



# ON THE WAY TO A NEW CHAMPIONSHIP

Sports clubs as a hope for change in Honduras, one of the most violent countries in the world.

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When sports events are held – especially in the case of soccer – stadiums are filled with renewed enthusiasm. People pour in, mostly young folk, brimming with vitality and energy. On the day of a classic game, noisy vendors congregate within the installations and the surrounding areas; reporters join in to provide coverage of one of the activities that most attracts the attention and the spirit of the public (and, therefore, provides important profits for the media); owners of rival sports clubs are there, too, in the hope of continuing to arrange lucrative deals; and, of

course, in attendance are families and thousands of young spectators who desire – sometimes to extents that are incomprehensible for some – to see their team win. As magnets that attract attention, the stadium, the competition, the game itself, bring together all the eagerness and enthusiasm of thousands of young fans who, in countries like Honduras, have placed their vital hopes in soccer, because it is impossible or nearly a privilege to place them elsewhere: in the country there are no opportunities. Or there are none or they are extremely scarce, reserved for a small and privileged percentage of the population. Soccer, a mass-spectator sport

Not surprisingly, when the national team plays an international match the streets of the principal cities are deserted, even though it be a regular work day; or that the best players are elevated to the category of heroes, all the more so in a socio-political environment where there are no models worthy of admiration.

As can be imagined, Honduras brings together its passion for soccer with acute levels of poverty and inequality that join forces, in a sort of overwhelming vicious circle, with a set of State institutions and social elites that have been unable to further the well-being of the citizenry. In the face

Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) (2) has pointed out a slight decrease in the homicide rate in the country – it dropped from 85.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants to 79 – the numbers remain extremely high and, above all, unacceptable. (3) When speaking in such terms, it should be remembered that the average world homicide rate is 9. It is equally unacceptable that this scenario of death affects, above all, adolescents and young people, a segment of the population that is the country's present and future, upon which rest its possibilities for transformation and growth. When placed within their respective age groups, the numbers pro-

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that with the rise of communications and information technologies has gained notoriety, presence, and relevance in the lives of many people, occupies a key place in many contemporary societies. Honduras is a good example of this. Its population is mostly young (1) and characterized by fervent soccer-related activities which, on occasion, define the country's agenda to the point of national paralysis. The cipotes, as children and adolescents are called in this Central American country, play soccer since they learn to walk; a small plastic ball, or an orange, plus a couple of markers in lieu of goal posts on a dusty street, is all that is needed.

of the country's socioeconomic problems, the State's institutions manifest weaknesses that range from an absence of technically valid and legitimate public policies, from a political point of view, to a lack of financial resources necessary to implement them. Ignorance, abandonment, and marginalization are rife. In short, complete underdevelopment.

Within this framework there thrive, also, a number of indicators that place Honduras in the position of the most violent country in Central America and one of the most violent in the world. Even though the Observatory for Violence of the National

vide an immediate description of the horror: the homicide rate per 100,000 under the age of seventeen is 150, and it is 190 for those above eighteen.

In the face of so much data, it is indispensable to acknowledge that the homicide rate only reveals the tip of an iceberg that also contains all sorts of violence, from verbal to institutional, as well as psychological and physical, in all their possible combinations and some which are even unimaginable. The scenarios in which this violence is played out are everywhere: the family, the school, the street, the pages in the newspapers, the busses, the market



places, the State’s institutions, the municipalities, the rural areas, and, of course, the stadiums. The actors in these scenarios are, similarly, everyone, be they victims of a society accustomed to settling its disagreements with aggression or perpetrators of the most varied type: drug traffickers, gang members, criminal organizations, corrupt policemen, abusive mothers and fathers, harassment by teachers and bosses in the work place, extortionists, aggressive youth, complicit government officials, “good, law abiding citizens” who keep a gun and use it when they consider it necessary, hard core supporters of a sports team...

which are also abundant in the country). There are no nuanced analyses that distinguish the individual case from those that can be applied to the barra as a whole. Barras are groups of young people who come together basically to express their deep liking for a given club or sports team. A leader of one of the main barras in Honduras defines quite precisely some of the differences that set them apart: “The spectator is the person that, suddenly, when able, shows up at a soccer stadium. This person loves her/ his team one hundred percent. This fan is a person, as I see it, who is a frequent spectator but does not belong to an organized group that backs a team. A member of a bar-

masse, marching to the rhythm of drums and song, carrying banners and signs that identify their barra and their team. The day their team plays, they fill the streets – or take them over, better said – and paralyze traffic and stop all other activities near the stadium. The police surround them.

Barras are made up mostly of young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, with some exceptions. Sometimes there are adults, but individuals under eighteen are generally not accepted in order to avoid problems. Most of a barra’s members are from poor and dysfunctional homes. Most young barristas do not study or do so beyond their

archal practices which pervade all aspects of gender relations in Honduras. A division of labour along gender lines can be seen when they prepare their team’s insignias: the women sew the signs and prepare the decorations, while the men look for the means to purchase the materials. This discriminatory division of labour is also evidenced in the few women in positions of leadership.

In Honduras the best-known barras are those that identify with the teams of the National League, among which two stand out: the Ultra Fiel (Very Faithful) barra of the Club Olimpia soccer team, and the Revolucionarios (Revolutionaries) barra of the Club Motagua

soccer team. Both of these teams are based in Tegucigalpa, the nation’s capital, but their fans can be found all over the country, as well as their barras. For example, the Ultra Fiel barra was born in San Pedro Sula on 17 August 1990; it currently has some 15,000 members, organized in peñas (local sections of the sport clubs) and groups under a national leadership. (7) On the other hand, the Revolucionarios, the barra of the Motagua soccer team, was founded on 29 September 1998 and has about 11,000 followers distributed in comandos (task forces) under a national leadership of two individuals. (8) Positions of leadership in a barra, or a peña or comando, are achieved through seniority, after

years of proven fidelity, commitment to the team, a desire to serve, companionship, and solidarity.

In addition to high levels of organization and communication, these two barras are distributed in identifiable territories (neighbourhoods, communities, and specific areas within stadiums); they possess distinctive symbols and insignias and, perhaps most importantly, they operate under codes of conduct that lay down obligations within the organization. This means that they are frames of reference that, as opposed to other social spaces, can be coherent with young people’s needs. Each barra has its own identity which is shared by its thousands

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**Barras: sports clubs in exclusionary societies**

It is common that the Honduran collective imagination, especially in urban areas, perceives barras – groupings of youth who are fans of a particular sports team – in eminently negative terms. The members of a barra are equated with gangs and judged uncritically to be juvenile delinquents who, therefore, must be feared (if one is a “law abiding citizen”) or persecuted (if one is a police officer on the beat near a stadium on the day of a game, or an active member of a criminal gang that engages in extrajudicial killings,

ra is that person who does belong to a group that supports a sports club and thus is not concerned if a team wins or loses because she/ he will always be supporting that team.” (4) In this sense, belonging to a barra entails a maximum level of support to and commitment with a given team.

Barras express support, collectively and in a highly organized way, for the team of their preference: “The fans in the stands express their emotion, their euphoria, while we, as a barra, provide the carnival atmosphere, that sense of affection for the team.” (5) The barras show up at the stadium en

age; they live in violence-prone areas of the country’s principal cities; their fathers and mothers are unemployed or underemployed or have emigrated (generally to the United States) in search of work. (6) As it happens, there are exceptions: some barra members have university degrees, hold a full-time job, or are even owners of businesses that provide them with an income, albeit minimally satisfactory. They are structured in hierarchical terms and are made up of both men and women. Even though they enjoy a certain gender balance in numbers, their activities reflect a form of organization that reproduces the wider patri-





of members. This is very significant, especially when referred to the socialization process of adolescence and youth which is, after all, one in which each individual must come to terms with her or his own subjective identity as it emerges from the tension produced by the contradictions of – and preferences with – pre-existing models. Bear in mind that “... the ways in which subjectivity is produced are not universal nor limited in time but defined within specific social and cultural conditions.” (9) Thus, adolescents and young people from countries with low levels of human development (10), riddled with social problems under a common denominator of crisis, find themselves on the

been pointed out that “a fundamental shift [has taken place] at the base of subjective reality: the promise held out by the State has been replaced by that of the market. It is not longer a matter of citizens but of consumers... The Nation-State, through its principal institutions – the family and the school – has ceased to be the basic mechanism for instilling ‘morality’ in the individual.” (11) The churches of different denominations are also not up to the task to assume this role and attract thousands of adolescents and young people to its ranks because, as they themselves recognize, their guidelines are rigid and cannot allow or channel free expression.

are the product of the decline of social institutions, but they also contribute to foster that system of centrifugal forces that tend to transform the citizens in consumers, to expel individuals, to sideline them: “In an authoritarian society, with a low educational level in transcendental terms, the critical elements required to bond or belong to something are very simple, primitive, and induced. Thus, there is fanaticism in religion, fanaticism in politics, fanaticism in the defence of territory, fanaticism in sport. It is obvious that soccer as a social phenomenon has grown through the media. This fanaticism promotes an addiction to consume which the sports system has to offer,

more ways than one by the activities of the barras. Thousands of young people fall for this overwhelmingly attractive crowd-puller, which may substitute for the construction of a personal life project or make the individual forget about it, at least momentarily, while the social environment might eventually offer better opportunities.

**The sports barras: thuggish barras or actors for peace?**

As can be imagined, the barras of rival teams are themselves rivals. In the case of Honduras, many barras have expressed such intense hatred within the stadiums that they have engaged recently in beatings and brawls that exceed past experience, in which people have been injured and even killed. But the surrounding areas of a stadium and the neighbourhoods where rival barras operate can also turn violent. In other words, the barras in Honduras have descended into a third type of sport violence as defined by Randall Collins: “An extremely tense form of violence beyond acceptable bounds is the sports violence associated with hooligans, which turns into a violence which has nothing to do with the rhythm of the game.” (13) In other words, the approach of a contest between sports clubs that are historic rivals can exacerbate tensions, but these remain a constant at different times and with varying frequency, and can even acquire a dynamic all their own when joined up with territorial concerns of actors which are foreign

to barras (drugs and arms sellers, gangs, or corrupt State security officers, for example), until the situation turns into a source of renewed and systemic violence and citizen insecurity.

The notoriety which precedes the sports barras can be found in the involvement of some of their members in violent episodes and even criminal acts. However, the way the media handles these situations means that the barras in general – that is, not just some isolated individuals – are perceived as a social problem. Politicians tend to take advantage of violent episodes in stadiums to magnify even more the negative image of the barra members and, by extension, that of young people in general. In this manner, they can continue to justify their hard-fisted and obstinate attitude, regardless of the fact that these approaches have demonstrated their failure, if it were not obvious enough, in Central America.

The police have been singled out on more than one occasion by the very members of barras and human rights organizations as an institution that contributes to the discrimination experienced by young people, when they persecute them and use unnecessary levels of violence, in clear violation of their human rights. As young people have said: “They [the police] believe that we are engaged only in crime... And that is our life, according to the police, running around making trouble. They even blame us if the sun is clouded over in the morning. We are blamed even for that!” (14)

Many young people from rival barras are a product of their environment and of their times. It cannot be otherwise. For this reason, in countries like Honduras today, they have internalized aggressive and violent patterns of behaviour as a normal response in the face of social conflict. In a more profound sense, their conduct is based on a patriarchal viewpoint that is current in society insofar as patriarchy postulates the supremacy of the strongest by equating force with power. But they are also the product of a country that is today considered one of the most violent in the world. They live there. The episodes of violence, therefore, are merged into a spiral whose path is full of increased suffering because impunity in Honduras is nearly complete.

Notwithstanding, the leadership of the barras like La Ultra Fiel and Los Revolucionarios have begun to occupy public spaces to do more than support the team of their choice. They organize sports events with the younger members to provide for moments of recreation; they help with reforestation projects and undertake clean-up campaigns in the cities. In recent times, they were troubled by the coup d’etat of June 2009, as were many Hondurans, and took part in the citizens’ movement that demanded a reinstatement of constitutional and democratic rule in the country. They participated actively and were a key player in the design and implementation of the policy to prevent violence against children, adolescents, and young people that was enacted by

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sidelines and at great risk for lack of safe spaces for socialization that would enable them to build their identity in a positive and safe way, in contexts of harmonious coexistence and under social benchmarks that transmit universally recognized values.

In Honduras, barras are powerful magnets for young people precisely because other social environments do not offer a sense of belonging nor appropriate and functional spaces for the gradual discovery and definition of their own place in the world. As is well known, the family unit is in crisis, as well as the State. It has

As things stand, in countries where systems of State-supported social safety nets are inexistent or insufficient, and where families or other social institutions have not adapted to undertake their social functions as required by contemporary life, barras and other forms of youth groups – such as gangs – represent an opportunity for thousands of young individuals, a space where they can construct their identity, in safety, trust, and brother/sisterhood. As many barristas point out, the barra is a family for them, a place where they feel accepted and can express themselves freely. Therefore, in Honduras barras

not only attendance at a stadium but all the collateral products, as well as the never-ending hours of monotonous sports commentary, especially that of soccer, that take one’s mind off, for example, the small increase in the minimum salary or why Honduras does not have a more just society. This bunch of sports programmes are not random occurrences: they play a role, not just by providing employment for many commentators, but as a means to profoundly alienate society.” (12)

The paraphernalia and the drama which surround soccer as a mass spectator sport are increased in



president Porfirio Lobo in February 2013. They attend, as a barra, courses in leadership and have begun to make their voice heard to tell society and the authorities that they are not the problem but, rather, as young people, they have provided ample proof that they are part of the solution to the deep-rooted conflicts that affect everyone.

In this sense, it is only a matter for the counterparts of the barras – in other words, the Government, the mass media, the owners of the sports clubs and other businesspeople, the Legislative Assembly, and other relevant actors and sectors of Honduran society – to lend their ears. Otherwise, they will not only be helping to stigmatize the young people of Honduras even more, but the

spiral of violence, which to date seems to have no end in sight, will be dangerously strengthened. A new championship must be played out in the field of prevention. There everyone can find hope and dignity.

## NOTES

1. According to the National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística) of Honduras, there are 2,985,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 29, which is equivalent to 35% of a total population 8,555,072. See: [www.ine.gob.hn](http://www.ine.gob.hn)
2. El Heraldo, 29 February 2014, p. 29.
3. Note should be taken, as reflected in the information issued by the Observatory of the UNAH, that San Pedro Sula, the second most important city in the country, has a homicide rate that makes it the most violent city in the world: 193.4 per hundred thousand inhabitants. La Ceiba has a homicide rate of 140.7 per hundred thousand inhabitants.
4. Interview with Melvin Cerbellón, in the documentary Haceme barra (roughly translated “Support me”). A copy of the documentary was given to the author by the video’s director, produced by Cría Films with the support of the Cultural Centre of Spain in Tegucigalpa and the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID). Further reference to this documentary will be by its name.
5. Interview with young member of a barra in the documentary “Haceme barra”.
6. According to Melvin Cerbellón, when interviewed by the author, 70% of the members of barras live in the most marginal areas of the country.
7. Information provided to the author by Melvin Cerbellón, a leader of La Ultrafiel barra.
8. Information provided to the author by Carol Bustillo, co-leader of Los Revolucionarios barra.
9. Duschatzky, S. and Corea, C. (2002). Chicos en banda. Los caminos de la subjetividad en el declive de las instituciones. Argentina: Paidós, p. 21.
10. According to the United National Development Programme (UNDP), in 2012 Honduras had a human development index of 0.632, which placed it in position number 120 in the world classification and number 30 among the 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Honduras placed higher only in relation to Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Haití. See: <http://www.hn.undp.org/content/honduras/es/home/presscenter/articles/2013/03/14/informe-sobre-desarrollo-humano-2013/> Consulted on 20 March 2014.
11. Ibid., pp. 21 and 26.
12. Interview with the Honduran sociologist, Álvaro Cáliz, as appearing in the documentary “Haceme barra”.
13. Collins, R. (2008). Violence. A Micro-Sociological Theory. Princeton University Press, p. 282.
14. Interview with young member of a barra, in documentary “Haceme barra”.

We understand that conflict is natural to society. We understand conflict to be the confrontation of differing interests, ideas and agendas that is inherent to social and political life. Moreover, we believe that conflict can play a positive role in social dynamics as a driving force of innovation and change, when effectively managed.

Interpeace, Strategic Position Paper.

