The 1920s saw the emergence of a distinctive, new urban culture in the city of Buenos Aires. Although this culture did not extend to the borders of the nation, it was a national culture in the sense that it continually manufactured and reproduced images of Argentine national identity. Research conducted over the last two decades has greatly improved our understanding of this new culture. We know that it was, to a great extent, forged in the city’s new, outlying barrios where manual workers lived side by side with skilled workers and members of the middle class. The relatively strong performance of the Argentine economy during these years made social mobility a more realistic aspiration for more people than it had ever been before. Partly as a result of this economic reality, the new barrio culture revealed a less militant attitude on the part of porteño workers, a trend visible as well in the significant decline in membership and effectiveness experienced by labor unions. But the new cultural milieu reflected more than just economic prosperity; it was intimately tied to the birth of a mass culture disseminated by radio, cinema, and tabloid. In particular, the 1920s witnessed the commodification and massification of tango and football, two popular cultural practices that were now transformed into quintessential representations of Argentinidad.
The consolidation of a distinctive, porteño culture during this period is, in part, a story of immigrant assimilation. The first two decades of the twentieth century had seen the formation of a foreign-born working class whose alienation from electoral politics and from mainstream Argentine society facilitated the rise of a fiercely combative labor movement. In this context, Argentine elites, politicians, and intellectuals worried about the lack of a cohesive national identity. A strongly nationalist curriculum in the public schools was one solution to this problem; a legal and military crackdown on anarchist labor organizers was another. The issue took on even greater urgency after 1912, when the Ley Sáenz Peña inaugurated Argentina’s first experiment with an open, competitive electoral system based on universal male suffrage. Its self a response to the crisis in national identity, the electoral reform necessitated the transformation of the children of immigrants into loyal, patriotic Argentine citizens. But what education, repression, and politics could achieve only in part, the mass culture of the 1920s seemed to accomplish far more thoroughly. By that time, a new generation of native-born children of immigrants had emerged, ready to embrace Argentine national identity, the dream of upward mobility, and the new mass cultural commodities.

Nevertheless, assimilation does not necessarily entail the construction of homogeneity or the erasure of social conflict. The children of immigrants became assimilated Argentines, but the nation they joined was hardly a harmonious community of equals. The mass culture embraced by this new generation produced versions of Argentine national identity that subordinated ethnic differences to national unity but often foregrounded divisions based on class. The capitalist logic of mass cultural production led to the commercialization of class solidarities, as producers sought to develop commodities that would appeal to masses of lower-class consumers. Yet elite and middle-class Argentines were often scandalized by the result. This article will explore these processes by examining the national images produced by media coverage of international football matches during the late 1920s. Although it is not surprising that Argentine football teams in international competition were often described as the representatives of national identity, these descriptions produced complicated and contradictory effects.

Scholarship on sports, and particularly football, in Latin America has often stressed its socially integrative function. In her classic study of Brazilian football, Janet Lever argues that the sport’s “paradoxical ability to reinforce societal cleavages while transcending them makes [it] the perfect means of achieving a more perfect union between multiple groups.”3

According to Lever, football unifies Brazil by offering a safe and sanctioned arena for the expression of social conflict. In a similar though less optimistic vein, scholars have identified the tendency of football “to further the hegemonic interests of the government in power and the respective model of development it sought to actualize.” As these scholars have demonstrated, Latin American governments, from populist regimes like those of Getulio Vargas and Juan Perón to the military dictatorships of the 1970s, have harnessed the popular appeal of football in order to advance their own political projects. In these accounts, it is the massness of football, its capacity to fill stadiums with thousands of spectators, that makes it a useful hegemonic tool. In this sense, football represents one example of a familiar phenomenon in the history of Latin American popular culture. As the cultural practices of poor people are disseminated and repackaged by the mass media, they are sanitized for a heterogeneous, multiclass audience, and they lose their oppositional meanings. In this form, they are available for nationalist appropriation by the state. Of course, subversive readings are still possible at the point of reception, and mass culture can occasionally provide the ingredients for cultural resistance. But for the most part, scholars have depicted the transformation of popular culture into mass culture as a step in the process of hegemonic nation building.


5 On the hegemonic appropriation of popular music, for example, see Robin D. Moore, Nationalizing Blackness: Afro Cubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), esp. pp. 6-8. More generally, for a nuanced account of the tension between mass culture and popular culture, see Rowe and Schelling, pp. 7-12. On the question of reception, see Jesús Martín-Barbero, De los medios a las mediaciones: comunicación, cultura y hegemonía (Mexico City: Gili, 1991). For an account of Argentine football that is sensitive to the ways in which national identity can be constructed from below, see Pablo Alabarces, “Fútbol argentino: Un cacho de culturas,” in Pablo Alabarces and María Graciela Rodríguez, Cuestión de pelotas: Fútbol, deporte, sociedad, cultura (Buenos Aires: Atuel, 1996), pp. 17-33.
Mass cultural representations of Argentine football from the 1920s present a more complex picture. In this initial moment of massification, before the state had begun to co-opt and control spectator sports, the meanings associated with football were contested and in flux. Fans encountered the sport through both hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses. While the traditional porteño press—newspapers like *La Nación* and *La Prensa*—presented football as a model of discipline and proper behavior, the football coverage in *Crítica*, the city’s most popular tabloid, was steeped in populism.6 These diverse representations reflected the ongoing conflict over Argentine national identity. By celebrating the good sportsmanship of athletes who represented the nation, the traditional press promoted a version of national identity that served hegemonic interests. By contrast, *Crítica*’s sports section employed a gendered and racialized discourse that accentuated class divisions. The paper’s enthusiastic accounts of the exploits of lower-class football players produced images of Argentinidad that subverted the dominant social hierarchy and made support for the national football team a potentially oppositional or counterhegemonic gesture. And yet *Crítica* did not embrace this discourse completely. The tension between social control and subversive populism was visible even within that paper’s football coverage. As a result, the powerful national images disseminated in *Crítica*’s sports pages were ambivalent and unstable, an instability that reflected and reproduced Argentina’s simmering class tensions.

Brought by the British in the late nineteenth century, football emerged as a significant mass entertainment in Argentina during the 1920s.7 During these years, a preoccupation with national identity infused mass media discourse on the sport. As Eduardo Archetti has shown, it was in this period that the notion of a criollo or native Argentine style of football was developed and disseminated. Archetti has analyzed this discourse as it appeared in the pages of the weekly sports magazine, *El Gráfico*, in which journalists argued not only that Argentines had become exceptionally skilled at the game, but also that the way they played it revealed certain essential aspects of the national character. The Argentine style of football, they wrote, had as

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5 My usage of the terms “populist” and “populism” draws on Ernesto Laclau’s definition of populism as a discourse in which “popular-democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc.” In this case, football, a sport of the popular sectors, is articulated with an explicitly anti-elitist nationalism. See Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: NLB, 1977), p. 173.

its central characteristic the art of dribbling, which foregrounded the individual player’s cunning and creativity, his ability to single-handedly evade opposing defenders. Argentine players were crafty, wily, imaginative—in contrast to the British, whose play was more rigid, machine-like.⁸

This discourse on Argentine football was not unique to *El Gráfico*. At least as enthusiastic in their description of criollo style were the sports reporters of *Crítica*, Buenos Aires’s most popular nightly newspaper. Founded in 1913 by Natalio Botana, *Crítica* began as a rather typical evening daily. But the newspaper reinvented itself in the 1920s when it embraced the sensationalist techniques of Hearst and Pulitzer and thereby transformed the Argentine journalistic landscape. With its attention-grabbing headlines, its extensive reporting on crime, its detailed coverage of porteño nightlife, and its many other innovations, Botana’s paper achieved tremendous popularity. By October 1924, *Crítica’s* average circulation was 166,385, putting it in third place among Buenos Aires’s many dailies; by the end of the decade, the paper was selling more than 300,000 copies per day.⁹ *Crítica’s* vertiginous growth was enabled by the massive expansion of literacy that followed modernization, economic development, the diffusion of public education, and the coming of age of a generation of Argentine-born children of immigrants. Like the romantic “weekly novels” published in the mainstream press and the growing number of publishing houses specializing in inexpensive books, *Crítica* addressed itself in large part to these new readers.¹⁰

In her recent book on *Crítica*, Sylvia Saíta reveals that the newspaper built its audience through two complementary strategies. On the one hand, the paper pursued “expansion through specialization,” continually generating new sections in order to appeal to distinct groups of potential readers.¹¹ Thus, *Crítica* included not only sections on sports, food, theater, film, and

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⁹ At roughly the same time that *Crítica* achieved a daily circulation of over 300,000, *El Gráfico* was selling approximately 100,000 copies per week. Clearly many more porteños encountered the discourse on criollo football style in *Crítica* than in *El Gráfico*. For *El Gráfico’s* circulation, see Archetti, p. 57. For *Crítica’s*, see Sylvia Saíta, *Regueros de tinta: El diario Crítica en la década de 1920* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1998), pp. 49, 73.  
¹¹ Saíta, p. 117.
business, but also a psychoanalysis section, a construction guide, a section on pets, and columns on each of Buenos Aires’s barrios. The newspaper’s internal diversity reflected its effort to capture as wide and heterogeneous a readership as possible. On the other hand, during the 1920s, Crítica adopted a consistent editorial pose as “the voice of the people.” The paper typically employed this language in a vague and inclusive manner, using its circulation figures as evidence of its status as the true representative of popular interests. But Crítica’s populism also pushed it into an explicit alliance with the working class and the poor. In 1923, Crítica distinguished itself through its outspoken support for Kurt Wilckens, the anarchist who assassinated Lieutenant Colonel Héctor Varela in retribution for the latter’s role in the brutal repression of striking workers in Patagonia. Throughout the remainder of the decade, Crítica supported Argentina’s labor unions, organized charity drives on behalf of the needy, and repeatedly presented itself as a defender of the poor. In the sports pages, this self-presentation resulted in a distinctly populist twist on the discourse on criollo football style.

Like El Gráfico, Crítica consistently emphasized the distinctive style of football played in Argentina (or in the Río de la Plata region, since Uruguayan football was often included in these descriptions). A series of contests between Argentine and European football teams during the 1920s brought the nationalist elements of this discourse to the fore. In addition to matches played in Argentina against visiting European teams, the European tour of the Buenos Aires-based Boca Juniors in 1925, as well as the participation of an Argentine team in the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam, provided excellent opportunities for national comparisons. In a typical article, Crítica contrasted the “picardía y astucia” of Argentine players with the stiff, almost robotic style of their opponents, a visiting Scottish team called Motherwell. In its coverage of international competitions, Crítica frequently described the Argentine teams as “ambassadors” for the nation as a whole. On the eve of Boca Juniors’ departure for Europe, for example, the paper spoke of the team’s patriotic mission: “A través de tierras extranjeras este grupo de deportistas argentinos va a pasear el altivo pabellón de la patria.” Crítica’s reporters sought to give their readers an intimate connection to the traveling players by emphasizing the bonds of national identity that joined fans and athletes in a cohesive community. Towards this end, the paper printed a note hand-written and signed by the Boca players during their

12 Saítta, pp. 55-90.
13 Saítta, pp. 65-70.
14 Crítica, 5/14/28, p. 5.
15 Crítica, 2/4/25, p. 13. For Boca Juniors as “ambassadors” see, for example, Crítica, 2/5/25, p. 13.
trans-Atlantic journey, in which “los footballers argentinos” send their greetings to “todos los aficionados argentinos.”16 In his description of the journey, Crítica’s reporter noted that the players brought tango records with them, and he pointed out how wonderful this “música criolla” sounded on the sea.17 Likewise, the paper’s coverage of the Argentine Olympic football team in 1928 included photographs of the players dancing tango with each other in order to entertain themselves “lejos de la patria.”18 These recurring images deployed Argentina’s most popular musical and dance genre in order to depict football players as representatives of the national community. On another level, photographs of football players dancing in single-sex couplings called attention to the explicit masculinity of this representation of the nation; women were clearly not integral to the proceedings. Unsurprisingly, the national identities constructed in Crítica’s sports pages were heavily gendered. Masculinity, most typically in the form of “virilidad,” was an essential characteristic of the football player as national prototype.19

Crítica described all of Argentina’s football players as criollo, regardless of their ethnicity. In fact, the newspaper never drew attention to the ethnic origins of Argentine athletes. The Provincia team that played Motherwell included such surnames on its starting roster as Bearzotti, Talenti, Tornatti, and Lunghi and yet was described by Crítica’s columnist as “un cuadro de muchachos criollos.”20 While the creators of Argentina’s football style were, to a great extent, the sons of European immigrants, this fact did not seem noteworthy to Crítica, nor did it disqualify them in any way for the role of national representatives.21 In fact, the newspaper frequently described ethnically diverse football players as representatives of a distinctive Argentine race. Crítica thus proclaimed that the Boca Juniors’ European tour would demonstrate “el admirable empuje de la sangre argentina”

16 Crítica, 2/6/25, p. 4. These notes were printed in other papers as well. See, for example, La Prensa, 2/4/25, p. 19.
17 Crítica, 3/18/25, p. 7
18 Crítica, 6/13/28, p. 2. See also Crítica, 6/9/28, p. 12
19 More research is needed on the consequences for women of the exclusively masculine national identities constructed around football. For one suggestive interpretation, see Donna J. Guy, Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), pp. 190-192.
21 Archetti shows that Gráfico’s journalists, Borocotó and Chantecler, did discuss ethnicity. While Borocotó argued that immigrants became criollo by virtue of their contact with Argentina, Chantecler developed a melting-pot theory, in which each immigrant group contributed something to the criollo style. See Archetti (1999), pp. 66-70. Notwithstanding these analyses of the origins of criollo football style, Crítica’s day-to-day coverage of the sport never mentioned Argentina’s ethnic diversity. Regardless of its origins, the criollo style was seen to belong naturally to any player who wore the nation’s colors.
and the “guapeza . . . de esta nueva raza argentina pletórica de energías.”

Similarly, when Argentina and Uruguay tied in the final round of the 1928 Olympic tournament (Uruguay would eventually win the rematch), Crítica interpreted this demonstration of Rioplatense football superiority in explicitly racial terms: “Y ésta es la lección duradera que deja el partido: la seguridad de que, ante la decadencia de la juventud europea, América acriosa su vigor racial dando un ejemplo magnífico de fuerza y de cultura.” Of course, the notion of an Argentine race was not unique to Crítica. Since the nineteenth century, Argentine intellectuals of all political stripes had been preoccupied with assessing and improving the nation’s racial qualities whether through social reform, immigration restriction or explicitly eugenic measures. Crítica’s sports reporters drew on this well-established discourse of race and deployed it toward nationalist ends. By racializing, and thereby reifying, the contrast between Argentine and European football players, the newspaper constructed a cohesive nation out of a diverse group of players and, by extension, a diverse population. That the attribution of Argentine national and racial identity to the sons of European immigrants made sense to Crítica’s readers demonstrates the extent to which the assimilation of the major ethnic communities had been achieved by the 1920s.

As Archetti shows, the discourse on criollo football style identified the British as “the relevant ‘other.’” Only by contrast with the British style did Argentina’s take meaningful shape. But Crítica’s football coverage revealed an internal other as well. The newspaper repeatedly contrasted criollo football players not only to the British, but also to the rich. This version of the discourse defined criollo football style as a creation of poor Argentines. In one typical formulation, the columnist José Gabriel argued that until Argentina developed a high culture worthy of export, the football played by “nuestra muchachada vulgar” would serve as the nation’s best embassy abroad. Similarly, following Argentina’s second-place finish in the Olympics, Crítica published a short piece by the leftist poet Raúl González Tuñón welcoming Luis Monti, one of Argentina’s star players,
back to the country.\textsuperscript{27} Entitled “La Pelota de Trapo” (prefiguring the famous film of the 1940s), the piece nostalgically evoked Monti’s childhood in a lower-class suburb of Buenos Aires, where he played with a homemade ball: “La pelota de trapo, sucia y descolorida, que muchas veces fue a parar tras de las tapias de los burgueses. . . .”\textsuperscript{28} For González Tuñón, Monti’s qualifications as a national hero clearly included his humble origins.

In another column, José Gabriel used a football game to construct the nation in opposition to the rich. The piece addressed an imaginary “señor muy aseñorado,” whose chauffeured car passes by the stadium just as one of Motherwell’s matches against an Argentine team is ending. As a multitude of 30,000 football fans pour into the street blocking his passage, the rich man is bewildered. He is entirely unaware of even the presence of a football field there, let alone of its significance. The columnist fills him in and goes on to explain just how important football and other mass cultural events can be: “El fútbol y el cine son los grandes espectáculos de nuestros días. Si no quiere reconocerlo, peor para usted. Pero, además, un partido de fútbol puede ser significativo. El de ayer lo era.” More than just the setting for a game, the stadium contains “la aglomeración de la alegría de un pueblo.”\textsuperscript{29} In this apocryphal story, the rich man has accidentally stumbled on a national community forged by football, a community that excludes him. \textit{Crítica}’s sports reporters celebrated lower-class football players as the creators of national style and the bearers of authentic Argentine identity, constructing a populist representation of the nation that followed logically from the newspaper’s self-definition as “la voz del pueblo.”

\textit{Crítica}’s everyday sports coverage advanced this populist nationalism through subtle rhetorical means, including the use of certain racial classifications. For example the newspaper’s reporters described Argentine football teams as “once morochos criollos” and often referred to the star player Manuel Seoane with his nickname, “el negro.”\textsuperscript{30} In so doing, they followed a popular linguistic convention whereby a general identification with subordinate racial groups could be used to express an anti-elitist, popular solidarity. Negro and morocho were epithets long applied by Argentine elites to people from the interior, whose darker complexions presumably revealed

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Crítica}, 6/15/28, p. 5. On the extensive participation of porteño modernists in \textit{Crítica} during the 1920s, see Saietà, pp. 157-188.  
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Crítica}, 6/15/28, p. 5. An impoverished childhood in a lower-class barrio, where football is played with rag balls on improvised asphalt \textit{fields} or \textit{potreros}, remains central to the mythology of Argentina’s football heroes. See Archetti (1999), pp. 180-189.  
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Crítica}, 6/4/28, p. 9.  
their mestizo origins. By the 1930s, when thousands of poor migrants from the interior poured into Buenos Aires to fill the new jobs in the country’s growing industrial sector, these racial insults were frequently applied indiscriminately to the working class in general. But if racial epithets were used to express the class-based prejudices of the elite, they were also available for populist reappropriation. Thus, Carlos Gardel, the great tango star of the 1920s, was popularly known as “el Morocho del Abasto,” a nickname that celebrated his lower-class origins by associating him with both a humble Buenos Aires barrio and a certain vague non-whiteness. This populist usage of racial terminology would figure prominently in Peronist discourse in the 1940s.31 But as early as the 1920s, Crítica’s sports reporters were able to employ racial classifications like negro and morocho to populist effect. In a move no doubt understood by their readers, they used the language of race to express class-based distinctions.

Both the extent and the limits of Crítica’s populism become visible if we contrast its football coverage with that of its principal competitors. The contrast is particularly vivid in the case of Buenos Aires’ older, more traditional, and more elitist newspapers, La Nación and La Prensa. While football occupied as central a place in the sports sections of these papers, the discourse on criollo style was far less dominant. Instead, La Nación and La Prensa mobilized an older discourse that associated football with the values of “fair play” and good sportsmanship. Dating from the 1880s and 1890s, when the sport was practiced in the private schools and elite clubs of the British community in Buenos Aires, this discourse stressed the importance of proper conduct over the pursuit of victory.32 Thus, on the eve of Boca Juniors’ departure for Europe in 1925, La Nación opined:

No interesa mucho que obtenga sonados triunfos en los países que visite. Si se logran, será agradable . . . pero es indudable que el Boca Juniors tendrá una función más importante que llenar en el viejo mundo: mantener la tradición.


According to *La Nación*, Boca’s trip had national significance because it would demonstrate not how well Argentines played football but how well they behaved on the football field. Moreover, the paper implied that the lower-class athletes who played on Argentina’s popular football teams ought to conduct themselves like the more elite men who played polo. This concern for the proper behavior of football players resulted from a sense that this increasingly popular spectator sport would invariably influence the behavior of the masses. As *La Nación* put it in another context, “El football es un sport educador. Puede serlo en el mejor o en el peor sentido.”

*La Nación*’s football coverage aimed to discipline the popular sectors and thereby reinforce the status quo.

*La Prensa* shared *La Nación’s* concern about the lessons football fans might learn from the sport. This newspaper’s reporters saw Argentina’s success in the 1928 Olympic football tournament as a badge of national pride, proof that Argentines were “un pueblo de grandes posibilidades.” But while celebrating Argentina’s football prowess, *La Prensa* stressed that the value of international competition lay in forging bonds of friendship between participating countries. Moreover, the newspaper strenuously condemned violence in football, arguing that sports must not be about winning at all costs, but about cultivating “el espíritu de caballerosidad, la disposición a reconocer los méritos del adversario que resulta triunfador.” In *La Prensa* as in *La Nación*, the good sportsmanship discourse clearly trumped jingoism, and sports reporters avoided drawing attention to the humble origins of Argentina’s football stars. Covering the international competitions of the 1920s, these papers could not resist the urge to cheer on Argentina’s teams, but they always tempered that nationalist enthusiasm with warnings about the importance of sportsmanship. Concluding its report on the massive rally that accompanied Boca Juniors’ departure from the Buenos Aires docks, *La Nación* seemed almost reluctant to wish the team success:

Acompaña al equipo del Boca Juniors la simpatía popular. Lleva los augurios más felices y porque es un propósito decidido de los jugadores y delegados desempeñarse de acuerdo con su tradición sportiva, no cabe sino ser inté-

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34 *La Nación*, 2/19/25, p. 4.
36 *La Prensa*, 6/5/28, p. 14. For another example of the notion that international matches were mainly useful for cementing ties between nations, see the coverage of Boca Juniors’ tour in *Caras y Caretas*, XXVIII:1383 (4/4/25).
Elementos del discurso de buenismo deportivo fueron evidentes en el periódico Crítica de la sección deportiva. Por ejemplo, el diario repitió las esperanzas de La Nación de que los jugadores de Boca Juniors honrarían al país jugando con “caballerosidad.” Sin embargo, en Crítica, el deseo por buen comportamiento fue generalmente eclipsado por el deseo para buen juego:

La misión [de Boca Juniors] es ciertamente delicada e importanteísima. Se trata de hacer conocer en los países más adelantados del universo el progreso indiscutible de nuestros deportes, representado por la muchachada viril y potente que vestirán los colores nacionales en esta cruzada sensacional.

The Boca Juniors players ought to behave themselves appropriately on the field, but Crítica also expected them to win games on behalf of the nation and, in so doing, to demonstrate their powerful masculinity.

La Nación and La Prensa were conservative publications that avoided big headlines and sensationalist journalism, and it is not surprising that their sports sections reproduced this conservatism. But even La Razón, a newer paper that explicitly addressed a popular readership, stopped well short of Crítica’s populist approach to football coverage. As Crítica’s main competitor for the evening audience, La Razón did embrace the discourse on criollo football style. This paper’s sports reporters, like their counterparts at El Gráfico and Crítica, defined Argentine football in opposition to the more “mathematical” British approach. British football teams, the paper argued, specialized in long passes and emphasized collective discipline over individual heroics, but they could not produce much excitement. The Argentine (and Uruguayan) approach to football constituted a new school, “la de la gambeta maravillosa y de la picardía que desconcierta.” And for La Razón, Argentina’s football style was not just more elegant and more exciting; it was also superior. But La Razón did not celebrate the lower-class backgrounds of Argentine players the way Crítica did. In fact, La Razón was far more likely to emphasize the importance of good sportsmanship. When the Argentine team qualified for the finals of the 1928 Olympic tournament, the newspaper congratulated “el caballerosco once nacional” not only for winning but also for representing the nation with dignity. In this account, the

37 La Nación, 2/5/25, p. 9.
38 Crítica, 2/4/25, p. 12.
39 La Razón, 5/14/28, p. 4.
40 La Razón, 6/7/28, p. 1.
players were “argentinos que utilizan el football como un medio de fortalecer sus energías, disciplinar sus fuerzas y templar su espíritu, muchachos nobles que prefieren la actitud correcta al desplante violento.” In *La Razón*, as in *La Nación* and *La Prensa*, football players were, first and foremost, models of disciplined, nonviolent behavior.

*Crítica* distinguished itself from all of its competitors by rebelling against journalistic norms of propriety in order to pursue a mass audience. In the sports section, this approach produced a populist nationalism that contrasted sharply with the restrained commentary of other newspapers. In the context of 1920s Buenos Aires, this populist nationalism must have helped sell papers, but it also created a problem. *Crítica’s* mostly middle-class journalists had succeeded in elaborating a rhetoric that interpellated the paper’s readers as a cohesive national community. But the rhetoric they used was inherently divisive; it highlighted the contrast between rich and poor Argentines. This strategy made good marketing sense, helping *Crítica* reach masses of working-class readers, many of whom continued to harbor class resentments even if they were less likely than their parents to support confrontational labor unions. But while *Crítica’s* reporters and editors were interested in increasing the paper’s circulation, they did not intend to sow the seeds of class conflict. Thus, the newspaper’s sports section oscillated between celebrating the criollo style of lower-class football players as representatives of “el pueblo” and reinforcing hierarchy by disciplining these athletes and holding them to the standards of good sportsmanship. This tension produced a nationalism whose meanings were shifting, ambiguous, and unstable.

This discursive instability was evident in the images of masculinity mobilized in *Crítica’s* football coverage. While its reporters applauded virility and aggressiveness on the football field, they were also careful to define those attributes in acceptable, non-threatening ways. Reacting to reports that a Spanish referee had encouraged violent behavior during a game because he believed football should be “viril,” *Crítica’s* columnist claimed that the Argentine notion of virility was quite distinct: “No podemos comprender que patearle la cabeza a un hombre sea hermoso ni viril.” Violence, he argued, was only justified when it was necessary to defend a woman. He

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insisted that Argentines, “los paisanos de los gauchos y repulsores de tiranías,” celebrated virility and “hombría.” But, echoing *La Prensa*’s insistence on good sportsmanship, he argued that these masculine values were reflected not in violence, but in healthy sport—“la inteligencia y la gracia puestas en juego para divertir y no dañar a nadie.”\(^{43}\) Similarly, *Crítica*’s notion of masculine virtue included honesty and keeping one’s word. Although the paper usually made a point of siding with players against management, on at least one occasion it harshly criticized a player for breaking his contract and switching teams. Denouncing this action as a threat to honor, discipline, and morality, *Crítica* depicted the player in question “ofre-ciéndose como cualquier milonguita aburrida.”\(^ {44}\) By likening him to the dancing girls for hire who were stock figures in tango songs, the newspaper ridiculed the player’s masculinity and defended the sanctity of contracts. In the interests of social order, then, *Crítica* strove to regulate the gender ideal it promoted, to keep masculine aggressiveness from erupting into violence or into an overt rejection of authority.

The ambiguity of *Crítica*’s populism was visible not only in the ways it defined acceptable masculinity, but, more generally, in the way it conceived of the interaction of players on a football team. The discourse on criollo football style, as it appeared in *El Gráfico*, *Crítica*, and *La Razón*, emphasized Argentine players’ superiority at dribbling rather than their capacity to work together as a team. This celebration of individual skills disturbed the Argentine Communist Party, which criticized both the nationalist and individualist characteristics of “bourgeois” sport and tried to develop its own football organization in order to foment working-class solidarity and collective unity.\(^ {45}\) But if this discourse was incompatible with orthodox leftist ideologies, its emphasis on the individual made it quite suitable for populist articulations. By calling attention to individual talents rather than to the accomplishments of the team as a whole, *Crítica*’s reporters were able to emphasize the players’ personal attributes, including their class backgrounds. In this way, the newspaper transformed football players into both national heroes and representatives of the popular classes. The paper’s coverage of Argentina’s matches against foreign teams was filled with descrip-

\(^ {43}\) *Crítica*, 5/24/28, p. 10.

\(^ {44}\) *Crítica*, 5/17/25, p. 14. For an example of the paper siding with players against management, see *Crítica*, 5/5/28, p. 10. In 1926, Natalio Botana served as President of the Argentine Football Association. For analysis of how this “conflict of interest” affected *Crítica*’s football coverage, see Saítta, “Fútbol y prensa en los años veinte: Natalio Botana, presidente de la Asociación Argentina de Football (febrero-agosto de 1926),” www.edeportes.com (Revista Digital) 8:50 (July 2002).

\(^ {45}\) Cristina Mateu, “Política e ideología de la Federación Deportiva Obrera, 1924-1929,” in Deporte y sociedad, pp. 67-86.
tions of individual heroics, which resonated unmistakably with populist nationalism:

El gol causó sensación. La picardía criolla una vez más se hizo ver en forma estupenda. El negro Seoane tomó la pelota... Cuando el contrario sajón se vino sobre Seoane, en tren de disputársela, el criollo abrió las piernas y la pelota siguió viaje.46

In this typical account, the Argentine player, Manuel Seoane, is not only distinguished ethnically from his foreign opponent (criollo vs. sajón), but the use of the nickname, “el negro,” emphasizes his popular origins. Seoane’s humble class status enables him to embody Argentine national style. On the other end of the spectrum, La Nación’s reporters often downplayed individual achievements, stressing instead the importance of harmony and cohesion. Celebrating the Argentines’ victory against the United States in the 1928 Olympics, La Nación declared that the team’s success was due to its determination “de eludir toda acción personal a fin de no sacrificar la obra colectiva.”47 Seen in this way, football served as a model of a harmonious, classless society.

But even though Crítica was much more likely than La Nación to celebrate individual performances, the need for discipline, cohesion and harmony also found expression in the paper’s sports section. In fact, Crítica’s reporters struggled to define the appropriate balance between the individual and the team. In two articles in May 1928, the paper attempted to account for a disturbing trend towards low scoring games. While both articles agreed that Argentine players were not shooting on goal enough, they saw this problem in very different terms. The first article suggested that the stylistic pendulum had swung too far, from a tendency to focus on individual skills like dribbling and shooting to an emphasis on collective play involving precise and frequent passing. By contrast, British players owed their success to the fact that the first thing they were taught was to put the ball in the net.48 The second article saw the problem in almost the opposite terms: Argentine players, it said, did not shoot enough because they were too worried about being fancy, too busy “entreteniéndose en excesivos floreos.” In this article, the British are singled out not for their powerful shooting but for their pragmatic commitment to teamwork: “Cada jugador, con verdadero concepto de la misión que le está reservada dentro de su team, trata de cumplirla en la mejor forma posible, no supeditándole en ningún caso a la eficacia práctica

46 Crítica, 5/17/28, p. 2.
47 La Nación, 5/30/28, p. 2.
48 Crítica, 5/5/28, p. 4.
Published only three days apart, these articles warned on the one hand that Argentine football had become too much of a team game and on the other that it was too selfishly individualistic. The newspaper thus promoted two contradictory ideals of behavior, first endorsing football’s individualist and populist appeal and then stressing the need to subordinate self-interest to the needs of the larger community. Of course, these contrasting interpretations might reflect a simple disagreement among reporters, rather than a more systematic editorial ambivalence. Crítica, after all, was hardly a model of internal consistency. Yet the newspaper’s tendency to undercut its own populist message suggests an underlying tension in its nationalist discourse. In any case, regardless of the intentions of Crítica’s editors and reporters, readers of the newspaper’s sports section received mixed messages.

The inconsistency in Crítica’s nationalism was particularly visible in its response to a fight that broke out between two Uruguayan players in an exhibition match held in Paris. In a piece entitled “Les sauvages sudaméricains,” the newspaper criticized the Uruguayans harshly for demonstrating such poor sportsmanship in front of a foreign audience:

Las rencillas y resentimientos deben ventilarse en casa, no en tierras extranjeras donde resulta fácil que quienes nos quieran mal supongan que bajo la apariencia cortés y culta de un sudamericano existe un indio indómito y salvaje. . . . Y ahí está lo mal de estas jiras. Antes de iniciarlas debía darse a los jugadores cátedra de buenas costumbres y educación. . . . [E]l hecho de ser un buen jugador de football no es un motivo para ser un mal educado.50

Sounding very much like La Nación or La Prensa, Crítica here defined violence as barbaric and sought to purge it from the national ideal.

Elsewhere in the same issue, however, Crítica’s cartoonist put a very different spin on the classic opposition between civilization and barbarism. The cartoon, entitled “El indio triunfa en Europa,” features a huge Indian, complete with dark skin, a beaded necklace and a feathered headdress, holding a football, wearing football shoes, and smiling triumphantly (see figure 1). In the background, four Europeans look on in bewildered astonishment. The caption reads as follows:

49 Crítica, 5/8/28, p. 9. In their discussion of Brazilian football, Rowe and Schelling emphasize that popular football style in that country valued improvisation and the art of the trickster over mere goal scoring. In this sense, Crítica’s condemnation of excessive fanciness can be seen as an effort to contain and discipline a popular style. Rowe and Schelling, pp. 138-9.

Published just as Boca Juniors’ European tour was beginning, this cartoon offered a much more sanguine assessment of European impressions of South American football players. Here, it was the athletic skill of the “sauvage sudamericain” that provoked astonishment, not his propensity to fight. While the cartoon poked fun at Europeans for being so foolish as to think

that Argentines and Uruguayans were Indians, it also embraced the figure of the Indian. In a sense, the cartoon merely echoed Crítica’s tendency to racialize the distinction between Argentines and Europeans. But by encouraging readers to identify with an Indian (if only in the context of a joke), the cartoonist employed the same populist technique used by sports reporters who referred to Argentine players as negro or morocho. The image of Argentine players as Indians defeating the Europeans represented a satisfying inversion of racial hierarchy, a reverse conquest of sorts.

The unrepentant populism of the cartoon and the disciplinary attitude of the anti-fighting article reflect the two sides of Crítica’s football coverage. The newspaper saw the sport as an opportunity to interpellate its mass readership as “el pueblo,” a national community defined in opposition to the wealthy. Emphasizing the humble origins of the players while celebrating their individual abilities, lauding their aggressive masculinity, and referring to them with racial epithets resignified as terms of endearment all served this project. At the same time, the newspaper did not reject completely La Nación’s more pedagogical and controlling discourse. If lower-class athletes were to serve as models of Argentineness, they needed to behave appropriately. Football’s capacity to provoke this split response was, I would argue, typical of Argentine mass culture in the 1920s. It was in this period that tango gained widespread elite acceptance and, as the image of touring football players listening to the music suggests, began to resonate as a symbol of the nation. Yet, tango also aroused deep suspicions on the part of the authorities, who sought to regulate the cabarets where it was played and danced, as well as the upper and middle classes, who only embraced the music and dance form once its transgressive gender politics had been sanitized. In the quest to build a national market, the burgeoning mass media of the 1920s—tabloids like Crítica, but also radio stations and record companies—harnessed the power of popular culture, even as they often tried to foreclose the subversive possibilities it contained. Nevertheless, the discursive instability that characterized Crítica’s football coverage suggests that such attempts to control the meaning of popular culture could never be completely successful.

The inconsistent populism of Crítica’s sports section had political implications, which the paper occasionally made explicit. During Boca Juniors’ tour, the newspaper ran an unsigned column on the visit paid by the Spanish King Alfonso to the visiting Boca players in Madrid. Crítica described the gesture as typical of the king:

52 Guy, pp. 142-156.
Es don Alfonso un monarca que ... pone especial cuidado en comunicarse con todas las representaciones populares que la casualidad le pone a la mano, dando ésta, con estudiada familiaridad, a cada uno de sus componentes y estrechándoselas tanto más efusivamente cuanto son más humildes.53

Crítica’s columnist thanked the king for his courtesy towards Boca Juniors, “una entidad popular argentina, salida de las entrañas del pueblo mismo.” But he pointed out that the king’s personal democracy contrasted sharply with the authoritarian policies of the Spanish regime. While the King acted like a friend to the poor, the Spanish people were oppressed by the tyrannical rule of Primo de Rivera. Moreover, the columnist argued, it was the naiveté of the Spanish themselves that allowed the King to maintain his popularity despite this glaring contradiction: “Ha conseguido hacerse, entre la masa ingenua y sensiblera que abunda en todos los países y singularmente en los latinos, una fama de rey campechano y democrático.” In this column as elsewhere, Crítica presented itself as the defender of democracy and of the interests of the humble masses, represented in Argentina by the Boca Juniors players. Yet, while the column spoke up for the rights of the oppressed Spanish people, it also criticized them for their gullibility, and it attributed this characteristic to “Latin” peoples in general. The masses, it seems, deserved democracy, yet their own shortcomings created the potential for demagoguery and tyranny. Just as Crítica’s sports section wavered between populism and social control, the paper supported the political aspirations of the masses even as it tried to guard against the potentially negative outcomes of popular political participation.

This attitude towards the political potential of the masses—the view that they were deserving yet untrustworthy—shaped Crítica’s analysis of Argentine politics. The same dynamic that destabilized the newspaper’s sports reporting resulted in its notoriously shifting political affiliations. As “la voz del pueblo,” the paper needed to identify with and defend the interests of the poor, but it needed to do so without undermining the social order. And as in its sports section, Crítica was unable to control completely the effects of its populism. The desire to prevent subversion and regulate the behavior of the masses led Crítica to oppose fiercely the Radical leader Hipólito Yrigoyen for most of the 1920s, a stance the paper shared with the conservative La Nación. Like La Nación, Crítica defended its anti-Yrigoyenismo as a commitment to law and constitutionality and against demagoguery, caudillismo and mob rule. As the paper put it in calling on porteño voters to support the

Socialists in 1922, “La gente decente debe votar contra la chusma.” Nevertheless, during the campaign before the 1928 presidential election, Crítica reversed itself and supported Yrigoyen’s run for re-election. As Sylvia Saítta has suggested, the paper probably had little choice; its self-definition as the representative of “el pueblo” gave it no alternative but to embrace the hugely popular candidate. In order to boost Yrigoyen’s chances, Crítica turned to the popular-national community constructed in its sports section. In an interview published by the paper on the eve of the election, the Argentine boxer Victorio Cámpolo declared his support for Yrigoyen. Using the former president’s popular nickname, Cámpolo declared “¡Me gusta el peludo de alma! . . . Todo el mundo lo va a votar: los obreros especialmente.” As a popular athlete, Cámpolo was already a representative of the less privileged masses; by singling out workers as Yrigoyen’s primary constituency, the interview reinforced the populist message of Yrigoyen’s campaign.

Yet Crítica’s anxiety about the political participation of the masses weakened its commitment to Yrigoyenista populism. Just five months after Yrigoyen took office, Crítica began to criticize the government, and the paper soon reemerged as one of the president’s most hostile opponents and a major proponent of the military coup of September 1930. In its attacks on Yrigoyen, the newspaper compared the president to the caudillos of the past, attacked him for his demagoguery and presented itself as the defender of civilization against the barbarism of the Radical government. The newspaper’s political inconstancy had again revealed the limits of its identification with the popular-national community it helped imagine.

Football had played an important role in that imagining. In the quest to expand its market, Crítica sought to construct a national community that it hailed as “el pueblo.” Towards that end, the paper celebrated the athletic abilities of lower-class sons of immigrants, particularly as they represented Argentina in international competitions. Emphasizing their humble origins, Crítica made these football players into representatives of the Argentine national ideal, even the Argentine race. The decline of the labor movement

57 Crítica’s effort to sell Yrigoyen as a populist was not limited to its sports section. On the paper’s attempt to resuscitate the reputation of the nineteenth-century caudillo Juan Manuel de Rosas and to link him with Yrigoyen, see Diana Quattrocchi-Woisson, Los males de la memoria: Historia y política en la Argentina (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1995), pp. 58-61.
combined with the persistence of class divisions and resentments made this strategy particularly successful in 1920s Buenos Aires. Yet, the newspaper’s commitment to this populist-nationalist representation was never absolute. In the sports pages, it existed uneasily alongside a more repressive discourse drawn from *La Nación* and other conservative sources. On the front page, *Crítica* was similarly ambivalent: in mere months, enthusiasm for the people’s candidate gave way to familiar denunciations of demagoguery and mob rule.

As *Crítica* launched its campaign to overthrow Yrigoyen, the newspaper looked for ways to maintain its populist and nationalist credentials. Once again, the paper turned to football. In late July 1930, just over a month before the military coup that would topple the Radical government, the Argentine national team was defeated again by Uruguay in the final round of the first World Cup football tournament, which was held in Montevideo. In *Crítica*, the loss became the occasion for an explosion of nationalist indignation. The newspaper blamed the defeat on the Uruguayans’ violent tactics and on the officials who allegedly favored the home team. Moreover, *Crítica* attacked those newspapers that were unwilling to accept its account of the game:

Nosotros sabemos que lo más elegante es siempre saludar la victoria del adversario y posar de deportistas. Pero desconfíe el público de ciertas actitudes elegantes porque suelen ser las más cómodas y las más convenientes. Muchas veces no hacen sino ocultar el interés de no perder la venta de ejemplares en Montevideo.59

Putting patriotism ahead of good sportsmanship, *Crítica* singled itself out as the only newspaper willing to risk its international sales in order to defend the nation’s athletic representatives. *Crítica* also used the occasion to attack its political opponents by denouncing, on its front page, an incident of vandalism committed against its offices: “[E]stimulando indirectamente al football extranjero en momentos en que nuestros muchachos daban todo su corazón en el estadio Centenario, un grupito klanesco e irigoyenista organizado por el diario ‘lacayo’ intentó un ataque veloz contra *Crítica.*”60 Even as other newspapers were insisting that football matches should not serve as an opportunity for politics or patriotism,61 *Crítica* sought to bolster its image as the defender of the people and to depict the Yrigoyen government as illegit-

59 *Crítica*, 8/1/30, p. 3.
60 *Crítica*, 7/31/30, p. 1.
61 *La Prensa*, 7/31/30, p. 14. *La Prensa* also argued that Argentina should not complain about the violent tactics used by Uruguayan players but should instead field a more manly football team capable of withstanding these tactics.
imate and anti-nationalist. Of course, populist nationalism was a weapon of only limited usefulness in a battle against demagoguery. Having celebrated Yrigoyen just two years earlier as the champion of the working masses, Crítica could not convincingly argue the opposite now. Instead, Crítica professed its loyalty to Argentina’s football team, wrapping its current political stance in the trappings of a less explicitly populist nationalism.

The images of national identity disseminated by the new mass culture of the 1920s did not transform Argentina’s diverse population into a harmonious community. On the contrary, many of these representations were fundamentally divisive. By turning lower-class sons of immigrants into national heroes, Crítica’s football coverage expressed an oppositional nationalism. The predominance of this discourse in Buenos Aires’s most popular tabloid reveals that although ethnic tensions no longer represented a significant obstacle to national unity, class divisions still did. In this early moment in Argentine mass cultural history, being a football fan, even a fan of the national team, could express and reinforce a populist, anti-elitist orientation. But even within Crítica, this counterhegemonic nationalism was often undermined by a much more conservative discourse on football reminiscent of traditional newspapers like La Nación. In the end, Crítica could not control the meanings of the nationalist images it had helped create. The populist connotations of football persisted throughout the 1930s and were available for mobilization when Juan Perón came to power in 1946.62 Perón’s populist and nationalist appropriation of football, like his use of other elements of Argentine popular culture, built on the meanings produced over several decades by an increasingly influential mass culture.

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