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Fútbol, Politicians and the People: Populism and Politics in Argentina
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Association football is undoubtedly the leading spectator sport in the world and this role is confirmed throughout most of Latin America. On mainland South America, only in Venezuela is fútbol less popular than imported North American sports such as baseball (it is only North Americans who insist on calling the game soccer in order to distinguish it from their own brand of American football). Notwithstanding the world dominance of the sport, football culture varies markedly according to the economic, social, political and historical characteristics of a society.¹ 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.² Historically, there are grounds to claim that fútbol is the social model around which the political system has been constructed.

This essay will outline how the ties between fútbol and politics were established, the form in which these links are maintained and comments briefly on whether the relationship is likely to continue.³ At the infancy stage of football in Argentina, the game was established and dominated by the English population of Buenos Aires.⁴ During the period of adolescence, the Argentines took-over both off and on the pitch, football became fútbol and the links between politics, the people and fútbol were established. Maturity brought the institutionalization of these relationships and the appearance of politically organized fan groups, the barras bravas. Towards the end of the twentieth century, pressures emanating from the globalization of sport began to challenge the traditional fútbol culture.
Britain was Argentina’s leading trade partner in the second half of the nineteenth century and there were a significant population of British nationals, mostly English, living in Buenos Aires. The first football in Argentina was played by visiting seamen in the port area of Buenos Aires; they were known locally as los ingleses locos. Expatriate railway workers helped to spread the game further inland during a period of extensive railway construction. Educationalists also played their part. The English made the physical space in which to play and were encouraged by employers and educationalists. Two of the oldest surviving football clubs were started by railway workers – Quilmes Athletic Club in 1887 and Rosario Central in 1889. As the suburbs of Buenos Aires spread outwards with the railway lines, a football club was formed at every settlement along the line. This historical pattern remains clearly visible today. Further afield in the provinces, football clubs were also formed by, and named after, railway companies, e.g. Central Norte in Mendoza, Pacifico in Bahia Blanca and Andes Talleres in Mendoza.

Games involving a mixture of what are now association football and rugby rules took place from the early 1860s onwards. The first official club in Argentina was Buenos Aires Football Club which formed in 1867 as a spin-off from Buenos Aires Cricket Club (founded in 1862). On 20 June 1867, the first recorded match took place: the Colorados defeated the Blancos 4–0. By 1890 there were around 45,000 British nationals living in Greater Buenos Aires and they were instrumental in the formation of several other football clubs. In 1891, Saint Andrews School won a tournament in Buenos Aires and the Argentine Association Football League was established in 1893.

A Scot, Alexander Watson Hutton is regarded as the padre (father) of Argentine football. He founded the English High School in 1884 where football was an essential part of the curriculum. Hutton became the first president of the Argentine Association Football League and the old boys of the High School formed Alumni who became the most successful club during the period of mainly English dominance. The founding clubs of the Argentine Association Football League reflected the twin influences of school (e.g. English High School and Lomas Athletic Club) and railway (e.g. Buenos Aires–Rosario Railway and Quilmes Athletic Club).
Football developed very early in Buenos Aires. Indeed, in terms of development it was second only to Britain. The first club, Buenos Aires Football Club, was formed in 1867, only ten years after the first English club (Sheffield FC) and in the same year as the first Scottish club (Queen’s Park). The establishment of a league championship in 1893 was preceded only by The (English) Football League in 1888 and the Scottish and Irish Leagues in 1890. Mainland Europe did not develop any leagues until 1895 (Belgium) and then 1896 (Sweden).

Evidence for essentially English dominance in the early period is available in many forms. On the pitch the league was won by clubs with overwhelmingly British players until 1912. In the 1990s, Lomas Athletic Club won the championship six times, and Alumni were undoubtedly the team of the first decade of the twentieth century. Between 1901 and 1911, Alumni won the league nine times. Furthermore, they acquired immortal fame in Argentina by defeating a visiting South African side in 1906. The Alumni team that day included five Brown brothers and four other British surnames, plus Weiss and Laforia. Visiting English professional teams provided the yardstick by which local players could judge their own progress (or lack of it). Notable examples were Southampton in 1904, Nottingham Forest in 1905 and both Everton and Tottenham Hotspur in 1909.

The earliest clubs consisted of predominantly, and usually exclusively, ‘Anglo-Saxon’ members. These clubs were unsurprisingly given English names and some clubs still carry this legacy today as a revelation of the roots of Argentine football. Examples among current leading clubs are River Plate, Newells Old Boys and Quilmes Athletic Club. Early English dominance is exemplified by the nomenclature of the football organizations in this period – consider the Argentine Association Football League in 1893, which became the Argentine Football Association in 1903. In the early days of these organizations the officials all had English surnames; the first four presidents were Hutton, Boyd, Wibberley and Boutell.8

Another indicator of English dominance lies in the fact that the official language for association business remained English until 1906. In 1905, a pamphlet on the rules of the game was printed in both English and Spanish. Only in 1912, following a split in the association, was there a partial change to Spanish wording in the title of what was now two organizations: the original and traditional Argentine Football Association became the Asociación Argentina de Football whereas the
breakaway group was entitled the Federación Argentina de Football. Interestingly both switched to Spanish for the organizational description (Asociación and Federación), both employed ‘Argentina’ rather than ‘Argentine’ (which is English), yet the name of the game remained ‘football’. Only in 1934 with the official acceptance of professionalism did the governing body become the Asociación de Fútbol Argentino.

Given that many of the early clubs emanated from English schools or were formed by English (or occasionally Scottish) middle-class professionals with a university education, involvement of the social elite was evident from the very beginning (although this is not to deny the role of the railway workers). For instance Hugo Wilson9 was not only president of the Argentine Football Association 1909–12 and president of the Asociación Argentina de Football 1912–15, he was also president of the Jockey Club; a highly prestigious institution to this day. Incidentally, Wilson was the last president of any of the Argentine football organizations to bear an English surname. Evidence of interest in football from the Argentine elite at this time is clearly furnished by the visit of the President of the Republic to the Alumni–Southampton match in June 1904.

1912 is usually cited as the last year of the period of English dominance in Argentine football. In that year Quilmes Athletic Club won the Asociación championship; they were the last predominantly English team to do so. The following year, Racing Club won the first of seven consecutive titles with a team including only three players of English origin. Racing Club are regarded as the first criollo champions of Argentina. A symbolic indication of the approaching end of an era occurred in 1910 when Argentinos beat Británicos 5–1 in the annual challenge match.

Although popular histories of Argentine football convey a discontinuity between 1912 and 1913, in reality the ‘creolization’10 of football was a more gradual process. As football became accepted and adopted by the Argentine population of predominantly Italian and Spanish immigrants, friction arose as the integration of other Argentines into some traditionally English/Anglo-Argentine clubs was resisted. This led to the establishment of new clubs where Argentines were welcome. Such clubs included Argentino de Quilmes (formed in 1899 as an Argentine-friendly counterpart to Quilmes Athletic Club), Estudiantes de Buenos Aires (established 1898) and Independiente Football Club (formed in 1905). Later Independiente made its name fully Spanish and became Club Atlético Independiente.
By the beginning of the twentieth century most of the major clubs we recognise today were established. All of the big five clubs in Argentine football were founded over a four-year period; River Plate in 1901, Racing Club in 1903 and Boca Juniors, Independiente and San Lorenzo in 1905. Boca Juniors were, and still are, based in the Genovese barrio alongside the port in Buenos Aires. The name chosen for the club is instructive, legend tells us they rejected other names such as Italian Stars and Children of Italy because they felt a strong identity with their barrio. ‘Boca’, meaning mouth of the river, establishes their identification with their port on the River Plate and ‘Juniors’ reflects the fact that they now considered themselves to be children of that place, rather than immigrants. In football’s formative years, the clubs developed a close association with the roots of their local communities.

At the very same time as football was imported into Argentina, Buenos Aires experienced a population explosion from 90,000 in 1854, to 670,000 in 1895, to 1,576,000 in 1914. By the early twentieth century there were over a million immigrants in the city. An accelerated process of suburbanization and a marked expansion in the transport infrastructure accompanied the rapid increase in population. An electric tramway was opened in 1897 and suburban railways developed in the latter part of the century.

This combination of urban elements rendered the barrio, or neighbourhood, central to life experience for the inhabitants of Buenos Aires. The barrios were crystallized as political and cultural creations in the 1910s. Those new football clubs that were established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played an important role in the social and political life of the barrio where they were based. The football club came to represent the locality and contributed to the integration of a young immigrant population into Argentine society.

From 1905 to 1910 hundreds of local football clubs were established as part of a genuine social and democratic movement. The new immigrants adopted the game played by the English workers and established their clubs in the new barrios. New identities emerged based on the barrio rather than the origins of immigrants. Local rivalries were central from the very beginning. Whereas the English learned their football in the schools, the criollos learned to play in the streets and on the patches of wasteland (potreros) on the edge of barrios. These very different ‘classrooms’ led inevitably to very different values on and off the pitch. Fair play and the amateur ethos of the gentleman were favoured by
the bourgeois English clubs. These clubs monopolized official football, where requirements included a proper ground and decent changing rooms. In contrast, the criollos played to win and many of their clubs could not afford proper facilities. Local rivalries were intense.

By 1907 there were over 300 football clubs in Buenos Aires playing outside the official championship. Most of these were either workplace or neighbourhood based. Appropriation of football by the Argentine working class led not only to conflicting values but also to disputes over behaviour, both on and off the pitch. Many of the upper-class English clubs would shortly abandon the unruly working class game of football and switch to the more elite game of rugby (e.g. San Isidro and Belgrano). The traditional ritual of ‘the third half’, a convivial social gathering between the players of both sides after the match, soon disappeared from football but it remains to this day in Argentine rugby.

Tension between the English and criollos erupted in 1912 in the form of a split into two rival organizations. Those sticking with the traditional official organization joined the Asociación Argentina de Football, which had 52 member clubs; the breakaway Federación Argentina de Football had 152 adherents. At the same time there were a further 280 clubs playing in ligas independientes (leagues independent of both organizations). The end result of all this was the entry of more non-English clubs from poorer social backgrounds into competitive football. The two organizations merged again in 1915 but by this time many of the traditional English clubs had abandoned football in favour of rugby. Alumni did not compete in 1912. The infancy stage was well and truly over.

**ADOLESCENCE AND THE ARGENTINE TAKE-OVER OF FÚTBOL**

From the very beginning of the adolescent period, native Argentines (excluding Anglo-Argentines) dominated the game that was becoming fútbol rather than football. This dominance was evident both on and off the pitch. On the pitch, all the championship winning teams from 1913 onwards were overwhelmingly composed of Argentines of Italian and Spanish origin. A debate ensued as to the superiority of the criollo style over the English style of play which was reinterpreted and romanticized by the sporting press in the 1930s and 1940s. The contrasting and conflicting styles of criollo football (characterized by individual flair, instinct, spontaneity) and English football (noted for its reliance on physical strength and hard work) complicated the search for a national
football identity. Off the pitch, all the leading officials in the various
governing bodies from 1915 onwards had non-English surnames.
Moreover the names of the governing bodies became partially Spanish
in 1912 and fully Spanish in 1934.

It is also during this period of adolescence that the structures that
integrate fútbol and politics to this day were established. Of crucial
importance to the subsequent development of fútbol in Argentina is that
it preceded democratic politics. Universal male suffrage was not
approved until 1912 and the first democratic election took place in 1916,
by which time 46 of the leading professional clubs involved in the
restructuring of fútbol in 1985 were already in existence. The newly
formed political parties had no adequate organization of their own so
they borrowed the infrastructure of fútbol and its neighbourhood-based
clubs. Both football and politics were organized in a similar manner
within the community. Football clubs in Argentina are private member
associations, which means that the socios (members) elect the club
officials. Party politics came to play a leading role in these club elections.

There are four main elements in the organization of Argentine fútbol
and it is the relationships between them that determine the role of
politics in sport and sport in politics. The state (represented by
politicians), the football association – Asociación de Fútbol Argentino
(AFA from 1934), the football clubs and the fans are the key players in
the political network. Other elements such as businesses, local
communities and the mass media have a part to play. The links between
the four main elements are complex. However, sufficient motivation has
been present on the part of all the players to ensure the continuation of
the structure into the twenty-first century.

In theory, 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 from the
adolescent period is that of Pedro Bidegain at San Lorenzo de Almagro,
who was also a leading figure in Unión Civica 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 fans 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).

The relationships between the four main elements of the fútbol
hierarchy became established during the 1920s and 1930s. During this
period, clubs were either financed by benefactors, received donations
from supporters or sponsorship from local businesses. Football clubs
became the sporting, social and political centre of the barrio. They
provided much more for their members than watching a match. Racing
Club and Sportivo Barracas were the first to develop advanced social
facilities for their members and their barrios. For instance, Sportivo
opened an enclosed pelota court in 1917, a new fútbol stadium in 1920
and a swimming pool in 1925.

The Unión Civica Radical were in power from 1916 to 1930 until the
government was overthrown by the first of Argentina’s many military
coups in the twentieth century. At the same time, rapid social and
economic change resulted in the continued suburban expansion of
Buenos Aires and industrialization heralded the rise of a significant
working class. The workers were to be an important market for fútbol
and fútbol was to become a useful medium by which the state could
control the population since it could be used to distract the workers from
everyday problems and political issues.

A breakaway professional league, the Liga Argentina de Football, was
formed in 1931 and comprised 18 clubs from Buenos Aires and La Plata.
P. Alabarces and M. Rodriguez recognize professionalization both as a key
element and a watershed in the history of Argentine fútbol and also claim it
provoked the definitive rupture between the upper classes and fútbol. While
acknowledging the immense effects of the break away from amateurism,
which was so central to the aristocratic ideals represented via football
during its infancy, it is important to emphasize that this did not mean that
the powerful and socially dominant abandoned fútbol. On the contrary, they
continued to run the game, to use it as a political tool, to gain social status
from it and, consciously or not, to exploit it as a vehicle of social control.

One of the main reasons behind the move to professionalism was a
desire to stem the flow of top Argentine players to European clubs. Julio
Libonatti was the first such player to move, from Newells Old Boys to
Torino. More significant was the transfer of the outstanding Raimundo
Orsi in 1928 from Independiente to Juventus. Orsi was later awarded
Italian nationality and went on to make 35 international appearances for
Italy; he was one of three Argentines (by birth) to play for Italy in the
1934 World Cup Final. By the end of 1934, the professional league had rejoined the official fold under the guise of the newly formed AFA.

The arrival of the professional league had a major impact on fútbol. Average attendance at matches increased significantly, competition between the clubs was intensified and the already fierce rivalry between supporters was heightened. The biggest of the club rivalries to this day, between Boca Juniors and River Plate, escalated during this period. Both clubs had become accustomed to success during the 1920s while they played in different leagues. In this period, fútbol experienced a short boom period of expansion and relative wealth, led by River, who were given their nickname of Los Millonarios.

Professionalization of fútbol increased its popularity even more. Fortuitously, this period coincided with the spread of the mass media. The press and radio contributed to the diffusion of the sport and to its exploitation in controlling and manipulating the masses during a period of political instability. The motivation for state involvement in the Liga Argentina de Football and in the running of clubs is clear. Government officials realized the potential of fútbol as political propaganda. It was advantageous to the state to establish a relationship, albeit indirect, between itself and football fans.

For individual politicians, football clubs provided a shop window, in which to display themselves and their ‘wares’ as they still do today. The motivation which helps explain the close links between fútbol and politics in Argentina in the 1930s remains the same today, thus enabling the continuation of the relationship. Directing a football club, supporting the club through some other activity, or simply attending a match provides politicians with the opportunity to become known to a large public. It facilitates networks for political canvassing and encouraging the loyalty of the local community. It is usual for the names of politicians to appear on lists of honorary socios for most clubs and it has gradually become a normal way of creating political propaganda. It is common practice during presidential elections at football clubs, for rival political opponents to stand as candidates and run campaigns against one another, thereby merging the structures of football and politics. In the past many businesses have decided to become involved in fútbol, not only for its potential for advertising but also so that businessmen (and the system involves exclusively men) could use fútbol as a stepping-stone to a political career. This remains true today. Involvement in the local club provided a positive image, shrewd politicians like to appear in touch with the people in this way.
Once fútbol was professionalized, its political function became more intense and more overt. Since its foundation in 1934, links between successive presidentes of the AFA and the state have been strong. During dictatorships, a state administrator has been appointed to run the AFA and at other times those officials who have been elected have usually had close relationships with the ruling government. Official links between state and fútbol are via the AFA. It is the AFA presidente who represents fútbol at a higher level.

The typical presidente of the AFA has three characteristics: links with politics, a business career and an apprenticeship in fútbol which often involves the running of a club. Of the 29 AFA presidentes from 1934 to the present day, one-third have been appointed as government officials during periods of state intervention. Many of the others who have been elected have either had links with political parties or held a position in government at some stage of their careers. Conversely, their political links meant that they held a relatively stable position as long as there was no change in the political power structure. Even when changes did take place, the ability to swap allegiance sometimes ensured survival, as illustrated by Raul Colombo (1956–65). Several presidentes have been members of Unión Civica Radical including Tiburcio Padilla (1934–35), Pedro Canaveri (1946–47) and the present incumbent, Julio Grondona.

Never have the state and the AFA been more closely tied than in the 1940s when the AFA presidente, Ramón Castillo, was the son of the President of the Republic. Oscar Nicolini, Cayetano Giardulli, Valentin Suárez, Domingo Peluffo and Cecilio Conditti were all government officials who ran the AFA during the dictatorship of Juan Domingo Perón (1946–55). No government has failed to get involved in AFA business and no AFA presidency has failed to seek Government support. In 1926 the President of the Republic intervened to resolve yet another rift between two rival football associations.

Football clubs were not slow to exploit the government’s desire to enhance the profile of fútbol. In 1936 state subsidies were made available in the form of special grants which enabled clubs to rebuild or upgrade their stadium or even to build a brand new one. The most famous examples of new stadia at this time are River Plate’s El Monumental (see Figure 1) in 1938 and Boca Juniors’ La Bombonera in 1940. Furthermore, it has not been uncommon in the history of Argentine fútbol for the state to bail clubs out of financial straits and save them from bankruptcy.
It was during the Perónist period from 1946 to 1955 that state intervention in fútbol reached its peak. Policies were adopted which were directed at expanding the appeal and strengthening the infrastructure of the sport. Perón undertook responsibility for sport as a mechanism of national integration via the socialization of the youth and as political propaganda. It was important to export a positive image of the country and fútbol was promoted in order to do this.

Sporting success was equated with Perónist success to such an extent that medals achieved under Perón were named medallas peronistas (Perónist medals). In return for state backing, the AFA supported Perón as a presidential candidate. Perón himself was reputedly enthusiastic about fútbol and frequently attended matches. His wife, Evita, patronized the Evita Youth Championships in the 1950s during which fútbol was used as part of the country’s child health programme. It was compulsory for all participants to pass a health check before entering the competition. Undoubtedly, these championships served to win over many youths to Perónism.

Links between the state and football were strengthened during the Perónist period. Clubs used their connections with power in order to
develop. Most of the club presidentes were, and still are, either rich businessmen or politicians or both. It became normal practice during the Perónist period for football clubs to have a padrino (literally: a godfather, or patron) within government, who often also doubled as directors at the club. The padrinos were occupants of high positions of power who looked after the interests of a particular club. They had no official status as such but many clubs looked to their support when they were in difficulties. At this time fútbol was still enjoying a steady rise in popularity, such that clubs continued to outgrow their stadia. The state policy of aid for redevelopment was extended. Huracán, Racing Club and Vélez Sarsfield opened new stadia in 1947, 1950 and 1951 respectively. Racing accomplished a particularly favourable negotiation via their padrino, Ramón Cereijo, who was no less than the government treasurer at the time.

In Argentina the fans also came to play an important role since they constituted the masses, the voters and the consumers. Their existence explains why everyone wants to become involved in the sport. One of the prime reasons why the state originally became interested in fútbol was to control the masses by structuring and defining social identities and reinforcing national sentiments as international football became more important. The state targeted fútbol as being a location where the masses could gather and channel their frustrations. For businesses, involvement in fútbol was premised on the fans’ role as consumers.

However, above all 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 as we have seen have been themselves party 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 during the mature stage of the game’s development in the form of the barras bravas.

Mention of the barras bravas (which translates roughly as the fierce opponents) raises the issue of the extent of violence in Argentine fútbol during the adolescent period. It is difficult to specify exactly when such violence began. Certainly we know that Estudiantes de La Plata had
their ground closed in May 1912 following an attack on a match referee. There is evidence that the term *barras de hinchas* was used already in 1929 to describe gangs of ruffians who defended the honour of their club against others. O. Bayer has suggested that such incidents between fans began in 1932. The aim of the fighting was to capture emblems and banners as trophies of war from the opposing fans. We have presented a more detailed argument regarding the separate evolution of football hooliganism in Argentina in an earlier published article.

In the 1930s and 1940s the violence was mostly apolitical in nature, largely related to events that took place on the pitch and directed towards players and match officials. However, there is also evidence of fighting between rival groups of fans. A complex system of enmities and alliances developed to the extent that a meeting of certain clubs would guarantee a fight. These traditional rivalries often involved clubs from the same neighbourhood in Buenos Aires (e.g. Huracán and San Lorenzo in Almagro; Racing Club and Independiente in Avellaneda), or from adjacent neighbourhoods (e.g. Atlanta and Chacarita Juniors), or from the same provincial city (e.g. Newells Old Boys and Rosario Central in Rosario). The Rosario case highlights another kind of rivalry between the workers’ club (Central) and a club associated with wealth and the middle classes (Newells). This situation is mirrored in La Plata (Gimnasia y Esgrima and Estudiantes) and Santa Fe (Colón and Unión). With the rise of the *barras bravas* what is different in the stage of maturity is that the violence became more organized, more political and more lethal in its consequences.

The network of links between *fútbol* and politics was established during the adolescent period. Motivation for ties between the state, the AFA and football clubs was high. The state did what it could for *fútbol* via the AFA. As the AFA was usually run by government officials or supporters, they toed the party line. The state tried to benefit by exploiting *fútbol* as a social drug and/or as a vote-winner in times of democracy. Individual politicians, the *padrinos*, did what they could for individual clubs. It enhanced their profile and status in society. Clubs benefited by having someone in power to represent them so it was in their interests to offer support in return. The fans were not just spectators providing gate money for the clubs because they were also the voters in both club and national elections. As such, politicians and football clubs could not afford to ignore them.
MATURITY AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE LINKS BETWEEN FÚTBOL AND POLITICS

By this stage of maturity, the complex structure of links between fútbol and politics in Argentina was already in place and all that remained was the consolidation of the various networks involving the four main elements. In other words, the relationships were institutionalized. These relationships have been described in detail in the previous section. Two additional features of maturity are worth mentioning. First, the relationship between the state and fútbol reached new heights in 1978 when Argentina hosted the World Cup Finals for the first time. Second, the rise of the barras bravas inaugurated a period of increased violence associated with fútbol, violence which was more organized, more political and resulted in more fatalities. Both of these features will be considered in detail below, following a more general consideration.

At the beginning of the mature period, social and economic changes were impinging on fútbol. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, fútbol began to be run more as a business venture and there was increased pressure on clubs to be successful. Average attendance at matches was declining, partly as a result of Argentina’s humiliation at the 1958 World Cup Finals in Sweden. La selección, as the national team is known, reached its nadir in a 6–1 defeat against Czechoslovakia. This disillusion with fútbol coincided with the emergence of alternative ways of occupying leisure time, such as watching the television that was increasingly widely available.

Although most clubs traditionally enjoyed the financial backing of a figure in the local business community, they were still aware of the importance of match results – success guaranteed fans and publicity and it is the fans who constitute the customers that businesses hoped to attract via their advertising and sponsorship. Thus the phenomenon of fútbol-espectáculo (football spectacular) was born. The two main protagonists in fútbol-espectáculo were the presidentes of the two largest clubs – River Plate and Boca Juniors. They invested huge amounts of money in their clubs, made big-name signings to attract the crowds and expected success. It is this increased pressure for success which some argue has led to the corruption and violence that frequently controls fútbol match results.16

While results have become ever more important, football clubs in Argentina have maintained their social function in the barrios. This goes way beyond the running of a football team. Clubs encourage support and reward loyalty by providing other facilities for the local community.
Even at the smallest clubs, other sports teams and not just fútbol are run for members of the local community of all ages and both sexes. Special social events are often held for women and their involvement is encouraged. At large clubs, the responsibilities of the club extend far beyond the professional football team. Promising young footballers might be invited to pursue their education at the club schools which opened in the 1970s – at Boca Juniors there is a library situated within the stadium. Although progressive in these respects, facilities for spectators at many of the major grounds lag behind clubs of equivalent status in Europe. For instance, the majority of grounds retain large terraces for standing spectators (see Figure 2). The AFA had promised all-seater stadia by 1995 but a combination of opposition from fans, lack of finance and simple inertia have preserved the status quo.

It is early in the period of maturity that the phenomenon of the barras bravas appeared on the scene. The existence of the structures linking fútbol and politics, coupled with the increased importance of results in the 1960s, meant that there was a temptation to manipulate violence. A. Romero has claimed that the style of violence by interested parties in Argentine fútbol is as distinctive as their style of play. Much of this

FIGURE 4.2
A packed terrace of River fans at Vélez Sarsfield as they clinch the championship in July 2000.
violence is organized and politically motivated. The term *barras fuertes* was used in 1958 to refer to groups of violent fans who appeared to be organized in a formal manner. Immediately after the military coup of 1966, this kind of behaviour was reinterpreted in the context of the new terminology of football hooliganism from Europe. According to Scher and Palomino, the murder of Hector Souto, a Huracán fan, in November 1967 marked the beginning of the era of the *barras bravas* and the institutionalization of violence. However, what was different from the late 1960s onwards, was not fighting between rival groups as such but an escalation in the killing of rival supporters.

In terms of organization, the emergence of the *barras bravas* represented the militarization of *fútbol* support. They have a strict hierarchical structure with a leader at the helm. Most of the group members are aged between 20 and 25 although the leaders are frequently over 30. Members are recruited and set a series of trials to test their commitment and strategies. It is common for core members to be full-time professional militants and not, therefore, in conventional employment. Attacks are only carried out on match-days, despite the fact that rival *barras bravas* know where each other meet during the week.

Most of the activity of the *barras bravas* can be explained in terms of political motivation. They have connections with those involved in the running of their club, for instance a particular candidate for club *presidente* who needs their support. They might also take part in political demonstrations on behalf of the club *padrino*. Occasionally political action takes precedence over *fútbol*. It is not unknown for gaps to appear on the terraces where the *barras bravas* usually stand. This means they are otherwise engaged on political business.

The *barras bravas* engage in political activity in return for some kind of payment, either in cash or in kind. Common forms of payment in kind are the funding of their transportation to away matches (sometimes including refreshments), or the gift of match tickets to sell on the black market. Particularly prized are tickets for the *clásicos* (derby matches or games between leading clubs) which are in big demand and command a high price. This understanding goes beyond *fútbol* at club level and penetrates the AFA. By way of example, leading *barras bravas* were provided with both match tickets and airfares in 1986 in order to maintain the backing and co-operation of the *barras bravas*, while at the same time ensuring vocal support for Argentina at the World Cup Finals in Mexico. During the USA World Cup Finals in 1994, it has been
estimated that $150,000 was spent on tickets for barras bravas, many of which were sold on the black market at three times their face value.\textsuperscript{19}

It is not only rival supporters who are targets for the activities of the barras bravas. Sometimes the violence is directed towards the club’s players, manager or directors. Victims are rarely chosen at random, the attacks are usually carefully planned and with clear motivation. In 1988, a San Lorenzo player was seriously injured as the result of an attack by barras bravas in the changing room at Córdoba. In February 1993 the River Plate manager, Daniel Passarella, was beaten up by a faction of the River barras. One of the authors saw River Plate clinch the championship in July 2000 against Ferrocarril Oeste at Vélez Sarsfield (see Figure 2). After the final whistle, the River barras stormed up and over the high wire fencing onto the pitch; wise players voluntarily donated their match shirts to the fans as valuable trophies, whilst the others were attacked by their own supporters and their shirts were ripped off their backs.

Another angle to the politicization of violence in Argentine fútbol centres around the relationship between the police and fans. The police were blamed for the death of Adrián Scassera at a match between Independiente and Boca Juniors on 7 April 1985 and 35 Vélez fans were injured when fighting broke out between police and fans in 1992. According to Romero, the police are responsible for 68 per cent of fútbol-related fatalities.\textsuperscript{20} The role of the police in Argentine society is extremely significant. They have a long history of violence against the people, often on behalf of a repressive state. They are seen as agents of the state. Figure 3 shows the riot police preparing for a match at Platense and standing in a line by the entrance for socios.

It is not unknown for barras bravas from different clubs to unite when faced with police hostility and to become temporary allies. One famous example occurred when rival fans from River Plate and Argentinos Juniors joined forces in protest, chanted obscenities and gestured aggressively as police attempted to arrest two youths in El Monumental in May 1983. On occasion the police have also been criticized for their lack of action, or apparent indifference. Their passivity in certain situations has been considered by some to indicate complicity.

Covert activities carried out by the barras bravas are crucial to the internal structures of fútbol. These operations involve blackmail and are carried out on behalf of the dirigentes or presidente. The victims are usually the players. 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
FIGURE 4.3
The riot police get ready at Platense by standing in line at the entrance for socios.

FIGURE 4.4
The players emerge at Independiente (Colón Santa Fe match, June 2000).
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.

Abusive chanting in the stadium is another barras activity to destroy an unwanted player on the pitch. Chants at fútbol matches have little or nothing to do with events on the pitch. If the barras bravas chant abuse at a player when his contract is due to be renewed, it makes it much easier for the presidente to lower the conditions of his contract or can even provide the club with an excuse to get rid of him. Barras are prepared to do this if they are offered the right price. Concern for the safety of players and officials in Argentine fútbol is evident in Figure 4. At all professional matches the players and officials emerge on to the pitch through long inflatable tunnels, which have the appearance of giant condoms.

Understandably it is in the players’ interest to try and keep the barras sweet. This provides another source of income for the fans, often in the form of match tickets. If the players are not intimidated by threats and do not respond to the barras bravas, they can expect punishment. The threat of punishment is usually enough to see that the barras bravas achieve their objective. Some who have not heeded warnings have been physically attacked or shot. So long as players, directors and chairmen are aware that the threats are not empty, intimidation is indeed effective. There have been many examples of intimidated players and managers during the 1980s and 1990s.21

The mutually beneficial relationship between the barras bravas and the club officials has been possible because of the historical links between fútbol and politics. Moreover, it is perpetuated by the internal structure of football clubs in which the socios elect the presidente. Electoral politics continue to play a leading role and it is through this function that the barras bravas have been implicated in covert activities and have become an essential cog in the workings of a club. It is in the interests of the club to keep them sweet and it therefore unsurprising that the media frequently accuse clubs of protecting the barras bravas and encouraging their violent activities. In the case of the Boca barras, they have often been known to stay at the same hotel as the official club delegation.

In wider political elections, which may be local, regional, national, or even trade union, typically a barras bravas from one club supports a candidate in opposition to another candidate backed by a different barras.
bravas from another club. Connections with trade unions also date back a long way. On one occasion in 1973, Quilmes received reinforcements from their allies, Nueva Chicago, in a match against Banfield. Members of one of the most powerful trade unions in Argentina were present among the barras bravas.

The jefes (leaders) of the main barras bravas have become celebrities and well-known figures, appearing frequently in the media and also in the company of the club dirigentes. One of the most celebrated and feared leaders was José Barrita, the jefe of the Boca barras in the 1980s and 1990s. He was more popularly known as El Abuelo (the grandfather) because of his prematurely grey hair and was frequently seen alongside the club presidente. In April 1997 El Abuelo was finally convicted for organizing an extortion racket (along with eight other Boca barras bravas) and jailed for 13 years.

The period since the restoration of democratically elected government in Argentina in 1983, has coincided with some of the worst violence from the barras bravas. Pressure to at least be seen to take action led to new laws in May 1985 and March 1993 that were specifically intended to combat fútbol violence. However, the level of fútbol violence today is as high as ever. In a previous article, we presented data which indicated a marked escalation in fútbol-related deaths, from an annual average of 0.44 (1958–66), to 1.32 (1967–85), to 5.25 (1986–93). Since 1993 the rate has remained around 5.00 per annum. Romero has argued that organized violence in Argentina has spread from fútbol to the rest of society, especially in relation to political activity. It is important, however, not to paint a totally negative picture of the activities of the barras bravas. During the last military dictatorship (1976–83), democratic politics continued in the organization of the football clubs, at a time when it was banned at the national level.

As we have seen, the period of maturity produced a strengthening of the relationship between politicians, football clubs and fans, leading to the institutionalization of violence in the shape of the barras bravas. At the top of the fútbol hierarchy, little has changed. The current presidente of the AFA (since 1979), Julio Grondona, is a member of Unión Cívica Radical, an important businessman in the steel industry and a former presidente of Independiente.

Government involvement in fútbol, always extensive, reached new heights during the last military dictatorship. Following the military coup of 1976, involvement became more open and the links between fútbol and
politics were at their most visible. In 1978 the World Cup Finals were to be held in Argentina for the first time and the state wanted to project a positive image to the rest of the world. The leaders of the barras bravas were called together by the military dictatorship and a truce was established so that they would instigate no violent incidents for the duration of the finals. It is significant that co-operation was achieved, reflecting the fact that the state would, and could, do business with the barras bravas.

Huge amounts of money were invested to promote the national image, most notably in the form of improvements to the country’s infrastructure. Road networks and the public transport system were developed and stadia and a television centre built. Some complained that the money could have been better spent on much-needed hospitals, housing and schools. Moreover, strong rumours circulated regarding additional expenditure on football bribes (for instance, in order to achieve Argentina’s 6–0 win over Peru).

In 1978 a state official was appointed to investigate allegations of financial corruption. These efforts were thwarted when a bomb exploded at his home. At the time, no exact figure was available regarding the full cost of staging the World Cup Finals. Steps were taken to silence the critical media for the duration of the event and also to remove from Buenos Aires anyone who was considered a potential threat to the regime. The Argentine press was specifically ordered not to print anything critical about the national team.

The opening ceremony was presided over by the President of the Republic, Videla, who gave a moving speech on peace, friendship, human relationships and living together in harmony. These values contrasted sharply with the country’s flagrant violation of human rights, including the ‘disappearance’ of thousands of its subjects and the torture of opponents of the regime in buildings a few blocks from where the speech took place. Politicians equated Argentina’s win in the final against Holland as a success for the dictatorship. The triumph of the Argentine team was viewed as belonging to all Argentines. It was a victory for the country. The Dutch refusal to attend the closing ceremony was interpreted by the Argentine media as a demonstration of sour grapes. In fact it represented a politically motivated gesture against repression in Argentina.

Such was the concern with the Argentine national image that an American company was employed to promote it in the build-up to the tournament. The main person responsible for the organization of the World Cup Finals was Carlos Alberto Lacoste, vice-president of the
organizing body Ente Autuartico Mundial (EAM’78). The original president of EAM’78, General Omar Actis, was assassinated in August 1976. Strong rumours at the time suggested that Lacoste was responsible for the assassination, because of disagreements on some of the fundamental principles of World Cup organization.

After the tournament, Lacoste was rewarded for his success. Aided by relationships and family ties with Presidentes Videla and Galtieri, his political career took off and he became an important public figure. Others who benefited included those involved in the construction industry, tourism, the mass media and communications not least because the state helped to finance those areas of national interest. The military dictatorship ended in 1983 and Argentina returned to democratically elected government, a thorough re-analysis of Argentina’s recent history ensued, with the voicing of previously censored views. Financial irregularities were exposed in EAM’78 and Lacoste was investigated for fraud. Lacoste was a notable example of the links between fútbol, politics, business and repression.

1979 witnessed a shameful illustration of the exploitation of fútbol to cover up deep social unrest. Argentina, captained by Diego Maradona, won the Youth World Cup. This victory coincided with the investigation into allegations of state breaches of human rights, which involved the presence of several prominent foreign political figures in Buenos Aires. The families of those who had disappeared at the hands of the state gathered in the Plaza de Mayo in Central Buenos Aires to demonstrate and demand an explanation of what had happened to their loved ones. Utilizing the compliant media, the regime’s response was to invite people to go to the Plaza de Mayo to fete the victory of the youth team. Thus protest was conveniently masked by a celebration of national pride. The state found in fútbol a good friend yet again.

CONCLUSION

In the twentieth century, fútbol has been exploited in Argentina by regimes of varying kinds. We have demonstrated that during the adolescent period, the Argentine take-over of the game established the key structures linking politics and fútbol. In maturity, the network of links between the AFA, football clubs, politicians and fans was consolidated. The relationship between the state and fútbol reached new heights for the 1978 World Cup Finals and fútbol violence became institutionalized in the form of the barras bravas.
Fútbol at the end of the twentieth century is as large a business as it has ever been and the mechanisms that link it with politics are as strong as ever. Interestingly, the new laws mentioned earlier, which were reluctantly introduced with the aim of reducing violence, took into consideration the role of fútbol as an industry. A sentence is increased by one-third if any crime leads to a match being cancelled or suspended. What politics is protecting is fútbol as an industry.

The sport’s combined political and commercial roles mean that those involved in fútbol whether as politicians, chairmen, directors or fans, will continue to enjoy a certain degree of protection. Football clubs are still looked after by their padrinos. In 2000 a new law was introduced exempting football clubs from the normal rules of bankruptcy, basically in order to keep Racing Club going. Significantly, both the vice-president of the republic and the mayor of Buenos Aires are Racing fans. Moreover, no one accepts responsibility for fútbol-related violence. As a consequence of these facts, many observers criticize the way that politicians, club directors and the judicial system are seen to protect the barras bravas.24

Towards the end of the twentieth century, television exerted a growing influence on sport around the world. In Argentina, possibilities of making money through the televising and merchandising of fútbol has led to new business initiatives, and the first clear threat to the established structure linking politics and fútbol. Attempts have been made to change the status of Argentine football clubs from private member associations (where the socios elect the club officials) to private limited companies but the clubs voted overwhelmingly against this. Not surprisingly, most socios, dirigentes and presidentes were against reform. There have been calls to reduce the concentration of professional clubs in Buenos Aires with their traditional rivalries. The moving of clubs to other cities has been proposed (Argentinos Juniors did briefly move to Mendoza in 1994) and club mergers/ground sharing have been suggested. All of these ideas are anathema to the traditions of Argentine fútbol.

It is ironic that the democratic organization of fútbol in Argentina is helping to perpetuate violence. As long as the links between fútbol and politics continue, the system will be maintained. At present, there is little attempt to keep fútbol and politics apart. The desire for power and money provides the motivation for the continuation of the relationships between the key ‘players’. It is in their interests to preserve the system. So long as the structures in Argentine fútbol stay the same, the relationship between fútbol and politics will also remain unchanged.
NOTES


3. Between them the authors have visited Buenos Aires three times in the last decade. In 1994, Vic Duke was supported by a grant from the Nuffield Foundation. Access to the archives at El Gráfico was invaluable on all three occasions. We are grateful to the following for their assistance: Pablo Alabarces, Eduardo Archetti, Andres Cruzalegui, Miguel Cruzalegui, Pablo de Biase, Natalio Gorín, Ariel Scher and Eric Weil.

4. A brief English language summary may be found in Tony Mason, Passion of the People? (London: Verso, 1995), Chs.1 and 2.


7. Ibid., p.130.


10. Creolization refers to the take-over of Argentine football by clubs whose players were mostly Italian and Spanish immigrants, by officials from the same ethnic background and by their criollo style of play (rather than the English style).


12. Example provided by Pablo de Biase from his thesis at the School of Social Sciences, University of Buenos Aires, 1999.


19. Romero, Las Barras Bravas, p.44.


24. For evidence of external protection by the judiciary see ‘La violencia en el fútbol’, Clarín (19 Dec. 1990); similarly, examples may be cited for directors, see ‘Las Barras Bravas’ (informe especial), El Gráfico (7 June 1983); and politicians, see ‘La ley del más fuerte’, El Cronista (18 May 1992).