

Latino Assimilation, Divided Loyalties, and the World Cup

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The tendency for Latinos in the United States of America to support Mexican (or other national) soccer teams is thus taken as a problematic signal that Latinos are not assimilating into mainstream American society. The question of cultural assimilation is critical to the ongoing debate regarding immigration and the influx of Latinos in the United States. Many argue that the Latino population differs from past immigrant populations because the new group is not assimilating into mainstream American society and sports structures. We challenge the thesis that the choice of a person's favored national team can measure cultural assimilation and loyalty to America as overly simplistic and as an example of nativism. Support of national soccer teams cannot be used as a reliable indicator for cultural assimilation. An important query left out of the discussion is the level of American incorporation of Latinos into American civil society; after all, assimilation is not a one-way street. It is less the case that Latinos in the United States have divided loyalties and more likely that they are underrepresented and ignored by American institutions.

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Introduction

How can researchers and the public know if a group has become assimilated into mainstream culture? The public-at-large might forget that one of the most important questions for a vibrant democracy is whether or not all groups in society have been accepted so they can participate in all aspects of society. Democracy loses much of its substance unless a majority of the population meaningfully and regularly participates. It also suffers if one group feels excluded from opportunities. As an influx of immigrants continues to flow into the United States, one might ask what has been done to help these new arrivals adjust to their new environment and become included in democratic processes.

The question we are tackling in this paper relates to sport and its importance as an aspect of participation in national culture. Critics contend that the tendency for Latinos to support external (other than the United States of America) national teams might reflect the group's inability or lack of desire to assimilate into American society.¹ By extension, this view implicitly supports the idea that Latinos can never become true Americans until they reject all forms of cultural ties to their homeland.² We challenge the notion that the choice of a person's favored national team can measure assimilation as overly simplistic. Support of a national soccer team cannot be used as a reliable indicator for cultural assimilation.³ The question that should be asked is what happens when a favored sport (in this case soccer) or activity of an immigrant group is ignored in society and shut out of important institutions. Why would Latinos in America support the United States Men's National Team or the Major Soccer League (MLS) when Latino representation in these organizations is not a reflection of the total population as a whole? The clear implication of this research is that cultural attachments should not be confused with nation-state based attachments and national identity if these attachments just personal

preferences. Attachments to the modern nation-state can only be measured in terms of sporting attachments, food, language, or entertainment if society in general does not reject these forms of civic participation outright.

This article deals with important topics such as assimilation, immigration, and cultural acceptance by incorporating the subject of soccer affiliations into the academic discourse. By integrating our research with the popular notion of sport and participation, we argue that Latinos are not ‘divided Americans’ and that they can become important actors in society.⁴ We address the question of what it means to be assimilated. Does it matter what team someone supports? We also address the stigma and perceived disloyalty one attaches to groups not supporting the American national soccer team. Is this an important aspect of cultural acceptance? All these questions intersect with the immigration debate and the difficulties that a society goes through as it experiences demographic change.

This paper will proceed with an examination of the connection between sports and politics and then a look at the question of dual loyalties and the Latino population. The position of assimilation as a blending and merging of different cultural attachments will be used to investigate the question of Latino incorporation into the fabric of American civil society. Our final point is one of tolerance, acceptance, and cultural engagement rather than fear and hysteria. Sporting attachments cannot be used as indicators of assimilation so long as these processes are outside of the American mainstream. The burden of assimilation is, to some degree, an issue for the receiving society, not just the newcomers. Assimilation is a two-way process and when some forms of traditional cultural attachments (like soccer) are invalidated as forms of civil participation, the process of national integration can be a slow process.

Sports, the World Cup and Cultural Assimilation

In the summer of 2006, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article in the sports pages (not in the opinion section) suggesting the television viewership of the United States national soccer team during the World Cup could be a proxy measurement of cultural assimilation of Latinos in America.⁵ The article expressed the concern that Latinos are not truly loyal to the United States. “For many of us who generally oppose the silent invasion from the south, if those who broke the law to come here acted as if their true loyalties were with the United States, then much of the fire in this highly combustible subject would be doused.”⁶ Therefore the contention is not that critics are against immigration because the new immigrants come from the South, but rather because when they get here they are not and do not become loyal Americans.

The statistics in the *Los Angeles Times* article were presented in a way supportive of the argument that Latinos will never assimilate into American culture. Latinos tend to watch World Cup games where the Latin American teams were featured rather than the U.S. team’s games. Soccer fans in the Los Angeles region also tended to watch games on Univision, the local Spanish language station. Therefore, a Latino fails to become assimilated because s/he does not follow American teams and, even more so, fail to use the language. These tenuous conclusions are dubious for many reasons, yet they are important to engage since forms of community participation through such avenues as sports or entertainment are important for developing a strong and broad civil society. Glenn Beck goes even further and notes, "It doesn't matter how you try to sell it to us, it doesn't matter how many celebrities you get, it doesn't matter how many bars open early, it doesn't matter how many beer commercials they run, we don't want the World Cup, we don't like the World Cup, we don't like soccer, we want nothing to do with it."⁷ Some

reject and despise soccer, yet the question is what impact this position has for Latino immigration, assimilation dynamics, and American civil society.

The issue of cultural assimilation is important to the ongoing debate regarding immigration and the influx of Latinos into America. Some argue that the Latino population of 42 million is much different than past immigrant populations because the new group is not assimilating into mainstream American society (Huntington 2004). It should be noted that a loyalty test based on national sport is not a new concept. Norman Tebbit, a Conservative politician from the United Kingdom observed that, “a large proportion of Britain’s Asian population fail to pass the cricket test, ...[making] the idea of a cricket test famous. Which side do they cheer for?”⁸ The implication is that if you do not root for the British team over an Asian team, then you are not a loyal citizen. In Britain the argument has been swept under the rug, yet the same argument is being made now in the Latino context within the United States.

We argue that support of World Cup teams cannot be used as a meaningful point in this debate. Additionally, left out of the debate is the question of American incorporation of Latinos into American civil society. Solutions to the ‘problem’ of Latino assimilation need not be posed solely from the perspective of the ‘other,’ rather one must ask what has the rest of American society done to integrate this group into the American cultural fabric and institutions. The question should be is society helping newcomers integrate? Is society acceptant of new multicultural views?

Sport proves to be a common window of analysis through which researchers can attempt to understand and explain the complex social phenomena of assimilation and divided loyalties in its current context. The simplicity of sport as a lens by which to view the world is underestimated and ignored. Sawyer and Gooding (2007) note, “the argument being that Soccer

(football) games are not just sporting events, but have political significance, because of the symbols they embody. Many of these symbols are racial and are why football has become a site of contestation over norms of racial equality vs. expression of national pride and purity.” More researchers should look to sport, and soccer in particular, to understand historical rivalries and the political symbolism expressed during these events. A little known account of the Cuban Missile Crisis is the placement of a soccer field in the middle of nowhere in Cuba that led the CIA to deduce that Soviets were working on the site since Cubans typically did not play soccer.⁹

Sports (specifically soccer) and politics are deeply connected. In 2008, on the same day, the United States played an important World Cup qualifier in Cuba for the first time in over 50 years; on the same day Turkey and Armenia played in a World Cup qualifier as well, with the President of Turkey visiting the ancient enemy for the first time ever. Just as war is policy by other means (Clausewitz and Rapoport 1968), sport reflects the struggle of war and also the policy struggles endemic to cultural conflicts. Team sports provide and sometimes require an intense form of participation (Mandelbaum 2004). Some teams such as the Glasgow Rangers and Scotland’s Celtics express religious preferences surrounding the ongoing political battle in Ireland. Other teams reflect the hegemony of a dictator and their policies (e.g. Real Madrid in Spain and the team’s relationship with Franco during his rule). Other teams reflect Western values or the rejection of capitalist perspectives (various Eastern European teams retain a socialist mission).¹⁰ Therefore, sport can be a means to reflect national political and economic policy choices. Using sport as a theoretical lens is a new development in the field of social science that has been relatively ignored. Participation and engagement through sport is a reflection of the norms of assimilation and acceptance in civil society in general, regardless of the type of sport or affiliations one has.¹¹ This paper is an extension of that perspective since we

are engaging the ideas, interests, and identity of actors engaged in a political battle. Rather than exploring specific hypotheses, this work explores the perceptions and constructed space on which these actors interact.

There has been a recent proliferation of books using sport to analyze the importance of cultural, political, and economic issues. Foer (2004) uses soccer to explain globalization, or the lack of globalization in certain societies. Both the Mandelbaum (2004) book and the Markovits and Hellerman's (2001) volume take a historical sociological view to explain the choice of dominant sporting enterprises in the United States. They argue the choice of sport reflects the overall view of American exceptionalism. The argument suggests that since America perceives itself to be different and special, it does not need to follow soccer, instead making its own way by supporting national sports such as American Football, Basketball, and Baseball. Each of these works presents sport as either an independent variable to explain a process or as a variable to be explained. This article pushes the point further and uses sport as a causal mechanism pushing actors to engage and participate.

There have been some important past explorations of the Latino soccer community in the United States. Shinn (2002: 241) considers the historical roots of soccer's popularity in Latino/a culture noting that these roots have translated into an ethnic safe area where one can follow the community's game in peace. This arena of safety allows for the construction of strong pan-ethnic identities. Taking the argument a step further, Messeri (2008) is able to explain how in Richmond, California, a strong ethnic soccer community translated into a form of social capital.¹² "Soccer is one of the primary leisure activities within the community and thus it is one of the ways in which relationships are created and built upon." (Messeri 2008: 420)

Soccer can provide an entry point towards assimilation under certain situations. The issue for us is that the United States has not done as much as it could have to help certain ethnic groups become part of the cultural fabric of the nation. If soccer has a deep cultural history for the group (Shinn 2002) and also provides for an avenue of social connection (Messeri 2008); why then is it excluded as a positive aspect of development? It is at this point that we enter the dialogue and contend that Latino soccer fans are not disloyal Americans, but rather suggest that the United States has not provided the opportunities required to incorporate Latinos into society.

Theoretical Perspectives

This paper is an example of research that blurs the line between social science and policy. The method is both discursive and investigative. It is hoped that the ideas and perspectives contained herein will spur future research of a data or case study nature to further enlighten other immigrant perspectives and the challenges they face. We will start with a review of theories that can shed light on the perspectives discussed in this paper.

This research follows in the transnationalist perspective in that multiple nationalities and identities do not hinder assimilation (Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller 2003). In fact, dual nationalities and citizenship serve to enhance political participation. Civic education that has already occurred in the homeland and new opportunities in the host country facilitates a civic awareness that interacts with new perspectives gained when one becomes a permanent resident (Wals 2010).

Two theoretical concepts are critical for this paper. The first is assimilation. Assimilation is defined as the two-way process of achieving cultural solidarity by the mixing of ethnic groups.¹³ The question then remains, what does it mean to be assimilated into a modern nation-state?¹⁴ Does viewership and support of sporting teams count towards being an

acculturated citizen? Is one truly assimilated when they give up their loyalty towards Chivas (Mexico) and accept the Boston Red Sox as their team?

Assimilation is a critical step towards achieving a true American melting pot (Alba and Nee 2003). The view held by the originators of the 'old' perspective is that assimilation is the ultimate goal that ethnic groups strive for. This view suggests that ethnic groups cannot positively contribute to a society until they assimilate (Alba and Nee 2003, 5). We follow the perspective that argues assimilation is a two-way street. Sharing and blending of cultures is key to understanding what assimilation is truly about. Recent research seeks to reclaim the term as a more inclusive vision of what a multicultural society should look like. This research follows that trend.

The difference between the terms acculturation and assimilation is key to the theoretical lens which we use in this paper. As Parenti (1967: 718) notes, "the confusion (empirically) rests, I submit, in the failure...to make a conceptual distinction between acculturation and assimilation. The distinction is crucial in reading correction meaning into our data and in guiding us to fruitful theoretical conclusions." Acculturation simply means that a minority group adopts the practices of the dominant culture and is a one-way process (Alba and Nee 2003, 23). Assimilation on the other hand is defined as "the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences." (Alba and Nee 2003, 11) Therefore, assimilation is the process by which an ethnic group folds into the dominant society simultaneously influencing and being influenced by the dominant culture. The only requirement is that, in the end, the social differences between the two cultures meet and no longer remain a divided group. Alba and Nee (2003, 11) note, "our definition of assimilation intentionally allows for the possibility that the nature of the mainstream into which minority individuals and groups are assimilating is changed in the process."

The concept of a composite culture or mosaic is illustrative of this process. Latino assimilation does not simply mean that Latinos take on the traits of Anglo society, but rather it means Anglo society also takes on some of the traits and values of the Latino groups. We would then suggest the complete process of Latino assimilation would be that Latinos accept and take on such shared traits as language (English), entertainment (Sopranos), and food (McDonalds) of the dominant culture. It would also mean that the dominant Anglo culture would take on such practices as Mexican food (Taco Bell), entertainment such as telenovelas (Ugly Betty), and language (increased enrollment of Anglos in Spanish classes). When combined, the new composite culture reflects the new dominant group.

The second key theoretical concept is that of civil society and social capital advanced most notably by Robert Putnam (2001). Civil society (Almond and Verba 1989) is defined as an arena of collective action around shared interests, purposes, and values. Social capital is defined as the benefit one gains from common forms of social networks and the reciprocity contained therein (Putnam 2000, 21). Social capital is an important concept for our argument as it discusses the lost opportunity of the creation of social capital through sport.¹⁵ There is little hope for cultural reciprocity if the avenue of accumulating social capital is rejected by society-at-large.

What does it mean to be a participant in civil society? The key benefit is that one gains economically and socially through broad engagement in civil society. With gains in social capital an individual can increase their economic, social, and political options. Putnam (2000, 19) notes, “the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too can social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups.” If immigrant groups can become folded into a wider civil society, the process of

assimilation will be much smoother with less outright political conflict. “Moreover, bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity.” (Putnam 2000, 23) It is through networks employing social capital that assimilation can truly take place in a bifurcated manner in which the process includes both feedbacks and inputs. Typically, any form of participation and engagement in society can produce social capital, but this is not the case with soccer as it is not an accepted avenue of participation in the United States for the immigrant class.

The rise of the Latino population has provoked revulsion and segregation, not inclusion in civil society. The dialogue is focused on conflict rather than harmony.¹⁶ A harmonious civil society requires the adequate assimilation of all cultural groups. Only through this process can Americans hope for stronger democracy and thus a stronger nation-state.

Soccer and Assimilation

The assumption is that soccer (football) is a sport that does not encourage ethnic assimilation in America (Sugden 1994: 237). This assumption is based on the near constant attitude that processes which encourage participation within groups, as opposed to between groups, are negative. The problem with the evidence is that it can be situational and selective, or selected to meet one’s own expectations. This has clearly been the case with evidence suggesting that Latinos are less American because some support the Mexican instead of the US national team. As J. David Singer (1966) said so many years ago, some have the tendency to “ransack history” to confirm expectations. We are suggesting that Latino support of the Mexican national team is not suitable evidence that the group is not assimilating and represents a ransacking enterprise by cultural nativists searching for their expectations to be fulfilled.

John Ziegler, a popular conservative radio host from Los Angeles, argues Latinos are not participating like other Americans are in terms of sports viewership. “While at first glance it

may seem an odd place to find enlightenment on the issue, the local TV ratings for games involving Mexico and the United States in the ongoing World Cup may provide some of the best evidence yet of where Spanish-speaking immigrants' true loyalties lie."¹⁷ He finds that during the 2006 World Cup, viewership for Mexican games reached a rating peak of 28.1 while viewership for the U.S. national team only received a share of 19.8 in the Los Angeles market. Ziegler concludes that this is a 'powerful indication' of one's true loyalty, or disloyalty towards America.

Contrary to this view, and the one we advance, is the perspective that assimilation is a two-way street. To gain acceptance into a mainstream society, a new immigrant group should assimilate to some extent, but it is also critical that the hegemonic group helps the new group integrate by accepting its cultural practices as valid forms of participation. If the new group cannot integrate and if common forms of Latino civic participation are disregarded, it is unlikely that a strong and inclusive civil society will develop. Latinos will, of course, follow the Mexican and other national teams since they have been following these very same teams since their youth. Support for local club teams such as Chivas (Mexico), Pumas (Mexico), and Boca Juniors (Argentina) are entrenched in the formative years of many immigrants through first-hand experience or collective memory. These early experiences and collective memories directly feed into continued support for the Mexican, Argentine, or Guatemalan national teams. These traditions will only be supplanted with both the acceptance of soccer in general but also a process by which soccer as it stands in the U.S. incorporates more Latinos into the system and national team.

The second point is that immigrants and their descendents have little incentive to follow the American national team because it does not reflect the true demographics of the state. There

were few Latinos on the American national team during the last World Cup. There are few Latinos participating in club teams or in the MLS. Therefore, why should anyone expect Latinos to support an unrepresentative American team?

The third point relates to civil society. Pundits tend to assume that to participate in American civil society one would have to support typical American activities like bowling leagues or sewing circles. Why can the Latinos not support an external national team and still express civil society values? Civil society and social capital are about collective organizations gathering in order to facilitate broad discussion and participation.¹⁸ As Messeri (2008) notes, these activities do not have to be distinctly American in origin or focus to reflect the true goals of civic participation.

The fourth point is that the evidence is selective. Mainstream American fans typically support external soccer teams because of their quality and not due to displeasure with the United States as a whole. Mexico had a better team during the 2006 World Cup and both teams made it out of the group stages in 2010 with the Mexican team only defeated by the highly rated Argentine team while the U.S. was defeated by Ghana.¹⁹ So of course they would attract a wider range of viewership because people generally like to be on the winning side. In addition, there is drama and pride connected to the Mexican national team that the United States team lacks. The Mexican national team was an underdog that people were rooting for. The United States national team is a rising power that is despised by other states due to its influence and power.²⁰

The fifth point is that supporting another team does not make one Anti-American. Choosing a national team to support is a personal preference. This preference is constructed through personal history, associations, and memory. It is also of note that Univision had better coverage of the World Cup games, so channel choice might reflect dramatic preferences rather

than national disloyalty. We will now proceed to a detailed discussion of our points and prospects for the future civil incorporation.

National Origins and Club Teams

Recent work (Markovits and Hellerman 2001, Mandelbaum 2004, Szymanski and Zimbalist 2005) on soccer in the United States seeks to explain why the sport was denied its place in the cultural landscape. Markovits and Hellerman (2001) suggest that a sporting culture reflects what a society follows (watches or discuss) as opposed what sports a society actively participates in. Clearly Americans participate in soccer, but is it part of the national sporting culture? The authors suggest that soccer is denied its place in the cultural sporting landscape because of timing (came along too late), alliances (other sports were able to forge cross-cutting connections), racism (seen as an immigrant sport), and classism (not a “gentleman’s” game). Therefore, if soccer is denied a place in the cultural landscape, what options do those who truly follow soccer have to resort to? Simply, they are likely to follow the leagues of their youth, national origins, and personal history.

The simplest explanation for why Latinos support Latin American soccer teams resides in patterns of support throughout childhood. If an immigrant and their descendents follow certain club teams such as Pumas (Mexico) or River Plate (Argentina) from birth, then they are likely to support the Mexican and Argentine national team later in life simply because players from these teams feed into national teams. They are unlikely to support or like the newer the MLS because it lacks the tradition and drama of established Latin American leagues and players. In fact, Foer (2004, 240) even goes so far as to mention that, “the United States is perhaps the only place where a loud portion of the population actively disdains the game, even campaigns against it.” If

there is such an active dislike for soccer in United States why would Latinos choose to support American teams?

The MLS is a relatively new league. Only recently has the league attracted attention throughout the United States, mainly due to the addition of David Beckham and other late career international stars. Viewership and support, however, can be considered marginal when compared to other American sporting leagues. Average attendance for MLS games from 2003 to 2005 hovered around the 15,000 mark. In 2006, the average attendance for NFL football games (which has a similar number of games) was 67,000. Economists' Jewell and Molina (2005) surprisingly find that an increase in Hispanic population coincides with a decrease of attendance for a local MLS team.

Paul Gardner suggests, "the lack of such [Latin American] players had always been an anomaly – worse, almost a blunder – in a league with a potentially huge base of Latin-American fans."²¹ Clearly the MLS is having problems marketing to the Latino segment of the population. This problem is compounded when one notes the MLS is also failing to attract the fan-base most familiar and connected to the game.

If support for the MLS club teams is weak, why would one expect viewers to support the United States national team? A supporter's favored players are not likely to feature in the U.S. team since they typically identify with club teams from other countries. Even the flow from MLS teams to the U.S. national team is limited with most star players finding employment in Europe.

It is clear that Latinos in the United States do not support the United States professional soccer system. Besides empirical support that can be gathered from television ratings, attending a US national game is sufficient in demonstrating the large discrepancy in attendance between

American and Latin American supporters. ESPN notes, “the huge number of Hispanic soccer fans who don’t attend MLS games is most obvious when Mexican teams play matches here. When Mexico played South Korea at the Los Angeles Coliseum a year ago, more than 64,000 people attended.”²² Attendance for United States national team games typically represents a fraction of the 64,000 ceiling reached when Latin American teams play in America (which oddly enough, frequently happens because of the money and fans available). When the American national team plays games against Latin American opposition anywhere in the United States, Latin American supporters typically and overwhelmingly outnumber American fans.

An interesting side note of David Beckham entering the MLS is that it was thought the league’s success depended on Latino’s coming out to watch the new star in the next few years. ESPN notes, “whether David Beckham’s American adventure proves a financial boon or multimillion-dollar blunder for Major League Soccer could depend on how well Beckham wins over fans such as Rodrigo Diaz.”²³ Yet, the Los Angeles Galaxy exhibits the typical MLS problem; there are only three Latinos starting on the team (as of 2011). This fact is shocking for a team based in the Los Angeles region, heavy with new and old Latino immigrants. The failure of the Beckham experiment speaks to the much larger problem of soccer in America. The evaluation of his stature, even though his playing skills had greatly diminished, was in insulting to ethnic fans of the MLS. There were more successful imports into the MLS system that had a much greater impact on the success of the sport than Beckham did, but the press and media coverage overwhelming focused on this one player.²⁴

The main problem for the MLS and soccer in America as a whole is that “many Hispanics scorn MLS as a bush league where players show little of the panache and artistry that gives soccer its ‘beautiful game’ name.”²⁵ For the sport to truly catch on, it has to be played at a

much higher level than it is currently being played at. For all the bluster about the advancement of American soccer, the national team did poorly during the last two World Cup's and U.S. club teams continue to lose when they face South American opposition.

In the end, the choice of a team to support reflects an accumulation of individual decision points. As Foer (2004, 40) notes, "even in the global market, they draw supporters who crave ethnic identification – to join an existential fight on behalf of their tribe." In our case, choice of a national team to support could be reflection of a wider cultural battle for some. The choice to support the Mexican team is a form of rebellion against the dominant culture but not a rejection of this culture. Supporting an external national team is a form of resistance but also a deep longing to be accepted by the group. It must be noted that this form of resistance is passive and non-confrontational. It is only a reaction to the wider lack of acceptance of Latinos in society. When the national team reflects the dynamics of the Latinos in society this form of rebellion will fade and be replaced by a new sense of inclusive nationalism.

On the road to assimilation, many cultural traits Latinos possess have been stripped away. Dress, food, and entertainment all change in response to external influences. It is difficult for one to rebel and succeed in the cultural landscape by retaining the trappings of the homeland. But soccer is different, soccer loyalties were once maintained without fear of an adverse reaction by the host culture. A dangerous path is taken when there is such a negative reaction to common sporting associations. Rejecting a potential path for civic engagement and a source of a personal pride is a rejection of that group as a whole. Providing a path to acceptance through sport is a way to help end the cultural battle and encourage civic participation.

The Lack of Diversity in American Soccer

The successful 1994 World Cup helped revive popular interest for soccer in the United States. Building on this ground swell of support, the Major League Soccer (MLS) organization was established to bring professional soccer to the U.S., due in part to a compromise before hosting the World Cup. The objective was to give young Americans the opportunity to play soccer professionally, like players in Europe and other regions of the world, as part of a wider commitment by the U.S. to participate in the world's game.

The MLS may or may not be a reflection of American society as a whole, but the bottom line is that we know it is not a reflection of the Latino population in America. Using a list of Hispanic names utilized by the U.S. government to establish ethnic origins of individuals only 40 players out of 337 on MLS rosters in 2006 were 'Hispanic.' This finding is even more astounding when one considers that the great majority of those with Hispanic names are likely internationals from Mexico, Guatemala, and other Latin American countries. It is clear that very few Latinos born and raised in America participate in the MLS. Certainly examples can be discussed, yet these are outliers and not representative of the norm in the MLS.

Prior to 2007, the MLS released statistics on foreign born players in the league. They note, "of the 325 MLS players under contract as of April 5, 2007, roughly two thirds were born in the United States, while 48 different countries are represented in the birthplaces of the other third."²⁶ A closer look shows that 36 of the 107 (33.6 percent) foreign born players come from the Latin American region.²⁷ Yet, Mexico only supplies four players. Guatemala sends only two players. Brazil and Argentina (both low emigration states, comparatively) supply 13 of the players. As a comparison, Liberia and Ghana supply three players each. Clearly professional soccer in the United States does not reflect the growing Latino population. Only 11.9 percent of

players in the professional league are of Latino origin.²⁸ Likely 70 to 80 percent of that total is represented by foreign born Latinos meaning very few of those 11.9 percent Latino players were born in the United States. It gets even worse if one considers that Claudio Renya (of Argentine descent) was one of three Latinos on the U.S. national team roster for the 2006 World Cup (an Argentine immigrant and a third generation Mexican-American were the other two).

ESPNSoccernet.com noted there were three players of Hispanic descent on the 2006 team and five in 1994, a clear regression (there were four Latino players on the 2010 team, three on the 2011 Gold Cup team). Where are all the native born Latinos?

The pipeline feeding into the MLS and U.S. men's national team does not lend one to think things will change in the future (see also Messeri 2008: 417-418). Very few players in the club system or college system in the United States are of Latino descent. Very few future American stars who have participated in youth tournaments are of Latino descent. Seldom are Latinos given college scholarships to compete at the NCAA division 1 level. Touted future stars such as Michael Bradley, Freddy Adu, and Charlie Davies are of non-Latino descent. Yet, throughout the country one can see young players of Latino descent constantly playing in city parks and empty fields. Something must be very wrong structurally. The pipeline from youth to professionalism is broken for Latinos.

For those of Latino descent, there is a clear disconnect between playing soccer and getting the opportunity to do so for a living in the United States. The American club system is one of wealth and privilege. Foer (2004, 239) notes, "surveys, done by the sporting goods manufactures, consistently show that children of middle class and affluent family play the game disproportionately. Half the nation's soccer participants come from households earning over \$50,000." In the United States, soccer is an upper middle class endeavor as opposed to its

populist and lower class base of support in the rest of the world. As Sugden and Tomlinson (1994, 9) note “Whereas, in many countries of the world, soccer’s roots lie in the urban impoverished working-class areas of the big city - from Belfast to Buenos Aires – in the USA the game has blossomed most in the respectable suburbs, schools and colleges of the white middle class.” In short, soccer in the U.S. has a structural problem; organized soccer associations in general are not accessible to Latino households.

Players in the U.S. club soccer system must buy into their teams by paying for travel and equipment.²⁹ It is less likely that Latino players can afford such luxuries and therefore few make progress necessary to advance to the men’s national system. Current national team member Clint Dempsey remarked, “it’s tough for some Hispanics, and Caucasians, as well as African-Americans and players of every ethnicity. Money becomes an issue for some of the players who don’t have that privilege.”³⁰ In the same article, current national team star and captain Landon Donovan remarked that many players of Latino descent were better than him growing up, but were lost in the system as time went on. The movie *Goal!* (2005) reflects this perspective. A young Latino is given a chance and finally makes it in the world of professional soccer. Yet, to achieve his big break, he has to leave the United States and his family, reclaim his Mexican citizenship (since he is an illegal immigrant), and seek opportunity in England.³¹

The lack of Latino representation has a direct impact on the perceived lack of support by Latinos for the U.S. men’s national team during the 2006 and 2010 World Cups. Why would a Latino support the U.S. team if no one on the team looks like them? Why support a team where no one can identify with the players? Whereas, the Mexican national team has many stories of rags to riches progress towards the greatest world soccer stage, the United States men’s team

players all have similar stories of progress: a middle class lifestyle - club soccer - and then introduction to the United States national team system.

At least the hierarchy of the U.S. national team recognizes this issue as a problem. ESPN notes, “Sunil Gulati, the U.S. Soccer Federation president, has made reaching such potentially overlooked talent one of the aims for his tenure, outlining an initiative that would focus on inner-city players and bringing young prospects in those areas to the attention of youth national team programs. The move would allow players to bypass the expensive youth club route that often excludes those who cannot afford the fees.”³² Maybe in the future things will change. The U.S. national team might eventually reflect American society at large with significant inclusion of Latino and also African-American players, both currently underrepresented on the national team. But this hope is only one for the future; it does not reflect the current state of relations and could help explain why Latinos do not support the U.S. men’s national team.

Mandelbaum (2004, 282) notes that diversity in America will require effective methods of social solidarity. Sports could provide one method for such solidarity. Sport will only provide a suitable method for assimilation if the sport itself is broadly supported by American society. In the past, baseball provided a common ground, after much contestation (Burgos 2007), for cultural assimilation in that Black, Jewish, and Italians all gained social capital when their neighborhood heroes became national stars. A similar process has played out in other sports as well, in boxing with Muhammad Ali or basketball with Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Russell. It is unlikely that soccer could provide a similar path towards assimilation so long as it remains rejected by most Americans. In the end, the process by which sport provides an avenue towards incorporation is a long and tough road that is much more nuanced than a simple question of Latinos supporting external national teams or Latinos lack of inclusion in the national World Cup

team. Social capital can be gained by minorities participating in sports, but this is a complex process, especially when soccer is barely on the typical sporting fan's radar.

Soccer and Social Capital

It is clear that Americans like to participate in civic organizations and groupings. Putnam (2001, 48) writes, "today, as 170 years ago, Americans are more likely to be involved in voluntary associations than are citizens of most other nations; only the small nations of northern Europe outrank us as joiners." Yet the problem is that soccer is not a viable form of civic participation in America. It is likely that participants do not gain the benefits of social capital that those who watch or participate in baseball or softball might. This point is particularly important since some suggest that Latinos are unlikely to join other types of associations (Price and Whitworth 2004: 186).

Soccer is clearly not a sport accepted on the cultural landscape (Markovits and Hellerman 2001, Mandelbaum 2004). It is not that soccer is incapable of facilitating civic engagement. Huebner (1906: 212) has noted that 'popular amusements' can act as 'assimilators.' Putnam (2001, 109) writes, "one common form of leisure activity is participation in sports...Have we perhaps shifted the locus of our social encounters from the card table or the neighborhood bar to the softball diamond or the exercise class?" Yet, soccer is specifically excluded as a form of participation because of its international character as well as its ties to ethnic groups.³³

Transue (2007: 78) argues that the discipline (of political science) has paid little attention to the social forces that unite people and transcend group boundaries. Soccer is one such social force that has been ignored. If the sport of soccer is not recognized as a viable form of social engagement in the United States, little social capital can be gained from participating or watching the sport. Raymond Keating has a typical reaction to soccer and notes his revulsion in

a *Washington Times* article. “That soccer is simplistic goes a long way in explaining why soccer is so widely played by young children in the United States, but the game loses interest as people grow into adulthood. Particularly as fans, Americans want to invest their time, resources and passions in something far more challenging than soccer.”³⁴

Nevermind that Keating’s quotation can be discredited by any one of the over one billion worldwide adult fans of the game; it still represents the dominant view by the American public. If social capital is key to economic, social, and political progress in a society, what can be gained by immigrants if their favored sport is dismissed so readily? Chong and Kim (2006, 348) note that the structural barriers to success in the United States leads ethnic groups to retain group ties based on ethnicity because they are not included into wider society. With cultural rejection and separation come difference and exclusion which then leads to ethnic seclusion.

Some have noted that other sports were accepted by immigrants as viable forms of acculturation in America. Mandelbaum (2004, 37) writes “America’s ethnic groups, if they did not shed their forbears’ identities entirely, did, over time, gain acceptance as full and legitimate participants in American life. In the twentieth century American sports, especially professional baseball, reflected this process.” The story of baseball as a path to civic participation is the typical story of immigrant inclusion. Ethnic groups such as the Irish and the Italians followed the favored ethnic players even more than their local teams. The practice of support for ethnic players has become an acceptable form of support for one’s heritage, at least in baseball. This was not always the case. The Encyclopedia Britannica notes that early on, there was much suspicion of the game since ethnic players typically dominated the sport. “They [critics] associated baseball, or at least the professional version of the game, with ne’er-do-wells, immigrants, the working class, drinking, gambling, and general rowdiness. Conversely, these

very qualities provided a foothold for the upward ascent of ethnic groups from the nation's ghettos."³⁵ Baseball was once met with aversion and then became a path towards eventual acceptance in the United States as it became the national pastime.³⁶ Boxing has a similar history in America, especially with the Irish ethnic group who used the sport to gain acceptance, but also to retain cultural ties. But can the path be repeated when it comes to soccer? Immigrants and ethnic groups choose to follow and participate in the dominant American sports as a way to become part of America and to participate in civil society. While soccer remains an alternative option it is an option that is not accepted by the mainstream and thus cannot currently contribute to assimilation dynamics.

The choice of one's outlet for participation and civic engagement should not matter. As long as one uses these associations to form cultural and political ties, then these outlets provide for a form of civil society. Social capital can be gained by immigrant groups if their sport were to become more integrated. By making social connections to other Americans through sport, Latinos can therefore increase the speed at which the United States reaches a point of assimilation.

The 2008 election has provided an interesting test case for the use of soccer as a political mobilization tool. The Nevada Democratic party sponsored a soccer team in the local elite Las Vegas league. The 'Los Democratras' made it all the way to the league finals losing to the incumbent champions. The party website notes, "In addition to their success on the field, Los Democratras allowed the Party to register over 100 new Democrats and spread our message to voters all over the country. The team garnered media attention both locally and nationally from newspapers, magazines, radio shows, and television news."³⁷

As Ramakrishnan (2005, 55) notes, social ties are key for political participation. “Social ties and networks alter the logic of participation in several ways...they reduce the costs of obtaining information that is relevant to voting.” Thus, by participating in soccer, immigrants can become better engaged with their political environment. However, this can only be true if soccer is accepted as an important sport in America. The ‘Los Democratas’ provide an interesting example of how this can be accomplished.

Latinos and International Soccer

There can be no doubt that Latinos are more likely to support their homeland’s national teams rather than the U.S. national soccer team. Sports Illustrated’s coverage of a Mexican team loss to the U.S. notes, “for Mexican-Americans whose futbol loyalty lies with their native land, the agony of that loss remains vividly painful. “I have cried three times in my life,” said Regelio Ruiz, a 26-year-old used-car salesman from Las Vegas...”that day was one of them.”³⁸ It is not important to understand which teams Latinos support, but why they support the teams that they do. Why would the loss to the U.S. team be such a source of discontent for a long-time U.S. resident?

First of all, Mexico had a better team in the last World Cup. In 2006, Mexico played some thrilling games, placed second in their group, and made it to the second round. The drama of the classic Argentina vs. Mexico encounter that went into extra time will not soon be forgotten. On the other hand, the United States’ team largely failed to build upon their success in the 2002 World Cup. The United States team did not make it out of its group, failing to win a match and finishing last. The United States team didn’t even score a goal; its only tally coming on a deflected goal against Italy.

There is wide gap in coverage of the soccer teams. The Mexican team was celebrated for their effort, success, and courage; while the American team was noted as a failure despite of their strong efforts in a tough group (they had to do battle with eventual champions Italy, the Czech Republic, and Ghana, all strong teams). One reason for the difference between perceptions has to do with the feeling that Mexico was an underdog. Soccer fans love to follow the underdog. Few matches during the last World Cup were more celebrated than Australia's unlikely tie against Brazil during the group stages. Mexico's efforts against the favorite Argentina were notable while the American team's tie with eventual champions Italy was a drab encounter, only memorable because each team had two players sent off during the match.

The main reason many Latinos and other ethnic groups might decline to support the American national team is the perceived arrogance and exceptionalism of American culture. Clearly, the rest of the world is not happy with the United States' military adventure in Iraq (and also Afghanistan).³⁹ If the United States' political and cultural dominance were to be extended to soccer, the reaction could only be negative. Safire suggests as much, "if the invigorated U.S. team had come out of nowhere to defeat the best of all nations of the world – and not in our football, but in their futbol – such a triumph, in this year, would have been a psychological bummer for the rest of the world and thus a diplomatic disaster for us."⁴⁰

There is no national sport in the United States. Some days one might consider it to be American Football, for others it is the 'national pastime' of Baseball. Either way, soccer does not enter into the discussion. American's reluctance to accept soccer as a viable sporting alternative clearly has an impact on its support base throughout the country. New and old immigrants who like soccer are only left with the narrow choice of following their 'homeland' teams since supporting the U.S. national team is not really an option. This is true especially

when coverage in the United States is so poor compared to the coverage of Latin American teams.

Supporting a Team and Personal Preference

The choice to support a soccer team is made through personal historical experiences, associations, and memory. It is a socially constructed association that cannot be forced. The choice of which national team to support is also extended through the practice of language associations. English is clearly the hegemonic language in the United States. The refusal to give recognition to Spanish options is “symbolically connected with a sense of powerlessness and subordination.” (Patten 2001, 693) The choice to follow a sport and coverage of that sport in Spanish is seen as a form of rejection of American mores and a move to regain cultural power.

It is unclear why even watching a sporting match in Spanish is a clear sign of the lack of assimilation. The issue is purely an individual preference. While most Latinos in the United States can get by and excel in English, they might prefer to watch television, sports, and conduct family business in the language of their origin. This choice has nothing to do with assimilation or acculturation; it is purely a personal decision unrelated to nationalism. Even the National Football League, as noted by the New York Times, is making efforts to reach Hispanic households with Spanish language football game broadcasts.⁴¹ Would the NFL be any less American if American citizens watched or listened to it in Spanish?

It must also be noted that Spanish language stations had what is recognized as better soccer coverage during the World Cup when compared to the meek efforts by ESPN/ABC to cover the sport. The cadence and excitement of Spanish broadcasters is celebrated worldwide. ESPN’s coverage lacked the drama and excitement that was evident in Univision’s coverage. Even Univision’s commercials were more interesting than those provided by ESPN. ESPN also

frequently employs broadcasters of English descent to provide commentary during halftime, so why is it so troubling that new American's might choose to listen to soccer broadcast by announcers from Latin America rather than English speaking broadcasters? This point was made clear when ESPN decided to hire Englishman Martin Tyler after failing to find a suitable American host.

It should also be noted that assuming that most Latinos have attachments to soccer is a form of "pop sociology" in which critics are making assumptions about a group based on a few examples.⁴² While it is true that the point here is that soccer can provide a path to assimilation for the exclude group, it is also true that the Latino group is not monolithic and does not uniformly support soccer as a sport. Many enjoy American football, baseball, and boxing to a greater degree than soccer. Many also reject sports in general. To assume an entire group can be judged by the sporting attachments of a vocal few is a textbook method of utilizing preconceived notions (i.e. soccer is not a worthy sport and Latinos in general are not worthy of being Americans) to judge an entire group. Critics must move beyond simple associations to demonize members of a population.

Conclusion

How do you know an American when you see one? To most, Americans are not those that follow soccer. The assumption put forth by Ziegler and others is that Latinos in America are not loyal citizens because they follow different traditions. The newcomers look to the South for news, sports, and culture. Therefore, they are not true 'Americans' and might destroy the true fabric of America by tearing apart its Anglo roots (Huntington 2004). Statements such as these are not based on evidence, but a gut feeling that Latinos are an 'other' group.

Marx (1996) makes the point that demonizing an ‘other’ race is be an important step towards establishing a strong nation-state. Every society is prone to designating an ‘other’ group to blame its problems on. Currently, Latinos are that ‘other group.’ Just because Latinos act differently in terms of sports viewership, language, and food traditions does not make them any less American than long entrenched Anglos. In fact, research points in the opposite direction in that Latinos are more patriotic in surveys than Anglo-Americans (De la Garza, Falcon et al. 1996).

In terms of Latinos and American sports, clearly more outreach needs to be made to achieve the desired representation in professional leagues and the national team. The positive view of Latino outreach by the MLS has largely failed to materialize as Delgado (1999) hoped at the time. One solution might be the encouragement of Latino ownership of sports teams and the MLS teams in particular.⁴³ Other solutions might be to support current Latinos making a trade in any professional American sport. Sport can be a positive avenue towards establishing what is called a pan-ethnic viewpoint, but only if certain sports and players are regarded positively.

Yet, the point must be made that elites in the United States do not need to consider Latinos a problem for political or cultural action. Rather, they should embrace the perspectives of Latino, African-American, and Asian actors as part of the cultural enrichment of United States as a whole. If the U.S. soccer team included more Latinos and played a better brand of soccer, it would be more likely to be embraced by Americans-at-large. As Parenti (1967) notes in an examination relevant to Irish and Polish groups, ethnic identifications do not have to be a barrier to a stronger society. “For the ethnic, a minority group identity is no more incompatible with life in America and with loyalty to the nation than is any regional, class, or other particular group attachment...Ethnics can thus sometimes behave politically as ethnics while remaining firmly

American.” (Parenti 1967: 725-726) Although the language used in the discussion of ethnic participation has changed, the sentiment has not. Ethnic attachments and dual loyalties do not have to be a negative force in American life.

Is someone less of an American because he/she roots for Mexico or Bolivia or even Germany over the American team? We would argue of course not. It is naïve to assume one’s favorite sports team is a proxy for that person’s nationality, ethnicity, and values. People choose to support teams for varying reasons. The Japanese have embraced David Beckham as a cultural icon, yet no one is suggesting that his legions of fans are any less patriotic. Evidence presented to slight Latinos is selected unreasonably and unfairly.

In the end, assimilation is a two-way process. It can only truly be accomplished by a composite mixing of cultures. If the Anglo group rejects influences from the Latino group, then progress on the cultural battlefield is unlikely. Putnam (2000) is supportive of the idea that soccer can be a force for the advancement of civil society in America. He (Putnam 2000, 26) notes, “league bowling may be pass, but how about softball and soccer? . . . Perhaps the younger generation today is no less engaged than their predecessors, but engaged in new ways.” It is possible that rejection of soccer as a sport can also mean the rejection of a potential pathway to assimilation of cultures and multicultural harmony.

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- ¹ By Latino, we mean of Latin American descent but based in the United States. The term Chicano is avoided here since it typically is used to speak about the Mexican-American group and this paper speaks to the struggles of Latinos overall.
- ² By American, we mean the United States of America in this paper. By Latino, we mean those of Latin American descent.
- ³ The term soccer is used throughout this paper to refer to football. Football was not used so as to not confuse the term with American football.
- ⁴ In this article I am generally referring to Latinos by the academic classification of Spanish colonized countries in Central and Latin America excluding Brazil and most of the Caribbean. Most states of Spanish heritage (along with Brazil due to their economic colonization by the English) are culturally attached to soccer, but Cuba and Venezuela remain outliers on this point.
- ⁵ Ziegler, J. June 24, 2006. Immigrants who root for the wrong team. Los Angeles Times.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Quoted from a June 11, 2010 radio broadcast as recounted by <http://mediamatters.org/research/201006110040> (accessed 6/10/2011)
- ⁸ Kuper, Simon. October 7, 2007. The Tebbit test finds a use in an age of ethnic division. Financial Times.
- ⁹ Safire, W. June 24, 2002. The Politics of Futbol. The New York Times.
- ¹⁰ The ice hockey Cold War grudge matches between the U.S. or Canada versus the Soviet Union reflect this dynamic.
- ¹¹ This research represents a start of a larger investigation and theory of sport and society by this author. Future work will lay the foundations for a theoretical perspective and research program that will flow from this article.
- ¹² Price and Whitworth (2004) also explore social networks and Latinos in the context of Metropolitan Washington soccer leagues. Pescador (2004) is also useful in that he provides a social history of Latino soccer organizations in Chicago and Detroit.
- ¹³ The authors are aware of the many critics of the term assimilation but choose to use the term positively in the vain of the literature discussed herein.
- ¹⁴ This research is clearly engaging the question of national or structural assimilation and not cultural assimilation. Cultural assimilation is too broad and nebulous to measure in relation to the modern state. It is not at all clear that any state has a cohesive culturally assimilated population (Japan might be one of the few examples).
- ¹⁵ There are many critics to the civil society and social capital approach to the study of political participation. See Anderson, Curtis, and Grabb (2006), Arniel (2006), Encarnacion (2002), Evers (2003), and finally, Hero (2007) for examples. We follow the approach that believes that civic participation can be increased by social organizations yet we are also very critical of mainstream society's ability to incorporate ethnic organizations into civil discourse.
- ¹⁶ As seen by the dialogue of news coverage surrounding Barack Obama's run for the presidency and question of Latino vs. African American conflict.
- ¹⁷ Ziegler, Immigrants who root for the wrong team.
- ¹⁸ In this context, group associations that actually play the sport or groups of people who gather together to watch the sport are the key actions this article relates to. Individuals watching at home alone, without interaction, clearly cannot gain the full benefits of civil society participation.
- ¹⁹ Mexico took four points at the group stage and scored four goals. They moved on the playoff round and lost in overtime to a strong Argentina squad. The United States finished bottom of its group with one point and only scored two goals.
- ²⁰ The World Cup 2022 vote is evidence of this, despite the allegations of bribery. The United States was rated as the best potential host country in terms of audience, infrastructure, and location, yet it was still defeated by a vote many think was corrupted.
- ²¹ Gardner, Paul, September 11, 2007. Latin American Flair Will Boost MLS Popularity Soccer. The New York Sun.
- ²² ESPNsoccer.net. January 1, 2007. MLS' bet on Beckham could hinge on Hispanics. ESPNsoccer.net.com.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Examples of players who had a greater impact than Beckham include Cuauhtémoc Blanco with the Chicago Fire, Juan Pablo Ángel with the New York Red Bulls and LA Galaxy, and most recently, Thierry Henry with the Red Bulls.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ April 5, 2007. MLS talent comes from across the globe. MLSnet.com
- ²⁷ The map of foreign born players can be found at www.mlsnet.com/pdf/mls/2007/040407_player_map.pdf
- ²⁸ It is interesting that Jensen and Sosa's (2008) article exploring the failure of the Houston MLS franchise to build a positive relationship with the Latino community fails to mention that lack of Latino players playing for the team as a possible source of discontent.
- ²⁹ The same problem plagues American Baseball and is represented in the decline of Black and inner city representation in the sport. Basketball remains accessible to all and the traveling club level is well sponsored by various organizations (Nike and McDonalds) wishing to ride the popular wave.
- ³⁰ Canales, A. January 3, 2007. The missing Latino link. ESPNsoccer.net.
- ³¹ see also Kwauk (2007) for a deeper exploration of the movies themes including the American dream and immigration.
- ³² Ibid.

³³ Many semi-professional teams in major cities reflect ethnic origins such as Polish, Serbian, or Mexican.

³⁴ Markovits and Hellerman (2001), xiv, 367 p, Mandelbaum (2004), xviii, 332 p.

³⁵ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/54751/baseball>

³⁶ It has been noted that the Irish, in their hatred of the English, pushed baseball towards its eventual path as the national pastime because of their hatred of English Cricket.

³⁷ <http://www.nvdems.com/go/the-blog/los-democratas-end-a-triumphant-season/>

³⁸ Wahl, G. March 28, 2005. Yes, Hard Feelings. Sports Illustrated.

³⁹ The Pew Global Attitudes Project (<http://pewglobal.org/>) has tracked the decline in positive perceptions of the United States since the War in Iraq in 2003.

⁴⁰ Safire, The Politics of Futbol.

⁴¹ Branch, J. February 3, 2007. Among Hispanics, N.F.L. Mania Hits Cultural Wall. New York Times.

⁴² I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

⁴³ The MLS Chivas experiment clearly was a failure. At first the team only used reserve Mexican players on the assumption these players would excel against a weaker American opposition. This strategy immediately failed and was replaced by a team built of many nationalities and levels of experience.