

The Meanings of Prizefighting

ELLIOTT J. GORN

Working-Class Culture in Antebellum Cities

The rise of the ring was a complex phenomenon, an integral part of American social and cultural development. On one level, the great champions were not just heroes but celebrities in the sense that their fame depended at least partly on commercialized media. Newspaper stories, cheap biographies, lithographs, and photographs all helped raise public interest and disseminate the names and deeds of fistic heroes. The public personas of the champions were now marketable goods, giving them fame beyond their class and community. However, commercialized cultural production was in its embryonic stages. Even the great champions, Sullivan, Hyer, and Morrissey, were not alienated from their origins; they remained well-known figures on the urban streets, influential yet approachable men with whom one might share a bottle or play a hand of cards. Fame was not merely a product of impersonal media but was based on intimate knowledge of local customs and institutions. Heroic deeds of prowess and bravado were known firsthand.¹

By the 1850s boxing was arguably America's preeminent sport—certainly the championship fights were among the greatest spectacles of the decade—but its popularity was not uniformly spread throughout the population. Despite the efforts of Frank Queen and his likes to argue the utility of the ring in Victorian terms, respectable native-born Americans rejected such claims. Pugilism, in other words, did not simply “mirror” American culture. Although it could be argued that boxing reflected such mainstream values as individualism, the will to succeed, and materialism, the ring remained primarily a working-class preserve and conveyed a working-class sensibility.

The ring's social isolation occurred during a period when Americans' interest in sports was expanding. Certainly influential citizens were more accepting of leisure and recreation on the eve of the Civil War than they had

been twenty years earlier. The hard shell of Victorian morality remained intact, but by the late antebellum era small cracks were appearing on its brittle surface. Reformers such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, William Ellery Channing, and even Henry War Beecher believed that man could improve himself in body as well as spirit, so they advocated fresh air and exercise as antidotes to the ills of cramped urban life. Spectator sports enjoyed newfound popularity as rowing regattas, trotting matches, and pedestrian races became very popular among diverse Americans. A few well-off men displayed their status in baseball, cricket, and yachting clubs, pastimes that required large amounts of leisure time. An occasional young rakehell, for instance Frederick Van Wyck, son of a wealthy mercantile family, even showed up at urban dives such as Tommy Norris's Livery Stable: "When you start with a dog fight as a curtain raiser," Van Wyck reminisced, "continue with a cock fight, then rat baiting, next a prize fight, then a battle of billy goats, and then a boxing match between two ladies, with nothing but trunks on—after that I think you have a night's entertainment that has enough spice—not to say tabasco sauce—to fill the most rapacious needs."²

Perhaps experiences like those of the young Van Wyck were more common than the surviving evidence indicates. But for most of the middle and upper classes, Victorian propriety still hedged recreations onto narrow ground, and even leisured *bons vivants* usually shunned the more raucous pastimes of the English sporting gentry, confining themselves to such activities as yachting and horse racing. Much of the liberalization that occurred before the Civil War gained impetus from a handful of reformers who argued for rational amusements to develop character and refresh men for labor. Parks, reading rooms, and gymnasiums, it was said, led workers away from such riotous activities as prizefighting. A few bold individuals, among them Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., might openly attend sparring matches, write in praise of champions' physical excellence, even speculate on the outcome of a bout. Judging by the coverage in the "respectable" press, growing numbers of men were at least willing to view the ring from afar. No doubt many in the bourgeoisie envied what they perceived as the uninhibitedness of the working class and itching to break out of their own cultural confinement. But in public, at least, Victorian strictures were still too strong and the desire openly to violate them too weak to allow much deviation. The ring remained a symbol of urban depravity, proof that the lower classes wallowed in dissipation.³

Despite bourgeois injunctions, working-class men—including ones in old established trades, unskilled laborers, the chronically underemployed, and those in the shadows or urban vice such as gamblers, pimps, and unlicensed

liquor dealers—continued to stage their own recreations. Urban growth helped provide potential audiences for commercial spectacles. In 1820 only New York City and Philadelphia contained 100,000 people; by midcentury, Boston, Baltimore, Cincinnati, and New Orleans were over the mark. New York's 1830 population of 200,000 would increase fourfold in a mere thirty years as rural migrants and foreign immigrants came in search of work. By 1855 over half of all New Yorkers had been born abroad, and three out of ten had drawn their first breath in Ireland. This large and heterogeneous population needed leisure as well as jobs and, Victorian repressions notwithstanding, the urban working class pursued boisterous amusements.⁴

But the mere growth of cities and influx of immigrants do not wholly explain boxing's appeal. Between roughly 1820 and 1860 the economic life of urban areas was transformed. Certainly by midcentury the old apprenticeship system, in which a boy learned a trade, then worked as a journeyman and acquired the skills, property, and independence of a master, was moribund. Under the old order, shopkeepers and apprentices held mutual rights and obligations; they worked and even lived under the same roof, and their relationship was in the nature of a patriarchal family. But now the venerable ideal inherent in small-scale shops—that a craftsman was as much a father to his workers as a businessman—had dissolved. Gone too was the household economy, where labor was often performed in the home by all family members. This old social organization of work had not been without tensions; apprentices, wives, and children had often chafed under domineering masters. But it offered an ideal of mutuality, faith in the honorability of labor, and a path toward modest mobility for young men.⁵

Replacing artisan traditions in many trades was a modern system of capitalist production that tended to reduce relationships between employers and employees to questions of wages or piece rates. Most young workers no longer lived in surrogate families based on craft but in boardinghouses, seedbeds of "immoral" influences. Although many native-born tradesmen still called themselves journeymen and clung to craft traditions, most had in fact become employees, "wage slaves" in the parlance of the day. Moreover, new immigrants were filling unskilled positions in such volume that by 1850, half of all Irish males were either day laborers or cartmen. Women too, both native and immigrant, now occupied large numbers of unskilled jobs, as did the masses of native-born rural migrants pouring into the cities.⁶

This new social organization of work asked both employers and employees to exercise internalized self-restraint, to subdue their impulses and discipline their passions, if they were to accumulate wealth in increasingly

competitive markets. The old republican ideology had demanded similar behavior, but the heightened importance of profit and the fear of financial failure now elevated assertive individualism over communal welfare, giving the emergent capitalist ethos an unmistakable harshness. The increasing emphasis on productivity brought employers to demand rigid self-control from themselves and their workers; industriousness and frugality became litmus tests of personal worth.⁷

Workers responded in a variety of ways, but it is probably best to think of their reactions as points along a continuum. At one extreme were those who accepted totally the stiffened ethic of abstemiousness. Like their bosses, many joined evangelical sects and temperance societies, merging piety and strict morality with industrial values. As their employers had promised, some rose through hard work to bourgeois prosperity and independence. On the opposite end of the continuum were those who rejected the safe and sober ethic, working so that they might play. For such lovers of street life, leisure more than labor formed the core of personal identity and cultural values. Raucous play offered these men a temporary escape from an oppressive working environment. In the middle were workers who adopted self-control as an implement of radical reform, a tool for building a revitalized producers' culture centered on the values of mutuality and communal improvement. Such men were the spiritual heirs of William Cobbett, and their assiduousness was aimed at collective improvement rather than purely individual gain.⁸

These categories are ideal types, of course, and few individuals matched them perfectly. The radical editor Mike Walsh, for example, wrote in the workingman's language, mixing admonitions for labor unity with endorsements of Yankee Sullivan's saloon, praise for jovial "Boss" Harrington with announcements of rat-killing contests. Similarly, one as impulsive as John Morrissey offered his name and money to shipbuilders striking for an eight-hour workday. But on balance, activities such as prizefighting appealed to those in the working class inclined more toward self-indulgence than toward constant diligence, conviviality rather than abstemiousness, "the good time coming" instead of sober self-control.⁹

The decline of the old apprenticeship system and the new emphasis on wages gave workers reason to value wild recreations and scope to indulge their tastes. The capitalist economy created a sharp separation of work time from leisure time, freeing at least a few discretionary hours and dollars. Moreover, most laborers were not becoming bosses and few journeymen would ever be masters. For many men, the realm of play more than work now held out the best chance for finding a sense of challenge and fulfillment. Places

such as New York's Bowery offered a kaleidoscope of plebeian pleasures. Working-class males revitalized such ancient pastimes as theatergoing, drinking, gambling, and bloodsports. They also frequented houses of prostitution, dance halls, oyster bars, minstrel shows, and circuses. Men reasserted mutuality among their compatriots in countless cliques and barrooms; they upheld a masculine honor that brooked no slighting of one's status among peers; and they demonstrated physical prowess in acts of strength and daring.¹⁰ If not on the job, then in their free time individuals took control over their lives, found refuge from bosses, and inverted the bourgeois ethos with an antithetical assertion of rough male conviviality. Away from the impersonal workplace, where their power was ebbing, journeymen, mechanics, and laborers found alternative sources of value and esteem.¹¹

Within this blossoming street culture, the new working class created a plethora of voluntary associations that engendered a sense of group autonomy. Labor unions, craft organizations, and mutual-aid societies offered hope for real social and economic change. But less respectable institutions also embodied the sensibilities of many men. Saloons, fire companies, street gangs, and political organizations all had overlapping memberships, all were deeply rooted in the social structure of mid-nineteenth-century cities, and all had ties to the prize ring.¹²

Saloons were at the heart of working-class life. Cliques of men created informal but stable brotherhoods in particular bars, where politics were argued, grievances aired, heroes toasted, sports discussed, legends told, songs sung, and friendships cemented. The tavern keeper was a businessman, but he was also the caretaker of a cultural style that emphasized camaraderie and reciprocity among peers. The line separating bars from billiard halls, gambling houses, and even brothels was not always clear, because in all of these establishments, entertainment was the order of the day. Saloon keepers promoted various recreations, including dogfights, rat-baiting contests, and boxing matches, partly to sell more liquor and arrange profitable betting pools, but also to fulfill their role as leaders of working-class culture. Foot on the rail and glass in hand, a man could momentarily feel in control of his life, for here amidst friends the harshness of labor and the moral arrogance of the middle class were left behind. From the 1840s on countless boxers made particular bars their headquarters, and the saloons that prizefighters owned, managed, or frequented were made doubly popular by their presence, because boxers symbolized the successful flouting of oppressive social and cultural norms.¹³

Volunteer fire brigades also became focal institutions of the working class. Men spent their leisure hours in the pump houses playing cards, drinking, and

maintaining the equipment. Once the call for a fire went out, they rushed from their homes or shops, gathered at the station house, then dragged their gear to the blaze. For men whose working lives were prosaic and unchallenging, fighting fires offered a chance for heroic community service, a real sense of adventure, and an outlet for competitive self-assertion. Because neighborhood and ethnic conflicts often made rivals of different companies, all sought tough men who were willing to battle it out with opposing brigades, sometimes while a building burned to the ground. Boxers' fighting skills and courage were real assets to the fire companies, so Yankee Sullivan was recruited as a member of the Spartan band company, named for Mike Walsh's clique of radical workers, while Tom Hyer, Jim Jerolomon, William Poole, and John McCleester joined other brigades. Similar chances for heroics and display were offered by ubiquitous volunteer militia companies.¹⁴

Urban street gangs such as New York's mostly Irish "Dead Rabbits" and their archrivals, the nativist "Bowery B'hoys"—made up mainly of journeymen and apprentices—overlapped the fire companies' constituencies, and again boxers were prominent members. Middle-class commentators feared that New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore were now overrun with gangs that were committing heinous attacks on the innocent.¹⁵ But though some of the gangs attracted social misfits who reveled in violence, most members were workers ranging in age from their teens through their thirties. The gangs were surrogate families, based on neighborhood, occupational, and ethnic affiliation. Here, as in the volunteer fire companies, laborers and apprentices turned loose after work sought adventure with their comrades. Drinking, fighting, gambling, playing sports, attending the theater, and especially promenading in distinctive dress filled their leisure hours. Because the gangs were intent on settling scores and intimidating rivals, prizefighters often became their leaders, and the Bowery B'hoys even wore "Tom Hyer hats" as part of their garb. Undomesticated by women, loving drink, and seeking distinction among peers, members valued strength, independence, and devil-may-care audacity. Though their violence was directed mainly against one another and was much less socially disruptive than the middle-class press feared, the gangs were perceived as deeply threatening to urban peace.¹⁶

Politics was also a crucial part of working-class life, and political organizations often blended almost imperceptibly into gangs, fire companies, and saloons. In New York and other burgeoning cities a fierce competition for place and power characterized the antebellum era. Lacking the stability of the modern two-party system, factions came and went, and no group dominated for long. For the working class in general and ethnic Americans in particular, political life had little to do with reformers' dreams of clean and efficient gov-

ernment. Jobs for the unemployed, power to the ambitious, protection for those involved in vice, licensing of trades, and naturalization for the immigrant—these were the lifeblood of urban politics. With so much at stake, unorthodox electioneering methods thrived. Nominations for city office were held in open meetings, often taverns, and anyone who could pack the hall with loyal supporters and menacing toughs might carry the day. Men as diverse as Mike Walsh, the radical leader of "subterranean" laborites, and Isaiah Rynders, head of the Empire Club, which bent with any political wind, pioneered such methods, and before midcentury the regular parties retained the services of political "shoulder hitters." On election day, repeaters at the polls, ballot-box stuffers, and strong-arm boys all had their usefulness, especially in hotly contested wards.¹⁷

These conditions allowed politicians and pugilists to form shifting but mutually beneficial alliances. At various times John Morrissey worked for Mayor Fernando Wood, William Poole and Tom Hyer for the Know Nothings, John C. Heenan for regular Tammany, Yankee Sullivan for the Empire Club. Countless lesser fighters were employed by various parties and factions. Mike Walsh made political hay with his ties to Hyer and the Bowery B'hoys, while Poole and Morrissey used their charisma and organizational ability to raise gangs of shoulder hitters whose motives were usually a mixture of ethnic pride and self-interest. The usefulness of prizefighters to urban politicians gave the ring protection it had not enjoyed since the days of Regency England, for in case of arrest, boxers knew that men in positions of power could get them out of trouble. In New York, pugilism's mecca, aldermen regularly had their friends released from police custody, especially muscular supporters who could be counted on next election day.¹⁸

Political factions, youth gangs, volunteer fire companies, saloons, ethnic brotherhoods, and nativist clubs added up to more than just a handful of ad hoc organizations. These were interlocking institutions with shared memberships, focal points of a distinct working-class culture. Changes in the nature of daily labor and in the relationships between employers and employees elicited creative cultural responses. It is only in this full context of work and leisure, economics and politics, that we can begin to understand what prizefighting meant to the tens of thousands of working-class men who followed the careers of the champions or even entered the ring themselves.

Meaning in Mayhem

On the simplest level, boxing gave elemental expression to deep social conflicts, to the pervasive parochialism dividing the working class. Intense

devotion to one's neighbors, shopmates, and drinking partners engendered suspicion of outsiders and the need to defend turf. Ethnic rivalries, of course, caused the deepest divisions. Boxers, saloon keeper-promoters, pool sellers, and editors all recognized that a battle between an Irish and an American fighter was good for business. But the enmity of the native-born and the Irish for each other was grounded in more than the mere manipulation of ethnic hatreds. Cultural and religious schisms ran deep, and they were exacerbated by parallel fissures in the social structure.

American-born workers bore the brunt of economic changes that destroyed old skills and crushed their autonomy. Many seized on the presence of foreigners as an explanation for their plight and accused the Irish of immiserating all laborers. Simply put, it was easier to blame one's problems on a rapacious and ruthless foreign enemy than on impersonal market forces over which one had no control. Lending credibility to nativist fears was the fact that in the competition for political power, the Irish were not passive victims but active organizers who used bloc voting as a way to secure offices and patronage. The suspicions, naturally, were reciprocal, and the Irish interpreted nativist prejudice as the source of their own special plight. Prizefighting was a means for both sides to dramatize and thereby understand these very real tensions over wealth and power. A good match focused their conflicts through the transparent symbolism of two heroes meeting under equal terms and orderly conditions. Whereas the divisions of the streets were shifting and chaotic, the ring created meaning from the chaos of existence, and the outcome of a fight offered cathartic if temporary resolution of deep social problems.¹⁹

Below the surface of ethnic turbulence was a less obvious battle over the nature of labor, for workplace affiliations also entered into ring loyalties. It was said of Harry Gribben, a sawyer, for example, that he had "many friends among the working classes, more especially those of his craft." Numerous native-born boxers practiced skilled trades, especially butchering. Tom Hyer, Bill Harrington, and William Poole were all members of this, one of the last bastions of the old artisan system. For young apprentice and journeyman butchers, boxing and other traditional recreations evoked the freer morality and less structured working rhythms of the preindustrial city. Better than most other tradesmen, the butchers retained their old cultural patterns centered around drinking and carousing after the markets closed.²⁰ But even the native monopoly on butchering was threatened in the 1840s, when Tammany politicians began selling licenses to Irish-born tradesmen. In this and other crafts the Irish were accused not simply of taking natives' jobs but of selling their labor for a pittance, aiding the extreme specialization of task that

was destroying the artisan system. And indeed, impoverished, reviled, and largely unskilled, the Irish were providing cheap manpower for capitalist expansion. In this sense a fight between an American butcher and an Irish day laborer dramatized not only ethnic conflict but tensions over the nature of work as well, especially the artisan's fear of losing his trade and the laborer's envy of the craftsman's privileges.²¹

But we must not dwell exclusively on these schisms, for the ring also unified men in an expression of their lives' contradictions, momentarily resolving through a shared set of symbols the intractable conflicts of daily life. Even as it gave voice to tensions between skilled and unskilled labor, for example, prizefighting upheld the ideal of craft as a transcendent value, for pugilists demonstrated superb skill in a world that threatened labor's competence. Here, at the very beginnings of commercialized leisure, sports offered a chance for cartmen, dock workers, miners, coal stokers, and other men engaged in exhausting and dangerous jobs to supplement their meager incomes.

Equally important, spectatorship provided vicarious compensation for the destruction of traditional skills in the workplace. This can be seen in the very language of the ring. Boxing was a "profession," and pugilists were "trained" in various "schools" of fighting. Newspaper reports regularly used such phrases as "they went to work," or "he did good work," in their round-by-round coverage. "Art," "science," "craft"—such words were constantly invoked to describe boxers' abilities. Symbolically, the ring was a surrogate workplace. In an environment that rapidly eroded the skills of many laborers, prizefighters retained their autonomy and traditions, their sense of craftsmanship. Sullivan, Hyer, Heenan, and Morrissey did not submit to the rigid regularity of industrial working rhythms: they might train diligently for a fight, but once it was over, they returned to their old, free-and-easy ways. In other words, prizefighters controlled the rhythms of their "work," enjoying precisely that independence which was sorely lacking in most men's lives. And even for less-than-famous boxers, the ring offered not only a chance to make a few extra dollars but a compensatory sense of accomplishment, of pride in one's own courage, grace, and skill that the work world denied.²²

This shared sense of craft highlights the fact that even while prizefighting dramatized the parochial social conflicts of the streets, it also bound men together with their own cultural style. Despite political, ethnic, and occupational schisms, despite the intense rivalries of urban cliques, boxers and their fans shared values and behaviors. Tom Hyer helping raise Yankee Sullivan's bail, John Morrissey giving a benefit for Bill Harrington's widow, pugilists acting as pallbearers at their comrades' funerals, all reveal that a sense of unity

often transcended the volatility of working-class culture. Boarding the trains or steamboats for a fight, the sporting crowd sought a neutral space where its social divisions could be dramatized even as the rites of the ring brought it together into a larger whole.²³

The overarching unities of pugilism derived from the shared ethos of a large segment of the working class, and boxing's symbolism, in turn, reinforced that ethos. Prizefighting inverted Victorian norms, not necessarily rejecting them but adapting, transforming, even parodying them. Boxers and their backers were all ambitious men, seeking to make money with their skills. Saloon keeper-promoters prospered when new patrons flocked to their drinking establishments, and gamblers thrived when fans bought into their betting pools. Pugilists not only profited from taking a share of the stakes plus side bets, but the glory they gained in the ring also opened up new opportunities. Like John Morrissey, Irish-born Mike Norton parlayed his prize-ring fame into local political power, becoming a Tammany district leader, state assemblyman and senator, and municipal-court judge. When he died in 1889 he left \$20,000 in real estate to his family, property purchased with profits from his liquor and hotel businesses.²⁴ Men such as Norton attained wealth and respect, but they did so on terms acceptable to the culture they came from. By their example they proved that bourgeois propriety and evangelical piety were not the only routes to success.²⁴

Boxers, then, embodied a distinctly working-class version of the American dream, providing models of upward mobility within bounds acceptable to the street culture. Alone in the ring with only his own skills, the prizefighter refracted the American cult of individualism through the norms of his peers. As we have seen, training regimens, with their temperance, chastity, and self-discipline, read like Victorian manuals on upright behavior. Boxers who underwent such preparation temporarily accepted a kind of middle-class, goal-oriented behavior, a version of the delayed gratification that is the hallmark of the modern personality in industrial society. In this narrow sense, plebeian culture incorporated elements of bourgeois culture.²⁵

But no one claimed, as observers would in the twentieth century, that the success of oppressed peoples in sports was evidence that social mobility was available to all who sought it, proof that any poor boy might "make it" in America. Quite the contrary, the very word "sport" implied social deviance. The gambler's bold wager, the drinker's revelry, the gang leader's profane boast—these were central to ring culture, and they offended middle-class sensibilities profoundly. A boxer who trained assiduously in order to mutilate another man mocked the goals of a society that deemed itself earnest,

productive, and humane. Large crowds who set off on riotous excursions in the middle of the week implicitly denied the sanctity of the work ethic. Sinful excess, vulgar conviviality, open dissipation, fanciful pageantry, and unvarnished violence all sharply contradicted the ways good men were supposed to behave. And the fact that steamboats and railroads—charged symbols of social progress—carried the rowdies to their destinations stoked higher the flames of middle-class resentment.²⁶

The centrality of money to prizefighting gives further evidence of the ring's inversion of evangelical and bourgeois ways. When a prizefighter or gambler flaunted his earnings, he was inherently attacking the cherished hope of the middle class that prosperity, piety, and hard work flowed together. Working-class men who marveled at the \$10,000 Tom Hyer and his backers won against Yankee Sullivan accepted the importance of wealth as a sign of success. But they valued money as a means to conviviality more than as a reward for sober self-control, or a sign of God's grace, or a vehicle of progress. Liquor sellers, gamblers, politicians, and boxers were not just petty entrepreneurs who, given the chance, would have chosen more respectable occupations. These men were successful by the standards of their communities, and they were leaders and heroes because their lives expressed the values of a large segment of the working class.²⁷

Indeed, the revenues from liquor sales and gambling were the engines driving the sports boom of the 1850s. It would be an exaggeration to say that prizefighting existed solely so men could gamble, but without betting the ring would have stirred far less excitement. When a man wagered on a boxer—perhaps in a seemingly irrational amount—he risked not only his money but also his self-esteem. Choosing to bet on a particular fighter was a statement of ethnic, neighborhood, or occupational pride. Gambling brought excitement to a prosaic world, and shrewd wagering offered an alternative display of skill for men whose working lives too often denied them a sense of craft.²⁸

Above all, both the small bettor and the professional gambler reversed the Victorian meaning of money. Rather than sanctifying wealth by putting it to prudent use, those who risked a high-stakes loss found in the risk itself what made gambling attractive. A man who put his money on a fighter gained status among his peers because he revealed his willingness to lose all in an effort to win big; gambling was a mark of courage. Of course, men wagering on a prizefight did not want to lose. Businessmen and gamblers both sought to increase their resources, and both assumed that agreements must be binding. But while the businessman argued that personal enrichment went hand-in-glove with material betterment for all, the gambler made no claim that his

deeds brought social improvement. He was content to enjoy the thrill of the moment, thereby mocking middle-class ideals of thrift and progress. In this way the successful bettor was more dangerous than the failed one, for the latter merely jeopardized his own and his family's security, where the former was rewarded, encouraging him and others to continue their immoral behavior. As a stimulant to gambling, then, prizefighting undermined the Victorian meaning of wealth, transforming it from a sign of virtue into a source of corruption.²⁹

Within the magic circle of the ring, not only were concepts of wealth altered, but gender too became inverted. With the breakdown of the household-based artisan economy, sexual identity grew increasingly bifurcated. Moreover, men and women were encouraged to moderate their passions and keep them from interfering with the goal of economic success. In the bourgeois canon, masculinity meant, above all, taking responsibility, controlling one's impulses, and working hard in order to support a family. Being a good provider was the touchstone of being a man, so probity, dependability, and resistance to temptation defined a middle-class male ideal. The very word *manly* was usually conjoined with "independence" or "self-reliance," thus linking the bourgeois concept of masculinity with autonomy and self-possession, key elements of Victorian character that flowed from diligent labor. Not all Victorian men fulfilled the role; many slid back into less morally rigid ways. The sporting underworld could stir the envy of those who felt themselves deprived of the freedom and openness they perceived in working-class culture. Despite these deep feelings of ambivalence, however, the bourgeois male ideal remained compelling, and it was reinforced by a new female role. For middle-class women, the home became a separate sphere, not a place of production but a haven where their superior morality refined men, nurtured children, and inculcated tender emotions. This domestic ideal placed women at the center of moral life, freeing men to go into the corrupting world, then return to a purifying sanctuary.³⁰

If the fundamental test of masculinity was, by Victorian lights, being a good breadwinner, if work was a man's primary source of self-definition, the measure of his worth, and proof of his manhood, then many working-class men in industrializing cities were doomed to failure. Of course, those who performed heavy or dangerous tasks could take pride in their strength and stamina. But fathers now had diminishing legacies of wealth or skill to pass on to sons, and for most men, earnings were small and opportunities limited. Put simply, daily labor undermined rather than buttressed masculinity. It made

sense, then, that many workers turned to a more elemental concept of manhood, one they could demonstrate during leisure hours. Toughness, ferocity, prowess, honor—these became the touchstones of maleness, and boxing along with other sports upheld this alternative definition of manhood. The *manly* art defined masculinity not by how responsible or upright an individual was but by his sensitivity to insult, his coolness in the face of danger, and his ability to give and take punishment.³¹

Sociologists have talked of a "bachelor subculture" to capture a phenomenon so common to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century cities: large numbers of unmarried males finding their primary human contact in one another's company. In some large cities unweddedness was so common that at midcentury, 40 percent of the men between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age were single. Irish immigrants contributed to this tendency, bringing a tradition of late marriage and high rates of bachelorhood to America, but even among the native-born, working men in the nineteenth century tended not to marry until their late twenties. The bachelor subculture, however, included betrothed men as well as unattached ones. Sullivan, Hyer, and Morrissey, for example, were all married, but their wives seemed almost tangential to their lives as the champions passed their nights drinking and carousing among friends. With the breakdown of the household economy, men and women spent diminishing amounts of their work time together, and many chose to take their leisure too in gender-segregated realms. In saloons, pool halls, and lodges as well as in gangs, firehouses, and political clubs, men gathered to seek companionship, garner one another's esteem, and compete for status.³²

Here, implicitly, was a rejection of the cult of domesticity so characteristic of bourgeois Victorian life. Members of the bachelor subculture expected women to be submissive; they also tended to view them as either pure and virtuous or exciting and whorish. Women were both exploitable and less than equal to men's affective lives. Rather than spend their nonworking hours within the confines of the family circle—where women's allegedly superior moral nature and "instinctive" sense of self-sacrifice tamed men and elevated children—members of the sporting fraternity chose to seek rough male companionship. It was not only men, however, who felt stifled by the domestic ideal. The Victorian home emotionally suffocated many middle-class women as well, and to compensate for the deprivations caused by their gender-based role, they sought one another's company. The homoerotic tone of letters women wrote to each other and the sensual descriptions of their meetings at places where they went for physical and emotional therapy had less to do with

simple homosexuality (though no doubt homosexual acts and relationships occurred) than with women reaching out for the warmth, love, and emotional contact that home life denied.³³

There was a parallel in the bachelor subculture that supported the ring. Of course heterosexual prowess was an important element of masculinity; fathering a family, picking up unattached women, and frequenting prostitutes all demonstrated virility. But maleness seemed most emphatically confirmed in the company not of women, but of other men. The loving descriptions of boxers' bodies so common in antebellum fight reports grew less from narrowly defined homosexuality than from a common male aesthetic. Men perceived men as creatures of beauty because they focused so much emotional attention on one another. In the saloon, the firehouse, or the gang, many working-class males found their deepest sense of companionship and human connectedness. The boxer's physique was a palpable expression of such masculine values as strength, power, and stamina. With his body alone the prizefighter attained financial autonomy. Conversely, women were associated with those family responsibilities made so onerous by low pay and lack of economic opportunity. Rather than accept domesticity as the highest good—and domesticity, after all, was a bourgeois luxury; working-class women often toiled in factories or as laundresses or maids—many laboring men sought refuge from the family in all-male peer groups where heroic prizefighters symbolized independence through physical prowess.³⁴

Here the concept of male honor helps us understand the culture of the ring. Honor, as historians have recently applied the term, is distinct from the more modern ideals of conscience and dignity. The Victorian man of character possessed a particularly well-developed conscience (an internalized sense of morality stressing strict self-control) and a profound belief in human dignity (especially faith in the fundamental equality of all men). Thus each Christian faced God alone, businessmen were responsible for the fulfillment of their contracts, and good citizens acted on inviolable principles to perfect society. Although the approbation of others was gratifying for such men, good deeds brought their own internal satisfactions and immoral acts evoked a sense of guilt.³⁵

But honor more than conscience or dignity depended on external ratification. It was conferred when men acknowledged one another as peers, often in symbolic acts such as buying drinks, spending money lavishly, or toasting one another's accomplishments. Honor had no existence outside group life, for only reputation and the esteem of others conferred it. Honorific societies have tended to be tightly knit and nonbureaucratic, placing special emphasis not on

inward virtues but on outward signs that must be approved or rejected by one's status equals. The objects of honor have varied across time and cultures. They have included the protection of the chastity of wives and daughters, grand displays of hospitality, and tests of male prowess. But regardless of the specifics, an individual had honor only when his kin or his fellows said he did. Honor was denied him when his peers refused to acknowledge his status as an equal, and no amount of arguing could restore it. Only acts of valor, especially violent retribution, expunged the sense of shame, proved one's mettle, and reasserted one's claim to honor.³⁶

The fights between boxers and the collectivities they belonged to—fire brigades, gangs, political factions, saloon cliques, militia companies, and so forth—were often animated by a sense of lost honor, of having had one's status impugned. Stake money for fighters, turf between gangs, and elected office for political parties were tangible objects to contend over, but the real battle was for peer recognition, for a sense of distinction that made a man first among equals in the small male cliques of working-class society. Saloons were so central to the culture of the ring in part because here, with alcohol lowering inhibitions, men affirmed their right to drink together or, alternatively, to cast aspersions that only blood could redeem. The ethic of honor had roots in the Old World, but it continued to thrive where individuals were concerned less with morality or piety, more with flaunting their status among peers through acts of masculine prowess. In mid-nineteenth-century America, then, character, conscience, and dignity were hallmarks of middle-class culture, while honor remained central to the lives of the poor and marginal, the acid test of personal worth in the male peer society.

The Rites of Violence

Perhaps most important, the bloodiness displayed in the ring was symptomatic of the violence endemic to urban working-class life. Unemployment and poverty were constant threats, and a cycle of alternating depression and inflation made the antebellum years particularly unstable. New York City's per capita wages fell by roughly 25 percent in the decade before midcentury. Moreover, the *New York Times* estimated in the middle of the 1850s that a family of four needed a minimum yearly income of \$600, double the salary of many laborers and well over what the majority of working-class men earned. In the impersonal market economy, lack of job security and inequalities of wealth and power were becoming intractable problems. And it was not only underemployment, poverty, and powerlessness but occupational hazards that

hit the working class with unrelieved force. Staggering numbers of men were killed or maimed on the job. Indeed, by 1860 there were four Irishmen in every three Irishmen in New York City, partly because of desertions, partly because of breadwinners' need to travel in search of work, but also because of brutally high job-related mortality rates. In addition, poor diet, overcrowding and lack of modern sanitation contributed to waves of deadly epidemics. Between 1840 and 1855 the city's mortality rates rose from one in forty to one in twenty-seven, and nearly half of all New York children died before reaching age six.³⁷

The death sounds of livestock slaughtered in public markets, the screams in open sewers, the feverish cries of children during cholera season, the sight of countless men maimed on the job: all were part of day-to-day street life. The poor lived as their ancestors had, in a world that did little to shield them from pain. Men tolerated violence—created violence—because high death rates, horrible accidents, and senseless acts of brutality were a psychological burden that only stoicism or bravado helped lighten.³⁸

This context makes sense of the ring's violence. Boxing, as well as cock fighting, bull baiting, and ratting, did not just reflect the bloodiness of life. Rather, these and similar sports shaped violence into art, pared away its maddening arbitrariness, and thereby gave it order and meaning. Here, ideally, was true equality of opportunity, a pure meritocracy free of favoritism and special influence. At their best, the ring and the pit rendered mayhem rule-bound instead of anarchic, voluntary rather than random. Boxers, like fighting cock and trained bulldogs, made bloodshed comprehensible and thus offered models of honorable conduct. They taught men to face danger with courage, to be impervious to pain, and to return violence rather than passively accept it.

As members of male peer societies steeped in the conflicts of their day, prizefighters embodied community values, giving them concentrated symbolic expression. Often harsh and brutal, working-class life required a dramatic form to express its reality. Boxing acknowledged rather than denied life's cruelty, even celebrated it. In the midst of nagging hatreds and festering injuries, often unleashed by flowing alcohol and blustering attacks on masculine honor, the cool restraint needed to sign articles, train, organize excursions and bring off matches made bloodletting comprehensible. A properly carried out fight was a performance, a pageant, a ritual, that momentarily imposed meaning on the savage irrationalities of life. Out of chaos the ring created an aesthetic of violence based on bodily development, fighting skills, and controlled brutality.

This is not to argue that boxing and similar sports supplanted real with virtual brutality. On the contrary, as recent research reveals, symbolic displays of violence tend to promote further violence.⁴⁰ Even as pugilism brought order to bloodiness, made it comprehensible by confining it to two men who represented larger collectivities and fought by rules, the ring also upheld, intensified, even gloried in the fact that brutishness was part of man's fate. Not the pious humbers of evangelicals, the sentimental humanitarianism of reformers, or the optimistic progressivism of the middle class, prizefighting as a metaphor declared that there was limited good in this world, that every man's victory implied another's loss, that the way was harsh and bloody for all, and that perhaps even death, were the soulmates of life. The ring thus expressed an outlook in which pain and defeat were ineluctable parts of living, a notion almost heretical in this rationalistic age.⁴¹

Despite the divisions among sporting men, then, all were united by desire to change in their patterns of work, alienation from bourgeois or evangelical ways, and shared attitudes toward wealth, labor, leisure, masculinity, and honor. Working-class men adopted their own forms of expressive culture, and prizefighting symbolically affirmed their distinct ethos. If not a political threat to new alignments of social and economic power, the ring at least offered cultural opposition: if not a challenge to evangelical or bourgeois authority, here at least was a denial of the values that undergirded oppressive social relationships.

Above all, the manly art gave men a way to get a symbolic grip on the contradictions in their lives, to see these conflicts neatly arranged and played out. It offered an alternative to the Victorian vision of an ever-improving world, a way instead a constant balance between victory and defeat. As drama, the prizefight depicted pain as the portion for both winner and loser, violence as a necessary means to human ends, and loyalty to one's communal group along with honor in defending one's good name as the very highest human ideals. The ring celebrated the high-stakes gamble, the outrageous boast, the love of strife. Prizefighting made Old World virtues such as prowess, courage, and virility the essence of manhood, while loving descriptions of muscles and scars gave palpable expression to naked physical beauty as a source of masculine pride.

Of course the culture of the ring had an ugly, disturbing side. Bare-knuckle fighting attracted some social misfits who reveled in brutality. Boxing could become an outlet for bully boys who enjoyed inflicting pain, sociopaths who responded only to their own pleasure at others' suffering. The special order of

the ring, moreover, sometimes broke down under the tensions it symbolically reconciled, unleashing further violence. Prizefighting also defined masculinity in a narrow way that encouraged male exploitation of women and alienated men from a whole range of softer emotions within themselves. But at its best the ring dramatized a world of victory for the socially downtrodden, realistically counterposed to defeat any bloodshed. It offered colorful, satisfying rituals that embodied the most profound human strivings but always presented them in mercilessly unsentimental terms. Boxers responded to a violent world by embracing violence, by accepting brutality and returning it with interest, by being as tough and savage as life itself.

In all of these ways bare-knuckle prizefighting was woven into the texture of working-class culture during the antebellum era. A plethora of urban street institutions supported the ring, as boxing helped crystallize the ethos of laboring men. Pugilism gave controlled expression to the schisms of working-class life, not in order to drain away violent passions but to make those divisions comprehensible and thereby transform chaos into meaning. Divided by neighborhood, ethnic, and workplace tensions, large segments of the lower classes were nonetheless united in opposition to key Victorian values, values on which an onerous new social system was built. Every bout inverted bourgeois and evangelical assumptions about such fundamental social phenomena as money, gender, and violence. More, the prize ring conveyed its own alternative outlook. Pugilism was an autonomous expressive form that symbolically opposed the drift of modern society. In crucial ways, then, boxing during the age of heroes captured the values, the ethos, the distinct culture of countless working men who felt dispossessed amidst the Victorian Era's heady optimism.

Notes

1. Peter George Buckley, "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820-1869" (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984), 505-10, raises the crucial issue in a very sophisticated way. We must be careful, however, not to read the present into the past. Today's celebrity possesses an aura of media-created intimacy that is fraudulent and alienating. We never personally touch the media-created celebrity, and he or she is oblivious to fans as individuals. But this was not the case for the first generation of great bare-knucklers.
2. Frederick Van Wyck, *Recollections of an Old New Yorker* (New York, 1932), 100-114. On the development of sports in the antebellum era see Benjamin G. Rader, "The Quest for Subcommunities and the Rise of American Sports," *American Quarterly* 29 (1977), 307-21; Roberta J. Park, "The Attitudes of Leading New England Transcendentalists toward Healthful Exercise, Active Recreations, and Proper Care of the Body, 1830-1860," *Journal of Sport History* 4 (1977), 34-50; Melvin Adelman, "The Development of Modern Athletics: Sport in New York City, 1820-1870" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1980), esp. chs. 9-11; John Rickard Betts, "Mind and Body in Early American Thought," *Journal of American History* 54 (1968), 790-801; John Rickard Betts, "Sporting Journalism in Nineteenth Century America, 1819-1900," *American Quarterly* 5 (1953), 39-56; John Rickard Betts, *America's Sporting Heritage, 1850-1950* (Reading, Mass., 1974), pt. 1; Stephen Hardy and Jack Berryman, "'Public Amusements and Public Morality': Sport and Social Reform in the American City, 1800-1860" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Detroit, April 1-4, 1981); Peter Levine, "The Promise of Sport in Antebellum America," *Journal of American Culture* 2 (winter 1980), 623-34; Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1983), pt. 1.
3. On the bourgeois response to the poor of mid-nineteenth-century cities see Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), pts. 2 and 3; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the American City* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971). For examples of Victorian responses to sport, see John Dizikes, *Sportsmen and Gamesmen* (Boston, 1981), chs. 1-5, 8; Buckley, "To the Opera House," 591-604; Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857* (New York, 1981), 164-73; Rader, *American Sports*, 30-43. Stow Persons captures the earnest tone of Victorian life in *The Decline of American Gentility* (New York, 1973). On the growing bifurcation of American culture—elite vs. plebeian—see Buckley, "To the Opera House," esp. 160-61. Excellent discussion of the underlying assumptions in Victorian culture is contained in Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1900* (Chicago, 1978); Daniel Walker Howe, ed., *Victorian America* (Philadelphia, 1976); and Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979).
4. For demographic change, see Spann, *New Metropolis*, ch. 1; Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 39-45; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984), 18-24, 192; Allen Stanley Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes: The Social Control of Young Men in New York* (Lewisburg, Pa., 1975), ch. 1; George Rogers Taylor, "American Urban Growth Preceding the Railroad Age," *Journal of Economic History* 27 (1967), 309-39; Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860* (New York, 1966), pt. 2; Philip A. M. Taylor, *The Distant Magnet: European Migration to the United States of America* (London, 1971), 34-37. Frank Queen claimed that audiences for sparring matches ranged from dealers in Wall Street to dealers in faro, from Broadway dandies to sellers of lozenges. However, he mentioned nothing of shopkeepers, businessmen, or industrialists. New York Clipper, February 4, 1854.

5. For a fine discussion of the moral economy of the old artisan culture, its rootedness in republican ideology and collective welfare, see Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, chs. 2 and 3. For changes in the relations of work, see Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 108–10, 119, 134; Paul Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1760–1860* (Albany, 1981), ch. 7; Bruce Laurie, “‘Nothing on Compulsion’: Life Styles of Philadelphia Artisans, 1820–1850,” *Labor History* 15 (1974), 337–66; Susan Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class* (Philadelphia, 1978), chs. 1, 2, and 5; Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York, 1977), ch. 6; Bridges, *A City in the Republic*, ch. 3; Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York, 1978), ch. 2. On wealth distribution see, for example, Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (New York, 1975); Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class and Power before the Civil War* (Lexington, Mass., 1973); Lee Soltow, “Economic Inequality in the United States in the Period from 1790–1860,” *Journal of Economic History* 31 (1971), 833–39.
6. For some of the social and cultural implications of the transformation from an artisan to an industrial economy, see the works of Wilentz, Faler, Johnson, Laurie, Hirsch, and Horlick cited above, in addition to Laurie, “Fire Companies and Gangs in Southwark: The 1840s,” in Allen F. Davis and Mark H. Haller, eds., *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790–1940* (Philadelphia, 1973), 71–87; J. Thomas Jable, “Aspects of Moral Reform in Early Nineteenth Century Pennsylvania,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 102 (1978), 344–63; Susan G. Davis, “‘Making Night Hideous’: Christmas Revelry and Public Order in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia,” *American Quarterly* 34 (1982), 185–99; Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 15–22; Jill Siegel Dodd, “The Working Classes and the Temperance Movement in Antebellum Boston,” *Labor History* 19 (1978), 510–31; David Montgomery, “The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780–1830,” *Labor History* 9 (1968), 3–22; Karen Haltunnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America* (New Haven, Conn., 1982), esp. 8–37.
7. The social stress created by the expansion of markets is a central theme in the work of Wilentz, Johnson, Faler, Laurie, Horlick, Rodgers, and Hirsch.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Raised on the radical republicanism of the preindustrial city, editor George Wilkes also merged support for labor with interest in sporting events. See Alexander Saxton, “George Wilkes: The Transformation of a Radical Ideology,” *American Quarterly* 33 (1981), 437–58. Wilkes’s devotion to radicalism waned as his desire to acquire wealth grew. Wilentz argues that historians have exaggerated the inherent contradiction of labor radicalism and street life; *Chants Democratic*, 255–56, 270–71, 326–35. Also see Bridges, *A City in the Republic*, 152; *Subterranean*, January 31, February 28, and May 23, 1846, and October 25, 1845.
10. As Buckley reveals in “To the Opera House,” surprising numbers of these men migrated to California in search of adventure. War also provided a test of masculine honor. Several boxers and their backers signed an open letter to *Subterranean* (July 11, 1846), for example, declaring their intention to enlist and fight in Mexico. For an alternative interpretation of sports and work, one emphasizing “congruence” between labor and leisure values, see Steven M. Gelber, “Working at Playing: The Culture of the Workplace and the Rise of Baseball,” *Journal of Social History* 16 (1983), 3–22. For two pathbreaking studies of nineteenth-century theater, see Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1974), and David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800–1850* (Chicago, 1968).
11. Wilentz argues persuasively that the street culture was not purely traditionalist—seeking to restore the recreations of the past—but a hybrid, mixing old and new social and cultural patterns; *Chants Democratic*, 53–60, 257–63. Also see Joshua Brown, “The ‘Dead-Rabbit’-Bowery Boy Riot: An Analysis of the Antebellum New York Gang” (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1976), 155–56; Spann, *New Metropolis*, 248–56; Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class*, 74–75; Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic* (New York, 1979), 295–319; Buckley, “To the Opera House,” 319–35; Bruce Laurie, *The Working Peoples of Philadelphia, 1800–1850* (Philadelphia, 1980), 53–58.
12. Brown, Spann, Wilentz, Buckley, Rock, Hirsch, and Laurie all touch on these points. The desire to form voluntary associations was part of the larger tendency of Americans to band together in pursuit of specific goals, a tendency engendered by the atomization of market- and contract-based society. As Rader observes, sports organizations such as early baseball clubs were another way that men countered social isolation with voluntary consociation. See “Quest for Subcommunities,” 355–69. The Irish also brought their heritage of secret societies and faction fighting—the poor man’s tools for influencing elections and tempering the power of landlords and bosses—all of which fed the gangs, fire companies, political clubs, and other working-class institutions in American cities. See Brown, “The ‘Dead Rabbit’-Bowery Boy Riot,” 117–47.
13. Stonecutter and Bowery B’hoys David Broderick also opened a tavern, named it in honor of Mike Walsh’s radical newspaper, and there entertained the editor along with the likes of Yankee Sullivan, William Poole, and John Morrissey. Another saloon keeper, Tom McGuire, a man whose roots were in the radical republicanism of the preindustrial city, grew to moderate wealth-promoting prize-fights as well as blackfaced minstrelsy, and even grand opera in New York and San Francisco. J. Frank Kernan, *Reminiscences of the Old Fire Laddies and Volunteer Departments of New York and Brooklyn* (New York, 1885), 114–19; Saxton, “George Wilkes,” 437–38, 442. For a typically judgmental account of these “degraded” characters, see Browne, *Great Metropolis*, ch. 6. On the centrality of the saloon to working-class culture see Jon M. Kingsdale, “‘The Poor Man’s Club’: Social Func-

tions of the Urban Working-Class Saloon," *American Quarterly* 25 (1973), 472-89; Michael T. Isenberg, "John L. Sullivan and His America," draft manuscript (Annapolis, 1985), ch. 2; Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pt. 2, ch. 2.

14. Laurie, *Working Peoples of Philadelphia*, 58-62; Herbert Asbury, *Ye Olde Fire Laddies* (New York, 1930), 154-55, 171-84; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 259-63; Kernan, *Reminiscences*, 19; Buckley, "To the Opera House," 333-42; Adelman, "Development of Modern Athletics," 569-74; Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Bowery Days* (New York, 1931), ch. 12; Leo Hershkowitz, *Tweed's New York* (Garden City, N.Y., 1977), chs. 1-6; Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 90-93; Ed James, "Lives and Battles of the Irish Champions" (1883), in a scrapbook of clippings on nineteenth-century American sports, New York Public Library Annex.

15. See, for example, anon., *London and New York: Their Crime and Police* (New York, 1853), reprinted from articles in the *New York Journal of Commerce*, February 1853; Harlow, *Old Bowery Days*, chs. 11 and 16; Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York* (New York, 1928), 37-45; Jerome Mushkat, *Tammany: The Evolution of a Political Machine, 1789-1865* (Syracuse, 1971), 208; Gustavus Myers, *The History of Tammany Hall* (New York, 1901), 154-63; and M. R. Werner, *Tammany Hall* (New York, 1928), 44-65.

16. Saxton, "George Wilkes," 437-58, does a fine job of revealing the juncture of politics, street life, and working-class culture. Also see Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 8-90; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 255-64, 300-301; Brown, "The 'Dead Rabbit'-Bowery Boy Riot," 60-61, 144-56; George G. Foster, *New York by Gaslight* (New York, 1850), ch. 12; George G. Foster, *New York in Slices by an Experienced Carver* (New York, 1849), ch. 9; Laurie, *Peoples of Philadelphia*, 151-58; Harlow, *Old Bowery Days*, chs. 11 and 16; Asbury, *Gangs of New York*, 37-45; Mushkat, *Tammany*, 208; Myers, *History of Tammany Hall*, 154-63; and Werner, *Tammany Hall*, 44-65. For an alternative interpretation of gang behavior—one stressing antisocial acts more than group norms—see Leonard Berkowitz, "Violence and Rule Following Behavior," in Peter Marsh and Anne Campbell, eds., *Aggression and Violence* (Oxford, 1982), 91-101.

17. Spann, *New Metropolis*, 319, 326-29, 344-50, 352-53; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 255-64, 326-35; Brown, "The 'Dead Rabbit'-Bowery Boy Riot," 78-95; Bridges, *A City in the Republic*, 61-62, 110-13, 132-35. Rynders, for example, brought such fighters as Bill Ford and John McClester to sixth-ward primary meetings, trying to use muscle to broaden his political base beyond the fifth ward. Kernan, *Reminiscences*, 52-54. On violence as a political tool in artisan culture see Michael Feldberg, "Urbanization as a Cause of Violence: Philadelphia as a Test Case," in Davis and Haller, eds., *The Peoples of Philadelphia*, 56, 66. For ties between urban vice, gambling, and politics, see Haller, "Recurring Themes," conclusion to Davis and Haller, 277-90.

18. For more on street politics, see George Walling, *Recollections of a New York Chief of Police* (n.p., 1890), 375-76; *New York Daily Tribune*, "The Poole Tragedy," March 10, 1855; Spann, *New Metropolis*, 318-19; Fred Harvey Harrington, "Gamblers, Politicians and the World of Sport, 1840-1870" (paper read at the Organization of American Historians meeting, April 8, 1983). As Buckley points out, several of the most influential individuals in working-class culture, such as editors George Wilkes and Mike Walsh, politician Isaiah Rynders, and promoter David Broderick, became wealthy men and ultimately cut themselves off from the very culture they helped create. "To the Opera House," 406-9.

19. On nativism and politics in New York see Robert Ernst, "Economic Nativism in New York City during the 1840s," *New York History* 29 (April 1948), 170-86; Ira M. Leonard, "The Rise and Fall of the American Republican Party in New York City," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 50 (April 1966), 150-92; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 315-25, 343-49. Several historians have argued that ethnic conflict was the major formative influence in the politics of the antebellum era. For this "ethnocultural" school, see Michael F. Holt, *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848-1860* (New Haven, Conn., 1969); Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978); Joel H. Silbey, *The Transformation of American Politics, 1840-1860* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967); Robert Kelly, *The Cultural Pattern in American Politics: The First Century* (New York, 1979); Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900* (New York, 1970); Paul Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System, 1853-1892: Parties, Voters and Political Cultures* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979).

20. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 137-39; Buckley, "To the Opera House," 342-49; *New York Clipper*, April 29, 1854.

21. See Wilentz and Buckley, *passim*.

22. For examples, see *New York Clipper*, October 15 and December 10, 1853.

23. The most comprehensive work on street culture is Buckley, "To the Opera House."

24. On symbolic inversion see Barbara A. Babcock, ed., *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978). Police Captain Petty referred to Norton's fifth-ward clique as "a gang of rowdies composed of thieves, gamblers, pimps, bounty jumpers, fighters, and rum sellers." The president of the police board called Norton "the champion of the desperate and dangerous classes," including thieves, murderers, and prostitutes. Other boxers also found success on their own terms. Ed Price became an attorney after retiring from the ring, building his practice with the aid of his street contacts, while Orville "Awful" Gardner—a few years after biting off part of William "Dublin Tricks" Hasting's ear in a brawl—was converted to Christianity and preached to others of his background in the language and style of the Bowery. Quotations from Edwin P. Kilroe, comp., "Skeleton Outline of the Activities of Michael Norton," New York

Historical Society manuscript dated April 1, 1938. See also Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years Work Among Them* (New York, 1872), 288–97.

25. On "modern" personality see Richard D. Brown, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life, 1600–1865* (New York, 1976), chs. 5 and 6, and Wilbur Zelinsky, *A Cultural Geography of the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1973), ch. 2. My considerable debt to Clifford Geertz should be obvious in these pages. See his *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973).

26. Contrast the behavior of men at a fight with Victorian propriety as elucidated by Howe et al. in *Victorian America* and by Haltunen in *Confidence Men and Painted Women*.

27. On gambling see Ann Fabian, "Rascals and Gentlemen: The Meaning of American Gambling, 1820–1890" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1983).

28. On the centrality of gambling to the rise of sport see Harrington, "Gamblers, Politicians, and the World of Sport." Labor radical Mike Walsh seems to have taken a live-and-let-live attitude toward gambling; see *Subterranean*, December 27, 1845. The ring depended on professional gamblers for stake money and to facilitate wagering among other bettors. Jake Somerendyke, for example, was a regular at the Empire Club, where fights were discussed and arranged. He earned his money from his expertise at the ring and track, handicapping horses and fighters and selling "pools" to other gamblers. See Ed James, *The Life and Battles of Tom Hyer* (New York, 1879), 2.

29. Fabian, "Rascals and Gentlemen"; Harrington, "Gamblers, Politicians and the World of Sport." Also see Haller, "Recurring Themes," 277–90.

30. On gender roles in Victorian America see Rader, *American Sports*, 34; Peter Stearns, *Be a Man: Males in Modern Society* (New York, 1979), ch. 5; Edward Anthony Rotundo, "Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of American Middle Class Manhood," *Journal of Social History* 16 (summer 1983), 23–38; Rotundo, "Manhood in America: The Northern Middle Class, 1770–1920" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1982), chs. 4–6; Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); Charles E. Rosenberg, "Sexuality, Class and Role in Nineteenth-Century America," in Joseph and Elizabeth Pleck, eds., *The American Man* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1980), 219–54; Michael Gordon, "The Ideal Husband as Depicted in the Nineteenth Century Marriage Manual," in Pleck and Pleck, *The American Man*, 145–57; Joe L. Dubbert, *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1979), ch. 2; Pleck and Pleck, "Introduction," *The American Man*, 14–15; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, Conn., 1977); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977); William H. Chafe, *Women and Equality: Changing Patterns in American Culture* (Oxford, 1979), ch. 2; Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America* (New York, 1974), chs. 1 and 2; Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck, eds., *A Heritage of*

Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women (New York, 1979), chs. 6–14.

31. Spann captures the male basis of this culture. *New Metropolis*, 344–50. Rotundo's dissertation is particularly helpful here, especially chs. 2–6. Also see Jonathan Katz, ed., *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the USA* (New York, 1976). Joseph H. Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 140–42, uses the terms "traditional" and "modern" to differentiate male-centered from female-centered masculinity, a class-biased formulation. Peter Stearns is quite sensitive to the problem of how class and gender roles interact: *Be a Man*, 41–46, 59–60, 62–63, 70–71.

32. Rader, *American Sports*, 34; Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class*, 54–55; Kernan, *Reminiscences*, 165; Stearns, *Be a Man*, 52–53, 85; Kingsdale, "The 'Poor Man's Club,'" 472–89; Brace, *Dangerous Classes of New York*, 286–97; Ned Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats and Others* (Chicago, 1967), esp. 31–37, 72–73, 85–115; Adelman, *Development of Modern Athletics*, 582–89; Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*, 7; David R. Johnson, *Policing the Urban Underworld* (Philadelphia, 1979), esp. 29–40, 78–89, 126–81.

33. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs* 1 (autumn 1975), 1–29.

34. *New York Clipper*, December 10, 1853. Joseph and Elizabeth Pleck point out that eighteenth-century men were intensely intimate in their interactions with one another. *American Man*, 13.

35. On the concept of honor see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), esp. pt. 1; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners* (Baton Rouge, 1985); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice, Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth Century American South* (New York, 1984), esp. ch. 1; Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review* 90 (1985), 38–42; Peter Berger et al., *The Homeless Mind* (New York, 1973), 83–94; Julio Caro-Baroja, "Honour and Shame: An Historical Account of Several Conflicts," trans. R. Johnson, and Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," both in J. G. Peristian, ed., *Honour and Shame* (Chicago, 1966), 88–91, 19–77; "Honor," in David Sills, ed., *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 6 (New York, 1968), 503–10.

36. See references in note 14 above.

37. Wyatt-Brown, 113–17; Bridges, *A City in the Republic*, 116; Spann, *New Metropolis*, 25–28, 71, 134–51; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 117–19, 363–64; Roger Lane, *Violent Death in the City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 59–64, 117–24. The human environment could be as threatening as the natural one. Mobbing and rioting were common, traditional forms of protest aimed at attaining particular social or economic goals. Moreover, street crime—though comparatively infrequent by

modern standards—was perceived as growing out of control. See Feldberg, "Urbanization as a Cause of Violence," 53–69.

38. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, ch. 7, esp. 262–66; Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970). Traditional use of violence is a pervasive theme in Buckley, "To the Opera House," and Joshua Brown, "The 'Dead Rabbit'-Bowery Boy Riot." Also see Harlow, *Old Bowery Days*, 146–51, and Charles N. Glabb and Theodore Brown, *A History of Urban America* (New York, 1967), 87–88.

39. Even though the rules of the ring sometimes broke down, it was the ideal of fair combat that gave boxing symbolic power. After a barroom misunderstanding in 1859, John C. Heenan was set upon in the streets of Boston, kicked down from behind, shot at, and left bleeding with injuries to his back and knee. Contrast such brutality—not uncommon in street life—with the controlled passions of the ring. Ed James, *Life and Battles of John C. Heenan* (New York, 1879), 3. For a fascinating discussion of the verbal violence in English youth gangs, see Peter Marsh, "The Rhetorics of Violence," in Marsh and Anne Campbell, eds., *Aggression and Violence* (Oxford, 1982), 102–17.

40. The best evidence indicates that violent spectacles such as boxing matches do not have a cathartic effect but tend to promote violence. See, for example, David P. Phillips, "The Werther Effect," *The Sciences* (July–August 1985), 33–39; George Gaskill and Robert Pearton, ch. 10 of Jeffrey H. Goldstein, ed., *Sports, Games and Play: Social and Psychological Viewpoints* (Hillsdale, N.J., 1979), 263–91; Jeffrey Goldstein, ed., *Sports Violence* (New York, 1983); Richard G. Sipes, "War, Sports and Aggression: An Empirical Test of Two Rival Theories," *American Anthropologist*, n.s. 751 (February 1973), 64–86.

41. For an excellent survey of sociological theories on youth-gang violence, see David Downes, "The Language of Violence," in Marsh and Campbell, *Aggression and Violence*, ch. 3.

10

"Oy Such a Fighter!" Boxing and the American Jewish Experience

PETER LEVINE

Benny Leonard was the lightweight champion of the world between 1917 and 1925, one of the greatest boxers of all time, and folk hero to many East European Jewish immigrants and their children. Early in his career he knocked out one Ah Chung during a six-round bout in New York's Chinatown on the Chinese New Year in 1913. Chung, in fact, was a Jewish boxer named Rosenberg. Determined to attract immigrant Chinese fight fans, the bout's promoters convinced him to put on eye makeup and apply yellow body paint to match his billing as a "Peking native" and the "only Chinese boxer in the world." At least one Chinese spectator was not fooled by the hoax. As Rosenberg rested between rounds, a distinguished-looking Chinese gentleman, dressed in a purple-and-gold mandarin robe, questioned the fighter in rapid-fire Chinese. The fighter, totally ignorant of what the man was saying, perfunctorily nodded "yes." As it turned out, Rosenberg answered correctly. According to one sportswriter, our Chinese patron demanded that the fighter admit he was an imposter. "You no China boy, you fake," he insisted. "China boy got more sense than to stand up and get licking when he can iron shirts and collars."¹

Laced with its own racist stereotyping of Chinese in the United States common to the early twentieth century, this column suggests something of boxing's popularity among immigrants and of the number of Jewish boys who put on gloves. Although this Jew didn't even have a "Chinaman's chance," many second-generation young men from East European immigrant working-class families did. Between 1910 and 1940, Jewish boxers more than held their own in the professional ranks. Prior to 1916 most title contenders in the eight weight divisions ranging from heavyweight to flyweight were either Irish, German, or Italian. By 1928, Jewish fighters constituted the largest total. Only two Jews held titles between 1900 and 1909, but then the numbers increased dramatically: four between 1910 and 1919, eight between 1920 and 1929, and ten