
SUGDEN, JOHN. *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1996. Pp. 218. An essay on the perils of ethnographic research, bibliography, index. \$24.95 pb., \$59.95 cb.

In his ethnographic work *Boxing and Society*, John Sugden demonstrates that boxing can only flourish as a sport where poverty exists in the shadow of affluence. The high unemployment and scarcity of opportunity for upward mobility in the ghetto provide the labor for the boxing clubs. For every athlete who achieves financial success in boxing, there are literally thousands who risk health and life for menial wages. Even so, most inner-city youths are not attracted to boxing for fame and fortune, as one would suppose. Sugden argues that although boxing exploits the impoverished inner-city youth, it also is a liberating influence for many of its participants.

Sugden begins his work by establishing a historic context for boxing utilizing predominately secondary sources. Chapter 1 demonstrates the historic class differences of boxing, concentrating on English and American origins from the eighteenth century through the acceptance of Marquis of Queensberry rules, thought to mark the emergence of boxing as a modern sport. Chapter 2 reviews the development of the modern sport of boxing framed in its political, economic, ethnic, and racial context in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the coverage in these chapters is uneven and often lacks clarity. Sugden has difficulty reconciling the modernization of boxing on two continents that were separated by an ocean and three decades in time.

The social stratification of boxing is integral to Sugden's thesis and needs to be developed in greater detail historically. He ignores important characters, such as Peter Jackson, and appears unfamiliar with work that may have informed his thesis, such as Michael Isenberg's *John L. Sullivan and His America*. The work suffers from some factual errors, the most obvious of which is Sugden's confusion of Yankee Sullivan with John L. Sullivan, two fighters of different generations.

Chapters 3 through 5 present three separate ethnographic case studies of boxing subcultures in Hartford, Connecticut, USA; Belfast, Northern Ireland; and Havana, Cuba. Clearly the strength of his work occurs in chapters 3 and 4. For these chapters, Sugden collected his primary evidence as a participant observer in the field. In chapter 6 Sugden offers his analysis, cultural comparisons, and some conclusions on the place of boxing in society. There is an appendix made up of a wonderful discussion of some of the ethical issues and safety concerns the author experienced in the field.

Control of the sport has always been in the hands of the upper classes, while its laborers have almost entirely come from the lower classes. To this day, the

sport feeds off the urban poor for laborers. Certainly in America, boxing is no different than any other major spectator sports. Young fighters see boxing as a vehicle for social status in the ghetto and an opportunity to learn self-defense skills necessary for survival in a violent community. The urban poor have traditionally used violence and physicality as a means of solving disputes and conferring status. Sugden argues that many of the fighters participate for the enjoyment. This hardly seems enough to suggest the experience is in any way liberating. Certainly within the ring, as with most sports, the athlete is provided with a venue of freedom unable to find expression in his other social options. Boxing entices, with the promise of wealth, those who gain some success in the amateur ranks, and in this way the professional fight game depends upon amateur boxing.

Boxing has historically been promoted for fitness, self-defense skills, character development, and in some circles, as a socially acceptable way to settle differences. Historically, boxing entrepreneurs recognized the need for a rationale, particularly in the twentieth century. The notion that boxing is a social good has been critical to its survival. The values boxing promoted from the beginning are the same today. Add to these values the idea that boxing keeps kids off the street and out of other forms of trouble, and the twentieth-century rationale becomes complete. Sugden recognizes the contradiction in this rationale when he tells the story of one well-meaning manager's lament at losing a promising young fighter due to that fighter's success as a person outside of boxing. Boxing certainly exploits these young men under the cloak of nurture.

As a historical work the book is disappointing, but as an ethnographic work Sugden has provided a rich source of data. He has organized his evidence in such a way that it paints a vivid picture of life in the subculture of the boxing club while supporting his thesis. The only thing lacking is more evidence on the personal lives of these boxers. Although the author's experience in Cuba is valuable, it is not described with the same depth as the other two subcultures. This may be due to the language barrier or to a need to spend more time in the field. Seventeen pages of Cuban political ideology seem out of place. However, there are few ethnographies on sporting subcultures, and this makes a fine contribution. The book is suitable for scholars interested in the sociology of boxing and for graduate students studying qualitative research methods. For such students, do not miss the appendix titled "The Perils of Ethnography."

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