Dios y los Diez:
The Mythologization of Diego Maradona and Lionel Messi in Contemporary Argentina

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Abstract

Argentine soccer players Diego Maradona and Lionel Messi have been subject to similar cultural phenomena, from national identity politics to Catholic imagery, despite wildly contrasting personal contexts. Their subjection to the tropes in question is not an overwhelming natural outpouring of the sport, the country, or the players themselves, but a function of cultural expression anchored in Argentine social values. This thesis undertakes a comparative study of the two players as secular icons in order to discern those values.

Foremost among these values is the ever more tightly grasped moral economy that informs Argentines’ relationships with soccer. The priority placed on local, collective prosperity over individual success has manifested itself as a communal resistance to soccer as one of many cultural products seen as under siege by neoliberalism and globalization. Yet another value is the definition of citizenship as participation in institutions that provide mechanisms for social change or resistance, which has only included soccer when left with no other options in civil society. Finally, ritual accessibility in Christian and secular contexts alike is an increasingly prioritized value that expresses itself in reaction to established forms of religiosity across class lines.
Acknowledgments

“Un entrenador genera una idea,” César Luis Menotti, the great philosopher of Argentine soccer, once said. “Luego tiene que convencer de que esa idea es la que lo va a acompañar a buscar la eficacia, después tiene que encontrar en el jugador el compromiso de que cuando venga la adversidad no traicionemos la idea.” It is above all to the fierce Menotti-like craftsmanship of my thesis advisor, Mariano López Seoane, that I owe my gratitude upon completion of this project. He helped me apply academic rigor to a project that started as little more than a soccer fanatic’s unwieldy enthusiasm and instructed me in fields of study I had barely heard of a year ago. “Gracias” es una palabra demasiada breve.

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Ultimately, this one’s for Elizabeth, my team captain from Potomac Yards to RFK Stadium, and I mean that entirely in the “o captain, my captain” sense with a dash of Carles Puyol game face. Vamos.
“La pelota no se mancha.”
 Diego Armando Maradona

“...”
 Lionel Andrés Messi

Thus read the painted captions below the twin murals of Maradona and Messi in the lobby of Punto Urbano Hostel in Mendoza, Argentina. The two soccer players’ portraits appear alongside other famous Argentines from Che Guevara to Carlos Gardel, with pithy quotes accompanying each celebratory portrayal.

Maradona’s quote comes from his final speech at the tribute match held in C.A. Boca Juniors’ La Bombonera stadium in his honor on November 10, 2001, just a bit over four years after his last official match with the team. Amid his own tears and a standing ovation, Maradona said, “El fútbol es el deporte más lindo y más sano del mundo. Esto no le quepa la menor duda a
nadies. Porque se equivoque uno, no tiene que pagar el fútbol. Yo me equivoqué y pagué, pero la pelota no se mancha.”¹ The moment exemplified him: a longtime public disaster, drug-addicted and financially shady, capable of creating personal intimacy with the crowds. Meanwhile, Messi never says anything of enough substance to the press to be quoted. Maradona and Messi are painted in the same style, but beyond this style, differences abound.

The murals speak to some remarkable if often overlooked truths. First, soccer is a serious cultural arena in Argentina, on par with spheres represented in the other portraits such as politics and art. Second, this juxtaposition of Maradona’s transgressive heroism with Messi’s literally unrelatable excellence sets up a somewhat contradictory comparison between the two clashing players. The comparison’s unlikely acceptance and proliferation demands some external reasoning, which this thesis seeks to identify and understand.

As scholarship has turned to analyze soccer as a form of cultural output, rather than overlooking it as a background presence in the Latin American landscape, a narrative has emerged over the sport’s history in Argentina.² Both the sport itself and the process of crafting a narrative to suit it have served to parse various identities over the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Gender identity is foremost among the matters soccer and its adherents have treated, as it has remained a form of cultural production open almost exclusively to men both as participants and as spectators. However, the norms of Argentine masculinity have never been isolated from larger questions of ethnic belonging and group membership.

¹ “Soccer is the most beautiful and most healthy sport in the world. Nobody doubts this in the slightest. If one person makes a mistake, soccer does not have to pay for it. I made a mistake and I paid for it, but the ball doesn’t stain.” (All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.)
² “Un vacío asombroso: la historia oficial ignora al fútbol,” Eduardo Galeano wrote in El fútbol a sol y sombra (1995). “Los textos de historia contemporánea no lo mencionan ni de paso, en países donde el fútbol ha sido y sigue siendo un signo primordial de identidad colectiva.” (“An astonishing void: official history ignores soccer. Contemporary history texts fail to mention it, even in passing, in countries where it has been and continues to be a primordial symbol of collective identity.” Trans. Mark Fried.) In the decades since, scholarly output has responded to Galeano’s lament, particularly in Argentina.
Eduardo Archetti’s *Masculinities* pieces together this reading of gender as it has been constructed with relation to soccer, analyzing the pages of sports magazine *El Gráfico*. The magazine, and especially its columnist Borocotó, is in large part responsible for inventing—or at the very least consolidating—the mythical narrative of Argentine soccer as it is discussed today. Soccer was imported from Britain to Argentina in the late 1800s but, the story goes, was not transformed into a truly Argentine pursuit until the second generation. Notably, soccer entered Argentina through the British system of education, which was in vogue among elites on both sides of the Atlantic. The attraction lay in the system’s association with “not just the most powerful player in world affairs,” but the most modern – Great Britain (Goldblatt 114). As such, the sport’s reimagining as a tale of Argentine improvement upon a British invention speaks to the need for what Benjamin Orlove has called “creating a local version of modernity,” referring to the adoption of new cultural practices in order to symbolically renounce an inferior or insufficient past. “Foreign goods are often tokens of such modernity,” Orlove continues, “because of their association with Europe, the center of modernity, and because of their evident contrast with local practices” (13). Argentines were not just distancing themselves from Britain for the sake of Anglo-Latin rivalry, but were carving out their own distinct claim on a modernity over which Britain had proclaimed a monopoly.

The style upon which Argentines like Borocotó settled, termed *la nuestra*, emphasized elegance and improvisation and constituted an alternative masculinity to British force and discipline, the presentation of which Archetti sees as core to the formation of Argentine national identity. The performative rituals of articulating style, playing games, and writing narratives placed this expression of masculinity at the core of national identity. Crucially, this style was performed in an entirely male setting, involving the violent and homophobic male behavior

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3 “Ours.”
documented in the context of supporters’ groups in the milieu of nationally accepted masculine ethics (Alabarces, *Crónicas del aguante*). Decades of repeated behavior by players, fans, and writers thus centered an ethic of male behavior in national identity,\(^4\) which is confirmed by the historical collusion of *nación* and *selección*.\(^5\)

But national identity has been tied to soccer through far more direct projects of nation-building, particularly in recent Argentine history. David Goldblatt, in his comprehensive soccer history *The Ball Is Round*, chronicles the ways in which the sport was used as “the bread and circuses of the industrial city” under authoritarian regimes in the twentieth century (Goldblatt 902). The most infamous case was the 1978 World Cup, hosted and won by Argentina while under the military dictatorship known as *El Proceso* with the final played just ten blocks from an urban concentration camp. The dictatorship’s ploy was an attempt to achieve legitimacy on the world stage as well as bolster the local economy, echoing Benedict Anderson’s characterization of nationalism as a creation to serve political and economic ends (36). However, as Goldblatt notes, the political forms that allow for such manipulation of the sport for nationalist ends are a thing of the past, while commercial branding has taken up where the state left off in directing and profiting from the spectacle.

Argentine soccer has a long history of being manipulated for profit. Though the economic stakes of corporations and political gains of the dictatorship have more recent legacies, the sport’s origins rode mainly on social capital. When soccer was imported from Britain to Argentina, certain class norms came with it. Just as in Britain soccer was purported to be played for the health of the spirit and body, British schools in Argentina imagined it as a useful tool for

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\(^4\) This manner of synthesizing identity in an emblematic action was most succinctly theorized by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, using the example of the black Frenchman’s salute. By appropriating a certain behavior—in this case a British sport, in Barthes’ a military stance— and re-associating it with certain demographics or ethics, an alternative history can be invented and internalized.

\(^5\) “Nation” and “national team.”
instilling citizenship (Frydenburg 25). It was supposed to be played for the love of the game and its virtues, not for money.

At the same time, British immigrants to Argentina and their Anglo-Argentine sons were often industrial and maritime workers rather than the traditional elites. Alongside the spread of the sport to other social sectors, this demographic reality opened the game to professionalization within a few decades, giving rise to class anxieties about whether workers would subvert the existing social immobility by profiting off the “gentlemen’s game.” The rags-to-riches stories among Argentine soccer players today show that the sport remains one of the most culturally visible paths to social mobility.⁶ As such, the reluctance behind turning soccer into a business that paid players and made a profit was not necessarily about the constructed integrity of the game itself, but about preserving the economic status quo of the community.

The class anxieties surrounding the question of professionalization in the early twentieth century were not necessarily just about economic competition, but appropriation as well. The upper classes perceived that a profound change was about to take place in the culture associated with the game, wherein the “gentlemen’s game” would become the “people’s game” in a matter of decades. Removing economic barriers to participation in leisure usually induces resistance and even withdrawal on the part of social elites. Another classic instance of class anxieties over appropriation in Argentine history was the abandonment of Mar del Plata, a resort town not far from Buenos Aires, by the upper classes once workers began vacationing there in union-run hotels under Perón. Just as the beach vacation’s attraction lay in its status as an exclusively upper-crust pastime, amateur soccer had been a talisman of elite resources: the time and money to play for free, as well as the social capital to associate with British education and

⁶ From Alfredo di Stéfano and Diego Maradona to Carlos Tévez, many of Argentina’s big names have their origins in poor urban neighborhoods. Players are very rarely from well-off families.
“gentlemanly” circles. After socioeconomic barriers to participation in leisure were removed, the character of both Mar del Plata and Argentine soccer became undeniably popular. The cost of actually vacationing in Mar del Plata or attending a soccer match these days reveals the reclamation of both realms by a certain elite entrepreneurship, but the popular character remains. No matter how ticket prices climb, the game is attached to “the masses” in Argentina.

The fact that this popular game is run by a global entertainment industry is not as paradoxical as it might seem. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer contend that what is often misleadingly called “mass culture,” as if referring to a culture made by the masses, is in fact a culture made for the masses by corporations. They propose the term “culture industry” to properly indicate the power relationship between the masses and the culture they consume. The concept of the “culture industry” is useful in understanding soccer as one of many standardized goods in contemporary popular culture, subject to the manipulation of social values for corporate profit. But in the case of Argentine soccer, this “culture industry” is literal: many of the first teams began as after-work pastimes for factory workers, with sides representing companies. Others began as working-class teams who took on elite patrons, whether a factory owner sponsoring his employees or an established amateur club funding a smaller local team (Biriotti del Burgo). Meanwhile, this cross-class dependency has grown in scope in the contemporary game, as corporate money fuels the meteoric rise of players from obscure suburbs to international stardom.

Over the past eighty years of professional league play in Argentina, those rags-to-riches soccer stories—though they are not as numerous as the legends would have it—have been synthesized into their own trope: the pibe, the poor boy teaching himself to play soccer on the

7 A famous example is Club Atlético Independiente, based in Avellaneda, which began with the employees of a British store in Monserrat who were prohibited from participating due to their young age. They broke away from the company team, Maipú Banfield, to form their own side—hence the name.
potreros (dirt fields) of the suburbs, who grows up to be a crack: a star (Archetti, “El potrero y el pibe”). The image follows in a long tradition of class-inflected heroic archetypes in Argentina, which are particular to the country’s history. The transgressive hero, poor and devilishly clever like the pibe on the field, reincarnates el gaucho fuera de la ley, the outlaw. These outlaws recall the “social bandits” outlined by Eric Hobsbawm insofar as they originate in social inequality and allow reverence for the morally unconventional heroes among the lower classes. From gaucho characters like Martín Fierro to beloved rule-breakers like Maradona, the national hero in Argentina takes on a particular form that repeats itself across the country’s history and culture. The trope is related in some sense to the trickster-hero common to many mythologies, a character Joseph Campbell has described as “both a fool and someone who’s beyond the system. And the trickster represents all those possibilities of life that your mind hasn’t decided it wants to deal with. The mind structures a lifestyle, and the fool or trickster represents another whole range of possibilities. He doesn’t respect the values that you’ve set up for yourself, and smashes them” (39). In the case of the gaucho, it is not explicitly the mind but the instilled social order of class structures against which the Argentine trickster-hero rebels.

The pibe, however, adds a childlike quality to the trope. The pibe’s absolute freedom in the male-only, child-only space of the potrero results not just in totally unrestricted personal creativity but also unregulated behavior. As a poor slum-dweller, the pibe is expected to exhibit the chaos of his surroundings. Maradona entered into that tradition at every step. He grew up playing on potreros in Villa Fiorito, and became a national soccer talent at a young age: he was “discovered” at age 10, debuted in the first division at 15, and was called up to the national team at 17. His lack of “manners,” his “problems in accepting boundaries and control,” and his chaotic personal behavior have fed that naughty-child image throughout his career, even into adulthood.
As one Argentine soccer fan put it, “Maradona is a *pibe* and will remain a *pibe*. He represents this state of perfection and freedom when we disregard the most negative traits of an individual” (Archetti, “And Give Joy To My Heart” 34). As such, the standard for the *pibe* follows an alternate morality just as the outlaw does, but in terms of emotional rather than financial remittance to the community from which he rose. This arrangement between Maradona and the Argentine public has been called an “emotional contract” in which he, the *pibe de oro* (“golden boy”), receives nearly limitless clemency and celebration as long as his play gives joy to the nation (Archetti, “And Give Joy To My Heart” 43).

Argentina also has a particular aesthetic often superimposed on such heroes, whether specifically *pibe* or generally outlaw: that of the *santos populares* (popular saints), the secularly canonized individuals that receive devotion without the institutional approval of the Catholic Church but fully in the ritualistic tradition thereof. This phenomenon includes both deliberate secular liturgy, where there might be altars built and candles lit before folk saints like Gauchito Gil or the invention of the elaborate *Iglesia Maradoniana*, as well as a more casual and widespread use of religious language and imagery for secular figures. María Julia Carozzi argues that these phenomena have their roots in the expanding social inequality of neoliberal Latin America. This economic gap produces a marginalized sector in which people perceive themselves excluded from traditional institutional forms of devotion. As such, people in these marginalized groups go in search of more accessible and relatable figures whose own “marginal” status as unofficial saints, lacking institutional canonization, enables a perceived empathetic connection with their devotees.
In the context of continuing social inequality and the persistent need for relatable heroes, soccer players are a natural fit for the *santos populares* motif. They do not often inspire overt religious devotion—Maradona being a rather stunning exception—but their idolization recalls to some extent *santos populares’* invitation of religiosity into secular contexts. The instinctive nicknames for Maradona (“D10S”) and Messi (“El Messias”) recall Christian language, for example, while cartoon after cartoon affixes halo and blessing to the two players. Perhaps this usage is just the result of a cultural instinct formed after centuries of Catholic practice—or perhaps, as Ksenija Bilbija has proposed, the use of God metaphors in secular contexts like soccer speaks to “the fragmentation and nationalization of the Omnipotent, Omnipresent and Omniscient One” in wider society (1).

Maybe, though, the connection is less related to the role of God and more to the ritual function performed by soccer in its capacity as a secular liturgy. The trope of stadium as cathedral, of going to the field rather than the church on Sundays, distracts from the more frequent ritual that is actually taking place—watching games on television, where the vast majority of spectators will experience the game. The medium through which soccer is mostly experienced informs the culture that has grown up around the sport. Walter Benjamin argues that reproduced art lacks a unique “presence in time and space” (3). The same could be said of a spectacle multiplied and reproduced across television screens: an authenticity is reduced, and therefore compensatory ways of manufacturing closeness to the “original” game in the stadium must come about. Little is more ritualistic than a soccer game, from the rules governing the players’ participation to the traditions that govern the spectators’ behavior. As such, the game has become another arena in which to observe the need for proximity and participation that Benjamin calls characteristic of “the age of mechanical reproduction.” At the matches
themselves, fan groups (*barras bravas*) have been known to storm the field, and constantly swarm around the edges of the field rather than watch distantly from seats in the stands. For fans who experience the game through television, proximity must be fostered in other ways. Crafting legends and idols out of players allows for that proximity: the player in Europe has his roots here in our hometown, his name is on our shirts, his face is on our products. Choosing players that share the necessary “marginal” status, whether the poor boy from the *villa*\(^8\) like Maradona or—to a lesser extent—the medically challenged Messi, enables not just proximity but empathy and therefore a more accessible pantheon overall.

As sociologist Pablo Alabarces cautions, using the lens of soccer to glimpse such large-scale value sets cannot be reduced to a clumsy equation involving a global entertainment product and much more complicated concepts. Responding to Néstor García Canclini’s “Consumidores y ciudadanos,” Alabarces writes that equating soccer and nation allows for a neoliberal, hegemonic view of citizenship as a consumer product. Whereas politics can produce meaningful identity and narrative, he alleges, soccer is “pura tribalización y puro merchandising” (*Fútbol y patria* 207). Though he does not outline valid notions of citizenship, his resistance to the frequent overdramatization of soccer’s social role is crucial to note at the beginning of this analysis. Value sets pertaining to social identities can be glimpsed through the lens of soccer, but that does not mean the sport itself is inherently alert to them or able to produce them. Soccer is not gender, ethnicity, class, nation, or religion—but it can be informative about them, especially by examining players as rigorously marketed, idolized, and mythologized as Maradona and Messi.

That information lurks in the tension at the core of this analysis: while both players have been subject to similar cultural phenomena, from Catholic imagery to national identity politics to

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\(^8\) In Argentine usage, *villa* (or *villa miseria*) refers to the slums around Buenos Aires. A person from a *villa* is called a *villero*. 
international marketing, their personal and political contexts are worlds apart. The persistence of these tropes in spite of a vastly transformed industry and nation is revelatory of the underlying values informing their processes of mythologization, and thus the values collectively produced and reproduced in Argentine society over the past few decades of neoliberalism and globalization. The specific values in question include a persistence in communal identity in resistance to the globalization of culture, a reclamation of citizenship as participation in civil society, and an ever-increasing priority on ritual accessibility. While the initial mythologization of Diego Maradona was deeply rooted in Argentine social archetypes and the need for collective identity, its commercialization allowed for its superimposition on Lionel Messi as an international marketing strategy counteracting the localized shift in soccer identities.

This thesis proposes a comparative study of Maradona and Messi, who interact with these identity formation processes and projected mythologies in discrete and emblematic moments, to discern that underlying logic and the milieu of Argentine society that explains it. In Part I: Identity and Globalization, the players’ relationships with their hometowns will be analyzed as a microcosm of traditionalist resistance to global capitalism. The question of changing relationships with the state, especially as the idea of national identity relates to the World Cup and both players’ experiences with the tournament, will be the subject of Part II: Citizenship and Consumerism. Religious imagery, alternate moralities, and the players’ relationships with the Church will be scrutinized in Part III: Ritual and Reverence. Finally, the latent values discovered through this study will be noted in the conclusion.
Part I:

Identity and Globalization

Diego Maradona grew up in the house on the left, a shack in Villa Fiorito now occupied by a man who scavenges for valuable trash for a living. Now, even more so back in the ‘60s and ‘70s of Maradona’s youth, it is ravaged by cocaine and poverty. When ESPN journalist Wright Thompson went to the neighborhood to visit, his driver warned him, “It’s like going on vacation to Syria” (2014). While Maradona himself has long since moved on, and only visits the community rarely, his distant relatives are still squatters there. A teacher in the neighborhood, Laura Ortiz, does not count his absence against him. “The important thing is that he is proud of this community,” she told a reporter in 2010 (Moffett). “He always said, and always says, that he came from Villa Fiorito.” He has spent his life trying to escape his origins, and has succeeded meteorically in his social ascendancy. Never looking back is true to the spirit of a slum dweller; it’s exactly what the community celebrates about him.

Lionel Messi grew up—or at least started to do so—in the house on the right, his family’s old home in Rosario that he still maintains though it has long been left empty. Its two-story stability is a little rough around the edges, much like Messi’s own childhood narrative: middle-class, ordinary, and equipped with enough resources to avoid real danger when suffering came
his way. While Maradona worked to escape the squalid *villa*, Messi’s exit from Rosario was somewhat more sudden. At age 11, Messi was diagnosed with growth hormone deficiency, which required a treatment too expensive for his family (his father worked in steel, while his mother was a part-time domestic servant) and for local club Newell’s Old Boys where he carried the youth team. He was forced by economic and medical circumstances to sign with the highest bidder, and so he moved to Spain to play for F.C. Barcelona at the age of 13, leaving behind everything he knew and becoming the family’s main breadwinner when just a boy. Unlike Maradona, Messi had the privilege of a home to miss, but he left it too early to forge a symbolic relationship with the sporting public there. Reflecting upon his visit to Rosario, Thompson characterizes the town’s coldness toward one of their most famous sons as bad timing. “Growing up in Rosario might not have shaped him, but leaving it certainly did.”

There is something of a tradition in the Argentine press, and among many Argentine fans, of tagging promising young stars with the “New Maradona” moniker until it sticks. Often it has been attached to stocky Boca players (Diego Latorre), tabloid haunters (Ariel Ortega), and poverty-stricken dreamers turned stars (Juan Román Riquelme), but a real stylistic heir to Maradona has been wanting. Lionel Messi has in large part inherited the title because he is the only player to have really embodied the scope of Maradona’s talent, being called the world’s best in his own generation. But their hometowns exemplify the difference in perception that makes Messi’s claim to the title of “New Maradona” so difficult to comprehend.

Maradona incarnates a relatable class struggle. His unapologetic misbehavior is surely just his personality, but disturbing the elite’s decorous peace also is a wink and a nod of solidarity with his origins. Kizito Madu explains that Maradona achieved every slum dweller’s dream: “To be the exception.” Talent is not rare in the slums, Madu says, but survival is, and
Maradona’s “confrontational” lifestyle speaks to how much he feels he has to defend what ground he has gained. Like the bandits sketched by Hobsbawm, Maradona occupies the higher echelons as a kind of reparation.9 “Yo soy la voz de los sin voz,” he wrote in his autobiography, “la voz de mucha gente que se siente representada por mí, yo tengo un micrófono delante y ellos en su puta vida podrán tenerlo” (139).10 He draws himself as a representative of the popular classes in a world from which they were set up to be excluded.

Messi was always meant to be included. Though he is read as perhaps more middle class than he was, given his family’s serious financial struggles and his own unusual medical needs, Messi never had to face the life-or-death intensity of slum poverty. He had relatives in Catalonia who called the F.C. Barcelona youth coach when their boy was in need. His success is not one most Argentines can imagine themselves replicating because it begins with a certain social status and it ends thousands of miles from home. The major tragedy in Messi’s story is the breakup of his family and his loneliness as a child far from home; his younger sister had a hard time settling in Catalonia, and so his siblings and parents remain scattered in two continents. Meanwhile, children in the slums are often lucky to have anything to break up or miss. The opportunity gap between the two stars is just as important as their personalities in understanding the public’s relationship with them. Marginalized groups need marginalized heroes with whom they can identify, and the only narrative Messi had to offer has long since been rectified. (He is now a full two inches taller than Maradona, and he never shares enough of his life beyond his childhood struggles to replace that story with anything more compelling.)

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9 See Hobsbawm 26. “Insofar as bandits have a ‘programme,’ it is the defence or restoration of the traditional order of things ‘as it should be’ (which in traditional societies means as it is believed to have been in some real or mythical past).”

10 “I am the voice of the voiceless, the voice of a lot of people who feel represented by me, I have a microphone in front of me and they will never in their fucking lives have one.” (Trans. Camila Quintana.)
Still, Messi has retained the “New Maradona” title, in part because Maradona himself insisted on it. In 2006, Maradona proclaimed, “I have seen the player who will inherit my place in Argentinian football and his name is Messi. Messi is beautiful to watch - my kind of player in our blue and white jersey. He's a leader and is offering classes in beautiful football. He has something different to any other player in the world” (BBC Sport). In terms of global perception, the inheritance made sense. Both are short, skilled, left-footed, visionary Argentine playmakers, and in the years ahead eerie similarities would confirm the comparison: Messi repeated Maradona’s “Hand of God” goal in 2006 against Recreativo de Huelva, and he repeated his “Goal of the Century” in 2007 against Getafe C.F. But back in Argentina, and especially in his hometown, Messi’s personal narrative has failed to live up to the “New Maradona” label. Novelist Eduardo Sacheri described the tension: “Maradona was born in the slums; he has had a chaotic life, anarchic. Failure and success, shadowy and brilliant. Those are things Argentines can relate to and empathize with. If Messi wins a World Cup, he will be an idol. But it might be more difficult for him to have a passionate relationship with the public” (Longman).

This gap in relatability has led to popular support for one of his teammates on the Argentine national team, Carlos Tevez, as a better fit. Like Maradona, he is a squat Boca attacker who plays with heart and gets himself in trouble. He is also a villero who is widely liked and embraced as a charismatic rebel hero. In fact, Tevez is even good friends with Maradona. Everything about him seems like the true Maradona heir, yet the press and the international soccer industry resists, because despite his fine career Tevez has not shown quite the outstanding talent and success of either Maradona or Messi. Yet more than just ability matters in the making of heroes. When Argentina lost in the final of the 2014 World Cup (having limped there almost entirely due to Messi’s individual brilliance), some fans blamed the loss on Tevez’s exclusion,
saying that he would have led “the people” to victory (Elsey). Such a conjecture is unjustifiable from a purely sporting perspective—but insofar as World Cups are exercises in imagining national solidarity and narratives, the lack of a real representative of the popular classes (who make up the majority of the sport’s supporters in Argentina) was more than enough cause for such a suggestion.

For now, though, Messi’s personal talent and international pull have put him in a leadership position, he struggles to fit as Argentine national team captain and therefore ostensible central heroic figure. That lack of a relatable backstory, for instance, is one of his few commercial weaknesses, and attempts to remedy it have been fairly plain on their face. For example, his latest Adidas cleats, marketed as “mirosar10” (combining “Mi Rosario” with Messi’s number 10), feature a map of Rosario. It highlights the Batallón pitch —“an abandoned military base field that Leo used to sneak onto through a hole in the fence to play football with his friends when he was a small child,” Adidas’ press release romantically explains—but not the kempt fields he frequented with the Newell’s Old Boys youth teams. Even more tellingly, the map is printed on the only part of the shoe no one can see: the insoles. The brand has all of the superficial trappings of celebrating roots, but none of the unashamed pride and personal investment that befit a hometown tribute.

Lacking any sense of organic connection, all that is left with Messi’s local reputation is marketing. Argentines often say as much, as they did to journalist Rob Brown. “A Central fan told me that Argentina was very much like England in that most people would much rather their club does well than the national team. Consequently, their idols tend not to be the best Argentines from an objective standpoint, but those that best represent the side that they go and watch every weekend.” Using such localism as an excuse to write off Messi may seem
hypocritical when Maradona, too, went to Europe in his prime, but much of Maradona’s abandonment of the Argentine league was mitigated by having made his name at S.S.C. Napoli in Italy. Italy is another motherland for many Argentines, due to the large Italian immigrant population, and Naples in particular is beloved as a southern, working-class city often derided by rich northerners. 80,000 Napoli fans welcomed Maradona at his presentation at the Sao Paolo stadium in 1984. Maradona spoke: “Quiero convertirme en el ídolo de los pibes pobres de Nápoles, que son como yo cuando vivía en Buenos Aires. Mi mente es pobre, porque quedó la misma [sic] que tenía años atrás cuando jugaba en las calles de Fiorito” (Zanoni 93).11 Not only was Maradona known to Argentines and valued as a player before he left, but he acted as an ambassador for Argentina, in a sense never really leaving the neighborhood. Crucially, Maradona ended up returning to spend his final sporting days in the country to which he brought several World Cups.

Messi does not inspire feelings of abandonment so much as estrangement. Messi grew up in a soccer culture, and a global economy, where talented Argentines simply do not make their careers west of the Atlantic. Since 2009, Argentina has overtaken Brazil as the world’s greatest exporter of soccer players. According to Euromericas Sport Marketing, Argentina sent 2,715 players abroad in 2014 alone (Segura). Resenting Messi for having made his name in Europe is on some level a cipher for the economic circumstances that pushed him there: not one player on the Argentine national team currently plays in Argentina, and none but Messi was forced to seek higher salaries abroad for medical reasons. The game has changed.

That large-scale sentiment of resistance is not merely the instinctive emotion of spurned fans, but a telling political reaction to a wider phenomenon. It recalls the spirit of the so-

11 “I want to become the idol of the poor kids in Naples, who are like me when I lived in Buenos Aires. My mind is poor, because it stayed the same [sic] I had years ago when I played in the streets of Fiorito.” (Trans. Camila Quintana.)
called food riots of eighteenth-century Englishmen analyzed by E.P. Thompson, who describes them as a response to capitalistic incursions into the community’s norms on legitimate economic practices and social obligations. “An outrage to these moral assumptions,” Thompson writes of the social obligations that defined the pre-capitalistic English moral economy, “quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action” (79). The resulting traditionalism, as the crowds’ resistance to capitalism would be characterized, shares a similar spirit with the localist Argentine soccer fans who maintain objections to exported stars. These fans lack access to a genuine emotional connection with their globalized countrymen just as those Englishmen lacked sustenance, but like them they just as seriously refuse to accept capitalism as a force of moral chaos into their community’s norms. If these fans reject Messi as a foreigner, it is equally a rejection of the soulless and mechanical economic system that sent him abroad with no regard for the social obligations they believe his nationality presents.

It is easy to see how globalized soccer culture has presented an outrage to Argentine fans’ moral assumptions about the way the game should be played. In Argentine soccer, a team’s identity was normally formed around the space of the stadium, the colors of the jersey, and the players of the team. All of these symbols have been weakened as reference points for identity formation in a newly globalized industry where stadiums’ naming rights are frequently sold and resold, jerseys are redesigned annually to boost sales, and players are traded incessantly (Alabarces, *Crónicas del aguante* 79; Goldblatt 803). In relaxing the requirements of fandom to simply having access to cable (Foer 1-2), soccer’s globalization actually tightens them by inducing an ever-larger fan base to invent new mechanisms of division and raise the bar for group membership. In Anglo-American soccer circles, globalization has given rise to widespread disdain for “glory hunters” who follow only winning teams or tune in only for tournament finals.
 Argentine fans, particularly those who form part of the *barra bravas* or supporters’ groups, invoke the ethic of *aguante* instead (Alabarces, *Crónicas del aguante* 75). *Aguante* literally means strength, but it implies a resistance to violence—usually the physical violence of police repression but also the metaphorical violence visited upon the club by adversary forces from managers to referees to “traitor” players. *Aguante* is then in a sense endurance and loyalty, and it defines the most passionate fans as the vessels of club identity. But *aguante* is itself integrated into the soccer industry, even if it has been cultivated as a response to it. Juan Pablo Ferreiro and Federico Fernández have called *aguante* “la mercancía de la violencia” (“the merchandising of violence”), a way of romanticizing resistance and profiting from it. For all their disdain for the changing jerseys and increasingly expensive tickets, these fans still buy them; *aguante* does not represent a resistance to the corporate interests of soccer so much as it represents an adherence to local traditions rather than jumping ship to European teams. The process is similar to the commercialization of cultures of resistance within rock and roll, Alabarces notes, where buying the right CDs is the new fighting the police (“Fútbol, droga y rock & roll”). The corporate structures that have taken Messi abroad are the same ones that benefit from his detractors’ reactive resistance, even if they are local clubs and not European powerhouses.

These structures also came into their own during Maradona’s time, though the seemingly organic hero’s commercialization has been overlooked in the collective imagination. He has benefited from globalized television culture enormously, and in fact, his ability to permeate the Argentine cultural landscape from retirement has somewhat defined that culture. “La mayor parte de los admiradores de Maradona sólo lo han visto por televisión,” Juan José Sebreli writes. “La gran pasión de nuestro tiempo no es el fútbol sino el telefútbol, por eso
Maradona pudo continuar siendo un showman sin necesidad de seguir jugando” (212). And a showman he has been. Maradona’s antipathy is fairly universal. “Sus gestos antisistema no se quedaban sólo en generalizaciones sino que pretendían combatir, en primer término, al poder establecido en la industria del fútbol, lanzando invectivas contra los dirigentes de clubes y las asociaciones futbolísticas nacionales e internacionales —la AFA y la FIFA—; incluía en su diatriba a los directores técnicos, árbitros, la prensa y hasta los propios hinchas; estaba contra todos” (Sebreli 177). Radical fans and others hungry for a rebel saw Maradona as “a breath of fresh air in an obedient, corporate football world” (Kuhn 120). But like most ostensible resisters to the globalized soccer industry, he was also easily bought. Maradona, the drug addict, appeared in anti-drug campaigns. Maradona, who denied one of his own children—born of an affair in Italy—as illegitimate, was named a UNICEF ambassador. Maradona, whose fall into ill health could not have been more public, was the basis for bank-sponsored children’s health mascot Dieguito (Sebreli 184). What passes for irony in Maradona’s life could easily be called hypocrisy.

There was some resistance that proved impossible to commercialize, and earned Maradona his reputation as an ambassador of the marginalized and a bona fide outlaw hero. When Maradona rose to the level of international stardom, he began living an ostentatious lifestyle proper to the maximum point of social ascendency that he had achieved. Most famously, he threw a lavish party at Luna Park for his wedding amid the 1989 economic crisis. Like another lower-class Argentine who rose to national prominence, Eva Perón, he was shamed for

12 “Most of Maradona’s fans have only seen him on television. The great passion of our times is not football but telefootball, which is why Maradona could stay a showman without having to play.” (Trans. Camila Quintana.)
13 “His anti-system gestures didn’t stick to generalizations but purported to combat, first, the established powers in the football industry, throwing invectives at club directors and national and international football associations—the AFA and FIFA; he included in his tirades managers, referees, the press, and even fans; he was against everyone.” (Trans. Camila Quintana.)
his displays of luxury. Journalist Silvia Fernández Barrio, reporting on *Nuevediario*, called the wedding’s lack of taste “una consecuencia de su origen villero” (Levinsky 202).\(^{14}\) Maradona, for his part, said, “A mí me parece bien que me llamen cabecita negra, porque nunca renegué de mis orígenes. Sí, soy un cabecita negra. ¿Cuál es el problema? Sí, soy villero, y la villa donde vivía ahora tiene asfalto. Pero yo viví en el barro” (Sebreli 173).\(^{15}\)

Maradona was referencing the epithet often thrown at him during his years of peaking fame and personal destruction with drugs and recklessness: “cabecita negra.”\(^{16}\) The term pejoratively refers to both the dark-complexioned and the lower-class Argentine, usually the two at once. Argentina has a long history of racializing class relations, stemming in no small part from colonial-era castes (Pizarro and Benavente 147). Sebreli notes that Maradona’s ethnicity had often been called out in this way: “...el padre era de ascendencia indígena, la madre descendía de inmigrantes italianos, una mezcla también típica que permitía la identificación de muchos argentinos de clase baja, entonces llamados «cabecitas negras»” (Sebreli 172).\(^{17}\) The term was most often used for him in the press when Maradona became something of a farce; his status as a representative of his popular origins meant that his personal behavior was written off as the inevitable conduct of all dark and lower-class Argentines.

Messi has largely handled his fame by not doing much at all. He is famously difficult to interview in the sense that he rarely says anything of interest, and his personal life as a successful father and professional is thoroughly poor tabloid fodder. He has used his economic position to

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\(^{14}\) “A consequence of his slum origins.”

\(^{15}\) “It’s fine with me if they call me a *cabecita negra*, because I never denied my origins. Yes, I’m a *cabecita negra*. What is the problem? Yes, I’m from the slums, and the slum where I grew up is now paved. But I lived in the dirt.” (Trans. Camila Quintana.)

\(^{16}\) The term, which roughly translates to “little black-head,” was famously the title of a 1961 short story by Argentine writer Germán Rozenmacher that showed the racist relations between the urban bourgeois and the new working class coming from the provinces.

\(^{17}\) “...the father was of indigenous roots, the mother was descended from Italian immigrants, an also typical mix that allowed for the identification of many lower-class Argentines, then called *cabecitas negras*.” (Trans. Camila Quintana.)
reestablish ties with Rosario, though, by pouring money into improving Newell’s Old Boys (where he funded a gym for the youth team) and into keeping up his family. He visits often, donates a great deal to the community, and has even begun to crack his silence a little: strangely, the quietest of international superstars recently did a TV spot with the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo.\textsuperscript{18} Yet he remains uncelebrated in Rosario.

Perhaps the difference is that where Maradona fulfills a trope—the rags-to-riches folk hero making it big—Messi evades easy categorizations. Trying to fit him entirely into Argentine folk hero expectations, as Maradona so easily can, does not line up with reality. Marcelo Ramirez, a family friend, said as much to Thompson: “He’s more of an international figure than a rosarino.” He annoys Argentines by refraining from singing the national anthem and failing to win World Cups, while he distances himself from Catalans by refusing to speak anything other than Spanish (in a strong rosarino accent at that) and constantly paying to import Argentine meat. Aitor Lagunas, a Spanish soccer editor, has called him “a man without a country” (Thompson); Juan Sasturain has called him the inheritor of Borgesian lineages that make him a half-Argentine, half-Catalan mix of a player.\textsuperscript{19} Messi was, in fact, eligible to play for either Argentina or Spain under FIFA rules, and chose his home country. But as with so many players who have multiple eligibility or nationality, his loyalty is perennially in question. Such nationalistic investment in teams may no longer line up with the reality of globalized soccer, where immigration and economic forces alike leave many players involved in more than one country’s league—but as Part II will discuss, the association between country and national team

\textsuperscript{18} Messi, along with teammates Javier Mascherano and Ezequiel Lavezzi as well as national team coach Alejandro Sabella, said alongside the Abuelas: “Hace 10 mundiales que te estamos buscando” (“We have been searching for you for ten World Cups”). They are addressing the children born to and taken from political prisoners during the Argentine dictatorship in the 1970s.

\textsuperscript{19} Inspired by Ricardo Piglia’s famous analysis of Jorge Luis Borges’ literature as a product of two lineages (his Argentine mother and his Anglo-Saxon father), Sasturain describes Messi’s play as a similar synthesis of Argentine boyhood and Catalan schooling.
remains. As such, neither a man with no country or with two countries is satisfactory to an Argentine public, perhaps because his performance of the ideal Argentine soccer player is discordant in other ways.

Brenda Elsey highlights Messi’s failure to live out what she calls traditional Argentine machismo as the fundamental disconnect in the narrative that would have him replace Maradona. While her analysis is incomplete—machismo is far from the only gender norm with which these two players interact—Elsey is correct to make the connection between mandated masculinities and such iconic figures as national athletes. As Eduardo Archetti’s previously mentioned analysis of Argentine sports magazine *El Gráfico* concluded, the values of middle-class male Argentines were projected onto soccer players over the twentieth century, resulting in a particular ethic and performance expected of players today. Since soccer was brought to Argentina by British immigrants, the British were set up as Latin immigrants’ sporting “other,” and masculine norms assigned as such: discipline, collectivity, and power for the “mechanical” Brits; agility, individualism, and creativity for the “artistic” creole20 Argentines. These concepts invoked the association between Britishness and industry as well as argentinidad and ingenuity, equivalencies that were not codified in Argentine sporting culture until after “local creativity” was praised by touring European teams.21

Two main narratives arose from this immigration and appropriation process. The first, developed by *El Gráfico* writer Borocotó, theorized that Argentine creole soccer had two origins: the freedom to play on potreros rather than the disciplinary structure of a British public school, and the consumption of mate and asado that was said to transform players’ bodies. This narrative

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20 In Argentine usage, criollo (“creole”) refers to the Argentine children of European (non-British) immigrants, specifically to those of Spanish and Italian heritage.
21 Similarly, the first tango craze was actually in Paris, inspired by traveling Argentine dancers. After word of its international success spread, it soon became the Argentine national symbol and pride that it remains today.
is updated in Maradona’s slum upbringing as a true *pibe del potrero*, and his adult consumption of drugs while in his glory days as a player. Meanwhile, Messi’s intense European schooling at Barcelona’s La Masia recalled the British “other” of early Argentine soccer culture. This opposition between Anglo-Saxon structured utilitarianism and Latin spiritual liberation was characteristic of *Arielismo*, a school of thought popular in early twentieth century Latin America based on José Enrique Rodó’s 1900 essay “Ariel.” Rodó, an Uruguayan writer whose ideas had a great deal of influence on both sides of the Río de la Plata, offered an idealistic vision of Latin American nobility of spirit based on such contrasts. Though on the face of it such narratives lift up Latin American models as enlightened, they are based on transgressing and subverting English virtues rather than establishing a culture’s own autonomous norms.

The second narrative stemmed from fellow *El Gráfico* writer Chantecler, who added a third origin to creole soccer and masculinity: the wiliness or *viveza criolla* needed to improvise creatively. That is one quality Maradona and Messi are almost always said to share—even if Maradona is assigned it more often in the context of cheating and Messi in the context of impossible attacking deceit. This characteristic came to be prized in conjunction with local ethical development: the replacement of Anglo soccer with creole soccer also entailed the replacement of “fair play” with a spirit of competition as the driving ethic of the game in Argentina.22 Elsey sees soccer culture’s interaction with *machismo* in this context, an Argentine social agreement that has lauded brash pride, self-deifying, and overt sexuality like Maradona’s ever since competitive bravado became the creole ideal. Maradona’s exemplification of these characteristics is normative for Argentine soccer players, she alleges, and the utter lack of

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22 The primary example of this development was the axing of *tercer tiempo*, a “third half” added after the match for opposing players to exchange pleasantries and leave as friends. A leftover from the “gentlemen’s game” in the amateur era, it survives in Argentina in other amateur club sports such as tennis, but it was cut in soccer after one too many post-match brawls.
outrage over Maradona’s domestic violence—caught on widely publicized video (Haisley)—speaks to this expected role.

However, Maradona is far from the incarnation of normative Argentine masculinity that the narrative propagated by Elsey, among others, claims him to be. His reputation and his conduct have frequently diverged from the heterosexual machista norm. Rumors of Maradona’s relationships with men have been consistent throughout his career, whether extravagant allegations by ex-girlfriend Rocío Oliva of a romantic relationship between Maradona and a close male friend (Clarín) or tabloid insistence on Maradona’s sexual relationships with male prostitutes, cross-dressing and otherwise. For decades of his career he did not deny any of these relationships, though recently he has been given to homophobic remarks and refutations (Alameddine). But his behavior in general is not the machista caricature that could be expected: he famously greets men and women alike with kisses on the mouth, particularly the players he coaches. His physical appearance, altered recently by cosmetic surgery, has left him with plump red lips that have tabloids calling him “Mamadona” (BILD Staff). His old nickname in Italy, which spread to Argentina, also refers to him in the feminine: “Santa Maradona.”

These details are not often mentioned in analyses of Maradona’s supposed machismo. Maradona has had permission to transgress gender norms to some extent by virtue of his status as a nearly untouchable hero, but unlike his transgressions in politics or drugs or sportsmanship these are cut out of the mainstream heroic narrative. The artificiality of this selective portrayal of Maradona reinforces how much of his status as an icon is a socially mandated creation, rather than a natural outgrowth of his personal behavior. If Maradona is illustrated as solely machista rather than the somewhat fluid character that he is, it is because there is a collective need for such a portrayal of masculinity.
This is where Elsey’s projection is helpful. *Machismo* is demanded by a certain social group that includes such a masculinity in any set of virtues accorded to heroes. Transgressions in politics and social status mean Maradona is as marginalized as the people who look up to him, who are themselves left-leaning and lower-class and can therefore prize these actions as signs of solidarity. Transgressions in gender and sexuality would make Maradona a partner of another marginalized group, the LGBTQ+ community in Argentina—an uncommon alliance in South American sport to begin with, but most pertinently an alliance he has firmly rejected (Alameddine). Since soccer in Argentina is collectively conceived of as belonging to straight, *machista* men, regardless of the sport’s real fan base, Maradona’s characterization in the mainstream narrative is aligned with that group’s norms.

Messi is also mischaracterized in his own ways, though perhaps due more to commercial needs than to social or cultural ones. His masculinity, as Elsey points out, is anti-*machista* at its core. For one, he is not at all inclined to involve himself in violence, to the point where he famously never fakes a foul while playing (CuleDelBarca). He also thrives on a narrative of boyish innocence. Adrián Coria, his youth coach at Newell’s Old Boys, told the story of the only time he had to discipline Messi during training—for playing with the ball rather than taking notice of the team running laps. Coria sent Messi off only to see him “glued to the wire fence,” watching the pitch longingly. Coria, saddened, allowed him to rejoin the practice (Caioli ch. 6). The anecdote is just one of many in the genre, establishing Messi’s narrative as one of purity and youth. “Leo Messi is still so young and, in the typical way of young people, so over it already,” journalist Rowan Phillips wrote after Messi became the all-time scorer of both Spain’s La Liga and the UEFA Champions League in the space of three days. His nonchalance is called “a genius’ indifference,” “a kid’s insouciance,” more self-effacing and prodigious than cold and
aloof. Messi’s own words reinforce his reputation: “I have fun like a child in the street,” he has said (Longman). “When the day comes when I’m not enjoying it, I will leave football.” The image has persisted. Where Maradona’s family largely made it into the news over illegitimate sons or disowned members, Messi has grown into the image of a family man, appearing often with his childhood sweetheart and longtime partner as well as their young son.

Messi’s indiscretions with supermodels and trial for tax fraud, meanwhile, somehow never make for the salacious headlines they merit. While Maradona’s womanizing was celebrated, Messi’s own years in the tabloids before settling down have disappeared from the story. Somehow, no one believes that his apparent tax fraud represents a late-blooming rebellious streak. It could potentially endear him to the Argentine public, by sheer virtue of irritating his adopted Spain if not by the beloved act of law-breaking itself. After all, “[el] Estado es impersonal; el argentino sólo concibe una relación personal,” Borges wrote (“Nuestro pobre individualismo” 58). “Por eso, para él, robar dineros públicos no es un crimen.”23 Instead, the global media is somewhat bemused. “He goes on trial for tax evasion soon; it is impossible to believe he defrauded authorities on purpose, because it is impossible to believe that he manages his finances at all,” journalist Brian Phillips admitted.

The utter immaculateness of Messi’s personal life in the press is startling. After all, the media are not usually in the business of keeping up reputations. Argentine tendencies toward outlaw heroes suggest that the need for Messi’s totally bland image in this country and abroad stems more from an international commercial need for a star that fits a brand. If the “New Maradona” sobriquet does not precisely follow style, success, or identity narratives, then perhaps it simply follows the money.

23 “The state is impersonal; the Argentine only conceives of a personal relationship. Because of this, for him, to rob public funds is not a crime.”
Part II:

Citizenship and Consumerism

As usual, it was Diego Maradona who said what everyone else was just impolitely thinking. “Messi? I would give him heaven if possible,” Maradona said on his television show after Lionel Messi won the Golden Ball for best individual player of the 2014 World Cup. A stone-faced Messi accepted the trophy after losing the final to Germany, wearing the somber blue away jersey that barely identified the team as Argentine. Maradona continued, “But it’s not right when someone wins something that he shouldn’t have won just because of some marketing plan” (Guardian Staff). His accusation alluded to the trophy’s sponsorship by Adidas, the same brand that sponsors Messi himself.

The incident tied together the constant tensions plaguing Messi’s relationship with the Argentine public: his failure to repeat Maradona’s success on the international stage, his tendency to succeed individually amidst collective loss, and the resentment created by his blatant commercialization. It also highlighted his seeming utter lack of agency in the process. “Right
now I don’t care about the prize. I don’t care about anything,” Messi said after the fact. “I wanted to take Argentina to the World Cup for all the people” (Guardian Staff).

Such distance between the Argentine public and the purported “New Maradona” is striking, since a close affinity is what marked Maradona’s entire career. The reasons seem clear initially. Messi lacks the two features most frequently cited in explaining why Argentines so cherish Maradona: a World Cup win and a relatable, iconic rise to the top. But their respective athletic accomplishments and individual personalities only go so far in explaining the stars’ dramatic contrast as national figures. The terms of the relationship between an athletic icon and the general public are just as strongly shaped by the national events in the background of stars’ careers. If Messi is received with a colder distance than Maradona, it is just as much due to the vastly distinct Argentine consciousness that has developed in the decades between their careers as it is to his own characteristics.

The Argentine public was invested in Maradona’s story for years’ worth of reasons that no longer quite apply. Recent social and economic developments ensured Maradona’s story was particularly well positioned to become a vessel for national sentiment. “Sin duda,” Ana Pizarro and Carolina Benavente write, “Maradona se fue constituyendo en uno de los héroes del epos nacional argentino en un momento en que, por una parte, las clases medias habían consolidado su espesor en ese país ahora ya no sólo de hijos, sino de nietos de inmigrantes, y, por otra, el desarrollo tecnológico permitía escenificar el relato de la epopeya nacional con la pantalla del televisor al servicio de las masas” (149).24 That lack of direct immigrant experience, which had so united the country around a single national narrative in previous decades, left a void where the

24 “Without a doubt, Maradona went establishing himself as one of the heroes of the Argentine national epos (epic) in a moment at which, on the one hand, the middle classes had consolidated their density in this country now that they were not just sons but grandsons of immigrants, and on the other, technological development allowed the staging of the national epic with the television screen at the service of the masses.”
concept of *criollismo* had been. The rise of standardized television culture propelled Argentines to fill that void in unison, and Maradona came along just as that technological apparatus was ready to roll.

Add to that backdrop a series of parallels between Maradona’s career and the concurrent arc of Argentine national events and the result is not a causal link, but an insight into the resulting personal investment many Argentines had in his story. Jorge Luis Borges writes that tango is a way for Argentines to participate in a more heroic existence that escaped the reality of the injustice that pervaded their lives. “Tal vez la misión del tango sea ésa: dar a los argentinos la certidumbre de haber sido valientes, de haber cumplido ya con las exigencias del valor y el honor” (“Historia del tango”).25 Maradona’s story came to play a similar role in Argentine popular culture. As his star rose and fell with the nation’s, he became a useful allegory for thinking through national problems, a point around which an idea of Argentine citizenship was constructed.

The beginnings of Maradona’s career, like the youths of all his generation, were played out under the shadow of the civic-military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983 known as *El Proceso*. The government’s bloody persecution of political opposition all but destroyed meaningful civil society for a time, while its economic mismanagement drove many Argentines into further poverty. The regime turned to extravagant displays of nationalism as tactics for domestic distraction and the production of national unity, first in the 1978 World Cup hosted and won by Argentina and later with the disastrous Malvinas campaign among other events. The tournament in particular was a unique opportunity to overindulge in national iconography and symbology, which the government was betting would produce sufficient

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25 “Perhaps that is the mission of the tango: to give Argentines the certainty of having been brave, of having fulfilled the demands of valor and honor.”
national social cohesion to offset the chaotic division ignited by its policies (Rodríguez, “Pan, circo y algo más” 134). Argentina was subject to a deluge of patriotic advertisements on television, on the radio, in newspapers, and on the streets during the year of the tournament. The official song covered them all: “25 millones de argentinos jugaremos el Mundial” (Mason 71).26

It did not quite achieve its intended effect. Many Argentines saw through the blatant politicization of the World Cup, which near the end of the dictatorship would occupy “el lugar de símbolo de la manipulación, del ocultamiento, del escamoteo, de la estupidez colectiva” (Alabarces, Fútbol y patria 125).27 During the tournament itself, though, the dissident reaction was simply too divided to make a substantial impact. Armed militants declared a ceasefire, but the Madres de Plaza de Mayo kept their protests going strong. Somewhere in the middle was the Argentine national team’s coach, César Luis Menotti, who chose to put his left-wing politics in the spotlight when he claimed the team played not for the dictatorship but for the people and refused to shake Videla’s hand after the victory (Kuhn 53). The opposition’s lack of unity perhaps contributed to the tournament’s short-term ability to transfix the nation, but the bombardment of the country with advertising and the game’s widespread popularity to begin with was likely not to be countered.

The final was held at El Monumental, a stadium just ten blocks from the urban concentration camp at the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) where political prisoners were tortured and killed during the regime. One of the detainees at ESMA, Graciela Daleo, remembered celebrating with “the guy who had tortured you with electric drills” after Argentina’s victory. “I hate World Cups because they dissolve the class struggle. In a way, during the World Cup it seems we are all the same. We are not all the same” (Kuhn 57). But

26 “25 million Argentines will play in the World Cup.”
27 “the symbolic place of manipulation, secrecy, trickery, collective stupidity”
some Argentines saw the tournament as a moment of necessary escapism, rather than deliberate ignorance. “Do dictatorships pass away, do Cups remain?” playwright Ricardo Halac mused. “We went, we won and we danced” (Mason 74).

Maradona was only nineteen and did not play for that World Cup-winning team, but he did lead the Argentine selección juvenil to victory in the FIFA World Youth Championship the next year. His 1979 breakout tournament was a useful tool for the government just as the World Cup had been, if on a smaller scale. Sociologist Juan José Sebreli recalls that the dictatorship used Maradona’s success as another moment of distraction and self-promotion. “El general Carlos Guillermo Suárez Mason, jefe del primer cuerpo del ejército a cuyo cargo estaban los campos de concentración, era por entonces dirigente de Argentinos Juniors—el club de los inicios de Maradona—y utilizó doscientos cincuenta mil dólares…para ayudar a ese club a cumplir los pagos al jugador” (182). Maradona’s willingness to allow the dictatorship to take advantage of his charisma and accomplishments for their own purposes led revealed beneath his Che-tattooed leftist image “un oportunista que estuvo con todos los gobiernos, incluida la dictadura, al mismo tiempo que lanzaba encendidas prédicas de izquierdismo infantil” (Sebreli 32).

Sebreli also placed Maradona, from this point on, among the pantheon of modern myths that derive “por una parte, de la manipulación industrial de la cultura de masas y, por otra, de la manipulación política, llevada al extremo por los líderes de movimientos totalitarios” (28). The model of nationalistic authoritarianism that presided over the 1978 and 1979 tournaments and

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28 “General Carlos Guillermo Suárez Mason, the commander of the first military division in charge of the concentration camps, was also the director of Argentinos Junior—the club where Maradona began—and used $250,000...to help that club make payments to the player.”

29 “an opportunist who was with all the governments, including the dictatorship, at the same time that he threw out fiery proverbs of infantile leftism”

30 “on the one hand, from the industrial manipulation of mass culture and on the other, from political manipulation, taken to the extreme by the leaders of totalitarian movements”
engaged in the mythmaking Sebreli describes is no longer alive in Argentina, but it set the precedent for the sociopolitical use of soccer as a substitute for unity that would be taken up by the dictatorship’s democratic successors when convenient (Goldblatt 902). The first of those successors was Raúl Alfonsín, who was president when Diego Maradona led Argentina to victory in the 1986 World Cup. His presidency, occupied mainly with economic recovery and human rights cleanup, purported to represent a time of reparation and transition. In a sense, soccer was ripe for its redemption from the dictators’ appropriations, too. The 1986 World Cup fit with that political agenda perfectly, lining up with the national spirit of justice-seeking over the one major loss that could arguably be outsourced: the intense sense of loss over the military casualties and economic suffering caused by the Malvinas War four years prior. Argentina was set to face England in the quarterfinals, their first meeting since the conflict. It was a bloodless way to get symbolically even. “Although we had said before the game that football had nothing to do with the Malvinas war,” Maradona later wrote in his autobiography, “we knew they had killed a lot of Argentine boys there, killed them like little birds. And this was revenge” (128).

Even before the Malvinas arose as a point of conflict, England had long occupied a contentious place in Argentine national discourse.31 During the era in which soccer was brought to Argentina by English immigrants, Argentina’s economy was oriented toward a policy of agroexportation that served the resource needs of Great Britain, among others (Hermans 42). Canadian historian H.S. Ferns characterizes Great Britain’s “informal imperialism” in Argentina as a strategy of subordination involving “the establishment in the weaker community [Argentina]…

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31 My occasional use of “English” and “England” for phenomena often more appropriately attributed to the “British” and “Great Britain” is an intentional misnomer. I aim to replicate the Argentine consolidation of all British immigrants into a single English “other,” as economic difference was prioritized over cultural nuance in the national discourse. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the empire in question was British, and that soccer was in fact imported to Argentina by a Scotsman. The national soccer team that became such a strong rival for Argentina, however, is specifically English.
of extra-territorial privileges, naval and military bases, and special areas where the commercial laws and policies of the stronger power [Britain] prevail” (60). Britain grew to have an overwhelming economic interest in Argentina; according to Ferns, the British investment in Argentina by 1890 was 174 million pounds sterling. The result was a model for economic domination, facilitated by rioplatense elites at the expense of most Argentine workers, which entangled Argentina in an economically if not politically colonial relationship:

Here we have the brilliant germ of the idea of Dominion status; the realization that military occupation, administrative control and political interference in the affairs of other communities are unnecessary to the interest of Great Britain provided there exists in those communities the institutional means and the will to engage in an economic and financial relationship with Great Britain, advantageous to British investors and consumers of foodstuffs and raw materials. In a very real sense Argentina was the first community, substantially dependent economically on Great Britain, to achieve Dominion status (63).

Because the economic milieu of soccer’s “amateur era” served Anglo-Argentine landowners’ priorities at the expense of urban workers, largely of Latin immigrant backgrounds, the national identity formation that would use the sport over the decades to come would be informed by this ethnically aligned class imbalance. As an immigrant-heavy country, Argentina could not adopt the prototypical Latin American narrative, pitting a heterogeneous European civilization against essentialized indigenous savagery. Instead, the nation required a melting pot model in order to congeal its ethnic diversity. Where the generic European or Indian served in other countries, the Anglo-Argentine took on a role as a convenient point of differentiation for the rest of Argentine immigrant culture. As a British import to Argentina, soccer was a useful
symbol of and a tool in that process, allowing England in the form of its national soccer team to become a major stylistic “other” against which Argentine identity was formed. Maradona, both because of his career’s timing with the Malvinas War and the *viveza criolla* said to characterize his personal style of play, became similarly useful.

That abstract process came to an apex in that 1986 quarterfinal. The match, in which Maradona’s famous “Hand of God” and “Goal of the Century” goals led Argentina to a 2-1 victory, surpassed even the final against West Germany to become the emblematic moment of the tournament. The way in which they were scored is crucial: the “Hand of God” refers to Maradona’s goal in the 52nd minute, which he scored illegally with his hand and later characterized cheekily as divine intervention, while the “Goal of the Century” followed in the 55th minute and is so called because Maradona’s dribbling past five English players to score is considered the greatest individual goal of the era. It was the high point of both Maradona’s tournament and his career—he would later not even score in the final, though he held the trophy aloft while the team lifted him as their captain—and despite the innovative tactics and brilliant support of his teammates, the entire gambit has been memorialized as an individual triumph over entire countries and the world at large. “La soledad del héroe es de gran valor para su transformación en ícono cultural: el héroe permanece solo contra un mundo de oponentes, y solo contra un submundo de peligros. La individuación de Maradona se vuelve empírica — no sólo simbólica — en esos dos goles,” Alabarces writes (*Fútbol y patria* 140).

In his autobiography, Maradona invokes the immediate political context: “It was as if we had beaten a country, not just a football team” (128). Specifically of the “Hand of God” goal, he says, “I sometimes think I preferred the one with my hand...It was a bit like stealing the wallet of

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32 “La soledad del héroe es de gran valor para su transformación en ícono cultural: el héroe permanece solo contra un mundo de oponentes, y solo contra un submundo de peligros. La individuación de Maradona se vuelve empírica — no sólo simbólica — en esos dos goles.”
the English” (127). The pickpocket reference was emblematic of the outlaw hero image that had been cultivated for him as a poor pibe gone gold. In this moment, he sublimated his status as an ambassador of the lower classes for Argentines, brushing up against the internal “other” of social elites, into an international creole image that outwitted the external “other” of the national rival. But it would prove to be a fleeting moment of victory, both for Maradona himself and for the nation—and, interestingly, for the tournament itself. According to David Goldblatt, “It was the last World Cup where the crowd actually stormed on to the field at the end of the final. Maradona would be the last captain to hold the trophy aloft in not merely a scrum of FIFA bureaucrats and the global media, but with the people who came to see him” (640).

The next phase of Maradona’s career—and Messi’s youth, before he went off to Spain—overlapped with the neoliberal government of Carlos Menem, whose presidency spanned the decade from 1989 to 1999. The decade was marked by the rapid globalization, and the consequent strengthening of local ties to soccer teams, discussed in the previous chapter. These in turn were facilitated by the menemista policy of privatization of state enterprises that eroded many of the institutions Argentines had come to conflate with citizenship, from state-owned businesses in electricity, water, and oil to the national airlines, telecommunications, steel, mail, and banks. The Argentine currency, meanwhile, was pegged to the U.S. dollar, resulting in fierce foreign competition over former state monopolies. The result was an eventual economic downturn exacerbated by government cronyism, leaving the country with little that was recognizable and stable in the way of civic participation.

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33 See Rodríguez, “El fútbol no es la patria” 44. “Una imagen de ‘argentinidad’ que apunta hacia dos direcciones: una concéntrica, es decir, hacia el país del cual es referente y otra excéntrica, hacia afuera, hacia el mundo: Maradona parece ser nuestro mejor embajador audiovisual.” (“An image of ‘Argentinity’ that points in two directions: one concentric, that is, facing inward to its referent country and another excentric, facing outward to the world: Maradona seems to be our best audiovisual ambassador.”)
Menem, like the governments that preceded him, looked to the national soccer team as a useful agent of social cohesion. He identified as a fan himself; as he once told a British television crew, “Football is the thing that formed me physically and it has given me a great deal of spirituality” (Mason 75). He actually wore an Argentine jersey at El Monumental not long after being sworn in as president. As a politician that fandom was convenient if slightly outdated. The national team was certainly a natural though obviously inadequate stand-in for the institutions his policies diminished, still riding Maradona’s wave of success, and its flair for economically skyrocketing the nation’s poor and uniting citizens across class lines confirmed all of the egalitarian principles his government preached. As Christian Bromberger once said, describing soccer, “¿Podríamos habernos imaginado en la época medieval un siervo oponiéndose a un señor feudal en un torneo? La respuesta es no” (36). Maradona, a superstar with his origins in the villas, was an easily appropriated symbol “para reaffirmar la creencia en la eficacia de los principios republicanos” (Rodríguez, “Pan, circo y algo más” 134). Menem went ahead and named Maradona the sports ambassador of his “revolución productiva” (Di Giano 111).

Meanwhile, the sport itself was being commercialized in earnest, with television profits, advertising revenues, and player salaries reaching new heights by the year. As the state withdrew from the project of national identity, the mass media was left to the task; commercial branding and television in particular took over the duty of crafting national sports mythologies from desperate dictators. The result was a nationalism reoriented from the state to the market, producing a “nacionalismo de mercado” that made citizenship into a simple act of consumerism (Alabarces, Fútbol y patria 32).

34 “Could we have imagined in the medieval era a servant opposing a feudal lord in a tournament? The answer is no.”
35 “to reaffirm belief in the efficacy of republican principles”
36 Menem’s political platform, known as the “productive revolution,” called for hard work and Christian morals.
Menem’s use of soccer was clumsy in that it did not use the sport as a political tool, but rather saw politics as a sport, “relegating discussions of the National to a question of sports and sporting events” (Alabarces, “Soccer and the Return of Argentine Politics” 33). “Se puede hablar de una futbolización de la sociedad,” Christian Bromberger said in 2001, reflecting on the discourse developed over the past few years. “Si antiguamente se comparaba el equipo a una empresa, con su patrón, sus directivos, sus ejecutivos, hoy en día se compara a la empresa o al gobierno a un equipo, con su capitán y con sus profesionales que tienen el sentido de la competencia y el sentido de la performance” (18).37 If a unified national voice persisted in soccer stadiums during the menemista decade, it was not because of an outpouring of national sentiment, but because every other area of national discourse was becoming increasingly divided due to a mounting economic crisis and various political tragedies, from the AMIA bombing to the pardoning of the juntas. Soccer was only ever an arena of civic participation because Argentines lacked other options, whether due to explicit dictators’ repressions or nebulous national identity crises in the wake of immigration. Even as his maneuver showed signs of success, civil society proved a far stronger option than Menem’s prescriptions for the country. Democratic protests rose alongside more localized, tribal loyalties in place of national complacency.

Unfortunately for Menem, his alliance between sport and state would become all too symbolically appropriate. The year privatization kicked in was also the year the Argentine selección began to falter, as Maradona captained the team to the final of the 1990 World Cup only to lose to West Germany. Four years later, the Argentine team went out in the initial group stage and Maradona was expelled from the tournament in disgrace after a drug test revealed he

37 “One can speak of a soccerization of society. If previously one would compare a team to a company, with its patron, its directors, its executives, today one compares a company or the government to a team, with its captain and its professionals who have the senses of competence and of ‘performance.’”
was using the weight-loss drug ephedrine. The hero’s celebrated picardía had been perverted into utter lawlessness as the nation was becoming disillusioned with a government they felt behaved the same way. All the while, unemployment and poverty grew.

Reflections on Maradona’s disaster rarely halted at the personal consequences for the athlete and rather extended the tragedy to contemplate the nation’s own disaster. Marchers protesting the aforementioned economic conditions explicitly invoked hope in their own fight against oppressive structures by analogy with what they saw as Maradona’s fight against persecution by FIFA. According to Eduardo Archetti, participants in a 1994 political rally followed the national anthem with Fito Paez’s “And Give Joy To My Heart,” a song widely associated with Maradona if not in fact written for him. A participant in the rally told Archetti, “There is hope in the song and there is hope today. We will win this struggle and all the strikes that will come in the future and, of course, Maradona will be back, next year, no doubt. FIFA will not crush him and the national government will not suppress our voices” (“And Give Joy To My Heart” 33).

However, many Argentines did not see Maradona’s doping as an organizational conspiracy but rather as their hero personally letting them down. In the “emotional contract” between the Argentine public and the pibe de oro, mercy ran out when Maradona’s ability to cause joy did. The media tended to fall on the more pessimistic side. “Ours is a country in which it’s the speculators who win, a country that violated its own constitution every time it felt like it. Yesterday, Argentina paid with Maradona [for] a way of life, of not heeding the law,” reporter Bernardo Neustadt wrote (qtd. Mason 146). “We just don’t know if we are capable of stability and of maintaining order,” Página 12’s Jorge Lanata also remarked (Nash). “Can we really be a
modern society that plays by the rules of modern countries, or are we just a boy from the poor barrio always thinking he can play by other rules, thinking he won't get caught?"

The connection between Maradona’s personal downfall and the nation coming to terms with its behavior as a society was not exactly prophetic of the events of 2001, but rather a characteristic observation of the inevitable economic depression and social crisis heading Argentina’s way. With Maradona retired into his role as a media star and Messi just starting to kick about Barcelona’s La Masia school, the crisis of 2001 brought the whole of Argentine society to its knees as a pileup of economic consequences left over from Menem’s policies. The crisis was a disaster for the nation, causing enormous job losses, erupting into rioting, and running through four presidents in just a few weeks. But where it marked a clear rock bottom for economics and politics, it also served as a landmark for the rebirth of the civil society that had been so brutally drained by the dictatorship and subsequent injustices. Reactions to the crisis involved practices learned at soccer stadiums—chants, tactics of resistance, and wearing jerseys—but they were moved into a purely political context. Soccer was not connected with the politics in question, nor was the sport serving as a distraction convenient to the powerful. Rather, the political sphere was reclaiming sovereignty as the outlet for civic participation that had been made to foment and develop in stadiums over the past few decades (Alabarces, “Soccer and the Return of Argentine Politics”). Tellingly, the Argentine elimination in the group stage of the 2002 World Cup was met with far less grief than Maradona’s downfall had been. It was not just that the 2002 squad lacked a similarly iconic figure, but that the sport was no longer needed as a vessel for national consciousness in the same way.

This is a problem for the globalized soccer industry, which relies largely on people expressing group membership—whether national citizenship or local tribal identity—through
acts of consumerism. When Pablo Alabarces wrote in 2004 that Argentina “more than ever before understands that citizenship and national identity are not determined by soccer victories or in the consumption of goods, whether a soft drink or an Argentine soccer jersey,” he was perhaps more idealistic than industry profit figures will justify (“Soccer and the Return of Argentine Politics” 37). Alabarces is certainly too quick to endorse without explanation the idea that citizenship exists outside consumption of state merchandising. At the same time, the underlying sentiment rings true: in the wake of a relatively successful emerging democracy, soccer has become less essential as an arena for national unity, and therefore its monetization must be focused on the club level. This shift, just as much as the superficial similarities in Maradona’s and Messi’s play, explains the commercial desire to replicate past eras’ conflation of selección and nación that so informs Messi’s derivative iconic image.

Companies’ business is to succeed at marketing, and yet fundamental challenges to this commercial narrative around Messi the “New Maradona” are possibly insurmountable. Most pertinently, whereas Maradona’s career synced beautifully with Argentine political needs and sentiments, Messi’s prime has been timed in tandem with a national politics that has no room for his story. His personal success as an international star, made possible by a trade to a European club, has accompanied collective loss in Argentina. His life story is in fact the incarnation of all the antineoliberal narratives put forth by the Kirchners, whose economically protectionist presidencies try to stave off this sort of national resource-drain. As María Graciela Rodríguez states, “[el] nacionalismo, entendido como condición necesaria de los proyectos de industrialización, requiere un Estado que garantice uniformidad y homogeneización entre sus habitantes” (“Pan, circo y algo más” 136).38

38 “nationalism, understood as a necessary condition of industrialization projects, requires a state that guarantees uniformity and homogeneity among its inhabitants”
As such, the neoliberalism of Menem could only exercise a nationalism that promoted the republican-fueled social mobility easily symbolized by Maradona, but the middle-class Messi who was exported through free trade to Europe is of no use to any antineoliberal kirchnerista nationalism. That antineoliberal nationalism is not just a rhetoric when it comes to the state’s relationship with sports: in 2009, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s government bought the rights to broadcast all Argentine first division games. The move both saved ailing clubs and put the nation’s most popular sport firmly in the hands of the state, riding the wave of increasingly popular local fandoms. The broadcast program’s name, Fútbol Para Todos (Soccer For All), indicates the populist sentiment attached to the sport by the government.

In addition to the sporting obstacles, from being sent off with a red card in his international debut to failing to win a World Cup, Messi’s success simply does not fit in that political environment. It is far too international and universal, rather than specifically argentino or rosarino. The difficulty in appropriating him as a national symbol is typical of a newly globalized industry. The menemista-style sale of the nation in the form of merchandising does not work in a world where Quilmes, the quintessentially Argentine beer, also runs ads in Brazil. Brands can very rarely afford to be specifically national when markets decline to respect international borders. Maradona was just as subject to this problem in his time, but the overwhelming political contexts in which he found himself negated the quandary.

Still, it is telling that after Maradona’s fall on the international stage, he reprioritized the local level and became an icon of Boca Juniors just as much as—if not more than—one of Argentina (Alabarces, “Maradona revisitado”). Boca Juniors is popular among urban workers, who make up most of its fan base and nearly all of its club mythology. It is considered an ambassador for the popular classes in much the way that clubs such as the Catalan powerhouse
F.C. Barcelona are ambassadors for their nations, rather than their states (Bromberger 26). It is appropriate that Maradona’s ultimate transfiguration took place on the club level. Where authoritarian models of government have fallen, states no longer require athletes to act as unifying figures, and the transnational economy needs stars’ appeal to bypass borders. As such, the club level has replaced the national level as a true mythmaking arena. The club as physical institution of local members, as is the usual model in Argentina, births Maradona at Boca; the club as international business with worldwide appeal, as is the usual model in Europe, births Messi at Barcelona.
The player as savior, an instrument of divine intervention in the worldly affair that is a simple soccer match, appears so frequently in the discourse of sports that Christian imagery often goes unchecked as a generic cultural background. The idea that Maradona and Messi have both been given the nickname “D10S,” when one can appear entirely seriously with a gold-leaf halo around his head and the other can only ever be revered in the exaggerated way of cartoons and memes, suggests a much more complex relationship with both the player and the divine than the ever present trope would imply. The appropriation of Catholic imagery in Argentine soccer is upon closer examination a rational, even calculated, political and cultural statement that bends an aesthetic tradition according to shifting moral needs.

To understand the portrayal of Maradona as saint and savior, an earlier appropriation of Catholic imagery for less than official church business must be taken into account. The
iconography associated with Maradona plays into the *santos populares* phenomenon outlined by María Julia Carozzi, in which uncanonized saints such as La Difunta Correa or Gauchito Gil are revered partially because of their unofficial status. Besides their lack of institutional recognition, Carozzi identifies several other commonalities that unite the *santos populares*: a violent death at a young age; reproducible images that facilitate devotion; and the invocation of “*un nosotros*” ("a we") on whose behalf they could be seen to be martyred.

Maradona is not an immediate fit, as he is alive and well, but elements of his legend enable the motif as outlined by Carozzi. A portrait by Argentine collective Mondongo gets at some of those elements. The *santos populares*’ violent deaths at a young age show up in the choice of materials that construct the portrait: by linking gold chains around nails, Mondongo both suggests the violent death of Christ so often invoked by Maradona as well as the *pibe de oro* appellation that has crystallized his youth. They also choose to portray Maradona at the height of his success, with a youthful grin, rather than as the decaying retiree he had become by the time the portrait was made. In a sense, much like the *santos populares*, Maradona is always youthful in the imaginary—thanks to his *pibe* status rather than to an early death. Mondongo also chooses an extremely familiar, iconic image, especially that emblematic eighties hairdo, which is as easily reproducible as the essentialized appearances of the *santos populares* on makeshift holy cards. The portrait recalls many an image of Maradona subject to devotion: his face tattooed on a fan’s arm, a collectible card displayed on an altar, an advertisement admired on the street. Finally,
while not martyred in a physical sense, Maradona is used as the bearer of many a *nosotros*: he is Argentina, he is the popular classes, he is Napoli, he is Boca. It’s a slight stretch, but the aesthetic functions brilliantly because Maradona occupies the zone of contact between the religious and the secular that *santos populares* also traverse (Sebreli 17). They invoke marginalized forms of devotion—superstition, paganism, and idolatry—and revere socioeconomically marginalized people, but place themselves firmly in the aesthetic tradition of an established religion.

Maradona was not the first “secular saint” to link socioeconomic and religious marginalization. The religious imagery around beloved first lady and political icon Eva Perón, whose “cult” was even more in line with the *santos populares* in that she did in fact die at a young age, preceded the career of Maradona by decades. “Santa Evita” was explicitly the saint of the poor, specifically of the industrial working poor. Her embalmed body was laid out for public viewing in the Confederación General del Trabajo (a national trade union federation) building for two years, where she received many a pilgrim in the ostensible palace of the workers. The reverence of Evita makes explicit the link between the marginalized and their heroes, while the particular manner of that reverence in the *santos populares* mold suggests the phenomenon’s utter modernity. Evita’s transfiguration was necessitated by the same need for ritual accessibility as Maradona’s. Their devotees are responding to a structural transformation that was exacerbated in the second half of the twentieth century, rather than invented or noticed all of a sudden in the 1960s.

That said, the sheer longevity and the recent renaissance of the *santos populares* indicate an utter lack of such religious accessibility in the Argentine religious landscape—that is to say, until quite recently, in the Catholic Church. This question of devotional and ritual accessibility
has been the key issue in both Argentine religious developments and in Catholic institutional
discourse for the past few decades, overlapping with the rise of the global soccer industry and the
idolization of the players to which this thesis is dedicated. As such, an examination of these
religious developments can be of aid in determining the reason for soccer’s shift into a ritual
role, beginning with the Catholic Church’s recognition of a certain institutional distance from
modern laity (non-clergy) at the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. The Council
addressed that distance spiritually, not by propagating new doctrine, but by highlighting the
existing Church teaching on the “universal call to holiness” among all members of the Church—
clergy and laity alike (Lumen Gentium ch. 5). There was also a more practical response to that
distance by expanding liturgical and aesthetic options, resulting in a liturgical reform that
drastically altered the average Catholic Mass. These liturgical changes included widespread
shifts from the use of Latin to the use of the vernacular; from celebrating the Mass ad orientem
(facing the east) to versus populum (facing the congregation); from wearing ornate regalia to
adopting more moderate vestments; and from worshiping with exclusively traditional music such
as plainchant to involving more modern local musical traditions.

But this Catholic liturgical push was accompanied by a contemporaneous diversification
of the religious landscape in Argentina, and in broader Latin America, that limited its success.
Catholicism’s overwhelming demographic majority began to erode in the 1960s, in part because
of internal challenges such as the polarization represented by liberation theology. However,
another major factor was the hugely successful movement across Latin America led by
Pentecostal Christians. Pentecostalism, named for the Christian event of Pentecost in which the
Holy Spirit descended upon early Christians bearing “spiritual gifts,” emphasizes direct
experiences of God. For those for whom Catholic liturgical reforms did not sufficiently alter the
fundamental structure of the Mass and the roles played by clergy and laity, Pentecostal liturgy presented a dramatic alternative in which lay participation is the central component.

Pentecostal laity are expected to act as vessels of the Holy Spirit, showing forth those eponymous spiritual gifts that the clergy (known as ministers, rather than priests) are there to facilitate. The spiritual gifts of faith healing and of speaking in tongues\textsuperscript{39} are distinctively central for Pentecostals, while their theology is otherwise evangelical Protestant (holding to the inerrancy of Scripture and the need to accept Christ as one’s personal savior). The latter’s exclusion of devotions such as reverence for the saints and for Christ’s mother Mary, which are traditionally popular among Latin American Catholics, has sparked a sort of syncretic movement in which Catholics adopt Pentecostal-style liturgical practices while retaining their own Catholic theology. This liturgical shift is known as the “charismatic” movement within the Catholic Church. Because the national census does not solicit religious data, the precise number of Pentecostals and charismatics in Argentina today is unknown but it is estimated to be over 10 percent (Aasmundsen 15). Meanwhile, Pentecostals and charismatics comprise 28 percent (156.9 million people) of the population in Latin America (Pew 2006).

Pentecostalism has grown in Latin America largely among populations who see themselves as marginalized both by society and by the Catholic Church, such as those of indigenous or African descent. In Argentina, the marginalized group looking toward Pentecostalism is the urban poor, the same group that has long turned to alternate religiosity such as the previously sketched devotions to santos populares in search of more accessible and self-reflecting rituals. Converts from Catholicism to Pentecostalism often say they are attracted by the

\textsuperscript{39}“Speaking in tongues,” as it is called among many Protestant Christians, or glossolalia as it is otherwise known, is the rapid vocalization of unintelligible speech-like syllables. Traditionally, Pentecostals believe it marks a person as having been truly baptized “in the Holy Spirit,” as they characterize the disciples of Jesus at the original Pentecost. Other charismatic Christians regard it as a personal rather than universal spiritual gift, and many Christians do not center the phenomenon in their beliefs at all.
latter church’s structure, which involves not only less hierarchy but more local ties. Catholic priests are usually assigned to communities and even countries to which they are foreign, for instance, while Pentecostal ministers tend to be from the places they serve (Mintz). In addition, Catholic priests in Latin America are often from an educated elite of white European descent, unlike frequently unlettered and impoverished Pentecostal leaders (Masci).

In short, Christian religious movements are succeeding in Argentina insofar as they align not just their liturgy but also their structure with the needs of the masses that perceive themselves as marginalized by existing religious institutions. Yet despite the genuine religious fervor to be found in Pentecostal, charismatic, and traditional Roman Catholic communities alike, the majority of Argentines do not express religiosity by traditional means. That is, 76% of Argentines attend religious services infrequently or not at all (Mallimaci), and so it is not unreasonable to seek a movement toward liturgical and structural intimacy outside of a strictly religious context. In the same decades that Christian liturgy has gradually fallen out of public favor, with the exception of intensely reformed or alternative churches, the secular ritual of soccer has consistently grown in popularity. Many of the characteristics of Pentecostalism’s rise have clear parallels in that of soccer, and the sport’s ritual dimension is a useful case study in discerning the shifting needs of the communities—national and socioeconomic alike—that have displaced if not outright replaced religious rituals with secular ones.

Just as Pentecostal liturgy has been found attractive for its emphasis on unmediated lay experiences with God, soccer can be understood as possessing a high level of ritual accessibility. As Pablo Alabarces points out, the concept of “ritual” suffers from an unnecessary religious connotation and from the assumption that rituals are always homeostatic actions (“Fútbol: la afirmación ritual de la identidad” 78). However, he asserts, ritual is in fact a useful idea in
analyzing social cohesion, particularly in its secular and modern manifestations. Soccer is one of those manifestations, and in a country where stadiums and sports bars fill much more on Sundays than churches do, it is one of the most crucial. According to Eduardo Archetti, Argentine soccer exhibits the essential elements of ritual: it is a repeated sequence of events governed by an internal logic that engages with larger symbolisms (“Futbol y ethos,” 6-10). But it entails a distinct spectator-performer relationship than that common to many Christian liturgies, even to a certain extent the Pentecostal one, where an ordained minority structures the central action. In soccer, most spectators will have played the game and can therefore imagine themselves in the central actors’ place (Mason, viii). This experience of personal participation allows for a particularly intimate ritual accessibility that is uncommon in Christian liturgy by design.

Soccer also shares with Pentecostal liturgy a popularity among the urban poor, and a tendency to rearrange existing social hierarchies in order to place that demographic at the ritual’s moral if not economic center. Where Pentecostalism allows the poor to reclaim a Christian faith that was increasingly identified with political and socioeconomic elites, soccer was appropriated by the popular classes from British and creole elites over the course of the twentieth century (see Introduction). The sport’s popular character allows it to become an accessible space for the masses, a space to seek out and lift up heroes that are as marginalized as they are—whether by religious or by sociopolitical institutions—much in the santos populares mold. This milieu explains the cultural ability to conflate someone as aggressively impious as Maradona with Christ.

The arc of Maradona’s personal life certainly provides superficial parallels to that of Christ, and he took on the association time and time again. When he was expelled from the 1994 World Cup and shamed worldwide for his drug use, he characterized FIFA bureaucrats and
sports journalists as his crucifiers (Sebreli 166). His return to soccer at Boca Juniors the following year made for a glorious resurrection. The loving tribute he would later receive at that club in 2001, marking his retirement upward into his role as ubiquitous media presence, showed all the marks of an ascension. The analogy became so popular that Maradona’s birth became the subject of a “Nativity” legend in which he was said to be born kicking (Burns 9).

The popular fusion of Maradona’s personal story with Argentine national discourse (see Part II) allows for one easy explanation of the parallel’s logic: if Argentina is like Maradona and Maradona is like Christ, Argentines could have hope for an eventual triumph just as those two men did. But Maradona’s idolization was not merely a national phenomenon. In fact, the projection of Catholic imagery onto Maradona began in earnest in Italy, while he played for Napoli. There “San Genarmando” took on the bishop’s attire of Neapolitan patron Saint Gennaro, or else “Santa Maradona” wore the crown of the Madonna dell’Arco, a local Marian devotion (Sebreli 165). The most famous song dedicated to Maradona, by French-Spanish band Mano Negra, appealed to the latter image: “Santa Maradona, priez pour moi!”

In less glorious moments, Maradona adopted the association as a personal tool in his own media narrative. He used the rhetoric of martyrdom later in his career, calling out FIFA and media organizations among others as his “crucifiers,” and eventually even the media took up his habit identifying with the suffering Christ. Consciously or not, the camera began to see

[Image of a person lying down, possibly injured]

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40 “Saint Maradona, pray for us!” The song, “Santa Maradona,” is an exception among the hymnography, which has mainly been constructed by rockeros from a similar socioeconomic background to Maradona. Julio Lacra’s “Dale, diez,” Charly García’s “Maradona blues,” Riky Maravilla’s “El baile del rey,” and Juan Carlos Baglietto’s “Vengan a ver” all evoke less of a worshipful Christian tone than that of an ancient ballad dramatically recounting the deeds of gods and heroes.
him through an eerily iconographic lens, as in this photo of Maradona’s fracture after a vicious tackle in a 1983 match between Barcelona and Bilbao. The identification became nearly habitual, until Maradona’s sanctification and even deification reached its apex with the establishment of the Iglesia Maradoniana in 1998 during his last glory days with Boca Juniors. The group’s ceremonies, which superimpose soccer imagery on otherwise aesthetically Catholic liturgy and replace mentions of Christ with Maradona, have the cinematic effect of conjuring up a fanatic cult (“Football as a Religion”). There is an element of truth to that, but in reality, the Iglesia’s activities are occasional gatherings of what Juan José Sebreli has aptly called a “virtual community:”

La deificación llegó a su grado máximo con el invento de la Iglesia maradoniana, una comunidad virtual con adeptos en Argentina, México, y España, fundada en 1998 por Hernán Aráoz y Héctor Campomar con el objetivo de «mantener la pasión y la magia con que nuestro Dios juega al fútbol». Celebran el 29 de octubre la nochebuena y el 30 la navidad maradonina, y en esa oportunidad los oficiantes vestidos con los colores del seleccionado argentino elevan una pelota al cielo con la inscripción «Dios» y la firma de Maradona. Se hizo una versión del padrenuestro y del credo adecuada al nuevo dios y se instituyeron diez mandamientos. El primero dice: «Nuestra religión es el fútbol y como toda religión ha de tener a Dios. … Nuestro Dios es argentino y se llama Diego Armando Maradona». Otros mandamientos ordenan «defender los milagros de Diego en todo el universo», y obliga a todos los fieles a agregarse Diego como segundo nombre y llamar así al hijo varón (166-167).

41 “The deification arrived at its apex with the invention of the Maradonian Church, a virtual community with adherents in Argentina, Mexico, and Spain, founded in 1998 by Hernán Aráoz and Héctor Campomar with the goal of ‘maintaining the passion and the magic with which our God plays soccer.’ They celebrate the nativity vigil on October 29th and the Maradonian nativity itself on the 30th, and on that occasion the officiants, dressed in the colors
It is only according to this kind of spiritual social justice that accompanies the *santos populares* instinct that Maradona’s unlikely sanctification is excusable. To revere him is not to make a statement about his moral character as defined by the religion of the elite, but about his capacity to incarnate the values of this appropriated ritual space. His failure to meet traditional standards as a moral hero or saint makes him as marginalized by religion as the masses perceive themselves to be, and so his impiety instead becomes an argument for his very heroism. Blasphemy is rather the point. When León Ferrari scrawled the First Commandment across the front page of *La Nación*—“No haréis para vosotros ídolos,” he paints over the faces of athletes, economists, and politicians—he gets at the core of this alternate morality offered by soccer as a ritual space. As Ferrari implies, sports, like money and political power, are easily made into “idols” and “false gods.” In the logic of Christian rituals, though, soccer fans have a moral advantage over other “blasphemers” in the sport’s entirely sensory nature. Morally consequential blasphemy requires a level of transcendence that soccer cannot, and does not try to, achieve.

Soccer as a refuge for those discontented or marginalized by Christian churches has a surprisingly formative history. Elite anxieties over soccer as a potential and actual replacement of the Argentine national team, elevate a ball to the sky with the inscription 'God' and the signature of Maradona. They made a version of the 'Our Father' and the [Catholic] creed fitting for the new god and they instituted ten commandments. The first says: 'Our religion is soccer and like all religions it must have a God. ... Our God is Argentine and his name is Diego Armando Maradona.' Other commandments order adherents to 'defend the miracles of Diego in all the universe,' and oblige all the faithful to add Diego as their second name and to give this name to their sons as well."

42 “Do not make idols for yourselves” (Leviticus 26:1)
for Christian liturgy as a default cultural ritual is at this point a well-known cliché. For many years, it was sport-governance policy to push the two apart. In Britain, the Football Association spent decades discouraging the popular Sunday soccer leagues—known as the “Continental abomination” for their origins in Western Europe—which served as spaces of resistance via recreation for non-churchgoers on “public house” teams and Jewish teams alike (Murray 117).

The policy, and the cultural attitude behind it, was not just a knee-jerk reaction against the impious or a show of organizational power. It was a moral statement in the face of the rapid popular appropriation of the game. Soccer’s elite British propagators considered it a moral tool in public education and personal health alike, insisting that “bodily health and vigour” be connected with spiritual wellbeing (Arnold 66). “The moment we disjoin them from the idea of a perfect spiritual condition, and pursue them, as we do pursue them, for their own sake and as ends in themselves, our worship of them becomes as mere worship of machinery, as our worship of wealth of population, and as unintelligent and vulgarising a worship as that is” (Arnold 66).

But in the 1980s, by which time the average Englishman had long abandoned churchgoing and the game was associated less with spiritual wellbeing than financial gain and emotional catharsis, Sunday was set aside for the English league’s biggest matches. In Buenos Aires, which inherited the sport and its cultural baggage from the British for so many years, soccer eventually came to redefine the time formerly known as the day of the Lord as well. As Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz wrote in 1931, the year professional soccer began in Argentina, “El domingo porteño es tristemente célebre por su tedio. Ahora, por lo menos, están los profesionales de fútbol” (132).43 This apprehension over Sunday soccer mistakenly treats the sport as the cause of, rather than as an alternative to, social exclusion and disillusionment in a religious context. It recalls missionaries’ self-defeating tirades against paganism and devil

43 “The Buenos Aires Sunday is infamous for its tedium. Now, at least, there is professional soccer.”
worship in that the discouragement and prohibition of rituals is precisely what gives them social power (Taussig 43).

That widespread if not actually ubiquitous slide from Mass to match, from religious to secular ritual, is now so culturally cemented as to often go unremarked. “El estadio urbano fue frecuentemente presentado como el santuario del mundo industrial. Esta aproximación no es meramente metafórica, si prestamos atención a los sentimientos y actitudes que este monumento urbano provoca” (Bromberger, “Las multitudes deportivas”). The grass of the playing field, to be touched by no one but the participants, is treated by fans as a kind of sacred ground. Viewing the game itself is considered a moral obligation for the most fervent hinchas, echoing the Christian commandment to keep religious observance on Sunday. Indeed, watching the game each weekend entails many of the ritual elements of a liturgy—flocking to a particular space, engaging in a local community, employing standardized gestures and chants, celebrating a set of shared moral assumptions—without the crucial element of a religious ceremony, which is a belief in the supernatural transcendence of the event. It is pure form, an entirely physical and sensory encounter accompanied by intense and fleeting emotions in a morally innocuous context.

“It is precisely this bounded emotional fervour, this seeming rupture from the everyday, that has led many to interpret football as a form of lay or pagan worship,” David Goldblatt writes (904).

The homologies and parallels between the two are now thought so obvious, so commonplace, that a satellite television broadcaster could, without irony, advertise its coverage by claiming ‘football is our religion’; ‘cathedrals of football’ is a sporting cliché across Christendom. ... The language of football is suffused with this self-understanding:

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44 “The urban stadium was frequently presented as the sanctuary of the industrial world. This approach is not merely metaphorical, if we pay attention to the sentiments and attitudes that this urban monument provokes.”
the suffering but still the faith of the fans, the season as liturgy, the player cast as divinity or demon (904).

Where Christian rituals revere a God that gives order to creation, the rituals of soccer redirect that reverence into an insistently ephemeral recognition of inherent chaos. They are structured to allow the spectator to make peace with anarchy (the trope of the “soccer gods” is mostly a metaphor for chance) and injustice (if the “gods” can’t be blamed, there’s always the referee). These rituals provide a realistic type of catharsis that is sufficiently in demand to attract perhaps the largest body of faithful among the weekend liturgical competitors, and the players who inhabit this context are associated with the values formed in those rituals. The rituals of soccer further distinguish themselves from Christianity, which purport to participate in the life of a larger “body of Christ” throughout the world, by taking on a purposefully untranscendent nature. Goldblatt continues:

Shorn of metaphysics the roar of the football crowd is no song of praise for deities; it announces the birth of Durkheim’s living cults, the celebration of the miracle of our own solidarities, innumerable imagined communities of class, ethnicity, nation, region, neighbourhood, and community, struggling to be born (904).

Providing a space for the identity formation and celebration of the masses is precisely where soccer, and its “deities” such as Maradona, makes itself useful. As a ritual space undominated by traditional mandates, soccer allows for “la canonización de valores preexistentes a través de un proceso de generalización” (Rodríguez, “El fútbol no es la patria” 42). In the case of Maradona, this means that the demographic that reveres him—largely male, Argentine, urban, and poor—saw him as an opportunity “para construir una ingenua autoglorificación” even

45 “the canonization of preexisting values by way of a process of generalization”
occasionally in spite of the man (Di Giano 139). The sanctified Maradona as a phenomenon was made possible only by a widespread willingness to sacrifice an authentic narrative for a collective sentiment, erasing inconvenient parts of Maradona’s life (such as his eventual wealth and gender transgressions, as analyzed in Part I) in order to provide the sought-after recognition and solidarity.

If Messi is capable of providing a similar symbolic touchstone for unity, it is not in Argentina. His personal narrative lacks a compelling “nativity” (as previously mentioned in Part I, his middle class origins are thoroughly unromantic), but more significantly it does not enter into the moments of suffering that made Maradona’s idolization so powerful. As François Brune theorizes, “Un dios petrificado en su pedestal es inaccesible, por el contrario el héroe que falla (en su vida profesional o privada) permite al espectador, después de identificarse con él, engrandecerse con sus hazañas” (20). Messi has not fallen from his pedestal. He could never said to have been “martyred” or “crucified,” as Maradona alleged he was by FIFA and the media. His most memorable public moment of suffering thus far has been his shame at winning an individual award at the 2014 FIFA World Cup after Argentina failed to win the top prize, which is hardly an entrance into relatability and empathy. If anything, Argentine religious discourse around Messi has taken on an ironic tone: he is a “saint” only in the way one writes off an overly well-behaved acquaintance, an “altar boy” more than a god. The religious banter surrounding Messi falls back into sincerity only in Catalan, the language of the city of his club team, F.C. Barcelona. There, he is known as “El Messies” (“the Messiah”) and occasionally simply “Déu” (“God”); the impassioned fan is known to tweet out a “Leo gratias” (imitating the Latin for “thanks be to God,” or “Deo gratias”). There is a reason Messi usually wears his Barcelona

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46 “to construct a naive self-glorification”
47 “A god petrified on his pedestal is unaccessible, on the contrary a hero who falls (in his personal or professional life) allows the spectator, after identifying with him, exalt himself with his feats.”
jersey in his caricatured godly appearances: outside the boundaries of that club, there is no particular default audience for which he is utterly symbolic.

That narrative discord and lack of a receptive audience shed light on why Messi’s interactions with religious discourse have never developed into a “cult” in the same way Maradona’s did, but they are not the full story. Much of the difference between the two processes lies in a fairly simple explanation: charisma. Like the charismatic movements their popularity accompanies, Maradona and Messi inhabit an extremely personality-driven landscape and the latter lacks anything like the former’s pull. Their interactions with Pope Francis are particularly illustrative, but then, nothing could have been so perfectly calibrated a foil as an Argentine soccer fan on the throne of Peter. Ever since the Pope’s election, memes have drawn the three as an Argentine “Holy Trinity”: a Father (Maradona), Son (Messi), and Holy Spirit (Francis) ready-made for media theatrics (Juncal).

Maradona, for his part, took the opportunity to reunite with the Catholic Church after a long estrangement. He had sparked a media feud with Pope John Paul II over the Church’s wealth, named the Argentine church among his “crucifiers,” and felt alienated from religion after his mother died. At one point he began to sound like many Argentine converts to Pentecostalism, saying, “La Iglesia es un negocio, el Papa un político, pero Dios es otra cosa. … Creo en Dios, sólo en Dios. Línea directa con el Barba” (Sebreli 180). This never stopped him from a good

48 “The Church is a business, the Pope is a politician, but God is another thing. ... I believe in God, only in God. A direct line with the Beard.” (Maradona often called God “el Barba,” or “the Beard.”)
photo opportunity with the Pope, but it did leave him on the very public outs with the Church, until the election of Pope Francis gave him a comfortable moment for reconciliation. As he said upon embracing Francis at a soccer event at the Vatican, “Estoy muy conmovido por haberlo abrazado, por sentirme argentino y por volver a la Iglesia después de haberme alejado al perder a mi madre. Pero hoy estoy contento de reencontrarme con la Iglesia, con Francisquito y de jugar por la paz” (“Papa a Futbolistas” 2014). It was classic Maradona: construct a sweeping symbolic narrative over the course of a career, then get away with calling the vicar of Christ by his diminutive on global television. It requires magnetism, and Messi just does not have it. Because Messi, ever the unshakable altar boy, paid his respects to the new pope by presenting him with an olive tree, and that awkward encounter felt entirely appropriate. As one blogger put it, Messi “offers so little of himself that it’s difficult to fill in the blanks, though he does seem like the kind of guy who would meet the Pope and bring him a house plant” (Soccer Gods). With Messi there is no instinct to go beyond the surface, and not much assurance that there would be anything to find. Devotion to such an emotionally inaccessible figure would feel far too much like the distant liturgy this entire phenomenon is structured to avoid.

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49 “I am very moved by having embraced him, by feeling Argentine and by returning to the Church after having distanced myself from it when I lost my mother. But today I am happy to reencounter the Church, with Frankie, and to play for peace.”
Conclusion

It bears repeating Pablo Alabarces’ point noted in the introduction to this thesis: soccer is not gender, ethnicity, class, nation, or faith. It is not any more inherently alert to these phenomena than any other realm of cultural output. It is not an opiate or a religion. It is a game. And that is precisely why any ability to analyze social and cultural values within it is possible: it has no moral force of its own. Soccer has only the cultural meanings assigned to it by its participants, and society at large.

In the contemporary Argentine context analyzed here, those cultural meanings have manifested themselves as persistent social values in the face of tremendous political and economic change. As noted in previous chapters, foremost among these values is the ever more tightly grasped moral economy that informs Argentines’ relationships with globalized soccer. The priority placed on local, collective prosperity over individual success has manifested itself as a communal resistance to soccer as one of many cultural products seen as under siege by neoliberalism and globalization. Yet another value is the definition of citizenship as participation in institutions that provide mechanisms for social change or resistance, which has only included soccer when left with no other options in civil society. Finally, ritual accessibility in Christian and secular contexts alike is an increasingly prioritized value that expresses itself in reaction to established forms of religiosity across class lines.

The political and economic trends that have prodded these values—whether Menem’s privatization or the Kirchners’ intense protectionism and nationalism—fomented the use of soccer as a tool of reactive cultural expression, generally on behalf of “the masses” and specifically on behalf of the male working classes. The often blatantly artificial portrayals of Maradona and Messi in the resulting discourse speak to that scaffolding. While the selective
mainstream portrayal of Maradona circumvents his transgressions in the realms of gender and political hypocrisy for the sake of social convenience, that of Messi bypasses his utter personal dissimilarity to his purported predecessor for largely commercial reasons. The gap between the realities of these two people and their public personas reinforces the foundation of this thesis: very little about the cultural relationship at hand is a natural outpouring of either the sport, the country, or the players themselves. The subjection of Maradona and Messi to the cultural tropes in question, including local and national identity politics as well as Christian devotional discourse, is a function of cultural need.

While this thesis examines the ways in which players have been used as tools of cultural expression in Argentina, the process could benefit from further comparative study. Players who have become national icons in vastly different political and economic circumstances from those of Argentina, such as David Beckham in England or Francesco Totti in Italy, would make for particularly intriguing comparisons to Maradona and Messi in establishing the dimensions of this global phenomenon. The theme of the Anglo-Argentine rivalry in soccer and elsewhere, in addition to the importance of Italian immigrant heritage in forming Argentine culture, present England and Italy as natural comparisons on historical terms. However, perhaps more crucially, European countries find themselves at the “center” of the economic globalization processes against which Argentina and other “peripheral” nations are forming their social values. This imbalance in socioeconomic power, along with the religious variations among the countries, would allow for an expanded look at the role of perceived institutional marginalization in each culture’s myth-making. Another central factor to consider in such an analysis would be the changes in global capitalism itself over the past few decades, particularly with regard to the role of advertising and television in creating demand for certain commercial narratives.
The present study, however, cannot quite conclude within these pages. Maradona and Messi continue to make headlines. Term limits have Argentine voters on the precipice of establishing the country’s next political era. Pope Francis has only just begun to make a dent on the religious landscape. And the country’s economic future, like the globe’s, could change the game at any moment. What remains at the end of this comparison is not a definitive public role for the soccer icon of the moment, but an understanding that an analyst is in the same position as Argentine public when these large-scale shifts do come to pass. We will look to our myths to make sense of things.
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