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Review article

Pugilistic rationality and medico-legal supremacism. An argumentative controversy about consensual violence

Racionalidad pugilística y supremacismo médico-legal. Una controversia argumental sobre la violencia consensuada

Racionalidade pugilística e supremacia médico-legal. Uma controvérsia argumentativa sobre a violência consensual

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a critical review of some of the main arguments put forward by detractors and defenders in the so-called *boxing debate*. It examines the positions put forward by prominent representatives of medico-legal activism in favor of the total abolition of boxing and particularly confronts the myth of the savage and irrational nature of the sport. This conception is contrasted with the ethnographic approach proposed by Lois Wacquant and his mentor, Pierre Bourdieu, on the existence of a *pugilistic rationality* forged in the boxer's bodily *habitus*. Important aspects of the problem are discussed, such as the fact that pedagogy, through which boxing is taught,

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is far from being conscious, reflective, theorizing and intellectualistic (which feeds the appearance of a supposed absence of training and cultivation of a knowledge that is eminently practical). It also shows the duality of medical argumentation by subtly moving from the *epistemic* plane to the *ethical-moral* plane and the implications that such opacity entails. The aim of the article is not to close the controversy to the detriment of the concerns of the medical-health sector, but to show the philosophical *complexity* that underlies it.

Keywords: Boxing; Corporality; *Habitus*; Practical logic; Pugilistic rationality.

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta una revisión crítica de algunos de los principales argumentos esgrimidos por detractores y defensores en el denominado *debate sobre el boxeo*. Se examinan las posturas planteadas por destacados representantes del activismo médico-legal a favor de la abolición total del boxeo y se confronta particularmente el mito de la naturaleza salvaje e irracional de dicho deporte. Se contrasta tal concepción con el abordaje etnográfico propuesto por Lois Wacquant y su mentor, Pierre Bourdieu, sobre la existencia de una *racionalidad pugilística* forjada en el *habitus* corporal del boxeador. Se recorren aspectos importantes del problema como es el hecho de que la Pedagogía, a través de la cual se enseña a boxear, dista de ser consciente, reflexiva, teorizadora e intelectualista (lo cual alimenta la apariencia de una supuesta ausencia de formación y cultivo de un saber que es eminentemente práctico). Asimismo, se muestra la dualidad de la argumentación médica al moverse sutilmente del plano *epistémico* al plano *ético-moral* y las implicaciones que tal opacidad arrastra. El objetivo del artículo no es cerrar la controversia en detrimento de las preocupaciones del sector médico-sanitario, sino mostrar la *complejidad* filosófica que le subyace.

Palabras clave: Boxeo; Corporalidad; *Habitus*; Lógica práctica; Racionalidad pugilística.

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta uma revisão crítica de alguns dos principais argumentos apresentados por adversários e apoiadores no chamado debate do boxe. Ela examina as posições apresentadas por destacados representantes do ativismo médico-legal em favor da abolição total do boxe e enfrenta em particular o mito da natureza selvagem e irracional do esporte. Esta concepção é contrastada com a abordagem etnográfica proposta por Lois Wacquant e seu mentor, Pierre Bourdieu, sobre a existência de uma racionalidade pugilística forjada no hábito corporal do boxeador. Aspectos importantes do problema são explorados, como o fato de que a pedagogia através da qual o boxe é ensinado está longe de ser consciente, reflexiva, teorizante e intelectual (o que alimenta a aparência de uma suposta ausência de treinamento e cultivo de um conhecimento que é eminentemente prático). Ela também mostra a dualidade da argumentação médica ao passar sutilmente do plano epistêmico para o plano ético-moral, e as implicações que tal opacidade implica. O objetivo do artigo não é fechar a controvérsia em detrimento das preocupações do setor médico-sanitário, mas mostrar a complexidade filosófica que lhe está subjacente.

Palavras-chave: Boxe; Corporalidade; *Habitus*; Lógica Prática; Racionalidade Pugilística.



INTRODUCTION

Very recently, on September 2, 2021, Mexican boxer Jeanette Zacarías Zapata, barely 18 years old, died after being knocked out by Canadian Marie-Pier Houle in the fourth round. Zacarías died at the Sacré-Cœur hospital in Montreal (Canada), where she had been in an induced coma for five days. The news, which shocked the boxing world, evoked other fateful deaths linked to the sport, such as that of 19-year-old Jordanian Rashed Al-Swaisat, who died a few months earlier (April 16), after being hospitalized in a Polish hospital for ten days because of the blows he received in a World Youth Championship bout. The list of boxers who died during a bout or as a result of injuries caused by the sport includes most recently Maxim Dadashev from Russia, Patrick Day from the United States and Hugo Santillan from Argentina, all three of whom died in 2019.

A few days after the fatal outcome of the fight, in which Jeanette Zacarias perished, the British advocacy association for people with brain damage, Headway, reiterated its call for a ban on boxing. Headway and other organizations provided evidence from British research on concussions in sport. Peter McCabe, chief executive of Headway, said, "We explain the consequences - as we have done repeatedly for decades - and yet no one seems willing to address the clear, obvious and unacceptable dangers of boxing. Make no mistake: this tragedy will be repeated again and again until boxing is banned."

The main medical argument against boxing has been the risk of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), also known as chronic traumatic brain injury (CTBI) and *dementia pugilistica* or "punch syndrome." It has also been noted that other boxing injuries can lead to blindness, hearing loss and fractures and studies show that boxing is associated with devastating short-term injuries and chronic neurological damage for long-term participants (Zazryn, McCrory & Cameron, 2009; Hernandez Rivas, 2020). Every time a death occurs in pugilism, the institutional and media effervescence against it resurfaces. The call for a *total* ban on boxing contained in the Declaration of the 35th World Medical Assembly (an instrument issued in 1983, revised and ratified by WADA in 2017 and 2020) is gaining strength. In that declaration, it is argued that: "Boxing is a dangerous sport. Unlike most other sports, its basic intention is to produce damage to the body with blows to the head specifically", (Cit. in Hernández Rivas, 2020, p. 30). Likewise, the declaration underlines that "national medical bodies have organized active campaigns to abolish all forms of boxing" and that, not being listened to, "a series of tragedies have occurred in boxing worldwide" (Cit. in Hernández Rivas, 2020, p 31).

This article proposes a review of the most common arguments in the confrontation between boxing detractors and defenders. The starting point is a general questioning of the claims of medical-health activism, followed by a critical reflection on the representation of boxing as an *irrational* activity. To this end, we have reviewed a series of works that contribute to an epistemic, ethnographic and ethical approach to observe the problem of *pugilistic violence* from a more fruitful angle.

For the realization of this work, classic theoretical-methodological documents in the area of combat sports, especially in boxing, were taken into account. On the other hand, some updated sources were consulted in this profile that enriched this conception of Pugilistic rationality and Medical-Legal Supremacy (Casper *et al.*, 2019; Finkel *et al.*, 2019; Stewart *et al.*, 2019; Hernández, 2020; Iverson, Gardner, 2020; Wolfson *et al.*, 2020; WMA, 2020; Chistiansen 2020; Chistiansen 2021; Schaffer, 2021).



DEVELOPMENT

Banning boxing: medical-health activism against a deadly degrading sport Institutions of very high academic prestige have been driving forces for the eradication of boxing, both professional and amateur. A paradigmatic reference, in this sense, has been the British Medical Association (BMA), which in 1993 had already urged the prohibition of boxing in its imposing and polemic publication *The Boxing Debate*. The medical sector has pointed out that the evidence of risk of brain injury is reason *enough* to ban boxing in civilized countries. The arguments outlined to support such a position had already been advanced by experts from the Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association (AMA). A brief review of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), starting in the 1980s, shows the combative spirit of the medical professional community to assert its criteria over the interests of big boxing business. In 1986, the editor of the *journal*, George Lundberg alleged that "organized crime in boxing" (fighters, promoters, media and all those who profit and live off boxing) was an obstacle to be overcome by the medical-scientific community, but that the challenge remained: to ensure that professional boxing in the United States and possibly *amateur* boxing as well would have the same fate as in countries such as Sweden and Norway, "extinction" (Lundberg, 1986). Meanwhile, he urged American states to take the initiative: "Who will be the first to abolish and the last to sanction this obscene tragedy?" (Ibis., p. 2484). In *The New York Time*, Lundberg sentenced that "boxing seems less like sport than cock-fighting; it is an obscenity. An uncivilized man may have been a bloodthirsty man. But no civilized society should approve of boxing, which is a return to incivility." It was emphasized that the *scientific* position coincided with the *ethical-religious* one: no morally good man would deliberately wish to harm another person. In this vein, another physician allied with boxing abolitionism, Maurice Van Allen, referred to the sport as an exhibition of the savage side of the human being: "a deadly degrading sport" (1983, p. 250). He found it strange that, in an age of strident voices fighting for equal rights, there was no advocacy for the rights of impoverished young men recruited to be sacrificed as a public spectacle for favored groups. The only reason for the lack of adherence to the prohibitionist cause was, according to several members of this medical activism, the enormous medical and scientific ignorance of the people.

In the 1996 *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, it was exclaimed: "Of all the dangerous sports, we are most enthusiastic about banning boxing because we feel deeply that it is a barbaric enterprise reminiscent of dog fighting" (Moutoussis, 1996, p. 62). In the article "On the barbaric nature of boxing: reflections on the panoramic debate about banning boxing after another death," its author, physician Michael Moutoussis, stated categorically that "it is wrong to think that barbarism, violence and the satisfaction of the bloodlust of crowds can coexist with the mental self-discipline of fighters" (Ibid., p. 62). He regarded boxing as antithetical to the humanitarian spirit of the health professions, which society admires. While acknowledging to the *British Medical Association* that boxing was repugnant because of the risk of brain damage as the very purpose of the sport a means and an end, Moutoussis pointed out that the most serious aspect of boxing was the fact that its success lay precisely in injuring the opponent as much as possible he compared it negatively with judo or Greco-Roman wrestling, which seek to reduce the opponent without cumulative violence being a goal in itself. The damage inflicted during boxing was appreciated as "an integral part of barbarism made show, at the worst of a gladiatorial tradition" (Ibid., p. 63). Moutoussi Asked the reader, "What is the difference between Romans gloating over gladiators and a certain kind of spectator shouting for `his' boxer to `kill' or `put out his opponent's eye'?" (Ibid., p. 63). He then urged his readers to understand that the differences between proponents



and opponents of boxing were deeply *evaluative* and not merely biomedical). In fact, from other points of view, sports physicians were urged to reject any commitment to boxing, since to do so implied a certain complicity with its irreversible risks. In 1999, S. Leclerc and C. D. Herrera of the Biomedical Ethics Unit at McGill University (Canada) affirmed: "The mere presence of a sports physician at a boxing match lends an air of legitimacy to conduct that is medically and ethically unacceptable" (1999, p. 428). They added that the absence of a 'boxing doctor' at ringside would send a strong and clear message to boxing's allies. The role that the sports physician should assume, according to these authors, was to educate the general public and not just boxers of the dangers of the sport: "In light of the medical evidence on the health risks associated with boxing, a cautious agnostic position is no longer justifiable" (Leclerc and Herrera, 1999, p. 426).

This medical-health activism gained increasing momentum, being a spokesperson for arguments and attitudes that encouraged other opinion makers to join the cause. In 2011, for example, the influential Spanish press, radio and television reporter, Arturo Pérez Reverte, stated in a Tweet on July 3, 2011: "What I would ban by decree is boxing. (..). Thousands of imbeciles howling because one man hits another" (quoted in Hernández Riva, 2020, p. 32).

Identity devalued: a boxer's killer instinct as the basis for his supposed irrationality

At the beginning of 2019, the media announced with great fanfare the big fight that the Filipino Manny Pacquiao would have on January 19 in Las Vegas with Adrien Broner. The headlines injected excitement into the audience by repeating almost in unison: Pacquiao puts his *killer instinct to the test at the age of 40*. The phrase was taken from Pacquiao himself, who had expressed it in a phone call with the press: "I still have that killer instinct and that fire in my eyes. That aggressiveness, the interest in my career is still there at 100 percent. The speed and the strength, too."

The stereotype about the *savage* nature of boxers has often been internalized and repeated by the boxers themselves. For example, alluding to the experience of being in the ring before the fearsome opponent, former champion Sugar Ray Robinson stated: "You don't think. It is pure instinct. If you stop to reflect, you're lost" (Cit. by Hauser, 1986, p. 29), and trainer Mickey Rosario emphasized: "Once in the ring, you can't think. You have to be an animal" (quoted by Plummer, 1989, p. 43). It is also combined with the entrenched idea that the boxer is "born" with a taste for fighting, the aggressive instinct is "born in him", "he already has it". The boxer is observed from an imaginary that associates him with a "primitive body" devoid of any knowledge other than that of his own bodily ferocity which makes it easy to confuse him with *the street thug*. The idea that boxing represents an archaism reserved for the lowest rung of the social classes is often taken as a *given*, supporting such a prejudice in the fact that numerous past and present stars, such as Sonny Liston, Floyd Patterson and Mike Tyson, made their first apprenticeship in the "Noble Art" in prison (Wacquant, 2000, p. 41).

is one of the *last barbarities consented to* in civilization, places boxers more on the side of bestiality than of humanization. In the internal context of their sport where bravery is mythologized, such bestiality insufflates superiority before the opponents, but, outside the limited sporting field, pugilistic knowledge does not count, it does not exist. That which the boxer does well and for which he stands out, is only an indication of his exacerbated animality. From the most unknown boxing apprentice in a black ghetto gym, to the most famous and laureate world champion, the boxer is the object of dismissive



and epistemicidal attitudes: he is observed as an *epistemically* inferiorized subject and, therefore, socially stigmatized.

Thus, the emphasis on the *instinctive* and *impulsive* nature of the boxer has the indirect effect of placing him at the opposite pole of rationality. However, as the present article attempts to argue, these bold *descriptions* must be severely challenged. The sense of urgency that physicians convey to the public feeds the feeling that there is no time to lose in order to act preventively and avoid further deaths. However, it is when the *baby is about to be thrown out, along with the bath water*, that different strategy of coping with a problem that at its core is philosophical must be rehearsed. What is ultimately in suspense is nothing more and nothing less than the rationality or irrationality of a sporting practice repelled by some and praised by others.

In what follows, the question of *pugilistic rationality* and its complex relationship with boxing violence will be addressed. The proposal will not resolve the intricate *debate on boxing*, but it will provide new *critical* reflections that go beyond a simplistic medicalization and criminalization of the problem.

Pugilistic rationality and habitus. From the primitive body to the cultivated body

In order to establish the existence of a *pugilistic rationality* and to challenge the myth of its irrationality, some developments in the sociology of boxing will be addressed and put in dialogue with epistemology. At the core of the analysis is the insightful research carried out from the immersive or *experiential* sociology of the Frenchman Loic Wacquant, anchored in Bachelardian epistemology and Pierre Bourdieu's developments about sport and its *practical rationality*. It is the original way in which Wacquant sought to understand the peculiar logic of boxing that is striking. He did not allow himself to be seduced by the comfortable aseptic observation of the cubicle in the academic space, but went into the microworld of boxing culture as a *learner* more participant observer than participant observer.

In 2000, he wrote *Entre las cuerdas. Cuadernos de un aprendiz de boxeador*, where he asserted that pugilistic rationality is not perceptible unless one coexists and witnesses the transformation process of the particular life trajectory of boxers in a highly structured context. To account for such rationality, he appealed to the concept of *habitus* proposed by Bourdieu (1991; 1999), which is central in contemporary sociology to explain why people tend to follow a certain orientation and direction (ignoring or omitting other possible ones. In this case, the question is to discern the general conditions that lead a person to enter the boxing universe and what happens inside. The permanence in such a sporting niche requires the individual to acquire, necessarily, a *pugilistic habitus* which, as will be seen, has nothing to do with the assumption of a barbaric nature brought from birth.

How does this *specific* boxing *habitus* come about? Let us start at the beginning. We all develop a *habitus* from the dawn of our lives, since it is a pre-reflexive structure that will influence our preferences, likes, inclinations, expectations and habits. This influence acts inadvertently, in the form of *dispositions*. Its original form (*primary habitus*) is strongly conditioned by the significant caregiving figures, usually the parents, but will be modified over time. Although such *dispositions* may seem *natural* because they have crystallized into a much-stabilized *way of being*, they are not, since they are closely linked to the *social* position of the individual. This means that the fact of belonging, since childhood, to a certain socioeconomic environment the home, the housing complex, the



neighborhood, the club, the gymnasium, the neighborhood induces a set of likes, preferences, attitudes and dispositions *shared* by that group of belonging. These coincidences which Bourdieu calls *homogamy* create regularities in social classes. What is considered unattainable for that social class is simply not desired, not even visualized as a possible horizon. In other words, one's likes, desires and expectations tend to coincide with what is objectively within one's range of possibility according to one's social position. This is not a coincidence, but a *primary habitus*.

In the case of sports, the class orientation can be identified without much effort: the social classes that prefer golf, motor racing, mountaineering, polo or tennis are different from those that prefer soccer, athletics or boxing. As for the latter, it is generally associated with a certain type of person rustic, with low schooling and a certain social class working class, with low cultural capital.

Thus, social position significantly conditions the *primary habitus* by directing choices in one direction rather than another. The way in which one relates to others and to oneself is also affected by social position, especially at the level of how one perceives oneself in one's own corporeality. It is not the same to conceive of one's body as simple sustenance as to conceive of it as a useful tool for work, or as a weapon of defense and attack, or as a source of entertainment, improvement or enjoyment through movement (Sánchez García, 2008). In other words, the experiences that are lived with and through the body are the ones that shape and reflect in what kind of activities one feels at *ease* and in which ones one does not. When a field of activity is perceived as congruent with these preferences, it is perceived as a *natural* environment. For example, those who have consistently preferred to practice a combat sport find *consistency* between their primary *habitus* their expectation, their disposition and what these sports offer. Not feeling comfortable with physical contact would clearly be an impediment to such practice. Similarly, for young people accustomed to environments where physical violence is commonplace, it may be much easier to attune to boxing than to swimming. Such a fit is not a determinism, but it helps to understand why there is a preference or inclination toward certain activities over others. It seems to operate a *practical logic* that is obviously not the logic of logicians, which ensures a *reciprocal selectivity*: the individual chooses the sport that chooses the individual. That is to say, he who relates to his body as a defensive weapon may find in boxing a sport that justly needs people familiar with defensive aggression. The needs of the individual harmonize, thus, with what that social-boxing field offers and vice versa.

It is important to consider that *class position* not only influences *what* type of activity is preferred, but also *how it is* carried out. As far as sport is concerned, the cultural bourgeoisie middle classes with a high degree of academic qualification tend to practice sport with different objectives than people who perform manual labor and have low intellectual qualification (Sánchez García, 2008). While, in the first case of the schooled middle classes, there is a tendency to prefer non-remunerated competition -amateur- or recreational appropriate to an intellectualized conception of the body itself as an entity for self-improvement or *self-cultivation*; in the second case -working class, proletarian class- there is a tendency to prefer remunerated competitive sport consistent with a conception of the body as merchandise, work tool or productive unit. For example, professional boxing embodies this conjunction of sport and spectacle, where the working class and the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie enter into a synergy that often ends up being predatory. Boxing can also be preferred by those who conceive their body as a weapon of self-protection and self-defense. This utilitarian-instrumental type of *habitus* is also



part of a traditional idea of aggressive masculinity that is still very much in force in the working classes (Ibid.).

In short, correlations can be identified between social class, economic capital, educational level cultural capital and sports preferences: the lower the economic and intellectual capital, the greater the preference for utilitarian and competitive sports practices. Conversely, the greater the economic and intellectual development, the greater the inclination towards sports oriented towards self-improvement or personal self-cultivation. This distribution and classification not only of knowledge and likes, but also of the people who carry them, makes boxing -especially professional boxing- look like a showcase for the instrumentality, vulgarity, lack of distinction and refinement of the working classes. Certainly, the type of sport to which the working classes are inclined synchronizes, contemptuously, with their lifestyle globally considered: how they talk, how they dress, what music they listen to, what places they visit or what kind of things they buy, everything becomes revealing of their social place. Consumption habits reveal a *habitus*, even if they want to hide it. For example, it is much more likely that boxers prefer to listen to cumbia, rancheras, hip-hop and reggaeton, rather than refined, learned and legitimized music in the field of the arts (Aboitiz Bellet & Álvarez Vandeputte, 2011).

Note, of course, that all this *background* is at the antipodes of being a *natural* condition. The psycho-socio-biological facticity with which an individual is born and grows up prefigures a *habitus* that, surreptitiously, will become a kind of invisible *social destiny*. That is to say, his future itinerary will be contoured although not sentenced by the set of initial circumstances over which he has no control. Nevertheless, within that *original habitus*, the individual can thrive. It is his space of conditioning, but also of possibility.

With this in mind, it can be said that the violence imprinted in the *habitus* or dispositions of boxers does not refer to an inexorable nature, but is the result of a long process of interpersonal modeling that will be modified in the course of life, but according to Bourdieu, without changing radically. For example, a person of humble origin, living in an environment of gangsterism, could be initiated into boxing simply out of a defensive, utilitarian need, but then, with the passage of time, could plunge into professional boxing or simply remain for years in recreational boxing, although, according to Bourdieu, he will hardly go from boxing to golf or swimming or any other sport so far removed from the primary *habitus* of that individual. These incursions are, in fact, quite common in the stories of boxers, who also share similarities in terms of their places of origin. For the most part, the boxers come from marginalized neighborhoods, with families in multi-problem situations, with histories of abandonment, alcoholism, addictions, delinquency, etc., several of them immigrants or children of undocumented immigrants and with low-skilled jobs. In these socio-demographic scenarios, the imperative to survive is imprinted in the primary habitus with much more intensity than the imperative to *be somebody*, to transcend or to self-actualize which are rather ideals consistent with the expectations of the schooled middle class. *Being good at fighting* can even be a marker of prestige, recognition and respect in the social context from which the boxer comes in addition to serving as a traditional sign of virility, usually economically diminished. Likewise, his physical strength reviled in another intellectual environment is also highly idolized in his original environment, a vigorousness for which he is granted rough jobs for which he seems *naturally* apt. These qualities considered *desirable* within the group of belonging, which incline boxers to dedicate themselves to this sport the likes for risk, for strength, for the mastery of fear, for daring, for vertigo are also so for criminal activity. This means that an individual who has developed such characteristics (imprinted in his *habitus*), and



who lives in a context of scarce opportunities, is *eligible* both for boxing and for a criminal career. This point should be crucial in the reconsideration of banning boxing, since it is precisely at this existential crossroads where the opportunity opens up for the first path boxing, and not the second delinquency, to become the path to follow.

Emphasizing this last point, one can anticipate the enormous extra pugilistic importance that a boxing gym can have in a neighborhood in which the main creators of opportunities for social advancement are criminal organizations. Indeed, this is one of the most interesting aspects of Wacquant's work on black ghettos in Chicago [Wacquant \(2000; 2007\)](#). Wacquant rightly points out that the gymnasium offers a *protected sociability*, which it achieves by closing itself off from the ghetto and isolating itself from the surrounding harsh reality "a hermeticism bordering on *claustrophilia*" [\(2000, p. 40\)](#). He likens the boxing gym to a sanctuary, which serves as a shield against the insecurity of the neighborhood and unbanalizes everyday life by turning routine and body remodeling into a means of transforming his original *habitus* [\(Ibid., p. 32\)](#). The gym, says Wacquant, "is an islet of order and virtue. Outside are drugs, bullets and death; inside are order, discipline and companionship" [\(Ibid. p.40\)](#). In this austere and at the same time sophisticated) ecosystem of the boxing gym, young men find a social space in which they can use the fundamental values of their masculine *ethos*, but subjugated to an iron discipline where the qualities of the street are put at the service of other goals. Wacquant is categorical in this sense: the pugilist dynamic functions practically as an institution that attempts to regiment the boxer's *entire* existence - how he eats, how he rests, how he uses time and space, how he takes care of his body, how he regulates his mood and desires, and so on. Punctuality, regularity, the inculcation of the qualities that make up the boxer, consist essentially of a craft process of repetitive education of the body, in which "the pedagogical work has the function of replacing the primitive body [...] with a *habituated body*" [\(Ibid., p. 67\)](#), a body *structured* and physically remodeled according to the demands of the trade. This is precisely the process of acquiring the *pugilistic habitus* that must be developed in order to "belong and remain" [\(Ibid., p. 73\)](#). The boxer's sacrificial routine does not remain behind the door of the gymnasium, but permeates all aspects of the private and social sphere. For example, since it is a sport in which the categories are decided by weight, a strict diet is a *sine qua non* condition to give the right weight and not be left out of the competition.

Wacquant argues that boxing is "a school of patience, discipline and perseverance antagonistic to immediate gratification" [\(Ibid., p. 133\)](#). The boxer's basic technical gestures - jab, hook, *uppercut* - seem deceptively *natural* and obvious, but they involve a complete, monotonous, repetitive *re-education of the gyms*. If Bourdieu and Wacquant find it so useful to use the example of learning boxing to explain the formation of the *habitus*, it is because this learning takes place through a system of dispositions that do not require reflexive monitoring of the consciousness of the body analogous to learning to play a musical instrument. Having mastery of the sporting gesture or of the musical instrument implies a kind of *forgetfulness* of each isolated movement: the performer does not think about the order in which he should press the piano keys, or how he should arrange the body to throw a *jab* or a straight boxing punch [\(Aguilar, 2017\)](#). He simply does it strategically, in response to the context, because, as Bourdieu explains, the acquisition of that *habitus* means that the reflexive monitoring of consciousness has been replaced by a *practical sense* that the individual has developed as a consequence of a systematic and constant work of repetition of bodily acts or movements until he has mastered them [\(Ibid., 2017\)](#).



In this sense, the learning of boxing that is, the incorporation of a pugilistic *habitus* is an exceptionally opportune example to illustrate a process of knowledge acquisition through pedagogical and socializing experiences, which bear little resemblance to *intellectualized* learning this leads to the error of believing that the boxer does not go through an epistemic formation, but merely *gives free rein to his natural ferocity*. Nevertheless, what is absent is not pedagogy, but *a pedagogy*: that of the directive and sequenced *instruction* of theoretical knowledge and explicit norms, as occurs in the transmission of intellectual knowledge. Thus, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant, boxing is the prototype of a practice which logic, being carried out directly in bodily gymnastics, passes neither through discursive awareness nor through reflexive explanation. That is to say, the habituation of the body excludes the contemplative and timeless apprehension of the theoretical posture (Wacquant, 2000). Indeed, "the rules of the pugilistic art are reduced to movements of the body that can only be fully apprehended in practice and that are inscribed in the frontier of what can be said and intellectually intelligible" (Ibid., p. 66). For this very reason, pugilistic pedagogy is much more *relational* than academic or schooled. What is involved are *actions*, which at the same time serve as evaluations. Wacquant states: What to the neophyte might *appear to be a wild waste of gratuitous and unbridled brutality* is, in fact, a *regular and finely codified* canvas of exchanges which, although violent, are constantly *controlled* and whose confection supposes a practical and constant collaboration of the two adversaries in the construction and maintenance of a dynamic conflictive equilibrium (Ibid., p. 87. *Italics added*).

The achievement of this dynamic conflictual equilibrium is the outcome of a pedagogy that operates *as a whole*, with the coach as an *implicit conductor* of a hierarchical organization in which the more advanced function as a model for the less advanced. An important part of the collective nature of boxing instruction is given by the degree of synchronization of the exercises, as each participant functions as a visual model for the others (Ibid., p. 109). In boxing initiation, both the rules and the stages are learned *collectively*, by imitation, emulation and reciprocal stimulation. The trainer's role consists of coordinating and stimulating an activity that turns out to be, for the trainees scarcely socialized in a reflexive or intellectualist pedagogy, a powerful source of pedagogical experience based on *silent* instruction through *practical, body-to-body communication* (Ibid., p. 108).

The pugilistic pedagogy is thus oriented towards a gestural, visual and mimetic transmission, which seeks to facilitate the ascent of the apprentice boxer in the tacit hierarchy of the gymnasium a very gradual ascent, adapted to individual limitations. It combines almost antinomian dispositions: the drives and impulses inscribed in the depths of the *biological individual at the limit of the cultural* is articulated with the capacity to channel these impulses, regulate them, transform them and exploit them according to an *objectively rational* plan, although inaccessible to the explicit calculation of the individual conscience (Ibid., p. 97). In the qualities of the (mis)named *natural boxer*, a *cultivated nature* is unveiled whose social genesis splices with an inflexible morality of work and effort. Wacquant says:

The myth of "*the gift*" of the boxer is an illusion founded in reality, what boxers take for a quality of nature (*You have to have it in you*) is indeed the result of the long process of inculcation of the pugilistic habit, a process that often begins in early childhood, either within the gym, where you can see children brought by club members, who try to box, or even, in that antechamber of the boxing hall that is the ghetto street (Ibid., 98).



Wacquant emphasizes that the learning of the *pugilistic habitus* seems to be situated on the border between nature and culture, but stresses that such acquisition requires an almost rational management of the body and time (Ibid., p. 32). With these positions, Wacquant, like Bourdieu, exalts his critique of intellectualism and the corset of mind/body dualism. In this respect, Wacquant affirms: "Pugilistic excellence can then be defined by the fact that the boxer's body thinks and calculates for him, instantaneously, without going through the intermediary and the costly delay that abstract thought, prior representation and strategic calculation would entail" (Ibid., p. 96). It is as if in the practice of boxing, there would be no other reflexivity than that which is imprinted on the body of the boxer acting tactically, a body that acts moved by a "sense of the game" to which it surrenders. That practical sense operates as a *radar*, capable of calculating from the dispositions already incorporated in the body, how to anticipate or guess the opponent's movements (Aguilar, 2017, p. 287). The pugilistic rationality can be appreciated from the bodily metamorphosis that the boxer undergoes in his technical-tactical development, but this rationality can also be glimpsed in the modeling of the links that make such experiential pedagogy possible. This occurs because boxing is a sport of individual skill but its learning is eminently collective. Wacquant illustrates this point with *sparring* rehearsal and prelude to actual combat. Sparring is possible because *non-contractual clauses* are put in place to ensure the care of the other (it is practiced with partners who act as *rivals*, but with protective helmets and padded gloves (Wacquant, 2000, p. 87). Such measures are tacitly based on the principle of reciprocity, which prevents the stronger from taking advantage of his superiority and the weaker from taking undue advantage of his partner's voluntary retention (Ibid., p. 87-88). Sparring requires learning to conform to the understood norms of "antagonistic cooperation" that promotes mutual respect for adversaries and inhibits unbridled competition (Ibid., p. 87). As Wacquant expounds, "the rites of interaction on which sparring sessions are based are governed by what Goffman calls a *working consensus*" (Ibid., p. 85). Precisely because of this, Wacquant considers that sparring aptly demonstrates the patterned character of pugilistic aggressiveness, as well as illustrating the *subtle*, seemingly contradictory *mixture* of instinct and rationality, of emotion and calculation, of individual abandon and collective control in boxing practice (Ibid., p. 83). Sparring progressively activates what Michel Foucault calls a "completely specific *plurisensory structure*" (Ibid., p. 88), as well as being the support for a particularly intense form of *emotional education work* on impulse control above and below the ring. Any *excessiveness* must be immediately and publicly punished by the trainer in front of the group of trainees, who generally have a filial respect for him. The trainer can act at the same time as mentor, guardian, counselor and confidant, affectively connoting the belonging to the gym, which boxers often compare to *their home* or to a *second mother* which indicates, according to Wacquant, the protective and nanny function it can represent for them (Ibid., p. 106).

Thus, the pugilistic rationality not only transforms the boxer's life in motor, hygienic, metabolic and physiological aspects, but also the discipline in the gym establishes the regulation of social relations, with teammates and with the trainer. In the pugilist culture, interpersonal aggressiveness is consensual, playful and pre-codified unlike what happens, for example, outside the sporting framework, such as street fights. "The gymnasium can constitute a *moral community* with a democratic spirit all equal before the stipulated rules and can confer a sense of differentiation with respect to the neighborhood or the ghetto" (Ibid., p. 98). The experience of rootedness in a community of meaning, which in this case is the fighters' gymnasium, is then what confers on the boxer a new possibility of identity from which to be recognized as endowed with a practical rationality of high resilient value.



From the danger of Boxing to its criminalization: The limits of medical ethics

In light of the above reflections on the existence of a *pugilistic rationality* embodied in the boxing *habitus* and the undeniable social mobility function of the *amateur* and professional boxing gym, is it viable to advocate for laws that prohibit it? How does one move from the demonstration that boxing is *medically risky* to the conclusion that it *should be banned*? The argument is only valid if one assumes the implicit premise that all risky activities should be banned (*Everything risky should be banned. Boxing is risky, therefore boxing should be prohibited*). However, as can be easily inferred, other sports activities in which injuries or deaths occur, even at higher rates than boxing, should also be prohibited motor sports, aerial sports, mountaineering, and rugby, among others.

Usually, the response to this argument has been that, in these other risky sports practices, the harm, when it occurs, is accidental and not *intentional* as it is in boxing. But this leads, then, to another question: should the motivation or intention with which the harm occurs be relevant to physicians? If the physician were to refuse to act in cases where someone is injured "because he has brought it on himself," would he let an injured criminal die? Is not medicine a profession which humanitarian, Hippocratic commitment is to heal and save life, regardless of whether the injuries have been caused with pain or without pain? Moreover, is it consistent to assume that such a risk is present in boxing, but not, for example, in American soccer or rugby? Is there not an intentional harm when a player performs a takedown to stop an opponent who is about to score an advantage?

The medical detractors of boxing have insisted that *violent intentions* are inadmissible for the sport in general and no one who considers himself civilized should allow painfully violent actions whether or not there are injuries. Now, it should be noted that this assertion is not a *medical* judgment, but a *moral one*. This introduces us to another type of discussion, which goes beyond the medical evidence and leads to an ethical-axiological controversy. It is philosophers, not physicians, who are better equipped with the argumentative resources to debate this question.

Boxers, on the other hand, can still sensibly argue that the ultimate intention is not to brain damage their opponent, but to *win* the fight. To take for granted, without more, that all boxers step into a ring with the exclusive purpose of causing chronic or acute *brain* damage to the opponent is to construct an argument based on a false premise a kind of *scarecrow* fallacy, so common in epistemic discourse. If causing damage to the opponent's brain were the only and exclusive way to win, a triumph obtained by blows not directed at the head would not be authorized.

However, even if one were to concede that boxing is, because of its *intentional violence*, an *immoral* activity, it does not automatically follow that it should be banned. There are many immoral actions that are not, however, illegal betraying a good friend is immoral, though not illegal. The moral and the legal run on separate tracks, sometimes coinciding and sometimes not. The claim that everything *immoral* must be *illegal* is unrealistic, since the field of ethics essentially admits a diversity of points of view for those who consider abortion immoral, the decriminalization law is wrong, but for those who oppose its criminalization, the decriminalization law is right. Is it ethical to use the law to impose a single criterion of how others should think? Does this legal moralism not hide, at bottom, an epistemic boastfulness that implies the pretension of legislating in favor of the values of a group?



On the other hand, on this moral and deontological level, it is worth remembering that intentional violence, as in boxing, is *consensual*, so that, according to the principle of autonomy, it does not count as violence (*Volenti non fitiniuria*: no injustice is done to someone who acted voluntarily). This principle ensures the right of individual self-determination, according to which a free and duly informed person is *able* to decide, on his own, what is in his own interest the limit is the harm to third parties. Boxers agree to participate in a contest that has rules known to both parties and which compliance is guaranteed by a referee who has the duty to intervene to avoid, as far as possible, injury or damage that puts health at risk. It is true and must be recognized that pugilists are not always sufficiently informed of the scientific evidence about the acute and chronic risks of their sports practice or are aware of them, but the desire to transcend and achieve social mobility weighs more. It can hardly be said that, under these circumstances, the consensus is free and informed. However, would that be a sufficient reason to ban boxing? Doesn't something similar happen in other areas of social life? How much do users of psychotropic drugs know about the side effects of the treatments prescribed by the psychiatrist? How much do consumers of canned food know about the risks of ingesting them? The issue of informed consent seems to refer more to the need for *education* than prohibition. Mandatory testing of boxers on their knowledge of scientific research on the effects of repeated blows to the head could be a measure that would effectively increase the chances of them making a reasoned decision to engage in boxing without having to use the argument of ignorance to ban it.

However, even if an individual is *fully* informed about the risks he runs when boxing, who, other than himself, can decide what is good for his life? Why should an individual who makes bold choices be pathologized under the trite argument that he is a *sadomasochist* or that he does *not know what he is doing*? Why punish, prohibit, sanction or, even worse, criminalize an individual whose lifestyle and way of being his *habitus* does not coincide with what is considered convenient by the medical-moral *establishment*? Is it not, perhaps, a paternalistic vice to establish coercive norms in the name of health as a *universal* good?

On the other hand, shouldn't the proclaimed health policy of "zero tolerance" for activities that impair quality of life also apply to the non-sports field prohibiting drinking alcohol, smoking or eating fats? The latter are as threatening as boxing in terms of their chronic deteriorating effects. There is no reason why, if boxing is criminalized, these other practices, so deeply rooted and accepted in people's social life, should not also be criminalized.

Finally, it is worth thinking about the possible scenario that would follow the banning of boxing. Surely, it would not be that of its extinction, but that of its *clandestinity*, with all the risks involved in carrying out activities in minimal or no controlled conditions a breeding ground for all kinds of irregularities that would undoubtedly show that conditions could always get worse.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this article, a series of arguments have been raised that *problematize* the medical denigration of the practice of boxing, as well as the call for its extinction. It has been implied that several of the arguments put forward by the prohibitionists are covertly *ethical* and *epistemically fallacious*. This is not to deny, minimize or refute the boxing



risks detected from biomedical research. What to do once those risks are identified is precisely the crux of the disagreement and, therefore, of the discussion to come. The medical aspect of the problem is undeniably highly relevant, but the legitimate concerns and anxieties of the medical sector are not *everything*. Sports practices, including combat sports, are immersed in ways of life and cultural matrices that must be analyzed in their medical dimension, but also in their philosophical, sociological and anthropological dimensions. In the case of boxing as in other similar cases, the arrogant tendency to medicalize social problems turns genuine discrepancies into "neighborhood fights". Social reality is sufficiently complex for a single profession to pretend to exercise epistemic supremacism and silence any dissenting voice dismissed as *ignorant*. As we have tried to argue here, the prompt and expeditious bestialization of boxing goes in the opposite direction of a profound dialogue (which does not start from translating the different as inferior). If the medical-Hippocratic commitment to protect health and life were above any other ethical commitment, the dilemma at hand would not arise. However, the duty to care for life is as important as the duty to respect the self-determination of individuals.

Recognition of such autonomy implies not only *not* interfering in the decisions that a person makes in a free, informed, consensual and responsible manner, but also refraining from treating as "irrational" those who make "less than ideal" choices from a prohibitionist perspective. Respectful treatment also does not include abiding by positions that *tolerate* the existence of boxing, since tolerance encapsulates a forced and insincere acceptance of that which is *tolerated* a rejection, not entirely consummated, but which feeds the *discriminatory* atmosphere of boxing as an unevolved underworld, devoid of logic and rationality. As mentioned here, *pugilistic rationality* exemplifies the operation of a *practical* logic (not intellectualized, which inscribes in the *habitus* a bodily knowledge which strenuous learning does not take place if the pugilist's entire life has not been regimented. Can this be called a "wild nature"?

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