

## **“BUSY LOUIE” IN THE RING: A SOCIOLOGIST AMONG PRIZEFIGHTERS \***

### **How does a sociologist become interested in boxing to the point of becoming a boxer himself?**

You don't become a boxer-sociologist or sociologist-boxer by design. Aside from the competitive spirit, the skills and inclinations required to slug it out in the ring and those needed to become an academic researcher are worlds apart and they are scarcely combined in the same individual. So it has to be an accident. In my case it was a serendipitous series of circumstances that led me to sign up at a boxing gym not far from my apartment (I lived on the edge of the ghetto of Woodlawn, on the South Side of Chicago, while doing my doctoral studies at the University of Chicago). At the time I was conducting research on racial and class inequality in the American metropolis. I felt that both everyday discourse and scholarly studies on lower-class blacks were full of preconceived notions that mainly expressed American racial prejudice and were more an obstacle than a help to research. I decided to carry out direct observation inside the ghetto, and for that I needed an observation spot to meet and socialize with young black men. So when Olivier, a French friend of mine who practiced judo and wanted to get in shape, proposed to take me to a nearby boxing gym he had found, I agreed to go.

I was immediately fascinated by what seemed like a strange planet — by the sights, sounds, smells, special mores and arcane language of a world closed onto itself (the gym had no window, which reinforced the sense of separation from the outside), with its own history, rites and idols, and about which I knew next to nothing. But if you had told me then that, two years later, I would fight in the Chicago Gloves tournament, work as a cornerman during a big-time bout on national television, and spend most of my days immersed in that gym, to the point where I would seriously think of giving up my academic career to “turn pro,” I would have said that you were nuts! And yet this is exactly what happened...

### **So you did not go into the gym with the intention of studying boxers. But how did the latter react to you, were you accepted by them?**

My intention was to use the gym as a window into everyday life in the ghetto for my urban research, and it proved to be that. But soon another, more personal, challenge arose: can I withstand the rigors of training and learn the craft, become a half-way decent boxer? And yet another, after I had imbibed enough to understand boxing from within: can I make sociological sense of the world of prizefighters? Can I explain to outsiders, with the concepts of sociology, what makes boxers tick, what determines the shape of their career, what the sensual and moral attractions of the trade are to them, why they dedicate themselves body and soul (medieval scholars had a beautiful term to express this sense of devotion: *religiosime*) to a profession that is ultimately destructive of the only thing they have of value, namely, their bodies? That's where the sociologist rejoined the boxer in me.

I was well accepted by all the boxers in the club, precisely because I entered their world as boxer and not as sociologist. At first they saw me as a sort of curiosity: I was the only white guy in the gym, the only one to wear glasses, the only one who had a university education of course, not to mention the only Frenchman. And I was quite inept too! Boxing is not as easy as it

looks... But I improved slowly and, after a few months of hard work, I was able to spar on a regular basis with amateurs and later with pros. Most importantly, I played by the same rules as everybody else: I trained diligently, running every morning, doing my “floorwork” shadow-boxing and hitting the bags, doing my “tablework” (abdominals and calisthenics) and my “ringwork” putting on the gloves. I got my knicks, welts and bruises, and I got my nose broken, like everyone else. In short, I was dedicated to the craft, and the trainers and the other fighters could see that. So they treated me as one of theirs.

So long as you submit yourself to the grueling regimen of the boxer and “pay your dues” in the ring, you will be welcome with open arms into the brotherhood of Fistiana. Black, white, yellow or brown, rich or poor, educated or not: who you are outside the gym does not matter one iota; what matters is whether you abide dutifully by the rules of the trade (including the prescription to not ask people anything about their personal life). In the course of my apprenticeship, I gained a set of wonderful friends and collected a whole series of nicknames that indicated my growing integration in the gym, from “Busy Louie” to “Bad Dude” to the “French Hammer.” I was even made an “honorary black” by my fellow-boxers and my old coach, DeeDee, who became like a second father to me.

**You say that, contrary to the common view, fighters don’t really get in the ring for the money, and that the notion of “sacrifice” is key to understanding the world of boxing.**

Because I learned the craft firsthand, between the ropes, spending nearly four years with my buddies from Woodlawn, I came to understand boxing the way they do, viscerally, with and through my body. And this allowed me to discover that what boxers get out of their profession is not the economic benefits — the great majority of pro fighters make very little money, as little as 150 dollars a bout and they’re lucky if they can fight every other month; nearly all of them could earn more working lousy jobs or plunging into the street economy. What they gain that only boxing can give them is the sense of having a valued craft and of making themselves into a new person who rises above his circumstances to become recognized within a moral community, the boxing fraternity. And what I call the “symbolic profit of masculinity,” the fact of being publicly attested as a supremely virile being on a public stage, the ring — the time-honored belief that the heavyweight champion of the world is the most manly man walking the face of the planet prevails to this day.<sup>1</sup>

Forget the money and think of prizefighting as a religion of the masculine, martial body, whose catechism centers on the notion of “sacrifice.” That notion organizes the daily round of the boxer in and out of the gym. It serves to expand and preserve his physical and mental capacities to guarantee peak performance in the ring, but it also has the effect of setting the fighter apart, of elevating him above others around him who do not follow the same regimen of denial of earthly pleasures. “Discipline,” “dedication,” “keeping clean,” “doing the right thing” are expressions that boxers use all the time to refer not only to work in the gym but also to the practices of abstinence in the three areas that form the “trinity of pugilistic sacrifice,” namely, food, social life, and sex.<sup>2</sup> Boxers must drastically restrict their eating, avoiding all fatty and

---

<sup>1</sup> Loic Wacquant, “The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel About Their Trade.” Theory and Society, 24-4, August 1995, pp. 489-535, and “The Social Logic of Boxing in Black Chicago: Toward A Sociology of Pugilism.” Sociology of Sports Journal, 9-3, September 1992, pp. 221-254.

<sup>2</sup> Loic Wacquant, “Sacrifice,” in Gerald Early (ed.), Body Language: Graywolf Forum Two, Saint-Paul, Graywolf Press, 1998, pp. 47-59.

sugary foodstuffs (not to mention soda and alcohol) to keep their weight down. They are expected to compress their family life and eliminate night outings, shunning parties and clubs like the plague, to conserve their energies. And they are instructed to keep away from all amorous intercourse with their girlfriend or wife for weeks and months before a fight, because sex is believed to disrupt their bodies, sap their strength and make them “soft.”

Following these ascetic rules encloses boxers into their own separate world (like the rules of the monasteries, more so than the walls, enclose the monks in their own cosmos). It transforms their everyday life into a perpetual ordeal, a mountain to be scaled, a land to be conquered. And they are the ones doing the conquest, against the odds, so that they feel that by boxing they escape the life of invisibility and indignity promised to them by their inferior class origins and stigmatized ethnic identity, and they seize their own fate, literally and figuratively, with their own hands — or gloved fists.

Boxers love what they do and are deeply attached to their occupation. To them, it's a passion, something they feel they have to do, and they express this compulsion by likening it to romantic love, drug addiction, and a disease. The Sweet Science gives them the dignity, respect, and recognition that they are hard pressed getting elsewhere. It is a springboard for discipline, self-confidence and a protective shield against the “fast life” of the streets and its dangers. At the same time, boxers have no illusions: they know that they are pawns in a game of ruthless exploitation, merchandise in an economy in which deception, manipulation, and guile are the normal order of business. They also know that if they had had other arenas where to realize themselves, in school or at work, they likely would not be seeking redemption in the squared circle. So theirs is a bittersweet love...

**How do boxers feel about that aspect of their trade, precisely, being exploited and treated as a sort of live physical commodity?**

All fighters will readily tell you that the game is rife with “crooked managers.” They take it for granted that promoters and matchmakers are “fleshpeddlers” who will not hesitate one second to send them “fight King Kong for a dime” if it's in the promoter's pecuniary interest. Boxers use three distinct languages to express their sense of exploitation, the fact of being a body trained, exhibited and marketed for money.<sup>3</sup> The first is the idiom of prostitution: they compare themselves to prostitutes and the manager (or promoter) to a pimp who uses them, sells them for a “quick buck” without regard for their well-being. As Randall “Tex” Cobb, a white heavyweight from the seventies, famously said: “I'm a whore who sells his blood instead of his ass. I never made much money being good lookin', but there's always somebody who'll pay me to take a punch.” The second idiom of exploitation borrows from the historical experience of slavery and likens the ring or the gym to a plantation and the fighter to the slave who toils under the tutelage of his master-manager. As you can imagine, it is a language that has a particularly bitter resonance in the mouths of African-American fighters. The third idiom, that of animal husbandry, suggests that boxers are treated in the manner of dogs, pigs, stallions, and other commercially valued livestock. All three idioms denounce the immoral, indeed inhumane, merchandising of live bodies.

---

<sup>3</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Whores, Slaves, and Stallions: Languages of Exploitation Among Professional Fighters,” Body and Society, 6-3, 2000, in press.

Yet, at the same time as they express this keen sense of exploitation, boxers accommodate themselves to being fleshly commodities in this “show business with blood” that is prizefighting (the expression is Bud Schulberg’s). First, being of low class and ethnic provenance, they perceive exploitation as an inescapable fact of life that ordinary folks like them cannot avoid — you will be exploited by a factory boss or by a boxing manager, either way you’ll be exploited. Second, they are duped by the ideology of entrepreneurship that pervades the profession, which portrays the boxer as a defiant individual, a modern-day gladiator out to prove his mettle by seizing his own destiny. Lastly, with the complicity of peers, trainers, and managers, every fighter clings to the self-serving notion that he will be the exception to the rule of exploitation: he will get a “big payday” without getting spoiled in the process.

### **Is boxing a “way out of the ghetto” as the pugilistic folklore claims?**

No, boxing is truly a dead-end if you look at the objective probability of financial success. There are some ten thousand registered professional boxers in the world, and only a couple of hundreds can even survive strictly on their ring earnings, with maybe two dozens making the big purses (in the six- and seven-figure range) that you always read about in the press. In Chicago, in the past fifteen years, no more than five boxers could support themselves solely with fights and only one broke the magical “million-dollar line,” heavyweight champion Oliver McCall, after he knocked Lennox Lewis out in Wembley, only to find himself broke soon after... Club fighters make a pittance: 50 dollars a round on average, between 500 and 1,000 dollars at best for a ten-rounder headlining a card in local night-club, a bit more if they’ve got a national promoter behind them who hopes to recoup his investment by “building” his guy up to the televised fights where all the money is.<sup>4</sup>

Boxing is the epitome of the “winner-take-all” game: a dozen prizefighters (and half-a-dozen promoters) skim 99,9% of all the monies to be made. The rest pay themselves with “the counterfeit money of their dreams,” to paraphrase the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss speaking about magic. If you’re athletically gifted, you’re better off going into one or the other major team sports that dominate the American media. But even then, your odds of success are absolutely minuscule, similar to winning the lottery... In a sense boxing is a kind of vicious lottery that a small and diminishing number of men from the lower classes play with their bodies.

### **Is this why, over the past decade or so, boxing has lost so many recruits to the NBA and the NFL?**

Boxing has declined tremendously from its glory days of the twenties or the sixties and it is only a shadow of its old self now. It’s hard for us to imagine how central it was to national life half-a-century ago, when a heavyweight championship fight brought the whole society to a complete standstill. The first reason for this is the general transformation of the life of the working classes, with the marginalization of hard manual work, the improvement in the standards of living, and the generalization of schooling as a means of access to even unskilled jobs: it has nearly dried up the supply of volunteers for the pugilistic front. Secondly, boxing occupies a lowly position at the bottom of the hierarchy of athletic avocations in the United States: it is something of a pariah sport, practiced mostly by those who have failed at other sports (guys too short to play

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Loïc Wacquant, “A Fleshpeddler at Work: Power, Pain, and Profit in the Prizefighting Economy,” *Theory and Society*, 27-1, February 1998, pp. 1-42.

basketball, too light to play football, not crafty enough for wrestling). It is not integrated into the normal academic cursus of American teenagers: you cannot get a fellowship to go to college by boxing, which you can by playing baseball, basketball or football, or even wrestling or track. A third reason helps explain why the top athletes in American high schools, particularly big and tall guys, are now going into team sports: with the extraordinary increase in revenues generated by television, even obscure “role players” in the NBA and NFL make much more money now than boxers can ever hope to generate. The median salary in the NBA is two million dollars and two thirds of the players — which means even most “bench warmers” — earn over a million a year. And, no matter how long and demanding the NBA season is, it’s far less damaging to the body to play 82 games of basketball than to go through three or four hard fights. (The NFL is another matter: the physical destruction that football players withstand is incredible, very similar if not worse than that suffered by boxers, but this is a completely censored topic in the U.S. media).

### **What determines what kind of boxer one becomes or the style and strategy that a given fighter develops?**

Boxing is the quintessential body craft: you work with your body, on your body, to produce a new, skilled, body capable of withstanding and giving punishment in the ring. So your body is simultaneously the raw materials, the machinery, and the finished product of the fighting factory that is the gym.<sup>5</sup> Which means that the kind of body you have, your somatic endowment so to speak, will determine the kind of boxer you can be. If you are small and stubby, with short arms and a strong upper body, you are tailor-made for becoming what the lingo calls a “slugger” who is willing to take punches in order to walk up close to his opponent and fight from inside. But if you are lightly built, with a lithe torso, thin legs and long arms, then you’ve got to be what specialists call a “boxer,” in the sense of technician who punches at a distance and avoids in-fighting by moving around and keeping his opponent at bay with straight jabs and right hands.

The style of boxer you are, in turn, determines your longevity: as a rule, sluggers or counter-punchers have much shorter careers than, say, “boxer-punchers” because they absorb a lot more blows and their bodies wear down much quicker. And they are also more prone to suffering long-term physical damage (medical studies show that dementia pugilistica, the “punch-drunk” syndrome, affects primarily sluggers and brawlers). Sometimes a boxer wants to fight a style for which he’s not built and then he pays a heavy price. That was my case, ironically! I’m rather thin and long-armed but I have the mentality of a brawler, I want to get in close, get rough and get it on. And, because I have no defensive skills, I have to attack and throw punches all the time to protect myself — thus the ringname my gym mates gave me: “Busy Louie.”

But anatomy is not quite destiny: the purpose of training is to hone the skills that capitalize on your natural strengths but also to develop the skills that will compensate for the limitations of your skeletal and muscular makeup. For example, a boxer who has a weak “chin,” meaning that he does not withstand power blows to the head well, needs to expand his defensive abilities, improve his footwork and his upper-body movement to slip and parry blows, and “ride punches” to get out of clinches quickly. Boxers and trainers like to say that you are “born” a fighter, that you need “raw talent” like in all other sports. But when you dig a little, they admit

---

<sup>5</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Un arma sagrada. Los boxeadores profesionales: capital corporal y trabajo corporal”, in Javier Auyero (ed.), Caja de Herramientas. El lugar de la cultura en la sociología norteamericana, Buenos Aires, UNQUI, 1999, pp. 237-292.

that even a “natural” needs to work hard and long to acquire the requisite bodily capacities, the right sensibilities to be proficient in the ring. Things as elemental as being relaxed between the ropes can prove elusive: Georges Foreman was a better fighter in his comeback at age 40 than he was in his twenties when he literally mauled opponents in a couple of rounds (before being defeated by Ali in “The Rumble in the Jungle”) because, in the interim, he had matured and learned how to breathe properly in the ring. And boxing is a craft that you can only learn by doing. This is why, good trainers will tell you, it takes four years to make a well-rounded amateur fighter and another three years to produce a seasoned professional.

**Last question: what was your fighting weight and did you spar with any well-known boxers?**

I used to train at about 143-145 pounds and I fought at 139 pounds, which is the upper limit for the junior welterweight division in the amateurs. My last summer in the gym, training and running hard everyday, I got all the way down to 130 lbs — on a 1,75-meter frame — but it made me too weak. My coach DeeDee complained that “you done shed so much weight, Louie, that if you lose another pound you gonna disappear,” and my regular sparring partner, Ashante, an undefeated welterweight at that time, was throwing me around like a rag doll in the clinches. So I got back up to around 139.

A boxer has two weights, his “walking-around weight” and his “fight weight,” the latter being anywhere from five to fifteen pounds lower than the former depending on his size and build. He must find his right “fight weight,” which is the lowest weight at which he is the strongest and the most comfortable moving about. A fighter sometimes competes in a weight category that is too low for him, where he has to kill himself dieting and then he becomes “weak as cat liver.” But he can also fight at a weight that is too high, where he does not carry enough of a punch and does not have the body strength to resist his opponent. Either can be a costly mistake.

I enjoyed sparring with shorter, stocky boxers that I could reach easily and slug with from up close. It didn’t really matter to me what weight they were. (I once got bloodied up by Smithie, a light-heavyweight, and the coach had me mop up the ring mat afterwards because it was all stained in red). I hated to box with tall and rangy guys with arms long like the tentacles of an octopus — like the best-known boxer I used to tango with at the Woodlawn Boys Club, Lorenzo “The Stallion” Smith: he twice battled for a world title in the 147-lbs division and he’s still ranked among the top fighters in the world today. He would keep me at a distance with his murderous jab and tag me whenever he wanted with straight right hands and crosses. And when I managed to come in under his guard, he’d greet me with vicious uppercuts. Just talking about it I can feel the sting of his punches! I gotta get back to him now that I’m more savvy: hey, Lorenzo, are you out there? I’m making my comeback, let’s rumble you and me!

*Loïc Wacquant is a Professor of Sociology at the University of California-Berkeley and a researcher at the Centre de sociologie européenne du Collège de France. He is the author of numerous studies on urban inequality, racial domination, social theory and the body. His most recent books are Cárceles de la miseria (Ediciones Manantial, 2000) and Corps et âme. Carnet ethnographique d’un apprenti-boxeur (Agone, 2000).*

\* Forthcoming in Spanish in Mistica (Buenos Aires), August 2000 (with pictures)