

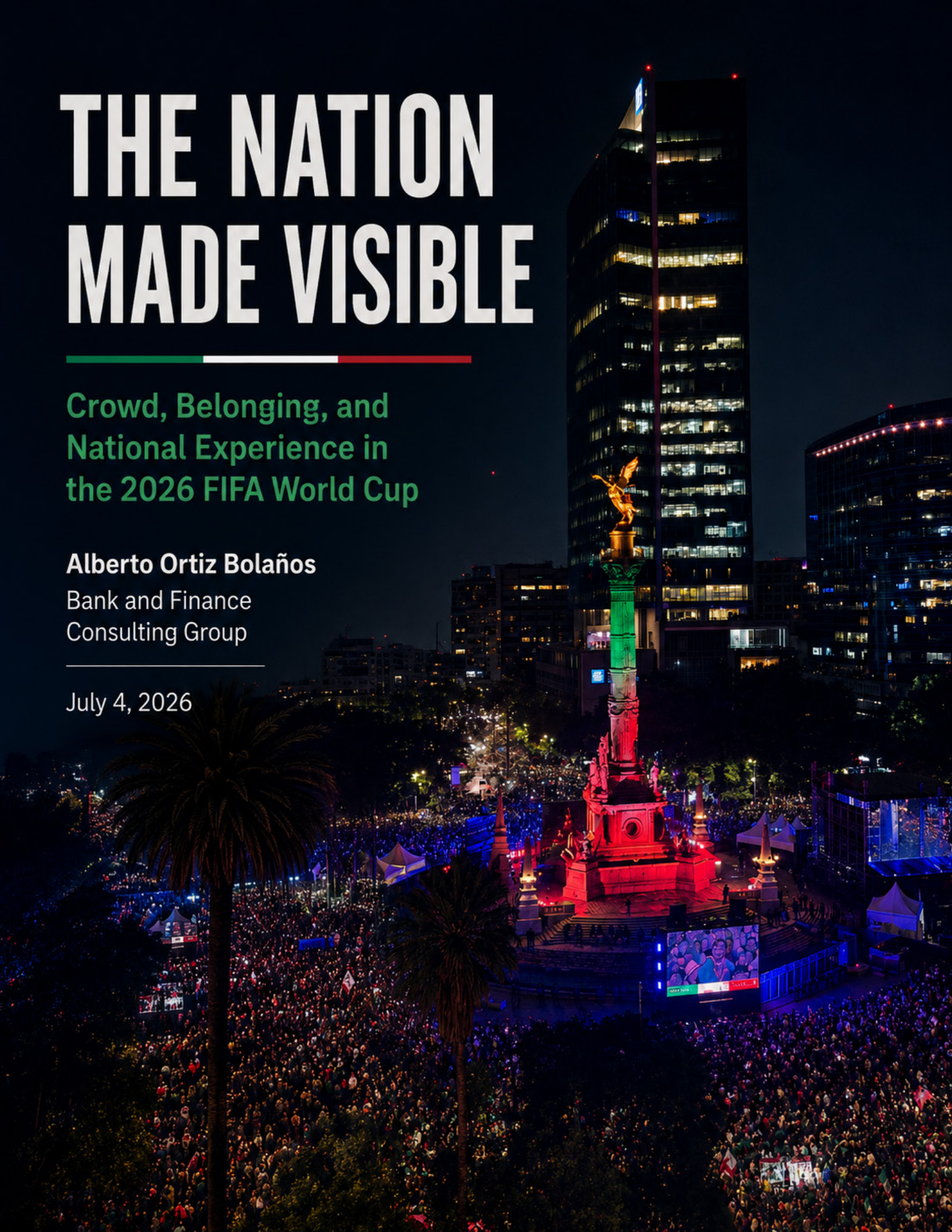
THE NATION MADE VISIBLE

Crowd, Belonging, and
National Experience in
the 2026 FIFA World Cup

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Series Overview

This volume examines the celebrations surrounding Mexico's national team during the 2026 FIFA World Cup as a window onto three fundamental dimensions of contemporary social life: crowd, belonging, and national experience.

The argument begins from a simple observation. In an age marked by unprecedented levels of individual autonomy, highly sophisticated institutions of social coordination, and technologies that make instant communication across distance possible, millions of people still gather physically to share collective experiences. World Cup celebrations are among the most visible expressions of this phenomenon.

The first essay analyzes the crowd as a form of social experience. Drawing on Elias Canetti, Émile Durkheim, and Victor Turner, it examines how individuals who are normally separate can be transformed, temporarily, into a collectivity. The disappearance of distance, emotional discharge, collective effervescence, and *communitas* help explain why certain human gatherings generate experiences of extraordinary intensity.

The second essay turns to the question of belonging. Modernity greatly expanded individual autonomy through the growth of rights, education, markets, and communication technologies. Yet this transformation did not eliminate the human need to take part in shared experiences. The essay argues that the persistence of crowds does not contradict the historical triumph of individuality. Rather, it reveals the coexistence of two complementary dimensions of human life: autonomy and belonging.

The third essay examines the nation as an experienced community. Returning to Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community, it analyzes how the matches of a national team, and the celebrations that accompany them, allow a normally dispersed and abstract community to become temporarily visible to itself. The nation is not created in such moments. It is recognized.

Taken together, the three essays trace a movement from the immediate experience of the crowd to the visible manifestation of a national community. The analytical sequence can be stated simply: the crowd makes presence possible; presence makes belonging possible; and belonging makes it possible for a national community to be experienced as a shared reality.

The central claim of the volume is that World Cup celebrations matter not only as sporting events, but as social phenomena capable of revealing fundamental mechanisms of collective life. Beyond soccer, these essays offer a reflection on the relationship between individual, community, and nation in contemporary societies.

Introduction: The World Cup as a Social Laboratory

On the night Mexico secured its place in the Round of 16 of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, thousands of people were gathered around the Ángel de la Independencia in Mexico City. Some had come to watch the match on the giant screens installed along Paseo de la Reforma. Others arrived after the final whistle from the Zócalo Fan Fest, the Plaza de la República, bars, restaurants, and public spaces scattered throughout the city. Many more had followed the game from their homes. For a few hours, people who ordinarily inhabit very different social worlds shared the same space of anticipation, observation, and celebration.

The scene was hardly unusual. Similar gatherings had followed previous matches of the Mexican national team, and comparable scenes could be observed in cities across the country. Nor was this a uniquely Mexican phenomenon. Every World Cup produces similar images around the globe: crowded public squares, avenues filled with celebrants, strangers embracing, collective chants, and shared moments of jubilation among people who will likely never meet again.

Precisely because such scenes are so familiar, they often escape our attention. We regard them as part of the emotional landscape that naturally accompanies international sport. We describe them as celebrations, festivities, or expressions of collective enthusiasm. Yet when examined more closely, they raise a series of striking sociological questions.

Why do thousands of people feel compelled to gather physically to celebrate an event that could be followed from any screen? What happens when individuals who are normally separate become a crowd? Why do collective experiences retain such force in societies characterized by ever greater levels of individual autonomy? And how can a national community composed of millions of strangers come to manifest itself as a shared experience?

These questions provide the starting point for the essays collected in this volume.

The purpose of these pages is not to analyze soccer as a sport, to evaluate the performance of a national team, or to explain the cultural significance of an international tournament. The World Cup appears here for a different reason. It serves as an unusually visible social laboratory. For a few weeks, phenomena that normally remain dispersed or only partially visible acquire exceptional intensity. The crowd becomes observable. Belonging becomes tangible. The nation seems to acquire an immediate presence.

World Cup celebrations make it possible to observe simultaneously processes that are often studied separately. They allow us to examine the formation of crowds, the persistence of the need to belong, and the capacity of national communities to become visible to their own members. What appears in streets, public squares, and national monuments during these moments is not merely a reaction to a sporting event. It is also a condensed expression of much deeper social mechanisms.

The three essays that follow explore these dimensions from complementary perspectives. The first examines the crowd. The second considers belonging. The third investigates the nation as an experienced community. Together, they offer a reflection on some of the ways in which autonomous individuals continue to construct experiences of community in contemporary societies.

The World Cup provides the setting. The questions, however, extend far beyond soccer. At stake is the understanding of a persistent tension at the heart of modern life: how societies composed of increasingly autonomous individuals continue to generate collective experiences capable of producing belonging, identity, and community.

1. The Crowd

The celebrations that accompany Mexico's national team during the 2026 FIFA World Cup produce scenes that are difficult to ignore. Hundreds of thousands of people fill public squares, avenues, and national monuments to watch matches and celebrate victories. For a few hours, spaces designed for the routines of everyday urban life are transformed into settings of intense collective experience. What ordinarily functions as infrastructure becomes a place of encounter.

The most immediate explanation is to view these scenes as expressions of sporting enthusiasm. Yet that answer barely scratches the surface of the phenomenon. The truly interesting fact is not that Mexico plays, wins, or inspires passionate support. What is remarkable is that thousands of people choose to gather physically in order to experience these events alongside complete strangers. The fundamental question is not why a victory is celebrated, but what happens when a crowd decides to celebrate it.

The question extends far beyond soccer. World Cup celebrations provide an opportunity to observe one of the most elementary and enduring features of social life: the capacity of individuals who ordinarily live separate lives to become, if only temporarily, a collectivity. For a few hours, strangers share spaces, emotions, and actions in ways that are difficult to reproduce in everyday life. What emerges is not merely a concentration of people, but a distinctive form of social experience.

Understanding this transformation requires examining three complementary dimensions of the phenomenon. The first concerns the disappearance of the distances that ordinarily separate individuals, a process explored by Elias Canetti. The second involves the amplification of emotions when they are experienced collectively, a dynamic that Émile Durkheim described through the concept of collective effervescence. The third concerns the temporary experience of community that Victor Turner called *communitas*: an intense form of shared belonging that arises when individuals who are normally separate participate in the same collective experience. Taken together, these perspectives help explain how a crowd emerges, what participants experience within it, and why such episodes retain such remarkable force even in highly individualized societies.

1.1 The World Cup and the Experience of Collectivity

During the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the experience of watching Mexico play extends beyond both the stadium and the home. Across Mexico City, public authorities installed large screens in a variety of locations, including the Zócalo Fan Fest, the Plaza de la República at the Monument to the Revolution, and several sites along Paseo de la Reforma. These were joined by privately organized viewing venues such as Campo Marte and the Hipódromo de las Américas, as well as public screenings sponsored by state and municipal governments throughout the country.

Observation is dispersed. Celebration, by contrast, converges. Yet some spaces acquire the capacity to combine both functions.

In the Mexico City metropolitan area, victories by the national team tend to draw hundreds of thousands of people toward a single symbolic destination: the Ángel de la Independencia.

The phenomenon is striking for a simple reason. Many matches are played before tens of thousands of spectators inside the stadium, while millions more can follow them from home through television,

the internet, or mobile devices. Yet a significant number of people choose a different option altogether. They leave private spaces behind and enter the public sphere in order to watch, wait, sing, and celebrate alongside strangers. Rain rarely discourages them. Nor does the discomfort of standing for hours, moving through dense crowds, or returning home late at night. If the objective were merely to know the result, any personal screen would suffice. What people seek is something else.

Images from these celebrations reveal scenes that repeat themselves with remarkable consistency: strangers embracing one another, entire groups singing in unison, supporters dancing in the middle of the street, young people lifted onto the shoulders of people they have never met, bodies thrown into the air after a goal, and crowds moving through avenues that, for a few hours, cease to function as channels of circulation and become spaces of collective celebration. Human beings have always celebrated. What requires explanation is not celebration itself, but the decision to experience it physically alongside thousands of strangers. An observed event becomes a shared experience.

The question, therefore, concerns neither soccer alone nor Mexico alone. What is at stake is a more fundamental phenomenon: the temporary transformation of individuals into a crowd. For a few hours, people ordinarily separated by physical, social, and psychological distances suspend some of those barriers and participate in a collective experience of unusual intensity. The match ends. The streets empty. Individuals return to their ordinary lives. Yet during that brief interval, a transformation takes place—one that reveals one of the most fundamental dynamics of social life.

1.2 The Disappearance of Distance

Everyday life is organized around distance. We maintain a certain separation from strangers, regulate physical contact, and move through the city according to a combination of explicit and implicit rules that allow us to coexist without constantly intruding upon one another. Even in densely populated spaces, most interactions take place within carefully observed invisible boundaries. Physical proximity has limits. Social proximity does as well.

Elias Canetti observed that one of the most remarkable features of the crowd is precisely the temporary suspension of these distances. In *Crowds and Power*, he argues that what ordinarily provokes discomfort, caution, or distrust ceases to be perceived as a threat. Proximity acquires a different meaning. Contact is no longer experienced as an intrusion but as a confirmation of participation in a shared experience.

World Cup celebrations illustrate this phenomenon with particular clarity. People who have never met embrace after a goal. Strangers sing together, pose for photographs together, and celebrate together. For a few hours, physical closeness ceases to be accidental and becomes an essential part of the experience. What is ordinarily avoided becomes precisely what is sought.

The transformation is not merely spatial. It also affects other forms of distance that structure social life. Differences of age, occupation, income, education, or personal trajectory do not disappear, but they temporarily recede before a shared experience. No one ceases to be who they are. Yet during the celebration, these distinctions lose some of their power to shape immediate interaction.

The crowd does not eliminate individuality, nor does it permanently dissolve social boundaries. What it does is suspend them. For a few hours, people who ordinarily remain separated experience a degree of proximity that is difficult to reproduce in other contexts of modern life.

This suspension constitutes the first step in a deeper transformation. Once distances are reduced, something more than physical closeness can emerge. A temporary experience of equality becomes possible. For Canetti, this is the decisive moment in the formation of every crowd.

1.3 Discharge

For Canetti, a crowd does not attain its full form simply because people gather together. Physical proximity is only the beginning. The decisive moment occurs when participants cease to experience themselves primarily as separate individuals and begin to feel part of a larger collectivity. Canetti calls this moment *discharge*.

The intuition is simple, yet profound. Social life is structured by countless distinctions. Occupations, income, education, positions of authority, personal trajectories, and other forms of hierarchy shape our everyday interactions. None of these differences disappears when a crowd forms. Yet there are moments when they cease to occupy the center of experience.

Discharge occurs precisely when what distinguishes people becomes less significant than what they share. The professional remains a professional, the shopkeeper remains a shopkeeper, and the student remains a student. But for a few hours, these identities recede into the background. What comes to dominate experience is no longer individual difference but participation in a common event.

World Cup celebrations provide a particularly vivid illustration of this process. Thousands of people watch the same match, await the same outcome, and react to the same events. When a goal is scored or the final whistle sounds, shared emotion temporarily displaces distinctions that would be immediately apparent in other contexts. The crowd does not create equality in any lasting sense. It produces something more limited—and for that very reason more revealing: a temporary experience of equality.

Anyone observing these celebrations from a distance can perceive a subtle transformation. The crowd ceases to appear as a collection of clearly differentiated individuals and begins to take on the character of a collective body. Attention converges on the same event, emotions follow similar rhythms, and actions acquire a degree of synchrony rarely encountered in everyday life. A vast diversity of personal trajectories is momentarily condensed into a shared experience.

This helps explain why so many people leave the comfort of their homes to gather with strangers. If the sole objective were to watch the match, a private screen would be sufficient. The crowd offers something different. It allows participants not merely to witness an event, but to share in an emotion. It adds no new information. What it adds is intensity, presence, and a temporary form of equality that is difficult to experience in isolation.

The disappearance of distance thus opens the way to discharge. Yet the transformation is still incomplete. Once individuals come to experience themselves as part of a collectivity, emotions

begin to reinforce one another. It is this phenomenon that Durkheim would describe as *collective effervescence*.

1.4 Collective Effervescence

Canetti's account helps explain how a crowd emerges, but it leaves open a fundamental question. If thousands of people are observing the same event at the same time, why does the experience acquire an intensity so different from what any individual would experience alone? A goal celebrated in solitude may produce joy. The same goal celebrated by hundreds of thousands produces something more. The emotion is not merely multiplied; it is transformed.

Émile Durkheim devoted much of his work to understanding this phenomenon. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he observed that certain collective rituals generate a form of social energy that cannot be explained solely by the individual emotions of those who participate in them. He called this energy *collective effervescence*. In such moments, people do not experience only their own emotions; they also experience and are affected by the emotions of those around them. Emotion circulates, intensifies, and acquires a force that is difficult to reproduce in isolation.

World Cup celebrations provide a particularly vivid contemporary example. Thousands of people focus their attention on the same event at the same moment. Chants become synchronized. Silences become synchronized. Expectations become synchronized. Each individual reaction is reinforced by the reactions of others. Enthusiasm becomes more intense because it is shared. Tension becomes more intense because it is shared. Joy becomes more intense because it is shared.

This emotional amplification helps explain why public viewing spaces continue to attract participants even when more convenient technological alternatives are readily available. A match can be watched almost anywhere. Collective effervescence, by contrast, requires presence. It cannot be downloaded, reproduced, or consumed individually. It emerges precisely from being among others while something that all regard as significant unfolds before them.

For this reason, crowds do more than alter the way people relate to one another; they also alter the way people feel. Individuals who are ordinarily reserved sing, shout, cry, or embrace strangers. Emotions that would remain contained in other settings find public forms of expression. The crowd does not create these emotions from nothing. What it does is amplify them, legitimize them, and make them visible.

Durkheim observed this phenomenon in religious ceremonies. World Cup celebrations suggest that similar mechanisms remain present in highly modern and secular societies. The symbols change, the settings change, and the reasons for gathering change. Yet the human capacity to generate shared emotional experiences remains remarkably intact.

The crowd, however, produces more than proximity, temporary equality, and emotional intensity. It also generates a distinctive form of community. For a few hours, people who ordinarily share no social ties act as though they belong to the same collective. Understanding that experience requires a third perspective: the *communitas* described by Victor Turner.

1.5 Communitas

The disappearance of distance and the intensification of emotion help explain how a crowd emerges. Yet an important question remains. Why do these collective gatherings tend to assume recognizable forms? Why do people not only feel together, but also act together?

Victor Turner approached this question through his study of rituals, pilgrimages, and other extraordinary events. He observed that certain moments give rise to a temporary experience of community that he called *communitas*. During such intervals, the hierarchies and distinctions that ordinarily structure social life lose some of their significance, while participants come to recognize one another as members of the same shared experience.

Communitas is not a permanent community. It does not replace the institutions, organizations, or relationships that sustain everyday life. Rather, it is a transitional condition. It emerges during exceptional events and dissolves once those events come to an end. Precisely because it is temporary, it possesses a distinctive intensity. Participants know, whether explicitly or implicitly, that they are experiencing something outside the ordinary.

World Cup celebrations contain many elements of this ritual logic. They involve more than watching a match. They also entail gathering in particular places, waiting alongside others, sharing expectations, singing, reacting to the same events, and participating in recognizable forms of celebration. Collective experience acquires a discernible structure. Although no one directs it from above, most participants seem intuitively to understand how to act.

This dimension becomes especially visible after the final whistle. The crowd does not remain still. It begins to move. People who had been watching the match from homes, restaurants, public squares, or viewing areas start to gather, converge, and make their way toward common destinations. The experience is not limited to sharing an emotion. It also involves participation in shared actions. *Communitas* is not only experienced; it is enacted.

Even the rain helps reveal this dimension. Remaining outdoors for hours under uncomfortable conditions would make little sense if the sole objective were to consume a sporting spectacle. Rituals, however, are rarely explained by considerations of convenience alone. They often involve waiting, movement, effort, and participation. What matters is not only what is being observed, but the fact of being there with others.

World Cup *communitas* is necessarily fleeting. The following day, the distinctions, obligations, and routines that organize everyday life reassert themselves. Yet while it lasts, it produces something real: a temporary experience of community among people who, outside that context, would likely remain strangers. The crowd ceases to be merely an aggregation of individuals. It becomes, however briefly, a collectivity that acts and recognizes itself as such.

Yet precisely because the crowd is a reality lived through bodies sharing the same physical space, it cannot be understood solely as a symbolic or emotional experience. The proximity that makes community possible also introduces risks and vulnerabilities. To understand the phenomenon fully, it is necessary to consider its physical dimension.

1.6 The Other Side of the Crowd

The crowd possesses a characteristic that is sometimes easy to forget. It is not merely an emotional, symbolic, or ritual reality. It is also a physical one. Everything described thus far—the disappearance of distance, discharge, collective effervescence, and *communitas*—rests upon something very concrete: thousands of bodies occupying the same space at the same time.

This observation may seem self-evident, yet it carries important implications. The same physical proximity that makes possible the discharge described by Canetti and the collective effervescence analyzed by Durkheim also introduces material constraints that cannot be ignored. The concentration of bodies that enables spontaneous embraces, collective chants, and experiences of community simultaneously creates conditions of vulnerability. Bodies occupy space. Movement has limits. Individual actions become increasingly difficult to control as density rises.

As long as that proximity remains within certain bounds, it can produce some of the most intense forms of collective experience found in social life. Yet when density rises or organizational conditions prove inadequate, the dynamics of the crowd can take on less visible—but equally real—characteristics. The force that makes collective integration possible can also become a source of risk.

The fatal incidents reported during the celebrations that followed the match between Mexico and Ecuador offer a painful reminder of this reality. Whatever the specific circumstances of each case, the episode underscores a simple truth: crowds require organization, prevention, and care. It is not enough to admire their capacity to generate social integration. One must also recognize the institutional responsibilities that accompany the concentration of large numbers of people in a shared space.

This dimension does not contradict the arguments developed in the preceding sections. On the contrary, it completes them. The crowd is powerful because it makes possible experiences of proximity, temporary equality, emotional intensity, and community. Yet precisely because it is powerful, it requires conditions that allow this collective energy to be channeled safely. The capacity to generate integration and the potential to produce harm arise from the same source: the physical concentration of human beings who, for a few hours, cease to act as isolated individuals and become a collectivity.

Recognizing this other side of the crowd does not diminish the significance of collective celebrations. It makes them more intelligible. A crowd is not simply an emotional experience, nor merely a symbolic construction. It is a complete social reality, composed simultaneously of meanings, emotions, bodies, movements, and institutions. To understand it fully requires taking all of these dimensions into account.

1.7 Conclusion

World Cup celebrations offer a window onto one of the most remarkable phenomena of social life: the temporary transformation of dispersed individuals into a collectivity. For a few hours, ordinary distances lose some of their significance, differences recede before a shared emotion, and a common experience emerges that turns a soccer match into something more than a sporting event.

A crowd is not merely a concentration of people. It is a distinctive form of social experience. Within it, physical proximity alters the way individuals relate to one another; emotions acquire an intensity that is difficult to reproduce in isolation; and people who would otherwise remain separate participate in temporary forms of community. The crowd does not eliminate individuality, nor does it permanently suspend the structures of social life. What it produces is something more limited—and for that reason more significant: the possibility of experiencing collectivity.

Soccer provides the occasion. The crowd provides the experience. Where an individual screen transmits information, the crowd generates presence. Where everyday life separates, classifies, and differentiates, collective celebration creates a temporary space in which thousands of people can act, feel, and respond together.

Yet understanding how a crowd emerges does not fully explain why it continues to attract millions of people. Contemporary societies have expanded individual autonomy to an extraordinary degree. Never before have people possessed so many opportunities to choose, communicate, and act independently of those around them. And yet collective experiences continue to exert a powerful attraction.

Why is this so? Why do increasingly autonomous individuals continue to seek opportunities to gather, celebrate, and feel part of something larger than themselves?

These questions lead to the subject of the next essay.

2. Belonging

Crowds raise a question that is difficult to ignore. If contemporary societies have expanded individual autonomy to an unprecedented degree, why do millions of people continue to seek collective experiences?

The question deserves attention because much of modern history can be understood as a progressive expansion of individual freedom. Over the past two centuries, people have acquired an increasingly greater capacity to decide where to live, what to study, what occupations to pursue, how to organize their lives, and which personal projects to follow. The expansion of rights, education, markets, and communication technologies has dramatically enlarged the range of individual choice.

From this perspective, it might seem reasonable to expect collective experiences to lose their importance over time. If individuals possess unprecedented levels of autonomy, mobility, and decision-making capacity, why do they continue to gather at concerts, festivals, pilgrimages, public demonstrations, and sporting celebrations? Why do crowds remain such a visible feature of highly individualized societies?

This essay argues that the persistence of collective experience does not contradict the expansion of modern individuality. In an important sense, it is one of its consequences. Modernity greatly strengthened personal autonomy and developed institutions capable of coordinating increasingly complex societies. Yet none of these achievements eliminated the human need to belong.

Understanding this apparent paradox requires distinguishing between two complementary dimensions of human experience. The first concerns the capacity to act as autonomous individuals. The second concerns the need to share meanings, symbols, and experiences with others. Modernity profoundly transformed the first. The second has endured alongside it.

World Cup celebrations provide a particularly valuable opportunity to observe this coexistence. Those who participate in them do not abandon their individuality, nor do they seek permanently to replace their personal projects with a collective identity. What they seek is a temporary experience of belonging. For that reason, these celebrations offer a privileged point of departure for exploring one of the most enduring questions of contemporary social life: why increasingly autonomous individuals continue to feel the need to belong to something larger than themselves.

2.1 After the Crowd

The crowd disappears as quickly as it emerges. Avenues return to their ordinary flow of traffic, public squares fill once again with pedestrians and tourists, screens are dismantled, and security barriers are removed. What only hours earlier appeared as an extraordinary collective experience vanishes with remarkable speed. The city resumes its everyday rhythm.

Something similar occurs in Mexico City after matches involving the national team during the 2026 FIFA World Cup. The gatherings that temporarily occupy plazas, avenues, and public spaces end almost as abruptly as they begin. The chants fade, the streets clear, and the thousands of strangers who shared a common emotion once again become individuals separated by the physical and social distances of everyday life.

Yet it is precisely because the crowd is so ephemeral that it leaves behind a more enduring question. The previous essay sought to understand what happens when a crowd forms. The question now is different. What requires explanation is not the collective experience itself, but the persistence of the need that makes such experiences possible.

The question is particularly intriguing because we live in an age that seemed destined to diminish the importance of collective gatherings. Never before has it been so easy to organize a relatively autonomous life. Individuals enjoy greater levels of education, mobility, information, and choice than at any previous point in history. Technology makes it possible to work, learn, shop, entertain oneself, and communicate without sharing physical space with others. Much of contemporary life appears to be organized around the capacity to act independently.

If this trend were sufficient to explain the evolution of modern societies, crowds should occupy an increasingly marginal place. Yet they continue to reappear. The occasions change, the symbols change, and the generations change, but large-scale gatherings continue to attract millions of people. We encounter them at concerts, festivals, religious pilgrimages, political demonstrations, and sporting celebrations. Technology has transformed the ways we live, work, and communicate, but it has not eliminated the appeal of coming together in the physical presence of others.

Understanding this apparent paradox requires posing a different question from the one that dominated much of the twentieth-century debate about mass society. The issue is no longer how the collective threatens the individual. The issue is why increasingly autonomous individuals continue to seek opportunities to become part of a collective.

The reflections of José Ortega y Gasset provide a particularly useful point of departure for exploring this question.

2.2 Ortega and a Different Question

In the early twentieth century, José Ortega y Gasset looked with concern upon what he regarded as one of the defining developments of modern society: the rise of the masses. In *The Revolt of the Masses*, published in 1930, he argued that economic development, urbanization, expanding educational opportunities, and technological progress were transforming social life in profound ways. Individuals who had long remained relatively dispersed were becoming increasingly visible in public life.

For Ortega, the issue was not merely quantitative. The problem was not simply that more people were participating in social, economic, and political affairs. What concerned him was the emergence of a new human type: the *mass man*. This was an individual who enjoyed the benefits of modern civilization without fully recognizing the historical and institutional conditions that made those benefits possible. The expansion of material well-being, education, and opportunity could, paradoxically, produce a diminished awareness of the limits and responsibilities that accompany collective life.

Ortega's concerns reflected a specific historical experience. During the first decades of the twentieth century, industrial societies were witnessing the large-scale incorporation of new actors into the public sphere. Urban growth, literacy, mass communication, and political democratization were

reshaping traditional forms of social organization. For many observers of the period, the central question seemed obvious: how would the rise of the masses affect the future of modern society?

Viewed from the present, that question retains much of its intellectual force. Yet the context has changed considerably. Contemporary societies remain mass societies in demographic terms. At the same time, many of the transformations that have unfolded over the past century appear to have strengthened individual autonomy rather than subordinated individuals to the collective. Citizens enjoy levels of education, mobility, personal choice, and access to information that Ortega could scarcely have imagined.

For that reason, the question we confront today differs subtly from the one that preoccupied Ortega. The central issue is no longer how the masses threaten to absorb the individual. Rather, it is why increasingly autonomous individuals continue to seek collective experiences. The original concern remains, but in an inverted form. Where Ortega saw the advance of the mass over the individual, we see the persistence of the need to belong in an age defined precisely by the expansion of individuality.

2.3 The Historical Triumph of Individuality

If Ortega observed an age marked by the rise of the masses, much of the subsequent history of modern societies can be understood as a remarkable expansion of individuality. Over the past century, modern institutions, technologies, and forms of social organization have extended, to an unprecedented degree, the capacity of individuals to shape their own lives.

This transformation took many forms. The expansion of civil and political rights strengthened individual legal autonomy. Education widened opportunities for social mobility and occupational choice. Markets offered an ever-growing diversity of goods, services, and ways of life. Advances in transportation and communication reduced dependence on relatively closed local communities. More recently, digital technologies have multiplied opportunities to access information, build social networks, and participate in forms of interaction that transcend traditional geographic boundaries.

As a result, individuals acquired levels of autonomy that would have been difficult for earlier generations to imagine. Decisions concerning occupation, place of residence, political affiliation, religious belief, personal relationships, and even forms of identity increasingly became matters of individual choice. Many of the constraints that for centuries had been imposed by family, local community, or inherited social position lost some of their power to determine the course of a life.

This transformation was neither uniform nor sufficient to eliminate all forms of inequality. Yet the broader trajectory is difficult to ignore. Much of the institutional architecture of modern society can be understood as an effort to expand the capacity of individuals to act as relatively autonomous agents.

From this perspective, it might seem reasonable to expect collective experiences gradually to lose their significance. If individuals possess ever greater resources for organizing their lives independently, why should they continue to seek physical gatherings as sites of belonging? Why do crowds continue to appear so prominently in societies where individual autonomy has reached historically unprecedented levels?

It is precisely here that the paradox emerges. The expansion of individuality is one of the defining features of modernity. Yet collective experiences have not disappeared. On the contrary, they continue to occupy a significant place in contemporary social life. Understanding this coexistence requires a closer examination of the relationship between autonomy and belonging.

2.4 A World Organized for Coordination, Not for Belonging

The expansion of individuality did not occur in isolation. It was accompanied by another of the great transformations that defined modernity: the construction of institutions capable of coordinating increasingly complex societies. As populations grew, economies expanded, and social interactions multiplied, it became necessary to develop mechanisms that could organize cooperation among millions of people who would never know one another personally. Much of modern history can be understood as the search for solutions to that problem.

Max Weber was among the thinkers who grasped the magnitude of this transformation most clearly. In his analyses of rationalization and the disenchantment of the world, he observed that modern societies came to depend increasingly on impersonal rules, standardized procedures, and specialized organizations. Far from representing an anomaly, this development was a response to the coordination requirements of an increasingly interdependent world. Social complexity demanded institutions capable of operating beyond personal ties and traditional forms of communal loyalty.

The results were extraordinary. Modern markets enable exchanges among millions of people who will never meet. Financial systems mobilize resources on a global scale. Universities produce and transmit knowledge across generations. Hospitals coordinate the care of thousands of patients. States administer public services for entire populations. None of these activities would be possible without organizational structures capable of operating in a relatively impersonal, predictable, and stable manner.

Rationalization made the modern world possible. It enabled contemporary societies to achieve levels of productivity, specialization, and cooperation that would have been unimaginable in earlier eras. Many of the freedoms we now take for granted depend precisely on the existence of institutions capable of coordinating vast numbers of individuals and activities with remarkable efficiency.

Yet the extraordinary capacity of these institutions to coordinate does not necessarily imply an equivalent capacity to generate belonging. This is the crucial point. Markets allow people to cooperate without knowing one another. Bureaucracies function precisely because they apply impersonal rules. Modern organizations coordinate complex forms of action among individuals whose emotional ties may be weak or nonexistent. Their effectiveness depends, to a significant extent, on not requiring close communities in order to function.

Here a fundamental distinction emerges: coordination and belonging are not the same thing.

An individual may participate successfully in a modern economy, work within complex organizations, exercise civic rights, and rely upon highly sophisticated institutions without necessarily developing a deep sense of community with most of the people who participate in those same structures. Modern institutions solve the problem of how strangers can cooperate. They do not always solve, with equal effectiveness, the problem of how people come to feel that they belong to a meaningful collectivity.

This observation should not be interpreted as a critique of modernity. It would be absurd to long for a world incapable of coordinating the complexity of contemporary societies. The point is different. The extraordinary success of modern institutions in solving problems of coordination can sometimes lead us to overlook dimensions of human experience that respond to different needs.

The persistence of contemporary crowds can be understood in precisely these terms. Sporting celebrations, concerts, pilgrimages, and public demonstrations do not arise because modern institutions have ceased to function. They arise in societies where those institutions function remarkably well. What appears to be at stake is a different need altogether: not the coordination of complex activities, but the experience of sharing time, space, and meaning with others.

Modernity solved the problem of social coordination with extraordinary success. Yet solving the problem of coordination is not the same as solving the problem of belonging. Recognizing this distinction helps explain why collective experiences continue to occupy an important place in deeply modern societies. The question is no longer why such experiences survive. The question is why they remain significant within a world increasingly organized around individual autonomy.

2.5 The Need to Belong

The distinction between coordination and belonging raises an unavoidable question. If modern societies have dramatically expanded individual autonomy and built institutions capable of organizing cooperation on a vast scale, why does belonging continue to occupy such an important place in human experience? Why do individuals who are increasingly free to define their own life projects continue to seek communities, shared symbols, and collective experiences?

The answer seems to lie not in any insufficiency of individuality, but in the nature of the human condition itself. Human beings are capable of acting as autonomous individuals, yet they rarely live exclusively as such. They construct personal identities, make independent choices, and pursue distinctive life trajectories. At the same time, they seek recognition, companionship, and meaning in relation to others. Autonomy responds to one fundamental need. Belonging responds to another.

This duality runs through virtually every dimension of social life. People wish to be recognized for their individual characteristics, but they also wish to belong—to families, friendships, organizations, professions, religious communities, sports teams, and nations. The affirmation of individuality and the search for collective ties are not necessarily contradictory impulses. More often, they are complementary dimensions of the same human experience.

Modernity greatly strengthened the first of these dimensions. It expanded opportunities for choice, weakened many traditional forms of subordination, and granted individuals an unprecedented degree of self-determination. Yet the success of this process did not eliminate the second. The need to belong does not appear to have been a vestige of premodern societies destined to disappear with the advance of individualization. Rather, it remains a persistent dimension of human experience, one that continues to manifest itself in new forms.

This observation helps explain why certain collective experiences retain such a powerful attraction. Those who participate in them are rarely seeking instructions about how to live, nor structures that permanently absorb their individual identities. They seek something different. They seek the experience of sharing an emotion, a focus of attention, or a source of meaning with others. They seek

to feel part of a reality larger than their own personal trajectory. Belonging does not eliminate individuality; it situates individuality within a shared horizon.

It is significant that many contemporary forms of belonging are voluntary. Unlike many traditional communities, which imposed relatively fixed identities, much of modern communal life is built through choice and participation. People elect to join associations, movements, cultural activities, sporting events, and networks organized around shared interests. Belonging has not disappeared; it has changed form. It has become more flexible, more plural, and more compatible with individual autonomy.

The persistence of this need has been recognized from a variety of perspectives. Robert Putnam, for example, drew attention to the evolution of civic and associational life in contemporary societies. Although his diagnoses of declining forms of social connectedness generated considerable debate, his work highlighted an important insight: even in increasingly individualized societies, social relationships, voluntary associations, and experiences of community continue to play a vital role in collective life. The question is not whether belonging has disappeared, but how the forms through which it is constructed and experienced have changed.

Recognizing this transformation allows us to move beyond a false opposition that often shapes debates about modernity. Too often, the relationship between individual and community is presented as an either-or choice: more autonomy implies less belonging, while more belonging implies less autonomy. Contemporary experience suggests otherwise. Modern individuals do not appear to be abandoning belonging. They appear to be redefining the ways in which they seek and experience it.

World Cup celebrations provide a particularly revealing example. Those who gather in public squares, avenues, and other communal spaces do not abandon their individuality in doing so. They remain who they are. They do not permanently suspend their personal projects or their differences. What they seek is a temporary experience of collectivity that complements, rather than replaces, their lives as individuals. The emotional intensity of these gatherings suggests that belonging continues to satisfy a need that autonomy alone does not fully address.

This may be one of the most important lessons of contemporary societies. The expansion of individuality did not eliminate the need to belong. What it did was profoundly transform the ways in which that need is expressed. Understanding that transformation becomes even more important in an age shaped by technologies capable of connecting millions of people without requiring physical proximity. For it is precisely here that a new paradox emerges: the easier communication across distance becomes, the more clearly we recognize what communication itself cannot replace.

2.6 The Digital Paradox

If modernity expanded individual autonomy through the growth of markets, rights, and complex institutions, the digital revolution carried that process to a scale that would have been difficult to imagine only a few decades ago. Activities that for centuries depended upon physical proximity increasingly migrated to digital networks. Instant communication became routine. Access to information ceased to depend on geographic location. Individuals acquired the ability to participate

simultaneously in multiple conversations, communities, and spaces of interaction without leaving their homes.

From a historical perspective, the transformation has been extraordinary. Never before had it been so easy to remain connected with family members, colleagues, and friends dispersed across different cities and countries. Never before had it been so simple to exchange information, organize collective activities, or gain access to forms of knowledge once constrained by significant physical barriers. The digital revolution dramatically reduced the costs of communication and greatly expanded the ability of individuals to build networks beyond their immediate surroundings.

Yet precisely because of its success, this transformation made visible a distinction that had long remained partially obscured: communication and presence are not the same thing.

A video call allows people to converse. A digital platform allows them to exchange opinions. A social network allows them to share images, emotions, and information in real time. Yet none of these tools entirely eliminates the difference between interacting with others and being physically present with them.

This distinction matters because for many years it seemed reasonable to assume that the growing capacity for communication across distance would gradually reduce the importance of face-to-face encounters. In many domains, that prediction proved correct. Meetings, shopping, administrative procedures, education, and numerous other forms of interaction migrated rapidly into digital environments. Technology demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to solve problems of distance.

But solving the problem of distance is not the same as eliminating the need for proximity.

As digital tools became increasingly sophisticated, it also became increasingly apparent that certain social experiences retained a special affinity with physical presence. Concerts continued to fill stadiums. Festivals continued to attract large crowds. Religious pilgrimages retained their capacity to mobilize participants. Sporting events continued to draw thousands of people into public spaces.

The paradox is revealing. The more effective technologies become at transmitting information, the more clearly we can distinguish those dimensions of human experience that cannot be reduced to information alone. Sharing news is not the same as sharing an event. Exchanging messages is not the same as experiencing an emotion collectively. Communicating a reaction is not quite the same as living through it alongside others.

World Cup celebrations illustrate this distinction with particular clarity. Those who gather to watch a match involving the national team could follow the game from almost anywhere and obtain exactly the same information. Yet hundreds of thousands of people choose to share the experience physically. Their decision suggests that contemporary crowds do not represent resistance to technology, nor nostalgia for earlier forms of social life. Rather, they reveal that certain forms of collectivity remain inseparable from presence.

The digital revolution solved the problem of communication across distance with extraordinary effectiveness. What it did not do was eliminate the human desire to share certain moments in the company of others. It was precisely an unexpected historical circumstance that would make this distinction visible with exceptional clarity.

2.7 The Pandemic and the Rediscovery of Presence

Rarely in recent history has a society experienced such an abrupt and widespread reduction in everyday physical interaction as that produced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within a matter of weeks, millions of people shifted a significant portion of their activities into digital environments. Work, education, family gatherings, professional meetings, and even certain forms of entertainment increasingly took place through screens.

From a functional perspective, the results were remarkable. Economies continued to operate. Universities maintained their academic programs. Technologies that had existed for years demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to sustain complex forms of interaction across distance.

Precisely for that reason, the experience proved so revealing. The pandemic did not create a distinction between communication and presence. It made that distinction visible on a scale that would have been difficult to observe under ordinary circumstances. For the first time in generations, millions of people simultaneously experienced a situation in which communication remained available while physical presence became exceptionally difficult.

As restrictions began to ease, many social activities quickly regained their vitality. Concerts filled once again. Festivals returned. Sporting events recovered their audiences. The resurgence was neither uniform nor identical across all contexts, yet it was sufficiently broad and rapid to suggest that certain forms of social experience retained a value that digital alternatives had not fully replaced.

The experience was revealing because it made visible something that had previously existed largely as a theoretical intuition. Digital tools proved extraordinarily effective at transmitting information, coordinating activities, and maintaining relationships across distance. Yet the ability to communicate did not eliminate the desire to gather. Presence continued to satisfy a different dimension of human experience.

The World Cup celebrations of 2026 can be understood in light of this recent history. Those who participate in them belong to a generation that lived through this involuntary global experiment firsthand. They know that a match can be followed from virtually any device and discussed in real time across multiple platforms. Yet they continue to gather. Not because digital communication failed, but because the experience of sharing certain moments in physical proximity to others continues to possess a significance of its own.

2.8 The Return of Presence

If there is one lesson revealed by both the digital revolution and the experience of the pandemic, it is that physical presence retains a value that cannot be fully reduced to communication, information, or coordination. This observation helps illuminate one of the most striking features of contemporary societies: far from disappearing, collective experiences grounded in physical presence continue to occupy a central place in social life. Crowds are not a residue of a premodern past. They are a persistent feature of the present.

What we are observing is not a rejection of technology. Nor is it a resistance to modernity. The people who participate in these experiences are often the very same individuals who use smartphones,

digital platforms, and social networks in their everyday lives. Presence has not returned because digital communication failed. It has returned because it responds to a different human need.

The distinction can be stated simply: digital technologies allow us to connect; presence allows us to share a situation.

World Cup celebrations make this distinction particularly visible. Those who gather to watch matches involving the national team are not seeking merely access to information or the opportunity to comment on the game with others. What draws them is the possibility of experiencing the event alongside those around them, perceiving their reactions directly, and participating in an emotion that unfolds simultaneously within a shared space.

This dimension is difficult to reproduce through purely virtual means. Presence introduces elements that can rarely be transmitted fully through a screen: the immediate awareness of bodies, the intensity of voices, the spontaneous synchronization of movement, and the immediate sensation of belonging to a visible collective reality. Within a crowd, the existence of the collectivity ceases to be an intellectual inference and becomes a lived experience.

For this reason, the return of presence should not be interpreted as a correction to modernity but as one of its consequences. Contemporary societies have vastly expanded the possibilities of individual life. They have multiplied forms of communication and refined mechanisms of coordination that allow people to interact across thousands of miles. Precisely because these capacities are now so widely available, it has become easier to identify what they do not fully replace.

Contemporary crowds make that limit visible. Not because they reveal a deficiency in modern life, but because they demonstrate that different human needs operate in different registers. Individual autonomy responds to one of those needs. Digital communication responds to another. Collective presence responds to a third. None necessarily eliminates the others.

Perhaps that is why large public gatherings continue to exert such a powerful attraction. They do not represent a return to earlier forms of social organization, nor a nostalgia for lost communities. Rather, they represent a contemporary way of satisfying a persistent human need: the opportunity to share a meaningful experience physically with others.

In this sense, crowds do not appear as an anomaly within modern societies. They constitute evidence that individuality and belonging continue to coexist. It is precisely this coexistence that invites us to return to Ortega from a perspective different from the one available to his generation.

2.9 Revisiting Ortega

The reflections of José Ortega y Gasset remain relevant because they identified one of the defining transformations of modernity: the emergence of social phenomena capable of mobilizing large numbers of people simultaneously. His concern with the relationship between the individual and the mass responded to a specific historical reality, shaped by the rise of mass politics, rapid urbanization, and new forms of collective mobilization. Viewed from the perspective of his own time, the question was entirely understandable: what would happen if the mass came to displace individual responsibility, critical judgment, and personal autonomy?

Nearly a century later, however, historical experience allows us to revisit that concern from a different angle. Contemporary societies do not appear to be characterized primarily by an excess of collectivity. If anything, one of the defining features of our age is the extraordinary expansion of individuality. People enjoy greater freedom of choice, greater opportunities for mobility, and greater capacity to construct their own life projects than previous generations. Individuality has not retreated. It has advanced.

From this perspective, contemporary crowds take on a meaning different from the one that concerned Ortega. Sporting celebrations, concerts, festivals, and large public gatherings do not appear to be manifestations of a collectivity that permanently absorbs the individual. They are temporary experiences. They emerge, reach moments of heightened intensity, and then dissolve. Those who participate return to their occupations, responsibilities, and personal trajectories. The crowd arises upon a foundation of established individuality rather than in place of it.

This observation suggests that the relationship between individuality and collectivity need not be understood as a zero-sum relationship. Much of the twentieth-century debate was shaped by two opposing concerns. On one side was the fear that traditional communities might excessively constrain individual freedom. On the other was the fear that the expansion of individuality might irreversibly weaken social bonds. Contemporary experience points toward a more complex reality.

Modern individuals place great value on autonomy, yet they also seek belonging. They wish to construct lives of their own, yet they continue to gather to celebrate, protest, commemorate, and share meaningful experiences with others. They affirm their individuality, yet they participate in collective rituals. Rather than excluding one another, individuality and collectivity appear to respond to different dimensions of human experience.

World Cup celebrations provide a particularly revealing illustration of this coexistence. Those who gather in public squares, avenues, and other communal spaces are not relinquishing their personal autonomy. Nor are they seeking a permanent collective identity to replace their individual projects. What they seek is a temporary experience of belonging—an opportunity to share emotions and meanings with people who, in most cases, will remain strangers once the event has ended.

Perhaps this is the most important lesson to emerge from rereading Ortega in the twenty-first century. The question no longer seems to be how to protect the individual from the mass. The question is why individuals who are fully conscious of their autonomy continue to seek opportunities for collective experience. What we observe is not the failure of modern individuality. Rather, we observe the coexistence of two equally persistent human needs: the need to act as autonomous individuals and the need to feel part of something larger than oneself.

The true paradox of modernity may not be that individuality triumphed. The true paradox may be that after two centuries of expanding personal autonomy, collective experiences continue to exert such an extraordinary power of attraction. Far from representing an anomaly, their persistence may be evidence that belonging remains a fundamental dimension of human life. Modernity profoundly transformed the ways in which we seek it. It did not eliminate the need to seek it.

2.10 Conclusion

The mass celebrations that accompany the Mexican national team during the 2026 FIFA World Cup provide a privileged window into a fundamental feature of contemporary life. At first glance, they may appear to be little more than expressions of sporting enthusiasm. Yet when examined more closely, they reveal a deeper question: the persistence of the human need to belong in societies characterized by unprecedented levels of individual autonomy.

Modernity dramatically expanded the capacity of individuals to construct lives of their own. People today enjoy greater freedom of choice, mobility, and self-determination than at any previous moment in history. Yet the expansion of individuality did not eliminate the desire to share meaningful experiences with others. The need to belong did not disappear. It changed form.

Contemporary crowds make that transformation visible. They do not represent a rejection of individual autonomy, nor a nostalgia for earlier forms of social organization. Nor do they constitute a reaction against technology or against the institutions that structure modern life. Rather, they express the coexistence of two fundamental dimensions of human experience: the need to act as autonomous individuals and the need to feel part of something larger than oneself.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that autonomy and belonging are not necessarily opposing principles. The first enables individuals to construct lives of their own. The second allows them to situate those lives within a shared horizon. Contemporary societies have greatly strengthened the capacity to act as individuals. Yet they continue to generate occasions in which those same individuals seek to gather and experience forms of collectivity that no institution, market, or digital platform can produce on its own.

The crowds that appear and disappear around major sporting events are a visible manifestation of this reality. Their persistence suggests that modern history should not be understood as a linear movement from community to individuality. Rather, it should be understood as a process through which both dimensions have learned to coexist in new forms. After two centuries of expanding personal autonomy, we continue to seek opportunities to feel that we belong to something larger than ourselves.

Yet this observation leads naturally to a further question. If individuals continue to seek experiences of belonging, what is the nature of the communities that emerge in such moments? What, precisely, do people feel themselves to be part of when they celebrate a sporting victory together, sing the same anthem, or gather around shared symbols?

The crowd explains how collectivity emerges. Belonging helps us understand why we seek it. One question remains: how can a community composed of millions of strangers come to be experienced as a common reality?

That is the question explored in the next essay.

3. National Experience

World Cup celebrations reveal more than a crowd and more than a need for belonging. They also reveal a particular form of community: the nation. When millions of people simultaneously follow the matches of a national team, they share symbols, emotions, and expectations that transcend their individual experiences. What is at stake is not merely a sporting event. It is also a relationship to a community far larger than any of the groups to which we belong in everyday life.

This observation is especially intriguing because nations possess a distinctive characteristic. Unlike families, circles of friendship, or local communities, national communities are composed of millions of people who will never know one another personally. National belonging does not depend upon direct contact among its members. It rests upon the shared conviction of belonging to the same collectivity. In this sense, the nation represents one of the most ambitious and extraordinary forms of community that modernity has produced.

Most of the time, however, that community remains abstract. Citizens encounter the nation through institutions, laws, symbols, maps, historical narratives, and everyday practices. They know that they belong to it, yet they rarely perceive it directly. The nation exists as a powerful social reality, but one ordinarily dispersed across millions of individuals separated by distance, diversity, and the routines of everyday life.

Precisely for that reason, certain events acquire special significance. Under particular circumstances, communities that normally remain dispersed seem to acquire an unusual presence. What ordinarily exists as an imagined reality can, for a brief moment, be experienced as a visible one. The nation does not cease to be a community of strangers. Yet during such episodes its members become especially conscious of sharing a common belonging.

This essay argues that a significant part of the symbolic power of international football derives from precisely this capacity. The World Cup does not create the nation, nor does it invent the sentiment of national belonging. What it does is provide an exceptional occasion for a community that is ordinarily dispersed and abstract to recognize itself.

Understanding how this occurs requires examining three related questions. First, the nature of the nation as an imagined community, following the interpretation developed by Benedict Anderson. Second, the role of international football as one of the most powerful national rituals of the contemporary era. And third, the way in which public squares, avenues, and monuments become temporary stages upon which a national community can make itself visible to its own members.

3.1 A Nation Before a Screen

During the 2026 FIFA World Cup, millions of Mexicans watch the matches of the national team simultaneously. Some do so from their homes. Others gather with family members and friends. Thousands more assemble in public squares, avenues, restaurants, bars, and specially designated viewing areas. When the result is favorable, a significant portion of that crowd eventually converges on the Ángel de la Independencia.

The scene is familiar. It has repeated itself in Mexico and in many other countries across successive generations of World Cups. Precisely because it is so familiar, we rarely pause to consider what it

actually represents. What kind of social phenomenon is capable of concentrating the attention of millions of people at the same moment and generating shared emotions among individuals who have never met one another?

The question extends well beyond football. It extends beyond Mexico as well. What makes the phenomenon interesting is that it occurs in societies characterized by increasingly diverse identities, interests, and life trajectories. Contemporary life is fragmented across countless spaces of information, entertainment, and participation. People consume different media, inhabit different social worlds, and pursue increasingly individualized projects of life. Few events succeed in interrupting that dispersion, even temporarily, and becoming a common point of reference.

And yet national team matches continue to do precisely that.

The observation is significant because it highlights a distinctive feature of the modern nation. Unlike a family, a circle of friends, or a local community, the nation does not rest upon direct personal relationships. The overwhelming majority of Mexicans will never personally know the overwhelming majority of their fellow citizens. They will never share a conversation, a friendship, or an everyday experience with them. And yet there exists a relatively stable conviction of belonging to the same community.

Most of the time, that community remains dispersed across millions of individuals separated by distance and the routines of everyday life. Matches involving the national team temporarily alter this condition. Each person watches from a particular location, yet does so with the knowledge that millions of compatriots are simultaneously participating in the same experience. Emotion ceases to be exclusively individual. It becomes accompanied by an awareness of shared attention.

The celebrations that follow make this dimension even more visible. When crowds fill public squares, move through avenues, and converge upon the Ángel de la Independencia, we are observing more than a gathering of people. We are witnessing a national community attempting to make itself present to itself. What ordinarily exists as a dispersed and abstract reality temporarily acquires a visible form.

Understanding how this transformation occurs requires answering a fundamental question: how can a community composed of millions of strangers come to experience itself as a collectivity?

The answer proposed by Benedict Anderson remains one of the most fruitful points of departure for approaching that question.

3.2 Anderson and the Imagined Community

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson offered one of the most influential explanations of the nature of the modern nation. His argument begins with a deceptively simple observation: nations are imagined communities. The phrase has often been misunderstood. Anderson did not mean that nations are fictional, illusory, or somehow less real than other forms of social organization. His aim was to explain how communities of enormous scale could acquire such a powerful reality even though the overwhelming majority of their members would never know one another personally.

Every community based on direct relationships faces obvious limits of scale. A family can know itself face-to-face. A group of friends can maintain relatively close personal ties. Even a local community

allows forms of everyday interaction among its members. The nation operates on an entirely different scale. No Mexican will ever know all of the more than 130 million people who make up Mexico. No citizen can directly experience the totality of the national community to which he or she belongs.

And yet millions of people share the conviction that they are part of it.

Anderson's key insight was to recognize that national belonging rests upon a particular form of collective imagination. Members of a nation mentally construct a community whose participants remain largely unknown to them. They know that these people exist. They know that they participate in common institutions, symbols, historical references, and cultural frameworks. They know that they share a political belonging larger than their immediate relationships. In this way, the nation becomes a social reality that exists simultaneously in the consciousness of millions of individuals.

Although they differ from Anderson in important respects, other scholars of nationalism have likewise emphasized the role of shared symbols, historical memories, and collective myths in the formation of national identities. Anthony D. Smith, for example, argued that modern nations rest not only upon contemporary political institutions but also upon inherited symbolic repertoires that allow individuals to recognize themselves as part of a broader historical community. From this perspective, the nation is not merely imagined; it is also sustained through narratives, collective memories, and symbols that help reproduce a sense of belonging across time.

The paradox is striking. The nation is a community of strangers. Its existence depends not upon personal familiarity but upon a shared awareness of belonging to something larger than individual experience. A citizen may feel connected to people who live thousands of miles away, who occupy different economic positions, who speak with different accents, or whom he or she will never encounter in everyday life. What produces the nation is not direct knowledge of others, but the certainty of sharing a common belonging.

Precisely because it operates through this form of collective imagination, the nation often remains invisible. We encounter it through maps, institutions, laws, monuments, national symbols, and historical narratives. We know that it exists. Yet we rarely observe it directly. The nation is usually experienced as an abstract presence—real, powerful, and meaningful, yet difficult to perceive as a concrete whole.

This characteristic helps explain the significance of certain national rituals. On exceptional occasions, millions of people concentrate their attention on the same event at the same time. They do so with the knowledge that countless compatriots are doing exactly the same thing. Simultaneity therefore acquires a special significance. It is not simply a matter of observing an event; it is a matter of knowing that millions of others are sharing that observation in the very same moment.

Anderson identified a similar mechanism in the rise of the modern press. When thousands of people read the same newspaper each morning, they could imagine themselves as part of a larger community engaged simultaneously in the same activity. Readers did not know one another personally, but they knew that others existed and shared a common horizon of reference. The nation was reinforced precisely through this everyday experience of simultaneity among strangers.

Matches involving a national team constitute a contemporary and extraordinarily intensified version of the same mechanism. For ninety minutes, millions of people observe the same event, react to the

same moments, and experience emotions attached to the same collective symbol. The difference is that the process unfolds with a degree of emotional intensity and temporal synchronization far greater than that which normally accompanies everyday life.

From this perspective, international football possesses a unique capacity to activate the national imagination. It does not create the nation. It does not invent the sentiment of national belonging. What it does is provide an exceptional occasion for a normally dispersed community to become simultaneously aware of itself. During such moments, the nation ceases to be merely a shared idea and begins to acquire the qualities of a shared experience.

Understanding why football can play this role requires examining the distinctive characteristics of the sport itself. Not every public event produces the same effect. There is something in the symbolic structure of international football that makes it one of the most powerful national rituals of the contemporary era.

3.3 Football as a National Ritual

If the nation is an imagined community, one question still remains. Why has football become one of the most effective means through which that community is made visible? Contemporary societies produce an enormous variety of spectacles, cultural activities, and forms of collective entertainment. Yet few possess the capacity to mobilize millions of people simultaneously and transform a sporting event into a shared national experience.

Part of the explanation lies in the extraordinary accessibility of the game. Football can be understood without specialized knowledge. Its basic rules are relatively simple, its objectives are clear, and its decisive moments are readily recognizable even to occasional observers. People of different ages, educational backgrounds, regions, and social trajectories can watch the same match and understand what is happening. This simplicity enables an exceptionally broad form of symbolic participation.

Accessibility alone, however, cannot explain football's social power. Uncertainty also plays a central role. Every match contains an open outcome. No lead guarantees the final result, and no observer knows with certainty what will happen in the next minute. For ninety minutes, millions of people follow the same unfolding story without knowing how it will end. Much of the emotional intensity arises precisely from this shared uncertainty.

The decisive element emerges when football is organized around national teams. At that moment, the match ceases to be merely a sporting contest. It becomes a symbolic representation of the national community. The team does not represent a particular region, profession, religion, or political tendency. It represents something far broader and more abstract: the nation.

This representative capacity is especially important in societies characterized by significant internal diversity. Mexico is a country marked by substantial regional, economic, cultural, and political differences. The everyday experiences of its citizens unfold within very different social worlds. Yet during matches involving the national team, millions of people direct their attention toward a shared symbol that transcends those differences. Disagreements and divisions do not disappear. What changes is that, for a brief period, national identity acquires an unusual visibility in relation to other forms of belonging.

It is at this point that football begins to perform a function comparable to that of a ritual. Not because it is a religious practice, but because it organizes the attention, emotions, and expectations of millions of people around a common event. As Eric Hobsbawm observed, many modern national traditions derive their strength from repeated ritual practices that symbolically reproduce the political community over time. Their significance lies not only in the symbols they mobilize, but also in the repetition of shared experiences that remind participants of their membership in a larger collectivity. Matches involving a national team perform a similar function. Millions await the match, follow its progress, react to the same moments, and participate in recognizable forms of celebration or disappointment. In this sense, international football constitutes one of the most powerful national rituals of the contemporary era.

Temporal synchronization plays a crucial role in this process. Everyone observes the same event at the same moment. Everyone learns the result simultaneously. Everyone reacts together to a goal, a save, or the final whistle. In an age characterized by fragmented audiences and increasingly personalized forms of information and entertainment, such synchronization is extraordinarily rare. Precisely for that reason, it possesses considerable symbolic power.

The World Cup amplifies this dynamic even further. Unlike ordinary competitions, it concentrates national attention over several weeks and places the national team within a narrative of global significance. Each match acquires a meaning that extends beyond sport itself. The games become episodes in a shared story followed simultaneously by millions of people. The nation watches, waits, celebrates, and suffers together.

Yet the ritual does not end when the match is over. In fact, some of its most significant moments occur after the final whistle. Shared observation begins to transform itself into movement. People leave their homes, restaurants, public squares, and viewing areas in order to gather physically with others. The imagined community ceases to express itself solely through shared attention and begins to manifest itself in urban space.

To understand this transformation fully, we must turn to the places where the nation chooses to encounter itself.

3.4 The Places of the Nation

Imagined communities require symbols. But they also require places. Although the modern nation exists primarily as a shared reality in the consciousness of millions of people, certain spaces acquire a particular capacity to represent, condense, and make visible that collective belonging. The World Cup celebrations of 2026 allow us to observe this phenomenon with unusual clarity.

The matches are watched in countless locations throughout the city and the country. Thousands of people gather in public squares, parks, restaurants, bars, and specially designated viewing areas. Watching the match is a spatially dispersed experience. There are many places from which to observe.

Celebration, however, follows a different logic.

When Mexico achieves a favorable result, a significant portion of the crowd begins moving toward a common destination. Despite the existence of numerous venues for gathering and viewing,

metropolitan celebrations tend to converge upon the Ángel de la Independencia. Observation is dispersed. Celebration converges.

This convergence is sociologically interesting because it does not respond to any obvious functional necessity. No one needs to go to the Ángel in order to learn the result of the match. Nor is it the only space capable of accommodating large crowds. There are larger plazas, broader avenues, and many other locations suitable for public celebration. Yet generation after generation, the Ángel continues to serve as the principal gathering place for national celebrations in the capital.

The explanation appears to lie less in the physical characteristics of the site than in its symbolic significance. Originally conceived to commemorate the centennial of Mexican independence, the monument gradually became one of the most recognizable stages of national public life. Sporting celebrations, civic demonstrations, historical commemorations, and a wide variety of collective events have repeatedly used the site as a place of public expression.

Each celebration is layered upon those that came before it. Each generation inherits a spatial memory constructed by its predecessors. People go to the Ángel because others went before them. And precisely because others went before them, the place retains its power of attraction. Physical space gradually becomes symbolic space.

Something similar occurs with other locations that structure the civic geography of the capital. The Zócalo represents the political and ceremonial center of the Republic. The Plaza de la República evokes the memory of the Mexican Revolution. Paseo de la Reforma constitutes one of the great monumental axes of the nation. None of these spaces is neutral. All form part of a landscape charged with historical, political, and symbolic meanings that help represent the national community.

This spatial dimension reveals an important characteristic of imagined communities. The nation exists primarily as a symbolic construction, yet it requires material anchors through which it can be experienced. Monuments, plazas, and avenues function as points of encounter between national abstraction and everyday experience. They are places where a community too large ever to assemble in its entirety can partially represent itself to itself.

The World Cup celebrations make this process visible. The national community does not appear uniformly across the territory. Instead, it concentrates in particular spaces that function as symbolic nodes of belonging. Millions of people may watch the match from different locations. Yet when the moment of celebration arrives, certain places exert a distinctive attraction. It is as if the nation, for a few hours, seeks to gather itself in spaces that already form part of its collective memory.

The significance of these places, however, lies not only in their capacity to concentrate people. Equally important is the movement that leads toward them. The celebration does not begin when the crowd arrives at the monument. It begins when thousands of people decide to leave the places from which they watched the match and undertake a common journey toward a symbolically recognized destination.

That collective movement constitutes an essential part of the ritual itself. To understand it fully, we must see it as something more than a spontaneous gathering of people. We must understand it as a contemporary form of secular pilgrimage.

3.5 Secular Pilgrimage

World Cup celebrations consist not only in the gathering of a crowd in a particular place. They also involve movement. Thousands of people leave the places where they watched the match and begin making their way toward a symbolically recognized point in the city. Something important occurs during that journey. The national community ceases to express itself solely through shared attention and begins to manifest itself through visible collective action.

Victor Turner observed that many rituals possess a fundamental spatial dimension. Participants do not simply remain in one place; they move through a sequence of actions that carries them from ordinary life into an extraordinary experience. Movement is not a secondary element of the ritual. It is part of its meaning. Walking, gathering, converging, and arriving are actions that help produce the collective experience the ritual seeks to generate.

The celebrations that follow matches involving the national team display similar features. Once the game has ended, the crowd begins to reorganize itself. People who had been dispersed across homes, restaurants, public squares, fan festivals, and viewing areas leave those spaces and join streams of pedestrians moving toward a common destination. What matters is not only the arrival at the Ángel de la Independencia. Equally important is the process through which thousands of individuals gradually become a collectivity in motion.

The analogy with pilgrimage should be used with caution. This is obviously not a religious practice. Participants are not performing an act of devotion, nor are they seeking transcendence in the traditional sense of the term. Yet certain structural similarities are difficult to ignore. There is a shared symbol, a movement toward that symbol, and a collective experience that intensifies as the concentration of participants increases.

What is remarkable is that no one needs to organize this process from above. There is no formal announcement directing hundreds of thousands of people where to gather after each victory. Nor is there an authority responsible for coordinating the movement. Convergence occurs because participants share an implicit understanding of the meaning of the place and of the behavior expected within that setting. Each individual makes a personal decision, yet the aggregate result is an extraordinarily consistent collective pattern.

Direct observation of the 2026 celebrations, supplemented by contemporaneous audiovisual records, illustrates this dynamic clearly. Despite the rain, thousands of people continue moving along Paseo de la Reforma toward the Ángel de la Independencia. Groups that watched the match in different parts of the city gradually merge into streams of pedestrians moving in the same direction. As the concentration of people increases, the sidewalks cease to be sufficient, and portions of the route spill into lanes normally reserved for vehicular traffic. Chants pass from group to group. National flags appear draped across shoulders, hanging from windows, and waving from vehicles. People who have never met find themselves sharing routes, slogans, and symbols as they approach a common destination.

What is particularly interesting is that the crowd does not yet fully exist when the movement begins. For much of the journey, participants advance in relatively small groups. Some emerge from restaurants and bars. Others leave public squares or transit stations. Still others join from side

streets. The perception of belonging to a collectivity emerges gradually as these groups encounter one another, recognize one another, and begin moving together. The crowd does not appear instantaneously at the point of arrival. It is constructed progressively along the way.

From a strictly utilitarian perspective, this behavior is difficult to explain. The result of the match is already known. The celebration could take place in locations much closer to home, or even in private. And yet the crowd continues to move.

This observation reveals a fundamental characteristic of collective rituals. People do not participate solely because of the outcome they obtain. They participate because the act of participation itself carries meaning. Being present matters. Arriving matters. Sharing the event physically with others matters. The experience cannot be reduced to the information that circulates or to any immediate utility it produces. Its value lies precisely in becoming part of something that is unfolding alongside others.

For that reason, the journey toward the Ángel temporarily transforms the city. Avenues cease to function merely as transportation infrastructure and become spaces of encounter. Pedestrians are no longer simply individuals moving from one point to another. They become participants in a collective experience whose meaning depends upon the simultaneous presence of others.

This dimension helps explain why national celebrations possess such a distinctive emotional intensity. The nation is not experienced only in the moment of victory. It is also experienced in the collective movement that follows it. Each participant observes thousands of others making similar decisions, following similar routes, and orienting themselves toward the same symbols. The imagined community begins to acquire a visible form even before it reaches its point of concentration.

Perhaps this is one of the most revealing features of contemporary national rituals. The nation does not simply appear when the crowd gathers. It begins to appear when thousands of individuals decide to move in the same direction. The journey transforms an imagined community into an observable one. The nation ceases to be merely something people know exists. It begins to become something they can see unfolding around them.

And when the crowd finally reaches those symbolic spaces, something even more significant occurs. The national community, normally dispersed across millions of people separated by distance and everyday life, seems to acquire a tangible presence. It is at that moment that the nation ceases to be merely imagined and begins to be experienced.

3.6 When the Nation Becomes Visible

Benedict Anderson's central insight is that nations exist because millions of people share the conviction that they belong to the same community. That conviction has profoundly real consequences. It organizes institutions, inspires loyalties, mobilizes resources, and structures much of modern political life. Yet the nation itself usually remains abstract. We know that it exists, but we rarely observe it directly. The national community is too large, too dispersed, and too complex to appear in everyday life as an immediate experience.

For precisely that reason, certain events acquire exceptional significance. On particular occasions, the distance between the imagined nation and the experienced nation appears to narrow. World Cup celebrations are among those moments. For a few hours, millions of people not only know that they belong to the same national community. They also perceive the existence of that community in a tangible way.

What occurs in such moments is difficult to describe solely in political or institutional terms. When hundreds of thousands of people simultaneously occupy public squares, avenues, and national monuments, the nation acquires a visible presence. It becomes audible in collective chants. It becomes embodied in the concentration of crowds. It becomes tangible in the shared experience of occupying the same space and participating in the same celebration. What ordinarily exists as a reality distributed across millions of individuals is momentarily condensed into a common experience.

This transformation helps explain the emotional intensity of national celebrations. People are not merely celebrating a sporting victory. They are also celebrating the opportunity to experience something that normally lies beyond the reach of direct perception. Each individual can observe those around them, hear the same chants, and encounter the same symbols. They can recognize that thousands of others are simultaneously participating in a similar experience. The nation ceases to be an inference and becomes, however briefly, a presence.

The images recorded during the 2026 celebrations illustrate this dynamic with particular clarity. Crowds fill Paseo de la Reforma, surround the Ángel de la Independencia, and temporarily transform urban space into a national stage. What matters is not simply the number of participants. What matters is the possibility of collectively perceiving the scale of the community being celebrated. Each participant experiences something that everyday life rarely makes visible: the simultaneous existence of a collectivity far larger than their immediate circle of relationships.

The assembled crowd thus functions as a partial representation of a community that can never be gathered in its entirety. No plaza, avenue, or monument can contain the whole nation. Yet certain moments allow a visible portion of that community to stand as a symbol of a much broader reality. The crowd gathered around national symbols is not the nation in its entirety. It is a manifestation of it.

For that reason, the significance of these celebrations extends far beyond the sporting event that gives rise to them. What becomes visible is not merely a crowd celebrating a victory. What becomes visible is a community that, for a few hours, is able to perceive itself with exceptional intensity.

3.7 Conclusion

The celebrations that accompany the Mexican national team during the 2026 FIFA World Cup reveal more than a crowd and more than an experience of collective belonging. They reveal a particular form of community: the nation.

What makes these events especially significant is that they render visible a reality that normally remains dispersed across millions of people separated by distance and the routines of everyday life. During matches involving the national team, millions of individuals concentrate their attention on the same event at the same moment. After the final whistle, that shared attention is transformed into

movement. People leave their homes, public squares, restaurants, and viewing areas. They converge upon monuments, avenues, and places charged with historical meaning. The national community begins to acquire a perceptible form.

The crowds that fill Paseo de la Reforma and surround the Ángel de la Independencia are more than gatherings of supporters. They function as a visible representation of a much larger community distributed across the national territory. Each participant is able to observe something that is normally known only in the abstract: the simultaneous existence of a collectivity that extends far beyond the limits of immediate experience.

Perhaps therein lies the deepest significance of these events. International football does not create the nation. It does not invent belonging. It does not produce a community that did not previously exist. What it does is something different: it provides an exceptional occasion for a normally dispersed community to make itself visible to itself.

For a few hours, a nation composed of millions of strangers recognizes itself.

Epilogue: What the World Cup Reveals

The FIFA World Cup lasts only a few weeks. Matches end. Celebrations conclude. Screens are dismantled, streets return to their ordinary functions, and everyday life reasserts itself with the quiet force of habit. Viewed from a distance, the intensity of those moments seems disproportionate to their duration. Millions of people reorganize their schedules, alter their routines, and occupy plazas, avenues, and public spaces in order to participate in experiences that are, in strictly practical terms, remarkably fleeting.

And yet it is precisely because of their fleeting nature that these events possess a unique capacity to reveal fundamental aspects of social life that normally remain hidden.

Everyday life disperses. It disperses people, activities, attention, and experience. Most of the time, we inhabit different spaces, follow different routines, and participate in institutions that organize social cooperation without requiring physical proximity among those who belong to them. The complexity of modern societies depends, to a considerable extent, on this capacity to coordinate millions of individual trajectories that rarely converge in the same place at the same time.

The World Cup temporarily produces the opposite movement.

It concentrates.

It concentrates the attention of millions of people on a common event. It concentrates emotions around shared symbols. It concentrates bodies in plazas, avenues, stadiums, and public spaces. For a few weeks, processes that normally remain distributed across millions of individual experiences acquire a visible form.

That is why World Cup celebrations are sociologically interesting. Not because they constitute exceptions to modern life, but because they allow us to observe, with unusual clarity, dimensions of that life that ordinarily remain dispersed. What appears during those days does not emerge from nowhere. It was already there. What changes is that it becomes observable.

The crowd is not created by the World Cup. The human capacity to transform an aggregation of individuals into a collective experience long predates the opening match. Nor does the need for belonging arise from sporting celebrations. People continue to seek shared symbols, relationships, and experiences even in societies characterized by unprecedented levels of individual autonomy. And the nation, of course, does not suddenly appear during an international competition. It already exists in institutions, symbols, historical memories, and forms of belonging that organize collective life far beyond the realm of sport.

What the World Cup does is make these processes visible simultaneously.

For a few hours, we can observe how individuals who are normally separated become a crowd. We can observe how the search for belonging continues to operate within deeply individualized societies. And we can observe how a national community composed of millions of strangers acquires a perceptible presence for its own members.

None of this contradicts the history of modernity. On the contrary, it complements it. The expansion of individual freedom, the increasing sophistication of institutions, and the development of

communication technologies have profoundly transformed the way we live. Yet they have not eliminated the human need to participate in shared experiences. Nor have they diminished the importance of symbols capable of linking people who will never know one another personally.

Perhaps this is why such events retain such remarkable symbolic power. Not because they suspend modern life, but because they allow us to observe simultaneously dimensions of that life that usually appear separately. For a few hours, autonomy and belonging cease to seem like opposing realities. Individual experience and collective experience become visible together. The imagined community acquires a visible presence without ceasing to be a community of strangers.

Then everything disperses again. The crowds disappear. Monuments recover their customary silence. Avenues fill once more with traffic, and participants return to the occupations of everyday life.

Yet precisely because the concentration was temporary, it leaves a lasting impression. For a brief interval, millions of people were able to observe something that normally remains hidden beneath the routines of social life: that behind extraordinarily diverse individual trajectories there continue to exist forms of community capable of making themselves present, if only for a few hours.

Perhaps this is the principal lesson that the World Cup offers as a social laboratory. It tells us something more than a story about football. It helps us understand something broader: how societies composed of increasingly autonomous individuals continue to generate collective experiences capable of producing belonging, identity, and community.

And perhaps it is precisely this capacity—the capacity to make visible, however temporarily, that which normally remains dispersed—that makes such events a privileged window into the nature of contemporary collective life.

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