

Virility and Violence: The Masculine Identity of Argentina's Barrabravas

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LAST 400

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Introduction

Damián Muñoz was a thirty-eight year old municipal worker in the Argentine province of Mendoza. Father to six children, he was described as affable and having many friends. On Sunday, November 11, 2007 he walked into the stadium of his favorite soccer team, Independiente Rivadavia, to enjoy an afternoon of cheering and socializing. When he left, Muñoz was carried out by thugs who had stabbed him three times in the chest and were taking his body out of the stadium to be dumped on a small street in the surrounding neighborhood. Paramedics brought Muñoz to the hospital, where he died from his wounds and became the latest martyr of soccer-related violence in Argentina.¹

Since the 1930's, when soccer became professionalized in Argentina, the sport has gone hand in hand with violence. From 1930 until today 223 deaths have been attributed to soccer-related violence.² Since the collapse of the nation's economy in 2001, this particular brand of violence has become more visible and more pervasive. It is not uncommon for numerous matches throughout the season to have to be cancelled due to violence between fans. Argentina is a nation that prides itself on the beautiful style of *fútbol* that its players have cultivated. Why then is the nation's "beautiful game" consistently juxtaposed with acts of the most heinous brutality?

Argentina, like many Latin American nations, has its own concept of what it means to be masculine. For the *barrabravas*, masculinity is inextricably tied to the ability to both perform and withstand acts of violence. This violence, though reviled by the middle and upper classes of

¹ Angel Rosales, "Mataron a un hincha, apuñalado en la tribuna," *Clarín*, November 11, 2007, online edition.

² 20 Minutes Spain/Agencias, "La Violencia Sigue Goleando al fútbol." 20 Minutes España. <http://www.20minutos.es/noticia/284000/0/violencia/futbol/casos/> (accessed November 10, 2007).

society, nevertheless is an important determinant of masculinity amongst men of the lower classes. The economic collapse of 2001 meant that more lower- and middle-class Argentine men than ever before found themselves out of work or in precarious economic positions.

Unprecedented numbers of men were suddenly unable to provide for themselves or their families. These feelings of economic impotence are tied to the rise in soccer-related violence of the past seven years. The dominant classes continued to impose a hegemonic system of masculinity which the crisis made unattainable for many. For the fans known as *barrabravas*, or super-fans, violence is a subaltern tactic used to oppose this hegemonic discourse on masculinity. By using illegitimate violence to establish codes of masculinity, the *barrabravas* have created their own system of symbolic capital, based on the concept known as *aguante* (the ability to withstand or endure). I will argue that the *barrabravas* have created this illegitimate masculinity and symbolic capital in order to regain some of the power and self-determination which the 2001 crisis took away from them.

Context of the Crisis

In 2001, Argentina experienced an economic and political event that was unprecedented in its history. During the 1990's, Argentina's Ministry of Economy instituted a policy known as *la convertibilidad*, whereby the Argentine peso was pegged at a one to one ratio with the American dollar, which caused an influx of foreign capital into the nation and a period of extended stability and expansion for the middle-class. The presidency of Carlos Menem enjoyed wide popularity with many Argentines, whose new prosperity convinced them that Argentina had finally entered the first world to stay. However, these boom times were not to last. External financial shocks, such as the Russian and Brazilian financial crashes, meant that foreign investors were wary of putting more money into nations such as Argentina with unstable

economic histories.³ Domestic factors also were significant in the slow-down of the Argentine economy. The government spent more than it earned for much of the decade, finally resulting in a massive public debt of 120 billion pesos when Menem stepped down in 1999. Also during the 90's, the Argentine government privatized many industries which had formerly been state-owned, causing massive unemployment and heightened poverty amongst the nation's industrial working classes. These privatizations took place under murky conditions, and allegations of corruption were widespread. The most oft-cited example is the case of YPF, the Argentine national petroleum corporation which had been the pride of the country's state-run industries. The Menem administration oversaw the sale of YPF to a Spanish multinational corporation, an act which benefitted a few rich members of the Argentine elite while causing economic distress to thousands of YPF employees who suddenly found themselves without a job.⁴ By the end of 2001, the Argentine government was in dire straits, and found itself unable to pay back loans which the IMF and various other international lending organizations were demanding. In an act of desperation, the government put a halt to extractions of cash from banks and converted savings from pesos into dollars in order to pay back the national debt. The middle-class was outraged, and took to the streets during several days of violent protest that ended in the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa and the deaths of fifteen Argentines on the streets of Buenos Aires.⁵

The crisis resulted in an absolute catastrophe for Argentine society, especially the lower and middle classes. Lifetimes of savings now suddenly had only a fraction of their previous buying power due to the end of the *convertibilidad* system. The percentage of the population

³ Roberto Cortés Conde "La Crisis Argentina de 2001-2002," *Cuadernos de Economía* 121 (2003), 762-767.

⁴ Pablo Alabarces, "De los tribalismos a la política," in *Hinchadas*, ed. Pablo Alabarces, Mariana Conde, and Christian Dodaro (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2006), 220.

⁵ (Alabarces 2006; 204).

living below the poverty line dramatically increased. More than fifty percent of the population was labeled as poor, and forty percent found themselves without jobs as numerous small businesses could no longer afford to pay salaries. The economic collapse was particularly harsh for the lower-classes, who found themselves without savings and with little prospect for finding jobs in a society where most industry was now in foreign hands.⁶

In traditional Argentine masculinity, a heavy emphasis is placed on the ability to work and provide for one's family. Significant social capital is gained when a man is known as a hard worker who earns a consistent salary and can ensure the security of himself and his loved ones.⁷ What are the implications of an economic collapse that makes the acquisition of this legitimate social capital impossible? Many working class Argentines suddenly found themselves out of work and with very limited future prospects for financial security. For many, years of labor and saving were made moot almost overnight. Men who had prided themselves on being providers and hard-workers suddenly found themselves unable to continue in these roles, and through no fault of their own. From this perspective the 2001 crisis can be viewed as a singularly damaging attack on Argentine masculinity.

Defining Masculinity in Argentina

What do we mean when we speak of "masculinity?" Numerous authors have pointed out that it is impossible to narrow down one single definition of masculinity⁸. Each culture has its own nuanced view of what it means to be a "true man." Middleton writes,

Masculinity is ... hard to grasp. Is it a discourse, a power structure, a psychic economy, a history, an ideology, an identity, a behavior, a value system, an aesthetic even? Or is it all these and also their mutual separation, the magnetic force of repulsion which keeps

⁶ Pablo Alabarces "Soccer and the Return of Argentine Politics," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 37 (2004): 33-37

⁷ (Elbaum 1998; 238).

⁸ (Middleton 1992; 152-3) (Archetti 1999; 113)

them apart...Masculinity is a centrifugal dispersal of what are maintained as discrete fields of psychic and social structure.⁹

In Argentine, masculinity is intricately tied to power. To be male means to have the power to provide for oneself and one's family, and to have self-determination over one's role in society. This masculinity/power complex is inherited both from Argentina's place in the Ibero-American tradition and its own unique development in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries.

Argentina is part of the larger region of Latin America, and shares a certain cultural heritage with the other Western nations that comprised Spain's former empire. Ilan Stavans has argued that the conquistadors who came from Iberia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brought with them their own concepts of manhood which laid the foundation for future Latin American masculinities. The conquistadors can be contrasted with the English who arrived in North America around the same time. The English were puritanical, looking to set up new lives in a land where they would be free from persecution and able to raise their families according to the strict moral tenets of their Church. Many arrived in established family groups, and there was only limited racial mixing with the indigenous North Americans. In stark contrast, the vast majority early Spanish settlers of South America were young, single, and libidinous men.¹⁰ They saw in the New World opportunities to increase their wealth and social standing, while at the same time finding sexual gratification from the beautiful female natives. Rape was very common: "the phallus, as well as gunpowder, was a crucial weapon used to subdue."¹¹ The New World was a masculine realm, at least during the early stages of the conquest. Native women were seen as the objects through which the Spaniards could live out their sexual fantasies. The ability to sleep with and discard many women was viewed as an important way of gauging one's

⁹ Peter Middleton. *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture*. New York: Routledge Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1992.

¹⁰ Ilan Stavans. "The Latin Phallus," *Transition* 65 (1995): 48-68.

¹¹ (Stavans 1995; 49).

masculinity. Also important was the ability to gain territory and the ability to use violence when it was necessary to fend off Indian attacks or to defend one's honor. These characteristics laid the foundation for Latin American masculinity, today often labeled *machismo*.

While, Argentina is certainly one of the inheritors of this *machismo* tradition, its own unique development in later centuries must be taken into account. Argentina's prime resources are its vast tracts of land. The seventh largest nation in the world in terms of area, only forty million people live within the country's borders. This means that much of the nation is comprised of fertile, empty grasslands, known as *La Pampa*. In the nineteenth century, the political elites recognized the potential economic strength that lay in the Pampas. The only way to tap into that wealth was to have people working the land, but human resources were in short supply at the time. Consequently, the Argentine government instituted policies which made the country one of the most immigrant-friendly in the world. Six million Europeans came to Argentina's shores from 1870 to 1914.¹² Originally, Argentina's leaders had hoped to draw Northern and Western Europeans to ensure that their nation's future racial make-up would be predominantly white. In actuality, the vast majority of the immigrants in this time period were from Southern Europe. The largest contingent was Italian (39.4%), closely followed by Spaniards (35.2%) and various other marginalized groups, such as Eastern European Jews seeking to escape the bloody pogroms of their homelands.¹³

Buenos Aires became home for most of this European Diaspora. Almost immediately, this vast new core of people was the subject of downwardly-exerted pressure. The *criollo* elite (the ruling families of Argentina who had been established for generations) viewed these immigrant masses as a potential threat to their dominance. Strong policies of *argentinización*

¹² Eduardo P. Archetti, *Masculinities: Football, Polo, and the Tango in Argentina* (New York: Berg, 1999), 1.

¹³ (Archetti 1999; 1).

were put in place in order to make sure the masses were indoctrinated with a particular version of Argentine culture and history. Strong emphasis was placed on the values of the *gaucho*, upheld as the prime example of all that was masculine and Argentine. The gaucho was the Argentine version of the cowboy, an independent, self-made man who worked alongside the Pampa's vast cattle herds. The gaucho embodied all that it meant to be male in Argentina: strength, independence, and economic self-determination. It is ironic that the elites chose to exalt gaucho ideals only after they had ensured that all the actual gauchos had been turned into a class of weakened agricultural proletariats.¹⁴

Argentine masculinity then can be seen as a synthesis. The foundation was laid by the Hispanic traditional masculinity, based on the ability to dominate women and gain economic power through strength. On top of this, Argentina's particular history of immigration and the conquest of the Pampas instilled new masculine values: the ability to gain economic independence for oneself and one's family via labor.

The History of Soccer and the Rise of the Barrabravas

Argentina is home to numerous professional, semi-professional, and amateur soccer leagues, with each league hosting between fifteen to twenty five teams. The total number of teams numbers in the thousands. The nation's most prestigious league is the *Primera División*, home to the twenty most elite and high-performing clubs in the nation. Each of these top clubs can lay claim to fan bases in the hundreds of thousands, with supporters across Argentina; the largest clubs, such as River Plate or Boca Juniors, command international respect. However, even the smallest clubs in Argentina have their fan bases, which are no less loyal or passionate

¹⁴ (Archetti 1999; 18)

than the fans (*hinchas*) of the larger teams. It is not uncommon for each *barrio*¹⁵ to have its own team which is the pride of the neighborhood. The system of allegiances can be complex at times. A fan may support one of the so-called “Big 5” (the five most prestigious teams in the nation) while at the same time cheering for the small local team in his *barrio*. In addition, each team has others with whom its relations are friendly, hostile, or neutral, meaning that things can get complicated when deciding who to root for on game day.

Amongst Argentine men, being a soccer fan is almost a given. While separated by worlds of economic disparity, a rich businessman and a destitute *cartonero*¹⁶ may find themselves in the same stadium on any given Sunday, rooting for their *equipo* (team). It is difficult to describe in words the passion that Argentine men feel for their national sport, but this passion is evident in the cheers, songs, and celebrations that occur every Sunday. Unfortunately, for some fans, these traditional displays of support are not enough. There exists a class of super-fan in the world of Argentine soccer, and these fans are collectively termed “los barrabravas”. Each team, from the largest to the most insignificant, will have a dedicated group of barrabravas, who view themselves as the backbone of the team and defenders of its honor. They are organized in much the same way as criminal gangs, and in reality, that is exactly what they are: groups of young and middle-aged men, from the lower social classes, who are devoted simultaneously to their team and various delinquent activities.

Soccer and immigration share a common history in Argentina. The first people to bring the sport to the Río de la Plata region were British laborers who arrived to construct the nation’s

¹⁵ Buenos Aires is divided into forty eight barrios, each a small town in and of itself. This division is based on the original network of Catholic parishes which comprised the city.

¹⁶ After the 2001 crisis, many of the newly homeless and unemployed began collecting cardboard from the streets and turning it into collection centers for money. This burgeoning class of “the new poor” quickly became one of the most visible signs of the new economic reality in Argentina.

railroad system.¹⁷ The English were a small but very visible group in Buenos Aires at that time. They mostly kept to themselves, maintaining English-language schools, clubs and churches where they could associate with their compatriots and hold on to traditions from their native island. The first soccer match in Argentina was played in the Buenos Aires Cricket Club in 1867, between two teams comprised entirely of Englishmen.¹⁸ At first soccer in Argentina was a sport played only by the English, with the occasional inclusion of some Italians on a team roster. Gradually though, this simple game (in theory, all one needs are players, a ball, and two rudimentary goals) caught on amongst the general population. By the turn of the century, soccer clubs were springing up by the dozens, including the majority of those which are most famous today. Soccer was adopted by the Argentines and in turn went through a process of evolution. Whereas the British brought over a game which was heavy on team discipline and tactical strength, the Argentines placed more emphasis on dribbling ability and creative flare. By the 1930's, soccer was so popular that the sport became professionalized, meaning that for the first time players could be paid for playing.¹⁹

Over the course of decades, each club became the center of its own lore, an object of secular worship for male fans. The barrabravas arose from the militarization of certain groups of fans who felt that supporting their team only during matches was not sufficient. The team became a symbol, a totem around which the barrabravas could construct their theories and practices of masculinity.

Argentina struggled through the 1960's and 1970's, two decades which saw economic downturns and political tragedy. In 1976, a coup brought to power a military junta determined to suppress leftist subversion in Argentina. Thousands of young people, some guilty of nothing

¹⁷ Osvaldo Bayer, *Fútbol Argentino*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1990), 18.

¹⁸ (Archetti 1999; 48).

¹⁹ (Archetti 1999; 54-55).

more than being suspected Communists, were abducted, tortured, and murdered. It was during these difficult times that soccer took hold in Argentina as a source of universal national pride. The sport was a constant, something to be looked forward to all week amidst an atmosphere of political repression and economic uncertainty. Argentine men, found themselves in a weakened position. Politically, men could not speak out against the hegemonic discourse of fear imposed by the government. Economically, increased globalization meant first-world nations could find cheaper sources for the importation of raw materials that had previously come from Argentina.²⁰

It is not surprising then that so much of Argentine masculinity became invested in soccer. The barrabravos mainly come from Argentina's lower classes, which are at the most risk when the economy goes into a downward phase. The forerunners of modern-day barrabravos arose in this era of a weakened civil society during the 70's and 80's. It is my belief that there is a direct relationship between the fact that the barrabravos arose during the dictatorship and the violent foundations of their masculinity. During *la dictadura*, the official discourse coming down from the government was based on violence and aggression. It holds then that the barrabravos would co-opt this violence and convert it into their own violent discourse. The barrabravos' violence had as its arena the streets and poor neighborhoods where the government could not always extend its power.

The actual term "barrabrava" translates to hard stick. This refers firstly to the violent identity of the groups, who view themselves as a weapon at the disposal of their club's honor. It also carries with it an obvious phallic connotation, and indeed amongst the barrabravos the ability to express sexual power is an important characteristic in defining masculinity.²¹ The term

²⁰ (Alabarces 2004; 33)

²¹ Ernesto R. Rodríguez, "Fútbol y Homosexualidad (Un Deporte para Machos)", in *Deporte y Sociedad*, ed. Pablo Alabarces, Roberto di Giano, and Julio Frydenberg (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1998), 245-259.

rose to prominence in the early 1980's, when the Argentine sports press took notice of these fans and declared them a scourge on both soccer and society. The barrabravas were viewed as a manifestation of society's worst elements. They fought amongst themselves and against the police. The gangs also were viewed as mafia-like in nature. They were organized around leaders, known as *jefes* or *capos*, who directed the actions of their subordinate soldiers. Also, the barrabravas were suspected of being tied to each team's leadership, acting as an enforcement unit in exchange for free tickets and immunity for their actions at the stadium.²²

The barras were universally denounced by Argentina's press and ruling sectors. The nation had long seen its history as one of a continual struggle between civilization and barbarity. In the earliest days, this struggle referred to the efforts of Europeans to subdue and then eliminate the land's indigenous population. Later on it took on the additional significance of criollo civilization attempting to control the vast, uneducated immigrant masses that came in the early 20th century. Now the barrabravas were viewed as the most recent manifestation of barbarity in Argentine culture. The National Congress of Argentina condemned the barrabravas as "wild beasts."²³ The dominant classes viewed the barrabravas as representing all that was immoral and illogical. However, this was not and is not the case. These groups brought with them their own definition of masculinity, which was followed its own logical premises.^{24,25} The barrabravas' violence was a subaltern tactic used to oppose the forced imposition of dominant identity formation systems.

²² Mariana Conde, "La invención del hincha en la prensa periódica," in *Hinchadas*, ed. Pablo Alabarces, Mariana Conde, and Christian Dodaro (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2006), 30-33.

²³ (Conde 2006; 32)

²⁴ (Alabarces 2004; 33)

²⁵ Pablo Alabarces, "Introducción: Quién sabe lo que es un hincha?," in *Hinchadas*, ed. Pablo Alabarces, Mariana Conde, and Christian Dodaro (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2006), 13.

Aguante, the Basis of an Illegitimate Masculinity

The barrabravas' masculinity is based on a few key concepts. The most important of these is known as aguante.²⁶ Aguante is a term which can roughly be translated as the ability to withstand or endure, though in practice it means much more. I will go into some of the main factors that go into determining whether one has aguante and can thus be defined as a macho, or "real man."

First and foremost in determining aguante is one's ability to partake in violent actions against opposing teams' barrabravas. The encounters between opposing groups are known as *combates*, and are the main stages upon which the gang members can display their bravery and thus earn the social capital that is aguante. These fights between groups are the times in which the individual fan can prove his devotion by sacrificing his body. In fact, the use of weapons (especially firearms) is depreciated. Only when one can succeed in harming his enemy via hand-to-hand combat is he viewed as being truly manly.²⁷ The combates usually take place in the street, but can occur wherever two *hinchadas* (groups of hinchas) happen to meet. Combates have been known to occur in train stations, on the sides of highways, or in stadiums where the police presence is not enough to separate the two groups. The fights usually take on a highly organized and ritualized form. At first, the two opposing groups will face off, separated by only a few yards' difference, yelling insults and trying to intimidate their opponents. Even in this preliminary stage, the body is used to communicate, with the shirtless barras standing tall, chests pointed out, brandishing their fists in threatening gestures. If after a time neither group has

²⁶ Jose Garriga Zucal, "'Soy macho porque me la aguanto': Etnografía de las prácticas violentas y la conformación de identidades de género masculino," and "Pibitos Chorros, fumancheros y con aguante," in *Hinchadas*, ed. Pablo Alabarces, Mariana Conde, and Christian Dodaro (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2006), 39-59; Jorge Elbaum "Apuntes Para el 'Aguante'. La Construcción Simbólica del Cuerpo Popular," in *Deporte y Sociedad*, ed. Pablo Alabarces, Roberto di Giano, and Julio Frydenberg (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1998), 237-245.

²⁷ (Garriga Zucal 2006; 42).

retreated, the fight will progress into the stages of actual physical violence.²⁸ If the two groups consist of equal numbers of men, this initial stage will usually last for quite some time, as each side studies the other and prepares itself for combat. On the other hand, Garriga Zucal writes that if one side has significantly more fans than their opponent, they will advance rapidly to “obliterate the adversary to either retire or fight.”²⁹

The second stage of the fight is where most of the actual violence occurs. Here is where the fans meet for hand-to-hand combat, and here is where one proves their masculinity. As a 24 year-old barrabrava named Enrique puts it, “Aguante means to keep pushing. He who has aguante has to display it, has to offer himself up completely... If you have aguante, you go to the front of the fight, and you never show fear.”³⁰ The fights are characterized by extreme violence, even cruelty. Every part of the body is used to subjugate the opponent, and only primitive weapons such as clubs or belts are allowed under the rules of combat. The combat ends when one side, seeing itself overwhelmed, runs from the battlefield. In this case, the victorious side is that which does not leave the scene and is thus the symbolic victor, having earned the right to declare itself masculine and in possession of aguante.³¹

Within each barrabrava, there exists a hierarchy of members, with the leaders being the ones judged to have accrued the most symbolic capital. The possession of this symbolic capital is determined by various factors. These include: knowledge and capability in street fighting techniques; recognition of having come out victorious in previous situations of hand-to-hand combat with enemy fans; and the ability to show that one is able to withstand pain and suffering

²⁸ (Garriga Zucal 2006; 43); Gastón Julián Gil, *Fútbol e identidades locales: Dilemas de fundación y conflictos latentes en una ciudad feliz*, (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 1998), 119.

²⁹ (Garriga Zucal 2006; 43).

³⁰ (Elbaum 1998; 237).

³¹ (Garriga Zucal 2006; 46).

in order to continue fighting.³² Pierre Bourdieu writes that “symbolic capital is whatever property...that is perceived by social agents whose categories of perception are of such a nature to allow them to distinguish and recognize said property, and assign some value to it.”³³

Amongst the *barrabravas*, *aguante* is this symbolic currency. It is recognized and attributed by individuals to others who have proved themselves capable of displaying the aforementioned characteristics. *Aguante* can only be gained or lost via violent actions. Since *aguante* is the main determinant of masculinity, this means that there is no escaping the fact that in order for one to be considered a real man, he must partake in brutality.

Aguante is above all a measure of corporal performance, and the importance of the body cannot be underestimated. Those who are most admired are those who show the willingness to throw their body into conflict at the slightest provocation. The ability to show competence in violence without having prepared oneself before hand is a sure means of earning credit from other *barrabravas*. Strength and muscularity are admired, but only if the man who possesses them seems to have come by them naturally or by way of work requiring physical labor. Those who work out in gyms or lift weights are made fun of and seen as effeminate, not having gained their strength through truly masculine hard work.³⁴ *Aguante* is not something that can be gained in a gym or from lessons in martial arts; it is earned through spontaneous, marginalized street combat whereby participants selflessly and masochistically launch themselves into situations where significant bodily harm is a very real threat.

As stated above, *aguante* is unavoidably linked with masculinity. Only real men can possess *aguante*. The world of Argentine soccer is a world strictly confined to males.³⁵ This can

³² (Garriga Zucal 2006; 46).

³³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Razones prácticas. Sobre la teoría de la acción*, (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1997).

³⁴ (Elbaum 1998; 240).

³⁵ (Garriga Zucal 2006; 48).

be surprising to many outside observers not familiar with Argentine society. For example, in the United States, soccer is seen as a sport that both men and women can perform in at all levels, ranging from youth leagues to both the feminine and masculine World Cups held every four years. However, in Argentina, it is extremely rare to see girls playing soccer, and those that do are often laughed at or denigrated as un-feminine. The barrabravas are at the far end of this already extremely male-dominated realm. The possession of *aguante*, and thus the possession of true masculinity in the eyes of one's peers, trumps all other symbolic capitals which can be gained. But what against what is this masculinity contrasted? If those who have accrued enough symbolic capital are named machos, than how are those who do not possess this symbolic good labeled?

Interestingly enough, for the barrabravas, the opposite of that which is masculine is not that which is feminine. Since the world of soccer is so sealed-off from women, they are not even taken into account when it comes time for masculinity to be judged. Rather, for barrabravas, the true man is compared to his polar opposite, the homosexual, or *puto*.³⁶ For the purpose of this paper, the homosexual can also be described using the synonym non-male. For a barrabrava to be labeled a *puto* is the worst insult imaginable. Every characteristic which is seen as defining a true macho is seen as utterly lacking in the homosexual. A real man has *huevos* (testicles), physical force, and courage. The homosexual, on the other hand, is seen as weak, cowardly, and utterly unable to perform those actions which a normal man is capable of.³⁷ In terms of combat, the macho is the one who throws himself into battle and continues to fight even if wounded or severely outnumbered; the *puto* flees from battle or shows an adversity to bodily sacrifice and pain. Once again, the use of violence is the main tool which is used to determine into which

³⁶ (Elbaum 1998; 241); (Garriga Zucal 2006; 49-51); (Rodríguez 1998; 245-56).

³⁷ (Garriga Zucal 2006; 49).

one of these mutually exclusive categories a hinchita falls.

Rodríguez draws us to the notion that aguante and eroticism are very closely related. In both cases, the barrabravas view as true men those who are able to exercise power over another. In terms of sexuality, barrabravas are expected to control their wives or girlfriends, and recount sexual experiences which show how they are sexually dominant over their significant others. The same concept applies when it comes to how opposing teams' fans are viewed. The fact that enemies are described as putos means that they are weak, incapable of expressing sexual dominance and in fact are the ones who would be violated in a sexual encounter.³⁸ Again, corporal descriptions predominate, with the non-male said to be lacking testicles, which for the barras is the body part most associated with masculinity.

The ironic thing is that the barrabravas have appropriated physical and verbal actions which are outwardly homosexual in nature, but in a new context have become symbols of hyper-masculinity. For example, each gang has its own litany of chants and songs.³⁹ Some of these songs simply attest to the glory of their own club. However, many contain explicit lyrics, stating that the barras will rape their opponents or force them to perform oral sex.⁴⁰ These chants express how the barrabravas are going to violently rape their weak opponents, forcing them to succumb to sexual subjugation. While seemingly attesting to a homosexual relationship between opposing groups of fans, these songs actually must be viewed as performances of power relations. Threatening to rape an opponent does not mean that one actually intends to carry out the threat. The value of the threat is symbolic. By saying that he is capable of raping his opponent, the hinchita is saying that he is more powerful and more virile.⁴¹ Thus, verbal threats of

³⁸ (Rodríguez 1998; 250).

³⁹ (Gil 1998; 119-23); (Garriga Zucal 2006; 65)

⁴⁰ (Garriga Zucal 2006; 50)

⁴¹ (Garriga Zucal 2006; 51)

a seemingly homosexual nature are in reality instruments used to signify the hyper-masculine power of the barrabrava, and so contribute to accumulation of aguante.

Michel de Certeau plants the argument that there is a constant struggle in every society between the dominant classes and the popular classes. The dominant classes, the elites, contain the vast majority of societal resources and thus the means to impose their will on the popular classes. Given this fact, the lower classes must use whatever tools are at their disposal to gain small victories and expose slight weaknesses in the monolithic societal structure imposed by the elites.⁴² One of the most important tools available to the elites is their literacy, the capability to produce texts which can then be passed down to the popular classes in order to instill the values favored by the dominant sectors. The lower classes, with their comparative lack of education and illiteracy, are not able to produce texts as efficiently as are those who control society. However, as the barrabravas show, sometimes the body itself can serve as a text upon which a resistance to the dominant sectors can be inscribed. The barrabravas use corporality as their main tool in combating the imposition of societal values from above. Whereas most people shun or fear violence, the barrabravas embrace it and give themselves up willingly to the possibility of injury and bodily damage. Barrabravas wear their scars with pride, since these markings prove one's sacrifice for the club. The scars are textual symbols of a corporal nature.⁴³ As such, these men are reviled by the Argentine upper- and middle-classes, as evidenced by the universal negative depictions of the barrabravas in the national press, which is controlled by individuals and organizations from the dominant sectors of society.⁴⁴

⁴² Michel de Certeau, *La invención de lo cotidiano. Artes de Hacer*. (Mexico City; Universidad Iberoamericana, 1996).

⁴³ (Garriga Zucal 2006; 53).

⁴⁴ (Conde 2006; 30-31).

Conclusion

The barrabravas are violent, engage in criminal activities, and support the use of drugs and alcohol amongst their members. The dominant sectors oppose these activities, and look down upon them as illegitimate. However, we can view the unique brand of masculinity cultivated by the barrabravas as a form of true cultural production which emanates from the lower classes. The barrabravas have shown themselves capable of resisting the imposition of a “legitimate” masculinity from above. This “legitimate” masculinity refers to a system of values which does not exalt violence as the prime resource for proving oneself.

We can understand the choice of violence as the tool of gender identification as part of a disputation of meanings between opposed social sectors. It is fit to question, then, if violent action is or is not an exercise of rebellion or resistance given that gender identity is constituted using practices and meanings that society considers anomalous.⁴⁵

If the barrabravas used violence only as means of contrasting themselves from homosexuals, this would not serve as a valid form of rebellion against the dominant classes. In fact, such homophobic behavior could only be viewed as actually replicating the value system of the extremely Catholic dominant classes in the lower social realm. However, this is not the case. Violence amongst the barrabravas is used as a tool of identity formation and attribution. Violence is not an end, but rather serves as a means through which subaltern actors are able to institute a value system that contradicts the one imposed on them from the dominant sectors. We have seen that the system of symbolic capital and values used by the barrabravas is not illogical or irrational, as the dominant sectors have labeled it. Rather, it makes use of a code of honor and ethics which have their own well-defined rules, and which can stand apart from the constructs of masculinity practiced by the elites of Argentine society. It makes sense that the barrabravas are

⁴⁵ (Garriga Zucal 2006; 57-8).

so reviled by wide swaths of Argentine society: they have created a systemized rebellion that has managed to survive for three decades.

For lower class men, the new economic realities after the crisis left little room for anything other than the adoption of a system of masculinity viewed as illegitimate by the dominant classes. In some cases, this meant that men joined movements such as those of the *piqueteros*. These were groups of unemployed men, wearing bandanas and ski masks who would camp out in the middle of highways and bridges. They would disrupt traffic and impede commerce in an attempt to draw attention to an economic plight which had no antecedents in Argentine history.⁴⁶

Similarly, many working class Argentines could find refuge in the particular masculinity espoused by the *barrabravas*. Soccer continued every Sunday in Argentina, and the *barrabravas* continued to practice their own masculine ideals heavily centered on violence. Amongst a people so weakened and emasculated by economic factors outside of their control, it is no wonder that many more men than in the past turned to the *barrabravas* as cornerstones for a new type of masculinity, one which diverged significantly from the dominant version of the upper classes. New meanings were assigned to masculinity as a novel social consciousness arose following the crisis. Hugo Vezzetti illustrates the importance of social memory among a society's inhabitants:

In reality, memory is made of "facilitations" (a Freudian notion), that is to say, dense significations, figures, and scenes that establish points of condensation and anchorage with respect to the past and forge exemplary values, which are not given once and for all but require constant reworking and reinforcement from the present.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ (Alabarces 2004; 33).

⁴⁷ Hugo Vezzetti "Scenes from the Crisis," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 11:2 (2002), 163-171.

In other words, we can speak of social memory as the collective accumulation of symbols and meanings in a society which give the population a sense of itself and its purpose. After the crisis, the social memory of the lower classes had to be completely changed. The way in which people viewed the economy and the political system was irreversibly altered. Similarly, for many men, the previous symbols and meanings that went along with Argentine masculinity had to be forgotten or renegotiated.⁴⁸ No longer able to accrue social capital via legitimate means, such as finding consistent work, illegitimate systems were viewed as new avenues for repairing damaged masculinities.

Soccer-related violence is more prevalent than ever before. The barrabravas are fighting amongst themselves at an increasing rate. Not only that, but the violence has spread to the point where now even referees and players are periodically subjected to threats by hinchas who wish to make sure that matches have a certain outcome. This rise in violence is tragic, but can in no way be viewed as surprising. Argentina's post-crisis economic realities mean that access to "legitimate" masculinity is increasingly restricted for lower class men. The desire to feel manly has not diminished however. As men search for ways to feel securely masculine, they will be forced to turn to systems of "illegitimate" masculinity, centered on violence, such as that practiced by the barrabravas. This means that for the foreseeable future soccer-related violence will continue to be a major issue in Argentine society and a point of contention between the dominant and popular classes.

⁴⁸ (Vezzetti 2002; 166).

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