

# Boxing and Urban Cultures

**'Boxing, Boxing Clubs, and  
the American Urban Milieu'**

SOC280: Lecture I



# Core Themes of the Course

- Boxing as a 'blood sport': ethics, violence, exploitation
- Boxing as work/craft: class-dimensions and economics
- Boxing as a reflexive sociocultural practice: nexus of cooperation, antagonism and symbolic struggles
- Boxing as a window, reflection, and critique of ghettoization
- Boxing Clubs as sites of sociocultural identity formation, (re)production, domination, and resistance
- Boxing Clubs as dialectical sites of egalitarianism and hyper-ethnoracialization

# Boxing in the US Context

- Professional boxing may not be an exclusively urban sport, but, at least in the US, it has been a quintessentially urban one.
- US-based boxing clubs are not merely physical places typically located within cities.
- More fundamentally, boxing clubs in the US constitute part of a physically precarious but historical and socio-economically durable landscape of deprivation, disrespect, and disorder commonly known as 'the ghetto' or, more locally, 'the hood'.

# Boxing and 'the hood'

- Given the distinctly urban inflection of US boxing, one needs to understand how the attitudes and choices of urban boxers intersect with the larger forces and constraints that define 'the hood' and inform the culture of boxing in America.
- And yet it must be emphasized that boxers are never merely urban cultural dopes, to paraphrase Goffman. Boxing gyms and gym cultures are parasitic on but also reflexively distinct from urban cultural norms and forms.
- 'This ain't no ghetto up in here!' Coach Edgar

From the inside out:  
A participant-observer ethnography  
of an urban boxing gym

# Lessons Learned in the Gym

- 'Structural violence' (Farmer) and the 'damaged life' (Adorno) in the American urban milieu: repeated exposure to structural violence creates a habitus of disrespect and disorder ingrained in ghetto residents' mental and physical perceptual schemes.
- Emergence of the 'new American ghetto' (Vergara): today's ghettos are sites of social anomie in which urban boxing clubs are remnants of earlier ghetto forms.
- From institutional ghettos to jobless ghettos (Wilson): from neighborhoods to 'hoods' of economic dislocation.

# Boxing, Disrespect, and Social Recognition in the American Urban Milieu

- The unique self-understandings of individual boxers can neither be separated from nor reduced to the urban milieu in which professional boxing in the US is embedded.
- Culturally speaking, to be a boxer in such places is to engage in a **reflexive** mode of recognizing and being recognized within a milieu of profound scarcity, violence, and disrespect.

# Observations

- Boxing in US urban settings has little to do with **physical violence** or even so-called cultures of violence.
- American boxers take up a **highly reflexive relationship** to the durable but elusive constraints tacitly imposed by the force of structural violence in their own urban milieu and opt to pursue a different path in constituting their identities.
- In opting to become boxers, individuals are undoubtedly churned, as it were, in accordance with the **economic logic** of the sport. But their self-understandings and identities as professional boxers are not reducible to that economic logic.

# References

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- FARMER, Paul (2003). ***Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*** Berkeley: University of California Press.
- VERGARA, Camilo Jose (1995). ***The New American Ghetto*** Rutgers: Rutgers University Press.
- WILSON, William Julius (1997). ***When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*** New York: Vintage.