

## BOOK REVIEW

Pablo Alabarces, *Fútbol y Patria: El fútbol y las narrativas de la nación en la Argentina*. (Prometeo Libros, Buenos Aires, 2002), pp. 227.

Even the most obdurately anti-football student of Argentine culture soon recognises the obsessive hold that the sport holds over Argentines. In this book, the author makes a distinguished contribution to the growing literature of football in the Americas, presenting a series of insights into the development of the discourse of football in Argentina. Starting from an examination of Argentine football's roots as a sport of English expatriates in the late nineteenth century, Alabarces develops a thesis that football in Argentina is the prime cultural producer of national identity in the early twenty-first century.

Key to his analysis is a re-evaluation of the early history of Argentine football, and the presentation of that history in national film productions during the Peronist years of the mid-twentieth century. Alabarces' argument about the use of football as a motor for generating values of national identity specific to the political projects of the period is underlined by his attention to filmic revisions of the foundational myths of Argentine football, as his critique of the 1950 film *School of Champions* makes plain. The film, erroneously displacing the Argentine popular classes as the prime dynamic in the growth of Argentine football (to be substituted by upper class English players of the Alumni club), altered historical fact to present a 'melting-pot' vision of Argentine society suited to the corporatist nature of the Perón governments from 1945-55.

This concern with national identity, and the use of football to provide its central elements, is clear in Alabarces' fascinating revision of the rise of Estudiantes de la Plata, from weak provincial club to world club champions, in the late 1960s. Whilst readers may be familiar with the tales of violence and intimidation surrounding Estudiantes' contests with Manchester United in 1968, it is unlikely that they will have had the opportunity to assess Argentine opinions of the period about that contest. Alabarces not only presents us with intriguing contemporary Argentine media commentary, but also underlines the developing responses in the Argentine media to Estudiantes playing style. Far from displaying the 'classic' Argentine style highlighted as an indicator of Argentine national identity from the 1920s on, Estudiantes 'machine-like' pressing game and high-level of physical intensity was first viewed with suspicion, then widely applauded in the wake of their astonishing success in the late 1960s. Alabarces views this discourse around Estudiantes playing style as proposing a modernistic national identity based not on individualism, but on a collective, modern, 'industrial' type, signalling a modernising Argentina moving forward on its development path. This view was clearly forwarded in popular media accounts of Estudiantes success, although it was summararily

dispensed with after a defeat by AC Milan in 1969, during which the violence of the Estudiantes players was condemned even by the Argentine government.

As Alabarces, and others, have noted, contrasting playing styles in Argentine football is notably symbolised by the distinct football philosophies represented by the two World Cup winning coaches Menotti and Bilardo. In light of Alabarces' comments on playing style as a symbol of national identity in Argentina, we might conclude that continued debates in Argentina over the merits of Menotti and Bilardo's football philosophy have remained significant is precisely because they do indeed present two variants on Argentine national identity.

Aside from issues of playing styles, though, Alabarces also posits an argument with a broader relevance than that of the Argentine case. He suggests that in a country where the state has substantially withdrawn from a role of large-scale economic activity, and where national identity seemed to have been linked directly to a national state which 'provided' for its citizens, a void in terms of national identity has been left as we enter the twenty-first century. For Alabarces, Argentine football now operates as a transmitter of cultural values, to some degree replacing – thanks to its 'televisual imposition' – a much diminished public education system in that function. Alabarces argument is convincing, and seems to have much potential for a comparative study with other countries – particularly less developed countries – where the effects of neo-liberalism and intensified capitalism characteristic of the late twentieth century have often decimated fragile local economies and encouraged the withdrawal of the state from policies aimed at citizen well-being. Alabarces' focus on such issues in Argentina is perhaps the strongest aspect of the book and is clearly enhanced by his analysis of the discourse of Argentine football over the long-term. This linkage between past and present both allows the author to develop his contemporary perspective on a sound historical footing, and to present the historical evidence in the light of subsequent developments.

In short, *Futbol y patria* is a welcome addition to work on Argentine football, whilst also suggestive of productive avenues for new comparative work on issues of sport and national identity in the early twenty-first century.

**Laurence Allan**  
**Institute of Latin American Studies, London**