The Politics of Boxing: Resistance, Religion, and Working Class Assimilation

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This study examines the role of boxing promoters and participants in the process of working class assimilation to mainstream middle class value systems. It analyzes ethnic, racial and religious factors in that transformation as well as the retention of class specific norms that allowed an acceptable merger of disparate groups in American culture.

INTRODUCTION

Few would dispute that boxing is a working class sport. Pierce Egan’s Boxiana, the first full account of the English pastime, describes generations of working class fighters who confronted one another for the entertainment of the gentry and the recognition of their peers. Little had changed in nineteenth century America, as a largely Irish working class dominated the sport. They were succeeded by Jews, Italians, African-Americans, and Hispanics, all from the lower levels of the socioeconomic strata. This study examines the process of working class assimilation to mainstream middle class values through boxing, the role of its promoters, and the retention of residual class specific norms that allowed an acceptable cultural transformation.

CONTESTED CULTURE

In inner city slums fighting was a necessity, not only for survival; but as a psychological release and a form of expression. Youths and adults fought ethnic rivals, labor competitors, and a frustrating, unintelligible system. Europeans and Asian immigrants came in search of work, willing to build the country and their own dreams; yet nativists opposed even their presence, and industrialization relegated them to the most menial tasks, for which they had to compete with each other. Urban squalor and overcrowding only added to their misery, and that of the African-Americans, who migrated northward. Gramsci explained that the working class felt such pain; but it didn’t understand

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it.¹

In response they lashed out, sometimes in organized labor strikes and hostile confrontations; but more often against one another in youth gang warfare, racial violence, and ethnic rivalries. Both politics and fighting proved ready venues for resistance and retaliation. In many municipalities the English speaking Irish gained control of the Democratic party, creating political machines that opposed and confounded the WASP dominated Republicans. Ethnics commandeered urban school boards, prescribing their own languages and values to maintain European traditions.⁶ Such oppositional groups thus provided a formidable opposition to reformers who sought to establish a republic based on their own middle class capitalist values that included decorum, education, aspiration, and financial success. They succeeded, in part, through boxing, ironically a sport that espoused none of the prescribed values.

Boxing, though illegal in most states, required no sanction for ethnic street fights. Such hostile encounters highlighted and reinforced a particular working class lifestyle, mired in physicality, emotion, aggression, and ethnic rivalry. Jewish boys had to fight to protect themselves; and the Chicago Hebrew Institute began providing lessons by 1913. Danny Goodman, who had never suffered a knockout in 225 bouts, joined the gym and Frederic Thrasher, a sociologist, later found that “about one-fourth of the membership of the WWW’s (a Jewish gang), is composed of professional prize fighters, and more than once this gang has struck terror into the hearts of overaggressive Polish groups.”⁷ The institute also housed a Zionist club. Zionists maintained that America offered the only immediate solution to persecuted Jews in Eastern Europe, as a Palestinian state seemed unlikely at that time. Jewish fighters became role models who might also serve the Zionist cause. By 1928 there were more Jews in the ranks of professional boxing than any other ethnic group.⁸

With the legalization of boxing in the 1920s, some Jewish boxers proudly wore the Star of David on their trunks to proclaim their Judaism, and Catholic Youth Organization fighters heralded their religious differences in the 1930s. In one presumed encounter, Benny Leonard pounded his opponent, “Irish” Eddie Finnegan, unmercifully, until the latter clinched and revealed in Yiddish that he was really Seymour Rosenbaum. Other ethnics, like Filipino Ceferino Garcia, won acclaim with his indigenous bolo punch. Garcia learned to box under the American colonialists who occupied his country since 1898; but by the 1930s he symbolized an ardent Filipino nationalism. The bolo punch called attention to his roots as he recorded 52 knockouts among his 71 victories from 1927-1941 on his way to the middleweight title. African-Americans, too, used the boxing ring to challenge racial assumptions and to retaliate for indignities suffered.⁹

As early as 1892 George Dixon, the black featherweight champion, battered Jack Skelly, his white challenger, so badly that the white backlash engendered an unsuccessful move to ban interracial bouts. White complaints did, however, succeed in banning such clashes from New Orleans and its Olympic Club, the site of the Dixon-Skelly fight. The club heeded the advice of one writer who stated that

we sincerely trust that this mistake - for it was a mistake and a serious one to match a negro (sic) with a white man - will not be repeated.... For, among the ignorant negroes (sic) the idea has naturally been created that it was a test of the strength and fighting powers of Caucasian and African .... which give negroes (sic) false ideas and dangerous beliefs.... And the white race of the south will destroy itself if it tolerates equality of any kind."
Jack Johnson’s wrestling of the heavyweight crown from Tommy Burns in 1908 and his continual challenges to white domination thereafter fostered a search for the “Great White Hope” who might bring a return to the established order. Johnson’s victory over the previously unbeaten Jim Jeffries in 1910 engendered black jubilation and white retaliation in the form of race riots. Boxing provided such alternative groups with the means to express their frustrations against each other and the system. In doing so they bid for a measure of power and recognition, and proved their masculinity in an industrial world that had replaced traditional craftsmanship.

Such internecine quarrels fractured religious and political life as well. Irish control of the Catholic Church and the Democratic Party greatly limited the inclusion of other groups. African-Americans traditionally favored the Republicans, mindful of their liberating role during the Civil War. By the end of World War I the American working class demonstrated its displeasure with the capitalist system by massive strikes that included more than 4,000,000 laborers in 1919 alone. Union membership doubled between 1915-1920.

Some flirted with communism, as evidenced by the Red Scare; and the Sacco and Vanzetti affair affirmed fears of a nascent anarchist movement. Youths idolized the violent gangsters that seemingly ruled urban centers. Concomitant with this sociopolitical crisis that persisted into the 1930s, most states legalized boxing, largely through the efforts of the Democratic Party. The process fostered several alliances that crossed political, religious, ethnic, and social boundaries that culminated in a more heterogeneous American identity, a less contentious working class, and a more patriotic national spirit.

Democrats in New York also maintained a close association with boxing throughout the nineteenth century, with prizefighters often supplying electoral muscle for the Tammany machine. Democratic politicians served as promoters of the sport, while progressive reformers and Republicans generally tried to suppress the activity as uncivil and immoral. By 1920, however, the Democrats had gained the upper hand and won legalization.

Similar movements took place in Illinois, where the issue took on a religious tone, with urban, largely ethnic Catholics favoring the sport, opposed by rural and Republican Anglos. The commercial opportunities and widespread reader interest caused the normally Republican Chicago Tribune to favor legalization, however; and in 1924 it challenged the law by organizing an amateur tournament. Formal legalization followed in 1926 and Chicago soon became a national boxing center. Joining the unlikely alliance were Jewish rabbis, who followed the exploits of champion Benny Leonard, and the Catholic clergy, who found a host of reasons to support the effort.

The church hoped to quell communist sentiments, fearful of its atheistic tenets, liberal allowance of birth control and divorce, and its potential appeal to the working class that comprised the vast bulk of its membership. In order to wrest its congregation from the potential threat of communism it also had to address the stifling poverty and urban conditions that drove youth to juvenile delinquency and lives of crime. Church administrators also faced the task of unifying and Americanizing a church beset by ethnic factions and dominated by an Old World clergy resentful of Irish preeminence. Parish boundaries delineated the extent of ethnic enclaves and Catholic insularity limited social ties outside of that domain. Since his succession to the Archbishopric of Chicago in 1916 Cardinal Mundelein had attempted to Americanize his ethnic constituents with limited success and much turmoil. Moreover, Al Smith’s stinging defeat in the presi-
dential election of 1928 indicated to Catholics that they were still not fully welcome in the American polity. The diatribes of Father Charles Coughlin, the radio priest who had found as many as 40,000,000 listeners by 1930, only exacerbated Catholic differences, and Coughlin's growing anti-Semitism and attraction to fascism emphasized further separation.  

As early as 1923 the Catholic newspaper, The New World, publicly stated a strain of anti-Semitism within the church that labeled Jews as "non-producers, who lower the business morality;" and the Polish paper, Dziennik Zdrowoczenia, proposed that Poles boycott Jewish stores to drive them from their neighborhoods. As the Catholic Church moved to quell such nativist sentiments in the next decade, Coughlin supplied a rallying point for traditionalists. His early support for New Deal policies soon faded as he rallied against government, bankers, Jews, Communists, and eastern elites. His message held a particular attraction for many working class Catholics, who found easy scapegoats in Coughlin’s analysis, and his lower middle class adherents, who had been dispossessed by the events of the Depression.

The Catholic hierarchy feared the factionalism that Coughlin presented. He not only exposed the Church’s past compliance in the anti-Semitic movement; but threatened its gains in the American mainstream society. It reacted with its own retaliatory rhetoric. Bishop Sheil of Chicago announced that “As an American citizen, Father Coughlin has the right to express his personal views on current events, but he is not authorized to speak for the Catholic Church, nor does he represent the doctrines or sentiments of the Church.” Catholic authorities in Boston and New York eventually banned Coughlin from their jurisdictions, as the church struggled with its attempts to maintain American democratic principles, such as free speech, and its own theological and social views on non-Catholics and non-whites.

African-Americans experienced even greater exclusion than Jews. Jim Crow laws, segregated housing patterns in the north, and a prevalent social ostracism that erupted in occasional race riots provided little contact with the mainstream white culture. Within the Catholic Church, African-Americans represented only 2% of the membership at the turn of the century. Despite a 1919 papal directive that called for missionary efforts among American blacks, African-Americans still considered Catholics “as perhaps the most prejudiced group in the United States” as late as 1933. Music and sport allowed for limited spheres of interaction, and among the latter, boxing offered the greatest opportunity for exposure and recognition of one’s abilities.

**THE ACCOMMODATION OF DIVERGENT CULTURES**

With the success of the Chicago Tribune's and New York Daily News's annual boxing tournaments, known as the Golden Gloves since 1927, the Chicago archdiocese embarked on its own parallel program in 1930. Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, Mundelein’s protégé, announced his intentions for the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO):

> We’ll knock the hoodlum off his pedestal and we’ll put another neighborhood boy in his place. He’ll be dressed in C.Y.O. boxing shorts and a pair of leather mitts, and he’ll make a new hero. Those kids love to fight. We’ll let them fight. We’ll find champions right in the neighborhood.

Sheil, an inner city youth, gained an early sense of social justice from his father, who, engaged in the coal and ice business, had fought against political corruption. Sheil
had also turned down professional baseball offers to become a priest, and then served as the Cook County jail chaplain. Educated by the middle class clergy, he also understood the pains and frustrations of the working class, and the role that sport played in their lives. Sheil fulfilled the role of Gramsci’s organic intellectual, one who bridged both worlds. Gramsci further explained the importance of such an individual for “The strength of ... the Catholic Church ... has lain ... in the fact that (it) feel(s) very strongly the need for the doctrinal unity of the whole mass of the faithful and strive to ensure that the higher intellectual stratum does not get separated from the lower.” Sheil accomplished this feat as he fashioned a comprehensive athletic program with clear social goals intelligible to the masses that organized all parishes in a centralized bureaucracy. That association brought the insular, ethnic parishes, and, eventually, the national church closer to the mainstream culture and its more liberal and middle class value system. In so doing Sheil served as an effective antidote to Father Coughlin by fostering a Catholic communialism that included ethnics, African-Americans, and Jews in a sporting fraternity. He construed such social activism to be consistent with papal initiatives that called for unity and justice. Both Pope Benedict XV had called for the inclusion of blacks in his Maximum illud of 1919; and Pope Pius XI reiterated the need for social activism to achieve the just society in his Quadragesimo anno of 1931, 40 years after Leo XIII’s original Rerum novarum. Throughout the 1930s Catholic theologians emphasized inclusiveness rather than the divisiveness of race and ethnicity.

Sheil’s league soon became the largest athletic organization in the world, with 400 basketball teams alone in its first year of existence in the Chicago area. Basketball eventually drew 600 teams; but boxing remained the core of its program and the center of its focus, as well as its major funding source. When Sheil incurred criticism for associating the church with boxing he took to the radio in response, extolling the “health, strength, and vitality, of alertness, endurance, courage, and self-control accruing from ... training and actual participation.” He warned that the physical and environmental aspects affect one’s spiritual and intellectual life, and therefore, could not, and should not be divorced. Sheil espoused that the church’s spiritual mission included one’s physical well-being, and he rationalized that boxing improved one’s physical, mental, and moral qualities.

In the case of youth and boxing fans who disagreed with Sheil’s ideology, he offered other more materialistic attractions to the CYO program. Its 1931 tournament, held at the Chicago Stadium, drew 18,000 fans and guaranteed winners a trip to California. Champions also received a gold medal commissioned from the papal sculptor. Young men from every parish entered the contest in 1932. In succeeding years boxers won scholarships to Catholic colleges, thereby promoting the middle class value of education and the promise of a better future. Membership on national and international CYO teams earned participants more immediate rewards. When their West Coast counterparts came to Chicago in 1933 to challenge the CYO fighters they were received by Cardinal Mundelein, toured the World’s Fair and feted with a banquet at the Illinois Athletic Club before engaging in a tour of the countryside. Working class youth, accustomed to the more lavish middle class lifestyle, became more accepting of its tenets of discipline, sacrifice and work ethic. For such largesse, Sheil required the following pledge that adhered to middle class standards of decorum as well:

I promise upon my honor to be loyal to my God, my country (sic) and to my Church; to be faithful and true to my obligation as a Christian, a man and a
citizen . . . (l) promise to avoid profane, obscene and vulgar language and to
induce others to avoid it. I bind myself to promote clean, wholesome, and manly
sport . . . to be a man of whom Church and country may be proud.23

An honor guard of boy scouts escorted fighters to the ring, where they reiterated
their oath before the American and CYO flag raisings preceded the singing of the na-
tional anthem and “America.” Failure to adhere to the middle class standards of mor-
ality and patriotism brought a six month suspension from CYO activities. A survey of the
1600 young men who entered the 1932 tournament revealed that 40% didn’t practice
their religion. A year later Sheil proudly reported that all had returned to the faith, and
in 1934 CYO participants in all sports had to sign the Legion of Decency pledge.24

Sheil promoted his program of social mobility and working class recognition in a
systematic fashion. Thrasher’s 1927 study of more than 1,300 gangs in Chicago had
already indicated that working class youth admired toughness. Gang members deferred
to the toughs for leadership and Thrasher stated that they had “a special admiration for
the ... pugs,” and that “boxing represents the nearest approach to fighting that has
social sanction ... a flattened nose, cauliflower ear, or an otherwise battered ‘phizz” ...
are marks of distinction.”25 Sheil conscientiously and publicly proclaimed his intent to
create new, tough heroes in the neighborhoods. He did so by incorporating all neigh-
borhoods into a local, then national and international program that brought peer and
ethnic recognition and neighborhood popularity to boxers. Physical prowess not only
retained its hallowed status among the working class; but gained increasing acceptance
in the middle class world, particularly after Bishop Sheil offered a trophy for the best
sportsmanship. Boxers thus learned to fight in a particular, more acceptable fashion
than the street fights and gangland violence that permeated America’s largest cities,
and the daily papers extolled both their integrity and efficiency.26

By 1934 the CYO featured weekly bouts, broadcast over the radio, and playing to
capacity crowds that filled parish coffers during the height of the Depression. The 1934
championships produced an ethnic and racial melange that included Italians, Poles,
Irish, Mexicans, Scandinavians, Germans, Eastern Europeans, and African-Americans,
representative of the larger American society. More than 2,200 fighters entered the 1935
tournament and nearly 20,000 showed up to watch the championship bouts alone.
WCFL, “the voice of labor,” broadcast the affair. The next year four different radio sta-
tions, the AP and UPI all covered the CYO spectacle, in which 15 different racial or
ethnic groups found representation. Sheil’s enterprise preceded the 1938 papal announce-
ment that Catholicism offered an “all embracing character” that emphasized the “funda-
mental unity of the human race.”27

Sheil began intercity bouts with Catholic teams on the West Coast in 1932, creating
a national enterprise. Such teams were feted as heroes, providing working class fighters
with the recognition and esteem denied them in other areas of life. Boxers received a
full suit of clothes, including socks, shoes, and underwear as well as medical, dental
care, and jobs. The latter proved particularly attractive during the Depression, and in
the general instability of working class economics thereafter. CYO boxers also traveled
in style on a chartered railroad car, enjoyed banquets and the finest hotels. Receipts
from the intercity rivalries funded Catholic charities and unemployment relief, further
emphasizing the communal aspect of caring for one’s own.28

In addition to forging a working class solidarity, Sheil allied with the B’nai B’rith
and Arch Ward, the Catholic sports editor of the Republican Chicago Tribune, to create

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religious and political unions. Jewish champions Benny Leonard and Barney Ross served the CYO as boxing instructors; and Harry Berz, from the Jewish People’s Institute, acted as an AAU official. But Sheil’s affiliation with Ward produced international results that fostered a patriotic spirit and nationalistic pride through boxing. The Tribune initiated intercity Golden Gloves matches in 1928, reinforcing Chicago’s rivalry with New York, and the Tribune’s contention with the Daily News, sponsors of the New York team. Boxing proved wildly popular in New York, where the Daily News drew 2,300 entries and nearly 22,000 fans to Madison Square Garden for its 1927 tournament. When another 10,000 were turned away they rioted and required police intervention. That same year more than 100,000 attended the Dempsey-Tunney rematch in Chicago, while an estimated 50,000,000 listened on the radio. Boxing clearly had a national audience. On the local level the Tribune Charities further capitalized on such widespread popularity by donating its share of the intercity proceeds to an American Legion convalescent home for veterans, providing it with $25,000 by 1929 and further linking boxing with patriotism and service to the country.

Sheil’s decision to go west with his intercity matches honored Ward’s territorial turf and produced dividends for both. The CYO received free and laudatory publicity from a Republican paper as Sheil became a prominent figure in the national Democratic party. Rather than compete with the Golden Gloves, the CYO provided many of its boxers, and Catholic patrons insured its success and that of the Tribune in a largely Catholic, Democratic city. Intercity rivalries built a communal identity, transferring disparate ethnic loyalties to the larger urban community, and Ward duly warned his Chicagoans to uphold the city’s honor against their New York counterparts. The team generally heeded his admonitions with a 9-4-2 record against the Gotham warriors from 1928-1942. Ward thus pleased his boss, the eccentric Colonel Robert McCormick, who owned the Tribune and despised effete easterners. Boxers took on more than just the representation of a neighborhood or church parish and assumed the identity for a greater polity, the city of Chicago.

Both the CYO and the Golden Gloves embarked on bigger, international efforts that drew even more attention and profits, often sharing the same fighters. Ward combined the New York and Chicago squads for his first venture against a French team at Soldier Field in 1931. The grand pageantry included a Souza march and an American Legion escort, a band, fireworks, and 40,000 fans. The next year the CYO team fought in Panama and it later competed against Hawaiian and European contingents. Three of its fighters made the 1936 Olympic team, while the 1934 Tribune team featured Joe Louis. By 1937 the Golden Gloves team had defeated opponents from France, Ireland, Poland, Italy, and tied Germany, and the CYO squad enjoyed similar success. Both groups’ tournaments received national attention and NBC broadcast the events across the country. With such exposure politicians clamored for sponsorship enabling both Ward and Sheil to extend their influence.

Ward did so by expanding his tournament to allow regional competition for the Chicago Golden Gloves, emblematic of the city champions. By 1935 he had aligned 36 other newspapers and had 10,000 entrants from 11 states in the Midwest and South. The next year 41, mostly Republican, newspapers joined in his promotion; but 11 of his 32 champions still came from Chicago, and 7 represented the CYO. Nine were African-Americans, and another, an American Indian, hailed from Oklahoma. The composition of the “Chicago” team portrayed a pluralistic society that signaled a measure of hope for minorities and the working class. Both Sugar Ray Robinson of New York and Ezzard
Charles, from Cincinnati, rose to prominence in the Golden Gloves ranks. By the 1930s African-Americans accounted for more than 20% of all pro boxers, and Bishop Sheil made a concerted effort to attract them. CYO fighters who wished to turn professional were assured of managerial aid, expenses, and invested earnings, with one-third of their purses placed in a retirement account. By so doing, Sheil introduced working class youth to the middle class system of finance. By the end of the decade, the Golden Gloves served as the training ground for professional aspirants, developing boxers not unlike the farm system of major league baseball teams.33

Not all boxers had the talent or inclination to become professionals, and Sheil’s program promoted education by offering scholarships. The Notre Dame football team attended the 1935 finals as Sheil’s guests, seated prominently at ringside. The next year he invited both the Notre Dame and Northwestern university teams. Prominent judges served as sponsors of the CYO bouts, and by 1936 such educational efforts seemed to be producing results. The New World reported in a survey of 1,500 CYO boxers that in addition to traditional working class jobs, such as mechanic or truck driver, many aspired to middle class occupations as lawyers, doctors, engineers, musicians, teachers, journalists, and businessmen. Only 5 percent planned on a professional career in the ring.34

One CYO boxer, Tony Canadeo, accepted a scholarship to Gonzaga, where he became an All-American in football. Max Marek, a member of the 1932 Olympic team, defeated Joe Louis for the 1933 light heavyweight championship. He then attended St. Viator College and Notre Dame on a CYO scholarship, before turning pro and becoming the Illinois heavyweight champion. Following Sheil’s example of charity and social activism he became vice-president of the Veteran Boxers Association, a non-profit, mutual aid organization.35

Yet, working class youth still admired toughness and their traditional means of monetary acquisition. Some CYO fighters returned to criminal activities; while sociologist William Foote Whyte, in his 1943 study, Street Corner Society, found that working class youth still engaged in widespread gambling. He asserted that “The corner boys consider playing for money the real test of skill, and unless a man performs well when money is at stake, he is not considered a good competitor.”36

Working class youth saw in boxing a means to such recognition, and perhaps a better lifestyle, based upon their cherished physicality and without compromising their own value system. In its first year of operation six of Sheil’s champions opted to join the professional department of the CYO boxing program. In his first year as a pro Leo Rodak’s purses grew from $25 per bout to $1000 per bout, reinforcing the perception of physical prowess as a treasured means of social mobility for the working class. One of Rodak’s opponents, Pete Hayes of New York (whose real name was Anthony Ferranda,) had nearly paid for his parents’ $12,000 farm with his professional earnings in the midst of the Depression. His younger brother soon entered the Golden Gloves. African-American Bruce Flowers, another New Yorker, could boast that he “has made a fortune in three years of fighting (and) ... owns a fine home.”37

At least 18 Golden Gloves fighters went on to win world championships as professionals, enjoying celebrity status and serving as role models for working class youth. Although the criminal element had always been well known in boxing circles, Sheil, at least, protected his fighters by cloaking their management under a religious veil. The reality of life for most boxers only received public tarnishment with Weinberg and Arond’s 1952 study of “The Occupational Culture of the Boxer,” and subsequent Con-
gressional hearings on corruption in the sport. Meanwhile boxers attained social mobility, albeit temporarily, through their physical prowess, unlike middle class aspirants who pursued education or white collar positions as the means to advancement. Boxing thus promoted working class solidarity and sanctioned prowess while portraying a measure of the American dream.

In 1938, the CYO rented Chicago’s Soldier Field to accommodate 23,000 fans and the Golden Gloves tournament drew 23,000 entries from 26 states. When the Chicago team met a combined European squad on the eve of World War II, the Tribune projected an American identity and a sense of nationalism by declaring that “they already have whipped New York’s champions and if they win tonight there will be few who can challenge their world supremacy.” The Chicagoans became America’s team in defeating the Europeans 5-3. The CYO had already proclaimed itself a “league of nations,” with 15 different nationalities represented in its 1936 championship bouts. The 1939 finals featured 11 African-Americans, and both the CYO and the Tribune fostered and remodeled the image of an inclusive, multicultural America as the United States moved toward an inevitable confrontation with the Axis powers.

Sheil had already declared the potential of boxing as a social, religious, and political tool. As the Nazis threatened Europe, he stated that

We have a need of a youth which will carry on the good fight not merely in the field of boxing and athletics, but in the greater field if (sic) life on a far-flung front ... We are faced by foes ... confronted by enemies that are shaped in the form of an ideology and a philosophy alien to an American and a Christian standard of living ... ruling powers have attempted to crush religion under the heel of militant nationalism. We must fight against any subversive influences ... eight years ago the Catholic Youth Organization enlisted in this campaign ... through the channels of this vast organization, American children are being guided and trained in the American manner.

Sheil’s boxers demonstrated the practicality of their craft as well as their ability to lead the American crusade by defeating teams from South America, Ireland, Hawaii, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland, Cincinnati, and the U.S. Navy.

By 1940, when Golden Gloves fighters squared off against Italian champions, its promoters touted the enterprise as a peace venture when they stated that “The Olympic Games have been abandoned. Davis Cup play has been called off indefinitely. International golf matches have been dropped. Golden Gloves alone survives,” and that it is “carrying on its international show in the midst of war.”

While the contest inevitably failed to achieve world peace, the sport had managed to bring greater harmony to American society. Boxing had provided the working class with the means to greater inclusion on its own terms. Both the Golden Gloves and the CYO programs not only sanctioned but promoted physicality. The latter also fostered education, aspirations and middle class values as it sought to assimilate disparate groups. While many Catholic parishes still adhered to ethnically and racially segregated boundaries, Sheil labored for integration and both he and Ward maintained it as a fixture of their boxing teams. Throughout the 1940s Sheil became even more active in preaching his message of inclusion, stating that “Jim Crowism in the Mystical Body of Christ is a disgraceful anomaly.” He later likened ghettos to concentration camps, and faulted all churches for not addressing discrimination. He declared racism to be anti-Christian
and a hypocrisy in a democracy.\textsuperscript{44} The CYO had, in effect, become a gang for all ethnic and racial groups, channeling their fighting into more acceptable ventures within the capitalist system and diminishing the delinquent behavior that threatened it. Before the initiation of the boxing programs the Chicago Juvenile Court had reported over 79,000 cases, 40 percent of them involving delinquency. One such delinquent and a favorite of Al Capone, Barney Ross righted himself in the Golden Gloves program. He gained world titles as a pro, then demonstrated his patriotism as a Marine hero during World War II, and served the CYO as a boxing instructor. While Ross’s story proved uncommon government sources felt that they had succeeded in coopting delinquency through sport by the late 1930s.\textsuperscript{45}

That process of transformation allowed Bishop Sheil to integrate ethnic factions within a centralized Catholic bureaucracy, and both African-Americans, Jews, and the larger working class consolidated their political allegiance within the established system under the Democratic wing. The international competitions of both Sheil and Arch Ward focused the attention of the working class outward, developing a greater sense of Americanization, nationalism, and patriotism. World War II quickly solidified that emerging identity and by 1944 twelve hundred CYO boxers had joined the fight against fascism, with 25 making the ultimate sacrifice. Sheil, Ward, or the establishment had little to fear for God, country or church.\textsuperscript{46}

\textbf{THE LEGACY OF SPORT, POLITICS, AND RELIGION}

Anti-Catholicism persisted in the post-war years, as evidenced by Paul Blansard’s 1949 best seller, \textit{American Freedom and Catholic Power}. His 1951 sequel equated Catholicism with Communism; yet Bishop Sheil had emerged as a national Catholic spokesman and a prominent arbitrator for the Democratic party. Equally Catholic, but conservatively Republican, Arch Ward demonstrated his own political power in 1953, when he managed to elicit the transfer of a Navy boxer from Brooklyn to Chicago, so that the sailor could represent the Golden Gloves team in its match against the Europeans.\textsuperscript{47}

Catholics further reveled in their symbolic acceptance when John F. Kennedy ascended to the presidency in 1960, though he allegedly did so through the electoral chicanery of Chicago’s Irish-Catholic mayor, Richard J. Daley. By that time Sheil, the CYO, and the Golden Gloves had passed their apex. Sheil failed to achieve the expected cardinalate and retired to semi-seclusion in 1954. His successors counted 250,000 participants (28,104 boxers) in Chicago CYO activities, and 5,000,000 nationwide; but projected a greater role in international efforts. The Chicago CYO had already expanded its social services in a community center for African-Americans and a Nisei Center. Chinese, Mexican, and Puerto Rican agencies followed; while the athletic program deemphasized boxing and promoted other sports, particularly its national championship women’s track team, which aimed at providing Olympic team members.\textsuperscript{48}

Televisioned professional boxing matches caused a gradual decline in attendance at the amateur bouts. The waning interest in boxing soon changed, however, when Cassius Clay won the Golden Gloves championship in 1959 and an Olympic gold medal the following year. As Muhammed Ali he resurrected boxing as a political and religious tool, using his world-wide recognition and stature to inspire reaction and social revolution.\textsuperscript{49}

Mike Tyson later inspired a working class following with his blatant physicality, spectacular, but temporary prowess, and the representation of sport as a means to social mobility. However, his inability to adhere to the middle class value system pro-
moted by Sheil resulted in personal disgrace and further depreciation for boxing. Whereas the multitude of entries once necessitated three simultaneous rings and the Chicago Stadium seated 20,000; today the Chicago Golden Gloves bouts are fought in a Catholic parish gym that holds 2,000. While the religious-secular fusion initiated by Sheil and Ward remains, so do its working class values, characteristic of an alternative and residual culture. At the 1998 bouts a spectator, apparently drunk, decided to accompany the soloist who sang the national anthem. Others joined in with patriotic and heartfelt emotion; then cheered wildly and often lasciviously as ring girls paraded around the arena with their numbered cards each round. The first fighter appeared draped in a Puerto Rican flag, demonstrating that boxing still honors the pluralism of American society. Another spectator chided employers and the system over a recent Illinois Supreme Court case, in which peanut vendors at the United Center, home of the Chicago Bulls and Blackhawks, lost their case against management. He lamented the apparent incongruence that “they can pay $12-15 million to a ballplayer; but take a buck and a half (license fee) from a vendor.” Yet the same onlooker extolled the virtues of Eric “Butterbean” Esch, the rotund club fighter who has become a popular cult figure by limiting his fights to four round affairs in which he can knock out overmatched foes without taxing his own endurance. Esch has enjoyed regular national television appearances, and the spectator revealed his admiration for one of limited ability who had managed to beat the system when he remarked that “He’s gotta gimmick ... he’s makin’ money. God bless ‘im.” Despite the wane of boxing it still holds powerful meanings for its adherents that continue to bind them to mainstream American society and a patriotic, if pluralistic nationalism that allows them to celebrate their differences.

NOTES


9 New Orleans Times-Democrat, Sept. 7, 1892, 1; Sept. 8, 1892, 4.


17 Shenton, "Fascism and Father Coughlin," 10.

18 William L. Katz, ed., The Negro In Chicago; McGreevy, Parish Boundaries, 7-8, 61 (quote).


22 Gerald R. Gems, "Sport, Religion, and Americanization: Bishop Sheil and

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26 New World, Dec 11, 1931, 10; Dec 16, 1934, 15.

27 New World, Jan 19, 1934, 14; Feb 2, 1934, 14; Feb 9, 1934, 15; Feb 16, 1934, 14; Mar 2, 1934, 11; Nov 1, 1935, 10; Dec 13, 1935, 16; Nov 29, 1936, 12; Nov 27, 1936, 1.


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29 Lucy P. Carner, Report of Interview with Fr. Peter D. Meegan, Feb 9, 1939, Municipal Welfare Council Papers; Rader, American Sports, 192-193; and program, Intercity Boxing; Third Annual Meeting of Golden Champions and Runner-Up, March 19, 1930, CHS.


31 Littlewood, Arch, 55-58.


34 New World, Nov 17, 1933, 15; Feb 9, 1934, 15; Feb 23, 1934, 11; Oct 16, 1936, 12; Nov 20, 1936, 12.

35 Box 7, Sheil Archives, Archdiocese of Chicago; Veteran Boxers Association of Illinois, Inc., 1941 (booklet), n.p.


37 Romano, Post Boxing Record, 1937, 35-44; George Winn, ed., Boxing News Record (New York: George Winn, 1939), 60-61; Fleischer, The Ring, 86 (July 1934), 54; 88 (Sept. 1934) 54; 7:5 (June 1928), 24 (quote).


40 Tribune clippings, Box 7, Sheil Papers, Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago Archives; New World, Nov. 29, 1935, 10; Nov. 20, 1936, 12. See Cerulo, "Identity Construction, " on the manipulation of national identity during particular historical moments.

41 Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, address, 8th Anniversary Boxing Show, 1937, in Sheil Papers, Box 1, folder 5.

42 9th International Golden Gloves Program, 1940, I, Chicago Historical Society.


48 Chicago Herald American, Sept. 10, 1954, (clipping); 1954 CYO Report to the Welfare Council; Catherine V. Richards' interview with Monsignor Kelly, Jan. 9, 1958, all at CHS.


50 Littlewood, Arch, 80.