Soccer, Politics, and the Crystallization of Identity

Franco Bavoni
Mexico vs. Germany, 1998
Collective identities are:

• Optional, not inescapable
• Multiple and interchangeable rather than unique
• Not fixed; they shift around and can change continuously
• Context dependent
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Crystallization of Identity

• Identity has to become relevant in social interaction.

• Soccer can contribute to the crystallization of identity.

• By this I mean a process whereby members of the collectivity express and reaffirm their sense of belonging to the group.
Research Questions

• How does collective belonging crystalize on and around the field?

• What are the political effects of this crystallization of identity?
Methodology

- Bulk of research in Chicago
- Several Mexican soccer leagues in the city
- Ethnographic approach: participant observation and semi-structured interviews
- Forums organized by Mexican governmental authorities
- Trip to Michoacán
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Mechanisms for the crystallization of San Rafael identity

1. Competition and adversarial nature of soccer
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2. Sporting victories
“It was a huge pleasure to watch our team, especially when they won, and we felt very proud about it. The players proudly wore our uniform. The players as well as us [the supporters] just felt it. It was a huge pleasure. We brought bands, mariachis, all of that.”
Arnulfo

“Back then, all the people from the rancho who lived here [in Chicago] went to the games every week. It was very nice, each week it was full. It was wonderful because a lot of people gathered for the games.”
Mechanisms for the crystallization of San Rafael identity

1. Competition and adversarial nature of soccer
2. Victories on the field
3. Socializing and coming together on a regular basis
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5. Symbolic construction of community
Ramón vs. Mariano

“Talk with other townspeople and relax”

Feel “more Mexican” as opposed to feeling “more American” while at work
When I arrived in Chicago at age seven, it was my dream to play for the team; now I want my children to experience the same thing."
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5. Symbolic construction of community
6. Reconstruction of place of origin
San Rafael = Chicago
Mechanisms for the crystallization of San Rafael identity

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6. Reconstruction of place of origin
7. Topics of conversation
Los de arriba

Los de abajo
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Mechanisms for the crystallization of San Rafael identity

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9. **Beer-drinking sessions**
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8. Reconstruction of the past
9. Beer drinking

10. Collective finances
Interview with Pablo

- **Pablo**: Well, it is a pleasure to go see the boys play, give it all for the team. It is a big satisfaction for me.

- **Interviewer**: Do you also do it for San Rafael, for the pueblo?

- **Pablo**: Yes, yes, yes, just for the pueblo. In fact I do not go watch any other games. I am not interested. Sometimes they invite me to go watch other teams, but since I don’t know anyone, I don’t find it appealing. And here, well, it’s all about meeting with the pueblo, seeing the people.
Mechanisms for the crystallization of San Rafael identity

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4. Emphatic engagement
5. Symbolic construction of community
6. Reconstruction of place of origin
7. Topics of conversation
8. Reconstruction of the past
9. Beer drinking
10. Collective finances
11. Collective decisions for team affairs
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Hometown Associations

• HTAs are organizations formed by migrants from the same town in Mexico usually with the aim of raising funds in the United States for community development projects in their place of origin.

• 1,662 registered associations in the U.S. (2012)

• 14,636, projects co-funded by these organizations and the Mexican government (2010)
Informal School

Soccer helps develop leadership and organizational skills:

- Public speaking
- Sharing information
- Coordinating the purchase of beer and refreshments
- Devising mechanisms of administration, transparency, and accountability
- Negotiating with authorities
Raising Funds

- **Eduardo**: [The HTA] is the community group that Antonio [an HTA leader] is involved in. But Antonio knows that if he involves himself with the soccer team, there’s going to be a lot of support from the soccer team, and I think it’s a good idea.

- **Interviewer**: Do you think the support would be the same if the soccer team did not exist?

- **Eduardo**: There is support from non-soccer people that live here [in Chicago]. I know because of my uncles. They don’t necessarily come to our games but they still support the town. But soccer is a huge... it’s a big help. No little help. If they help us for the team, imagine all the money they pitch in for the town.
TOMA DE PROTESTA E INSTALACIÓN DEL CONSEJO CONSULTIVO DEL MIGRANTE MICHOACANO 2016-2019 Y PRESENTACIÓN DE LA ESTRATEGIA "SOMOS MEXICANOS" DEL GOBIERNO FEDERAL
A Glimpse into the Future

Will these practices endure as a new generation, raised or born in the United States, replaces the migrants?

Probably not, for two main reasons:

• Lack of immigrants from San Rafael
• Less intense ties with hometown among the 1.5 and second generations