

# Matches, identity, and power: an interview with Pablo Alabarces

**Édison Gastaldo**

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## Abstract

Paulo Alabarces is one of the most important Argentinean intellectuals and a reference on the relation between popular culture, communication and sports in Latin America. Author of crucial texts, such as "Fútbol y Patria" (2002) and "Hinchadas" (2005), Paulo looks at sociocultural issues in Latin-American societies based on a mix of anthropology, cultural studies, and sociology. Tenured Professor at the Communication Department of the University of Buenos Aires, Paulo Alabarces is associated with researchers and universities from all Latin America and has conducted long-term work with Brazilian researchers and institutions. In this exclusive interview, Alabarces addresses cultural impasses in peripheral societies, hooliganism, media and fans, as well as upcoming sports mega-events in Brazil.

## Keywords

Cultural Criticism; Soccer; Journalism; Latin America.

**Édison Gastaldo** Like that of many other Latin American intellectuals, your academic training was wide, in a number of different areas, in universities in different countries. Could you please comment on your academic trajectory, your main theoretical and personal influences?

*Paulo Alabarces: My trajectory is the typical product of a time when we had no graduate studies programs, which only started to be institutionalized in Argentina in the 1990s. It is, at the same time, typical of the last period of dictatorship, as I finished my degree early in the transition to democracy, which allowed me to get to know some of my best professors toward the end of my course. Then I got my degree in Languages and started to work in the democratic University when I was very young, in 1985, in a Semiotics course that was being taught for the first time. At the same time, I was trained by Eduardo Romano, one of the great founders of popular culture studies*

**Édison Gastaldo** | edisongastaldo@yahoo.com.br  
Degree in Advertisement from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), master in Anthropology from UFRGS, PhD in Multimedia from Campinas State University (Unicamp). Post-doc in Sociology (Manchester, 2001) and Anthropology from Rio de Janeiro Federal University (UERJ). Associated Professor at the Communication and Language Department of the Rural Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ).

*in a Gramscian and populist perspective. Thus, I slid towards communication and popular culture studies, gradually giving up semiotics. From 1988 on, I have also worked with Aníbal Ford, another great student of communication and popular culture, one of those who invented its intersection with anthropology. I did a master's degree in Sociology of culture in the mid-1990s and my advisors were Carlos Altamirano and Beatriz Sarlo, other two great masters. I already was working on my research on sports culture when Sarlo's influence, especially, converged with my meeting Eduardo Archetti, the great Argentine anthropologist who, together with Roberto Da Matta, invented these studies in Latin America. These two influences led me to gradually move away from theoretical populism and adopt both a critical perspective on cultural studies and a strong anthropological influence. I did PhD in England, in Brighton, together with Alan Tomlinson, who is one of the founders of British sport Sociology, in a close dialogue with those colleagues who had incorporated Ethnography to these studies, such as Richard Giulianotti and Gary Armstrong. At the same time, I have always worked in a communication department, and I still do, in the Popular Culture course founded by Eduardo Romano. I am this knot,*

*this disciplinary intersection: literature, semiotics, communication, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, as well as populism, Marxism, subaltern, and post-colonial studies. With a strong presence of Gramsci as read by the British and the Latin Americans. As Raymond Williams used to say, I am always going back to Gramsci...*

**Edison Gastaldo:** One of his preferred research topics is violence among soccer fans. Eric Dunning once remarked that, in England, much of hooligan violence related to the “self-fulfilling prophecy” of British tabloid press, which, by spectacularizing violence, would have indirectly encouraged the emergence of hundreds of new hooligan groups across the UK. How do you see the relationship between the discourse of the press and the accusation of violence against organized supporters?

**Paulo Alabarces:** I believe the relationship is much more complex than what Dunning describes: I think that interpretations offered by his Leicester team have never been very subtle. In the Argentine case, the press (all sports journalism) participates in a common language that we call an ethics of aguante<sup>1</sup>, according to which violence is not only legitimate but also compulsory. This language

<sup>1</sup> Emic term used by Argentine fans, which literally means “ability to endure,” but which also encompasses the senses of bravery, physical strength and endurance, qualities seen as crucial in situations of confrontation with other fans or the police.

*and this ethics stem from three decades during which the Argentine soccer culture was shifting from a predominance of comic and farcical to a predominance of tragic (shift that begins under the dictatorship...). Journalism could not then take a distance from what he contributed to form with the excess drama and -another acute problem- contamination of its language by the supporter's. Journalists decided they should be similar to fans, at exactly the time when fan self-perception and role in the sporting spectacle, now hypermercantilized and global, became disproportionate. Fans started to believe they were the only pure, authentic thing, above suspicion; so, their role shifted dramatically. Journalists were unable to read this process, or they merely monitored it. Given the facts of violence, they simply took refuge in a comfortable, stigmatizing and useless "they, the violent"...*

**Édison Gastaldo:** In your book *Fútbol y Patria*, you analyze soccer in Argentinian society as a 'cultural machine', to use Beatriz Sarlo's words. In Brazil, as in many other Latin American countries, soccer has already played an important role in the construction of a national identity discourse. More recently, though, authors such as Ronaldo Helal and Antonio Jorge Soares suggest this link between soccer and national identity tends to be weakened. How do you see the relation between "soccer" and "homeland" in our countries now?

*Paulo Alabarces: I am revising the work I did ten years ago, but noting that my hypotheses were correct. Argentina already underwent this process of "weakening" in the 1990s: when Maradona left the scene, that link no longer had anything to hold onto, became little more than a media commodity. In *Fútbol y Patria*, however, I had pointed out that the key was to be found in the relations between national narratives, state and civil society; that the state had been, in the course of national history, the great nationalistic rapporteur (with an enormous weight, of course, of the Peronist populist state). This is what explains part of Maradona's success: a clearly Peronist symbol that replaced the lack (or absence) of the state narrator under a neoliberal regime, and the weakness of civil society to propose alternative narratives, except for the media, of course. Then, in 2010 there is a coincidence between Maradona's return as coach, the emergence of Messi (a new hero, however dumb, with no plebeian origin, without Maradona's populist appeal) and also a new populist and Peronist State. This latter once again presents itself as the nationalistic narrator during the festivities celebrating the bicentenary of the first Argentine national government in the same year. The conclusion is that only soccer embodies the national identity as a media commodity; to narrate the nation, the State is back, and does so in a better and more powerful way. This conclusion cannot be*

*extrapolated to the entire continent, but we do have just one general rule, which is that we need to consider all these factors when analyzing the relationship between sport and nation: history, state, civil society, media, sports heroes, etc.*

**Édison Gastaldo:** Another of your specialties is popular culture, specifically music. Considering the enormous changes that have taken place in the world of music production with the introduction of digital technologies, how do you see this process and its effects on popular culture in Latin American countries? Has our aesthetic, technical and economic dependence on international music market changed?

*Paulo Alabarces:* No, this dependence has not changed; but the enormous capacity local musical cultures have to produce deviations and local intersections has not changed either. Despite the weight of the international market and its endless capacity to impose itself, the weight of local music continues to be decisive. Of course, this topic requires more development and examples. It requires, for example, that we take into account the latest theoretical developments on the relationship between music and identity, and the ability popular songs have to generate - not to reflect - complex identitary phenomena.

**Édison Gastaldo:** To conclude, how do you see the process of preparing Brazil for

**World Cup 2014? Not only the stadiums, but the whole soccer culture in Brazil is in the process of being transformed based on the so-called “FIFA standards” (numbered seats, online ticketing, renovation of stadiums and reduction of their capacity, etc.).. In your opinion, how will these changes affect the everyday soccer culture in Brazil after the World Cup?**

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*Paulo Alabarces:* I have just attended a meeting in São Paulo where this was discussed with federal authorities, who are convinced that they can win the arm wrestling with FIFA ... Inevitably, FIFA demonstrates their oligopolistic power every step of the way, and there is little margin for democratic governments to compete in this space. No doubt about it: global resistance to this power should be stronger, but I fear that European complicity, first of all, and then other countries', co-opted by the overwhelming FIFA machine, leaves little room for resistance, and allows for much complicity or failure. Argentina, for example, is just an institutional accomplice of this state of affairs, and CONMEBOL as a whole is just replicating global power. In this sense, there is little room to imagine a democratic, democratically organized soccer that popular classes would democratically enjoy. The path we are on is that of an increasingly elite soccer, where popular space is limited to players (not all of them) and the audience watching on television

*... that is, if before that all matches are not only on cable or satellite channels. This future is possible and not desirable: But not many of us are concerned. I have just heard the Brazilian federal authorities warning against it, and pledging to fight it: I can only trust this.*

## Expediente

A revista E-Compós é a publicação científica em formato eletrônico da Associação Nacional dos Programas de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação (Compós). Lançada em 2004, tem como principal finalidade difundir a produção acadêmica de pesquisadores da área de Comunicação, inseridos em instituições do Brasil e do exterior.

E-COMPÓS | [www.e-compos.org.br](http://www.e-compos.org.br) | E-ISSN 1808-2599

Revista da Associação Nacional dos Programas de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação.  
Brasília, v.16, n.3, set./dez. 2013.  
A identificação das edições, a partir de 2008, passa a ser volume anual com três números.

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[gislenedasilva@gmail.com](mailto:gislenedasilva@gmail.com)