

STRATEGIC FRAMING, EMOTIONS, AND *SUPERBARRIO*— MEXICO CITY'S MASKED CRUSADER*

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This article explores the spontaneous and emotional dimensions of social protest and the expressive dimensions of constructing movement identities. It analyzes how a “party mood” that prevailed in a Mexico City social movement organization, the Asamblea de Barrios, created the conditions for the emergence of Superbarrio, a masked crusader for justice who used humor and drama to help the urban poor confront the corruption and mismanagement of the Mexican state. Superbarrio drew on Mexico’s culture of wrestling and the wrestling audience’s cognitive and emotional responses. He represented an innovation in the movement’s action repertoires that used the emotional dramaturgy of wrestling for framing purpose. This proved crucial in sustaining effective challenges to the authorities and led to dozens of imitators. This article argues that the public’s response to strategic dramaturgy is mediated by the emotions dramatic representations of conflict arouse.

On March 7, 1993, the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* reported a wrestling match held the day before in Mexico City’s *Zócalo*, the capital’s main square, between Superbarrio and Senator No. Superbarrio was dressed in a red and yellow mask, red tights, a shirt emblazoned with the letters “SB,” yellow briefs, and matching boots and cape; Senator No was also masked and dressed all in black, with the word “NO” across his chest. The match promoted a plebiscite to be held in a few days to decide whether people wanted to elect the mayor of the Federal District (Superbarrio was for the “Yes”), or to continue being ruled by presidential appointees (Senator No’s position). The newspaper published a one-quarter front-page picture of Superbarrio holding Senator No, as well as three more pictures of the match, and a chronicle of the event. According to the daily, a cheering crowd welcomed Superbarrio to the ring. Senator No arrived soon after in midst of jeers and thumbs down, to which he responded with insults and corresponding gestures, further inciting the crowd. Superbarrio was technically superior to his opponent and won the first pin. Then, while the referee was distracted, Senator No threw some lime-like powder at Superbarrio’s face. As soon as Superbarrio was blinded and defenseless, Senator No walloped him while the crowd angrily protested and demanded fair play to no avail; the second pin was awarded to Senator No. As the match continued, Senator No used more dirty tricks. One picture shows the moment when, according to

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2000 SSHA Conference, Pittsburgh, PA. I am grateful to Doug McAdam, Ron Aminzade, Pam Oliver and Sidney Tarrow for their extremely helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper. For their helpful suggestions, I thank Margarita Favela, Magdalena Hernandez, Hank Johnston, Greta Krippner, Ligia Tavera and Gigi Trebatoski.

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the caption, the “Yes,” i.e., Superbarrio, was boycotted by both the referee and Senator No’s manager. Nonetheless, Superbarrio managed to overcome the cheating and won the third pin and the match.

I will use the role of Superbarrio in Mexico City’s urban movements to illustrate the importance of performance and emotion in certain forms of contentious politics. There is a growing consensus among social movement scholars that structural models cannot fully explain social movements and social change. A much-needed corrective to structural theories has been the concept of strategic framing of grievances (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; Snow, Rochford Jr., Worden, and Benford 1986) that stresses the importance of social-construction processes and illuminates how a given structural situation is defined and experienced. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that there is an ideational bias (McAdam 1996) in our understanding of framing processes—an almost exclusive concern with formal pronouncement of ideas by movement actors. Using the *Asamblea de Barrios* in Mexico City as a case study, I argue that the public’s response to framing, and a movement’s capacity to provoke reactions in different target publics are *mediated by the emotions that dramatic representations of conflict can arouse*. Movements stage dramatic representations, not to convince target publics with impeccable and irrefutable arguments, but to invoke values and basic moral principles and redefine situations, events, and relations in ways that would legitimate action, sanction inaction, arouse bystanders’ sympathy, reduce governments’ ability to use social control resources, and attract media attention to reach distant publics. That is, movement actors try to appeal not only to audiences’ reason or self-interest, but they also try to appeal to their values and normative judgment, and they do so by tapping on audience’s emotions. This article analyzes the *Asamblea de Barrios*’ efforts at strategic framing and the mediating role played by the emotions in the publics’ responses to those efforts.

STRATEGIC FRAMING OF GRIEVANCES

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a growing consensus among social movement scholars that structural models cannot fully explain social movements and social change. From the perspective of social psychology, several social movement scholars called for attention to cognitive and ideational factors such as interpretation, symbolization, and meaning (Cohen 1985; Ferree and Miller 1985; Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982; Klandermans 1984; McAdam 1982; Turner 1983). Particularly influential has been the concept of strategic framing of grievances (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; Snow et al. 1986) which redirected attention to subjective dimensions in the analysis of social movements. The framing perspective sees grievances as interpreted in different ways by individuals and SMOs. The link between intensely felt grievances and susceptibility to movement participation is not immediate, but rather mediated by interpretation.

Framing concepts enable us to examine empirically the process through which a given objective situation *is defined and experienced*. Adopting a new injustice frame, for example, may lead people to redefine situations that were previously seen as an unfortunate but tolerable as inexcusable, unjust, or immoral. For action to occur, injustice frames should be accompanied by shifts in attributional orientation that shift blame or responsibility from self to system. Framing denotes “an active, process-derived phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction” (Snow and Benford 1992: 136). Thus, mobilization depends not only on the availability and deployment of tangible resources, the opening or closing of political opportunities, or a favorable cost-benefit calculus, but also on the way these variables are *framed* and the degree to which they *resonate* with targets of mobilization (Snow and Benford 1988: 213).

McAdam (1996) makes a convincing case for giving more attention to the framing function of movement *tactics*—the way tactics are consciously designed to frame action,

attract media attention, shape public opinion in favorable ways to the movement, signify the degree of threat embodied in the movement, and its ability to disrupt public order. McAdam (1996: 348) uses the term strategic dramaturgy to denote these kinds of framing efforts that are mindful of the messages and symbols encoded in movement actions and demands. One strategy is to stage actions with the purpose of framing situations in ways that appeal to publics' values and moral convictions, trying to provoke predictable reactions. Because movements have moral and cultural dimensions that involve insurgents' and publics' consciousness, beliefs, and practices, the concept of strategic dramaturgy enables the analyst to move away from the cognitive bias of framing and recognize that movements often dramatically invoke values and basic moral principles to frame grievances and legitimate action. Emotions are especially relevant to these dimensions of strategic framing. Yet as Benford (1997) points out, frame analysts have ignored emotions, thus failing to elaborate the mediating role that emotions have in the communication and interpretation that goes on among movements and their publics.

EMOTIONS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The argument that emotions mediate people's reactions to strategic dramaturgy raises the question: What is an emotion? Research on emotion has been complex and controversial. There has been disagreement about what counts as an emotion because emotions are not a set of homogenous phenomena amenable to parsimonious classification. All taxonomies of emotion have problems because emotions refer to a disparate set of mental and physiological states.¹ Following recent work on emotions (Calhoun and Solomon 1984; Hansberg 1996; Jaggard 1989; Smith-Lovin 1995; Solomon 1984; Thoits 1989), we can nevertheless identify several relevant characteristics.

- Emotions are not simple inner feelings, and differ from other mental and physiological states. Emotions are referential; they are always directed toward some real (or perceived-as-real) object.² Moods, which are much like emotions, do not have an object however—in other words, they are diffuse, all-embracing, and long-lasting states of mind or dispositions (anxiety, depression, melancholy). In contrast, feelings are the physical sensations associated with emotions that frequently have a definite location in the body (upset stomach, tears, sweating). Only in pathological or abnormal states are emotions independent of experience. Emotions are not merely somatic reactions to the world, or reflexes or irrational responses to external stimuli without intermediary interpretation of emotional context.
- Emotions have two sides, one *physiological* and one *cognitive*: (1) The physiological reactions to emotions (the increase in heartbeat, trembling, blushing) are conditioned by biology. The physiological disturbance is necessary to emotion, but emotion cannot be reduced to bodily changes—if emotions were just somatic sensations, it wouldn't make sense to talk about them as rational-irrational or adequate-inadequate (Calhoun and Solomon 1984; Hansberg 1996). (2) The cognitive side of emotions involves values, beliefs, and social expectations. The behavioral expression of emotion may be learned and depends on the *meaning* a certain object has for us. Emotions are conditioned by prevailing forms of social life, particularly by culture and religion.³
- Physiological reactions to and/or identifications of emotional states can be thought of as value judgments about emotional objects. When we feel our stomach turning in disgust we tend to disapprove the object of that feeling. In this way, emotions provide us with information about their objects through the way we feel about them. Emotions are, in part, ways of making sense of the empirical world because they provide information (sometimes partial and distorted) about what is going on—even when we experience

contradictory emotions and ambivalence; and in this sense accompany or parallel other cognitive activities.

- Sometimes what emotions tell us about an object conflicts with what other cognitions. Emotions may be inappropriate to the actual situation because we hold mistaken beliefs about the situation. Thus, emotions are not reliable cognitions and may have or may lack evidence—just as reason. Sometimes emotion provides information that is more insightful than the information retrieved by our senses or by reason and logic.
- Emotions are not blind, irrational reactions that prevent us of seeing the world objectively, nor states of agitation and excitement that distort reality and go into conflict with cool reason and logic. Some emotions, like indignation, guilt, remorse, shame, empathy, and sympathy, are *moral emotions*,⁴ which depend on values, beliefs, and social expectations. Moral emotions are not just something we feel inside us but are associated with evaluations about the empirical world. Emotions signal how we feel about their objects and what should be done about them. Emotions are thus epistemologically important mental phenomena that complement reason's insight by leading to the world of moral and aesthetic values (Calhoun and Solomon 1984).
- Emotions mediate between cognition and action in a two-step process. First, we experience emotions and thereby learn something about the object of that emotion. Then we develop the ability to reflect on our emotions and ask ourselves if, as in the Aristotean model of moral virtue, our emotions are appropriate to the situation—that is, whether the emotion we are experiencing is the right emotion, directed toward the right object, in the right intensity—and then fine-tune our emotions accordingly to our values, normative commitments, social expectations, and goals. Thus, emotions neither overcome us nor are they beyond our control.

These observations have rarely found their way into social movement theory—a situation that derives from the origins of the field in the collective behavior tradition.⁵ In the mid-1970s, social movement theories reacted against the “myth of the madding crowd” (McPhail 1991) by stressing the rationality of movement goals and actions. Resource mobilization theory assumed rational actors weighing costs and benefits of participation vis-à-vis non-participation, and goal-oriented action constrained and enabled by the availability of resources at their disposal (Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977). Subsequently, political process models focused on the relations between movements and the state, particularly the circumstances under which the state is more vulnerable or receptive to challengers' action (Kitschelt 1986; McAdam 1982; Perrow 1979; Tilly 1978, 1984). McAdam (1982) considered “cognitive liberation” along with external opportunities, but further developments of the political opportunity model emphasized strategy, organization, and external opportunities at the cost of social constructionist dimensions. The abandonment of psychological, social-psychological, and normative perspectives was perceived as a necessary step to place due attention on “objective” variables leading to a false dichotomy between rationality and emotions, planning and spontaneity, the subjective and the objective.⁶

Recently, it has been pointed out that this dichotomy between rationality and emotion is strongly related to gender issues. Feminist scholars contend that the separation of passion and reason serves not only to dichotomize thought and feeling but also to elevate what has come to be called *abstract masculinity* over women's standpoint. Feminist scholars have been among the most vocal critics of the rationalist bias in Western thinking that privileges rational, independent, self-interested action over action that is driven by emotion, undertaken collectively, and motivated by altruism or the desire to affirm the group (Taylor 1995). Feminist groups try to channel emotions tied to women's subordination (fear, shame, resignation) into emotions conducive to protest (anger). For example, Groves (1995) research on animal rights activists shows how movements perceived as emotional are not considered respectable. To gain respectability, activists developed a “vocabulary of emotions” to rationalize their par-

ticipation to others and to themselves. Animal rights activists reproduced organizationally the dominant gender division of emotion: recruiting men was considered a strategic device to bring credibility to the movement because men were believed less emotional and more rational than women. As a consequence, male activists were often chosen for spokesperson and leadership positions while women tended to be overlooked for those positions.

In sum, emotions are pervasive in social movements and play an important role in different points of a movement's life course (Aminzade and McAdam 2001). Sometimes for instrumental reasons emotions are hidden from the public and only displayed backstage. Robnett (1998) makes the case that civil rights movement leaders strategically displayed a calm rationality in order to maintain their legitimacy with the state, while emotions clearly prevailed behind the scenes. At other times, emotion and passion happen before our eyes but we rarely analyze them or even discuss them because they are considered irrelevant to our theories (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2000). Yet through the lens of strategic dramaturgy, the case of Superbarrio and the Asamblea de Barrios helps clarify how emotions are instrumental in a movement's strategic framing processes.

EMOTIONS IN THE ASAMBLEA DE BARRIOS

The death toll and destruction left by the 1985 earthquakes in Mexico City attracted national and international aid and attention. Pre-existing and emergent social networks provided vehicles to challenge the state when it was most vulnerable to popular demands, at a time when recourse to authoritarian social control measures would be condemned. Under the rising pressure of popular mobilization and international attention (both because of the disaster and because Mexico was hosting the 1986 Soccer World Cup) the government decreed the expropriation of several thousand properties in downtown Mexico City to launch a federal program to restore, reconstruct and build houses in the expropriated plots. In addition, the state extended credit that enabled the earthquake victims to buy the plots. It also recognized the *Coordinadora Unica de Damnificados* (Single Coordinating Committee of Earthquake Victims, CUD), as an independent umbrella organization representing the earthquake victims.

CUD's success in winning concessions to the earthquake victims' demands meant that it faced dissolution. Foreseeing movement decline, several CUD leaders sought to continue mobilizing housing applicants other than the earthquake victims and founded the *Asamblea de Barrios* (Neighborhood Assembly) to challenge unfair economic policies. The mobilizations after the earthquake made obvious the housing shortage for low-income families. Moreover, the unavailability of soft credit condemned the poor to live in ruinous *vecindades*, stacked in small rooms with relatives, or to squat the city's periphery. Left-wing groups (dominant among independent urban movements) had been organizing the homeless and renters in the downtown areas to squat in the outskirts of the cities. Contrary to this practice, the *Asamblea* leaders wanted to stay in the downtown area of Mexico City. For them, moving out could only mean renouncing their rights, livelihood, and *barrio* culture, in exchange for land in the middle of nowhere, without legal tenure, drinking water, paved streets or any other urban services. CUD's success and the reconstructed housing units owned by their former renters provided the hope housing applicants needed to join the *Asamblea*. The *Asamblea* leaders, distancing themselves from old-left discourse, tried to combine street protests with actions designed to attract sympathizers and media attention. In this ambiance, some sort of unofficial contest to see who had the most amusing proposal to attract public attention to the *Asamblea's* mobilizations began.

... in the *Asamblea [de Barrios]* the idea of generating a more festive movement, less solemn, was developing. Several buddies tried to recover characters from the culture, the defenders, the champions of justice, these mysterious guys who adopt just causes, noble causes, and started showing

up as paladins. But it was more an idea with which we fooled around, with which we tried to give the *Asamblea* a festive atmosphere, than something we would carry out for real (interview with Superbarrio, cited in Schwarz 1994: 24).

In one of these moments of festive collective effervescence Superbarrio was born. The outrage caused by the cry for help from an old lady who had had property stolen by her landlord was the catalyst. The following quotes represent a narrative of how Superbarrio was born:

One of the persons who lived in a small subleased area in a warehouse in *La Merced* was fifteen days late with the rent. Then, the sublessor showed up and stole some gas tanks to pay himself. This lady went to the *Asamblea* [*de Barrios*] to complain about it. We were in a gathering of more than one thousand people. She denounced it, [she said] she had been robbed. The *Asamblea* decided to go to the La Merced warehouse ... to detain that person and bring him before the authorities. When all these people arrived at the warehouse, this fellow [the sublessor] had already gone taking away everything he got at hand. There was the feeling that these kinds of injustice should end, somehow... And the question was raised louder: "When these abuses happen, why doesn't *El Santo* show up, or some champion of justice show up, someone who could stop abuses like this? I wish Superman, or I don't know who, would come" (interview with Superbarrio, quoted in Schwarz 1994: 24-25).

People felt frustrated and angry about what happened that day and kept talking and thinking about it for several days.

Even though I had never been a direct victim of precisely this kind of situation I know that feeling of impotence, of fury. My concern was how to stop it, how to put an end to this problem—no one in the city should be left out in the street just because a landlord wants to squeeze a tenant even more. How to make justice, how to put these people in their place? I went round with this, how to do it, how to do it—how to release this uneasiness? Those were nights without sleep, going to work but thinking about other things (interview with Superbarrio, quoted in Brooks 1989: 87).

Then, "the idea emerged that if the landlords have their protectors—the court officials, the judges, the police, and the government as a whole—then the poor, the tenants, should also have someone to defend them" (interview with Superbarrio, quoted in Cuéllar 1990). At some point, they decided to put this idea into practice and bought, on the way to a rally, a mask from a street vendor.

The red and yellow uniform was because we found the mask in Moneda Street, behind the National Palace. And in fact he dressed up right there, asking someone to get the tights and a T-shirt, and someone else to make the red and yellow emblem. And he remained that way. At that time he was wearing a pair of tennis shoes [instead of the wrestling boots he wore later] (Rascón, cited Schwarz 1994: 70).

The design of Superbarrio was the result of strategic dramaturgy catalyzed by the emotions derived from an episode of injustice and abuse. The emotions involved were frustration and outrage caused by injustice in the context of a festive movement. But clearly, not

everything that happened was planned. There were spontaneous reactions that catapulted Superbarrio into popularity.

Originally, Superbarrio was conceived of as someone who would head demonstrations and serve as silent witness in meetings with authorities. Events took an unforeseen twist and pulled Superbarrio rapidly in a different direction. The character's persona resonated among the people. Bystanders were curious and started asking questions: Who are you really? Why in the world do you decide to dress up like that? What is the meaning of the red and yellow in the costume? But perhaps more importantly, Superbarrio appealed to journalists and photographers who thought that government officials' reactions to the masked crusader merited being in print. Unexpectedly, both bystanders and journalists started looking for him more than for any the *Asamblea's* leaders or spokespeople.

The first person who played the character was good at interpreting a silent Superbarrio, but was not very articulate and would get nervous whenever bystanders and journalists questioned him. The masked character attracted much more attention than he could handle, and eventually he gave up the Superbarrio role. The *Asamblea's* leaders wanted to keep Superbarrio in action to take advantage of the unpaid media attention and his sudden popularity, but no one was willing to surrender his personality and wear those funny lycra tights and mask (personal interviews with Superbarrio).

A militant from one of the cadre organizations to which some of the *Asamblea's* leaders belonged came to Mexico City for a vacation. Having nothing better to do and known only to few people in the metropolis, one day he agreed to wear the mask—"just for a while," he said, until he returned to his home state. After leading a couple of demonstrations as Superbarrio, he discovered that he enjoyed impersonating the character. In fact, he was so good at it that his comrades in Mexico City and his home state demanded that he keep doing it. After considering it for a while he moved to Mexico City and performed Superbarrio for almost ten years, until 1997. Of course, he tells a different story about his origins.

Suddenly a red-and-yellow light came, it was so big that it blinded me. I looked at the mirror and there I was, as you see me now [dressed as a masked professional wrestler]. Then I asked myself, what's the point of this? An stereophonic voice told me: "You are *Superbarrio*, defender of poor tenants, scourge of [greedy] landlords!" And I said: "That's fine, let's start" (*La Jornada*, August 9, 1987).

Superbarrio's popularity and the emotional response he elicits from the public come from the cultural resonance of wrestling and the memory of the most popular professional wrestler ever in Mexico, *El Santo*.

WRESTLING SYMBOLISM

According to Barthes's semiotic analysis, wrestling displays the great spectacle of suffering, defeat, and justice. The first is represented by the wrestler who suffers in a hold which is reputedly cruel and "offers an excessive portrayal of suffering; like a primitive Pieta, he exhibits for all to see his face, exaggeratedly contorted by intolerable affliction... Suffering appears as inflicted with emphasis and conviction, for everyone must not only see that the man suffers, but also and above all understand why he suffers" (Barthes 1990 [1957]: 90-91). In wrestling, "defeat is not a conventional sign, abandoned as soon as it is understood; it is not an outcome, but quite the contrary, it is a duration, a display, it takes up the ancient myths of public suffering and humiliation: the cross and the pillory. It is as if the wrestler is crucified in broad daylight and in the sight of all" (Barthes 1993: 92). It is fairly common in Mexico that important wrestling matches (when a championship is at stake or when wrestlers are long standing rivals) are settled "mask versus mask," "mask versus hair," or "hair versus hair."

That is, wrestlers bet their mask or hair on two out of three pins. Removing his mask or having his head shaved right on the spot marks the loser. In wrestling, defeat comes along with public humiliation. The victor keeps his hair or mask, which thus become markers of superiority.

Wrestling is a dramatic representation of the endless struggle between good and evil, and depending on who wins the bout, justice and injustice. There are many ways of representing this struggle with varying degrees of success in eliciting an audience's emotional response. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, our interest is held by the emotional response to the tragic standard story—love against grave adversity. Similarly, wrestling stages a well-known dramatic structure—the never-ending fight between good and evil. As in any other representation, the story *per se* is important. The enjoyment of the representation is not weakened by the audience's familiarity with the story—on the contrary, recognizing familiar themes increases its enjoyment. The emotional response that a given performance elicits depends on their familiarity with the story, the empathy raised by some of the characters, and on how it is staged. Also, given the familiarity of wrestling's drama, who wins a match is less important than how that outcome is reached. What wrestling aficionados enjoy is not necessarily the representation of a known story but the *mise en scène*.

Wrestlers are actors representing established and clear-cut characters. In one corner of the ring is the *hero* who fights clean and fair—the *babyface*, in the jargon of the trade. Across the ring is the *villain*, the cruel and cowardly bastard—the *heel*. Each wrestler expresses his ultimate goodness or badness through their name, appearance and behavior. But what makes wrestling even more shocking to the public is that the referee always sides with the heel allowing him to abuse the babyface. The heel commits sadistic acts (like gouging eyes or kicking in the groin) when the referee pretends he is not looking. But if the babyface commits a minor infraction, the referee yells at him out of proportion. The wrestlers and the referee perform their obvious roles with studied gestures and exaggerated mimicry to an aroused crowd that participates in the bout by enthusiastically approving or condemning what happens in the ring. This dramatic structure underscores wrestling's intention to portray a purely moral concept: that of justice.

The idea of “paying” is essential to wrestling, and the crowd's ‘Give it to him’ means above all else “Make him pay”... The baser the action of the “bastard,” the more delighted the public is by the blow which he justly receives in return. If the villain—who is of course a coward—takes refuge behind the ropes, claiming unfairly to have right to do so by a brazen mimicry, he is inexorably pursued there and caught, and the crowd is jubilant at seeing the rules broken for the sake of a deserved punishment (Barthes 1993: 92).

Wrestling fans know that not everything that happens in the ring is real. They are aware that it is a representation, that the gestures and most of the blows and cruel holds are exaggerated. But this conventional dramatic structure has plenty of room for surprises, drama, accidents, and tension. This dramatic structure is not peculiar to wrestling in Mexico. But the corrupted and authoritarian features of Mexican government give a different resonance to wrestling in Mexico than in the US,⁷ where wrestling resonates with the “American Dream” (Lincoln 1989: 158).

WRESTLING IN MEXICO

In Mexico wrestling is more popular than bullfights or baseball. There are dozens of professional wrestlers who travel all over the country to wrestle opponents for the amusement and catharsis of a mostly working-class audience. In sports, such as boxing, soccer, football or

hockey, precise rules demarcate what is allowed from what is forbidden. All these sports require a referee (or referees) whose job is to enforce the rules and guarantee a fair and clean match. Sports fans expect that the rules will be observed and that the best athlete or team will prevail. Wrestling matches have no limits on time or number of contenders, which might be uneven. Sometimes team members unexpectedly change sides in the middle of a bout and wrestle each other or all against one single wrestler. There is nothing to prevent a wrestling match ending up in a savage attack on one wrestler or in a general free for all in which even the referee receives and gives blows. Obviously, wrestling is not a sport in the usual sense, and it is certainly not an elite sport associated with an aristocratic world-view and ethics (fair play, will to win etc. See Bourdieu 1984: 209). It is a spectacle that reproduces the real world's unfair competition as opposed to the ideal of fair competition. It encodes a subliminal message that says that there are hurdles built into competition that do not affect everybody in the same way, i.e., there's no fair play. Wrestling is a spectacle where courtesy and chivalry are replaced by unleashed competition and violation of the rules—even by those whose job it is to enforce the rules.

In Mexico wrestling happens to be a well-suited metaphor of class relations and the corrupt Mexican authoritarian regime.⁸ Superbarrio is the fair and clean athlete (representing the popular movement) wrestling a tricky and cruel opponent (the landlord and his lawyers), who usually is helped by a corrupt and partial referee that fails to enforce the rules (the judges, state officials, riot police). It is expected that good guys have to fight bad guys. What defies expectations is that the referee favors the bad guys.

Just as there are bad guys inside the ring, there are also bad guys on the streets. And just as the referees inside the ring are always partial to the rude ones and allow them to do their tricks and prohibited things, in the streets it is the same. In the barrio the government want to be the referee and it supports the landlords and lends them riot police to assist in evictions of families (interview with Superbarrio, cited in Brooks 1989: 88).

This drama resonates with working-class Mexican's lived experience. In wrestling they empathize with the babyface, who needs support from the audience to keep both the referee and the heel in check. The heel pretends to shield his illegal maneuvers and concealed weapons from the audience who can't help but angrily condemn his wrongdoing and the referee's partiality that allows abuse. The heel responds to the audience with insults further infuriating the crowd. In Mexican politics, the wrestling metaphor is played out in Superbarrio's symbolic field.

SUPERBARRIO IN THE SYMBOLIC FIELD

Based on wrestling symbolism, the presence of Superbarrio at a collective event transforms it into a symbolic field, to use Bourdieu's (1984) term, in which the crowd applies the dramatic structure of wrestling to their own struggle: the powerless must fight not only to improve their condition or have their demands met but *even* to have their rights observed. Moreover, authorities are partial and will not concede anything just because people are entitled to it. In wrestling, as in real life, good people follow the rules and wicked people use illegal methods and dirty tricks. Popular movements that ignore this basic fact will be inevitably crushed. Superbarrio's presence further suggests that some suffering will be inflicted on the people, that it's immoral to remain aloof in the presence of abuse and injustice, and that the audience should help to correct the unfair situation.

Superbarrio devalues the symbolic power of suits, ties, titles and other symbols of distinction that bureaucrats, politicians, and the upper class use, with the symbolic power of popular superheroes. He also devalues superheroes with his paunchy figure and curved legs of

a regular working-class body in lycra tights. The rituals of politics and bureaucratic decision-making are opposed with humor and popular culture by a superhero whose powers come from organized people. The myth of state power and bureaucratic structures is opposed with the popular mythology of struggle and self-organization. At least for a short while people stop seeing themselves through the eyes of the masters (Gramsci 1985 [1918]). They refuse to “look at the situation of the dominated through the social eyes of the dominant” (Bourdieu 1990: 130). The symbolic power of the desk is opposed with the symbolic power of the mask. Superbarrio breaks the norms, rituals, and routines of politics, challenging the terms of the relationship between authorities and popular movement. Officials, who are used to talking solemnly and pompously about laws, regulations, technical and budgetary constraints became disadvantaged when they face a popular organization posing heart-felt demands through a masked and caped crusader for justice.

In performances designed after popular theater, Superbarrio stages mock wrestling matches against popular movement foes. The authorities have sometimes repressed these performances because they seriously challenge the dominant symbolic order.

The police confiscated the ring the night before Superbarrio was holding his first wrestling match in a public square. The *Asamblea* denounced the event as the first ring abduction for political reasons in Mexico’s history and demanded its immediate release. The old slogan “Freedom to political prisoners!” was modified accordingly to demand, “Freedom to political rings!” (*La Jornada*, July 19, 1987). The city regent admitted that the authorities took away the ring because the bout would be “a disrespect to the Constitution Square” (*La Jornada*, July 24, 1987).

The response of government officials when they faced Superbarrio for the first time was a mix of emotions; sometimes they took offense and responded in anger. These reactions indicate that authorities perceive Superbarrio as a threat to the dominant symbolic order, which usually works to the movement’s disadvantage. Once Superbarrio was addressing a meeting in front of the governor’s house in Guadalajara, Jalisco. A furious governor approached Superbarrio and asked him “Who are you? What are you doing here? Why are you manipulating these people?” Then the governor took the microphone from Superbarrio and tried to unmask him. The people in the meeting protected Superbarrio and impeded his unmasking. The disgruntled governor said: “I show my face. I want to know who I’m talking with” (*Proceso*, December 7, 1987).

Superbarrio’s resonance is derived from the memories of popular wrestling heroes. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Mexican culture industry transformed several professional wrestlers into comic book and film heroes, the most popular of which was *El Santo*, who dressed in silver mask, and immaculate white boots, tights, briefs and cape over his naked torso. He wrestled around 15,000 matches in 45 years and never lost his mask. Nobody ever knew his real name or what his face looked like until he died in 1984—the year before the earthquakes hit Mexico City (Carro 1984; Sánchez 1989). *El Santo* became the top star of popular weekly comics, photo novels and wrestling films where he tirelessly fought the forces of Evil. From 1952 to 1983, around one hundred and fifty wrestling films were made, in which at least fifty featured *El Santo* in the leading role. During the 1960s, *El Santo* alone filmed 21 movies (Carro 1984: 31).

Still in the late 1980s, most of the Mexican mass media represented and promoted conservative business interests closely related to political elites in the government and the ruling party. With few exceptions, there was virtually no media representation of the voices of other social groups. Having unpaid access to the media became a major goal for the *Asamblea* and Superbarrio turned out to be its main instrument. Photographers were Superbarrio’s best allies. When they knew that a top official was going to be in some public event or ceremony, they called Superbarrio and snuck him in when the officials showed up. Superbarrio describes his relationship with photographers as a game of mischief. Some photographers used to tell him: “Hey, Superbarrio, give us the picture!” Then, he was expected to perform some auda-

cious move. The more audacious, the more pictures they would take, and the more likely at least one of them would be published (personal interview with Superbarrio).

Superbarrio's presence in the media was double-edged, though. The TV networks reported his activities only when they could hurt his public image, framing him as a vandal, as a radical agitator who should be in jail. He did not worry about this. He even liked bad press: "I like a lot of headlines like: 'Superbarrio vandalizes.' 'Superbarrio damaged national property.'" He admits that some people reading those headlines would like to have him in jail, but also realizes that some people would applaud his actions and even say, "Do it again! Give it to them! Make them pay!" For the *Asamblea* the worst media is no media. Being in the media is a way to make the public consider the popular movement's point of view and not only that of the government or the powerholders (personal interview with Superbarrio).

Reflecting Superbarrio's influence several organizations all over the country have adopted wrestling symbolism as part of their repertoire of protest. Wearing flashy professional wrestling outfits, a cohort of masked heroes have appeared leading protests and voicing the demands of the organizations they represent. Most of them did not last long. They did not handle the stress well nor have the devotion that is required to maintain a masked character representing a popular movement. A case that merits separate study is Subcommander Marcos, spokesperson and most visible leader of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). He and most of the Indian guerrilla fighters wear ski-masks or bandannas over their faces. For Superbarrio "The mask is not a disguise but a symbol. [It] represents the idea that our struggle is a collective one, which doesn't belong to one individual" (*Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 1989). Similarly, Marcos explains why the Zapatistas cover their faces. They don't act as individuals; they represent the community. "If someone wants to see my face he should look to the mirror and will discover who's behind the mask," Marcos once declared.

CONCLUSION

The creation of Superbarrio was prompted by strong moral emotions. The outrage caused by the cry for help from an old lady and the frustration resulting from their inability to help her were the catalysts for conceiving Superbarrio. At the time, the *Asamblea* was trying to create an aura of a festive movement that combined serious problem-solving mobilizations with actions designed to attract sympathizers and capture media attention. Struggling with these collective emotions, "the idea emerged that if the landlords have their protectors ... then the poor ... should also have someone to defend them" (interview with Superbarrio, cited in Cuéllar 1990).

Superbarrio's performances provoked emotions both in the man who played him and in his audiences. The first person who played the character was good at interpreting a silent Superbarrio, but the public wanted him to speak up. The second Superbarrio enjoyed it so much, and was so good making up outlandish stories about his origins and mission, that he moved to Mexico City to perform the role on a permanent basis.

Wrestling symbolism accounts for Superbarrio's emotional resonance on the audiences. The reason? Wrestling portrays an unfair situation so that the audience cannot help but empathize with the babyface and react against injustice and abuse. The everyday experience of poor and dominated people is that hard work seldom provides enough to live decent lives. Wrestling symbolism provides a key to understand the "systemic" hurdles that work to their disadvantage. The referee costume is a disguise that hides his complicity with the heels. Idealized assumptions of fairness and equality before the law hide class, gender, and race distinctions that produce different sets of constraints and opportunities for different groups. In practice, women are not equal to men, straights to gays, blacks to whites, Indians to *mestizos*, rich to poor, and so. Paraphrasing Orwell (1954), all citizens are equal but some citizens are more equal than others. The mechanisms that create a gap between reality and principle are

transparent but rule like iron law. Everyday experience in the context of economic inequality in a corrupt authoritarian state granted resonance to wrestling symbolism. The people, the good movement, was represented as being martyred by an evil and corrupted system.

Mexico City's urban poor experienced a mixture of different emotions—with indignation as the dominant one—when they saw Superbarrio wrestling popular movement foes. Indignation is a moral emotion that involves a set of concepts, beliefs, and social expectations. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines indignation as anger aroused by something unjust, unworthy or mean. To be indignant it is necessary to recognize a given situation as unjust. It is an emotion that results from empathy with the one who suffers and evaluation of the reasons why he suffers. In this emotion the interest or dignity of the person who has the emotion does not intervene, until she pictures herself in the same situation: victimized by people breaking the law with authorities' indifference or complicity. Indignation is provoked by the belief that some moral norm has been deliberately broken, and that harm and suffering are being inflicted upon undeserving people. Indignation requires that the indignant person believe that there is a responsible party whose action or lack thereof shows hostility, ill will, or indifference towards other individual or group. The quotidian experience of invisible hurdles that poor and dominated people have to overcome transforms indignation into resentment, and resentment into anger. Indignation, resentment, and anger can then be mobilized against political targets.

When government officials, undoubtedly literate in wrestling symbolism, faced Superbarrio, they could see the role assigned to them. Journalists and photographers tried to register government official's reaction to being defined as villains in front of an audience that expected Superbarrio to make them pay. Authorities frequently perceived the challenges to the dominant symbolic order as disrespectful, took offense, and made efforts to restore it. Had the authorities not reacted the way they usually did to strategic dramaturgy, Superbarrio would not have received the media coverage the *Asamblea* was looking for.

The success of the *Asamblea de Barrios* in meeting their demands cannot be explained by their use of compelling strategic dramaturgy alone. But its use made the organization well known nationally and internationally, primarily because of its symbol of struggle and newsworthy protest events rather than for its formal pronouncements. The attention Superbarrio attracted severely limited the possibilities of ignoring, neglecting, or silencing him or the organization he represented, as well as constrained authoritarian social control options. Through its linkages with other social movement organizations, with the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), with the local and federal legislatures and with national and international organizations, the *Asamblea* rapidly acquired conventional political resources. Thus, through street protests, strategic dramaturgy, lobbying and skillful negotiations, the *Asamblea* achieved substantive housing victories.

What attracted media attention were not the issues the *Asamblea* was fighting for—housing issues in Mexico City were hardly news! Strategic dramaturgy accounts for it. Many organizations promoting housing demands made the news only when life and property were threatened. Dressed up as a wrestler, Superbarrio suggested struggle and the threat of violence. But he was not calling for violent struggle. Superbarrio invited people to organize themselves and struggle for their rights and clearly, and repeatedly, declared himself against the use of violence.

The earthquake victims organized in the CUD (*Coordinadora Unica de Damnificados*) had to overcome their grief over the loss of relatives, friends, neighbors, and possessions, and transform it into anger against the authorities (who delayed adequate response to the emergency) and the landlords (who tried to take advantage of the situation tossing out poor people from the downtown *barrios*). After several months of struggle the CUD succeeded in several important demands. Some movement leaders decided to continue exploiting the perceived vulnerability of the government instead of letting the CUD die of

success and return to a quiet home life—after all, they were full time activists with a long record of movement participation.

The formation of the *Asamblea* and the creation of Superbarrio benefited from, and contributed to, a happy succession of events. The *Asamblea* leaders were known and trusted, they were familiar with the intricacies of housing policy in the Federal District. They knew how to pressure and negotiate with the authorities without compromising the movement's political independence. Simultaneously, an elite group that opposed the government's neoliberal policies split from the PRI. The splinter had basically the same demands as the popular movements that resisted the IMF-inspired austerity programs followed by the government. This coincidence coalesced in an electoral front that ran Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas for president in 1988, the Frente Democrático Nacional (FDN). Superbarrio's action was initially limited to housing demands and tenant issues. After a couple of months on the street and in the printed media, he became known nationally and internationally, thus extending his struggle beyond the barrio limits. The *Asamblea* endorsed Cárdenas bid for the presidency and several of its leaders ran tickets under the FDN. After the election, they became very influential in the transition from the anti-PRI coalition, the FDN, to the center to left-wing PRD. As result, several *Asamblea's* leaders became party officials, siphoning off leaders and cadres from the movement sector into the institutional politics sector. This situation created tension between movement and party politics. Disagreements within the PRD on party or national politics were brought into the movement organization, which until then had had a remarkable consensus on movement and local matters. This tension caused a split in the *Asamblea*. Each splinter kept its own Superbarrio.

In 1997 the PRD won the first election for Chief of Government of the Federal District. As a result, the *Asamblea* was confronted with a stark dilemma: stage protests against Cardenas and the PRD or adopt less confrontational and more accommodating tactics. Eventually, institutionalization and lobbying, became more salient than street protests and strategic dramaturgy aimed to challenge the symbolic order. The *Asamblea* continues representing housing applicants but all of the founding leaders followed political careers in the PRD, in the Federal and Local Legislative, and after 1997, in the government of the Federal District. Among those who did was the man who performed as Superbarrio.

ENDNOTES

¹ The diversity of what we call emotion is considerable. Some emotions are related to feelings and physiological changes (blush), others to cognitive activities (pride in an accomplishment), and still others to wishful attitudes (hope). Some have typical behavioral expressions (nervousness), while others have a variety of behavioral expressions (regret). Some are amenable to change through changes in beliefs and attitudes (shame). Some seem to be beyond our control (depression), while others may be manipulated (empathy). Some are closely related to pleasure (joy) or pain (sorrow), while others are not so closely related (boredom). Some are related to immediate circumstances (embarrassment), while others are possible in different situations (anxiety). Some provide us with reasons for action (anger) while other emotions are not connected to action in an obvious way (wonder). Some emotions are violent and short-lived (rage) while some emotions are mild and long lasting (affection). Some are only human (pride) while others are common to humans and non-humans (fear). Some seem to depend on the level of arousal (anger, rage, frenzy, ire, fury, wrath) while still others do not (resignation) (Hansberg 1996; Rorty 1980).

² I use 'object' here as shorthand for things, symbols, people, relations, situations, and events.

³ Note the gendered quality of most cultural rules about emotion, and how the Bible condemns emotions such as wrath and praises other emotions such as love and hope.

⁴ The idea that emotions have a cognitive dimension and that they are a sort of value judgment has its own tradition. In the eighteenth century, the moral philosophers David Hume, Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith, argued that emotions such as sympathy played an important function in sociability.

⁵ Collective behavior theories defined ordinary behavior as rational and collective behavior as irrational and even pathological. Following Turner (1964), there are two types of such theories: contagion and convergence theories. Contagion theories set themselves to explain the discontinuity between individual and collective behavior on the basis of psychological processes whereby moods, attitudes, and behavior are communicated rapidly and accepted uncritically. These theories (Blumer 1939; Lang and Lang 1961; Le Bon 1969 [1895]; Park and Burgess 1921; Smelser 1963; Tarde 1903 [1890]) take as their focal point some form of imitation and emotional contagiousness that

lead to unanimous, intense feeling and behavior at variance with usual predispositions. Mechanisms such as anonymity, restriction of attention, and isolation are believed to neutralize normal inhibitions and social pressures against types of behavior that occur in the crowd.

Convergence theories assumed continuity between individual and crowd behavior, which thereby resulted from the simultaneous presence of people with the same predispositions. These predispositions are activated by the event or object toward which their common attention is directed. Convergence theories identify authoritarianism, anomie, alienation, and relative deprivation as the main causes that predispose individuals to uniformity of response and in some cases equate crowd behavior with some form of psychopathy (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford 1959; Arendt 1973 [1948]; Freud 1921; Horkheimer and Adorno 1995 [1944]; Kornhauser 1959).

⁶ The assumption of the false dichotomy between rationality and emotion has been far from unanimous. The emergent norm theory (Turner 1964; Turner and Killian 1972, 1987) stressed the continuity between normal group behavior and crowd behavior, questioning the “illusion of unanimity” in crowds. Just as ordinary groups give rise to, and are governed by, norms, so crowds generate and are governed by a norm that arises in a special situation. In a related vein, Lofland (1981, 1985) argues that collective behavior requires the suspension of the “attitude of everyday life” by a relatively large number of people and that such suspension is accompanied by increased levels of emotional arousal in participants. He contends that the “dominant emotion” in collective behavior episodes has the same logical status as the emergent norm; the shift is from the cognitive (the norm) to the affective (the emotion).

⁷ Lincoln (1989) examined an individual episode, chosen at random, of the syndicated TV show “All-Star Wrestling.” He describes the show as follows: “In the four matches that followed the opener, the villains consistently triumphed, and triumphed easily, using illegal and sadistic means in every case. They strangled their victims and bit them, hit them with chairs and concealed weapons. They gouged eyes and kicked in the groin, threw their hapless opponents from the ring and smashed them to the mat. They sneered at referees, abused fallen heroes, taunted the crowd, and made mockery of the rules. Truly, these four matches constituted a chamber of horrors: an abandonment of all normative morality, without a hint of retribution” (: 152).

⁸ The PRI ruled the country for a world-record seventy-one years behind a democratic façade that veiled an electoral system that was not free, impartial, or fair (Cadena-Roa 2002).

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