

Skirting the Issue

Women boxers, liminality and change

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Introduction

On August 13, 2009 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that it would allow women to box for the first time in London in 2012. To make room for women's three weight classes, the IOC cut men's from eleven to ten. Although far from equality, this new arrangement was perceived as a major victory for women's boxing. On September 18, 2010, merely a year after this major milestone for the sport, the International Boxing Association (AIBA) 'invited' women athletes to wear a skirt as part of their uniform for the 5th Women's Boxing World Championship in Barbados. Only Poland and Romania made all their athletes wear the skirts (Bourgon, 18 January 2012). As a result, only 14 out of 40 competing athletes wore the skirt in Barbados, 11 of whom stated fear of retaliatory action (Rivest, 18 September 2010). Rumours circulated that the skirts may become mandatory at future international events as AIBA considered different possibilities for women's official uniform.

In a classic essay, Messner (1988) wrote that female athletes are contested ideological terrain, their bodies a site where social anxieties about the gender order are projected. In the case of boxing, our cultural view/myth of women as fragile, pacific beings in need of protection does not sit comfortably with images of muscular women hitting one another in the head, shedding blood and getting knocked out. While women have been boxing since the 18th century (Hargreaves, 1997), their existence has either been denied, illegal, hidden or eroticized until very recently. Their recent inclusion at the Olympics was a watershed.

In this paper, I use Bourdieu's theory of practice and the concept of liminality to discuss what has been perceived as a major setback for women boxers after their inclusion on the 2012 Olympics program: what I call AIBA's 'skirt issue.' I analyze media coverage of this initiative to expose the different coexisting logics of the field, which range from 'women shouldn't box at all' to 'warriors shouldn't wear skirts.' These differences illustrate the crisis that is currently occurring in the field of boxing and its associated condition of *hysteresis*.

This paper is written using a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) of the response to AIBA's initiative to mandate the wearing of skirts by women boxers at international events. A Google search conducted on January 23, 2012 and repeated May 23, 2012, identified media responses to the issue published between September 23, 2010 (after the initiative was first announced) and March 3, 2012 (the date when confirmation that women would not need to wear skirts was posted on the AIBA website). Documents about women's boxing in the Olympics and about the Women's Boxing World Championships were also collected from the AIBA website along with women boxers' profiles. All documents (n = 28) were read and coded before being categorized by type of argument.

Bourdieu and the Gendered Body

My theoretical approach combines insights from Bourdieu's theory of practice and the concept of liminality. This conceptual apparatus enables us to see the body as a stratifier that shapes and constrains lived experience and its representation. It also helps us to understand how structural factors such as a changing gender order and the mythology of boxing can lead to the contemporaneous existence of feminist advocacy and attempts at disciplining women's bodies. Indeed, Bourdieuan ideas of *doxa*, *crisis* and *hysteresis* help connect individual-level resistance and structural change.

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

Bourdieu's key concepts of field, capital, and habitus have been covered earlier in this volume. My argument in this chapter is dependent on three other Bourdieuan concepts: *doxa*, *crisis* and *hysteresis*. *Doxa* is a 'set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma' (Bourdieu, 2000: 15) and which lead social agents to behave in a particular way. It exists at the intersection of field and *habitus*: it is embodied intuitive knowledge of the game that is played within a specific field, knowledge developed through interactions in a field. Consequently, it is *doxa* that guarantees that most agents in a field will share a similar *habitus* (Hardy, 2008: 125).

A *crisis*, defined as a break in the 'immediate fit between the subjective structures [*habitus*] and objective structures [power relations]' in a field (Bourdieu, 1977: 168-169), enables the reconsideration and re-evaluation of the taken-for-granted or unspoken and may lead to *doxic* change. In a stable field, objective structures, field logic, *habitus* and *doxa* align. Social agents feel like 'fish in water' as the world makes sense; they know how to play the game they are asked to play frictionlessly. In a field in crisis, however, field logics and objective structures are being disrupted and the legitimacy of the *doxa* is reconsidered. According to Bourdieu (1977: 83): 'The hysteresis of habitus, which is inherent in the social conditions of the reproduction of the structures in habitus, is doubtless one of the foundations of the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them.' In other words, because it is embodied and durable but not inflexible, *habitus* has inertia; in contrast, fields and their associated logics are disembodied and can change rapidly (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 130). *Hysteresis* will happen when an agent's *habitus* has been fitted to a structure that does not exist anymore. Consequently, 'practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment to which they are actually confronted is too distant from that to which they are objectively fitted' (Bourdieu 1977: 78).

Bourdieu and Gender

Gender is a key determinant of social agents' cultural and symbolic capital and thus an important factor in their position in the field (Bourdieu, 2001; Paradis, 2012). As such, it creates a symbolic order that constrains the possibilities of actors and results in a deep gendered divide within society. Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* is seen by feminists as a critical mediating element between structure and action (Laberge, 1995; McCall, 1992). For Moi (1991: 1019), Bourdieu's approach 'enables us to reconceptualize gender as a social category in a way which undercuts the traditional essentialist/nonessentialist divide.'

For Bourdieu and Bourdieuan theorists, the development of a gendered *habitus* is the result of an internalization of external social practices that position women as different from and dominated by men. In Bourdieu's (2001: 55) own terms: 'The masculinization of

the male body and the feminization of the female body ... induce a somatization of the relation of domination, which is thus naturalized.' Sport participation contributes to the embodiment or internalization of cultural norms, that shapes gendered and classed relations of domination (Bourdieu, 1978). Furthermore, as Bourdieu notes, the female experience of the body is 'the limiting case of the universal experience of the body-for-others, constantly exposed to the objectification performed by the gaze and discourse of others' (Bourdieu, 2001: 63). To further theorize this aspect of gendered bodies I turn to the concept of liminality.

Liminal bodies

Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1908) first introduced the idea of liminality in relation to rites of passage among small-scale societies. The concept got purchase through its development by Victor W. Turner (1967) who extended the concept. Individuals who are parts of various minority groups can be seen as liminal: situated 'betwixt and between' socially prescribed positions, living in a space where there are no established rules, pre-prescribed ways of being and doing (Turner 1967).

Women boxers inhabit a liminal space, a contested position. They are both women and not 'real' women, both boxers and not 'real' boxers: they do not have the right capital to claim either full womanhood or full boxinghood. Their bodies are bodies-for-others, scrutinized and often dismissed as appropriate for neither boxing nor full (heterosexual) womanhood. Their strength, muscularity and aggressiveness detract from their feminine capital; their femaleness detracts from their pugilistic capital. Yet as we will see in the next section, women have become less and less liminal in sport over time; there is also evidence that the masculine, misogynistic and homophobic *doxa* of fighting sports, is changing.

Women and Fighting Sports

Sport has been theorized as a space that defines social relations, create hierarchies among men as well as legitimate the domination of men over women (Messner, 1988). Women who participate in what are seen to be stereotypically masculine sports such as hockey, football, basketball, and boxing, have been ostracized in a wide variety of ways (Bolin, 2003; Muller, 2007), partly because sports serve to reinforce a faltering ideology of male superiority (Messner, 1988). Even as women have been 'allowed' to participate in any sport they 'choose,' hegemonic gender relations still shape which sports girls and women choose, as well as the status they obtain from participation (Fields, 2008; Messner, 2011).

Women's boxing and doxic crisis

While women have been boxing since at least the 18th century, it is only recently that they have been legitimately doing so in the United States. They started being officially licensed as professional boxers only in the 1970s (Hargreaves, 1997) and were not allowed to box as amateurs until 1994 when Dallas Malloy, backed by the American Civic Liberties Union, won her case against US Amateur Boxing (*Malloy v. U.S. Amateur Boxing*). These two historic moments have arguably led the sport into a state of crisis that had still not been resolved in 2009 when the IOC allowed women into the 2012 Olympics.

The *hysteresis* experienced by individuals in the field is still visible today. The historically masculine, misogynistic and homophobic *doxa* of boxing has been only imperfectly replaced by a more welcoming one imposed partly from without. Women boxers face both implicit and explicit harassment or discrimination, in the gym and beyond (Mennesson, 2000; Paradis, 2012). Lafferty and McKay (2004: 263) found that men and

women boxers alike relied on ‘inborn biological differences’ between men and women to ‘explain why men’s boxing was inherently superior’ to women’s. Hargreaves (1997: 45) wrote that ‘In general, promoters and boxers alike want to present an essentially feminine ... They oppose women who ... wear khaki shorts and shirts and “look like blokes”.’ Based on ethnographic work, Mennesson (2000) has argued convincingly that class and (heteronormatively-appealing) beauty interact to shape the different realities of women in the sport. ‘Butch’ women were sometimes violently mistreated by men who purposefully hurt them, while attractive ones were rarely challenged to their skill level to protect their face. Similarly, Paradis (2012) highlights how women boxers experience boxing systematically differently: excluded from certain rituals, reminded they are outsiders and dependent on coaches whose *habitus* may not condone women’s boxing.

Finally, the liminality of women fighters can be seen in academic scholarship, where they have been pushed into the margins. Indeed, despite women’s inroads into contact sports over the past 20 years in the United States and elsewhere (Boyle, Millington, & Vertinsky, 2006; Cahn, 1994; Fields, 2008; Hargreaves, 1997; Paradis, 2010), most recent sociological accounts of fighting sports do not feature women. But for a few exceptions that focus on women’s experiences (Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Mennesson, 2000; Mennesson & Clément, 2009; Paradis, 2012), women’s presence in accounts of fighting sports tend to be minimal (e.g. Abramson & Modzelewski, 2011; Woodward, 2006) or altogether ignored (e.g. Beauchez, 2010; de Garis, 2000; Green, 2011; Wacquant, 1995, 1995a, 1998, 2004). Furthermore, as noted by Woodward (2008: 548), there are very few women among the authors of the field’s key ethnographies and boxing books, maybe in part because the field tends to be difficult for women to access (Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Woodward, 2008).

Female boxers, as liminal beings and as newcomers looking for legitimation in a field in crisis, consciously manage their presentation of self to navigate the difficult gendered waters between what is perceived to be too masculine (with ensuing negative stereotypes and sanctions) and too feminine (with ensuing negative stereotypes and sanctions). While several of boxing’s powerful agents have embraced women’s participation in the sport, others lag behind, begrudgingly tolerating women among their rank: their *habitus* has not evolved to match the new field structures. The skirt issue, as I will show, exposes the tensions experienced within the field as the distribution of capital has shifted, as the rules of the game have evolved, and as the old heterodox idea of women in boxing has become orthodox.

Skirting the Issue

In August 2009, AIBA celebrated the decision by the International Olympic Committee to include three weight classes for women on the London 2012 Olympic card. Yet merely a year later, a rumour to the effect that AIBA would *require* women boxers to wear skirts during competitions emerged. Michael Rivest, a boxing commentator writing for timesunion.com, shared the ‘disturbing news’ that AIBA officials ‘prefer women boxers to be in skirts, rather than in their typical team uniforms’ (Rivest, 18 September 2010). The issue received little press coverage until Elizabeth Plank, a Canadian-born amateur boxer studying in London, brought to life a petition on Change.org asking AIBA to ‘play fair’ and not ‘ask female boxers to wear skirts’ (Change.org, 2012). Worldwide, commentators took to their keyboards. Commentators can be separated into two groups: those for whom skirts are no problem and those who are outraged.

Skirts? No problem.

The first set of commentators sees no problem with women boxers wearing skirts. For some of these people, it is about a display of the gender-appropriate image. Cuba's head coach thinks that Cuban women 'are made for beauty and not to take blows around the head' (Jacobs, 21 September 2009), and one reporter quotes the Polish national team's coach: 'By wearing skirts, in my opinion, it gives a good impression, a womanly impression' (Creighton, 26 October 2011). For others, the issue can be reduced to the pragmatic question of comfort. High-profile Canadian boxer Mary Spencer is often cited in support of the skirts: 'I actually wore a skirt at the world championship last year,' she said, and 'found them to be much more comfortable than shorts' (The Canadian Press, 11 April 2011). For a final subset of commentators, the skirt issue is of comparative insignificance. According to Iorfida (20 January 2012), the 'fashion crime' represented by the skirts pales against other issues in the sport (it has become boring) and larger injustices faced by women boxers (who have only three weight classes to men's ten). This exemplifies the dilemma faced by the field: women are legitimately participating in the game, yet the distribution of capital has not become even between men and women.

Skirts? Outrageous!

Another set of commentators sees the skirts as a serious setback for women boxers. Some arguments against skirts are rooted in sport psychology. For example, in the text of the Change.org petition, we read: 'forcing female boxers to wear a uniform they are not comfortable in may have direct consequences on their performance. Research has repeatedly shown the reality of stereotype threat on individual performances' (Change.org, 2012). Another argument centres on the legitimacy of women boxers. Says Marianne Marston, professional boxer who runs women's boxing classes across London: 'Unfortunately it's sometimes difficult for women to go into boxing gyms and be taken seriously' (Rawi, 17 January 2012). A third set of responses focuses on our cultural ideas about femininity. Plank asks polemically: 'What is it about the strength of women that still shocks us? ... While men are taught to apologize for their weaknesses, women are taught to apologize for their strengths' (Plank, 22 January 2012). A final set of comments stresses how the skirts are a way to sexualize women boxers and an attempt to 'sell' the sport. The short skirt is seen as a symbol of sexual availability and as the sport industry knows well: sex sells. According to Bourgon, the subtext of the AIBA initiative 'seems to be that more people will tune in to watch women fight if they look more like, well, women' (Bourgon, 18 January 2012). Some women athletes concur, including British lightweight champion Natasha Jonas who thinks that the 'only people who would want to see women in skirts are men' (Creighton, 26 October 2011).

Discussion

In this paper we have seen a wide range of responses to the AIBA skirt issue, including that of AIBA's President, who stressed viewers' inability to tell men and women boxers apart. Commentators within the field of boxing took extreme positions, which is quite surprising. Indeed, while we may expect strong reactions from people outside the field, the range of responses from boxing insiders seems odd: if we like boxing as a sport, why should we care whether men or women are in the ring? Isn't it cause for celebration that women athletes have become so good at boxing that they box as well as men? That they look as strong and focused and muscular as men?

How does a Bourdieuan perspective and the concept of liminality help us make sense of all of this? First, it is obvious that the skirt issue is not merely about a piece of fabric. It is the clear indication that the boxing field is in a *crisis* triggered by the inclusion of women into this historical male preserve. The field structure has been transformed by the inclusion of new, legitimate agents: women. Consequently, the masculine, misogynistic and homophobic *doxa* of the field has been disrupted. While some agents have adapted to the new field structure and welcomed a more inclusive *doxa*, others have suffered from *hysteresis*: their *habitus* has not yet adapted to the new environment and women's presence.

That AIBA would invite women to wear skirts is a sign that the organization itself has not fully adapted to women's newfound legitimacy. It is an attempt to mark the bodies of female athletes as feminine, a means to reassert their difference from the unmarked male body, which has constituted the *doxa* of boxing for centuries. Our social understanding of the female habitus is at odds with the boxing habitus. The concept of liminality here helps us make further sense of this issue: sitting at the uncomfortable intersection between woman and boxer, demure and powerful, in need of protection yet aggressive, female boxers' bodies are neither here nor there, betwixt and between to social positions that make sense independently but not together. The skirt, then, can be seen as an act of positioning, an attempt by AIBA to reconcile these two positions.

Clearly, 22 years after Messner's (1988) classic essay, the female athlete's body is still contested terrain. The AIBA initiative, less than a year after women's admission to the Olympics, betrays the profound anxieties associated with women's progress in boxing, anxieties about the gendered contradiction women who box represents for several officials, coaches, men athletes and the general public. Using a Bourdieuan perspective, we understand how AIBA stood between a rock and a hard place: women threaten not only the masculine *doxa* of boxing but also its very logic, its mythology; at the same time, women boxers threaten the domination of men over women, and thus the mythology of both manhood and womanhood.

In short: the skirts skirt a broader issue. Women boxers threaten a gender order where women are the weaker, demure sex: submissive, passive, nurturing and in need of protection. The fact that women's boxing prowess is such that it can't be easily told apart from men's when the clearer signifiers of face, hair and gender-typical clothing are hidden by a gender-neutral uniform threatens the idea that men are inherently better, tougher, more muscular, more athletic. To punch like a girl used to be an insult; now these 'girls' can punch so well that the audience can't tell them apart from men.

On February 20, 2012, Elizabeth Plank declared on the Change.org website that petitioners had 'won,' making it clear to AIBA that the public did not approve of skirts as a mandatory uniform (Change.org, 20 February 2012). Although a fight was won for women in boxing, the war they are waging for recognition and for greater gender equality is far from over. Until recently, being female meant exclusion. Since 2009, however, female boxers have gained legitimacy through amateur sport's greatest event: the Olympics. However, different and contradictory *habitus* still coexist in boxing. The crisis is far from over, as the fact that national team coaches can publically claim that women are made for beauty and shouldn't box in all impunity shows. Social agents will continue to clash to define the new rules of the game, to gain privileged positions in the field. Wearing a skirt or not, women boxers are redefining the field's *doxa*: they are redefining what it means to be a woman and a boxer, redefining what a real woman looks like and what a real boxer looks like. Yes, they can.

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