

## Incorporating the Novice: The Elementary Forms of the Boxing Experience

First, at my place, I mean, at our place [the Gants d'Or], education is [*Luis interrupts himself and stares intensely at me*]... Education, for me, is not some guy in his third year of I-don't-know-what, senior year, his high school diploma. I could care less about that. Education is a guy's attitude: learning to listen to people who know more than you. You know, you come to the gym like all of us come to the gym. You start at square one. You don't know anything. When you show up, what immediately matters is how you show up. If you want to think, you've got to know how to listen to other people. The next thing is, you show up relaxed, you say hi to everybody and all. When you're learning to work, you stay clean, all the time. With some people, no matter what you say to them, there's no point. So you let it drop! (Excerpt from a recorded interview)

Luis' opening remarks to those seeking admission to his gym to learn the subtleties of fighting are a necessary preface to discovering the "elementary forms" of the boxing experience. Though this term is drawn from the title of Emile Durkheim's classic work, the point is not to use his study of totemism to present boxing and its various rituals as transformations of some "primitive" form of confrontation. While this notion prevails in a number of sociological commentaries devoted to the noble art,<sup>1</sup> only one primitive creature will appear in these pages: me. Diligent in my efforts to learn, even though they were often sloppy and awkward, the reactions I received upon being admitted to the Gants d'Or, from the boxers as well as the coach, are worth recounting. It provides a direct

entry point to the initial physical ordeals through which learning to box is *organized* (in the twofold sense of the organization of training sessions and the immediate mobilization of organisms).

It should be noted that I initially decided not to openly state my investigation's goals. First, I did not want to disrupt the course of normal interactions (this was the "good"—i.e., epistemological—reason) and second, I was afraid that I might be banned from the gym (this was the "bad" and more personal reason). We shall later see how all this unfolded and my fears vanished. In any event, I joined the Gants d'Or as an ordinary apprentice boxer. This provides an all the more realistic perspective as to how an average person seeking initiation into the noble art is received. Moreover, I subsequently observed that the various phases of my induction into the boxers' guild were repeated for all novices. After all, at the time of the study, I was generally the same age as most other boxers, and I looked quite athletic, so it was possible to see me as a potential recruit for competitive fights. The latter, as we shall see, play a crucial role in the life of a gym, as they are its primary path to social recognition. Yet, at the time, I still knew nothing about all this. As I began, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's words, to turn my body into a "vehicle of being in the [boxing] world,"<sup>2</sup> I discovered the gym's daily routines, which I initially experienced as the crucible of agonistic tensions on which I had little handle.

### "WORK OUT!"

Friday, December 3, 1999. Looking rather worried, Boris approaches Luis to ask him: "What are we doing tonight?" After savoring his reply, the trainer cracks a wily smile, shouting to anyone in earshot: "We're working out!" Immediately, every face falls. Everyone—except for me—knows what they are about to endure. It will not take long for my body to understand why these sessions are particularly dreaded.

### *"Do What You Can, but Go All the Way!"*

Luis begins by having us run. The boxers get started, grumbling about it, yet making sure that the coach does not notice. He stands right in front of the mirrors the fighters typically use to monitor their movements while shadowboxing. As we begin to circle around the room, Luis pulls me out of the line. One of his eyes bears the stigmata of past fights; I am

not sure how to hold his split gaze, which is appraising me from head to toe. Before sending me back, he looks straight at me, measuring each of his words: "Do what you can, but go all the way!"

In other words, this is no place for dilettantes. Just as we are getting used to the steady trot, the coach's voice bellows once again. We begin a sequence of exercises, each methodically following the other. They start with the lower body, gradually working upward. We alternate between interminable knee lifts and air punches, all the while continuing to jog. At other times, we run with our arms raised—first straight up, then at a right angle—which, as the minutes tick by, becomes almost unbearably painful. To signal when we must shift from one movement to the next, Luis claps his hands. If he claps twice, we have to fall to the floor and either do pushups or an exhausting bout of extension jumps. For each of these tasks, the basic movement is rehearsed briefly and ritualistically, since everyone—except for me—knows what it involves. When the coach is not satisfied with someone's efforts, he inveighs against him: "Not like this! [*He acts out the mistake, with mocking exaggeration.*] Like this! [*quickly performing the correct action*]" In short, consistent with a kind of expressive minimalism, words here are never more than injunctions to imitate, designed to ensure efficient action sequences. As Marcel Mauss might have remarked, these movements are "assembled by and for [the] social authority" embodied by Luis and his most battle-tested fighters.<sup>3</sup>

This series of tasks executed in motion, while jogging, are followed by exercises performed while standing in a stationary position. Some have nicknames. For instance, French cancan is the name the boxers give to a movement sequence in which one thrusts one's legs, each in turn, behind oneself, holding them straight. Because it causes so much pain, due to the way it combines muscular exhaustion and cardiovascular strain, this exercise is particularly hated—especially since Luis punishes any sign of leg weakness with pushups. He points his finger at the offender, then curtly announcing the number that is his sentence: "Twenty!" or even "Thirty!" if the offense is repeated. These punishments can be applied to other situations in which the coach concludes that a boxer's resolve is flagging. Like everyone else, I too suffered this penalty. As for passive recovery between exercises, it essentially does not exist. Most of the time, the only pause allowed consists in repeatedly jumping from one foot to the other in the most relaxed way possible, essentially reproducing the body technique used in skipping rope. When Luis thinks the workload has been particularly hard, he grants a

full minute's reprieve. This corresponds to the regulatory break boxers are given between rounds.

### *In All Lucidity: Enduring Pain*

At first glance, this model of physical training would seem highly disciplinarian. It is externally imposed by the trainer's voice and it forces—in every sense of the term—the boxer's body to be relentlessly productive. As a novice, this is precisely how I saw it. When I returned home, exhausted, I did, however, write down in my field journal every event that had occurred during the training session (a habit that I kept up through my 3-year study). The exercise sequence that Luis had announced with two words—"Work out!"—took place three or four times a month. As I continued to record every detail—with no particular method for organizing them other than the order in which they occurred, from which more structured categories of observation gradually emerged—I began to realize that this physical work imparted, over the course of these sessions, a lesson that is essential to the process of preparing to fight. This lesson is one that the boxers apply to everything they do in the gym. When their bodies show signs of weakness, when they begin to slow down, they utter brief slogans, like so many symbolic condensations of practical experience: "In the ring, you can't stop when you're tired," or "You won't get pity just because you're pitiful!" As physical exhaustion weakens one's resolve, repeating these slogans encourages tenacity. They remind the boxers of the meaning of their actions and help to revive the energies of those who are afraid of succumbing to their own weaknesses.

Since the ordeal of the ring spares no one, the basic point is that knowing how to endure pain protects the boxer. Thus Luis pushes the workout to help everyone push back what they see as the limits to their own resistance. For it is almost always in this realm beyond limits that fights are fought and, in the best cases, won. *Resisting*—the fighters' watchword in these situations—thus consists of keeping one's cool and focusing on the will to fight, even when every physiological indicator demands retreat. This ability is acquired through training. It is thus important to regularly experience and immerse oneself in this breakdown of the senses, which, over time, one learns first to control and then to manage as an indicator that can be minimized. As the boxers put it, one acquires "lucidity," which refers precisely to this ability to

bring some distance into the total commitment the fight requires. At the core of the boxer's resistance, one thus finds a version of what Norbert Elias calls "emotional self-control." To illustrate this process, Elias draws on the narrative structure of an Edgar Allen Poe story about two fishermen whose journey is about to be brought to a disastrous end by a maelstrom. Seized with fear, one fishermen's mind is, as it were, swept up into the water's powerful surge, while the other one pulls himself together, calmly examines the situation, and finds a way to extract himself from the waves.<sup>4</sup>

What the example of boxing shows is that detachment, wrested from the experience of immediate danger, can also be learned. Hence, once again, the importance of regularly confronting one's own limits and "doing what one can, but going all the way," as Luis advises. Thus the boxers constantly repeat that "it is in training that fights are won." The corporeal wisdom contained in this statement involves far more than the acquisition of body techniques. Needless to say, I was far from having grasped all the sensory arcana implicit in this insight during my first work-out session at the Gants d'Or. Out of pride and a desire to make a positive impression, I completed all the tasks we were assigned. This earned me not a single comment. Yet, feeling completely drained, I needed a few long minutes to recuperate. This, however, did provoke a reaction from Luis. Seeing me at a complete standstill, the trainer sent me without further ado to "move" the punching bag.

LUIS: Go over to the bag. Hit it!

ME: The bag? But I don't know how to do anything yet.

LUIS: Got your bandages?

ME: Yeah, but ...

LUIS: So put your gloves on and go ahead and hit it. We'll deal with the rest later.

After this brief exchange, Luis went about his other business. The coach did not have to add anything for Éric, stationed nearby, to spontaneously come up to me and explain how to wrap the bandages around my fists. Now that my hands were prepared beneath my newly donned gloves, I headed for one of the four punching bags and "hit it," as the coach had instructed me. Arranged next to each other from hardest to softest, I chose one of the leather pouches in the middle: I did not want to appear presumptuous in immediately going for the hardest or faint-hearted in

opting for the softest. Since I had no specific instructions, I attentively watched the boxers near me before giving it a try. As for Luis, he seemed to be paying no attention to a beginner's solitary gesticulations. Only from the corner of his eye did he now and then take note of my disorderly thrusts, which was all that he seemed to need to assess my performance; the same was true of the other boxers, who contented themselves with an occasional distracted glance in the newcomer's direction.

### EMBODYING BOXING

As social phenomenology has shown, relations occurring at close proximity invariably lead to a process of "reciprocal typification."<sup>5</sup> Session after session, I learned how to act like a boxer, while trying to observe what happened at the gym on a daily basis. Meanwhile, the boxers were also discreetly watching me. They projected their own interpretive frameworks on the various ways I acted in their midst. From the arrival of other newcomers, I learned that they were always met with inconspicuous scrutiny aimed at determining their identity and whether they had what it takes to become a fighter.

#### *From Virtual Nonexistence ...*

While it occurs in the natural attitude, the approach to reciprocal typification creates new problems when it applies—as in my case—to the scientific attitude of an ethnographer who conducts a *covert* investigation. When the investigative attitude hides itself behind the mask of naturalness, whatever is gained in terms of the spontaneity of observations is offset by the loss of any freedom to wander around asking questions (since one is supposed to be boxing). Choosing a role implies that one will keep it. Yet there is a risk of overly limiting one's ability to manoeuvre in a world to which one is seeking the widest possible access. It is necessary, moreover, to constantly negotiate the fact that the investigator's subjectivity is split between his public persona and, going beyond his immediate role, the need to privately record as much data as possible—from the obvious to the most tenuous observations—after he has left the site. The goal is thus to regularize one's presence (by sticking to one's role and maintaining boundaries), while ensuring that one does not dissolve into the social banality of virtual nonexistence. That said, the latter more or less defined my situation at my initial sessions at the Gants d'Or.

As an aspiring boxer, I was not exactly ignored. Luis and other fighters always insist on the fact that deference is central to the gym's interactional order. Yet the smiling greetings I received were merely fleeting social exchanges that never developed into genuine interaction. While I wallowed in a liminal realm of relative relational indifference, the rituals of politeness, along with simple questions such as "How's it going?" and "Do you like it?" made the attention I received eminently impersonal. *Mutatis mutandis*, Clifford Geertz described similar problems during his initial time in the Balinese village where he studied cockfights with his wife, another anthropologist. Their status was spectral; they were present yet absent, confined to the other side of a symbolic boundary that barred them from genuine social engagement.<sup>6</sup> The self-affirmation that had constantly eluded them was ultimately achieved not by intensifying their efforts to forge interpersonal relations but by participating in a seemingly minor act of belonging. While attending cockfights that were as illegal as they were central to the village's daily life, Geertz and his wife found themselves caught up in a police raid that sought to shut down the prohibited event. Rather than siding with the authorities by invoking their status as government-authorized researchers, they spontaneously fled, just like the villagers dispersing in all directions. There was nothing strategic about this mimetic instinct. It meant that, in the Balinese' eyes, they became *embodied*: the anthropologists drew closer to the inhabitants by sharing a small part of their way of seeing, their sensibility, and their sense of the social significance of cockfights. With abundant information from his new informants, Geertz set out to demonstrate that these cockfights were part of that culture's symbolic structure. Their escape thus amounted to a change in status. The government investigator, who had been confined to an *external* position vis-à-vis the villagers' daily lives, gradually became an *internal* ethnographer, earning the trust of his hosts who, consequently, integrated him into the relational network of their world.

Like most of those who aspire to the status of boxer, I had a weak initial position at the Gants d'Or that was gradually reinforced by a series of actions that were somewhat more structured than Geertz's escape. Sparring—the training fights that are held regularly at the gym—was the rite of passage that altered my ontological status. Becoming the embodiment of a boxer through my performance in the ring, I began, as it were, to seem "real" to the gym's members. As for when this moment of personal transformation through the rituals of combat occurs, it is always

determined by the coach. He makes novices wait—some for more time, some for less—before summoning them to the ring when he believes they are ready.

*... To the Agonistic Affirmation of Oneself*

Though it happened quickly (as of my third training session), my first experience between the ropes was hardly spectacular. It takes place on Tuesday, December 7, 1999.

This evening, Franck and I are working the punching bag when Luis comes up to us: “Hey, you two heavyweights, I want you to come up in a bit.” Though I am immediately apprehensive, I continue training without letting it show, while being sure to save my punches. As I hit the bag, I watch Franck from the corner of my eye. A former high-level basketball player who had to abandon his career prematurely due to an injury, with no education or resources, his build (a solid 1.90 meters and 90 kilos) allowed him to join the network of black bouncers—the security agents of African or Caribbean origin who, like Boris, David, and Momo work at night in clubs and bars. Moreover, Franck practices boxing to increase his personal security. At age twenty-eight, he has recently assumed the responsibilities of fatherhood, which makes him more aware of the dangers of his profession. He often says that if he has to hit someone, he would rather hit only once. Thanks to the combat experience he acquired through other martial arts and, in particular, his spade-like hands, he does not seem to have much to worry about it. The other boxers confirm this impression, predicting that his “mule kick could make him a hell of heavyweight.” I am not, in short, feeling particularly overconfident.

At last, we are face-to-face. Feeling as if I am taking on a mammoth—even if he weighs only three or four kilos more than I do—I decide, as the old saying goes, that the best defense is a good offense. Thus I make the classic mistake of trying to hit too hard and, as the boxers say, I “announce” my punch. In other words, I make my intention to attack too clear, before delivering it with a movement that is both obvious and messy. He immediately blocks me with a jab that hits my face. The impact resonates dully through my skull. Here is my proof that Franck is indeed a good puncher. Because of his size, he is content to control me from a distance. This is why Luis encourages me to take the initiative: “You’re smaller. It’s up to you to go for it. C’mon, move, get inside his guard!” The first rebuff, which still stings, does not make me eager to try



my luck again. Still, I decide to act, thrusting myself forward. This time, I touch his body. But in striking, my guard comes down. My opponent's response—a vigorous and decisive hook—encounters no obstacles on its way to my cheekbone, which it brutally smashes. “Raise your hands!” Luis seems vaguely annoyed but, more than anything, amused. “Raise your hands immediately when you hit him. If you don't, you'll open yourself up and take a counterpunch.” I can confirm his analysis.

The round ends. My head is spinning. I am dazed and exhausted by the stress of the fight. The minute-long break is over in a flash and the bell calls us back to our labors. During the entire second round, I am knocked around all four of the ring's corners. I manage to muster only a meager resistance. Worse still, I will later learn that Luis expressly asked Franck to go easy on me. Never informing the concerned party, he always did this before a baptismal sparring. So when I was struggling—in other words, all the time—Franck was not hitting me particularly hard. By the fourth or fifth minute of the fight, my breath feels like a furnace burning through my ribcage. Each mouthful of air is blocked by my damn mouthpiece. My heart is pounding wildly. I feel I will spit my heart up if I am hit again in the stomach. My entire body has been transformed into a kind of inert diving suit. I experience what Norman Mailer called “carnal indifference”<sup>7</sup>—that is, the physical annihilation of my will to fight, which has been dragged to exhaustion's lower depths. Moving the least of my segments demands considerable energy, which in my pathetic excitement I have depleted. Now, I am easy prey, and Franck is about to annihilate me, particularly since Luis is egging him on: “He's stopped doing anything! Go on, Franck, wake him up!”

Even softened, the avalanche of blows produces its effect. My opponent's arms feel like octopus's tentacles, lashing at me repeatedly, always directed at my face. Overwhelmed, I cover myself the best that I can and commit an irreparable offense: hunched over, I lower my head between my fists so that I can no longer see. Instantly, Luis interrupts the fight. Berating me, he yells: “Watch his punches! That's pointless! You're still getting hit! And it hurts a lot more if you don't see them coming!” In addition to the fatigue, I feel deeply insulted by what has just happened. If the coach had not suspended the fight, I would without question have received a nasty thrashing. I look around, making sure that my humiliation has been private, promising myself to show more vigor, which I no longer have the physical ability to act on. After exchanging a few punches that Luis suggested we keep soft, the bell announcing the end of the

second round finally rings. Disappointed with my performance, I cannot help but wonder how even experienced boxers manage to last when they are beaten like plaster for ten to twelve rounds. One thing is certain: I would now watch fights on TV in a completely different light. I have learned at least one lesson: in boxing, when one starts to weaken, one is doubly defeated. For in addition to the physiological collapse resulting from physical exhaustion, one's adversary, being less tired, is in a position to press his advantage and can hit twice as fast.

When Franck comes up to me, his face breaking into a broad smile, he taps my gloves, bringing ritual closure to our agonistic exchange. "It's all good, man. You can defend yourself! Yeah, you've got a couple things to figure out. That's normal. A few bad reflexes to get rid of. But it's the same for everyone." As for Luis, he looked at me mischievously before he too said: "That wasn't so bad, for your first time. But you did too much bodybuilding. You wear out fast: you're going to have lose weight and run. So you see it isn't just about strong arms, or whatever. It's a real sport!" In his eyes, I represented something artificial, an impression I was eager to correct by acquiring a new authenticity: that of a boxer. Whether this encouragement and advice was earned or simply automatically bestowed on me, it allowed me to cope with and heal the symbolic wounds I had received in the fight which, in addition to the physical ordeal, aroused an entire spectrum of emotions that were all the stronger because I was not used to fighting. I will later return to this point by showing how repeated sparring sessions teach one to regulate these feelings.

This routinization of the ordeal of the ring also makes one gradually visible to the other boxers. After yet another bout on the patched-up blue canvas with Franck, Boris, or David, a number of them spontaneously came up to me to offer their advice or comment on my moves. Even the professional boxers, such as Chuck, Carlo, and Nassim, with whom at this point I had had very little contact, rewarded me with words of encouragement: "That's good. Watch the punches. You're learning! Remember we've all been through it. It's a tough sport. But don't worry, don't give up, it will come!" This was topped off with a friendly shove, intended to congratulate me and strengthen my resolve. As I noted above, by diligently completing the rite of passage that is sparring and by beginning to establish myself in the ring, I came to exist locally as an aspiring boxer. According to Luis, it is precisely the indissolubly physical and symbolic difficulties involved in this process of agonistic self-affirmation that can span one's entire career that place boxing

at the summit of the sports hierarchy. "For me, it's the most beautiful sport, because it's the toughest. And on top of that, you've got to have style" (notes from December 20, 1999)—style, or an unfailing *agôn*, matched with great technical skill in fist work. Obviously, I still had a way to go. Yet this was clearly what the coach wanted us to achieve. No doubt this was indicative of a working-class habitus in which the ideal boxer's physical self-preservation—having style and being tough on pain—is nothing more than a symptom that situates those who embody it in a social hierarchy. But so what?

### RECOGNIZING ONESELF AMONG ONE'S OWN

If an investigation begins where what we already know ends, the ritualistic order through which boxers are consecrated seems more interesting than the observation that most are men and belong to the working class. At the level of lived experience, these rituals do not suggest forms of membership that can be reduced to a gender or a class status. Rather, they are constructed through a sequence of interactions that tie the subject to a collective body: the boxing community. The latter certainly participates in the masculine world and working-class culture, but even so, it selects its members and submits them to its own ordeals.

#### *Choosing the "Right People"*

The process begins with the selection of those whom Luis sees as the "right people." To do so, he adapts the discovery of the ring to each aspiring boxer. Though it comes across as brutal, the first sparring bout is, in fact, closely controlled by the coach. His view of the situation is as broad as the novice's is narrow in its focus on his opponent. First, Luis carefully chooses a partner from those fighters who are capable of controlling both themselves and their opponents. Next, if the apprentice boxer is hot-headed, the coach will limit his striking opportunities. He does this systematically with the younger fighters, forbidding them from hitting faces. When, however, he determines that an aspiring boxer's style is reasonable, Luis pairs him with a tougher adversary, whom he will nonetheless rein in, ensuring that the fight is realistic but that no one will get hurt. In any event, no one—neither the beginners nor the experienced fighters—can ignore Luis's instructions. The idea, once again, is not to force the boxers to submit to his domination but to render them

increasingly autonomous as they are trained to fight—a process that must, as much as possible, preserve each participant's physical integrity.

As I learned in my journeys through other gyms, this constant pairing of *agôn* and self-mastery is what distinguishes “good” gyms from their opposites, in which the boxers throw themselves with no structure into fights that do not resemble boxing so much as carnival games, which makes them particularly dangerous. For this approach, the Gants d’Or’s coach has nothing but contempt:

If you have two boxers, two beginners, maybe one will knock out the other. But the one who knocks the other out doesn’t even know why. He doesn’t know how he did it. Because he’s not lucid. You know, it’s just a stroke of luck. But when you reach a certain level, if a boxer wins by knockout, he knows how he knocked him out. A beginning boxer who wins by knockout? That doesn’t mean anything! But there are some coaches, you know, who think they have a champion when things happen that way [*his expression is scornful*]. I don’t like those kinds of people. [Extract of recorded interview]

### *An Ethnomethodology of Boxing Selections*

Just as he dislikes excessive confidence, Luis has little tolerance for misbehavior at his gym. Transgressions—which tend to be few and far between—are quickly contained. They usually involve adolescents or young men displaying their virility in a particularly bellicose way. While in the ordeal of the ring they usually capitulate to the more experienced boxer, the boldest among them retain their defiant attitude, including Hafid, a fifteen-year-old stud whom Luis has taken up a number of times.

Tuesday, February 1, 2000. This evening, the sentence cannot not be appealed. His face contorted in barely concealed anger, Luis walks over to the offender who had entered the ring without permission, where he noisily distorts the idea of shadowboxing rather than simply engaging in it. “Get down here!” As Luis’s command reverberates through the room, everyone stops and watches what is happening. In the church-like silence, Luis hisses through his teeth, which are locked together in an effort to contain his rage: “You’re not even trying to understand. I’m not going to make an effort anymore. You see your bag? Take it, get out of here, and don’t come back.” With a smile that weakly conveys the ironic detachment he struggles to display, Hafid, distraught by his

eviction, nonetheless makes himself scarce, to the gym's general indifference. He later tries to negotiate his return. In vain.

Dispositionalist theories explain such failures by claiming that young people who are the least integrated into society lack the (pre)dispositions needed to submit to the rigors of training, such as the ability to stick to a schedule, respect a coach's instructions, and obey the rules of deference that ensure quality social relations.<sup>8</sup> For my part, I have never found any ethnographic evidence to support such a claim. Though Hafid's mother pleaded her son's case before Luis—once again, unsuccessfully (the *Gants d'Or* coach means what he says)—she did not strike me as someone who was obviously afflicted by social exclusion. When I tried to learn more, Luis simply replied: "Sure, I feel sorry for the lady. She's nice, she's polite and all. But her son is a little jerk. And that's what I told her" (notes for Friday, February 11, 2000). I do not doubt this, just as I know that others in the gym who were particularly regular and deferential never had a solid family structure. We will return to this in the biographical analysis as it is undoubtedly in this material that the data required for a thicker explanation are to be found. For now, I will simply describe what the boxers think. Fairly elitist when it comes to selection, they believe more than anything that boxing recognizes its own. Family, origins, what one does or does not have—none of that matters. What counts is one's fighting instinct. Those who have it—it is not something the boxers can explain, they simply observe it in the ring—recognize one another in the gym, which, in turn, recognizes them as its members.

In describing this "ethnomethodology" of boxing selections,<sup>9</sup> a few words of caution are, however, necessary. The first pertain to the trajectory of a young gypsy from a neighboring shantytown who attended the gym for several months. As reserved as he was wild, Chavlo, in this brief period, demonstrated impressive boxing skills that he nonetheless was unable to bring to fruition. His life oscillated between the law of the gym and code of the street. The latter won out over the former, which he abruptly abandoned, much to Luis's disappointment. The coach admired the kid and (almost seriously) placed his hopes in him. If mutual recognition was initiated, it never, however, achieved stability. The same was true of Linda's stint at the *Gants d'Or*. An unparalleled brawler, tempestuous and undisciplined, this agonistic pillar of her neighborhood was brought to the gym by Naima, who had known her since she was little. In this case too the boxing graft was almost a success. A natural puncher, Linda also had a quick grasp of the fight, giving her a flawless sense of

her opponent's weaknesses, at which she threw herself with no hesitation. Often vehement, speaking in an irreverent voice that was always too loud, she nonetheless could take criticism with humor in a way that made her widely liked. There was only one problem: on several occasions she disappeared, only to return, her breath smelling of tobacco and cannabis and her face bearing the scars of altercations that had nothing to do with her newfound interest in boxing. Ultimately, she was called back once and for all to her life beyond the gym. To paraphrase the title of Nikki Jones's fine ethnography of female fighting in working-class neighborhoods, Linda's problem was not "where," but "how" she lived<sup>10</sup>: though the ring's ropes were not able to structure her rage, she continued to deliver her blows elsewhere.

### WITH AND AGAINST THE OTHER: BOXING AS "ENTERPRISE OF THE SELF"

A dispositionalist gaze focused on the convergence or divergence between a particular habitus and the experience of a social field would no doubt see in the oscillations represented by Linda and Chavlo yet another example of the divide which, according to Loïc Wacquant, separates the code of the street from the law of the ring.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Law of the Ring or Code of the Street?*

This oppositional point of view suggests that dispositions that are too deeply anchored in the concrete of the ghettos and the projects are incompatible with a long-term commitment to boxing. Yet, as we have seen, the boxers embrace a far more existentialist interpretation. Far from rejecting the most underprivileged as a matter of principle, they maintain that even if life can, at times, be as hard as asphalt and opportunities are (to say the least) few and far between (something everyone at the Gants d'Or has experienced), we are all free to choose between the options we are presented with. Whatever the obstacles, whether one trains or not and whether one is serious about running, gymnastics, or the healthy lifestyle that boxing requires remains a choice that one makes. One must show that somehow one is able to resist the twists and turns of destiny and can summon the strength needed to go *somewhere*, rather than *nowhere*. This alternative, with all the risks it entails, invokes what

the fighters call the “guys.” Because they are able to find their own way despite all the obstacles blocking their daily horizon, their determination will unquestionably take them somewhere. And it is precisely because they aspire to belong to this category that, like many practitioners of the noble art, the boxers of the Gants d’Or are constantly saying that “not everyone is born a boxer.”

*Mutatis mutandis*, Lucia Trimbur describes a similar opinion among the coaches and regulars at Gleason’s Gym in New York City, where she conducted an ethnographic study over 4 years. A veritable temple of boxing culture, with 600 boxers and nearly forty coaches, Gleason’s is an enormous room that is used by a large number of boxing teams, each operating under the tutelage of its own coach. Trimbur’s study covers two of them, comprising a total of forty boxers.<sup>12</sup> She set out to document the type of relationships forged between coaches and fighters around bodily work. Their age ranges between seventeen and twenty-seven, and most are black or Hispanic. All or nearly all had been in jail and/or sold drugs on the street. Thus they could not, as Trimbur emphasizes, be counted among the poor workers whose ethnographic portrait Katherine Newman has painted, but very much belonged to the population’s most underprivileged segments, which, as William Julius Williams puts it, constitute the “underclass” of American inner cities.<sup>13</sup> Trimbur’s fighters were children of the ghetto, born into families torn apart by the increasing brutality of a form of daily life that also shaped the experience of their coaches, several of whom had to undergo the ordeal of the underground economy and incarceration. Against this background of structural social misery, her study shows that their presence at the gym had to be understood as an effort to collectively oppose forces of marginalization, even if this simply meant finding something to do other than “hanging out.” Thus boxing is not a rejection of, but an outcome of trajectories shaped by the ghetto experience. Yet the gym does not make miracles happen; rare are the subjects who find legal employment. Jay, one of the coaches, lost his apartment during the course of the study due to a lack of financial resources. Struggling against a life in which he was once again thrown out onto the asphalt of streets he knew only too well, Jay insisted on maintaining his dignity, whatever the cost, carefully hiding his situation from the boxers whom he continued to train by passing on to them his internally precarious but externally intact inspiration.

*"Tough Love" as a Group Response*

More than anything to do with boxing itself, it is this ability to resist adversity—whatever its structural features and existential reasons might be—that Jay sought to impart to his boxers. To do so, he employed, as did the other trainer's at Gleason's Gym, an ostensibly voluntaristic and moralizing discourse in which the idea of personal responsibility is rivaled only by the condemnation of faint-heartedness. From their point of view, more or less commiserative indulgence produces nothing but a gradual weakening, which, in the hardscrabble world of the ghetto, spells perdition. For this reason, the coaches' approach to learning to fight involves unflinching discipline, and they never hesitate to abuse their young recruits. Tough love is how they look after their boxers. Whatever coaches fail to convey in boxing's relatively secure environment, the street will impart with unparalleled brutality.<sup>14</sup>

This leads Trimbur to ask: should one discern, in this homosocial relationship between coaches and trainees, a hint of the violence of the neo-liberal values that shape the lives of the poor, persuading them that they are responsible for the deprivation and pain that are their fate? At some level, she replies, the answer is certainly yes. The gym, however, does not simply perpetuate discourses about the "entrepreneurship of the self"; it readapts them to the realities of the street, explaining to the young that they will only ever be able to rely on their own strength. Neither the government, nor any state institution (schools, the police, etc.) will come to their assistance. It is best that they learn this as soon as possible and that they refuse to be victimized, adopting an attitude not of resignation but of struggle.<sup>15</sup> All of this is, of course, entirely consistent with neo-liberal ideology, but it is not exclusive to it. Moreover, a form of social critique is apparent in the methodological individualism that defines the form of collective action in this institution of the poor that is Gleason's Gym, despite the fact that it is anchored to the idea of personal responsibility. Far from ignoring the profoundly racist and unequal dimensions of the dominant system, the coaches nevertheless refuse to see themselves—and their boxers—as victims. This is what defines their dignity as laborers of the boxing ring. Their role is to harden the resolve and fuel the combativeness which they believe to be their best form of defense, whatever kind of fighting it might be. Boxing is thus seen as a form of life insurance for those who have none. Above and beyond the bodily techniques that it allows one to acquire, its moral basis is a symbolic structure that



allows one to make sense of the violence pervading one's surroundings. If Trimbur is to be believed, these concerns, far more than aspirations for glory or even victory between the ropes, are the reason why Gleason's coaches and boxers fight daily.

At the Gants d'Or, no one would dream of giving them a hard time. All other things being equal, here too, boxing offers itself as a response to situations of socioracial domination, which the gym's members experience on a daily basis. Based on their own explanations, at each moment of training, the will to fight is inextricably tied to the difficulties they encounter in their life trajectories. While it has some resonance with neoliberal ideas about the voluntary construction of personal success, for which the individual alone is uniquely responsible, the combative attitude the boxers display seems to construct itself at the intersection between a resistance to domination and a certain conformism with entrepreneurial values—a link that this book, in the pages remaining, will attempt to explore. Thus it is in closest possible proximity to combat and preparing for it that this study will be pursued. A study that is not *undercover* but totally out in the open in a way that offers new insight into the boxers' intimate world, where one finds if not their motivation, at least the constellation of motives that informs their collective presence at the gym.

### CODA: THE WRITER, OR THE “GOOD FOR NOTHING” DOCTOR

From the liminal standpoint of the novice, this chapter has attempted to show how an aspiring boxer experiences the sport's elementary forms. If he passes the ritual tests that are required to be a member of the boxing community, he could well become one of its lasting members. In any case, this group does not, at first, genuinely embrace the new member, which it, initially, politely ignores. Rather, it is up to the novice to overcome the gap separating him from the other boxers. Joining the community thus means simultaneously demonstrating resolve, resistance, respect for others, and personal responsibility—values that, as the New York ethnography of Gleason's Gym confirms, are the elements of a boxing culture extending far beyond the Gants d'Or.

While seeking to grasp these structures through my own body, my status as an investigator disguised as a future boxer never ceased to trouble me. Consequently, I ultimately decided to reveal my true identity, to bring myself into line with my subjects, while also expanding the scope of my work, which would soon involve requests for interviews. Just as

Bill Whyte observed when describing the moment when he decided to declare that he was an ethnographer to the residents of the Italian American neighborhood that he was studying, it was the personal relationships that I had forged with the boxers that played in my favor far more than my convoluted attempts to explain sociology.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the Gants d'Or members I first spoke to quickly appropriated the idea of a sociological study, the typification of which—despite careful preparations—I immediately lost control over.

Friday, March 3, 2000. A late afternoon at a bar in a shopping mall near where Luis lives. It resembles an antique bistro that has been accidentally grafted onto the commercial modernity that is vividly on display in the nearby windows. The confined atmosphere takes hold of one's senses like a bitter fruit, the scents of which has been ripened by several generations of consumers. A layer of beer, cheap wine, and cigarettes seems to coat the furniture, which has been worn down by countless elbows and forearms, as well as the hands that have slapped hundreds of cards onto these tired tables. The rolled-up sleeves of the eldest display the awkward craftsmanship of amateur tattoo artists. These greenish, half-erased figures dance to the movements of their tattered flesh, just as the Gypsies that grace their packs of Gitanes,<sup>17</sup> imprisoned in rings of smoke, fill with lethal charm the voices of these men who savor the brown tobacco that has stained their fingers. Their scratchy voices bellow as they play cards, while constantly yelling at the owner. During one conversation, a man whose creased face betrays a vaguely Gypsy air asks Luis: "Hey, boxer"—a sign of the esteem in which the regulars hold him—"who's the new guy?" Pointing to me, Luis replies: "Him? A young guy who'll be fighting soon." Then, turning to me, he asks: "Right? What do you say?" Mohand's face breaks into a broad smile. Looking at me, he adds: "Ha, you see! He's pressuring you!" In a playful tone that requires no commitment, they nonetheless note what is expected of me. I tell myself that this is, perhaps, the right time to tell Luis and Mohand my own expectations, as I share this calm and sociable moment with them before a difficult training session. I begin:

You know, guys, I haven't told you. I've been coming for a while now. So now I want to write something about you—you know, on the gym. The idea is to let the boxers speak, since they never get to. It's true: in the papers, in that kind of thing, you see a quote from time to time. But you

never hear boxers talking about their lives—training, preparing for fights, where they come from, etc.

This idea of “letting the boxers speak” is the best card I have. I play it before the two fighters’ serious gazes. Their silence worries me. Suddenly, Luis takes the step of breaking it. He seems to have warmed up to the idea: “Yeah, that sounds pretty good. Like I’ve told you, it’s good to have students at the gym. What do you study again?” I reply: “Sociology, I am working on a doctorate.” Their faces brighten. The coach reacts immediately: “Doctor? That’s great. We need one in the gym! No, no, do it, that’s good.” Mohand acquiesces without the slightest reservation. I instantly realize that they have misunderstood the meaning of “doctorate,” which, in my case, has nothing to do with medicine. I quickly explain this to my two companions, whose daily lives are too far removed from academia to grasp the nuances of degrees and titles. They are sorely disappointed. “Oh, I didn’t know they had those kinds of doctors,” Luis replies, with a doubtful frown. Then a mischievous look returns to his face, as he ups the ante: “So basically, you’re a doctor who’s good for nothing!”

Off the cuff, I have no comeback. Annoyed, I content myself with muttering under my breath: “Yeah, I mean ...” Then I shut up, upset and unable to form a single thought. Seeing my frown, Luis and Mohand burst into laughter. While the former patches up the symbolic wound from his gibe with a customary “Nah, I’m messing with you!” the second decides to quiz me: “So what exactly is sociology? I’ve heard of it, but to be honest, I’d don’t really get it ...” I thus find myself before a new challenge: I try to explain that it is about “describing how people live, not so much in general, as in groups ... Showing how their members see their lives and connecting all this to bigger things: the fact that you live in such and such a country, town, or neighborhood; that you belong to a social class, that you’re a man or woman, that kind of thing.” I am not particularly persuaded by my own pseudoexplanation, but it seems to suffice for Mohand, who summarizes it in his own words: “So really, you’re a kind of writer: you tell stories about how people live!”

The “writer”: from this moment on, this was the nickname Mohand gave me. It spread through the gym as fast as the news about my study, the basic parameters of which had just been explained. Now that my new identity had been accepted, no one was surprised by the questions I began to ask or the interviews I requested and obtained without a

single rejection. Beyond its direct impact on the investigation, there are many things that might be said about this moment in which the investigator revealed his identity. I will mention only one, as it relates to the ethnographer's profession. It is the insight that informs this chapter's entire edifice: one always observes the observed as much as one is, in turn, observed by them. Hence the reciprocity of typifications directed at the former as well as the latter. When behavioral expectations are pursuing their usual course, everyone attributes identities to everyone else and asserts themselves by attempting to manage the impressions they create. After all, is this not what the boxers do every day at the gym, where fighting is organized as much around reciprocal actions as the ritual order of endlessly repeated exercises?

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Kenneth Sheard, "Aspects of Boxing in the Western 'Civilizing Process,'" *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 32, no. 1 (1997): 31–57; Patrick Murphy and Kenneth Sheard, "Boxing Blind: Unplanned Processes in the Development of Modern Boxing," *Sport in Society* 9, no. 4 (2006): 542–558.
2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002 [1945]), 94.
3. Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body" [1936], trans. Ben Brewster, *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973): 85.
4. Norbert Elias, *Involvement and Detachment: Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, vol. 8 (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2007 [1983]), 105ff.
5. On this topic, see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 54ff.
6. Geertz explains this, notably by invoking a "Balinese character," which situates local attitudes, culturally speaking, at the exact opposite of the almost excessively warm and tactile welcome that he received in other regions of Indonesia and in Morocco. See "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 413.
7. Norman Mailer, *The Fight* (London and New York: Penguin Classics, 2000 [1975]), 3.
8. Wacquant, *Body & Soul*, 42–44.
9. In the sense of a procedure sustained by the common-sense knowledge of the members of the same society, culture, or microculture. See Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 10–11.

10. Nikki Jones, "'It's Not Where You Live, It's How You Live': How Young Women Negotiate Conflict and Violence in the Inner City," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 595 (2004): 49–62.
11. Wacquant, *Body & Soul*, 41ff.
12. Lucia Trimbur, "'Tough Love': Mediation and Articulation in the Urban Boxing Gym," *Ethnography* 12, no. 3 (2011): 338.
13. See Katherine Newman, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* (New York: Knopf/The Russell Sage Foundation, 1999); William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
14. This is also shown in Scott Brooks's ethnographic work in Philadelphia's playgrounds, which was made possible by his triple identity as a scholar, an African American man, and a basketball coach. While documenting the vagaries of upward mobility among a group seeking sporting fame, he also explores the numerous pitfalls hidden in the streets beneath the feet of these poor young African Americans as they stride across basketball courts and ghetto sidewalks. See *Black Men Can't Shoot* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).
15. Trimbur, "'Tough Love,'" 350–351.
16. See William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993 [1943; 1955 for the methodological appendix]), 299–300.
17. Gitanes is one of the best-known brands of French cigarettes. Its logo is a Gypsy woman dancing in twists of smoke.



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