Violence and corruption, a network threatening Argentine football

Javier Szlifman
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More than a hundred years ago, Argentine football was a spectacle starred by its players. There were no major stadiums or grandstands. The matches were not broadcasted on TV. As time passed, the teams started to grow, and so did the amount of fans who followed them. The major media gave the game the boost it needed to become a passion of the crowds. Nowadays, Argentine fans not only cheer and support their team but they also play a leading role as an element of the sports spectacle.

In this sense, the French anthropologist Christian Bromberger (1995) argues: "The fans play three roles which they combine and assume, with a greater or lesser intensity, in the different moments of the game: they watch the match, they act, they make the show". These characteristics of the fans are functional to the television cameras, which find, in this way, a festive environment which helps to shape a better show.

In Argentina, for more than 20 years, the media have highlighted and legitimized the passion of the fans. Many of you may have heard about the passion of Argentine football. The most important match between Boca and River is now a show known worldwide due to the passion and color which come from the stands. However, this way of experiencing football coexists, for the Argentine fans, with violence and death, which are often present in the stadiums. Organized groups of Argentine fans, known as "hooligans" [barras bravas] have taken their violence and their businesses to unsuspected limits only until few years ago.

In Europe, football violence is mainly embodied in the infamous British hooligans, who have become known worldwide since the 1960's due to their excesses. But this violence carried out by British fans has been controlled in recent years. However, in Argentine football, the first death motivated by a football game occurred 87 years ago. Such violence, far from coming to an end, has been continuously increasing since that time. Today, for many news media, sport violence in its various expressions is a distinctive feature of Argentine football, which coexists with passion on a daily basis.

Julio Grondona has been the vice president of FIFA since 1987, and president of the Argentine Football Association since 1979. In a few days he will probably be re-elected for 4 more years. During his chairmanship of 32 years so far, 156 fans died in football-related events.
This violence in Argentine football is today not only limited to those participants who are directly involved, such as the hooligans, but organizes links between these groups, the media, club managers, players and political power. This network of support and complicity represents a potential threat to Argentine football.

Pedro Demby is the first deceased person in the history of Argentine football. He was murdered in 1924, after the game between the national football teams of Uruguay and Argentina played in Montevideo. In the midst of a fight among fans from Argentina and Uruguay, one of the participants took a revolver, hit Demby in his head and then shot him twice, killing him. At that time, violence and death appeared in the media of the time as a novelty, as something strange and alien to the world of football.

However, in 1924, there already existed the complicity among hooligans, players and club managers. The suspicions of murder would then fall on a well-known Boca fan protected by the club’s goalkeeper and who had traveled with the Argentine delegation. After hiding in the Argentine hotel, the attacker fled to Buenos Aires by boat, evading the police. Suspicion for the protection he got reached the very Argentine president at that time, Marcelo T. de Alvear.

Since the early twentieth century, the media in Argentina named the attendees to the stadiums with terms such as "people", "spectators", "public", "crowd", "fanatics", "sympathizers", "supporters", "fans". Hooligans were separated from the whole and were identified, at that time, as isolated individuals who were described as "undisciplined", "messy" or "troublemakers".

In 1958, the death of Alberto Linker in a match between Vélez and River, caused by a policeman, would highlight in the newspapers, the presence of organized groups of supporters, who fought violently against the police. 53 years ago, it first appeared in the newspaper La Razón, the term "strong groups" [barras fuertes] to identify groups of fans with a mild internal organization with leaders, hierarchies and links to club managers. For some journalists, the police was already inefficient when it came to preventing incidents in the stadiums.

With the death of Héctor Souto in 1967, the most important Argentine media began to speak of the so-called "barras bravas". This phenomenon coincides in time with what happened in England, the birthplace of both the sport and the hooligans. The 1966 World Championship in that country was the setting for the large-scale emergence of violent groups in British stadiums. In that tournament, England defeated Argentina in the quarterfinals, but in terms of violence both countries were neck to neck at the time.

In 1968, 71 Boca fans died after a match against River, amid riots and avalanches. Nothing changed after such a tragedy.

In 1969, Julio Grondona was the president of a club named Arsenal, and was suspended for assaulting a referee. In 1977, Grondona would again attack another referee. The violence was not exclusively related to the fans.
As time went by, the "hooligans" of Argentine clubs were seen by the media and fans themselves as more concerned with their economic interest than with the encouragement and love for their club. These hooligans are associated in journalistic discourse, and in many of the fans’ thoughts, to the mob, to violence, to business and to death, as opposed to real fans, who are far from any commercial interest, and are driven by the passion associated to the encouragement of their team.

The 1978 World Cup, played in Argentina, was a time of consolidation for the hooligans. Two years before, after the death of two fans in Santa Fe, the dictator who ruled the province said publicly that there was a need to control the violence, since the World Cup was coming close.

The military dictatorship solved the problem of violence with an agreement with the most important hooligans of the time. Similar meetings would take place for the 1982 World Cup in Spain. The aim there was to fight Argentine exiles attempting to claim for the violation of human rights in the country.

These contacts between the military dictatorship and the hooligans further consolidated these groups of fans, which displayed all their violence in the early 80’s. Only in 1983 Argentine football suffered five deceased people and over 300 injured fans. Incidents which before had been considered marginal events, relegated by the game, were now at the forefront of the chronicles.

For over 20 years, most of the press has identified the "hooligans" as groups with high internal organization which are institutionalized in Argentine football. They are, plainly, "criminals". Being a "barra brava" would become a job, a chance of survival in itself. Some steal, others sell drugs, others collect money from players and managers, others work for political leaders and unionists. And violence is already becoming a real threat for the continuity of the show.

In 1990, English football had already suffered the Hillsborough Disaster, where 96 fans died at a stadium. The stage of effective fight against hooliganism was starting. Argentina experienced a reverse process. Not only did the incidents and deaths not stop, but also it became visible, in the media, that the chain of responsibilities expanded even reaching the managers of the different clubs and also political leaders. They were publicly accused of supporting hooligans with money and favors. These incidents were already considered a structural part of Argentine football.

Julio Grondona said in 1990: "We, the managers, are the first to know exactly who the hooligans are, along with the police and the journalists. We assume our responsibility to eradicate these people from the stadiums completely" (La Nación December 18th, 1990). After being called by the government, in 1990 the managers pledged to give no more free tickets nor buses nor any kind of support to the hooligans. But, only a few days later, Argentine newspapers reproduced the criticism of the police, motivated by the lack of cooperation shown by the managers to implement new policies to
combat violence.

four yaers after, the death of two River fans after a match against Boca represented, due to its brutality and impact, a milestone in the history of Argentine football. That day, the murderers acted in a planned and premeditated way, and attacked their rivals with weapons of war, with the intention of killing them.

Antonio Alegre, then president of Boca, acknowledged to the press that he gave free tickets to the hooligans in return for not causing trouble and not attacking managers, coaches and players (Clarín, May 27th, 1994).

Ulises Fernández died in 1997. He was a supporter of Huracán. That fact meant, for the press, the definitive emergence of a new concept in Argentine football: the violence as the norm. "One important match, one deceased" was the headline used by the newspaper La Nación after that death. Since then, football was not any more, for the media, a festive space. The incidents would definitely occupy the headlines every time they occurred. The novelty was not that the violence was the main item in the press, but that its presence was already considered a normal fact.

The different actors linked to football violence would be gradually identified by the media as parts of a network of complicity and responsibility which supports the hooligans.

The new millennium started with the death of two fans in an Argentine route after a brawl between supporters of River and Newell’s. "I do not know what to do with violence," confessed Julio Grondona (La Nación, April 22nd, 2003).

In these times appears a powerful new expression in the media, which is in force today: "The business of violence". This expression accounts for a phenomenon which involves different elements in the world of football, such as fans, cops, and managers who profit from violence in the stadiums. While the victims mourned their dead, others turned the fighting into a form of profit. The police would sometimes allow incidents to increase their income. The more the violence, the more the money the managers should pay to try to prevent it.

As a symptom of these businesses in dispute, the hooligans would, in the last years, fight other supporters of the same club. This is motivated by the dispute for the money which is to be distributed among these groups.

A clear example of this phenomenon was the murder of Gonzalo Acro, a River fan, in 2007. Acro was shot dead by other River supporters. That night, their team was not even playing. Acro was an employee of River and enjoyed a very good salary. He was part of one of the two groups vying to control the whole group of fans. These hooligans did business selling tickets for the matches at the club’s stadium, and also sold official clothing. They may even have received money due to the sale of players like Juan Pablo Carrizo, former goalkeeper of Argentina’s national team, and Gonzalo Higuaín, now in Real Madrid. It was estimated that the gangs were fighting for a monthly income of 50,000 euros. That was what the ‘barra brava’ collected.
"A grandstand with genuine fans" was the headline of a newspaper after the first game played by River following the death of Acro. It tried to emphasize that those who occupied the stands were the ones who actually loved the team. That day, the hooligans could not go into the stadium. That day, in the press, the news was that no violence was reported. Incidents were considered normal, and its absence was highlighted.

A similar situation was experienced a few months ago, when River lost its category and was relegated to the second division. That day, it was likely that the team’s relegation would cause many incidents. And so it happened. The television channels generated special programs about violence. In the half time of that game, club officials allowed the hooligans to threaten the referee in his own locker room. Nowadays, Justice investigates those police groups responsible for caring for the club, because they suspect that they ask the hooligans for money so that they can generate incidents during the games. The same complicity we saw in 1924, although more sophisticated, between fans, police and officials.

This is the story of getting accustomed to death. It has determined that, for the press in Argentina, violence and loss of life are a natural element of football. They are integrated to it, while, in the beginning of modern sports, they were perceived as transgression. These hooligan groups, which are, in the end, minorities, are those who frequently occupy the center of the stage through their scandals, and who end up extending their own features to the sport as a whole. Due to their actions, the violence has become one more ingredient of Argentine football. The situations we can see in the pictures here are not exceptional or rare in Argentine football. They are fragments of a history that is repeated regularly.

In the 60’s, the British press began to create rankings of the different groups of supporters according to the violence of each. This kind of treatment is contrasted with the view of journalists in former times, when they praised the respect and good behavior of the spectators. Now the focus would turn to the incidents which, to a greater or lesser extent, had always occurred in the stadiums. The graphic press began to send reporters to the matches to report exclusively about the behavior of the fans.

In Argentina, there is a list of 257 deaths related to violence in football. It appears on the web page of the organization Let’s Save Football [Salvemos al Fútbol], which is managed by Mónica, who is here with us. Those names do not appear in the mainstream media. There, we can only see how the violence of the hooligans and the passion of the fans become, as Bromberger says, a big show.

Javier Szlifman

Journalist / Argentina