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No Mas, No Mas; Ear Biting; and Iconoclasm: The Political Psychology of Boxing

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Title: No Mas, No Mas; Ear Biting; and Iconoclasm: The Political Psychology of Boxing

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Abstract. With boxing as but an example, this article describes the political psychological substrates of competitive athletics' popularity throughout history.

Some United States (US) politicians assert that all politics is local, i.e., that the resolution of political problems is ultimately based on satisfying needs which are proximal--geographically, psychologically--to participants in the political process. Some political theorists from the US and elsewhere assert that all life is politics--the continuous managing and resolution of the predicament in which there is infinite need but only finite resources. Especially in the latter case, one may attribute the popularity of competitive athletics to its mirroring of and isomorphic parallelism to political problems, strategies, tactics, and outcomes.

Take boxing. Overtly, there are just two participants. But each is merely the most visible and not always the most powerful representatives of others--trainers, cut men, cornermen, financial backers, supporters (psychological, social, cultural, and national)--, and still others who stand to gain or lose from the outcome. And the outcome actually subsumes outcomes: who gets knocked out, loses on points, draws, or is disqualified; the allocation of financial assets based on what officially happens in the ring; and the psychosomatic, behavioral, psychological, sociocultural and accompanying intangible consequences for supporters, the interested, disinterested, and unknowing. Then there's the environment of a boxing event from machinations leading up to signing for a match to media reporting, various corrupt practices after signing and during and after the match, public interest, and lofty philosophical speculations (like this article?) about what it all means. Of special interest to boxing aficionados are "mind games": leading up to the match and strategies and tactics during the match--starting slow and picking up the pace, employing power versus speed, stalking versus counterpunching, frequent jabbing versus occasional launching of the "big punch," cutting off the ring from an opponent, rope a doping (i.e., letting the opponent throw everything at you; hoping this tires out the opponent and increases susceptibility to your own attack; and equally hoping you are still standing by the time your opponent will be susceptible to your attack), throwing punches and showing abilities that are unanticipated by the opponent, and engaging in some degree of "dirty" fighting--head butts, punching below the belt, behind the head, or after the bell. After the fight's over, the participants may wish each other well until the next time. Or they may remain enemies in the ring and outside of it.

The greatest similarity between boxing and politics may be the images, storylines, and reputations created for each boxer. In essence, each becomes an icon--representing something holy or at least something basic and timeless about the human condition. During the fight and in events before and after, the boxers may end up breaking icons--that of an opponent, that of their own. In politics and boxing, this occurs when there's an upset victory or when the participants perform counter to mass expectation. For example, Roberto Duran had the reputation of having hands of stone but quit during a Title match with Sugar Ray Leonard while saying "no mas, no mas". "Iron Mike" Tyson had the reputation of legally demolishing his opponents, of being in total control, and enjoying it. Yet he twice bit the ear of Evander Holyfield and was disqualified in a Title match just a few days ago (June 28).

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The uproar, the media coverage is about more than just boxing. They're about the primeval essence of politics, of life itself, which we carry inside us and express as archetypes from the remote past through the present and into the future. In the aftermath of the Tyson-Holyfield fight, amidst charges of corruption, of emotional disinhibition, of disgust, of anger, of disbelief, of ridicule, even amidst claims of disinterest, one thing is clear: the reactions are about a part of ourselves that we may seek to disown but cannot. (See Friend, T. (July 2, 1997.) Nevada weighing 18-month suspension of Tyson. The New York Times. (<http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Boxing, Politics.)