiums in exchange for a small fee or, to put it more accurately, a bribe. As Duke and Crolley point out, “on occasion the police have been criticized for their lack of action, or apparent indifference. Their passivity in certain situations has been considered by some to indicate complicity” (2001, 109). The prevalent sense of complicity and impunity is exacerbated by the fact that many police officers have friendly relationships with *barrabravas*. Thus, it becomes apparent that many police officers look after their own interests. The prospect of easy money is hard to resist, especially considering the fact that police salaries in Argentina are very low. Endemic institutional corruption, which permeates all spheres of society, allows officers to get away with almost anything.

Having the complicity of the police, *barrabravas* dedicate themselves to establishing personal contacts with club officials and politicians at the local and national levels. For individual politicians, soccer clubs provide a shop window in which to display themselves (Duke and Crolley 2001). The political potential of soccer clubs in Argentina is very appealing to both politicians and businessmen. It is important to note that “in the past many businesses have decided to become involved in *fútbol*, not only for its potential for advertising but also so that businessmen.... could use *fútbol* as a stepping-stone to a political career” (Duke and Crolley 2001, 101). The most famous example of this political function of soccer clubs is the case of former Boca Juniors’ president Mauricio Macri, whose term lasted from 1996 to 2007. Boca is one of the two biggest clubs in Argentina. Despite being from Buenos Aires, rival clubs River and Boca are the only clubs that have a strong fan base at the national level. Most other clubs have a local fan base. As a result, club officials from Boca and River have a considerably stronger influence on national politics because they can mobilize large numbers of fans across the country. Boca has been traditionally associated with the lower classes. It is the “people’s club”. Not surprisingly, Macri, a wealthy businessman who stands in the centre-right of the political

spectrum, used Boca to his advantage, through which he promoted his populist brand of politics. In late 2007, he was elected Chief of Government (i.e. Mayor) of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. He intends to run for president in the not so distant future (in fact, he had already considered running for president in 2007, but decided to wait until the next presidential election, probably to consolidate his political image). Still, Duke and Crolley explain that

It is the political role of the fans which has been distinctive in Argentine fútbol. The fans have been voters not only in elections for club officials, which... have been themselves partly political, but also in local, regional and national elections. Therefore, ambitious politicians needed to cultivate a solid fan base of support. The more militant fans (militantes) participated in more than committed support for the team and the club; they also undertook political work on behalf of a politician who might be the club presidente, a candidate for club presidente or one of the club dirigentes. This direct relationship between politicians and fan groups was to reach its apotheosis... in the form of the barras bravas (2001, 104).

In short, just as *barrabravas* receive protection from the police, they provide political support to club officials and politicians, who in turn pay *barrabravas* for their “services”. In this privatized environment where corruption and violence are not regulated by the state, the economic and political goals of *barrabravas* often translate into physical violence inside and outside the stadiums as well as at political rallies, where opposing groups of *barrabravas* collide in support of their respective candidates. More often than not, *barrabravas* are mercenaries who sell their services to the highest bidder, regardless of political ideology. Videla’s military dictatorship created a social environment in which violence became privatized. This privatization of violence, coupled with the privatization of the economy and the erosion of the judicial system as a result of the neoliberal policies of the 90s, allowed different social actors (in this case, *barrabravas*, soccer club officials, and the police)

to gain political and economic power through corrupt arrangements, extortion, and the use of unregulated violence.

Clientelism in soccer and beyond

Auyero's (2007) model of clientelism can be applied to soccer. The basic principles found in Peronist social networks, including the presence of patrons, brokers, and clients, can also be found in Argentine soccer clubs. In the words of Auyero, "brokers direct flows of goods, information, and services from their political patrons to their clients and flows of political support (in the form of attendance at rallies, participation in party activities, and sometimes votes) from their clients to their patrons" (2007, 60). Club officials and *barrabravas* are patrons and clients at the same time (depending on the situation); they have a symbiotic relationship. Full-time *barrabravas* cannot make a living without the economic support of club officials. Club officials, on the other hand, need the *barrabravas*' "social skills" in order to mobilize support for their political purposes.

The practice of patronage politics has expanded since the 1990s, when Menem introduced neoliberal reforms that allowed politicians to develop strong networks of clientelism. Auyero (2007) tells the story of Manuel Quindimil, mayor of the municipality of Lanús, located just south of the city of Buenos Aires, who mobilized seventy-five buses during a political rally held in 2003 in support of Néstor Kirchner, now ex-president of Argentina. The rally took place in River Plate's stadium. This political mobilization modality, based on social networks involving patrons, brokers, and clients, is a defining characteristic of Argentine politics. In the last thirty years, the world of soccer has become an influential political sphere in its own right. Auyero's story about an influential figure mobilizing buses in support of a particular cause and/or politician is often replicated among *barrabravas*. In soccer, these mobilizations do not have to be triggered by issues of national relevance. Violent fans know that there is strength in numbers (in this case, it might be more accurate to say that there is *intimidation* in numbers). Recently, seventy fans of Platense, a

second division team, arrived in buses at the office of *Futbolistas Argentinos Agremiados* (Union of Argentine Soccer Players) to protest against a sanction that prevents Platense from using newly acquired players in the team's starting lineup. The fans threw rocks and fought against union officials.³ Incidents such as these, which are considered "minor" in comparison to the ones that take place at political rallies, important matches, and between rival *barras bravas*, are a reflection of the patronage politics described by Auyero outside the world of soccer. More often than not, Argentine politics is about overpowering the opponents. Even though many politicians try to portray an image of diplomacy and open dialogue, the acts of political violence and intimidation experienced at rallies point to the fact that networks of clientelism are able to thrive outside the legal boundaries of the state. The following statement by Auyero, although referring to Peronist networks, can easily be applied to club officials and *barrabravas*: "Brokers and patrons of the Peronist Party pursue their own political careers, try to accumulate as much political power as they can, and improve their positions in the local political field. In order to do so, they attempt to maximize their intake of state resources.... vital to solving poor people's problems *and* to winning followers: They do politics through problem solving" (2007, 61-62). Although it is possible to draw a parallel between the actions of politicians and those of club officials (*before* they turn into politicians outside of soccer), some distinctions need to be highlighted. Rather than maximizing the intake of state resources, club officials use their respective soccer clubs to maximize their power of negotiation by managing the clubs' finances. They win followers in the form of *barrabravas*, who in turn provide officials with political support and mobilization (Duke and Crolley 2001). Problem solving networks in Argentine soccer rely on the exchange of goods for services. These networks are based on the clientelist model to the extent that they allow *barrabravas* to make a living out

³ See Clarín, August 14, 2008.

of being mercenaries, while *barrabravas* provide officials with a large number of followers. *Barrabravas* are often employed by soccer clubs; they receive money in the form of monthly salaries and ticket sales (Buzzella 2007). Club officials turned politicians (e.g. Mauricio Macri) also rely on strategies of problem solving such as those described by Auyero.

Conclusion

The causes of hooliganism in any given national context can only be understood in terms of local specificities. It is not possible to develop a single universal theory capable of explaining the defining characteristics of soccer-related violence transnationally. British Marxist, social psychological, and figurational approaches cannot be applied to the Argentine context. In England, hooliganism has traditionally been tied

to class differences. Soccer-related violence emerged as a working-class reaction to the appropriation and commercialization of soccer culture by the middle class. In Italy, the actions of the *ultras* are attributed to the unconditional love for their clubs' colours. Symbolic violence among Italian *ultras* is a matter of pride and honour. In Holland, individual downward mobility seems to motivate violent behaviour among Siders, although the explanations advanced by Spaaij and van der Brug need clarification. In all of these national contexts, hooliganism is apolitical in nature. Only in Argentina are fans able to acquire social, political, and economic power through the use of violence facilitated by club officials, politicians, and the police. This particular configuration is tied to the country's historical, social, and political specificities.

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