

David C. LaFevor, *Prizefighting and Civilization: A Cultural History of Boxing, Race, and Masculinity in Mexico and Cuba, 1840–1940*

University of New Mexico Press, 2020, pp. 298

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(Received 25 January 2024; accepted 30 January 2024)

In *Prizefighting and Civilization: A Cultural History of Boxing, Race, and Masculinity in Mexico and Cuba, 1840–1940*, David Lafevor does just that, traces the history of boxing in Mexico and Cuba. While he focuses on the territory of Cuba and Mexico, the neighbour to the north, the United States, is never far away. Lafevor reconstructs what boxing meant to generations of Cubans and Mexicans rather than list notable boxers and historic firsts. Ultimately, the story he tells in *Prizefighting and Civilization* is how boxing went from being viewed as a barbaric blood sport to a gentlemanly sport, or at least as a pathway to decency. Famous Mexican and Cuban boxers do not just win fame for themselves but become representatives of their nations and become invested with national pride. Lafevor argues that the meritocratic nature of boxing allowed underclass Mexicans and Cubans a chance to refashion a version of masculinity and civility that they could attain. Success in boxing – once labelled as transgressive – by these boxers from humble origin provided hope to new generations.

Lafevor uses a variety of sources to construct his narrative. Cultural historians are often reliant on newspapers; Lafevor uses newspapers from Cuba, Mexico, the United States and across the Latin American world. Since boxing was often illegal, Lafevor uses legal petitions, court decrees, permits, etc. to show the persistence and cunning of boxing aficionados. Not only does Lafevor employ a variety of sources, but he also uses tools from different historical fields. *Prizefighting and Civilization* is at once history of sport, history of race and gender, history of nationalism, imperial history and history of postcolonialism, to name the most prominent. Bringing in so many different strands of history might clutter the narrative, but Lafevor is able to show how all are needed to tell the story of boxing in Mexico and Cuba. Historians of sport often claim that sport touches all elements of society and *Prizefighting and Civilization* is a good example. Opponents of boxing labelled the sport at different times as too modern, too revolutionary, too Anglo-American, un-masculine, or too masculine. Boxing was a consistent symbol of the struggle of the underclass against the powers that be, whatever they were.

Lafevor places the strength of boxing within its competitive and meritocratic nature. Boxing requires two people to participate, and the victor is the better boxer. Underclass Mexicans, denied economic or political opportunities at home, could use their skills against US boxers in Los Angeles. Not only could these boxers

escape poverty, but they could escape obscurity as well and be national heroes for fighting against the *yanquis*. Likewise, Afro-Cuban boxers could also become national heroes and symbols of revolutionary Cuba's 'raceless society'. Lafavor argues that, more than just providing an avenue for nationalism, boxing allowed Cubans and Mexicans to fashion their own version of masculinity. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, masculinity in Cuba and Mexico was equated with gentility, belonging to polite society through reading the right books, wearing the right clothes, going to the right schools, and so on. Poor Mexicans and Cubans lacked the means to enter polite society, but as Lafavor argues the gym provided them with such an avenue. Through exercising, these underclass men could build the modern masculine bodies of British and US men they read about in local papers. Through competition these same men could prove their masculinity, or at least their belonging.

While each chapter follows a different narrative, Chapter 3, 'Who Will Say We Are Not Progressing?', serves as a good example of the breadth of Lafavor's analysis. In the chapter, he traces the history of boxing through three Cuban political regimes: colonialism, US occupation and the Republic. Lafavor shows that in each stage boxing represented something transgressive, a way to resist the powers that be. Under colonialism, Spanish officials discouraged the public from boxing as something un-Spanish and characterised gyms as hotbeds of anti-Spanish sentiment. Boxing enthusiasts and gym owners were not so much anti-Spanish as they were anti-colonialism, which they viewed as anachronistic. Modern activities such as boxing and going to the gym, they argued, counteracted colonialism and trained modern citizens. Under US occupation, Cuban officials and landowners characterised boxing as a barbaric and imperial import from the occupiers. Cuban boxing aficionados objected, pointing out that one of the greatest US boxers, Jack Johnson, fought against US racial and gender norms. Cuban boxers characterised Johnson as a symbol of anti-imperialism and maintained that the sport fit with the narrative that Cuba was a raceless society. Johnson's victories against white opponents, therefore, supported the narrative. Throughout Chapter 3, Lafavor demonstrates how boxing was a cultural good that was easily refashioned based on the needs of the people.

Overall, *Prizefighting and Civilization* will be useful to anyone interested in Latin American history, history of sports and cultural history. While Lafavor does not go into issues of foreign policy, he does deal with boxing as a cultural good that binds the United States, Mexico and Cuba together and to the larger world, and so would be of interest to those in regional studies. No book contains everything, and while Lafavor mentions themes of scientific racism which were tied to ideas both of physical fitness as well as civilisation he does not go into detail. Given so many different types of history that Lafavor deals with, this is a small complaint. Most importantly, *Prizefighting and Civilization* is readable. Each chapter has easy-to-follow narratives, making it a good book to assign to undergraduate and graduate students alike – as I have done with great success.