

Soccer and Devotion in the Barrios of Santiago

BY PEDRO LEMEBEL

The empty lots of land which dot the arid landscapes of Santiago's urban periphery were once planned as tree-lined plazas and recreational areas for the residents of the city's shantytowns, a status that they never attained. Instead, they became the dusty fields on which generations of young people have come of age playing soccer. Soccer is Chile's most popular sport, a cheap form of entertainment that is deeply etched into the everyday memories of proletarian Santiago. There is no shantytown without a club that brings together those addicted to playing ball. All that neighborhood kids need is a ball and a field to forget, at least for a time, the lack of opportunities that defines the world they inhabit. Each weekend on the neighborhood field, they experience the only real freedom that they know—their only respite from the resentments of growing up poor amidst the Chilean "miracle."

In Santiago's peripheral neighborhoods, these dusty fields have become a place beyond the law, a free-trade zone of sorts where poor kids gather to celebrate the triumphs and defeats of their soccer club or just to hang out. Young people no longer fashion their rebellion according to the nostalgic revolutionary ethic of the

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1960s. It is the city that stages their expressions of frustration and disenchantment. In Chile at least, soccer fan clubs, known as *barras bravas*—literally "fierce fan clubs"—are the highest expression of these new militancies. The *barras bravas* erupted onto the national scene at the outset of the democratic transition in 1990, just as the massive grassroots movement against the Pinochet regime was eclipsed by the return of democratic institutions. Chile's new rulers were quick to criminalize the discontent expressed by the *barras*—the same discontent that only a few years earlier had fueled the shantytown uprisings against the Pinochet regime and which eventually brought them to power.

On the soccer field, victories and losses are all the same—both are valid reasons to celebrate. Neighborhood fields come to life after nightfall, when the protective shroud of darkness arrives to shield the revelers from the vigilant eye of the police. There is no shortage of drugs there. *Pitos*, *guiros* and *macoña* are some of the names given to the marijuana that freely passes through the lips of the kids on the field. They usually grow it themselves—a dash of green on their otherwise sad and dusty gardens. In the 1980s, marijuana was the most popular drug among kids on the fringes, so much so that its consumption came to be

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Translated from the Spanish by NACLA.



accepted by mothers and relatives who did not see any grave danger in the innocent little plant. "It calms him down," the mothers would say, "and on occasion I'll even make myself a cup of tea with the leaves when I'm too nervous." By the 1990s, however, the homegrown herb was displaced by the other offerings of the free market. As cocaine continued to make its way through Chile's middle and upper classes, *pasta base*, a highly addictive poor-man's cocaine made from plaster, the by-products of cocaine production and other powdered garbage, flooded Santiago's poor neighborhoods. Entire communities, including some like La Legua and La Victoria, once famous for their activism and militancy, are now devastated by the desperate cravings of hundreds of *pasta* addicts who appear each night on the edges of the soccer field or under the shadows of neighborhood street lights in search of a fix.

Yet the desolate neighborhood soccer fields bear other memories as well. In the 1980s, at the height of the protests against the Pinochet dictatorship, shantytowns were regularly raided and searched by the regime's security forces, often in the middle of the night. Shantytown residents would awaken to the thunder of loudspeakers ordering all men to assemble on the

local soccer field in military formation. The machine guns carried by the soldiers insured that no one would disobey the order. The troops, often with their faces painted for combat, would kick down doors and break windows as they entered people's homes, dragging half-dressed husbands, grandfathers, children and youth out of their houses at gun point. Residents were forced to trot to the soccer field boot-camp style, and were beaten if they so much as flinched when asked for their identity card number. Only the city's shantytowns were subjected to such humiliating rituals of surveillance and intimidation, justified by the regime as part of its war against subversion. These episodes became indelibly etched in the memories of the kids who would eventually join the *barras bravas*.

The intense memories accumulated in the neighborhood soccer fields made them the physical and symbolic spaces from which the protests against the dictatorship, and later the *barras bravas*, would emerge. During the 1980s, Santiago's poor barrios were the cradle of the intense struggle against the Pinochet regime. Molotov cocktails ignited the nights of protest other-

The desolate leisure of a shantytown soccer field.

Soccer fans cheer for their team at Chile's National Stadium.



wise shrouded in darkness thanks to the organized or random sabotage which often left entire neighborhoods without electricity. Many young shantytown residents who fought against the military machine with little more than stones were repeatedly detained, tortured and humiliated in the jails of the regime. They spent their adolescent years involved in clandestine militancy, student strikes, school takeovers, vigils for the disappeared, soup kitchens, hunger strikes, and all the other struggles that birthed the return of democratic rule. During the 1988 plebiscite, they actively participated in the marches for the "NO," which shook the regime and eventually led to the triumph of the *Concertación* coalition in the closing months of 1989.

The sense of triumph that followed the electoral victory of Patricio Aylwin, who came to power with the support of the Socialist Party and other sectors of the left, faded quickly for most poor urban youth. The dictatorship's repressive apparatus was left almost intact—ready to quell any kind of social unrest with violence. The police, now authorized by a legitimate democratic regime, soon unleashed a wave of repression directed specifically at shantytown youth. The government, in what seemed like an act of vengeance against those who had so fiercely fought against the security forces in the 1980s, passed a law which allowed the police to

detain individuals on suspicion alone. Bands of long-haired *rockeros* hanging out on shantytown street corners and groups of kids drinking beer and listening to music on the local soccer field were routinely rounded up in an attempt to control the "surplus" youth that the neoliberalization of the economy and the transition to democracy had left behind.

The two most important *bar-ras*—famous for their boundless devotion to their teams—are La Garra Blanca (The White Claw) and Los de Abajo (The Ones From Below). The former is devoted to the Colo-Colo soccer team, one of the country's most popular first-division clubs named after a heroic indigenous warrior who has been mythified in

Chile's official histories for defending the territory against the Spaniards during the Conquest. La Garra Blanca appropriated the hero's epic narrative and translated it into the social and economic idioms of its members. The members of La Garra, mostly young men from Santiago's peripheries, refer to themselves as "Indios, Proletarios, y Rebolucionarios"¹ (Indians, Proletarians and Revolutionaries), contradicting the narrative of upward social mobility so pervasive in contemporary Chilean society. La Garra proudly flaunts the humble origins of its members—they sing about it in their hymns, spray-paint it in their graffiti and shout it in their slogans, defacing the manicured landscapes of the Chilean miracle with their intransigent presence.

La Garra Blanca was formally founded in the late 1980s after generational tensions led to a split among the team's fans. As Eric, a founding member, describes:

The conflicts had been developing gradually, over many years. In the youth group, there were about 50 of us. Since we were young, we weren't allowed to participate in the club's events and parties. Among those on the fringes there were natural leaders like Fatman Jano, who was known for his foul mouth and his irreverence towards the rules. He always had problems with the officers of the fan club and was eventually expelled for insulting one of them. At the first game following the

The *barristas*' most fervent desire is to see their team victorious on the field, but their passion transcends both the team and the players.

"Players come and go," says Eric of La Garra, "but the *barra* remains."

incident, he sat down in the stands on the north side of the National Stadium and began singing all by himself. We immediately followed, and that is where it all began.²

This original group of rebellious Colo-Colo fans had ways of celebrating their beloved soccer team which were radically different from the orderly afternoons at the stadium sponsored by the official fan club. Boxes of wine and marijuana joints would make their way around the stands. Out of nowhere, someone would shout, "Death to Pinochet," incorporating the political slogans of the moment into the mantras of the fans. The new *barra* grew by leaps and bounds until the old fan club disappeared in its shadow.

It did not take long for La Garra to become a massive phenomenon, bringing together over 20,000 youth behind the chant of "Te quiero albo, te llevo en el corazón" (I love you White [the color of the Colo-Colo jersey], I carry you in my heart). During games, wooden stadium bleachers are set ablaze, and sticks, rocks and bottles rain on the playing field. As the fans make their way back to their neighborhoods, dozens of windshields are left shattered. The buses of the *barras* transport their pubescent mayhem throughout the country, following their team wherever it may go as they sing:

*I was born in a neighborhood made of tin and cardboard
I have smoked pot and I have felt love
I have been to jail many times, and many times I have lost
my voice*

*Now with democracy everything remains the same
We ask ourselves how long we can put up with it
Now that I am from below [referring to the name of the
barra]*

I understand the situation

*There are only two options—to be a hell-raiser and join
the 'revolución'.⁴*

Colo-Colo officials court the media in an effort to distance the team from the mayhem, which they blame on the left-wing extremists who have corrupted the otherwise wholesome souls of the fans. While Santiago's

political authorities insist that the club must pay the millions of pesos in damages and injuries, club officials refuse, stating again and again that the Garra Blanca operates beyond the limits of their control. After all, they say, La Garra was expelled from the official fan club years ago.

The love-struck fervor of Garra fans is orphaned, unrecognized by the official institution for which it is proclaimed. It stubbornly resists domestication. The Law on Violence in Stadiums, which imposed stiff jail sentences and other penalties for soccer-related offenses, did not deter *barristas* from their enamored pursuits. Fans meet clandestinely in neighborhood dives or on local soccer fields to plan their actions, organizing their movements through the city in strategic neighborhood-based groups. Los Killers, Los Incansables, La Río, Holocausto, Los Gangsters de Cerro Navia, and Los Rebolucionalbos³ are some of La Garra's "working groups," a term they use with bitter irony, a commentary on the rampant unemployment of the group's members.

Several years ago, soccer authorities launched a campaign to promote the affiliation of the *barras* with the official fan clubs of their teams. To those who would give their name, date of birth, identity card number and address, the official fan clubs were offering all kinds of gifts and benefits—materials to replace their old banners tattered from urban warfare, new drums to reinvigorate their heartbeat in the stadium bleachers, an easily accessible office to coordinate fan activity and resources for future projects. These offers in part resulted from the pressure that the government was putting on soccer authorities to control their fans. "As if we were children," commented Eric of La Garra Blanca, "they offered us toys in exchange for our freedom." Eric was adamant that the fans would never be seduced by such blackmail. Meanwhile, *barra* members tirelessly proclaim their independence: "I don't want to work, I don't want to study, I'm not going to affiliate, I want to sing to the White all day, and fuck up the *chuncho* (the rival Universidad de Chile team) and the police."

After so many years underground, La Garra has learned to operate with its own limited resources—taking up collections to repair the drum, putting on heavy metal benefit concerts and organizing parties to publish the *La Garra Blanca* magazine, which they say is the official and authentic voice of the fans. So far, the Garra has published three issues of its magazine, which has a

circulation of 3,000 and includes photographs, glossy paper, high-quality printing and only minimal advertising—at a cost of over \$13,000 per issue. In all likelihood, the money comes from a combination of pirate ventures administered by La Garra, including theft and other illicit undertakings. On one occasion, they accepted funding for a new 70-foot banner from the

no guarantees. I tell him that soccer is a transnational industry in which people are bought and sold like slaves based on their ability to move their legs. “That is true,” he responds, “but it is the only possibility that a lot of people have to get out of the barrio and become somebody. We like Ivan ‘Bam Bam’ Zamorano, for example, because even though he has become rich and famous, he has never forgotten his class.” But only a handful of kids ever reach the first-division soccer league, while the rest remain beating their drum in the stadium stands where La Garra Blanca stages its weekly spectacle.

“It is the only freedom I know,” proclaims Eric as he describes the *barristas*’ strategy of entrenching themselves in one part of the stadium to protect themselves from police aggression or a rival *barra*. “There, I am someone else,” he states as he recounts the strategies he and his friends use to smuggle into the stadium the alcohol and marijuana that enliven their weekly party. At the gates of the stadium, they are



A woman of the *barras* proudly wearing her piercings and the team jersey.

Milled Trophy Company on the condition that they put the company’s name and logo on it. When they unfurled it, the name of their corporate sponsor was nowhere to

be found, ostensibly because the cops had ripped that part of the banner off in a scuffle before the game—any excuse to avoid selling one’s soul to the market.

While the *barristas*’ most fervent desire is to see their team victorious on the field, their passion goes beyond the team and the players at any particular moment. “Players come and go,” comments Eric with a hint of sadness in his voice, “but the *barra* remains.” Eric bitterly compared his own situation to that of the players, who are paid millions of pesos each month. Forgetting his fanaticism for an instant, he wonders what the future might hold for him and those like him who live in a system which affords

frisked by cops and sniffed by dogs, but the alcohol makes it in anyway, usually in plastic bags that they hide in their crotches. “It’s the only part of our bodies that they don’t touch,” he recounts with a smile, remembering one time when the stands were so crowded and the movement so intense that a bag of *pisco* broke and spilled all over his inner thigh, making him run to the bathroom several times to put water on his legs to ease the burning.

The identities of individuals are also concealed and transmuted through the multiple names and nicknames used to elude the police and the files of the official fan club. *Barristas* identify each other through names like Viper, la Chica Sandra, Palomo, Rodilla, Bartiarti and Jota—without last names, without a past and without families because their only family is their passion for the *barra*.

Only a few women participate in the euphoria of the *barras*. They are usually women who were once girl-

Every year
on the anniversary of
the military coup, the *barras*
enter into a non-aggression pact,
joining forces in a unified
contingent of rebellion.

friends, sisters or friends of *barra* kids who, after accompanying them through countless triumphs and defeats, earn their place amidst the multitude of machos. Acceptance, however, is not without its price. In order to earn the respect of the *barristas*, women must transform themselves by masculinizing their gestures and their language to prove they deserve a place in the violent territory of the stadium bleachers. "At first it concerned us," Jorge remembered, reiterating the cliché of feminine fragility. "We had to follow them around to protect them from the cops and the rival *barra*." Soon, however, they realized that their women comrades were just as fierce as they are. The women who wield sticks, throw stones and yell team slogans are hardly delicate flowers.

There are countless motives underlying the *barras*' rage. On one occasion, as the *barristas* made their way home from the stadium, they ran across a store selling Hush Puppy shoes, which in Chile are prohibitively expensive for everyone but the middle and upper classes. They ransacked the store, leaving their old beat-up shoes in the store window. There are also more explicitly political reasons that arouse the *barristas*' ire, such as Pinochet's presence in the Senate. I saw them at the massive demonstration outside the National Congress on the day the dictator made his shameful entrance into the legislature in March 1998. There they were wearing ski masks and ready for combat, just like *Subcomandante* Marcos but on skateboards. Amidst the smoke of tear-gas grenades, they fought the cops with an artillery of rocks thrown from behind their barricades. It was difficult to determine to which of the two main *barras* they belonged, La Garra Blanca or Los de Abajo. In such circumstances, *barristas* hide their faces from television cameras and photographers. They also leave the insignia of their teams behind, as their political memory unites them into a single squadron of rebellion.

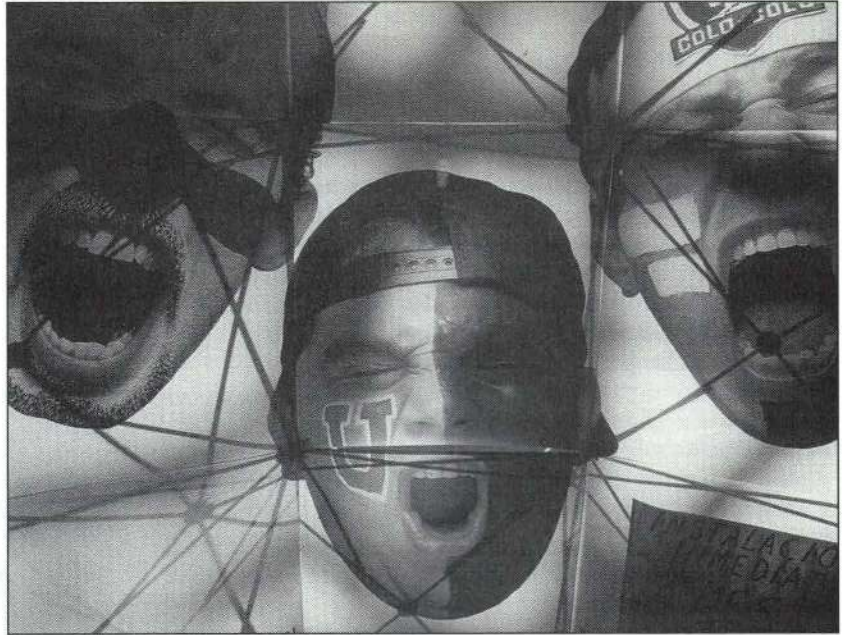
The *barras* enter into non-aggression pacts every year on the anniversary of the military coup. They are always present amidst the crowd that makes its way towards the main cemetery. Year after year, the march is led by a contingent of orphaned mothers wearing the pictures of their disappeared children on their lapels. The police always disrupt the event, launching tear-gas grenades into the crowd during the march or the ceremony inside the cemetery. In the face of such provocation, the two major *barras* join forces against the police. Inside the

cemetery, they form a human shield around the Monument to the Disappeared to protect the women and children from the inevitable police onslaught, always justified after the fact by claims of self-defense. Kids from the *barras* simply laugh at these excuses, as they pummel hypocrisy with their rocks.

Racial and ethnic discrimination is another factor that has detonated the rage of the *barras*. When images of the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles reached Santiago, the *barristas* organized street demonstrations to protest the incident and the impunity given to the L.A. cops. In a similar gesture of solidarity, La Garra Blanca organized a demonstration when Mapuche communities were evicted from their lands by government and business interests in order to build a hydroelectric dam. They also helped organize the Festival of Mapuche Resistance, a large-scale benefit concert which brought together rock and heavy metal bands from Chile and Argentina, uniting the thunder of amplified rock music with the struggles of native peoples. Bands like A.N.I.M.A.L., Fiscales, Los Panteras Negras and Los Miserables were present, strumming their own tribal riffs as Mapuche leader Aucán Huilcamán spoke of past and present injustices. In these ways, the kids from the *barras* politicize their aggressions by creating allegiances with other minority struggles, placing their resentful hearts on the side of the victims of the neoliberal bulldozer.

Barra graffiti is the language of the shantytown tribe, a mix of gothic signs with their rocker grammar. Its inverted crosses and vowels-turned-arrows invoke both satanic and precolumbian signs to create a language indecipherable by the cops on their trail. It is as if by inscribing the profane calligraphy of their graffiti on city walls, the *barristas* are confronting the new educational order of the free market—the classist policies of the private schools to which shantytown youth have no access. These inscriptions, with their hip lettering and intentional misspellings, are visible signs

An advertisement for cable television in Santiago appealing directly to the passion of soccer fans.



of these shantytown stiff's whose police files were created long before they were born.

The affluent neighborhoods of Santiago shiver in fear every time there is a soccer game in the San Carlos de Apoquindo Stadium, home to the Catholic University Soccer team, which is located in the city's ritzy suburbs. A few days before these games, there is always an announcement about increased police protection for the houses of the rich. It is as if the announcement itself prefigures the all-out battle that inevitably takes place. And so it happens—kids appear on television being herded off to jail handcuffed, with their heads lowered. Those who escape arrest inflict their rage on the luxury cars, quaintly manicured gardens and other of toys of the upper class—that 1.8% of Chilean families who receive monthly incomes of over \$15,000.

Then, and only then, the *barristas* return to their own neighborhoods—grooving to the sounds of their songs and reviving the popular melodies of yesteryear with new lyrics. The well known "Venceremos," one of the hymns of the Popular Unity, echoes afresh in the bleachers of the National Stadium, once a concentration camp of the military regime. But the *barras* sing it without nostalgia, without the sad optimism of what now seems a wordy leftist harangue. They revive a melody that they

themselves never sang—a melody they learned from clandestine tapes or the stories of relatives who were exiled or jailed after the military coup. In spite of the indictments of the national press, which accuses them of being lost souls, drug addicts, bums and drunks, the kids of the *barras* know where and when to pledge their allegiance. From the trenches of their curbside struggles, they evoke the fractured memory of the country into which they were born. In the punitive eye of the system, they are the black sheep who set a bad example for today's success-oriented and conservative youth, those mesmerized by the year-round Christmas of the malls that line the Chilean Miami. The kids of the *barras*, those angels with holes in their shoes, are the human surplus that wipe the hypocritical smirk off the face of the victorious Chile of the miracle. ■

Notes

The Children of War: Youth Gangs in Today's El Salvador

1. Statistics from the Pan American Health Organization's *Health Situation Analysis Program 1997* and the World Bank publication, *Crime and Violence as Development Issues in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 1997 as cited in "Assessing Personal Security in Latin America," *Latin America Special Report* (London: Latin American Newsletters, April 1997).
2. With a population of 5.8 million people and a per capita homicide rate of 150 per 100,000, there are approximately 8,700 murders in El Salvador each year. Salvadoran police statistics place the homicide figure even higher than the PAHO-derived figure at roughly 11,000 per year. It is estimated that about 75,000 lost their lives in the 12-year-long Salvadoran civil war—approximately 6,250 per year.
3. A total of 12 civilians and four policemen were arrested for the 1994 slayings. During the April 1997 trial of three of these Black

Shadow members, the mayor of San Miguel praised them and they were acquitted. See *The New York Times*, August 10, 1997.

4. *The Washington Post*, May 27, 1995.
5. *The Washington Post*, May 27, 1995.
6. UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 1997* (New York: UNICEF and Oxford University Press, 1997); and UNICEF, *El Salvador Basic Data* (UNICEF: San Salvador, 1994).
6. UNICEF estimates that one out of every ten Salvadorans owns a television and 48% own radios. The figures for household ownership would be much higher. UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 1997*.
7. Statistics from the Salvadoran General Household Survey of 1995, cited in "A Proposal Addressing the Issue of Youth at Social Risk: Youth and Violence Project," UNICEF, San Salvador (1997), Mimeograph.
8. On U.S. policy towards El Salvador, see Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York:

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Times Books, 1984). On U.S. support for counterinsurgency units involved in massacres, see Mark Danner, *El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). On the intellectual legacy of the Jesuits and the U.S. government's role in the Salvadoran army's cover-up of their murders, see Teresa Whitfield, *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuria and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); and Martha Doggett, *Death Foretold: The Jesuit Murders in El Salvador* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1993). On the FMLN, see Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution* (Boston: South End Press, 1982). On the legacy of war and the transition to peace, see Horacio Castellanos Moya, *Incertidumbres: Cultura y transición en El Salvador* (San Salvador: Ediciones Tendencias, 1993).

9. "FY 1997 Year End Report," *Monthly Removals Report*, U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, Washington, D.C., October 23, 1997; and "FY 1998 Total Removals by Top Twenty Nationalities," *Monthly Removals Report*, U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, Washington, D.C., March 23, 1998. Note that INS statistics follow years from October through October.
10. "An Inside Look at the 18th Street's Menace," *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 1996.
11. Statistics from the UN Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Delinquents (Ilanud) as cited in "Institutions: Weak Court System Delays or Denies," *Latin American Special Report* (London: Latin American Newsletters, April 1997).

Heroes or Hooligans: Media Portrayals of Peruvian Youth

1. *La República* (Lima), March 1, 1995.
2. Photographs published in *El Mundo* (Lima), March 1, 1995.
3. Under public pressure, the army gave a confusing explanation of the incident, but acknowledged that Yenuri Chihuahua did not die in combat and that while in the barracks suffered "cuts in his feet" that resulted in the tetanus infection. Official Communique 001/OIE/95, Army Information Office.
4. See Aldo Panfichi, ed., *Fútbol: identidad, violencia y racionalidad* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica, 1995).
5. *La República* (Lima), February 13, 1995.
6. *El Comercio* (Lima), February 12, 1995. The following description of the clash is based on this newspaper article.
7. *La República* (Lima), March 1, 1995.
8. *El Comercio* (Lima), February 26, 1995. The conflict between Peru and Ecuador occurred between January and March, Peru's summer months.
9. *La República* (Lima), November 18, 1995.
10. *El Mundo* (Lima), February 7, 1995.
11. *El Mundo* (Lima), February 13, 1995.
12. *El Mundo* (Lima), February 21, 1995.
13. *La República* (Lima), November 18, 1995.
14. *El Mundo* (Lima), February 7, 1995.
15. National Coordinating Committee on Human Rights, "¿Deber Cívico o Licencia para el Abuso?" *Flecha en el Azul*, Vols. 4-5 (Lima), p. 17.
16. Defensoría del Pueblo, "Levas y Servicio Militar Obligatorio: Pronunciamiento," *Flecha en el Azul*, Vols. 4-5 (Lima), p. 22.

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1. In their graffiti, *La Garra Blanca* spells "revolucionarios" with a "b" to make the word pun with "boludo," which in this context would mean obnoxious or stupid.
2. Interview in *Las Últimas Noticias* (Santiago), March 23, 1997.
3. Here the expression "rebolucionario" is mixed with the word "albo," meaning white, in reference to the color of the Colo-Colo jersey.
4. The hymn of *Los de Abajo*, to the tune of Venceremos, appears in *Página Abierta* (Santiago), February 2, 1992.

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