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Leisure Studies

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Ring and the street

Young immigrant boxers in the neighborhood Bolognina - Bologna

Abstract

The paper describes the social organization of the boxing gym “Tranvieri”, located in Bolognina, a working class neighborhood of Bologna that has been rapidly changing over the last twenty years due to the closing of factories and the arrival of immigrants, especially from Maghreb. The gym population has changed accordingly: currently about two thirds of those attending the gym as a leisure centre are children of immigrants. I studied the practices of everyday life by these young boxers born in Italy but without citizenship who daily go to the gym once finished vocational school, work and family responsibilities. Boxing is for them not a solution to the frustration inflicted by a social world they perceive as indifferent if not hostile towards them, rather the possibility of not being represented within it as excluded persons.

Keywords: leisure; urban space; boxing; young immigrants; neighborhood

Introduction

This paper aims at inquiring the practices of everyday life by a group of young men who spend a significant part of their spare time at the “Tranvieri”, a gym in Bolognina, a district in the outskirts of Bologna.

I stepped in this gym for the first time in February 2007 along with fellow anthropologist Fulvia Antonelli (Antonelli & Scandurra, 2008, 2010) after having conducted from January 2006 to January 2007, along with a group of colleagues, a social investigation on the territory Bolognina (Piano B, 2008) in order to describe the profound changes that have affected this area after the closure of the metalworking factories at the end of the eighties and the arrival of numerous immigrants. This gym is a piece of history – it was opened in 1950 – as well as a major leisure place in one of the territories most popular in the city. (Circolo Dozza ATC, 2005)

The Tranvieri was set up shortly after the end of Second World War. Since it started its activity it has not changed much: despite having moved from the basement of a local club of tram drivers to just a few hundred meters away, the boxing society Bolognina maintains the characteristics of a working men's club. The gym is not very large and, when active and crowded, it barely holds the group of training boxers. The entrance is in a side alley, near the road connecting the main square of Bolognina to a trade fair zone and is scarcely visible, if not for a sign that indicates its presence.

1 . Young immigrants and leisure

The overall objective of this paper is to investigate the transformations of Bologna through the analysis of games, sports and physical recreation for young people of foreign origin. Focusing on a specific place, a boxing gym, my goal is to inquire the practices of a group of boys who, on a non-professional basis and in the majority of cases just as a leisure activity, share this physical space. Most of the Tranvieri's boxers today are young men of foreign origin, mostly Moroccans. Studying their practices of everyday life, between February 2007 and February 2010, we were able to investigate problems, needs, hopes of a "second generation" of immigrants: almost all of them arrived in Italy as small children and attended school here. (Scandurra & Antonelli, 2010)

The athletic education they receive by learning how to box translates into practices and knowledge that give relevance to their daily lives through a continuous production and reproduction of meaning, which keeps being valid also out of the gym. Practices and knowledge that affect the way in which they build their identity as citizens and that are relevant to their citizenship.

While in the last thirty years in Italy there has been a growing interest, even in social sciences, for the young generation and their relationship with urban space, especially with regard to "young foreigners" (Zoletto, 2010), however this interest is mostly focused on cultural identity and migration legacy, social inclusion or exclusion in the sphere of education and/or employment or some fundamental aspects of formal citizenship. Minor importance has been given to the analysis of spare time and of the formal and informal places devoted to leisure, seen as environments where corporeality is built and consequently the boundaries of multicultural citizenship are defined.

How do you become a boxer or, more simply, a gym-goer? How do you produce and reproduce body knowledge in such a physical space? Is it mere knowledge of the body or is it a knowledge that *through* body makes you belong to a "community"?

The analysis of a boxing gym, designed for recreation, physical and mental wellbeing and socialization through sport, must be placed in the framework a broader reflection on the relationship between body and space and on the role that should be given to corporeality in the urban space (Satta & Scandurra, 2004). In an innovative cross between urban and immigration, this paper aims to focus on the link between sport and urban areas, between bodies and cities (Huizinga 1938;

Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Dick, 2003; Coleman & Kohn, 2007; Stevens, 2007; Sugden, 2007; Rojek, 2009)

3. The boxers of Golden Years

We did two matches a week on Monday and Friday, at the Paladozza, the sport palace of boxing.. and the audience was huge. Have you ever seen eight thousand people who go to see a boxing match? Let's say that memories are beautiful because it was another life, another sport. (Albano)¹

Whit this words Albano, who directed the gym for years, remembers the Fifties, the Sixties and the Seventies, the “golden years” of boxing when Bologna was the capital of this sport in Italy. Almost all the people I interviewed and who have experienced it as direct protagonists or as mere spectators described me this period as unrepeatabe, because boxers were “brave” and “heroes”.²

Today other boxers fight in the gym, almost all of foreign origin, who have not experienced that period, the Golden Years. The stories of the boxers of today bring out the problems and real difficulties connected to a career in this sport, and deconstruct a myth of boxing lasted until the end of the Seventies. (Oates, 1987; Philonenko, 1991; Quercioli, 1994;)

It is no coincidence that boxers of the past continue to train at the same place where they started their careers. Tranvieri's “veterans” usually occupy a space between the ring and the benches, an institutional strategic position because from this angle you can have a full view of everything that goes in the gym. That is the place where stories are told, where the memory of the gym is passed on to new members.

Ernesto, a former amateur boxer, is one of the most respected members of the gym by virtue of his daily presence there since more than forty years. He is the one who can afford to represent the world of boxing in other ways than the “official” one, because his loyalty to the history of boxing and gym is indisputable. Like him, other former boxers of the Golden Age as Dante were willing to tell us even the dark side of boxing and the difficulties they encountered in their professional careers: unfair defeats, combined meetings, the power of sponsors (De Franco, 2006). These stories often reveal the “hunger” of men, who, in those glorious years, practiced boxing in order gain some money: money to buy a motorcycle, to hang out with girls on Saturday night, to purchase fashionable clothes.

I think I was a good amateur boxer [...]. My sport was motorcycling [...]. My friends and I wanted to be like Marlon Brando in “On the Waterfront”. But in order to race you need money [...], and I put all the money I took from boxing on racing. Once they called me on Friday to make a boxing match on

¹ For privacy reasons all names listed in this paper do not correspond to the real ones.

² Almost all the old boxers of the gym are emigrated from South Italy to North after the Second World War to find a job in the local factories.

Saturday night and I hadn't been in the gym for six months because I had had a motorcycle accident and I broke a couple of ribs. I agreed to do it because they offered money. Then finally I stopped both racing and boxing. I stopped boxing because I was to let others win. It is obvious that they always called me with people who were much more trained than me. One who called me on Friday to make a match on Saturday had to give me a lot of money in those conditions [...]. In the factory, when I became qualified, I gained about 75 thousand lire a month, and for this match they offered me 300 thousand lire. I did it for money, but then I got bored of taking blows. (Dante)

The gym has helped many boxers as Dante to leave the street, as many former boxers often have said to me: the street means fights, thefts, and wars between gangs.

The gym... I started in the Sixties. I was nineteen years old. The gym gave you a certain discipline and kept you from street fights. In the gym I vented with the others! I wasn't a bully, but 70% of the boys of Bolognina spent their time fighting in the street. (Ernesto)

4. Today's boxers

If we compare the words of Albano, Dante and Ernesto with those of the protagonists of our study, the reasons that prompted them to train in the gym are not dissimilar. The boxers of today are young people aged from twelve to twenty-five who partly are attending vocational schools and partly are struggling with their first experiences in working world. Many of them live in the neighborhood and spend in the gym much of their spare time. In their stories the entrance to Tranvieri emerges as a random choice, but when we questioned about their deepest motivations they always said that they needed to vent, to self-discipline or to socialize.

I'm just nineteen years old; I started about one year and a half ago. I started because I had some problems at home and the only place where I was at ease was the gym [...]. Instead of going around to bully I decided to come to the gym with initially no intention of fighting. (Anuar)

That's why I started going to the gym. The main reason was the discussions between my mother and my father... I went out and I vented outside, on the street... I hated smoking, drinking, dancing outside on Saturday and Sunday and so... (Kalhed)

The stories of young boxers as Anuar and Kalhed, both sons of Moroccan citizens come to Italy more than ten years ago, are full of references to tensions in the family, in the school environment, in the work place, all places where most of them had had to learn the meaning of the word "failure". The practices of everyday life by Anuar and Kalhed are the same of their gym mates born in Italy but without citizenship.

This guys go to the gym because it allows them to feel respected, to prove their worth, to prove strong without the burden of self-destruction that self-assertion in aggressive forms produces in other contexts, as it emerges clearly from an interview to another boxer of Moroccan origin, Samir:

Once a guy told me “fuck off” and I threw a table on him, and I broke his back. I did not something like that. This guy always told me: “You’re a Moroccan, go back to your country.” They wanted to suspend me from school but I had never done anything and I was not punished. (Samir)

Vocational schools of Bolognina frequented by Samir, Kalhed, Anuar represent places of humiliation. Most of these young boxers look at their schools as total institutions where, more than acquire knowledge, they learn only the awareness of their subalternity. (Sayad, 1999; Giacalone, 2002; Guerzoni & Riccio, 2009)

I liked to go to school. My father ruined me because he said I wasn’t good enough to go to proper school. He sent me to vocational school and I really hated it. I hated mechanics; I hated becoming an electrician [...]. I wondered why you must always be compelled to become a carpenter or an electrician [...]. What if I wanted to be a lawyer? (Kalhed)

The majority of the boxers involved in research come from stories of forced migration, economic hardships, social insecurity and daily life where the meeting places are commonly courtyards, abandoned basketball and football playgrounds, more generally the big streets of the neighborhood, as Erzan, a young boxer of Albanian origin told me:

In boxing gyms you can not find a rich, because people there must be nasty [...]. In the gym you see poor people, myself, for example, people who are bad, who know what it means to live in the street, what it means to beat each other on the street. People box to prevent themselves from fighting in the street [...]. Two friends of mine had been in the prison. Then one came here with me. This guy was a beast and he said to me: “I want to make money fast.” I told him: “Listen to me, be careful!”, and he said to me: “No, I’m going now to steal a car, then steal in a store” [...]. I grew up with him... with him I started boxing. (Erzan)

The gym for these guys is not different from other places of spatial segregation present in certain areas of this suburb. What distinguishes these guys from their mates, vocational schools mates for example, almost all born in Italy but children of North Africans people, is the pursuit of self-control, of discipline, expressed by the boxing choice. Boxing gym for these kids is not a solution to the frustration from a social world they perceive indifferent if not hostile towards them, rather the possibility of not being represented in it as excluded people. (Grillo & Pratt, 2002; Queirolo Palmas, 2006)

5. Leisure: Saturday and Sunday

The gym includes two rooms. The first, for training, contains a twelve-string ring positioned in front of the entry: tools – bags, speedball, punching bag, headboards, benches, scales, racks for storing weights, exercise bikes – are distributed all along the walls of this first room. At the centre is a space that ends with a large mirror on the wall where boxers are trained on the blow technique, interrupted by two sacks and a suspended pear. The second room is much smaller and is used as a men's locker room. For women there are no lockers. (Fox, 2001; D'Aguanno & Montesi, 2006)

The gym is open from Monday to Friday from 17:30 until 20:30, but it actually opens its doors also out of official hours. The very young gym-goers, for example, arrive at the gym at 17:30, earlier than the masters themselves: Ernesto opens the *Tranvieri* before the training hours in order to put into place weights and tools, repair damaged cords, pick up unpaired gloves. The young boxers demonstrate, by helping Ernesto in these maintenance work, the relationship of trust that binds old and new members, which is independent from the relationship they have with the two coaches of the gym, Tito and Sante. Boxers who go to the gym straight from work, which have a longer boxing experience behind them, arrive later and stay well beyond the official closing time: the long, hot shower after training, the gossip and jokes in the locker room are ways to ease the tension after the fatigue of school, work, the gloves and the ring.

The *Tranvieri* is open all over the year: apart from a short summer break in August and some holidays, the courses have a duration that goes well beyond that of traditional gyms. Even virtually closed, as well as on Saturdays and Sundays, when the coaches do not work if not during periods of intensive training, the gym continues to be a daily gathering place.

Oh my God, but do you have in your mind what an African mother is? They're crazy, completely off their head!... go at your friends to ring the bell and the third degree starts: she starts screaming that her son is never at home... no, no, we prefer give us an appointment at the gym or somewhere else! (Marcel, junior boxer of Cameroonian origin)

Ernesto, who holds the keys, on Saturday afternoon opens a little earlier than the usual and allows children who live in the district to train. Often, in these situations, younger brothers and friends at their first gym experience join young boxers. On Sunday morning the gym becomes an "illegal" soccer field.

We play but please don't go and tell it around. Samir, for example, plays soccer, Anuar plays soccer and so his brother Kalled, they are very good. Look at how many Moroccans play in A Series, there are many. They should take more of them in our teams, because they are good. But be careful, if someone gets hurt while playing here, it is a mess; on Sunday you're not insured, of course. However, come if

you like (Ernesto when I asked him if I could go to play soccer with the other boxers in the gym on Sundays)

In these occasions, when Italian coaches are not there and the boys led by Ernesto are in charge of management, the prevalence of guys of North African origin becomes very evident. (Valeri, 2006)

On Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings a hybrid language made Arabic idioms and Bolognese dialect is spoken in the gym, while the prolonged cohabitation in this narrow space of veterans, young boxers and kids allows them to insult and banter each other often resorting to stereotypes that in another context, such as the weekly training, would be considered racist.

There's no way, you're just an Arab... do you really have to bugger around for a penalty up to this point? (Ernesto, in one of his verbal exchanges during a play)

The weekend games are also opportunities for new boxers recruitment, because most of these neighbourhoods guys around sixteen join the *Tranvieri*: by the time they join the gym, many of them have already entered it, used the showers, learned how to use the tools, only they have never seen a coach (Turner, 1967; Roets, Vandenabeele & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012). Tito and Sante are aware that the gym is open on Saturday and Sunday, but turn a blind eye, being also aware that the *Tranvieri* is also an agency of socialization for the kids in the neighbourhood.

6 . Cultural Intimacy

The *Tranvieri* can be described as a group of heterogeneous people who share, on a daily basis and for several hours in the afternoon and evening, rules, bans, standards of behaviour, a way of perceiving time and space. By studying the social organization of the gym it is appropriate to speak of «cultural intimacy» (Herzfeld, 1997)

If you stay in the gym for one day, three months, one year, you know that he also wants to get what you want to get and then you seek to help him. Help him on how to pull the blow, on how to behave in the ring. There are no different nationalities in the gym, most of people are foreigners here and there have never been troubles; we always help each other. (Anuar)

Estimation and encouragement by the gym fellows, as well as the fact of training in a group, are elements that strongly influence a boxer's performance, because the individual psychological factors – perseverance, determination, self-confidence, coldness on the ring – is strengthened or weakened by the group: if his teammates do not consider him “a good one”, it is unlikely that a boxer will be able to step into the ring, even holding sufficient physical qualities. (Beattie 1996; Heiskanen 2006)

The exercise of sparring, or the combat simulation that takes place between boxers in the gym, is a decisive moment for a boxer who aspires to enter the ring in regular competition. Sparring plays at the same time a role of socialization since it often is followed by moments of confession and confidence in order to defuse the violence exhibited on the square (Wacquant, 2000). The relations between boxers sometimes take form through this practice.

Each boxer has his own ideal sparring partner. For the guys of Tranvieri sparring on the ring, with Sante and Tito giving advice at the opposite corners, is a baptism, a «rite of passage» (Wacquant, 2000; Crossley 2001; Faure, 2004; Roberts, 2006). When Tito calls two boxers sparring, it means that he is focusing on them, he's going to make them fight. Or, if it is their first sparring session, it means that the two boxers are destined to enter the main group of Tranvieri's athletes, and will prepare to fight.

Obviously the "pairs" are formed mainly on the basis of practical reasons. This is because not all guys train at the same hours, and if you do not take at least some boxers to spar, a gym can be a great environment in which to train, but do not form an environment where to raise professionals. Tito and Sante, for example, who are at the constant search for a great boxer, know they must select new members every day, continue to put the mirror in front of those who make less progress and gradually make the most promising approach the ring.

The ideal sparring partner, when there is not much difference in weight, is often a person who knows the boxer, one he trusts even outside the gym. Studying how boxers find their partners within the Tranvieri made me realize also the relationships between the guys out of the gym. Obviously, observing the practices of everyday life of these boxers once they stepped out of the gym, I could reciprocally understand how and why they formed pairs inside the gym.

Friendships and acquaintances who then determine the formation of subgroups in the locker room are often determined by the fact of living in the same territory, as in the case of Samir, Anuar and Kalhed, neighbours and for a period of time even roommates.

The road and the ring are interdependent in shaping the group of athletes who fight for boxing society Bolognina. Sharing the space of the gym and sparring with each other, means building a relationship with each other (Mauss, 1936); the street can have the role to strengthen or completely reverse these connections.

One of the most interesting explanations of the link between street culture and the gym was provided to us by one of the coaches of Tranvieri, Sante. At the end of a meeting organized by Tranvieri during the final stages of the research, a sport reporter nostalgic of the great local boxers of the Fifties and Sixties asked the coach to organize in the gym collective visions of the most significant matches of old boxers of Bologna.

I think it is wrong to consider Anuar or Yassine as Benvenuti [*very famous Italian boxing champion*] because I think that every boxer needs to be himself, to find his way to boxing. For example, Anuar's blows are

natural; they come from his experience on the road. This way of boxing will never be taken away from him and we can slowly teach him how to transform that blow in a proper hook. You can force him to shoot straight at a distance, but as soon as he will hit the ring and be provoked, he will fight to defend himself in his peculiar manner. I believe my task as a coach is to adapt box to the natural qualities and personality of a kid, because if you take his individual characteristics from him, he is not the same boxer anymore. They are not all the same, there is not a unique way of boxing that fits everybody. A good coach is like a tailor, who sews suitable a dress for every guy, enhancing their features. I want Anuar to become a good boxer remaining himself. If you take that from him you've taken everything. If you teach them to employ strength as well as their character they will know how to behave on the ring and in life as well, as boxers and as men.

7. Generation gap

Once established a relationship of trust with a group of young boxers I began to get out of the gym with them. The relation ring/street is decisive for the gym. Tito is aware of how his gym draws its top boxers, such as Erzan, Khaled, Anuar or Samir, from the street. If once Tito could count on the workers, almost all Italians, of the factories of Bolognina, today the gym depends more and more, in terms of athletic achievements, on a group of young people of foreign origin who live a few hundred meters away from the gym.

When I asked Ernesto to describe his old gym mates, their life stories were not dissimilar from those of the *Tranvieri*'s boxers of today. Issues such as the street, family troubles and difficulties to integrate into the territory often return in the speeches of Ernesto as in those as Khaled, Anuar, Samir or Erzan.

Bolognina in the early years after the Second World War was, for a twenty-something like Dante, Ernesto or Albano, a territory to explore. Their parents, like Anuar's, could not control them after school. Many old boxers, in a similar way as Khaled told me, formed in these years "bands" of young boys which spent their time playing in backyards, parks, public squares of the quarter.

Artemio, for example, recalls how after the Second World War he often heard his mother referred to as "Sicilian" or "Moroccan". Once the former boxer confessed to me how he felt compelled to engage in fight with some Bolognese guy joked about his southern origin. At the base of the only violent reaction Samir has had in his young life outside the ring, as we saw earlier, there was precisely the accusation of being a "Moroccan shit".

Despite all these similarities, so deep in the practices of everyday life, in the relationship with the territory, in the way they invest on boxing career, in the difficult relationship with school and family, the boxers of the old *Tranvieri* don't identify with the new generation of boxers who train at the gym now.

I feel nostalgic of the times when I lived in Bolognina. I remember that at midnight we went to take newspapers at the central station, now everything has changed. I've never been afraid of being robbed. Now via Barbieri [*one of the streets of Bolognina mostly inhabited by immigrants, mostly North Africans*] - has changed completely. (Dante)

Conclusions

In recent years municipal authority has decided to build engineering centres and business activities related to the tertiary sector on the ashes of the old factories. All the jobs typical of the manufacturing sector deteriorated in the new service economy, where, as Anuar often told me, "You have to tolerate racist acts by the boss if you want to keep your work place". All the jobs accessible to immigrants do not warrant economic security or opportunities to rise. (Kats, 1990; Farmer, 2003) The gym, for boxers as Erzan, often appears as the only hope because it is still a place where to build social capital and make friends. In fact, despite having worked for many years, they have never been able to make friends with their work colleagues.

Scholar Asher Colombo, in studying the career paths of a group of Algerian immigrants compares the current working reality in Milan to the French industrial situation until the end of the Seventies, and in doing so he brings in his text reflections on the working world made by French historians such as Dubet and Lapeyronnie:

In a society organized around industry, immigrants found slowly their place in working world. Gradually they were inscribed in the trade union struggles, shared the class-consciousness of their fellow workers and abandoned the status of immigrants. Their integration was the integration into the French republic. The socialist working class suburbs were a powerful tool for integration of immigrants, internal and foreigners. Thanks to workers, trade unions and the working-class community, the socialist suburbs were able to absorb the new populations. Their decline was the decline of this integration tool. The immigration problem is the consequence of this decomposition. (Colombo, 1998, p. 92)

Bolognina is not a ghetto or a suburb, however the growth of information technology industries, the fragmentation of the labour and the transformation of public welfare at all municipal levels are affecting this neighbourhood too. All processes that have hit the African-American ghettos and French *banlieues*. With the closure of the factories the local labour market is increasingly marginalizing young immigrants who, in some areas of the country, are up to 25% of the total resident population, relegating people like Anuar on the edge of the service economy. (Wirth, 1928; Holston & Appadurai, 1999; Fava, 2008)

From the stories of Kalhed and Erzan emerges the existence of niches of unskilled service sector where migrants are hired without a contract. Samir told me more than once about vocational schools

where he was put in separated classes for immigrants – the same schools that, years before, Artemio and other old boxers had attended successfully becoming specialized workers.

If we assume as an imperative of ethnographic research to «reconstruct the meaning» that certain social practices have from the point of view of those who are involved (Bourgois, 1996) it is evident that every guy reacts differently to the objective transformations that more and more are narrowing the range of possibilities that the protagonists of research have in front of them. The gym itself is perceived by some of them as the only refuge, by others as a place where to find “revenge”. (Wacquant, 2004)

If Artemio and Dante found in the factory economic opportunities along with the chance to gain respect and dignity through work, Khaled, Anuar and most of the protagonists of this research are aware that if they want to survive they have to suffer every day the injustices inflicted by their Italian colleagues. (Foot White, 1943)

Meanwhile, Bolognina is undergoing a radical process of gentrification. Years ago we asked the current mayor of Bologna the following question: “How do you regard the development of this suburb?”. He answered: “It will be the service industry district”. But what is a “service industry district”? What will the future of Bolognina and of our former industrial peripheries be like?

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