J O E  L O U I S  A S  A
K E Y  F U N C T I O N A R Y
W h i t e  R e a c t i o n s  T o w a r d
a  B l a c k  C h a m p i o n

A R T  E V A N S
Florida Atlantic University

O l s e n  (1 9 7 8 : 2 5 - 2 6 )  d e f i n e s  " k e y  f u n c t i o n a r i e s "  a s  a c t o r s
p e r f o r m i n g  c r u c i a l  a c t i v i t i e s  f o r  t h e  t o t a l  s y s t e m .  S y s t e m s
d e p e n d  o n  a d e q u a t e  p e r f o r m a n c e  f r o m  k e y  f u n c t i o n a r i e s  f o r
o v e r a l l  s u r v i v a l  a n d  o p e r a t i o n .  B e c a u s e  o f  t h e i r  l o c a t i o n s  a n d
a c t i v i t i e s ,  k e y  f u n c t i o n a r i e s  a r e  i n d i s p e n s a b l e  a c t o r s  f o r  a n y
s y s t e m ' s  o p e r a t i o n s .  T h i s  a r t i c l e  i n v e s t i g a t e s  r e s p o n s e s  o f
d o m i n a n t s  t o w a r d  r a c i a l  m i n o r i t i e s  w h e n  t h e  l a t t e r  o c c u p y  k e y
f u n c t i o n a r y  p o s i t i o n s  t r a d i t i o n a l l y  r e s e r v e d  f o r  t h e  f o r m e r.
S p e c i f i c a l l y ,  w h i t e  A m e r i c a n s '  r e s p o n s e s  t o w a r d  J o e  L o u i s ,  a
b l a c k  h e a v y w e i g h t  b o x i n g  c h a m p i o n ,  a r e  e x p l o r e d .  T h e  J o e
L o u i s - M a x  S c h m e l i n g  h e a v y w e i g h t  t i t l e  f i g h t  o f  1 9 3 8  i s  t h e
p r i m a r y  f o c u s  b e c a u s e  t h i s  m a t c h  e x e m p l i f i e s  L o u i s ' s  r o l e  a s  a
k e y  f u n c t i o n a r y  f o r  t h e  A m e r i c a n  s y s t e m .  I  a r g u e  t h a t  L o u i s ' s
a c h i e v e d  s t a t u s  a s  t h e  A m e r i c a n  r e p r e s e n t a t i v e  f i g h t i n g  a g a i n s t

A U T H O R ' S  N O T E :  I  w i s h  t o  a c k n o w l e d g e  t h e  a s s i s t a n c e  o f  b o t h  A n n e t t e
E v a n s  a n d  L i n d a  Z o u z o u l a s  i n  t h e  p r e p a r a t i o n  o f  t h i s  m a n u s c r i p t .

J O U R N A L  O F  B L A C K  S T U D I E S ,  V o l .  1 6  N o .  1 ,  S e p t e m b e r  1 9 8 5  9 5 - 1 1 1
© 1 9 8 5  S a g e  P u b l i c a t i o n s ,  I n c .

9 5
Nazism did not negate whites’ negative perception of him as black. Sport reflects dominant values, norms, and the ideology of society (Edwards, 1973: 84-100; Loy et al., 1978: 297-331; Coakley, 1978: 15-35). Hence one expects institutional discrimination in the general context of American society to exist in athletics. Institutional discriminatory beliefs and practices against blacks during the time of the Louis-Schmeling fight are crucial in understanding whites’ responses to Louis.

Hitler had reached the height of his power in Germany by the time of this fight. Many Americans were uneasy with Nazi ideology and the German boxer who vowed to return to his nation with the heavyweight crown. The Louis-Schmeling fight acquired both political and symbolic significance, featuring American democracy and Nazi supremacy as opponents (Orr, 1969: 19-63; Leonard, 1980: 73). Schmeling gained favor among those supporting Nazi ideology because he also was a believer. White Americans, however, felt somewhat ambivalently toward Louis. On the one hand, whites practiced institutional discrimination against all black Americans, relegating them to low status positions in society. On the other hand, Louis was black but had achieved the status of a great fighter and was expected to represent and fight symbolically for American freedom and democracy.

During the 1930s institutional discrimination against blacks was pervasive. Race was the determining variable that denied blacks access to privilege and power. Even talented and educated blacks could not acquire positions of prestige and influence in integrated contexts because of skin pigmentation. These imposed segregational arrangements were supported by the doctrine of white supremacy. Such discriminatory practices had and continue to have an enduring negative effect on the black population. Relations between blacks and whites were strained during the 1930s, resulting in whites solidifying their economic and racial domination through social, judicial, and political discrimination. In general social interactions between political discrimination. In general social interactions
between whites and blacks during the Louis-Schmeling fight were antagonistic, not harmonious (Wilson, 1978; Sitkoff, 1978). Using this historical background, I suggest that whites perceived Louis in categorical and inferior terms despite his status as a key functionary. However, before discussing examples of white perceptions of Louis, a theoretical framework of racial minorities occupying key functionary positions is needed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF RACIAL MINORITIES AS KEY FUNCTIONARIES

Racial stratification often results in an impermeable caste system. Such systems delineate racial minorities by their ascribed status and categorically debar them from preferred roles and statuses. The position of racial minorities is always disadvantageous because salient rewards (e.g., power, privilege, and prestige) are allocated by dominants who formulate and judge rules of that system (Blalock, 1962; Berry and Tischler, 1978; Kinloch, 1979). Almost no escape exists for even qualified members because they, like others in their category, are perceived and responded to by dominants as inferior. Says Kramer (1970: 7):

race . . . is itself the harshest form of differentiation. Unlike ethnicity, which may be diminished over time, race is never irrelevant under any circumstance; members of different racial groups always respond to each other as representatives of their respective categories rather than as individuals.

Blalock (1967: 74) suggests two resources racial minorities may utilize to help overcome their disadvantaged situation. First, pressure resources (e.g., protest, boycotts, and strikes) can be employed to force concessions from adamant dominants. Pressure resources, however, often prove problematic
over time because they necessitate mass organization and diminish in value once tokens gain access to privileged positions.

Second, competitive resources may be used to advance a racial minority's position in society. These resources are especially advantageous in competitive situations where each position functions as a key functionary and individual performances are judged independently and objectively. A competitive system cannot afford to discriminate on the basis of ascribed status because rewards gained depend on that system's performance in relation to other systems. Such systems recruit only the most qualified persons to perform roles because all are crucial. Professional athletics for the most part are a competitive system. Managers and owners recruit only qualified athletes to maximize the sport unit's chances of winning and hence of receiving rewards. Because records are kept on each athlete, it seems unlikely a superior athletic performance will go unnoticed (Blalock, 1967: 92). According to Coakley (1978: 277-313) the competitive aspect of professional sport is key to understanding the overrepresentation of blacks in athletics today.

Blacks' representation in professional sport has proliferated (Olsen, 1968: 10,) but racial discrimination directed toward them does exist. Athletic prowess of black athletes is secondary to their race (Boyle, 1963: 100-134; Brown, 1973: 168-173; Edwards, 1969; Eitzen and Sanford, 1975: 948-959; Evans, 1979: 1-10). In other words, athletic ability qualifies blacks to become key functionaries for their sport units when competing in sport systems, but their performances have little bearing in eradicating white perceptions of their inferior status in the larger society. One explanation for this paradox is that professional sport is not only competitive but also functions as entertainment. Of fans who follow sports and pay to observe them, most are white and middle class. Edwards (1973: 214) notes that the dynamics of fan involvement require that they cognitively and affectively identify with the sport unit, but
This identification is hindered in cases where an athletic unit is composed of members of one race and the population upon which it depends for fan support is composed of another. ... It was this fact which motivated the movement of the American Basketball Association’s Dallas franchise to remove four of the ten blacks from its eleven man 1972-73 roster. According to the team’s head coach, “Whites in Dallas are simply not interested in paying to see an all black team and the black population alone cannot support us.”

Potentially, all black professional athletes face a conflict between their achieved and ascribed statuses. On the one hand, able athletes are honored and esteemed, but, on the other hand, as blacks, they are treated as inferior (Edwards, 1973: 182). Their ascribed role disvalues them, as their achieved role accords them esteem. In most cases the ascribed status overshadows any achievement and results in inconsistent cognitions (Yinger, 1965: 10-14). Examine, for example, the case of Jackie Robinson, a key functionary for his athletic unit, who nevertheless faced prejudice and discrimination from white fans and teammates despite his objective performance (Robinson and Duckett, 1972). Unlike Robinson, who was a key functionary only for his team, Joe Louis became involved in a sporting event that placed him in a key functionary status for all America. One ex post facto explanation suggests that white Americans placed race prejudice aside to support Louis against the German Schmeling. This article does not support this claim. Instead I suggest that despite Louis’s role as a key functionary for American democracy, whites demonstrated an ambivalence toward him. Whites found it difficult to support Louis fully as a national hero because they simultaneously regarded him as inferior because he was black.

WHITES’ PERCEPTIONS OF JOHNSON AND LOUIS

Louis was the second black to hold the heavyweight championship. The first was Jack Johnson, who won the title
by defeating Tommy Burns in 1908. I believe white Americans’ responses toward Louis are linked to the career of Johnson.

Johnson held the heavyweight crown from 1908 to 1915. After Johnson won the crown whites became disillusioned with boxing as a professional sport because the then popular theory of Social Darwinism (which supported the belief of white superiority) was shattered. A central concern of white fans was that a black would permanently reign as champion; this situation they would not tolerate. For example President Roosevelt expressed his concern over the outcome of the Johnson-Burns match by calling for the prohibition of all pugilism in the United States (Gilmore, 1975: 71).

Some whites who believed the Johnson-Burns contest was a fluke and that a white could always easily defeat a black urged Jim Jeffries (a retired white undefeated champion) to return to the ring to fight Johnson. The Johnson—Jeffries fight occurred on Independence Day, 1910, demonstrating the political significance of the match. This fight proved disappointing to white fans when Jeffries was easily defeated.

Negative reactions from whites stemmed not only from the fact that Johnson was a black champion but also because his mannerisms outside and inside the ring defied conventional stereotypes regarding how blacks were supposed to behave. For whites, Johnson’s conduct was abominable and arrogant.

Johnson’s activities spurred on several Progressive reform movements from prohibition and anti-vice campaigns to attempts to ban boxing matches. His defeat of Jeffries led to a successful fight to prevent movies of the fight from being shown and convinced Congress to pass a law banning the interstate transportation of fight films. Long after his death laws banning interracial marriages passed in reaction to Johnson’s white wives were still enshrined in several state’s constitutions . . . Johnson was viewed by whites as too “impudent,” he showed so much scorn for his white opponents, and was so unrepentent that for decades after his era whites feared that other black sports figures would do the same [Gilmore, 1975: 6].
The foundation of white fears concerning Johnson was that he would serve as a role model for blacks causing the status quo to be in jeopardy. Immediately after the Jeffries match whites used negative sanctions directed toward all blacks to suggest that their dominance was still intact. For example, fight-related riots and disturbances perpetuated by whites toward blacks occurred in almost every American city. Though some blacks had only a vague familiarity with Johnson they were often the targets of white hostility. Consider the following:

I was fourteen at the time. Jack Johnson, a Negro, defeated Jim Jeffries, a white man. . . . White men in my county could not take it. A few Negroes were beaten up because a Negro had beaten a white man in far away Nevada. Negroes dared not discuss the outcome of this match in the presence of whites. In fact Johnson’s victory was hard on the white man’s world . . . Jack Johnson committed two grave blunders as far as whites were concerned: he beat up a white man and he was socializing with a white woman—both deadly sins [Mays, 1971: 19].

On the cognitive level whites did not identify with Johnson as their champion. This feeling led white managers and promoters to search for a “Great White Hope.” According to Lardner (1951) promoters traveled to cities and rural towns looking for strong tall white males to oppose Johnson. In some cities “White Hope Tournaments” were staged to determine which white boxer could best oppose the black champion. Certainly these affairs were not openly competitive because all black fighters were barred from participating (Lardner, 1951).

When Johnson lost his title to Jess Willard in 1915, whites were jubilant because they believed the ideology of white superiority was regenerated (Gilmore, 1975). Perhaps the following is indicative of feelings on the part of whites:

It is a point of pride with the ascendant race not to concede supremacy in anything, not even to a gorilla. The fact the Mr. Willard made it possible for many millions of his fellow citizens
to sit down to their dinners last night with renewed confidence
in their eight-inch biceps, flexed, and their twenty-eight-inch
chests, expanded in his peculiar triumph [Gilmore, 1975: 138].

After Johnson’s fall, integrated professional sports became less
available to black athletes. Whites were determined, especially
within the sport of boxing, that a black (in particular an
arrogant one) would never fight for the heavyweight crown
again (Lardner, 1951).

Despite institutional segregational arrangements and the
reluctance of the white boxing establishment to allow blacks to
fight for the crown, Louis’s objective competitive boxing
record could not be denied. Louis turned professional in 1934
and had won an impressive total of 46 fights (36 of which were
by knockout) even before winning the title from Jim Braddock
in 1937. His only defeat was to Schmeling in 1935. By any
objective standard his record in the ring was impressive and
could not be overlooked, even by racists. If one considers
athletic prowess in isolation of other traits, Louis was overly
qualified and deserved a chance at the crown.

Another and perhaps more important factor accounting for
the change of heart within the white boxing establishment
concerning black fighters was Louis’s demeanor. I have
already noted the entertainment function of sport and the
importance of fans identifying with athletes. In contrast to the
“arrogant” Johnson, Louis was basically a docile person and
therefore less of a threat to whites:

One of the champion’s most likeable traits is an utter lack of
snobbishness, and the attention of such notables as few colored
products of the Alabama backwoods have ever seen has not
upset his equilibrium [Brown, 1940: 50].

At least one writer has suggested that the years during
Johnson’s reign as champ would have been less problematic for
whites if Louis had held the crown:
Probably the White Hope era of 1908-15 would not have been exactly what it was if Louis had been champion then instead of Johnson. Johnson's character had a strong influence on the temper of the time. He was much that Louis is not—haughty, articulate, stubborn, determined to express his nature openly and to assert all his rights in the face of prejudice [Lardner, 1951: 22-23].

Louis's behavior was carefully structured to meet white expectations. For example, Louis's managers—John Roxborough, Julian Black, and James Blackwell—attempted to package their fighter so that race would be subordinate to his boxing skills. They taught Louis even such details as bathing, hair care, and table manners. They controlled his car driving, airplane riding, and any other behaviors that might offend whites. To fight Braddock for the heavyweight championship Louis needed not only to be overly qualified but to demonstrate behaviors acceptable to the predominantly white fans (Brown, 1940: 52).

Despite Louis's behavioral transformation and his great skills as a fighter, whites still perceived him in negative, categorical, and stereotypical terms. Consider the following description of Louis after winning one of his many fights.

Probably the most important asset of this kinky-haired, thick-lipped embalmer was the cool, expressionless manner in which he fought. . . . That dead pan has been a potent box-office factor. . . . Never has he aroused revulsion at seeing him tower over a fallen white man [Literary Digest, 1936: 36].

There is also some evidence that some white Americans renewed their search for a "Great White Hope" during Louis's reign, though less hysterically than in the days of Johnson (Orr, 1969).

**THE LOUIS-SCHMELING FIGHT**

Louis's role as a key functionary for America is demonstrated in his second fight with Schmeling. Regardless of what
whites felt toward Louis, he had to be accommodated because of his outstanding competitive record. The importance and political nature of the fight can be seen by examining those in attendance at ringside. The following were among the many who attended: Mayor LaGuardia, the postmaster general of the United States, four governors representing Michigan, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, Supreme Court justice, the secretary of state, and more than 100 fans from as far away as California (Daley, 1938: 15).

Minority group interests were also represented, though many could not afford to attend:

Indications are that between 8,000 and 10,000 Negroes will attend the fight. . . . The two-and-a-half million Jews in New York are solidly behind Louis and they expect to represent a large quota of the attendance [The New York Age, 1938: 1].

It is safe to assume that both blacks and Jews were interested in the fight out of self-interest rather than nationalistic concerns. For blacks a Louis victory would be a symbolic triumph over the notion of white supremacy as expressed by both America and Germany. We have already noted the effects of institutional discrimination on black Americans during the 1930s. Like white Americans, Germans also held racist beliefs that suggested blacks were inferior. For example, even

Schmeling stated in a recent interview that a Negro had no right with the world’s heavyweight championship; that he had returned from Germany to take it away from him. . . . He said that after he had wrested the heavyweight title from Joe Louis, it would be up to the other white fighters to wrest the other championships from all other Negroes holding them [Abbott, 1938: 6].

An article about the first Louis-Schmeling fight appearing in the German publication Der Welicampf is indicative of the racist attitudes Nazis held about blacks. After denouncing the
use by France, England, and the United States of black troops in World War I, the article stated:

These countries cannot thank Schmeling enough for this victory for he checked the arrogance of the Negro race and clearly demonstrated to them the superiority of white intelligence. He restored the prestige of the white race and in doing so accomplished a cultural achievement. I for one am convinced that Schmeling was fully conscious of this fact and that he fought as a representative of the white race. . . . The victory of Italy in Abyssinia must be regarded in the same light. . . . After the war started there was only one thing left, the fight of a white against a black nation. This has become a racial fight. The same question must be asked: What would have happened if Abyssinia had won? The same answer applies: the whole black world would have risen up against the white race in arrogance and bestial cruelty [Spandau, 1936: 301].

Jewish Americans wanted Louis to beat Schmeling because they strongly identified with German Jews being persecuted under the Nazi regime. In 1937 Jewish groups were helpful in forcing the cancellation of the Braddock-Schmeling championship match by organizing a national boycott. Jews did not make the same attempt for the Louis fight because they feared Gentiles would put the bout over despite their protest (Clark, 1938: 8).

Almost every walk of life was represented in the fight crowd or radio audience. New York City, not expecting such a crowd, ordered 3,000 extra policemen to cover the fight, leaving other parts of the city deserted (Dawson, 1938: 25). On the night of the fight New York welcomed 30,000 visitors and made more than $3,000,000 from them in sales. Hotels, night clubs, and railroads could not meet the demands of the newly arriving people.

For all the publicity and promotion, the fight was a disappointment. It only lasted two minutes and four seconds, with Louis winning by a technical knockout. Within this short time span Schmeling was decked three times and received a fractured vertebra (Time, 1938: 19-20).
Events leading up to and after the fight demonstrate how whites failed to support fully or cognitively identify with Louis. For example, Schmeling arrived in the United States to begin training for the fight on May 19, 1938. After recuperating from his journey, he left New York City to train in Spectator, New York. Before boarding the train, however, he received a strong ovation from white Americans (New York Times, 1938a: 25). After reviewing the New York Times concerning Schmeling's workouts, I found that between May 18 and June 20 an overwhelming amount of attention is devoted to the crowds who came to observe him. On some days Schmeling received up to 8,000 visitors to his camp (New York Times, 1938a, 1938b, 1938c, 1938d). It appears safe to assume that the majority of spectators who observed Schmeling were white Americans when one considers the negative views Schmeling expressed toward blacks and Jews. Louis's training sessions were not covered as extensively, but when discussed the writers were quick to point out the racial make-up of his supporters:

So dense was the congestion around his training ring that Louis himself had to fight his way to it. He was surrounded at every step by worshipful admirers, mostly of his own race [Nichols, 1938: 26].

This does not suggest that whites did not support Louis. However, the racial make-up of the crowds attending both training camps closely parallels the dual existence of most blacks and whites living during these times.

Another indication of what whites felt toward Louis is how they perceived black fighters in general. In some cases the athletic prowess of black fighters was explained as a latent benefit of the institution of slavery:

The Negro race has provided some of the outstanding prize fighters. . . . This leads to the consideration that slavery in the South, while a cause of sorrow to the Negro race, nonetheless physically was a benefit. The 250 years that slaves of the South
worked in the cotton fields and on the plantation accounts for the splendid physique of the race today. Life in the open air, away from the congested conditions of the cities has been beneficial to the white and black races. . . . With the influx of the Negro into the industrial North it will not take a generation to stunt their growth and reduce them to the inferior physique of the white factory laborers [Duckett, 1938: 10].

Even on the night of the Louis-Schmeling fight sportswriters demonstrated how they did not contain their racism by referring to all black fighters in the preliminary bouts as "dusky warriors." In particular, one qualified black fighter was described in the following manner:

Dusky Dave Clark carries his mouth protector pushed forward under his upper lip making him look like one of the Ubangi savages from South Africa [Kieran, 1938: 14].

One would expect an athletic victory by Louis would cause much celebration among all Americans if indeed they regarded him as "winning for America." However, I found that for the most part blacks were the only group demonstrating celebrative behaviors. For example, in Chicago,

Shots were fired in the air, firecrackers set off, trolley poles jerked from streetcars and some windows broken. . . . Crowds poured into the street, a few moments after Schmeling's defeat was broadcast from New York. Dancing Negroes covered the pavements and tied up traffic. . . . Special police details were on duty in the district South Loop but no arrests were reported [The New York Times, 1938f].

In Harlem blacks were also overjoyed that Louis had won. Extra police were assigned to special duty in Harlem as it celebrated the victory of Louis. The Harlem streets were almost deserted when the fight began because blacks were indoors, listening to the radio description of the knockout. But,
No sooner was the Schmeling debacle over than thousands of men and women and children surged out of the tenements and radio stores into the Harlem streets shouting with glee (The New York Times, 1938e).

The celebration in Harlem was so enormous that the police commissioner ordered all traffic on Seventh Avenue between 125th and 145th Streets shut off so the celebrants could enjoy themselves. The commissioner reported that "this is their night; let them have their fun" (The New York Times, 1938e). In Cleveland, however, police were not so generous to the black celebrants. For example, police used tear gas to quell riotous crowds in the black section. One man was shot to death and two white policemen were knocked unconscious by flying bricks.

For the most part, whites did not celebrate Louis's victory, and if they did it was done quietly and did not receive public notice. The diminutive response from whites toward Louis does not mean they had no interest in the fight or did not support Louis. All evidence suggests whites were as interested in a Louis victory as blacks, though the reasons were different. I argue that whites did not celebrate the Louis victory because they could not cognitively identify with him as a national rather than only a black hero, despite his status as a key functionary for their system.

**DISCUSSION**

I do not claim as absolute truth that whites supported Louis out of nationalistic concerns, yet perceived him as inferior because he was black. However, when the historical circumstances of racial discrimination against blacks are taken into account and events prior to and after the fight are observed, I believe this inference is justified.

It was impossible for a nation with a history like ours, where the races were separated in every social realm, to judge Joe
Louis only on the basis of his individual traits. Steps were taken in this direction, but Louis's race was never forgotten. This was exemplified in the many articles I found that acknowledged Louis's great skill, yet went on to remark on his color, stereotypical physical characteristics, or his lack of intelligence.

This ambivalence is also demonstrated by the fact that only those newspapers and magazines aimed at black audiences made reference to racist Nazi ideology. Publications aimed at the general public played down any reference to Louis as representing America; yet German tabloids clearly saw the fight as a contest between races. Despite denials by some, press attention and the makeup of the ringside audience indicate that the Louis-Schmeling match was indeed seen as politically important by white Americans. Their failure to acknowledge this publicly demonstrates their failure to identify cognitively with Louis.

I have discussed how Louis succeeded in the competitive aspect of sport, and his status as a key functionary. But these two things do not appear to supersede the entertainment aspect of sport. In order to be successful, entertainment must be socially acceptable to the audience. The social climate of our country precluded the public's cognitively identifying with and thereby lending their full support to Joe Louis. His socially ascribed status transcended his achievements in the competitive realm.

This analysis should not be limited to the specific case of Joe Louis. Are today's black athletes, continually lauded by the press, judged by fans primarily on their individual merits, or does their race still transcend their role as key functionary? Finally, on a broader scale, this analysis can be used in examining minority key functionaries in their organizational settings; for example, in the government, military, business, religion, and entertainment. How do ambivalent responses of dominants affect these individuals socially and psychologically? Does this contribute to marginality?
NOTE

1. A methodical search was made of anything written about the fight in the *New York Times*, *The New York Age*, and *The Crisis* (the latter two were aimed at black audiences).

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