2013

The elementary forms of sports fandom: A Durkheimian exploration of team myths, kinship, and totemic rituals

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Published Citation

Serazio, Michael. (2013). "The elementary forms of sports fandom: A Durkheimian exploration of team myths, kinship, and totemic rituals." Communication and Sport, 1(4), 303-325. DOI: 10.1177/2167479512462017

The Elementary Forms of Sports Fandom: A Durkheimian Exploration of Team Myths, Kinship, and Totemic Rituals

Abstract

This essay explores sports fandom through a Durkheimian theoretical framework that foregrounds the totemic link between civic collective and team symbol. Specifically, I analyze the myths, kinship, and rituals of Philadelphia Phillies fans during their historic 2008 World Series victory in the United States' professional baseball league using a limited participant-observation of beliefs and behaviors on display at public events and articulated through the sports media. I argue that the totem's success offered a momentous opportunity for intense social unity and reaffirmed group ideals – at both the civic and kin level – and mirrored a quasi-religious functionality at a moment of declining integrative institutions. The "collective effervescence" and *communitas* generated during this period represented a celebration of identity and indexed solidarity. The rituals attendant to the actual sports event are, I argue, as essential as what happens on the field, for these rituals preserve the collective memory that upholds the totem and, in turn, the group.

Keywords: fandom, religion, ritual, Durkheim, Philadelphia Phillies

> It is in communitarian rituals that *communitas*, often excited, sometimes ecstatic, sometimes achieving the extreme states called 'trance,' is most frequently experienced. One of the fundamental properties of *communitas* is the blurring of distinction between self and other… The revelation of the hidden oneness of all things and of one's participation in such a great oneness may be the core meaning of *communitas*. (Rappaport, 1999, pp. 380-381)

For a moment, the pitcher's breaking ball hung suspended above the infield grass – a moment pregnant with possibility, a lit fuse for a quarter-century's worth of bottled-up collective yearning. Fans stood on the precipice of a celebratory sports ritual as familiar and seemingly prescribed as it is earnest and palpably authentic. As the ball careened past the opposing hitter and the pitcher dropped to his knees, a city exploded in noise. There were countless many fans branded with the totemic badge of unity: that tribal mark that had long symbolized unrequited devotion, the Phillies logo of Philadelphia's professional baseball team. And into the streets, the crowds poured, sprinting for the civic spine that is Broad Street, the central north-south thoroughfare that binds neighborhoods blighted, blue-collar, and upscale. Police had already cordoned off the area in preparation, knowing that fans would pool there, to dance and shout and huddle and revel in the delirium of what Emile Durkheim (1912/2001) long ago identified as "collective effervescence," those moments of intense social unity and reaffirmed group ideals that interrupt the prosaic goings-on of anonymous everyday life in a big city:

> The very fact of assembling is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are assembled, their proximity generates a kind of electricity that quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation… There are violent gestures, shouts, even howls,

deafening noises of all sorts from all sides that intensify even more the state they express. (pp. 162-163)

Such a riotous display routinely accompanies the exaltation of victory, whether in the context of an Olympic gold medal basketball match, an English Premier League football final, or, as deconstructed here, a World Series victory in in the United States' professional baseball league championship. Yet rarely have these uncivilized, even primal stirrings – and the deeper sports fan culture upon which the effervescence is built – been theorized explicitly religiously as such. In this essay, I rectify that oversight and offer a creative, original exploration of the myths, kinship, and rituals of Phillies fandom during that historic 2008 championship. I investigate this utilizing a Durkheimian framework that foregrounds the totemic link between civic collective and team symbol.

Although there is no shortage of valuable literature devoted to fan studies in the past two decades (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Lewis, 1992), *sports* fans have been comparatively disregarded (Hugenberg, Haridakis, & Earnheardt, 2008; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Cornel Sandvoss (2003) has contributed to closing this gap and his theorization that football fandom, as "a form of consumption in a supermediated world," represents a means of "communicating essential coordinates ['a projection'] of the self" will be helpful here, particularly as that location of identity takes place within the political economy of a highly commodified sports consumer culture (p. 27). And still fewer scholars[1] have taken a thorough and serious account of the quasi-*religious* dimension of those beliefs and practices, even as migration, industrialization, and secularization finds "formal" religion occupying a less central place in modern society (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). This essay holds the position that if

one looks closely at contemporary sports allegiances, the contours of religious expression as a "nonmaterial social fact" begin to emerge.

Although primarily intended a theoretical exercise, in this course of this research, my limited participant-observation[2] included frequenting local bars to monitor fan behavior during games; attending the pre-World Series rally at Philadelphia's City Hall, the postgame "riot" on Broad Street, and the championship parade through downtown; conducting a close reading of coverage in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the city's broadsheet daily, from October 16 (when the Phillies clinched the National League pennant, the penultimate series in U.S. baseball's playoffs) to November 2 (following the parade); and listening to local sports talk radio (WIP 610) for one hour each day.[3] The mediated component of this ritual was essential in identifying the narratives that gird it (Serazio, 2010); for by summoning collective memory and casting new myths, "there is surely no cultural force more equal to the task of creating an imaginary… unity than the… sports-media complex" (Rowe, McKay, and Miller, 1998, p. 133). Talk radio, in particular, offered a useful site to examine the feedback loop of these themes, as I listened to fans negotiate with and participate in that larger narrative. And, ultimately, the bodies in "worship," at local bars and in the streets, provide indexical confirmation that the ritual had taken hold: "*By performing a liturgical order the participants accept, and indicate to themselves and to others that they accept whatever is encoded in the canon of that order*" (Rappaport, 1999, p. 119, italics in original).

The Civic Totem

At the very center of this analysis is the premise that the Phillies, as civic symbol, embody and represent Philadelphia in a totemic fashion. On the surface, this may seem tautological, but it holds a much richer diagnostic potential. In fandom, much as in religious

worship, the social experience is brought to life: Per Durkheimian shorthand equivalence, the team (god) is us (society). Players unknowingly indulge this mythology when they dote upon the vacuous old sports cliché: "We couldn't have won this without the fans." The totem, of course, served as Durkheim's theoretical centerpiece:

> On the one hand, it is the external and tangible form of what we have called the totemic principle, or god. But on the other, it is the symbol of that particular society we call the clan. It is its flag; it is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from others, the visible mark of its personality, a mark that embodies everything that belongs to the clan in any way…The god of the clan, the totemic principle, must therefore be the clan itself, but transfigured and imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal species that serve as totems. (p. 154)[4]

Philadelphians are meant to locate their need for enduring fraternity in that totem that has endured for nearly 130 years strong; it makes tribal fellowship and social solidarity concrete and identifiable; it reifies the otherwise-imperceptible ties that bind. As civic religion, public hopes are expressed through the veneration of and aspiration for the totem. At the same time, devotion to it provides a metaphor for devotion to the polis, to the collective for which it stands. The emblem gives natives identity and unity and marks their distinction from geographically rival outsiders; it serves as a reminder of civic interconnectedness and dependence, despite the daily endurance of big city anonymity. Even as primary social ties through neighborhood, work, and religion increasingly wither, identification with a sports team can satisfy the need for quasi-intimate relationships (Serazio, 2008; Melnick, 1993). Through symbols as simple as the Phillies "P," the logo found on the team's cap, the group totem can cut across difference, integrate subpopulations, and materially index *belonging*. Thus, we cheer not merely for on-field success;

we also cheer for the togetherness occasioned in that experience, as Anthony King (1997) argues:

> This love which the lads feel for their team is simultaneously also a love for the feeling of solidarity which they experience every time they attend the game and participate in the communal practice of drinking and singing. Just as Durkheim suggested aboriginal tribes worship their society through the totem, so do the lads reaffirm their relations with other lads through the love of the team… The team and the love invested in it, is a symbol of the values and friendships which exist between the lads. (p. 333)

Love flows most effusively when the totem is fertile, when the team reaps victory.[5] An *Inquirer* columnist marveled at this phenomenon in the wake of the Phillies victory that night, writing of the Panamanian catcher and the Philly mayor – two strangers before – now hugging and laughing "like the oldest of friends":

> It was a snapshot of what was going on all over the city by then. On the way out of the parking lot, a stranger informed me that he loved me. At that moment, he loved everyone, and he was making sure they knew. Some men won a baseball game, and the mood of an entire region was transformed. If that doesn't answer the questions of why sports matter, nothing will. (Sheridan, 2008a, p. C3)

Another columnist similarly tried to articulate the ineffability of *communitas* experienced at the parade:

> Everyone was filled with the same purpose – a great desire to bear witness to something they weren't sure was possible here. In that way, the parade was equal parts spectacle and miracle because it brought so many people together – united different ages and backgrounds. Perhaps that sounds overly maudlin or sentimental to those who weren't

there. But if you were among the masses, I bet you felt the sense of community, too. (Gonzalez, 2008a, p. E2)

That *communitas* was never more apparent than in the manic celebration in those hours after the championship victory. For one exuberant autumn evening, strangers fully embraced – a trance-like, teeming mass of individuals hugging and high-fiving and chanting together – individuals who would, by morning, be guarded and distant once more. "Broad Street was sheer madness," a newspaper columnist would later reflect. "All rules and order were suspended." Police officers, who would normally tamp down on the drinking, public urination, and traffic chaos that was taking place, simply stood idle. Indeed, those rules of social reality seemed somehow put on hold in favor living out something more spontaneous and uninhibited – a *carnivalesque* atmosphere that Mikhail Bahktin (1998) identified thus: "The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is, non-carnival life are suspended… All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people" (251). Social barriers had broken down and participants in the spectacle caught a glimpse of Ferdinand Tonnies' *Gemeinschaft* restored – that "utopian" place of "equality, abundance, and freedom" (Storey, 2001, p. 109). For however briefly, urban anomie had melted away, indexed by the warm glow of totemic worship around a sacred center.

In that sense, Victor Turner's (1969) work on the linkages between liminality and *communitas* also suggests insight into a sports ritual such as this. Within liminal phenomena, those in-between states and processes of culture, an "essential and generic human bond" is revealed that temporarily suspends societal norms and collapses hierarchical differences among a population (p. 97). In contrast with that system of social status that occupies the normal space

outside it, the properties of liminality include "homogeneity," "equality," "sacredness," and "continual reference to mystical powers" – all of which were in evidence on Broad Street (p. 106). To be certain, Turner (1982) would later identify sports more with his modified concept of the "liminoid," a similar yet smaller-scale, secular rite more optional than obligatory. Sharon Rowe (2008) challenges Turner's distinction in this regard and points out that, as seasonal recurrences, sports very much sit at the center of collective experience, much as characterized by liminal ritual: "Large collectives of people identify, and come to be identified, with particular athletes and athletic events… Like the tribal rituals Turner describes, these modern sports are occasions for public reflexivity and metacommunication" (pp. 135-136).

Indeed, journalists stitched myth in much the same way, some contextualizing the Phillies as spiritual balm within the wider societal conditions of economic collapse, endless war, partisan dueling, and urban gun violence: "The team is the one thing we all can agree on"; "It's a positive energy that people want to identify with… It breaks down the walls of a neighborhood and unites people"; "You can see yourself in them" (John-Hall, 2008, p. B1). The president of a local company that was "growing so fast that people don't know each other" saw in the team a means "to retain that small-company feeling" (Von Bergen, 2008, p. C3).

Just as the Phillies occasioned an opportunity to reassert "Philadelphian-ness," Edward Shils and Michael Young (1953), making their case for the Queen's coronation as a moment of national communion, likewise posit that the ceremonial occasion was an opportunity for affirming the moral values that constitute British society. In these moments of *communitas* between deity ("or other symbols of the highest values of the community" – i.e., here the Phillies) and community, "the individual loses his egoistic boundaries and feels himself fused with his community" (p. 74). At the most extreme ends of fandom, we might glean traces of

this: "Herb Hall," one *Inquirer* article boasted, "is such a Fightin's[6] partisan that during a bout of amnesia a decade ago he didn't know his own name but could perfectly recite the 1956 Phils' starting lineup" (Nunnally, 2008a, p. B8). Hall may well be trafficking in hyperbole, but the spirit of his enthusiasm reveals precisely that "ideal" absorption that Shils and Young outline: His own identity disappears and he exists only as a loyalist to the group (that loyalty made manifest in the showboating capacity to call forth arcane bits of knowledge about the totem). Sandvoss (2003) empirically charts this intersection of self and team at a linguistic level, as when fans commonly utilize the pronoun "we" to appropriate and express an inseparable unit (p. 35).

Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) identify this kind of *communitas* – that "good neighborliness and shared spirituality" on display – as a key byproduct of "media event" contests like the World Cup, Super Bowl, or World Series (p. 132).[7] In the lead-up to what effectively became a local "media event," fans performed various acts of absurdity to showcase their totem fealty; talk radio was replete with chatter of such display and declarations of devotion. Morning radio host Angelo Cataldi sought out "the ultimate Phillies fan" in the city to have their vehicle repainted and "tricked out" with the totem logo. One competitor in the suburbs claimed that he spent seven hours painting his lawn with a 15-foot Phillies logo that drew local television cameras from a helicopter overhead. Another day Cataldi held a contest to judge the "most extreme Phillies fan" among tribe members dressed in outlandish Phillies costumes.

It should be noted that this deep embedding of totemic symbolism – and the linkages between identity and community for which it stands – takes place in the context of a capitalist sports franchise bent on maximizing profits. After all, as Sandvoss (2003) claims, sports fandom seems increasingly "*a series of acts of consumption*" (p. 17, italics original). The commercial impulse unleashed during the World Series, with Phillies fans snapping up countless sums worth

of merchandise[8], seemed to function as centripetal gravity in that regard: The more you bought and decorated your body with the totem, the closer you moved to some sacred center and the more a part of the group you displayed yourself to be. In other words, the more that "togetherness" was visibly indexed. Durkheim noted this phenomenon in tribal behavior far removed from pro sports: "It is a general rule that the members of each clan try to give themselves the external appearance of their totem… When the totem is a bird, the individuals wear its feathers on their heads" (an observation literally applicable to the city's NFL franchise, the Eagles) (p. 95). Moreover, "when the clans meet to share a communal life and attend religious ceremonies, [the native] is obliged to adorn himself" in totem representations (p. 96). This, frankly, is a "valuable" cultural proposition.

For as David Rowe (2004) suggests, "culture, social relations and economics" are "inextricably linked" when it comes to sports and, more specifically, teams, as a media sport texts, represent "almost perfect prototypes" of commodity "signs in circulation, heavily loaded with symbolic value" (pp. 68, 70). In other words,

> Irrespective of whether sport and its values are religious in the strict sense, in broad economic terms (concerned more with profits than prophets, to use a rather old pun) it is one of the key contemporary sites where the expression of strong emotions is translated into the generation of substantial capital. (p. 73)

Therefore, it is their sacred capacity as vehicles for solidarity that ultimately facilitates the durable flow of revenue, particularly given the inevitable successes and failures a franchise will have to endure on the field alone. And while the potential for totem triumph to serve as an effective vehicle for civic collective is, of course, not without precedence, its religiously communal linkages with Durkheimian theory have been rarely highlighted as such. Alan

Tomlinson (2005) notes that sports are "critical sites of sources for the expression of forms of collective belonging, affiliation, and identity" (p. 31) and research has found that "group affiliation" (that is, sports as "an opportunity to spend time with others") ranks among the strongest allures in self-reported fan scales (Wann et al., 2001, p. 41). Susan Birrell (1981) adds that through the community's worship of the sports totem,

> The individuals indicate affirmation for the abstract values for which it stands. Moreover, the symbol is a 'collective representation' because it serves as a concrete reminder of the values of the community to which all individuals must subscribe and through which they maintain their community identity. (p. 357)

Similarly, Stephen Wieting's (2001) anthology demonstrates how sports can shape identity: By yielding "particularly vivid, compelling, accessible material to be memorialized and ascribed contemporary meaning… [it] serves as an efficient common archive for collective as well as individual memory" (p. 4). Thus, sports have often served as a metaphorical index for the state of the nation (Dauncey & Hare, 1999; Jackson & Ponic, 2001; Wieting, 2000). In Philadelphia, scribes invoked the health of the polis as resting on victory or defeat: "You've got the self-esteem of the entire city riding on these guys."

The Kin Totem

The Phillies totem functions not only as abstract civic symbol – enabling solidarity, even *communitas*, amongst total strangers – it equally bridges and binds generations of Philadelphia families. For just as Shils and Young (1953) argued that fealty to the Royal Family offered proxy fealty to one's own family (p. 78), so, too, does devotion to the "local nine" offer a means to reaffirm filial piety:

> The Coronation, like any other great occasion which in some touches the sense of the sacred, brings vitality into family relationships…[It] was a time for drawing closer the bonds of the family, for re-asserting its solidarity… On this occasion one family was knit together with another in one great national family through identification with the monarchy. (p. 73)

Fans describe these kin linkages forged in worship over years of faithful following; World Series success occasioned reflection on the sacrifices of ancestors who kept that faith but did not live to see it restored by triumph. In that afterglow, one blogger eulogized:

> This brought tears to my eyes. This father [the blogger], now 38, held his son, who is 5 and was up way too late for the last out. I thought different thoughts, but one was the continuity of life and sports as a metaphor for it. My dad died in 2001 from cancer. His love of baseball was passed to me, and it continues. Events like last night help solidify this. I have thought of Dad a lot in the past two weeks, and how much he'd be enjoying this run the Phillies are providing for us. Thanks. ("BlogZone," 2008, p. E2)

An *Inquirer* sports columnist similarly reflected:

> Everyone has a story like that – someone for whom they'd like to see the drought end. For me, it's my dad. He was a huge Philly sports fan. He died of cancer a few months before the Birds reached the 2005 Super Bowl. My mom and I were convinced they'd win because he deserved it. Then they lost. He's still waiting, and so are a lot of others. So are we. (Gonzalez, 2008b, p. E2)

Blood and totem co-mingled even literally: Tim McGraw, son of the storied Phillies reliever who closed out their last championship victory in 1980, took the mound before game five to throw out the ceremonial first pitch. He rubbed his father's ashes into the mound for luck,

a gesture evoking religious echoes like "from dust to dust" and dedicating corporeal ephemerality to the timeless and enduring totem.[9] McGraw, in ashen form, was fully subsumed by that which does survive: the Phillies tradition. Similarly, another fan wrote in to describe buying his grandfather a betting stub in Las Vegas for the Phillies to win the championship and giving it to him three days before he died: "When he was buried, I made sure to put the ticket in his suit pocket for good luck. It's hard not to think that he helped the Phils out this year" (Gonzalez, 2008a, p. E2).

Death figured prominently in the totem march to the "Promised Land" – a Biblical analogy for the championship – and not just in fans' remembrances. The Phillies manager, Charlie Manuel, lost his 87-year-old mother just days before winning the pennant. "I put a Phillies hat in her casket," he told reporters after the funeral – the totem mark enduring even as bodies expire (Juliano, 2008, p. E6). An *Inquirer* columnist conjured this dedication to long-gone kin through totem fealty:

> Remember the other, uncountable losses: the loved one buried in their red caps and their Eagles sweatshirts, the fathers and mothers, spouses and friends who didn't make it to this day. Even the die-hards die in time. Remember the older loved ones you weren't sure would live to see it. Make a call. Give out hugs. Bask in this with the people who matter the most. (Sheridan, 2008b, p. A17)

Here, again, we might note the parallels of such *communitas* in the media events that Dayan and Katz (1992) describe:

> *The event creates an upsurge of fellow feeling*, an epidemic of communitas. Family ties and friendships are reactivated. People telephone and visit each other to comment on the event; they make plans to view together… Parties are organized, reuniting families,

> friends, and neighbors. The event serves as a pretext for putting an end to long-standing rivalries and feuds. (p. 196, italics original)

The totem heirloom was often referenced as a binding force between generations: "It's a link," one fan claimed (Kerkstra & Graham, 2008, p. A16). "My father's watching at home, my uncle loved baseball and he passed away, but I'm watching it here with his grandchildren." To that end, the origin myth of an individual's fandom was nostalgically exalted – and the longer a fan could claim allegiance to the totem, the more venerated his or her status among the community gathered in genuflection before it. Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle (1999) have noted that, in traditional societies, group members are initiated into the significant tribal rituals at an early age (p. 131); similarly, research has found that, of dozens of possible reasons, one's parents' support for a given team is the most common predictor for why an individual would identify with it as well (Wann, Tucker, and Schrader, 1996). Thus, more than one fan claimed being "born" into the Phillies: "In Philly, you're born into the sports atmosphere, and it never leaves you," a native testified (Nunnally, 2008a, p. B1).

As particular fans were profiled in newspaper coverage or in talk radio self-representations, their entry point into the totem community took on a distinctly moral inflection and was detailed as an index of righteousness. Sister Elizabeth Anne DeWaele, for example, who adorns her Virgin Mary figurine with a Phillies cap and clutches team trinkets when leading a blessing (the holy totem!), "has been dedicated to her hometown team for as long as she can remember." She proudly adds that *her* mother began rooting for the Fightin's at age 5 in the 1930s (Nunnally, 2008b, p. B1). "Few people have the loved the Phillies longer – and perhaps more fervently – than Robert 'Maje' McDonnell, 88," the *Inquirer* piously boasted in reporting

on this longtime fan who claims to have fallen in love with the totem around age 9 or 10 (Vitez, 2008, p. C1).

In these portraits, as with others, long-lasting faith in the totem – especially for those who are supposedly "baptized" into it – is a crucible for fealty. Passing along the faith to your offspring is coded as equally righteous behavior: On WIP, one caller pledged to the host – under scrutiny – that he'd be raising his newborn son a Phillies fan, despite his wife's Chicago roots. Another pregnant fan in attendance at the victory parade was "eager to raise the [as-yet unborn] girl as a Fightin's fan" (Nunnally, 2008c, p. F2). Here, too, the commodified context cannot be overlooked; one book on sports branding strategy illuminates the potential for exploiting filial affect toward revenue gains. For instance,

> Every time an avid Washington Huskies football family has a new baby enter the family, the football program benefits from grandparents dressing the child in purple Huskies T-shirts and decorating the baby crib with pennants. Reaching youth early in the child development process imprints Washington Huskies on the child's memory channel and increases the potential for creating an enduring fan connection. (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, p. 61)

For fans, this produces the "full circle" effect around the totem. A caller named Ryan told radio host Howard Eskin as much before the opening game of the series: "Everything comes full circle today – I can remember when I was a little kid and my dad taking me to the seats up in the Vet… I wanna raise my kids to be crazy Phillies fanatics like the rest of us fans." To do so would, of course, be to preserve group unity. Thus, we see how fans are bound by the totem through time and space – integrated with strangers at any given moment and linked with ancestral kin throughout more than a century of history.

The Comparative Totem

As totem, any given sports team also exists in contradistinction to the other team totems in its league. Within that context, fans chart their individual commitment and wider collective sense against rivals. This seems especially important for Phillies partisans:

> Those 25 years without a parade [celebrating a championship]… hurt so much because they were an emblem of deeper woes. In a place like, say, Seattle, the teams haven't won anything in a long time either, but folks there don't treat it like a bleeding civic wound. Here, it hurt so much because, deep down, we feared we really were a city of losers. (Satullo, 2008, p. B1)

That this *Inquirer* columnist identifies his totemic devotion in contrast to "say, Seattle" is deeply revealing. On one hand it signals how much the city of Philadelphia comparatively locates its identity and self-esteem in the team totem – a totem that has produced much suffering over the years and has abetted a broader urban self-regard as the "underdog" geographically overlooked between New York and Washington (see Theodoropoulou, 2007, for a relevant reflection on fan rivalries). But it also reveals another relevant facet of group preservation: By disparaging other cities' fandom and relationship to their totem (particularly World Series opponent Tampa Bay), Phillies fans might be read as effectively disparaging the quality of fellowship there and self-congratulating themselves on the maintenance of their own. Put simply, every insult hurled at Tampa Bay fans by Phillies fans – and there was no shortage of that over two weeks – can be read as a coded message about the weakness of group bonds there and the comparative strength of group bonds in Philadelphia. Good fandom signals healthy unity and regular integration; bad fans mean civic anomie and social dislocation. Journalists, talk show hosts, and fans themselves did not, of course, express this in neo-Durkheimian terms as

such. However, it is not hard to hear in their braggadocio about loyalty a not-so-subtle chord about cohesion.

For in the sports discourse surrounding the World Series, the Phillies totem was conceived as sturdy, righteous, and authentic, much like the kinship it represented, while the Tampa Bay totem was disparaged as artificial, superficial, and gossamer. One beat writer who covers the Phillies reported in an interview from Tampa Bay, "This town is not that excited… They're not even jumping on the bandwagon." Eskin, the radio host, similarly carped of Rays fans: "These people just don't seem connected… There's certainly a small core of fans… but it's not like Philadelphia where they went crazy. People here really have not connected." He later maligned the Tampa Bay-St. Petersburg cityscape in the context of their weak fandom and therefore ties: "There's no central place in any of this… They're not *connected* to anything – they're connected to warm weather, to the beach." His disgust that, on the eve of the first game of the series, "you would get no sense that this city has a team playing for a national championship – it's just another day in Tampa," bespeaks a distaste for such anomie. They lack "a central place" – a civic spine, a mythical sacred center like one finds in Philadelphia's Broad Street – and the collective is not maintained well there because the fans do not maintain those bonds *through* their loyalty to the totem. A radio caller named Brandon vented on the fact that fans in west Florida "can't pick three Rays guys out of a line-up," but that, "you talk about loyalty – we got loyalty." Fidelity to the totem – awareness of and intense participation in the sports ritual – communicates fidelity to the group it represents.

This is something of a remarkable phenomenon, given how much sports teams have changed over the course of a century as they have evolved from local institutions to capitalist franchises (Nauright & Schimmel, 2005). Although early on, popular sports belonged much

more to the "folk culture" realm, wherein profit making was not necessarily the overriding purpose, as opportunities for revenue growth crystallized, "these community associations and meanings would be abraded and transformed by the logic of the marketplace" (Whitson, 1998, p. 59). North American sports leagues and franchises developed this entrepreneurial, "business-like" mindset faster than other more "tradition-bound" institutions elsewhere globally, leading some to mourn the trend as "Americanization": that is, smaller clubs marginalized, more upscale consumers targeted, a greater dependency on marketing and merchandise, and lucrative television contracts dictating priorities (pp. 58, 71). In the case of British football, Richard Giulianotti (2005) argues that clubs like Manchester United try to "obfuscate" those capitalist aims and the underlying corporate strategy beneath nostalgic claims to tradition and heritage.

Expansion – as with any other form of business franchising – is a byproduct of that broader commodification of sport, both "as a preemptive move against potential competitors, and a reliable wealth creation strategy" (Whitson, 1998, p. 62). To that end, Phillies fans and scribes took chauvinistic umbrage at the fact the expansion franchise in Tampa Bay lacked history, having been established only a decade earlier as compared to the Phillies venerable totem: "These people haven't the faintest idea of what it's like to suffer and wait, wait and suffer, sit and stew, stew and sit," griped one veteran *Inquirer* sports columnist (Lyon, 2008a, p. C1). "This is only their 11th year of existence… Do you have any idea how long we in Philly have to lie on a bed of nails for something like that?" Criticizing the fact that "fair weather" Rays' fans did not sell out their earlier playoff games in Tampa Bay – thereby bodily indexing a weak tribal loyalty, an *absence* of demonstrating group solidarity – another *Inquirer* columnist complained that, "The pro-sports experience here tends to be as shallow and insubstantial as a local TV

newscast" (Fitzpatrick, 2008a, p. H2). One sportswriter sneered about Tampa Bay's "Instant Loyalists (just add pennant)," undeserving of their totem's success (Sheridan, 2008c, p. H2).

A disdain for the artificialness of Tampa Bay seemed to pervade Philadelphians' estimation of it: fake grass inside the domed stadium; fake fans showing up in the heretofore empty stands to belatedly embrace their totem; and fake bonds between them (Ford, 2008, p. A8). By contrast, Philadelphia, via the Phillies, displayed *true* community, *real* fellowship: in faith tested by decades of totemic sacrifice; in the depth of Phillies trivia knowledge paraded on talk radio (a public testament that proves perennial unity with and focus on the totem); and in the hardships endured in loyally following the team down to Florida on a moment's notice.

With an almost Calvinist penchant for seeing suffering as a testimony of belief and adherence, Philadelphians were quick to judge harshly the lack of faith shown by opposing teams' supporters. The half-filled stands in Los Angeles during the end of a playoff loss showed "they're not even real fans," as one resident told the *Inquirer*. "Real fans," the article continued, "have had their sports faith defined by suffering for more than a generation" (Nunnally, 2008d, p. P4). Naturally, most seasons end in unfulfilled commitment; after all, only one totem can be crowned above all. For congregants, weathering the years of losses is a badge of honor. Moreover, the group is actually *produced* in that ritual of hope and disappointment by riding those rhythms together. Spring training fertility – and the potential and promise that arrives with it – must eventually give way to the death of a season when fall's leaves wither and rust; it is an annual cycle of renewal mirrored in nature by baseball more so than any other U.S. sport. In 2008, for Phillies fans, that faith was said to have finally been redeemed.

The Totem Redeemed

James Carey's (1992) warmly humanistic approach to communication and culture offers much to illuminate the "'sharing,' 'participation,' 'association,' 'fellowship,' and the 'possession of a common faith'" that is at work in fan rituals, totemic myths, and participatory activities surrounding the Phillies World Series run (p. 18). I have here demonstrated in the sports discourse and bodily practices how the group entity – be it civic or kin – is reaffirmed through shared behaviors and beliefs about the team totem. Carey's thoughts on the ritual function of newspapers binding communities also lend insight into sports journalism's coverage, for perhaps nowhere more than in the sports pages are timeless myths renewed: "[This] will… view reading a newspaper less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed," he wrote (p. 20). Indeed, the repetition of themes in sportswriters' narration follows a fairly consistent script – indeed, almost like that of a Catholic mass – just as the players and fans themselves follow certain predictable routines and voice certain prescribed commentary.

The first question from the sideline reporters to the star players after a big win routinely asks about "how it feels" and "what it means" for the individual, team, and community. Very often, the moment is beyond words – an ineffable experience: "I can't even describe it," said Brad Lidge, the Phillies reliever (Zolecki, 2008, p. C1). Jamie Moyer, the aging starting pitcher, "tried to find the right words," but couldn't: "I'm… I'm…in the moment," he stammered to a columnist (Sheridan, 2008d, p. C1). A half-century ago, Shils and Young (1953) noticed a comparable ineffability during momentous rituals: "Nothing was more remarkable than the complete inability of people to say why they thought important the occasion they were honoring with such elaborate ritual" (p. 63). On local TV news, as reporters would gather in front of delirious hordes, the question seemed to fall equally flat, drowned out in a cacophony of

hollering, chest-beating, and finger-wagging. Some fans would bluster hyperbole: "This is the greatest day of my life!" Others simply fell short of communicating, in language, the overwhelming import of the moment, "acting" out the effervescence instead.

This returns us to the "riot" on Broad Street – where bodies needed to congregate as an expression of group solidarity in the wake of totemic jubilation for the same reason Philly pubs swelled up with fans needing to watch the games *together* rather than at home alone. This, too, has historical precedence as Nick Couldry (2003) observes of the Coronation and similar events since, "People watched television in groups… creating a sense of a wider 'national family' watching in parallel in homes across Britain" (pp. 56-57). One Phillies fan at a bar conveyed much the same to an *Inquirer* reporter the night of the pennant win: "Why would you stay at home…when you can watch it with all this energy, all these fans?" (Nunnally, 2008d, p. P4) A "civic family" is stitched in that collective viewing of Phillies games at bars and restaurants across the region and in the heightened consumer activity around totem objects (i.e., Phillies merchandise).

It indexed bodily allegiance at one level, but it also suggests that the Phillies serve as a kind of lingua franca bridging self and other both locally and among diaspora faithful. Shils and Young (1953) interpret a comparable phenomenon: "A general warmth and congeniality permeated relations with strangers" and "there was a vital common subject for people to talk about; whatever the individual's specialty, the same thought was uppermost in his mind as in everyone else's, and that made it easier to overcome the customary barriers" (pp. 73, 74). An *Inquirer* staff writer on holiday in Italy – waking before dawn to catch scores – spotted a woman in a Phillies cap there and struck up an immediate connection (Fitzpatrick, 2008b, p. E8). Durkheim (1912/2001) prefigured this kind of behavior in his study of primitive tribes:

> The totem of the clan is also that of each of its members… They may be scattered across tribal territory, but they all have the same relations of kinship with one another…It often happens that the whole clan does not reside in the same place but has members in different places. Still, its unity is felt even without any geographical basis. (p. 88)

Indeed, on talk radio, natives of the Philly tribe chimed in from Chicago to South Africa to vocalize that unity, even in the absence of immediate geographic association. Radio host Eskin reported that Phillies fans had effectively overrun the bars in Tampa: "And they're all sort of bonding over old stories about the neighborhoods and stuff. I just met a guy who I found out shares the same barber as me." Cataldi, overcome by emotion, asked his co-host, former Phillie Mitch Williams, "Have you ever felt this city so *alive*?"

The intemperance and vitality of that celebration is perhaps explained well by a remark featured in Shils and Young (1953): "'What people like is the sheer excess of it. We lead niggling enough lives these days. Something a bit lavish for a change is good for the soul'" (p. 75). The unrestrained excess of victory night and the more choreographed excess of some 2 million fans for the afternoon parade show the totem at work, intensifying otherwise "niggling" lives. One fan suggested as much in her letter to the newspaper editor: "Thanks, Phillies! What a lovely lift to our collective hearts. For a few brief, shining moments, elation displaced elections and economy" ("Readers respond," 2008, p. A18). Bill Lyon, a veteran columnist for the *Inquirer* since 1972, gave full-throated endorsement to the transformative power of victory in echoes worthy of Martin Luther King, Jr.: "The Fightin's followers sing out a refrain from that old spiritual gospel: 'Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, free at last'" (Lyon, 2008b, p. E2). This was not, ultimately, a celebration of the Phillies, but something much larger than that:

a celebration of Philadelphian-ness; a dramatic demonstration of myth, kinship, and ritual; an exemplary case study in the elementary forms of sports fandom.

Yet this unabashedly functionalist account of sports fandom through a Durkheimian lens is deserving of some caveats. First, the account here is clearly an idealized one: a committed fan base celebrating atypical success. Rituals, after all, can be both everyday and ecstatic, routine and extreme. While such expressions of *communitas* are not automatically the norm, their appearance illuminates how the team as totem *can* operate as "nonmaterial social fact" in worshippers' lives. By that standard, empty grandstands and apathetic followers are not simply the byproduct of losing seasons; they are, in fact, very much intertwined with the community's larger sense of itself. For example, it is conventional wisdom in the world of sports that cities of the western United States and "Sun Belt" lack attachment to their totems quite like those of the East Coast or "Rust Belt" (e.g., Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Green Bay). By harboring "good" fans, these industrial cities of old supposedly sustain and index community through their civic symbols, while the indifference of the postmodern cities of new (e.g., Los Angeles, Phoenix, Tampa Bay) reflects an absence of social memory, a collective detachment, a feeling of dislocation, and, as Durkheim mourned, anomie. This doesn't contradict the nostalgic communal potential explored in these pages; rather, I've offered a glimpse into sports fandom as tribal culture as *it ever longs to be*.

Second, in tracing Durkheimian totemism through sports devotion, I've obviously elided questions of hegemony, conflict, and marginalization. Given that Durkheim's work was effectively consumed with the question of "social *order*," not revolution, and that he has long faced accusations of a theoretical conservatism – especially when paired alongside other founding sociologists like Marx – this criticism is somewhat unavoidable (Ritzer & Goodman,

2004, p. 17). Teasing out the quasi-religious mechanisms of integration that sports provide, as a cultural institution, does not disqualify the possibility that many are left out; there has been, and should continue to be, inquiry into these patterns of inequality and discrimination (e.g., Victoria Gosling's (2007) recent work on female sports fans). To say that sports serve a salutary function in fans' lives does not preclude the possibility of *dysfunction* also being present there in the form of racism, sexism, classism, or violence. Both can and surely do exist – and may well map onto each other in that the same institutions that unite certain groups in certain ways also divide them from others. That is, in a reductive sense, how tribes fundamentally operate. The interpretive detail illustrated here simply probes what draws sports fans into the fold and how their (seemingly secular) beliefs and practices map onto a more religious schema.

Finally, it bears repeating that, as local sports clubs have transformed into capitalist franchises, promotional personnel seem increasingly wise to the lucrative potential of that totemic sociology. In one textbook on sports branding, Kirk Wakefield (2007) notes that, "The sports fan pays a price for the right to enjoy an emotional experience with others. The fan goes to the game to be with others, to share the experience in this social exchange" (p. 11). Moreover, he adds that taxpayers and governments at the local and national level routinely subsidize sports facilities, believing that "from a broader sociological perspective, sports teams provide a city (or state) with a social identity that can represent who they are to others" and that "major cities who have lost or have been without major league sports teams spend considerable effort searching for an identity by way of alluring sports franchises" (p. 9). Therefore, the more effectively the team can align and insinuate itself as totem, the more the franchise can exploit economic rents for social dependency. Thus, there is more than some degree of corporate manipulation and profit motive inherent to stimulating a sense of belonging that is, eventually, earnestly felt by

participants. As Garry Crawford (2004) puts it – building upon Tim Delaney (2001) – "As many 'traditional sources' of community have begun to decline, such as those based upon family and local networks, the sense of community offered by contemporary sport becomes increasingly important and *evermore a commodity sold to paying fans*" (p. 52, italics added).

Here, too, the cynicism inherent in such a formula does not invalidate the authenticity of feeling experienced by adherents. It may strike some as ironic, or even naïve, to plumb such primal, romantic significance from an institution like a sports franchise that is so deeply enmeshed in consumer society and late capitalism. However, we are not, I would argue, beyond needing totemic vessels in that postmodern context. The totem may well be exploited toward profit-making ends – marketed, merchandised, and cross-promoted so as to maximize every potential revenue stream. And what is being sold might be venal and crassly commercialized, but for fans that genuinely believe in the totem, what is bought can be simultaneously sincere, righteous, and faithful.

In an introduction to Durkheim's seminal work, Mark Cladis (2001) opens with the following question: "If religion provided moral solidarity in the past, and if religion has been in a continuous state of decline, what will take its place in the future?" (p. vii). One answer outlined here is contemporary sport – a source for identity and fellowship, a "collective conscience" – for "robust, collective beliefs still shape, move, and enliven us, though perhaps not in domains usually associated with religion." Even as society finds itself ever more specialized and fragmented, sport still lends a "common language" and it is through that communication that community is built (Wann et al., 2001, p. 184). The details of this integrative moment might be unique to Philadelphia, baseball, and 2008, but the rituals of participation, I would argue, exemplify timeless and universal ideals; parallels we might find in the New Zealand All Blacks,

the Montreal Canadiens, and Real Madrid. Buoyed by such an expression of *communitas*, the Phillies faithful can look forward to spring trainings yet to come. The team might win or lose, but it is the totem that ultimately succeeds the most – for as in religion, it provides as a powerful custom and form of authority that links the individual to a larger social context.

Notes

[1] Christian Bromberger (1995) – whose work highlights the parallels between sports matches and religious ceremonies – is a notable exception here, as are others' musings on sport as "civil," "secular," or "natural" religion (Alomes, 1994; Evans, 2002; Hoffman, 1992; Morris, 1981; Novak, 1994). Yet the significance and relevance of Durkheim, one of sociology's landmark theorists of religion, has not been sufficiently plumbed and applied.

[2] The author's personal identification as a Phillies fan should be noted here as a self-reflexive methodological advantage: This research occasioned the opportunity to excavate interpretive meanings from within the "inside" of this particular sports subculture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Lindlof, 1995).

[3] The question will justifiably arise: Why the Phillies and why now as the place and time for this inquiry? As the oldest one-city, one-name professional franchise, the Philadelphia Phillies offered a useful institution against which to situate this investigation. Philadelphia fans are commonly held as some of the most intense (or notorious) in North American sports and the Phillies championship in 2008 – a year in which the team set records for sell-outs and season attendance – was the city's first in three decades. Few scenarios of time or place could therefore be more aptly suited to disclose totemic functionality, given the historic legacy and the fierce local loyalty. And though this essay is informed by a qualitative sensibility, I follow the lead of

Edward Shils and Michael Young (1953) – who cited letters to the editor and a statistical drop in crime as proof of the British coronation's communal power – in noting such quantitative data to testify to that ritual success. For instance, an average of 37% of homes in the Philadelphia region tuned in for the World Series with a spike to 50% for the final game (Storm & Klein, 2008, p. A14); the day following final victory, the two local newspapers, the *Daily News* and the *Inquirer*, had "one of the best sales ever" with 290,000 and 160,000 copies sold respectively; during the entirety of the Phillies playoff run, an editor estimated sales were boosted 380,000 and 200,000, respectively, above normal circulation; and for the parade, the local transit authority reported "a day in public transportation of historic proportions" (Lin & Vitez, 2008, p. B7).

[4] Other recent projects in communication and media studies have utilized Durkheim and mythology to productive analytical ends. Rich Ling (2008), investigating how mobile phones impact social rituals and cohesive solidarity, borrows from Durkheim and his theoretical successors to frame his work. Elsewhere, Vincent Mosco (2004) deconstructs how contemporary cultural myths about cyberspace and computers animate and inspire techno-utopian believers.

[5] The use of "fertility" is not simply fanciful interpretive license here. Examining closely the metaphors employed to describe the team's pennant run, one finds reference to the championship as life-giving nourishment: "The Phillies have been playing baseball in Philadelphia for 126 years, and across the long sweep of those decades, some of which were as fallow as a dust-bowl field…" began one columnist (Ford, 2008, p. A1). "The thirstiest sports town in the known universe, parched and dusty Philadelphia, could see its 25-year championship drought end this month," wrote another, later adding, "a parched city [is] hoping it finally, finally gets to drink in

a championship" (Sheridan, 2008e, p. A1). Death – and not the fertility of life – marked the vanquished opponent: "Lidge and the bullpen drained the life out of the Dodgers," a columnist remarked (p. A7). "Out in the parking lot, an endless trail of brake lights snaked slowly toward the 110 and the 5 like some horrible funeral procession," another described (Gonzalez, 2008c, p. C2).

[6] "Fightin's" is a nickname used synonymously with the Phillies.

[7] More specifically, Dayan and Katz (1992) pinpoint the same kind of *carnivalesque* effervescence witnessed on Broad Street in the aftermath of victory as the extreme expression of this: "Living room celebrations of these games, and of the Olympics, involve rituals of conviviality, knowledgeable exchange, and a level of attention and sociability far exceeding that of everyday television. This sociability can reach disastrous heights, as in the parody of communitas which has marred recent European soccer matches and in the explosions of enthusiasm which may now be seen in the streets of cities whose teams have just won a televised game; television spectators pour out of their homes and jam the streets in frenzied cavorting and motor carnivals" (p. 206).

[8] Though not citing specific figures, Modell's Sporting Goods, a leading local apparel retailer, reported Phillies-related consumer activity as being "the single biggest event in the history of our [119-year-old] company" (Burling, 2008, p. D1).

[9] Magical and superstitious – that is, quasi-religious – practices are, of course, nothing to new to athletes and among fans, too, there was no shortage accompanying the Phillies playoff run (Gmelch, 1979). Foremost among them was the response to local fears about the "curse of William Penn" – the notion that, because Philadelphia developers had deigned to build

skyscrapers higher than a City Hall statue of Penn, he had cursed the city to losing championships ever since. Since that time, the city had tried a number of voodoo gambits to appease the apparently agitated specter: outfitting the statue with a Phillies baseball cap during the 1993 World Series and a Flyers hockey jersey during the 1997 Stanley Cup (Kerkstra, 2008a, p. A19). This time around, the mayor's office was reportedly "flooded" with e-mails and calls begging the mayor to leave the statue alone: "The World Series depends on it," one fan wrote to the local newspaper (Kerkstra, 2008b, p. B2). Nonetheless, a tiny William Penn figurine was placed atop the Comcast Center skyscraper, at that time, the highest building in town – a gesture Comcast later touted in its advertising (Matza, 2008, p. B1). Other fans reported small gestures and subtle rituals made to the baseball "gods": A crew at the Phillies souvenir store always played the same Beatles CD; a fan in South Philly reported staying on the sofa for the entirety every game (Talarico, 2008, p. B2); a woman claimed the team always won when she entered the park through one particular outfield gate and gave her ticket to the "sandy-haired usher" there (Jensen, 2008, p. P4); and another man told a talk radio host that the team hadn't lost when he wore his "magical" blue suit from Sears.

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