

For supporters, fans, ultras, casuals and journalists of soccer/football, Diego Maradona is an infamous character in the theater of the beautiful game. As a professional athlete raised in poverty, he brought pure and unadulterated joy to working class people of Argentina who saw themselves in his rising arc to greatness. For leftists who dabbled in the “people’s sport” he resembled the potential for transcending sports and politics as an athlete who wore his politics on his sleeve, unafraid to weigh in on global issues. He was once photographed leading a protest in Argentina against then U.S. President George Bush while wearing a shirt that read “STOP BUSH,” where the S is a swastika. Yet journalists and media mongrels alike spent many pages decrying his seemingly moral ills. Accused of running drugs in Italy, and arrested several times for participating in violence in the streets and outside of games, Diego Maradona “dirtied” the game of proper football in the eyes of the elite.

Diego Maradona resembled the intersection of so many reasons why soccer/football can serve as a vehicle for positive social change. Anti-imperialist politics, working-class roots, Maradona showed the world that Latin America can and will dominate the global game that the English purport to have ownership over. For leftists new or unfamiliar with the game, this zine can serve as an introduction to the revolutionary potential of soccer/football as a cultural and social space. For impassioned followers of the beautiful game, Diego Maradona’s legacy is not one to be overlooked for his purported dabbling in drugs and violence, but to be highlighted for its pure honesty. Diego Maradona was no perfect angel, he was one of us.



*Diego Maradona mourners face off with police in the streets during his memorial.*

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## **Goal by Maradona**

*By Eduardo Galeano, from "Soccer in Sun and Shadow"*

It was 1973. The youth teams of Argentinos Juniors and River Plate were playing in Buenos Aires.

Number 10 for Argentinos received the ball from his goalkeeper, evaded River's center forward, and took off. Several players tried to block his path: he put it over the first one's head, between the legs of the second, and he fooled the third with a backheel. Then, without a pause, he paralyzed the defenders, left the keeper sprawled on the ground, and walked the ball to the net. On the field stood seven crushed boys and four more with their mouths agape.

That kid's team, the Cebollitas, went undefeated for a hundred matches and caught the attention of the press. One of the players, "Poison," who was thirteen, declared, "We play for fun. We'll never play for money. When there's money in it, everybody kills themselves to be a star and that's when jealousy and selfishness take over."

As he spoke he had his arm around the best-loved player of all, who was also the shortest and the happiest: Diego Armando Maradona, who was twelve and had just scored that incredible goal.

Maradona had the habit of sticking out his tongue out. By night he slept with his arms around a ball and by day he performed miracles with it. He lived in a poor home in a poor neighborhood and he wanted to be an industrial engineer.

to his many enemies and that childish irresponsibility that makes him step in every trap laid in his path.

The same reporters who harass him with their microphones, reproach him for his arrogance and his tantrums, and accuse him of talking too much. They aren't wrong, but that's not why they can't forgive him. What they really cannot stand are the things he sometimes says. This hot-tempered little wisecracker has the habit of throwing uppercuts. In '86 and '94, in Mexico and the United States, he complained about the omnipotent dictatorship of television, which forced the players to work themselves to the bone at noon, roasting under the sun. And on a thousand and one other occasions, throughout the ups and downs of his career, Maradona said things that stirred up the hornet's nest. He wasn't the only disobedient player, but his was the voice that made the most offensive questions ring out loud and clear: Why aren't the international standards for labor rights applied to soccer? If it's standard practice for performers to know how much money their shows bring in, why can't the players have access to the books of the opulent multinational of soccer? Havelange [then FIFA president], busy with other duties, kept his mouth shut, while Joseph Blatter, a FIFA bureaucrat who never once kicked a ball but goes about in a twenty-five-foot limousine driven by a black chauffeur, had but comment: "The last star from Argentina was Di Stéfano."

When Maradona was finally thrown out of the '94 World Cup, soccer lost its most strident rebel. And also a fantastic player. Maradona is uncontrollable when he speaks, but much more so when he plays. No one can predict the devilish tricks this inventor of surprises will dream up for the simple joy of throwing the computers off track, tricks he never repeats.

He's not quick, more like a short-legged bull, but he carries the ball sewn to his foot and he has eyes all over his body. His acrobatics light up the field. He can win a match with a thundering blast when his back is to the goal, or with an impossible pass from afar when he is corralled by thousands of enemy legs. And no one can stop him when he decides to dribble upfield.

In the frigid soccer of today's world, which detests defeat and forbids all fun, that man was one of the few who proved that fantasy too can be effective.

## **For Diego Maradona (1960-2020)**

*published to Autonomies.org, November 29th 2020*

For the lovers of the "beautiful game", the passing of Diego Maradona cannot leave one indifferent. It is not however for his footballing skills alone that we celebrate him – his game was without equals –, but for his capacity to express the passion of a game that was still lived by many as a sport of the people, and not quite yet the total commodity-spectacle<sup>1</sup> of today.

It was Maradona's defiance, his rebelliousness, his lack of decorum, his playing for "underdogs", along with his football, that is mourned with his death. And however contradictory his life's deeds were – and whose are not, though in his case, magnified by fame and fortune –, it is Maradona the football artist-rebel who will be remembered.

Are words are not to be taken as idolatry, but as respect for a tradition of football rebels that has too often been passed over in silence. And ours is not a time for "gods", new or old, but perhaps for "Homers". Each may tell his own story, each may imagine their own Maradona, but with him, we remember an older meaning of sport.

***"I WAS NOT A STREET BOY; I WAS A POTRERO BOY"***

- Prologue written by Diego Maradona for the photobook "Potrero" Fotos:

I always tell my daughters that I grew up in a private community... , ha, with privations of electricity, running water, almost everything, Villa Fiorito. For the first, I had my family: my old folks, who worked day and night so that I lacked for nothing, and my sisters, who were so fond of me that they spoiled me; for the second, I always had a potrero nearby and a bouncing ball... I experienced this feeling in the potreros in Villa Fiorito, in the small field of Argentinos, I felt the same in my so loved Bombonera, in the luxurious lawn of Wembley, when I reached glory in the Azteca and I still do it, even in a showball field. Let me put it like this: the setting changed, but the essence – to me – is the same, that of the potrero. Or how do you think I gathered the strength to play against Brazil, at the World Cup in Italy, with my ankle swollen like a watermelon? In Cebollitas, I once played all in bandages because a soda-siphon had blown up my hands. Don Francis, the coach, did not want to

**1** Suggested reading: The Spectacle of Football: A Somnambulist's Reflections on a Man Called Neymar, published to Autonomies.org, August 10th 2017

let me play, it was a risk... And I cried, not for the pain, but for not being able to play. I cried so much that in the end they let me play; I scored like five goals. Or where do you bet I had the ability to dribble the English? That was nothing compared to the kicks that I had to avoid in some matches in the small fields of my neighborhood. Because, beware, eh, I was a professional since I was a kid: I played for the team that called me first and I did not ask them their age. From those early days in the potrero I have happy remembrances and a word to define them: struggle, struggle, struggle... I once wrote it and will continue to do so every time I am given the chance, like this, where a book shows the potrero as the roots of so many things. What I say is: what you learn there is treasured forever whatever may happen to those... potrero boys. I wrote once and I do it again now: "This is what I want to put across to the people: my skin became thicker for what I lived in Fiorito and later too, but the feelings have never changed. And they won't. When I say 'what I want to put across' I am saying that people have idols in their homes, pretty near them, they can touch them. They don't watch them on the television or the magazines; they are there..."



*Maradona present at protests in France, 2020*

"Later on in Naples, Maradona was Santa Maradonna, and the patron saint San Gennaro became San Gennarmando. In the streets they sold pictures of this divinity in shorts illuminated by the halo of the Virgin or wrapped in the sacred mantle of the saint who bleeds every six months. They even sold coffins for the clubs of northern Italy and tiny bottles filled with the tears of Silvio Berlusconi. Kids and dogs wore Maradona wigs. Somebody placed a ball under the foot of the statue of Dante, and in the famous fountain Triton wore the blue shirt of Napoli. It had been more than half a century since this city, condemned to suffer the furies of Vesuvius and eternal defeat on the soccer field, had last won a championship, and thanks to Maradona the dark south finally managed to humiliate the white north that scorned it. In the stadiums of Italy and all Europe, Napoli kept on winning, cup after cup, and each goal constituted a desecration of the established order and a revenge against history. In Milan they hated the man responsible for this affront by the uppity poor: they called him "ham with curls." And not only in Milan: at the 1990 World Cup most of the spectators punished Maradona with furious whistles every time he touched the ball, and celebrated Argentina's defeat by Germany as a victory for Italy.

When Maradona said he wanted to leave Naples, some people tossed wax dolls stuck with pins through his window. Prisoner of the city that adored him, and of the Camorra, the Mafia that owns it, he was playing against his heart, against his feet. That's when the cocaine scandal erupted, and Maradona suddenly became Maracoca, a delinquent who had fooled people into thinking he was a hero.

Later on in Buenos Aires the media gave a further twist to the knife: live coverage of his arrest, as if it were a match, to the delight of those who love the spectacle of a king disrobed and carted off by the police.

"He's sick," they said. They said, "He's done for." The Messiah who came to redeem southern Italians from their eternal damnation was also the avenger of Argentina's defeat in the Falklands by means of one sneaky goal and another fabulous one that left the English spinning like tops for several years. But when he fell, the Golden Boy was nothing but a numb-nosed whoring phony. Maradona had betrayed the children who adored him and brought dishonor on the sport. They gave him up for dead.

But the body sat up. Once he had served his cocaine sentence, Maradona became the fireman of the Argentine squad, which was burning up its last chances to reach the '94 World Cup. Thanks to Maradona, they made it. And at the Cup once again, as in the old days, Maradona was the best of the best until the ephedrine scandal hit.

The machinery of power had sworn to get him. He spoke truth to power and you pay a price for that, a price paid in cash with no discount. And Maradona himself gave them the excuse, with his suicidal tendency to serve himself up on a platter

## Maradona

*By Eduardo Galeano, from “Soccer in Sun and Shadow”*

He played, he won; he peed, he lost. Ephedrine turned up in his urinalysis and Maradona was booted out of the 1994 World Cup. Ephedrine, though not considered a stimulant by professional sports in the United States or many other countries, is prohibited in international competitions.

There was stupefaction and scandal, a blast of moral condemnation that left the whole world deaf. But somehow a few voices of support for the fallen idol managed to squeak through, not only in his wounded and dumbfounded Argentina, but in places as far away as Bangladesh, where a sizable demonstration repudiating FIFA and demanding Maradona’s return shook the streets. After all, to judge and condemn was easy. It was not so easy to forget that for many years Maradona had committed the sin of being the best, the crime of speaking out about things the powerful wanted kept quiet, and the felony of playing left-handed, which according to the Oxford English Dictionary means not only “of or pertaining to the left hand” but also “sinister or questionable.”

Diego Armando Maradona never used stimulants before matches to stretch the limits of his body. It is true that he was into cocaine, but only at sad parties where he wanted to forget or be forgotten because he was cornered by glory and could not live without the fame that would not allow him to live in peace. He played better than anyone else in spite of the cocaine, not because of it.

He was overwhelmed by the weight of his own personality. Ever since that day long ago when fans first chanted his name, his spinal column caused him grief. Maradona carried a burden named Maradona that bent his back out of shape. The body as metaphor: his legs ached, he couldn’t sleep without pills. It did not take him long to realize it was impossible to live with the responsibility of being a god on the field, but from the beginning he knew that stopping was out of the question. “I need them to need me,” he confessed after many years of living under the tyrannical halo of superhuman performance, swollen with cortisone and analgesics and praise, harassed by the demands of his devotees and by the hatred of those he offended.

The pleasure of demolishing idols is directly proportional to the need to erect them. In Spain, when Goicoechea hit him from behind—even though he didn’t have the ball—and sidelined him for several months, some fanatics carried the “author of this premeditated homicide on their shoulders. And all over the world plenty of people were ready to celebrate the fall of that arrogant interloper, that parvenu fugitive from hunger, that greaser who had the insolent audacity to swagger and boast.

## Diego Maradona: Comrade of the Global South

*As much as for his genius with the soccer ball, he will be remembered for his willingness to fight power and be a voice for the voiceless.*

*By Dave Zirin for The Nation, Nov. 25 2020*

The world mourns today the passing of Diego Maradona, the soccer god and revolutionary from Argentina whose play inspired all manner of poetry and prose. The best description of Maradona’s abilities came from the late Eduardo Galeano, who wrote of Maradona in his book *Soccer in Sun and Shadow*.

“No one can predict the devilish tricks this inventor of surprises will dream up for the simple joy of throwing the computers off track, tricks he never repeats. He’s not quick, more like a short-legged bull, but he carries the ball sewn to his foot and he’s got eyes all over his body. His acrobatics light up the field.... In the frigid soccer of the end of this century, which detests defeat and forbids all fun, that man was one of the few who proved that fantasy can be effective.”

That Maradona died of a heart attack at the too young age of 60 seems preordained for multiple reasons. He lived a life of excess and addiction; of cocaine and massive weight fluctuations that undoubtedly placed a mammoth stress on his heart. He also lived a life of passionate, rebel intensity, always standing against imperialism; always standing for self-determination for Latin America and the Global South, always speaking for the children growing up in conditions similar to the abject poverty of his own upbringing in the Villa Fiorito barrio of Buenos Aires. He was the fifth of eight children, living without running water or electricity, and never forgot it for a moment. His heart may have simply been too big for his chest.

Maradona took political stances throughout his life that were never easy. A Catholic, he met with Pope John Paul II and told the press afterward, “I was in the Vatican and I saw all these golden ceilings and afterwards I heard the Pope say the Church was worried about the welfare of poor kids. Sell your ceiling then, amigo, do something!”

He tried to form a union of professional soccer players for years, saying in 1995, “The idea of the association came to me as a way of showing my solidarity with the many players who need the help of those who

are more famous.... We don't intend to fight anyone unless they want a fight."

Maradona always stood with the oppressed, particularly with the people of Palestine. He made sure they were not forgotten, saying in 2018, "In my heart, I'm Palestinian." He was a critic of Israeli violence against Gaza, and it was even rumored that he would coach the Palestinian national team during the 2015 AFC Asian Cup.

Maradona had tattoos of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and likened himself to Guevara, calling him his hero. Maradona credited the Cuban medical system with saving his life, when he arrived there, addicted and dangerously overweight, only to emerge looking like he could still take on the next generation of competition. He supported Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, at a time when Chávez was undertaking radical plans to redistribute income and education to the country's poor. He was a steadfast opponent of the Bush regime and the Iraq war and sported T-shirts proclaiming Bush as a war criminal. He once said, "I hate everything that comes from the United States. I hate it with all my strength." That sentiment made him a hero to the billions who live under this country's boot.

Many will surely write about Maradona's prowess on the pitch; his legendary World Cup runs, his "hand of God" goal against England, his ability to go the length of the field with the ball "sewn to his foot." Others will dwell over his torments, his pain, and his demons. But let's take a moment and raise a glass to Diego Maradona, comrade, friend, and fierce advocate for all trying to eke out survival in a world defined by savage inequalities. Many are writing today that Maradona is now resting in the "hand of God." I prefer to believe that he is hard at work organizing the angels. Diego Maradona: ¡Presente!

Then, a mere four minutes after the hand of God, Maradona scored what has been both called and widely acknowledged as "the Goal of the Century." This was an unfathomable 60-yard, 10-second jaunt that started inside his own half, required him to elude four of England's players, and ended leaving England's goaltender Peter Shilton on his ass and Maradona with a goal for the ages.

This triumph of both talent and trickery came at a time when Argentina was still reeling from its defeat in the Falkland Islands—known in Argentina as Las Islas Malvinas—at the hands of Great Britain. The battle—never officially proclaimed a war—came when the Argentine armed forces, invaded the island, which they believed to be their territory. Margaret Thatcher's Great Britain, which had been overseeing the islands as part of its own imperial portfolio, sent its navy to take them back. The resulting battle killed 900 people, most of them Argentinian. This recent memory supercharged the contest. (It must be noted that Maradona had no love for the military junta, but still felt the pain of Argentina's defeat.) As Maradona commented in his 2000 biography,

Although we had said before the game that football had nothing to do with the Malvinas war, we knew they had killed a lot of Argentine boys there, killed them like little birds. And this was revenge. It was something bigger than us: We were defending our flag.

Maradona also linked his hand of God goal to the Falklands defeat, saying,

We, as Argentinians, didn't know what the military was up to. They told us that we were winning the war. But in reality, England was winning 20–0. It was tough. The hype [for the soccer game] made it seem like we were going to play out another war. I knew it was my hand. It wasn't my plan but the action happened so fast that the linesman didn't see me putting my hand in. The referee looked at me and he said: "Goal." It was a nice feeling like some sort of symbolic revenge against the English.

Maradona pointed to the memory of the Falklands to explain why he would never apologize to England for the hand of God goal. The feeling that it was a slap against Thatcher and the Falklands War continues to this day. French President Emmanuel Macron was roasted in the British press for praising Maradona upon his death for his defeat of "Thatcher's England" in what Macron called the "most geopolitical match in football history."

Maradona's iconic match against England should remind us that, while there are always efforts to "keep politics out of sports," it is just a stubborn fact that sports is life and life is political. Maradona was a political icon not only because he stood with the voiceless of the Global South. He was political because in 1986 he put a nation on his back and, with that devilish left hand, wrote his own chapter in a history with a reach well beyond the world of sports.

## The Politics of Maradona's Iconic 'Hand of God' Goal

By Dave Zirin for *Edge of Sports*



The death of soccer god and social rebel Diego Maradona has provoked an outpouring of remembrances. Last week, I wrote about his various political stances, and how he always stood in solidarity with the Global South and against Yanqui imperialism. Yet there is another part of Maradona's political history that demands examination. That is the way his politics were reflected in his play. This is not uncommon in international soccer, where the political language of nationalism runs through the game, but in the annals of the history of the sport there are few rivals to the 1986 World Cup, when a 25-year-old Maradona put the country of Argentina on his back to defeat England in the quarterfinals.

Maradona was the star of this World Cup, from which Argentina emerged as victor. He scored five goals and created five more for teammates. It was at that quarterfinal match against England on June 22, 1986, that Maradona etched his legend in stone. Argentina won 2-1 in front of 114,000 people in Mexico City, with Maradona scoring both goals. The first, scored in the 51st minute, was the infamous "hand of God" goal, where the ball caromed off Maradona's left hand, going into the net. The blatant infraction was missed by the referee. Maradona said afterward, "I was waiting for my teammates to embrace me, and no one came.... I told them, 'Come hug me, or the referee isn't going to allow it.'" After the match, Maradona told the press that the goal was achieved "un poco con la cabeza de Maradona y otro poco con la mano de Dios" ("a little with Maradona's head and a little with the hand of God"). Thus the goal became stamped throughout the ages as "the hand of God." England still hasn't forgiven either the referee or even Maradona himself, who, even in the aftermath of his recent death, was lambasted on social media by English fans.

## In Naples, A City Steeped in Pagan Rites, I Saw Maradona Cast His Spell

by Ed Vulliamy for *The Guardian*, November 29th 2020

On the evening that Napoli football club won its first ever championship, in May 1987, a graffito was scrawled on the wall of Poggioreale cemetery, on the city's shoulders as it rises from the gulf of Naples: "Voi non sapete che cosa vi siete persi" – roughly, you don't know what you missed. Overnight came the reply: "E chi u l'he detto?" – who told you we missed it?

This is how Naples thinks, and holds in its heart the mercurial genius largely responsible for winning that scudetto: Diego Maradona. And now that "Dieguito" himself has passed over to the other side, the city's head of cemeteries, Alessio Castiello, and funeral director Gennaro Tammaro, urge the city to commission and erect a statue of, and monument to, Maradona.

"Besides him being an iconic figure," said Tammaro, "losing Maradona is – for Neapolitans – like losing a member of the family. As soon as we heard the news, we immediately resolved to give the city a place where we can remember him and – why not? – cry." Almost as Tammaro spoke, SSC Napoli announced the renaming of its San Paolo Stadium to Diego Armando Maradona Stadium.

Over the past days and nights of Argentinian mourning – passionate to the point of violence – crowds of Neapolitans have also gathered beneath murals of Maradona; there's a bridge between Vesuvius and Buenos Aires, of vigils held, tears shed, prayers whispered, memories exchanged.

Life is nothing if not a storage of memories long gone but cherished, and among my own are those Sunday afternoons over two years with an abbonamento – season ticket – spent at San Paolo, watching Maradona play. Years of wonder, and poignant decline: Diego's delivery of a second scudetto for Napoli in 1990; both triumph and tribulation during the 1990-91 season, then Maradona's ensnarement by celebrity, the Camorra mafia and its white stuff – and his tragic departure.

Maradona hails from, belongs to, and will be rightly laid to rest in his beloved Argentina. His playing career began with Argentinos Juniors, then Boca Juniors, and ended back at Boca. Buenos Aires sports journalist Alejandro Wall wrote on Friday: "Diego is the great narrator of Argentina", rising as he did from dire poverty in the barrio. Columnist Hugo Alconada Mon, writing in the daily *La Nación*, judged that in a riven nation, "Maradona was one of the few figures who, at least in certain moments, managed to unify us: his skill, his achievements, his myth and his legacy transcended his football... or politics... Maradona was unmistakably Argentine, and a universal genius."

But – as he said himself, many times – Maradona leaves a slice of his soul in Naples. It was wearing Napoli’s sky-blue shirt that he found a spiritual, as well as professional, home. Mayor Luigi De Magistris on Wednesday called Maradona’s death “the latest tragedy in a terrible year. It was a visceral love. Maradona was Naples.”

Naples is the world’s last pagan city. It exists on a faultline and in the shadow of a volcano, in close proximity to the cults of death and after-life, replete with what atheists and northern Europeans call “superstition”. Family shrines – and several to Maradona, sometimes complete with halo – adorn corners and courtyards. The canyon-streets of peeling stucco around Spaccanapoli and Quartieri Spagnoli are lined with wart-faced marionettes, masks and pulcinelle harlequins. Even the frayed suburbs, among the poorest in Europe, are steeped in folklore: Neapolitans read cards in earnest, and interpret dreams with the *smorfia* – from Morpheus, god of dreams – a table of numbers which correlate to body parts and other symbols. People wear the *cornicello* for protection and to assist with fertility or virility. Catholicism in Naples can be richly occult: in the chapel of Sansevero, the marble veil over Christ’s body is so impossibly thin, so they say, it cannot have been carved by Giuseppe Sanmartino, and must have been draped over him and turned to stone with a spell.

This is the city to which Diego Maradona arrived in 1984; a capacity crowd filled the stadium – and streets around it – just to greet the man Naples heralded as its Messiah.

Maradona’s football befitted a city steeped in magic. His ball control, the weird trajectory of his shooting, the weighting of a pass; his body-swerves and inability to fall over, defied the laws of physics and gravity. Maradona was a soccer-sorcerer; he played in a fifth dimension and could mind-read an opponent before he himself knew what he was thinking. Maradona’s tricks never repeated themselves; there was no pattern to read, no code to crack. He played football like a voodoo shaman, and Naples understood exactly what was happening.

There was also deep history beneath what Maradona achieved. Naples was once Italy’s biggest city, but with Italian unification during the 1850s and 60s, it lost hegemony to the industrialising north. The port became a gateway of flight to America as the south was impoverished, while Piedmont, Lombardy and Veneto flourished. And this, like everything in Italy, was reflected in football: the apparently never-ending reigns of formidable Juventus, and Milan’s brace of powerhouse clubs.

The north held Naples in contempt; the songs at matches spoke for themselves: “Here come the Neapolitans/ Oh, what a stench!/Even the dogs are running away/ Terremotati, Colerati... [literally: earthquake, cholera-ridden]”.

“O mamma mamma mamma, sai perché mi batte il corazón? Ho visto Maradona! Ho visto Maradona! Eh mamma, innamorato son!” Emiliano Paolini kept repeating the words that Maradona’s Italian fans chanted in Naples. (“Oh mamma, do you know why my heart beats so? I’ve seen Maradona! Oh mamma, I am in love!”)

The crucifix was the work of Paolini and his partner Marianela Perelli. “For the kind of people I identify with, people working their way up from the bottom, the kind of kids who play ball barefoot in the street, Maradona was the Malcolm X of those people,” Paolini told me later.

Argentina’s sizeable Afro-Argentinian community, which once comprised half the population in some provinces, was decimated by deliberate policies such as forced recruitment into the nation’s 19th-century wars, segregation, mass imprisonment and mass executions. Today less than 1% of Argentinians identify as being of African descent, though the “black” epithet is still used familiarly for anyone with slightly darker skin because of their indigenous or Afro-Argentinian ancestry.

The term survives as well in Argentina’s lexicon of prejudice, either discriminatory or affectionate according to the context of its use. In both Argentinian senses, Maradona was definitely “black”. Racial pride and class pride played a strong role in his magnetism.

Maradona stood proudly with the Latin American left: with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, both of whose likenesses he had tattooed on his body, and with Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. “I am a Chavista. Everything Fidel does, everything Chávez does, for me is the best,” Maradona said after a meeting with Chávez in 2005.

When the US president, George W Bush, visited Argentina that year, Maradona was photographed wearing a T-shirt with Bush’s face, and above, in bold capital letters: “war criminal”.

Yet for all his fiery politics, Maradona seems to be the only fire around which Argentina’s constantly warring progressives and conservatives can agree to warm their hands. “The only left that brought us happiness,” says a meme circulating on conservative WhatsApp groups, showing Maradona making one of his famous left-foot strikes.

Strangely for a man with such strong political opinions, that might be Maradona’s legacy to his divided nation. A token of peace around which progressives and conservatives can join hands for a moment to remember their departed god.



## Football Was Only Part Of It: Diego Maradona Transcended Sport

by Uki Goñi for *The Guardian*, November 28th 2020

Proud, defiant, political. To the world's neglected and marginalised, he was a figure of hope.

For a nation prone to frequent lamentation over its missed opportunities, crashing from the world's 10th wealthiest economy per capita in 1913 to a constant teetering at the edge of economic and social collapse for the better part of the past century, Argentina has produced an astonishing array of instantly recognisable global icons.

Eva Perón, unanointed queen of Argentina's "shirtless" working class, was transmuted into Santa Evita, whip-master of Argentina's oligarchy, by Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice. There's Che Guevara, who traded the rugby pitch of Argentinian high society to trudge through revolutionary Cuba alongside Fidel Castro. And Pope Francis, detested by the medieval-minded conservative wing of the Roman Catholic church for his championing of the poor.

And then there is Diego Maradona, arguably the world's greatest ever footballer, but a man who transcended the sport to become something much more than a soccer star to millions around the world. To the world's neglected and marginalised, Maradona became a figure of hope, for some almost a god. Such is the power of the Maradona icon that even his death of natural causes on Wednesday, most likely brought on by decades of substance abuse, still feels like a kind of martyrdom.

Here in Argentina, Maradona is everywhere present, in people's hearts, in people's minds. Friends have been crying non-stop since his death. Whatever side of the political chasm you are on – and in Argentina that chasm is wide – Maradona is there. "I love him, I love him," I have heard grown people shouting for over four decades now, continuing years after he retired from the soccer field.

"Do you realise the happiness he brought to us, the poor? You have no idea!" A short video of a crying fan, his face mask wobbling loose at his chin, lighting a candle on the street for Maradona on Wednesday, went viral in Argentina. To countless fans like this, Maradona represented a signal of defiance towards everything that is unfair in our unequal world.

To the church of Maradona, most came for the soccer, but almost all stayed for the gospel. On Wednesday afternoon, minutes after the announcement of his death, a 36-year-old artist ran out on to the streets of Argentina's central city of Rosario carrying a large crucifix upon which an effigy of Maradona was nailed.

This narrative was carved into the city's subconscious when Maradona captured the two championships: more than victories, they were deliverance and vindication. Then came Italy's turn to host the 1990 World Cup and face Argentina at San Paolo for the semi-final. While Italians saw the trophy on home terrain as an almost divine right, Maradona pleaded that the crowd commit treason and support his homeland team. Most present did not – nor did I – but the Ultras on the stadium's Curva B did, for sure; "Napoli non è Italia," insisted Maradona [Naples is not Italy].

Argentina won, Italy's showcase was shattered, and the country – public, judges and newspapers – never forgave Maradona.

In Naples, the brighter the sun and colours, the darker the shadows fall. "Napule è nu sole amaro" – "Napoli is a bitter sun" – reads a neon sign in dialect strewn across the main street through Sanità, a line from a song by Pino Daniele. And even back then, before the brave work of Roberto Saviano made it infamous, the Camorra was tightening its grip not only on the city's economy and political class of Campania but also on Europe's share of the global cocaine market.

Maradona was the perfect quarry: passionate, anxious to please and be pleased; over-generous, almost naive. He attracted money and could be made dependent – on cocaine, and on sex to a degree – and thereby on those who provided them. Maradona was courted and worn by bosses of the Giuliano Camorra clan as a badge of credibility, with regard to both the establishment and the people. Naples adulated but devoured him.

By the time of Italy's semi-final loss to Argentina, Maradona himself had edged ajar the doorway to his own destruction – and now the machinery of state pushed it wide open. So on weekdays, between watching Maradona play, I found myself, as a reporter rather than fan, listening to his voice on police wiretaps. One night, a Camorra madam called Donna Carmela Cinquegrana put her son Cristino on the line for a chat with his idol, before procuring him a pair of prostitutes.

After Maradona left Naples as a player for the last time, a warrant for drug possession over his head, another graffito appeared: Diego, "facci ancora sognare" – Diego, make us dream again.

So much has been written and filmed about Maradona's fall, we can forget that Diego's life, work and charisma survived and continued after Naples, as he rebounded from humiliation to defiance, from rehab to politics, and charted a course from football management career to papal audience, and global celebrity.

Maradona confidently befriended leftist leaders throughout the Americas: Cuba's Fidel Castro, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Argentina's Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Bolivia's Evo Morales. For whatever reason, it matters not: Maradona became an icon not just of football but of the barrio poor, sporting his tattoo of Che Guevara. Among the avalanche of tributes last week was that from American sports writer Dave Zirin, praising Maradona's "rebel intensity", as a "friend and fierce advocate for all trying to eke out survival in a world defined by savage inequalities".

A marvellous series on Netflix followed Maradona's two seasons as manager of the Dorados de Sinaloa, based in Culiacán, fortress capital of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán's drug business. It seemed like a disaster waiting to happen: Diego in cocaine's capital. Not so: the seven films show him taking a Mexican second division team playing on a pitch of barely growing grass, to the cup final, through sheer soccer-savvy, and belief in the redemptive joy of football.

Series producer Angus MacQueen recalls: "We imagined that in Culiacán, run by the Sinaloa cartel, we would get some tragic, disastrous shadow of Diego's Neapolitan triumphs. Instead, we lived with his raw passion, his desire to win, his drive. And yet, I have never met anyone who felt more alone, who so wanted to be loved. The football pitch was his escape. As he said to us: 'it was like touching heaven.'"

As the only player to whom Maradona is compared, Pelé, said on Wednesday: "I hope one day, we'll play football together in heaven."

Back in Naples, I interviewed a man called Pepe who had known Maradona well, and to whom he confessed: "I'm not a saint, I'm a football player." And the most arresting reactions to his death come from his adversaries on the pitch, and those who have sought to follow in his footsteps – the community of great players, most of whom, like Diego, rose from the slums.

Michel Platini, whom people called "the other number 10", captained probably the best team ever to play – Juventus – during the 1980s. He said on Thursday: "Our own past has passed away." In an insightful interview with La Repubblica on Friday, Platini expanded: "[Maradona's] game was magical and magnificent, and I won't allow myself into his personal life... But I don't remember Diego alone. He was always with his audience... he had a carnal need for contact. Wherever there was a crowd, there you'd find Diego, sweaty and happy. He loved being loved... However, I think that within himself, away from the crowd, he felt alone all his life."

Platini recalls playing against Maradona in his farewell game for Juve, in 1987: "We exchanged shirts, after he had played every one of those 90 minutes."

The generation that follows holds him in awe. Zlatan Ibrahimović, top scorer in Serie A, for Milan, two decades after joining Ajax, aged 20, said: "[Maradona's] not dead. He's immortal. God gave us the greatest player of all time, and he'll live for ever."

Best of all, from Tono Nuñez, president of Dorados de Sinaloa, who lured Maradona to Culiacán: "Trainers try to convince players to work hard, practise and believe in their tactics. But Maradona gets them to give their best just by showing up! He was defiant, stubborn, fragile at heart." And on Maradona's passing: "Every minute, there's a tear. And then comes this big laugh!"