Leslie Ray argues that politics and football have always been inseparable in the land of the ‘hand of God’.

On April 18th, 2004 Diego Maradona was admitted to the Swiss Clinic in Buenos Aires in an extreme condition. A crowd immediately began to form outside and soon developed into a mass vigil of a quasi-religious kind – devotees clutched candles, Virgin Mary statuettes, Mary beads and flowers, and held banners declaring ‘Jesus in Heaven and Diego on earth’; ‘Diego of the soul, after so many joys, give us one more’; ‘God forgive the journalists, they know not what they do.’ For British observers, there was an obvious parallel to be made with the collective grief following the death of Princess Diana.

That ‘San Diego’ (St Diego) is much loved is no surprise in a country so crazy about football, but why such reverence? For huge swathes of Argentina’s working class, despite his dalliance with drugs, Maradona encapsulates their own religiosity, nationalism and political identity to an extent that would be inconceivable with a player in Britain. But while millions adore him, Argentina’s elite and its beleaguered middle classes bate him with an equal intensity for declaring himself a Peronist, as the presence of the populist demagogue whose presence still looms large over Argentine politics, decades after he was in power.

In Argentina, football is divided along political lines: if you are a Boca Juniors fan, you are likely to be a working-class Peronist; if you follow River Plate, you tend to be a middle-class radical, Argentina’s other main political grouping. The origins of this division are probably rooted in early twentieth-century differences of geography, wealth and nationality. Boca is the port area where the poor immigrant Italians first settled, while River Plate is in more affluent Liniers, in northern Buenos Aires, where the middle-class Spanish and Jewish tended to live. Radical River fans cannot forgive Maradona for his very public association with communism – he has a tattoo of Che Guevara displayed prominently on his forearm – and with Castro’s Cuba. Yet this support for Cuba has a nationalist, rather than an internationalist, slant; after a meeting with Fidel, Diego said of him: ‘He defended his flag, in Argentina we gave ours away to the United States.’

The twin tracks of nationalism and socialism have been constants in Argentina’s footballing history. The nationalism is easily recognized by England or Scotland supporters, as it mirrors their own. As historian Eric Hobsbawm has said, ‘the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people.’

England and Argentina have a World Cup history of great pitch battles: Michael Owen’s winning goal in 2002, David Beckham’s leg wave at Simeone, his subsequent disgrace and rehabilitating penalty, in 1998, England’s victory over Rattin’s hackers in 1986, when Sir Alf Ramsey called the Argentine team ‘animals’, and of course Maradona’s unforgottably crafty ‘hand of God’ in Mexico in 1986. Argentine fans are often keen to bring up this particular bone of contention with England than the Falklands/Malvinas War. For them, the stadium is not just a battlefield; it is also the terrain of class struggle, nationalist fervour and ecstatic religious experience. This is not unique to Argentina, of course, but the intermingling of these elements on the football pitch seem all the more obvious here.

Curiously, the founding of Argentina’s football clubs around the turn of the twentieth century would seem to be due in equal measure to the empire-building efforts of the British bourgeoisie elite and to the organising forces of socialism. The English names of major clubs are many: Racing Club, Boca Juniors and River Plate are Argentina’s three leading clubs. However, it is Newell’s Old Boys, from the Primera Division A, which has the strongest connection with England. It was founded in 1903 in honour of Isaac Newell, originally from Kent, who was the headmaster of the Anglo-Argentine College in the city of Rosario from 1883 to 1900, where he taught the boys the skills and values of this character-forming sport. In 1903 his son Claudio and
other alumni of the school founded Newell’s Old Boys in Isaac’s honour. The club’s red and black shield have prompted many Argentine anarchists to believe that its founders had anarchist sympathies, though the club’s official history stresses that in fact black was supposed to represent eloquence and red wisdom.

In Argentina Rosario is renowned for developing two great traditions: attacking football and radical politics. Gabriel Batistuta, Argentina’s star striker of the 1990s, learnt his football on the streets of Rosario, and his first club was Newell’s. An even more famous local boy was Maradona’s hero, a certain Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara. Che was in fact a keen rugby player, but chronic asthma forced him to abandon the oval ball in favour of the round one. His chosen position was in goal, so he could be close to his inhaler. In the 1940s – as today – most Argentine youngsters supported River or Boca, but Che, ever on the side of the underdog, decided to follow his local team, lowly Rosario Central.

Football was looked upon rather ambivalently by the theorists of the left. In 1917 the anarchist newspaper *La Protesta* condemned it as the ‘pernicious reducing to idiocy through the repeated kicking of a round ball’. But socialists and anarchists were in the forefront of Argentina’s new football enthusiasm. Founded in 1904, the Club ‘Mártires de Chicago’ (Martyrs of Chicago), later to become Argentinos Juniors and now in Primera B Nacional, was named in homage to the Chicago Haymarket Martyrs, hanged in 1886 for demanding an eight-hour working day. The Club El Porvenir (The Future), from predominantly working-class southern Buenos Aires, also in the Primera B Nacional, was founded by utopians; Chacarita Juniors, in the Primera División A, by the members of a libertarian library, appropriately enough on May 1st, International Workers’ Day. Independiente, also in the Primera, was another socialist club, so named because it considered itself independent of the factory in Avellaneda where its players worked.

As the twentieth century developed, football gradually divested itself of its British identity (though British referees were still invited to preside over matches to ensure that they were played in a proper, ethical fashion) and became increasingly associated with the urban working class of Italian and Spanish origin. The powerful forces of ‘fanaticism’ that football unleashed began to be exploited by politicians pursuing a nationalist agenda. Juan Domingo Perón loved football, but he also recognised the part it could play in building the nation. Perón wanted Argentina to occupy a more prominent role on the world stage, and he saw it as essential to modify the elitist profile of many of the country’s institutions, including sports, and open them up to the popular sectors.

In a 1998 article for *Entrepasados* magazine, Euge- nia Scarzarella describes how the Peronist government contributed to the expansion of sport: ‘Racing drivers, marathon runners, boxers and footballers received decorations and favours. New football stadiums and sports facilities were built. Children were given free entry to matches and special tournaments were organised under the aegis of Evita.’ Such forceful promotion of football, along with other sports, might have led to success at the 1950 World Cup, had the event not been held in Brazil, with whom Argentina’s relations were – not for the first or last time – rather strained at the time.

Perón had seen that soccer could play an important role in forging a modern national identity for Argentina, but it was later generals who were the most determined to tap its immense power. So it was that when Argentina hosted the World Cup in 1978 during the military junta of Jorge Rafael Videla, the so-called ‘Dirty War’ – perhaps the greatest battle between ideologies in Argentine history – was waged inside and outside the stadiums. The Junta had spent an estimated $700 million on the World Cup project, seriously increasing Argentina’s already large national debt. Although 60,000 foreign tourists were expected, only 7,000 actually turned up, most of whom were journalists. So the panicking government commissioned the American PR firm Burson & Marsteller to improve the country’s image. Theirs was the slogan that was seen all over Argentina during the ‘Mundial’: *los argentinos somos derechos y humanos* (‘we Argentines are upright and humane’) – a pun that subverted and downplayed the accusation that grave abuses of human rights (*derechos humanos*) were taking place in the country at the time.

The national side progressed all the way through the competition – not without controversy, as when they beat a suspiciously supine Peru team 6-0, eventually making it to the final against Holland, which was played at the River Plate Stadium. It was somehow fitting that the great showpiece event pitted against the Generals’ team a side from a liberal democracy whose ‘total football’ was more than just a tactical system, it was the egalitarian principle in practice, as every player was capable of playing in every position, with commitment, empathy and without hierarchy. Mixed among the sea of blue and white banners, and the occasional orange one, were others drawing attention to Argentina’s thousands of ‘disappeared’. The cameras strained to avoid them, but by this stage it was too late, the cat was out of the bag. Every day during the World Cup, despite attempts to silence them, the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Disap- peared had walked silently and courageously around Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, their white headscarves embroidered with the names of their missing loved ones. Amid the fuss
surrounding the final – with thousands demonstrating their passion for the game, others their outrage at the Junta’s repression – the great but irredeemably elitist writer Jorge Luis Borges showed his utter disdain for the whole event by intentionally calling a conference on the theme of immortality on the very day, at the very time, that the Argentine team was playing. Few attended.

Argentina won 3-1, and the head of the Junta, Videla, gleefully handed the trophy to captain Daniel Passarella. Glory then, but anger or indifference now. Last year, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the victory, a palpity crowd of just over 6,000 watched a match between a current Argentine side and a team including three members of the 1978 World Cup winning side. Once again many held banners inside and outside the stadium denouncing human rights’ abuses. One banner read, ‘Inside they played a World Cup. Outside, a country was being lost.’

One irony of Argentina’s victory was that the team’s manager was Cesar Luis Menotti, who has never made a secret of his left-wing views. Menotti has always been understandably defensive about his work in 1978. He has said ‘Revolution is not made by footballers, musicians or actors.’ He was on tour in the USSR when the coup that brought Videla to power took place in 1976, and he has since confessed that he hesitated over whether to return to his country or go into exile. Return he did, his high profile and match-winning importance to the regime keeping him safe, despite his views.

Angel Cappa is a former midfielder and coach, and was Menotti’s right-hand man when he managed Boca Juniors in 1987 and later Atlético Madrid. What makes Cappa unusual for a footballer is that he is truly a soccer intellectual, a professor of philosophy and sociology, who has written a number of books on the sociological aspects of the beautiful game. He is also the living demonstration of the fact that socialist ideas are still alive and well in football. Cappa believes with former Liverpool manager Bill Shankly that ‘football isn’t a matter of life and death; it’s much more serious’. In an interview earlier this year he criticised the way that European soccer drains Argentina of two hundred players a year:

Eduardo Galician once said that the South sells not only arms to the North, but also legs. The centre of world footballing power has a permanent ‘factory’ of players in South America and other marginalised regions, some of whom are already in Europe without ever having played in our own premier leagues. At best, in their countries of origin they are only ever seen on TV. This is nothing but total dependency on the centres of economic power.

In December 2001, at the peak of the social upheaval in Argentina, when thirty people were killed and hundreds injured as the government struggled to maintain the rule of law, the decision was made to allow the final day’s matches on the fixture list to be played – thus ensuring that Racing won the championship for the first time in three decades. Three years later, this still arouses Cappa’s bitter condemnation:

It was disgusting. A cruel way of accepting that money is what counts most for those in power, perhaps it is the only thing that counts. Undoubtedly it was television, and the other sectors profiting from Racing winning the championship after so long, that needed the matches to be played. It’s one thing to sell products taking advantage of fresh euphoria and quite another to allow too much time to pass. Money has no patience. The same happened with the bombs in Madrid on March 11th [2004], when some Spanish teams didn’t want to play in the European tournaments, and were forced to, with the whole country in shock. If anything were needful to show that all they care about is money, that is the proof.

Today Argentina’s stability is precarious, but at the time of the millennium it was a country in ferment. Many factory owners, unable to meet their debts, abandoned their businesses. Faced with no jobs, the workers at a number of factories decided to run them themselves. One of these was Zanon, in Neuquén, Patagonia. In the late 1990s Zanon had a trades union leadership that was corrupt and complicit with the bosses. Surprisingly, it was football that enabled a group of activists to wrest the control of the unions from the bureaucrats and plan the factory occupation. Syndicalist Raul Godoy tells the story:

We decided to hold a soccer tournament, with every sector of the factory taking part, as there was much rivalry between them. There was a team for each sector, and each team had its own delegate, so there we took advantage to talk to everyone. We talked about organising the tournament, but we also began to chat about other things, the problems in the factory. So a network formed within the factory with comrades from different places, and we were able to find out their views, when we went to play, because you were not allowed to talk openly inside the factory. That’s how it came about. First it was matches, nothing more, every Sunday spent barbecuing sausages, selling beer and playing football. It was tough, but it was worth it, because it meant we were eventually able to organise.

Even though a hundred years have passed since some of Argentina’s first football clubs were founded by left-wingers, the country’s soccer socialists are still organising.