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Argentina

How social media invented the 'world's most racist country'

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During the recent World Cup, the clash between national teams quickly escalated into an international campaign against Argentina. A diverse range of figures, from musicians Rosalía and Patti Smith to actor Samuel L Jackson, former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis and writer and activist Etan Thomas, joined the mass condemnation of Argentina's alleged exceptional racism. This was amplified by social media and much of the Western press, both conservative and progressive. Support for Argentina's opponents was presented as an anti-racist cause, with Argentine society reduced to a caricature of a white, xenophobic and supremacist society.

What do you make of the global anti-Argentine backlash?

It was quite a striking phenomenon. For a few days, Argentina even appeared on social media as the world's most hated country, above even the United States. To some extent, none of this should be too surprising. Football stirs up intense national rivalries, and social media amplifies them within an ecosystem dominated by aggression and fake news. But it soon escalated to another level.

What began as a fairly typical reaction to sporting competition grew to encompass a large part of the international media. The right wing revived the old portrayal of the Argentine as a cheating barbarian. After Argentina's defeat to Spain in the final, for example, Conservative British newspaper The Telegraph ran the headline "Football 1 — Criminals 0". The match stopped being a sporting contest and became a moral confrontation between Spain's supposedly civilised style of play and the Argentine's inherent violence.

Even more surprising was the coverage by progressive or liberal Western media. The New Yorker, The Guardian, The Los Angeles Times and El País — to varying degrees and with different nuances — ran a narrative portraying the tournament as a struggle between a white, racist Argentina and the multiculturalism embodied by European teams. This approach differed from, yet complemented, the conservative one. While some denounced Argentine barbarism, others framed Argentina as expressing racial supremacy.

The scene was, to say the least, paradoxical. When the campaign reached its peak, the semi-final line-up featured three teams from Global North nations, with long colonial histories and well-documented contemporary problems of racism, pitted against a team from a Global South country. Yet a section of the international progressive movement presented support for Spain, England or France as an anti-colonial and anti-racist stance against Argentina.

I think this was a pretty characteristic case of our time. Within a few days, a completely delusional image of Argentina collectively emerged. Perhaps it can be summed up by Samuel L Jackson's comments, which portrayed Argentina as "one of, if not, the most racist country in the world" and suggested Black people should not support its national team. Jackson is an actor genuinely committed to civil rights living in a country whose history of slavery and segregation still casts a shadow, where deep-rooted traditions of white supremacy persist and hate crimes are common. His words illustrate the extent of the campaign's distortion.

This was an extremely powerful global cultural apparatus that built on a campaign of harassment originating on, and amplified by, social media. A Global South society such as Argentina has little capacity to influence global public discourse. Countering a narrative of that magnitude proved practically impossible. There were critical voices, but they were a minority and failed to achieve comparable reach. Among those voices were, in fact, many of the very people on whose behalf the campaign supposedly spoke — from Afro-Argentine organisations to Latin American migrant

groups. They described experiences very different from the caricature circulating abroad.

I believe the start of all this was far more prosaic than later political rationalisations. The raw material of our behaviour — all of ours — is emotion. Reasons tend to come later, as an alibi or disguise for our passions. And at the heart of this lay a very intense emotion, reignited in the context of the World Cup.

The starting point was many people’s irritation at the Argentine national team’s latest progress, having “endured” its supporters’ arrogance after the 2022 World Cup win in Qatar. There was, quite simply, an emotional rejection of the prospect of another Argentine victory. In Spain, this was likely compounded by the long-standing hostility towards Lionel Messi from a significant section of Real Madrid supporters. For years they had built a sporting and media culture centred on rivalry with the Argentine player who starred for FC Barcelona.

In Latin America, there was a pre-existing anti-Argentine sentiment, linked to its arrogant reputation. Added to this was the frustration of huge nations with far larger budgets and populations. Mexico has a long history of footballing disappointments, while Brazil is enduring the longest World Cup drought in its history, just as its main regional rival enjoys a run of success. Brazil was, in fact, one of the most active focal points of the campaign.

Football is an extraordinary catalyst for emotions and, during a World Cup, it combines with that enigmatic and powerful force of modernity known as national sentiment. The origin of the anti-Argentine phenomenon was largely a mixture of sporting rivalry and wounded pride at the prospect of another Argentine victory. This was all amplified by technology designed to reward aggression and outrage. Social media, and particularly X under Elon Musk’s leadership, functions as a machine to amplify such rhetoric.

Three political rationalisations were built upon this emotional foundation. The first was alleged FIFA favouritism towards Argentina, a conspiracy theory with very little substance. Any favourable refereeing decision was presented as proof of a plot, while mistakes that disadvantaged Argentina or benefited other sides were ignored.

FIFA’s lack of transparency is no surprise to anyone, and was exacerbated by Donald Trump’s influence at a World Cup hosted in the US. That closeness was laid bare when the president intervened to have US player Folarin Balogun’s suspension lifted. Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan’s exclusion was also outrageous, as were highly controversial refereeing decisions, such as those in the match between Croatia and Portugal, with the Croatian Football Federation lodging a formal protest. None of this benefited Argentina. The tournament confirmed the extent to which FIFA is riddled with commercialisation and corruption.

The second issue was the link between Javier Milei’s far-right government and Trump and [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu. This Argentine government alignment is a real political orientation, the consequences of which are borne by the country’s population. However, its use in the anti-Argentine campaign was selective and misleading. For example, attention was drawn to Messi’s participation in an official meeting between Inter Miami [for whom he plays in the US] and Trump — a reprehensible act. By contrast, far more personal encounters — such as [English player] Harry Kane golfing with Trump or [Portuguese player] Cristiano Ronaldo’s private visit — did not provoke the same outcry.

While the Argentine national team was condemned for this alleged political closeness, gestures pointing in the opposite direction were ignored. Alongside the beautiful image of Lamine Yamal celebrating with the Palestinian flag [which occurred during FC Barcelona’s celebrations of its league title, not the World Cup — FF], Argentina staged one of the tournament’s few acts of political defiance. Following the semi-final against England, several players unfurled a banner stating “The Falklands are Argentine”, defying an explicit ban by FIFA that was even backed by Milei’s government. The gesture tapped into a deep-seated popular sentiment and exposed the players to potential

sanctions. It also caused unease within Argentina's ruling party, which reacted with hostility. It was a brief but powerful act.

The third theme was racism. On this point, the backlash found a nobler and far more effective justification. The campaign stopped presenting itself as a footballing rivalry, and instead as a moral struggle against a country portrayed as white, colonial, racist, violent and deceitful.

This is not to say Argentina is free from racism. Racism exists, alongside other forms of discrimination and inequality. Various racialised groups, including indigenous peoples, people of African descent and regional migrants, suffer from prejudice and exclusion. And football is one arena where these manifest themselves in an unpleasant and exaggerated way. But reality bears little resemblance to the image constructed by this campaign.

It was truly surprising to read increasingly delusional posts written by people I know, many of whom I am close to and who are intelligent and well-educated. They shared easily debunked fake news making generalisations they would never accept if directed against other peoples. It was also disturbing to observe the growing aggressiveness in language. A Marxist activist among my contacts on X even called for Iran to bomb Buenos Aires. He clearly was not serious, but it showed just how normalised collective hostility became.

The experience was eye-opening. We could observe from the inside how the networks of hate that fuel the far right operate. It all begins with an intense emotion. Then, some true facts taken out of context and mixed with falsehoods were shared within a community that only listens to whatever confirms their preconceptions. In a very short space of time, a completely imaginary reality was constructed and intelligent people were persuaded to repeat it with conviction.

It is not an exaggeration to speak of this as hate speech. It exhibited several characteristic features: it stemmed from heightened emotion, spread via social media, was fuelled by fake news and half-truths, and attributed moral characteristics to an entire population. As is often the case, such stigmatisation had consequences beyond social media, with incidents of aggression against Argentines in Spain, Mexico and Brazil. So far, these have been isolated cases, but they show such narratives are never harmless.

Most strikingly, a section of the left and the global progressive intelligentsia — primarily in Europe and the US — provided the campaign with respectable language and a political justification.

I would say it was hate speech disguised as progressive discourse. A perfectly understandable football rivalry was transformed into a moral condemnation of an entire population, and a section of the international progressive movement granted it political legitimacy.

What is the situation regarding racism in Argentina?

Racism exists in Argentina, but it is not the exceptionally racist society portrayed during this campaign. Both statements must be acknowledged.

There is discrimination against indigenous peoples, people of African descent and migrants from the region. There is selective police violence and a football culture that includes very strong racist and xenophobic expressions. For a long time, moreover, the official narrative portrayed Argentina as a purely white and European nation, downplaying the population's ethnic and racial diversity.

But if you look beyond impressions and viral incidents to examine institutions, social history and comparative studies, the international caricature starts to crumble.

To begin with, Argentina established one of the most advanced civil rights systems in Latin America. It was the first country in the region to recognise same-sex marriage and full adoption rights for same-sex couples. Its Gender Identity Act allows people to change their registered name and gender without judicial authorisation or medical or psychiatric requirements, and was regarded as globally pioneering legislation. It also recognised migration as a human right and established a relatively open system, granting foreigners access to public services.

Nor did Argentina implement anything comparable to the wall between the US and Mexico or the European border regime in Ceuta and Melilla, where migration containment policies have led to deaths and serious human rights violations under both conservative and social democratic governments. I raise this not to downplay Argentine racism, but because Spain was presented as the embodiment of a multicultural and integrated society, in contrast to a closed and supremacist Argentina. This requires us to brush aside a large part of European reality.

Milei's government is attacking a considerable part of that institutional framework and promoting a more restrictive and punitive policy. So far, however, its ability to dismantle it has been limited. Its offensive constitutes a regression precisely because there is a particularly advanced tradition of civil rights.

Argentine history also presents significant structural differences. The Assembly of Year XIII was a political assembly convened in Buenos Aires during the Río de la Plata independence movement in the early 19th century. It did not completely abolish slavery, but decreed that the children of enslaved women should be born free and limited the slave trade. Definitive abolition was enshrined in the 1853 Constitution. The US, for its part, abolished slavery in 1865, but maintained legal racial segregation under the Jim Crow laws for almost another century.

The Río de la Plata region's economy never had a structure centred on slavery comparable to Brazil or the US south. This was not because the Argentine elites were anti-racist; they were openly racist. The difference came from a different economic and social structure. But that difference had historical consequences.

Added to this was a powerful egalitarian tradition. Historians of very diverse persuasions have linked this to labour migration's politicisation, the trade union movement's strength and the mestizo working classes' integration into political life, particularly during the Peronist era [under President Juan Peron between 1946-55]. They also point to the unifying role of state education and a highly active and densely organised civil society.

This egalitarianism coexisted with racism, but helped to mitigate some of its effects. It also helps explain Argentina's relative position compared with societies plagued by far deeper racial inequalities. Argentina has enormous material and symbolic inequalities. At the same time, there is a strong cultural norm against the open assertion of superiority based on birth, a phenomenon widely documented and studied by political scientists and historians. This tension forms part of the country's history.

Available comparative studies do not support the image of Argentina as a racist outlier either. In the World Values Survey, which asks whether people would object to having neighbours of a different race, Argentina usually ranks among the countries with the lowest levels of declared racial prejudice. Its results are generally better than much of the region and comparable to European societies with low levels of intolerance. Depending on the question, Argentina usually ranks close to Spain or Britain, and frequently above France.

The Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America provides another comparison. The study examines the relationship between skin colour and socio-economic status in several countries across the region. Its findings show

that racial hierarchies permeate all Latin America, albeit to varying degrees, and the gaps associated with skin colour are particularly pronounced in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Peru. This does not disprove the existence of racism in Argentina, but it contradicts the image of Argentina as an exception, contrasting with neighbouring countries which, in reality, exhibit very deep ethnic and racial inequalities.

In much of Latin America, ethnic and racial inequalities are deeper and more visible than in Argentina. Brazil has very pronounced racial divides in both living conditions and exposure to incarceration and police violence. Mexico faces deep inequalities that particularly affect the indigenous population and, to a lesser but nonetheless documented extent, Afro-Mexican communities. In other countries in the region, being Indigenous or Afro-descendant is closely linked to poverty and social marginalisation.

France and Britain, for their part, have abundant evidence of discrimination in the labour market and police treatment. Spain has significant racism against African migrants and a border policy associated with serious human rights violations.

In response to the claim that Argentina is more racist than the major Latin American societies or France, Spain or England, the immediate question should be: according to which indicator? Comparative studies of attitudes do not support that conclusion. Nor do civil rights organisations. Ethnic and racial inequalities are considerably more pronounced in other countries in the region, while several European societies face widely documented problems of institutional discrimination.

This does not allow us to draw up a definitive ranking of racist societies. But it allows us to dismiss the caricature circulating during the campaign. There is no serious evidence to suggest that Argentina is a racist anomaly compared with those countries. On several indicators, the available evidence points in the opposite direction.

How, then, did the external image of a particularly racist Argentina come about? I believe there were two decisive factors.

The first is, precisely, football. Stadiums are one place where Argentine racism manifests itself in the most exaggerated way. Racist chants have become normalised within the local football culture. Furthermore, Argentines who regularly travel to the World Cups are not a sociological cross-section of the country. They largely belong to the upper-middle and upper classes, among whom classism and racism are expressed in a particularly crude manner.

The second factor is the difficulty in recognising Argentina's diversity when it does not take the phenotypic and categorical forms seen in the US. Argentine society is profoundly mixed-race, although this mixed heritage has been obscured for decades by an ideology of whiteness. From the outside, this ideology is often taken at face value. Argentina once claimed to be white, and its critics chose to believe it.

Argentine categories of race and class do not correspond to those in the US either. The word negro, for example, can function as a racial category and a classist insult, but also, and very often, as an affectionate form of address. This makes it essential to consider the context. One example was the English Football Association's sanction on [Uruguayan player] Edinson Cavani for writing "gracias, negrito" to a friend [on social media]. An affectionate use of Río de la Plata Spanish was interpreted as a racial slur. An affectionate use of the term ended up being sanctioned because an English institution transposed its own code regarding racial language into a different linguistic context.

The challenge lies in avoiding two oversimplifications. The first is the long-standing local denial of racism, based on the idea that, since there is no racial division here identical to that in the US, there is no discrimination. The second is the opposite caricature, which portrays Argentina as a supremacist anomaly and ignores its diverse, mixed-race

population, as well as the egalitarian tradition reflected in many of its institutions.

International comparison allows us to reject an empirically false claim without downplaying Argentina’s real problems of racism. Moreover, this falsehood has negative political consequences worth examining. Argentina — neither in its institutions nor in the main international attitude studies — does not appear to be more racist than other Latin American countries or the major European powers that spearheaded this campaign. In several indicators, the exact opposite is true.

What do you think of the role of the global progressive intelligentsia?

It was one of the most disappointing aspects. A large section of progressive European and American intelligentsia replicated precisely the Eurocentric attitude that Anglo-Saxon departments of decolonial studies claim to denounce: they spoke from a moral high ground without bothering to understand the specific history or social reality of the country they were condemning. In doing so, they turned a Global South society into the object of scorn, rendering the racism characteristic of their own societies invisible.

An excellent article, “[Against Geopolitical Football Moralizing](#),” published by *Jacobin* in the US — one of the few major left-wing media outlets that openly opposed this wave, and an article that *Revista Jacobin* translated — highlighted a fundamental point: many of these interventions did not seek to understand an unfamiliar reality, but to force it into pre-established Global North categories.

The authors put it better than I ever could:

Racial inequalities in our country do not, and could never, fit the US pattern. Seeing them as lesser versions of the US fits the very definition of “imperial,” the practice of “ruling over” a multiplicity of otherwise disparate cultures. This “ruling over” disregards specificities, ignores alien ways of seeing, and generally expects all this diversity to be subordinate to this monolithic dominant view. This is not an exclusive feature of right-wing ideologues; it sadly extends to some of those who would in other contexts denounce empire.

Argentina’s racial history cannot be understood as an incomplete or flawed version of the US experience. Turning a particular national history into a universal model and forcing other societies to recognise themselves in it is an act that can ultimately be considered imperial.

Historically, the US organised its racial system around plantation slavery and, later, legal segregation, within a relatively binary classification between whites and Blacks. Brazil followed a different trajectory, characterised by an enormous slave economy and more gradual hierarchies of colour. Argentina’s development took a different course, characterised by the reduced economic centrality of slavery and a process of miscegenation whose visibility was subsequently overshadowed by the demographic and symbolic weight of mass European immigration. Added to this was rendering invisible people of African descent and Indigenous peoples, and a tradition of social integration that coexisted with concrete forms of discrimination.

Applying, even implicitly, a US-imported binary racial classification leads to scrutinising the faces and skin tones of Argentine players to decide whether they are Black enough. Failing to fit a stereotypical image of Blackness, the national team is then declared white. Yet the Argentine national team is mixed-race and socially from below, composed overwhelmingly of players from working-class homes in the provinces and urban outskirts. Society, for the

most part, identifies with them because of their backgrounds and recognising a shared sense of belonging, not because they represent a fantasy of white purity.

The Argentine national team is also multicultural, although its diversity does not match the expectations of a US university department. It reflects internal migration, as well as diverse ancestry fostered by grassroots institutions such as neighbourhood clubs.

There was also a clear asymmetry in the criteria applied. Argentina was subjected to an absolute moral scrutiny, while Spain, France and England were exempt from any historical or contemporary assessment. Their colonial histories and contemporary violence against migrants and racialised populations were overlooked.

Is Spain a multicultural society and Argentina a racist one? Spain is a society with a significant migrant population, and Lamine Yamal, as well as an exceptional player, has taken courageous political stances, championing his humble origins and expressing support for Palestine. Many Argentines saw in him something of Diego Maradona, probably the footballer who most openly stood up to FIFA and adopted recognisable political and popular causes.

But we also saw the Spanish team captain celebrating with his supporters shouting "For the king and for Spain", when the very idea of Spain is associated with subordinating Catalan, Basque and Galician national identities. In Spain, there is also systematic violence against African migrants and a xenophobic right wing that still feeds on the cultural legacies of the Franco dictatorship. France is characterised by widely documented discrimination against people of African and Maghreb origin. In Britain, there are racial disparities in living conditions and significant inequality in incarceration rates and police treatment.

This is not about defending one's own country by replacing one stigma with another. It is, quite simply, highlighting the arbitrariness of a Western intelligentsia that turned those societies into emblems of multiculturalism and anti-racism while subjecting Argentina to an absolute moral judgement.

None of this makes those societies inherently racist. That is precisely the standard that should also apply to Argentina. Societies are contradictory, shaped by power relations and internal conflicts. They cannot be reduced to a moral essence derived from a football team.

Yanis Varoufakis's comment was a particularly telling example of such simplification, although the list is, regrettably, very long. Varoufakis celebrated Spain's victory by asserting football had triumphed over its own commodification, and Spain's collective brilliance prevailed over Argentine individualism.

But why should Argentina represent commodification and Spain its transcending? The Spanish Football Federation is one of the richest and most powerful football industries in the world, dominated by clubs such as Real Madrid and Barcelona. Argentina, by contrast, occupies a peripheral position, training players who are snapped up by European leagues. Turning the subordinate pole into a symbol of the market, and one of its main centres into an emblem of resistance, shows how sporting preference was arbitrarily imbued with political content. It also reveals considerable ignorance, both on the structure of world football and the relations between the Global North and South — something one might expect considerably more from a figure of Varoufakis's intellectual and political stature.

It is also arbitrary to equate Argentina with individualism simply because of Messi. It is true the national team benefited from a providential figure, historically comparable only to Pelé or Maradona. But the Argentine team of recent years is deeply collective, built on solidarity among its players and subordinating its star players to a common project. What matters, however, is not the discussion about football, but the distortion of reality shared by prominent figures from the European intelligentsia. Varoufakis's comment says far less about Argentina's style of play than the

need to turn a sporting event into a moral and political victory, in an irresponsible manner contributing to the global harassment of a country.

This is not necessarily a case of bad faith. Rather, these were irresponsible acts that say much about our times. A person of intellectual authority must be particularly careful when speaking about a society they do not know. They cannot turn intuitions formed from viral posts into generalised assertions about the history and character of a people. Prestige increases that responsibility, because their words lend legitimacy to behaviours that subsequently spread in a far more aggressive manner.

There was also a form of political ventriloquism at play. People spoke on behalf of various racialised groups in Argentina, but those groups were rarely heard. Many of these voices rejected the international caricature without denying real problems of discrimination in Argentina. However, they received far less attention than the opinions of foreign celebrities. This so-called anti-racism once again placed international cultural centres in the position of explaining a Global South society, rather than those who live in it.

A truly internationalist intelligentsia should be less quick to judge and have a better understanding of the national histories on which it comments. It should also resist irresponsibly spouting opinions and the narcissistic stage presence social media fuels. Anti-racism loses its power when it becomes an arbitrary distribution of moral certificates, and it becomes outright imperial when it transforms Global North categories into the universal yardstick by which Global South societies must be judged.

Why does this campaign constitute a political problem, and not merely an unfair portrayal of Argentina?

Because the problem goes far beyond the country's international reputation. My concern is not to defend national honour or to demonstrate any supposed moral superiority on the part of Argentines. The serious issue is that a section of the left and the international progressive movement has adopted the tactics of a hate campaign and presented them as a form of anti-racism.

This mechanism harms, first and foremost, those fighting racism in Argentina. Racialised communities have been confronted with an external caricature bearing little resemblance to their actual experiences. The right can now exploit this exaggeration to deny the real problem. If it is absurd to claim that Argentina is the most racist country in the world, then, they will say, any accusation of racism is false. Extreme moralising ultimately provides them with an alibi.

The campaign also divides peoples who should be allies. Latin American societies are marked by specific problems of racism, but also by histories of workers', indigenous, democratic and anti-colonial struggles. Turning football rivalries into a moral contest between peoples is politically disastrous, particularly amid the far right's rise and renewed US pressure on the region.

The underlying problem is what sort of left is taking shape when it can so readily participate in campaigns of national stigmatisation. Internationalism is hollowed out when solidarity between peoples is replaced by a competition to prove who occupies the morally correct position. Racism must be combated and denounced wherever it appears. But a left that cannot distinguish between combating racism and stigmatising a people ends up pushing people who are neither racist nor right-wing towards reactionary positions. The far right has been very adept at exploiting this experience of moral humiliation.

Internationalism has always meant building solidarity between different peoples based on an understanding of their histories and the structures that pit them against one another. A campaign that turns marginalised people into a

collective object of hatred destroys that bond.

That is why it must be clearly denounced. Argentina is not free from racism, but no form of racism is combated by stigmatising a nationality. Criticism from abroad is legitimate, but must be based on facts and on a historical understanding capable of applying symmetrical criteria. Solidarity among oppressed peoples is far too important to be subordinated to moralising and the logic of social media.

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Translation by Federico Fuentes for [LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#) from [Revista Jacobin](#).

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