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Cultural Commentary

Won for All and All for Won

by William C. Levin

I was on my way to work at 8:30 AM on Thursday, the 28th of October, 2004 with my passenger side window opened and the radio spilling happy Red Sox news all over the place. The night before the Sox had won the World Series and “Red Sox Nation” had 86 years of frustrated ambition to wash away in a flood of self-congratulations. I was smiling.

A pickup truck pulled up to the light next to me, and the driver looked over. He must have heard my radio, because he raised his Dunkin’ mug in celebration, grinned and nodded to me. We had done it! I had never seen that guy before, and would likely never see him again, but it did not matter. For the moment we belonged to the same club, and we were WINNERS! (Insert Howard Dean maniac scream here. “EEEEEEEEHAH!”)

The memory of this little scene stayed with me for a few days as fans of the Red Sox pounded each other on their backs, traded stories of where they were when the deal was sealed, and wore Red Sox gear no matter what the requirements of the setting. In the financial district there were serious looking briefcase-toters wearing Sox jackets with their ties. Women in their eighties wore Sox caps and became popular interview subjects for the local news. Even lawns sprouted signs of congratulations for the Red Sox (and curses for the Yankees) that overwhelmed the political signs of the season.

After a week my wife had had enough. I had called an old friend from Manhattan, using the Red Sox win as an excuse to catch up with him, and do just a little gloating. (“Yeah, we won, but you guys did have us down three games to none in the ALCS. Shame about Rivera, though.”) After I hung up Jeanne quoted that great sage,

Jerry Seinfeld. “Remember that Seinfeld when he makes fun of George?” she asked. “George is watching a game on TV and suddenly jumps up screaming, WE WON! WE WON! Jerry looks up and him and says ‘No. They won. You watched.’ ”

She was right. They won. We watched.

And this is a fact that a sociologist like me should have kept in mind. The problem was that I was a fan first, and a sociologist a long way second. But now I’ve got my wits, such as they are, about me again, and I’m beginning to understand how extremely interesting this whole Red Sox Nation stuff really is, especially from the point of view of a sociologist. It turns out that the sense of belonging that we are still enjoying in the wake of the World Series win fits the two main definitions of community that sociology generally uses. This means that the euphoria may last a very long time. Sorry, Jeanne.

Sociologists have been fascinated by the idea of community, which we most often define as a social grouping that gives people a feeling of belonging. Originally, a community was understood in only geographic terms. That is, the social grouping forming a community had to be people who lived in the same place. For example, the suburban town where I was raised on New York’s Long Island, would be seen as a “place community.” Our sense of belonging was rooted in a number of factors. There was a way of life that defined us. For example, it was very much a suburb from which most folks com-



muted to Manhattan for work each morning. We had lots of shared norms and values such as our strong commitment to the importance of education and to the “neat lawns and weekend-barbeques” sort of life. We even had recognized boundaries, though they had nothing to do with the more traditional markers such as rivers or changes in terrain. Instead, there were white signs on our borders that said “Entering Hewlett” on one side and, “Entering Lawrence” (for example) on the other.

Clearly, the Red Sox have been a community of place, and are even more so now. Though you can get into a lively argument in any sports bar by asking where the geographic boundaries of Red Sox Nation lie, it is beyond question that Boston is at its core, and Fenway Park is dead center. They are emphatically the Boston Red Sox, though fans regularly travel from across New England to get to games, including regular season games. (I never was crazy about the name New England Patriots. It seemed to dilute the community feeling.) During the World Series, fans were interviewed who had flown across the country, and from around the globe to see the Sox win it all. They were from here, and they were returning to reclaim their membership in the community. Given the wide area claimed for the community of Red Sox fans, it became something of a defining issue to distinguish Boston from New York. Everything from the Canadian border to central Connecticut would be Boston, and below that boundary would be New York or Philadelphia. Big area, but the bigger the title, the greater the area of citizenship it can encompass. I understand that after the Sox won the World Series, fans were seen in Sox gear in Tokyo, Madrid and (of course) throughout Central and South America. Such a widely spread community stretches the idea of community of place beyond its original capacity. So we need another idea of community that can move beyond traditional ideas of place. No problem.

Sociologists have long recognized that people can be bound together by a common set of beliefs or practices, even if they may not live near one another. Examples of such “communities of interest” include civil libertarians, model helicopter makers and fliers, Mothers against Drunk Driving (MADD), veterans of WWII, conservatives against gay marriage and liberals for it, fans of the Grateful Dead and bird watchers. For many years these communities of interest were limited in their abilities to form or persist, mainly by the difficulties of staying in touch by mail and telephone. Recently, the ability of like-minded individuals to communicate has been revolutionized by the internet. Now it takes just a few people with minimal internet expertise to express an interest in an issue and—*BAM*—a community of interest is formed. Such communities can be amazingly nar-

row since they draw for their membership on essentially the entire population of the world that has internet access. To test this assertion, I just did an internet search for bottlecaps.org, assuming there must be such a site. Was.

As for the Red Sox community, it is clearly a community of interest. Baseball fans have for more than a century shared a love of the game, speaking a language of statistics that is the true sign of a fan-atic. The literature of baseball is monstrous, ranging from fiction to history and the endless publication of performance statistics. And the number of baseball sites on the internet seems infinite, even when you try to limit it to Red Sox sites. Some, such as the one called Sons of Sam Horn, even tries to limit its “memberships” to fans who are serious enough in their baseball chat. Here’s a taste of the site, quoted from their opening page. “Welcome to the Sons of Sam Horn discussion community, where the web’s brightest and most passionate Red Sox fans gather to thread messages from the security of their parents’ basements. Sure... we’re stingy with memberships and have been branded “elitists” by many but our commitment to quality and signal/noise ratio is second to none. SoSH has maintained a reputation as one of the most well-informed and introspective Red Sox discussion communities on the ‘net and our daily goal is to maintain that reputation. We’re proud that the site has become more than just a posting board for its members, but also an alternative source of information for Red Sox fans all over the world.” Anyone can hook onto the official web site of the Boston Red Sox, but you need to be serious to be an SoSH type.

It is clear to me now that what happened after the Red Sox won the 2004 World Series was an unusual combination of these two, powerful, sources of community. It seemed to amplify the sense of community surrounding the team, resulting in what I now think of as a sort of “flash community.” People who never felt any sort of membership in the world of Red Sox baseball were temporarily swept up in a feeling of belonging. It was infectious and fun. The boundaries of the community flew beyond its normal geographic and interest limits to encompass millions. It is certain that the community will recede to its pre-series numbers eventually, and certainly by the end of next year’s first losing streak. However, for the time being we should enjoy the good feeling that goes with the knowledge that “we won,” even if we don’t all wear spikes or spit in public.

—William C. Levin is Professor of Sociology and Associate Editor of the *Bridgewater Review*