

BODY, HONOR, AND DOMINATION IN MARGINALIZED URBAN SPACES.  
An Ethnography of Bodybuilding in an American Black Ghetto and Thai Boxing in a French  
Working-Class Banlieue

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the  
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

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Advisor: Professor William Kornblum

This work is a comparative analysis of ethnoracial domination and urban marginality in the United States and France that aims at studying two social spaces of relegation, the black ghetto in the U.S. and the working-class suburbs in France.

The ethnographic study of bodybuilding and Thai boxing in the black American ghetto and the French working-class suburb has allowed me to account for the incorporation of the social through a bodily practice and its translation into social strategies. Because they have adopted a new cosmogony, the young men of working-class suburb and the black ghetto build a carnal solidarity in practice and reproduce the social honor of the group challenged by various social mechanisms of stigmatization and marginalization in a the context of job insecurity and unemployment. At the same time, these bodily practices prevent practitioners from getting involved in a deviant career because they occupy and fix the agents, and because they internalize a set of "values" that give a meaning and a direction to their everyday life.

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### Preliminary Considerations

In order to contribute to an anthropology of domination, I intend to make an analysis of bodily practices by stigmatized groups within spaces of urban marginality in the US and in France, considering social agents as first of all living, desiring, and suffering beings who have beliefs, and who act. This study is at the same time an anthropology of embodiment and a sociology of urban poverty and ethnoracial domination. Breaking out of the Cartesian split between mind and body, I want to account for the *ontological interrelation* between mind, body, and society. The body is a biological, social and dated product, and therefore *historicized*. It carries a history that it has somatized. If one wants to understand different forms of domination, one needs to analyze larger structures as well as dissect how the power relations are internalized, and how they organize the way one perceives, appreciates, and acts. Positing that there is a relation between the body and the *esprit de corps*, and that it is not at all by chance if “total institutions” have resorted to bodily discipline, the interest of an ethnography of bodily practices such as bodybuilding and Thai boxing is to allow me to study the incorporation of the social in action and its translation into strategies among status groups whose estimation of honor is negative and who belong to the working class, those practices belonging to a specific lifestyle. Those pariahs, despite their stigmatization, are able to believe in their own social honor, and those practices are to be understood as ritualistic ways of production and reproduction of the group’s social honor. This quest for honor is to be inscribed within objective struggles and rapports of forces between different groups for the maintaining or the transformation of the material or symbolic social order.

In both societies, *mutatis mutandis*, the shared categories of classification make that

the inhabitants of the ghetto and the *banlieue*, especially the young males, are expected to have certain characteristics such as virility, aggressiveness, toughness, even by themselves, since they have also internalized those forms of classification and appreciation. The ethnographic approach will allow me to uncover the production of cognitive categories, bodily and cultural skills and desires specific to two bodily practices in the ghetto and the *banlieue*.

### **Framework and Purpose of the Dissertation**

I intend not to make a classical monograph but a comparison of urban inequality and ethnoracial domination between the United States and France in order to understand the dilemmas of class, ethnicity, and culture in the city of contemporary America and Europe. The comparative approach seems justified if one agrees with Durkheim's statement that "comparative sociology is not a specific branch of sociology; it is sociology as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts" (Durkheim, 1986: 137). Neither a "thick" description, or a thin one, the comparison is an appropriate way to find the "true causes" of social phenomena, and what is similar and distinctive about the two societies, and therefore to *denaturalize* what is specific to a particular social configuration in breaking the "antiquated topographic compartments of social realities" (Bloch, 1928: 26, 43). More precisely, I plan to study two spaces of urban and ethnoracial relegation which are more or less two structural equivalents: the black ghetto in the United States and the working-class *banlieue* in France. Because the two societies have different political cultures, national ideologies, legal and police practices, and spatial forms of segregation, the comparison between the US and France would get us beyond simplistic generalizations in order to reach a deeper grasp of how class, ethnicity, and place account for a new form of urban inequality as

it has appeared after the differential development of capitalist economies, and the retrenchment of the 'Welfare State' in post-Fordist cities like New York and Paris. Although they are a serious challenge to the conception of citizenship in the two cases in point, the mechanisms of urban inequality and ethnoracial domination are not everywhere the same. They have to be put into the historical and political contexts of the society where they have emerged in order to become intelligible.

In both cases, the issue of poverty is formulated in terms of not only (unthought) categories of deviant populations, but also specific spatial areas. The question of poverty has been spatialized and reduced to the "urban question" through the "urban ideology" (Castells, 1972) to the point of confusing the effects for the causes and therefore concealing the different forms of ongoing domination. In both societies, although to a lesser extent and more recently in France within the framework of the "reform" of the State and the rise of neoliberalism, and stronger in the US because of its history and culture, the stress is put on the responsibility of the individual and not the collectivity. Differing from "postmodernism," my project, as it constantly cross-questions the very categories used to describe urban poverty and ethnoracial domination that see "ghettos," "*banlieues*," "*quartiers*," "underclass," "*exclus*," "race" or "*immigrés*," everywhere, or nowhere, and uses them as all-explaining factors of social "problems," and without denying their social effects, is a contribution to the rethinking of the novel configurations of inequality and domination in the contemporary "dual city." Despite morphological similarities and parallel collective experiences in postindustrial cities, the ghetto and the *banlieue* are two different social institutions. Different mechanisms can also have similar effects and concrete manifestations (poverty, environmental degradation, class decomposition, familial instability, violence and insecurity). A comparative study will contribute to a comparative sociology of urban inequality by tracing the common mechanisms and the specific forms of urban inequality and ethnoracial

domination in two “differentiated societies” that are left unexposed by single case studies, and by focusing on the distinctive causalities, social modalities, and experiences in an American and French city.

Belonging to two contemporary capitalist societies that share the same pretension to universalism and commitment to democratic ideals, the black American ghetto and the French working-class *banlieue* are both urban spaces of isolation and social closure that mainly are characterized by four interrelated social processes: deindustrialization, retrenchment of the “Welfare state”, class segregation and disintegration, and ethnoracial domination (based on slave ancestry in the US, and colonial origin in France). However, there is an essential difference between them: historically the black ghetto has been created and organized on a very homogeneous racial basis, whereas the working-class *banlieue*, despite a strong concentration of diverse immigrants and their children and therefore a salient heterogeneous ethnicity, has more developed on the basis of class. Both groups have gone through a de-proletarianization that has made a lot of them unemployed and economically redundant.

Although contemporary Western societies have in common social mechanisms of ethnoracial domination and urban relegation, few comparative studies have been done between the US and France. Wacquant (2007) has made a major contribution to the study of “advanced marginality.” Comparative sociology between the US and France have been about culture (Lamont, 1992; 2002; Lamont & Thévenot, 2000), or volunteering (Simonet, 2000). Within the subfield of urban sociology, most studies have compared macro-analysis that underlines the view from the top, focusing on corporations rather than everyday life masking the differences between societies (Sassen, 1991), exclusively on urban policies (Donzelot, Mével, & Wyvekens, 2003) or remain concerned with only several cities within the same society (Abu-Lughod, 2007) or several neighborhoods in the same city (Perlman, 1976).

Most of these works have eschewed detailed and systematic ethnographic research, especially of the poor. Or, they have focused on the general depiction of everyday life (Drake & Cayton, 1993; Hannerz, 1969; Lepoutre, 1997; Marlière, 2005) or on deviance, gangs, criminality, or the “underground economy” (Bourgois, 1995; Mauger, 2006; Sauvadet, 2006; Tafferant, 2007; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Venkatesh, 2006; Williams, 1992; Wright & Scott, 1997). Studies about bodily practices and senses have been done in anthropology (Alter, 1992; Desjarlais, 1992; Kleinman, 1988; Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Stoller, 1989) but few, in sociology, have been written on bodily practices and their relation to forms of domination (Hancock, 2004; Trimbur, 2006; Wacquant, 2004) and even less comparative ones. In the US, the French *banlieues* – especially after the 2005 “riots” – are often perceived and described as “immigrants or Muslim neighborhoods” whereas they are not. In France, the comparison often is made with the US which serves as a foil or repellent, and the dominant and normative discourse is that France has been in a process of “Americanization,” and that the *banlieues* have become ghettos (Boucher, 2010; Lapeyronnie, 2008). The *banlieue* is often assimilated with the American ghetto, or the infamous reputation of cities or neighborhoods such as Chicago or the Bronx. The inhabitants, especially the youth (for instance within the hip-hop culture deeply influenced by American hip-hop), have themselves recently described their neighborhoods as “ghettos.” Articulated around the trope of disorganization, like it has been the case for the American literature on the so-called “underclass,” an important part of the literature and the dominant discourse on the French *banlieues* has been about their state of anomie (Dubet, 1987) or the fictitious “exclusion” of their inhabitants from “mainstream” society (Dubet & Lapeyronnie, 1992), masking the socio-economic factors that afflict those districts such as mass unemployment, or the multiplication of precarious and underpaid jobs in a new service economy that precisely make unemployment rates seem lower. All those journalistic and pundit productions have led

to a *spatialization* of the treatment of poverty with for instance the creation by the French State of 751 “sensitive urban zones” on the national territory (“*zones urbaines sensibles*” *ZUS*) and the implementation of the “*politique de la ville.*” In the US, there has been an individualization of poverty, the State delegating the problems to the community. The invention of such official categories – itself the result of struggles among different agents – has important *effects*. The official use of territorial categories such as “*cités-ghettos*” is a way to deny the ethnic forms of domination that part of the *banlieue* population has been experiencing by insisting on the “problems” those populations pose to the society and a supposedly failure of the mythical French model of integration (of immigrants and their children). One does not really establish the “social problem” of urban poverty as an object and especially a coherent scientific object with the multiplication of categories to describe the issue, whereas the “problems” do not really take root in those areas but elsewhere in the deproletarianization of the working class and its concomitant precarization and lasting unemployment (often 40% of the youth in *ZUS* or American “inner cities” sometimes even more).

The penalization of urban inequality has been common to both societies although not to the same extent. In both societies, the State has deployed its punitive apparatus to manage the fractions of the population deemed deviant and dangerous in the ghetto or the *banlieues*. In both societies, populations living in those stigmatized districts are more and more perceived as dangerous. Nevertheless, one cannot reduce those transformations to the destruction of “Welfare states” or to their penalization. One has to take into account the neoliberal revolution in its entirety, the new global economic order it has imposed, and the way it has introduced the market and managerial paradigm in public services, in a much stronger fashion in the US than in France, creating a strong feeling of generalized social insecurity. In the US, the Civil Rights Movement, the retrenchment of the social State and the

deployment of the penal State, the shift towards a service economy, the political weakening of African Americans, and the shift towards “community action” are the main causes of the conflagration of urban ghettos into “hyperghettos.” In France, the transformation of the left since the 1980s is key to understanding the decaying fate of the *banlieues* of the ‘Red Belt’ (Communist municipalities), with the neglecting of the Marxist model of class struggles for a more pacified version based on “modernization,” “participation,” “*citoyenneté*” (influenced by May 68), “*social diversity*” (“*mixité sociale*”), or short-term “projects” that aim at re-socializing supposedly “excluded” individuals by recreating social ties (“*lien social*”), and an ambiguous relationship with the working class and immigrants (Masclat, 2003). The *banlieues* have lost a political frame of solidarity around the factory, the union, and the communist party that used to organize their worldview, left with the State institutions ambiguously remaining. Similarly, the US ghetto has seen the implosion of its own institutions after the 1960s. The commonality between the two societies has been the *depoliticization* and *psychologization* of poverty that are consequences of the spatialization of the latter. The inhabitants have to take care of their own neighborhood, they are responsible for its maintenance and order, and they have to be involved and committed: not political and collective struggle against various forms of domination, but good will and individual participation in the local life of the neighborhood.

### **Research Methods**

Wacquant has made a major contribution in the study of the relation of embodiment and domination. His pathbreaking study of boxing in the Chicago black ghetto has been influential on my work. Since the social sciences are cumulative, I have highly benefitted

from his findings. *Body and Soul* has had an important echo in the sociological field, and his author has been perceived as a creature with an academic head mounted on a boxer's body. This representation and the reception of this book make any new study of boxing or similar practices almost irrelevant. One might think there is no need for other studies on boxing in the ghetto. Such a belief, I think, sparks off the end of sociological inquiry, as it could be asked for any practice, any topic, etc., and is due to a number of reasons that would need more space to be analyzed and partakes of the sociology of sociology. In the (social) sciences, it is as important to make new findings as to validate, or invalidate, precedent ones. Unlike Wacquant, as I entered the gyms to start my study, I was not a beginner and I had already practiced Thai boxing. Therefore, my integration into the gym was almost immediate and "initiatory immersion" (Wacquant, 2004, vii) has not been a vector of sociological inquiry, although intensive participant observation has been critical to understand boxers' and bodybuilders' world and a way to be accepted by them. When one takes one's own experience as a basis for sociological analysis, one runs the risks of accounting for one's relation to the ethnographic object instead of the object itself, unless one is able to control this distortion. I have tried to avoid this risk, and have not accounted for my relation to the training in the gyms. In addition, I have done fieldwork during an era of obesity epidemic and it has had important implications in the understanding of the practices. It seems that more men come to the gyms to lose weight than in the 1980s.

Most of the literature on racial and urban inequality is based on a materialistic approach that neglects the symbolic elements. The anthropology of the body and the sociology of racial domination and urban inequality are very often separated. Although those two elements seem to be two projects ostensibly different from each other, and often studied as such, they are in fact tightly imbricated: a microsociology of weight-lifting and Thai boxing as (sub)proletarian bodily practices in the ghetto and the *banlieue*, which offers a

particular illustration of those social configurations from below and inside, but that does not ignore a socio-historical and theoretical perspective on the ghetto and the *banlieue* as instruments of ethnoracial closure and social domination. Using this approach, I hope to provide a complex outlook of domination from below and the inside and also from above and the outside, contrasting the experiences, the structure, and the politico-economical grounds of urban inequality. I will be documenting the everyday life of ghetto and *banlieue* dwellers in their practice, and the political and economic factors that have recently transformed it.

As far as the study of urban and racial inequality is concerned, the sociologist must avoid two complementary mistakes: to romanticize the ghetto and *banlieue* residents, and to pathologize them. Accordingly, I must insist on the importance and necessity of the *ethnographic* approach – that does not ignore the “structures” – that allows the sociologist to observe the ghetto and the *banlieue* firsthand and therefore to provide an accurate dissection of the lasting social mechanisms at work and to convey the “taste of ethnographic things” (Stoller, 1989). I would avoid the separation between the micro and macro approach to sociology and construct my object based on a constant dialogue between empirical evidence and theory, rejecting both pure empiricism and “theory singing” (Katz, 2004).

The ethnographic method will allow me to seize what Malinowski calls “the impoderabilia of actual life” (Malinowski, 2002:18) and especially the care of the body. My goal is not to get close to the native in order to interpret her culture as one would make a hermeneutic interpretation of a text without any social *raison d’être*, or to make an exercise of subjective anthropology or even “auto-ethnography.” The danger of participant observation is to account not for the practice itself, but for the relation of the ethnographer to the practice. One has to bear in mind that by interviewing agents about their practices, the ethnographer imposes upon them questions that they do not necessarily ask themselves. Interviewing agents is a social situation itself, and it has the effect of making the agent tells

what he or she is not used to tell about his or her practice because it remains unthought or repressed. The intrusion of the ethnographer into the agent's life creates "perturbations that are not noise to be expurgated but music to be appreciated" (Burawoy, 1998: 14). In order to avoid the outsider's ethnocentrism and a false mystical and intuitive participation, one must consider the object not only as a practice but also as a meaningful rite.

This exercise of comparative sociology has imposed upon me a double epistemological break: the first one with the American racialized vision of the social world that made me break with the use of the notion of "race" as an analytical concept, and the second with the denial of forms of domination based on ethnic criteria in France. In addition to the use of different concepts, the founding epistemological strategy of this work has been not so much to focus on definitions or typologies as on the analysis of social mechanisms and practices. This double break has been made based on theoretical prerequisites, but also by the fact of doing fieldwork in two different societies. The first break in the American context, which seems easier because of the status of outsider, has still necessitated a strong epistemological vigilance: conversely to what can be done about France with an "American model," not to apply a "French model" – if those models even exist – on American realities. To depart from the homogenizing and reifying approach in terms of national "models" does not mean to deny the existence and the relevance of historical, social and cultural differences between the United States and France. It is also necessary to refuse a form of relativism that would only record flat cultural differences between the two societies. While challenging the use of "race" as a conceptual tool, it is not a matter of denying its peculiar history and its social effects on American soil. As far as France is concerned, the problem is the opposite. I have tried not to lock myself in my proximity with the French part of the fieldwork, helped in that with the comparative approach, which prevents from falling into the trap of ethnocentrism.

Overall, such an embodied and embedded ethnography would allow me to see *in situ* how social structures are incorporated and to seize the *material* and *symbolic* pressures that are at work in those urban zones, whose the stakes go beyond the local environment, without neglecting the complex and lively *visceral* dimension, allying corporeal/sensual experience and rigorous theorization in order to dissect how class, honor and place are entangled and play a critical role in shaping social practices within spaces of urban inequality.

The research considered in the US is a gym in Brooklyn managed by the city of New York (membership is affordable) where individuals lift weights where I have conducted participant observation, and a boxing gym in East New York. This embedment in a social institution within a black ghetto is as much a research object as an anchoring in its everyday reality. It is a way to gain entry in the ghetto in order to be part of the ordinary life, by “violating the apartheid” (Bourgois, 2003), to observe the social configuration, and the life strategies of agents. The gym is an observation post in the ghetto, a privileged place to get a firsthand picture of the daily life of young men in the neighborhood, and a complex social world with a social, cultural, esthetic, emotional and moral life of its own in relation with larger structures and dynamics. The choice of a weighting room was theoretically driven. The sociomoral and sensuous microcosm of the gym is a strategic research site in itself. Bodybuilding, the *socialization* of the biological, is at the crossroads of the biological and the social, as is ‘race’, which is the *biologization* of the social. The black body has always been the stakes, whether *material* or *symbolic*, of racial domination, and the vehicle for so many prejudices (contagiousness, natural muscularity, sport and sexual performance, naturally gifted for dancing, singing, etc.) (Patridge, 2008) that are at the same time the results of racial beliefs but also engines that (re)produce them. I found it crucial, in the sense of the *experimentum crucis*, to carve out the culture and the sculpture of the (stigmatized) black body.

The first difficulty was to enter this particularly closed social microcosm. It seems to me that there was so much more police presence in Brownsville that I often thought that “something” had happened. I felt that there was more eye contact than in other middle-class neighborhoods in NY, and sometimes I captured puzzled or even suspicious looks (What am I doing there? Am I an undercover cop?). The African-American girl who made me visit the room she was renting out in her apartment expressed astonishment to my willing to live in Brownsville, told me it was the first time she had heard such a thing, and confessed that sometimes (especially at night) she felt unsafe in this neighborhood. My presence even sparked off hostility: I was walking home at night along the Van Dyke Houses and came across what looked like a “gang.” One of them started to talk to me: “Hey! C.!” but first I was not sure he was talking to me, as two other men were walking out of a project and walking towards me, and then after he had repeated I couldn’t understand anyway. I understood this unfortunate incident afterwards. I was wearing blue jeans and a blue hooded sweatshirt, dressed up entirely in Crips color, and I was crossing a Bloods territory (Garot, Katz, 2003) where the color is red. Therefore “Hey! C.!” meant “Hey! Crip!” It is difficult to say that they really took me for a Crip member or not, but the fact that I was wearing the enemy color on their territory was felt by this group as a provocation and an opportunity reaffirm the boundaries of their turf. However, being not considered as fully white – I was told that I could pass for a Latino – my physical appearance made possible smoother interactions. For instance, at two different occasions, two African-American men accosted me just to ask me if I were Muslim, like them, and one of them started to explain to me how he converted to Islam influenced by Malcolm X, this man even kissed me when we separated.

The entry in the French *banlieue* was much easier as I grew up there, in the very near city where is located the Thai boxing gym. I also worked in La Courneuve and know some

people, even among the boxers. In addition, I myself practiced Thai boxing, therefore my integration in the gym was almost “natural.”

I aim at comparing and contrasting the American case with the study of Thai boxing in a French working-class *banlieue*. In France, Thai boxing is a bodily practice that is popular in the working-class *banlieues* among the youth. It has to be inscribed within an economy of acquisition and fructification of the “war capital (“*capital guerrier*”) of youths from the *cités*” (Sauvadet, 2006) that is related to the agonistic habitus that a youth from a *banlieue*, a ghetto or a *favela* ideal-typically has. This analysis of the economy of bodily practices will enable me to examine to what extent bodily capital, convertible into symbolic capital, and the agonistic habitus are central in the dominated zones of the social space. The particularity of the bodily capital, compared to other forms of capital (economic, social, or cultural) is that it can be distributed relatively independently from other forms of capital, and especially the economic capital. That can explain, partly, the reason why African Americans, who have historically been deprived of economic and cultural capital, have developed so many skills in bodily practices. Bodily capital can even provide the agent with the means to acquire economic, social or cultural capital. The acquisition of symbolic capital through a bodily practice such as Thai boxing or bodybuilding is a matter of *the logic of honor* in that it is a way of (re)gaining one’s social honor or to save face when one is dominated based on class or ethnicity, and a way of establishing or maintaining a reputation and a credibility based on the physical force or the aptitude for street fighting and also a way to *legitimize* a dominant position within the street environment.

In the first chapter, I will briefly describe the two sites of my research, and give some hints about the way youths from the ghetto or the *banlieues* get involved in boxing and bodybuilding.

In the second chapter, I will show that bodybuilding and Thai boxing are sensual, aesthetic and therapeutic practices. In that sense, they enchant the cosmogony of youths from stigmatized urban neighborhood.

In chapter three, I will demonstrate that bodybuilding and boxing gyms are virile institutions where gender identities are both reproduced and challenged.

In chapter four, I will argue that those bodily practices are ways to struggle against different forms of domination and a search for social honor.

In chapter five, I analyze what I call the economy of the pedagogical gift in which muscular and pugilistic knowledge circulates and creates hierarchies inside the gyms.

In chapter six, I contend that bodybuilding and Thai boxing in marginalized urban areas are social technologies that not so much contain deviant populations as they produce relatively normalized citizens, albeit ambivalent.

## **Chapter 1: Sociology of Embodiment and Action**

### **1) Embodiment and Social Strategies**

In many societies and throughout history, the body would have been considered as profane and the soul as sacred. This “duality of human nature” based on “the sensory sensations and tendencies on one hand, the conceptual thinking and moral activity on the other hand” (Durkheim, 1914) is a dominant representation, whether it is in the conception of death that separates the soul from the body, or for instance in the academic world that favors, in a monistic worldview, the “mind” with which the academic thinks, the body being dismissed, even though it is involved in space, time, and movement<sup>1</sup>. In the traditional hierarchy of scientific objects, the body has been relegated to the lowest rank. Sociology has for a long time disincarnated social agents by repressing their biophysical characteristics (Freund, 1988: 839), although the body has been the center of more and more studies recently. This antinomy between the senses and the rational, passion and reason, constitutes both an important obstacle to the understanding of the social world and a foundation of it. The historical existence of this dichotomy and its practical effects need to be taken into account, but it is as important to account for the incarnate dimension of social agents who are “total men” and for the relation between the body and the social. « The union of the soul and the body, writes Merleau-Ponty, is not sealed by an arbitrary decree between two exterior terms, one being the object, and the other one the subject. It is accomplished in every moment in the movement of existence” (2006: 118). The dichotomy between body and mind looks like those “recalcitrant dichotomies” (Lock, 1993: 134) that are made between nature and

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<sup>1</sup> For a powerful illustration of the indivisibility of the body and the mind even for a job that is said to be intellectual, cf. (Murphy, 1987).

nurture, freedom and authority, the individual and the society, theory and practice, structure and agency, etc. The practical aspect of the social life is a crucial dimension of it. Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach* asserts that social relations are first of all practical relations (Tucker, 1978, 144-145):

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.

Social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.

This thesis is not so much about the body as bodily practices as they are “techniques of the body,” both “traditional and efficient,” collectively transmitted in action “by and for the social authority” (Mauss, 2006: 371, 384). If the body has to be placed at the core of this work, it is the body of a “total man,” as both a receptacle and a producer of the social reality. Djamel, a boxer, is a real incarnation of the “total man” when he says:

*Thai boxing has brought me a lot of things me even more today. Beyond sport, I think that people like Fabrice who transmits this sport with its values, and it's a discipline that allows you to blossom. Thai boxing is part of my balance, I need it because it's what makes me stand back about my life, my job, my thoughts.*

I am interested in the incorporation of the social in the working classes and its transformation into practices that are “social ways of being” and “social ways of acting”

(Durkheim, 1975: 13-36). Bodily practices are cases in point for the study of social incorporation in action and its translation into strategies in that they are at the crossings of logical reasoning and affective expressivity. The body absorbs the social “viscerally, as a sponge soaks up displaced water,” and this thesis is “an attempt to squeeze that sponge for the inner moisture” (Desjarlais, 1992: 29-30).

Durkheim makes explicit the foundation of the relation of man to his social environment as an “entry” of the social into the agents’ body: “We cannot live without representing to ourselves the world that surrounds us, the objects of all kind that fill it. But, only by the fact that we represent them to ourselves, they enter in us, become part of ourselves; and then, we are attached to them and to ourselves at the same time” (Durkheim, 1914). Bodily practices are the expressions of collective representations that need to be materialized and symbolized so that they become meaningful and they last. They constitute “techniques and the work of individual and collective practical reason” (Mauss, 2006: 369). They also represent sacrifices society imposes on agents to reproduce itself, sacrifices that have a certain social cost. The attentions given to the body in everyday life are the products as well as the engine of categories that are socially constituted based on collective forms of classification. The physical body is perceived according to categories of appreciation that pertain to the social body. The physical experience that follows determines an incarnate conception of the society by the fundamental transformation it implied. The categories of perception and action are therefore mutually reinforced (Douglas, 1970: 65).

The “resistance to emotion,” as a control by the agent over his body through the education he has received, and the “inhibition of disordered movements,” are, according to Mauss, a pivotal element of the social world (2006: 385). Forms of bodily control correspond to forms of social control without which the control over the body is hardly possible. A society where forms of conscious social control are important is a society that is highly

ritualized and that prohibits the loss of control over consciousness (Douglas, 1970: 70-73, 81). Mauss writes that the body is not only an instrument but also “the first and most natural technical object, as well as technical means of man” (2006: 372). This functionalist vision of the use of the body is linked to the “practical necessity to control the body in situation,” or in other words to “control the situation,” and therefore to have the tendency to “reduce the whole body to one and only one of its properties or dimensions” (Boltanski, 1971). The body is socially assigned precise and specific functions that can vary across class, gender, etc. Boxers, for instance, have an instrumentalist conception of their body that is at the same time a tool, a machine, or an engine that needs to be maintained or repaired, but also a weapon (Wacquant, 1998: 330-333). Describing situations of tension in everyday life during which a fight can break out, Omar attests that boxers perceive that body as a weapon, and especially as a dangerous one that they must control, which leads them to avoid fighting in the street:

*Sometimes in certain situations you know more or less what you're capable of, so you tell yourself it's not worth it, so you let it go.*

In their everyday survival made of ordinary struggles, the homeless, who have lost all material goods, and who, very often, use their memory only in a very selective and instantaneous way, only have their body left and it then becomes the most prominent instrument of engagement, awareness, and retrospection” (Desjarlais, 1994: 890-891) in their social life that tends to escape ordinary temporality, and this I because their social practices, especially the job they lost, have been drastically reduced.

The raw force that could be found historically in societies has been progressively channeled and objectivized in what Weber calls the “judicial State” or “rational State.” The relations between bodies and State, or bodies and religion, sexuality and religious practices

are close. The “sexual orgy” often is transfigured, by ascetic or contemplative renunciation to sexual drives, into love for a divinity, chastity that is supposed to bring salvation (Weber, 1995: 372-376). This social energy circulates and can be reinvested in different forms. The general elevation of the living standards and the reduction of working time have made more “free time” available and have therefore developed what is called, maybe improperly, “leisure.” More specifically, in relegated urban areas, where agents, in more and more precarious situations, use less and less their labor power because of mass unemployment while physical power as labor power was a major component of their masculine identity, and to a certain extent a mediation of certain forms of domination. One consequence of deindustrialization has been the rarefaction of this mediator and the dissociation of the couple labor/labor power within the working class. This “physical and intellectual [energy] that exists in all the corporeity, the living personality of a human being” (Marx, 2006: 188) then available can be (re)invested in a bodily practice in order to maintain certain forms of capital of the group or to convert others to perpetuate the reproduction of the group. The investment in a bodily practice serves as a socially admitted outlet for aggressive drives, or even to other forms of drives (Élias, 1974: 442-443), and a strategy of reproduction of the group to at least preserve its position in the class structure by avoiding or struggling against class downgrading. However, the involvement in a bodily practice is also a form of resistance to the fixation in the household, a traditionally feminine place, and a way to get back a social and masculine legitimacy that has been lost along with the job. Besides wage labor, within the context of “leisure” activities, whereas women are more likely to “bring the ‘outside’ inside,” working-class men are more likely to practice them outside (Weber, 2001: 57). The bodybuilding and Thai boxing gyms belong to those “proper masculine spaces” which make up a “masculine private life” where certain social constraints are temporarily bracketed, especially the family relationships (relations of force with the wife) and the labor relations in

order to make life more bearable, less tiresome (Schwartz, 2002: 319-320). The reproduction of society and its modes of domination partly occurs through the shaping and normalizing of bodies (Mauss talks about “human taming” (2006: 374), and Wittgenstein mentions “taming” about language as it is taught to children (2004: 29-30), according to a mode of “prestigious imitation” (Mauss, 2006: 369), as they are perceived and defined based on class, ethnic, or gender categories of classification which need to be accounted for (Freund, 1988: 855-857).

By “body” I do not mean the equivalent of “person,” “self,” “being,” or “object,” even less a “text,” but rather a “microcosm of the universe,” “a symbolic template” (Turner, 1967: 107), a living organism capable of accumulating the social and to render it in different forms in different social configurations. Without assigning them any rational finality, or mechanistic attributes, but in establishing their social conditions of their (re)production, material and symbolic, this comparison of bodily practices in marginalized urban areas in France and the US is a contribution to the sociology of the economy of practices.

## **2) Bodily Capital in the Economy of Practices in Marginalized Urban Areas**

To focus on a practice as such, it is running the risk of isolating it from a larger social reality. Conversely, to concentrate the analysis on a specific practice can give the impression that this practice is central in the everyday life of those who practice, which is not necessarily the case. The involvement in a practice is determined, at least partly, by the material conditions of existence of agents who are themselves equipped with schemes of perception and action that are the product of these conditions (Bourdieu, 1980: 165), the practical dispositions of agents, and the locally available practices. These conditions impose constraints upon agents who then “choose” such or such practice. The necessities imposed by the conditions of existence are embodied in the form of “disposition generating practices that

are supposed to give a meaning to the engendered practices.” Agents socialized in similar conditions of existence are more likely to develop dispositions for similar practices and to distinguish themselves who have not been socialized in the same conditions. Those practices create a “a space of lifestyles.” The “affinity of style” is linked with the affinity of conditions of existence in that they constitute their embodiment in the form of competences, and then their transformation into practices that themselves contribute to the determination and the symbolic assignation of the position in the class structure. The social conditions of living that are embodied in the form of schemes generating practices are therefore translated into social strategies that look like deliberate choices, but that actually are the transfiguration of constraints imposed by those conditions of living (Bourdieu, 1979: 190-195). As Defrance (1976: 37) writes:

The rationalization of techniques of body culture and their explicit formulation in the form of a gymnastic system appear as one of the consequences of the school system in instrument of production and reproduction of certain forms of competence whose possession contributes to determine and to symbolically mark the position in the structure of class relations.

However, the investment in a bodily practice is not dependent on a mechanistic relation with the social and economic relations of living of those who practice. Social agents do not do things (only) because they like them or, according to a naturalist explanation, because they need to do it. They do things partly because the interest to do them is superior to the interest not to do them. It can be said with Mauss that « all the social phenomena are to a certain extent the work of collective will, and, human will means the choice between different possible options” (Mauss, 1976: 456-479). This investment is determined by the taste of agents, or their distaste. Without a real willingness to distinguish oneself, the taste allows one to express one’s differences and preferences that have chances to exist based on

the social conditions of living, but also to be judged according to those preferences (Bourdieu, 1979: 210). Any practice also is motivated by symbolic principles that look disinterested and often the search for social honor.

Virilist bodily practices, such as bodybuilding and Thai boxing, are parts of the strategies of reproduction of young men from stigmatized neighborhoods in the US and France. Some of these young men from ghettos and working-class *banlieues* share a certain aversion to institutional authority, and they invert the latter's cardinal values such as deference, obedience, and so on. This aversion gets more or less sedimented within the peer group and is expressed through practices, language, a specific temporality that allow them to partly escape conformism and to absorb the social cost that this represents, while allowing them to prove they are capable. The ordinary life in relegated urban areas such as the American black ghetto and the French working-class *banlieue* where physical force is more likely to be valued can predispose the young men with little cultural capital to acquire agonistic dispositions that make them exist in a social space that is tough and competitive, but also solidary, where one is more likely to know and apply the "code of the street" (Anderson, 1999) that allows ghetto or *banlieue* inhabitants to negotiate the dangers of the street, whether it is youths against the police or adults during "infra-political" relations with public administrations (Siblot, 2006: 89)<sup>2</sup>, or simply during ordinary interactions with peers. This field note shows the example of an ordinary altercation in the train in Brownsville between two young men. Despite the apparent difference in status, the two men want to fight for a reason that may seem derisory:

*In the 3 train that runs through Brownsville, a 30 year-old man, who has white and red streetwear clothes on (it may be gang colors), very large baggy jeans, a baseball hat, and*

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<sup>2</sup> Even if these relations with administrations produce "consent," and if these administrations' clients, disqualified as "assisted," show "administrative good will" or a certain "fatalism," cf. (Dubois, 2003).

*a large scar on the right cheek, is standing while the train is moving. When a woman stands up from her seat and gets off the train at the station, the man sits where this woman was seated, and apparently he touches another man who is seated right next to him, around 30 years old as well, but dressed with black “regular” clothes, reading the newspaper. The two men then start arguing because the second one felt disrespected because the first one would have pushed him a little bit while sitting down. After few minutes of exchange, the man in black clothes stands up and stays by the train door, ignoring the other protagonist who is still staring at him and talking to him and who is very upset. The man in black replies to the other one and while the train approaches the Sutter Avenue stop, he tells him: “we’re from the same place...” and the one in red and white abruptly stands up and they start to insult each other. The man in hip-hop clothes screams to the other one: “bum-ass nigga!” and the one in black ripostes: “get a job nigga!” Some passengers are looking at the scene like a spectacle, others completely ignore it as if this type of scenes was frequent. They almost start a fight, the man in red and white looks really willing to fight, and the other one answers: “I’m right here, I’m getting off here, come on!” hitting with his hand the bar on which one holds in the train. [Field note]*

The members of the working classes are not combative by essence. They are more likely to develop, within the context of a working-class lifestyle, a disposition to defend their honor or when they feel unfairly treated. Omar does not say something else when he claims that Thai boxing or not he would always react to “injustice” or to lack of “respect”:

*Even without Thai boxing, I am somebody who doesn’t really like injustice and I don’t like the lack of respect and often when I argue with people it’s mostly for things like that, and I wouldn’t have been a boxer, I would have been a tennis player, I don’t know how*

*to fight, I think it would have been the same, if I have something to tell you, I'm gonna say it to you, if I don't like something, I'm still gonna say it to you. Even if I get beaten up, at least I would have told you what I think. Now that I do boxing, maybe it will be more balanced. But I don't have a temperament like because I do Thai boxing I'm gonna beat you up, I don't have this temperament... I'm a rather cool guy.*

This disposition is not a general formula, nor a state or even less an essence, but a *potentiality that is likely to be activated in relation to a corresponding situation* (interactional, institutional, etc.) that is possibly present among many dispositions and it happens that agents react *against* their dispositions. This agonistic disposition does not pertain to all the members of the working classes, it is unequally distributed. The gyms, especially the Thai boxing gym, provide a framework for this agonistic disposition, and the boxer or the bodybuilder can learn to control or transform it. About American gang members, Sánchez Jankowsky, talks about “a defiant individualist character” that is also a sense of competition because of the scarcity of goods, a sense of suspicion, autonomy, social isolation, survival instinct, and a social Darwinist worldview (1991: 23-26). Contrarily to youths from the French working-class *banlieues*, those from American black ghettos become members of gangs mainly to protect themselves from street violence. Youths from the French working-class *banlieues* can be members of a “gang” to protect themselves and fight another “gang,” but the organization and the complexity is not as developed as in the case of American gangs, and identification mainly is in relation to the housing project, not to a specific “gang.”

*In the showers, two young boxers are talking about an argument they had on the trolley car, one of them, who was not there, asks what happened, another one tells the story, and the one who was not there resolutely claims that they all got to go back home that way in*

*order to settle accounts with them. He seems really upset and motivated to take revenge.*

[Field note]

Thai boxing can give confidence in one's strength and fighting capacity, and reinforce the obligation to protect oneself and others. The fact that in the US, the right to bear a firearm for every citizen – both a figure of the victim of the civil society's violence and virile hero – is written in the Constitution is pivotal to understand the link between violence, masculinity, and agonistic practices. While the possession of a firearm is relatively frequent among American gang members, it is rare among the youths in the French *banlieues*. The latter are more likely to get involved in a practice such as Thai boxing in order to learn self-defense, whereas young men from the ghetto are more likely to use a firearm as a instrument of protection and retaliation, symbol of virility – phallic extension – and matter of honor (to get respected, and symbol of group belonging). Even when a gang member possesses fighting abilities, he must get a firearm because his reputation pushes his rivals to avoid a “fair” fight with him and makes them use a gun (Stretesky, Pogrebin, 2007: 102). It seems that one needs to be more dissuasive in the ghetto than in the *banlieue*, and bodybuilding is a way to appear dissuasive by showing a muscular body, whereas pugilistic skills are less visible and are supposed to be used only if needed.

This agonistic disposition puts the agent in position where he puts into action, without rational calculation, a search for the fructification of his bodily capital through social strategies that are not particularly intentional, a “passionate hunt for value” (Marx, 2006: 173), both material and symbolic, a search that partakes of a logic of honor. In order to have access to a certain position in the social space of the ghetto or the *banlieue*, one needs to accumulate a certain amount of agonistic capital, a component of which is bodily capital, through practices such as bodybuilding or Thai boxing. The streets of the black ghetto or the

working-class *banlieues* are “antechambers to the gyms” (Wacquant, 2004: 99). The more one develops one’s “warrior charisma” (Turner, 2003: 99), as a power over one’s enemies and a capacity to avoid injuries and death, the more one is respected and feared, and the more one is self-confident. There is a correlation between the agonistic capital of a social agent and what we can call his charismatic capital that is transformed in a belief in a gift of the agent, which is in fact nothing else than the objectivation of the social energy that is spent to accumulate this capital. Put under similar social conditions by certain aspects, an agent who is socialized in the black ghetto or the working-class *banlieue* is likely to produce agonistic dispositions, at least during a period of his lifetime, according to the conditions of acquisition of this disposition and the social trajectory of the agent or category of agents. This physical disposition also is a class disposition, which can nevertheless, be inflected.

In social worlds where the public space (the street corner, halls of American projects and the French “*cités*,” the “street,” playgrounds) becomes a crucial space of socialization, self-assertion (through a confident way of walking and a rolling gait for instance, or during linguistic exchanges) is an absolute necessary condition if one wants to be respected. This bodily capital can be used to protect oneself, but also others, one’s friends, family, peers, by ontological complicity.

*Boxers greet each other at the entrance of the gymnasium. A young boxer enters the hall and greets everybody, another boxer who sees him eating cookies tells him: “you’re crazy, you’re eating before training, you’re gonna puke,” the other boxer says: “What?” and the other one repeats what he just said, and the one who is eating responds that he does not train because his hand is broken. They discuss the way hand surgery is done and he is then asked how it happened, and he says that he argued with a guy and he punched the wall.*

*In the hall of the gymnasium, before the training, Alain grabs a young boxer of 12 or 13 years old and asks him if he got into a street fight. The teenager says yes without hesitation, and Alain starts to lecture him, and he adds: “What is in Sarcelles [another banlieue]?” the young boxer answers “Yes,” Alain then replies: “Imagine that several of them come to hit you?” but the teenager does not seem to know what to answer to that, and looks a little bit fatalistic. [Field note]*

In this highly masculine universe, the members of the working classes are likely to assert or maintain their individual and collective virility. Men make it a point of honor to throw themselves headlong in this religious quest for ideal virility. Those men often are motivated by a sentiment of ontological vulnerability, a lack of self-confidence, a low self-esteem, in return for masculine domination and the fact to try to stick to the representation of men as virile. The following field note shows this feeling of insecurity that a 30 year-old boxer expresses based on the idea that life in the *banlieues* was better before:

*During a discussion around drinks and food before the Christmas holidays, an adult who just started training tells me that he is fed up with taking the trolley car because “there is no respect anymore,” and says that a woman with a stroller did not have a seat and that nobody has moved to let her sit, and that she had even been pushed. Then he says that “Before, there was anomalies in the banlieues and all that, but now it’s worse!” [Field note]*

It is partly this ontological weakness that makes that the agent invests so much time and energy in a masculine bodily practice such as bodybuilding or Thai boxing, which constitute “a pleasurable resolution of tensions” (Elias, Dunning, 1986: 43) between the drives of virility and the social repercussions they imply. The agonistic capital reinforces the

capacity of collective intimidation or even action of the American gang or the French “*bande*,” but also of the agent who perceives the necessity to be able to defend himself. The situation of agents in urban areas of relegation is therefore ambivalent: on the one hand they are strongly attached to practices that pertain to the logic of honor, to group solidarity, on the other hand they are influenced by individualist interests and both material and symbolic profit. This duality is a source of destabilizations and disorientations that are not without social consequences.

This agonistic disposition that can predispose agents to bodily practices (that are not “natural” or mechanistic) such as bodybuilding or Thai boxing for which they have a “musical ear” also contains a highly ontological dimension, in that such practices allow agents to exist, to feel useful, to be somebody who does something and who is not idle, to transcend an ordinary life that can be made of material privations and hardships, and of (symbolic) violence (Connell, 1991). The agonistic dimension of these regions of the urban space finds its illustration in the success of different ritualized and euphemized forms of fight, that work as symbolic emasculation, such as combat sports (judo, boxing, etc.), or these practices that take the form of a duel like these confrontation where the two facing rivals rap or dance one after the other with very explicit names such as “clash,” “battle,” etc. Lepoutre (1992) has shown the importance and the coherence of a “street culture” influenced by logics of honor. Heavyweight champions of the world Mike Tyson and Riddick Bowe claim that they learn how to fight in the streets of Brownsville where they grew up and that they have developed a “killer instinct” there. Thai boxing is inscribed in this space of agonistic practices that are integrant parts of the lifestyle of the working classes. Omar gives evidence of the routinization of Thai boxing in the cultural universe of the working-class *banlieues*:

*Question: How do your close relatives or friends see you knowing that you practice Thai boxing?*

*Omar: At the beginning they were like “You’re a boxer, you’re tough,” that was mainly what they were saying. There’s no negative image, it’s said with humor and well at the beginning my mother was a little bit scared but now it’s ok.*

*Question: And your friends, they say nothing special?*

*Omar: No nothing special, some of them tell me “I should come with you some day to see how it goes,” but there’s no negative image. My son has Thai boxing shorts, little gloves to his size, often he tells me “Come on daddy put your gloves on we’re gonna fight,” he likes it.*

Similarly, during a training session, Alain shows boxers in the locker-room a picture of his newborn son on his cell phone wearing a pair of Thai boxing shorts that are too large for him. “Relief is assured” say the boxers. In addition to transmit the taste for Thai boxing, the picture of a child wearing a Thai boxing outfit as well as its circulation among boxers make the practice an ordinary aspect of everyday life.

However, not everybody practices Thai boxing or bodybuilding. These agonistic practices are also ways to distinguish oneself and to acquire distinctive signs that increase one’s prestige. Recognition also is a motivation for the practice. Boxers obtain symbolic profits in the practice of Thai boxing because they are perceived as brave and competent, and they acquire a social legitimacy that they do not always have.

*The trainers Chérif and Aimé tell me that youths come to the gym “to learn to defend themselves.” They observe that “youths don’t like technical exercises, those where you just touch your opponent. What they want is fighting, even the younger, they always ask for going in the ring. And they recognize each other. It’s cool to do Thai boxing, you’re recognized.”*

[Field note]

To transcend a dull and precarious everyday life is to obtain a new self-esteem that can allow one not to become involved in different forms of deviance, whether delinquent or psychological, especially by the degree of effervescence, of excitation, and the effects of solidarity that the practice imply. When this stylization of everyday life is done through a bodily practice, the boxer or the bodybuilder becomes a full-fledged specialized and competent agent. The two possibilities are not exclusive, although it is difficult to reconcile a deviant career and a sport career. To get involved in a sport activity requires energy, time, and discipline, and can therefore deviate from other deviant practices. Deviants can even respect someone who succeeds in sports, especially if it is in an agonistic sport such as boxing or popular among working-class youths like soccer in France or basketball in the US.

## **Chapter 2: The American Ghetto and the French *banlieue*. Two Places, two Practices, one Comparison**

### **1) Two Gyms: Bodybuilding in Brownsville and Thai boxing in *La Courneuve***

The gyms are “social institutions” in that they concentrate “all the beliefs and all the modes of behavior instituted by the collectivity” (Durkheim, 1986: XXII). The gyms are places where an “experiment on what can be done to the self” (Goffman, 1961: 3-6, 12). A boxer is not so much created in the ring as in the institution that the gym is. He can have a very different appearance than the cliché of the broken nose boxer (especially in Thai boxing, the face receives less punches than in regular boxing, and therefore Thai-boxers’ faces are more intact), like Djamel, who is tall and wears glasses, explains: “*I don’t look the part. I don’t know what kind of image of me people have, and I think they would be surprised because at the gym I’m different, I’m not the same. I’m a little bit more aggressive than in real life.*” This boxer plays, more or less involuntarily, with clichés turning them upside down: he is boxer and at the same time looks like a “highbrow.”

Brownsville is a pretty dilapidated urban area. The state of desolation can be explained by several factors. After the 1968 riots that followed Martin Luther King’s death and that partially destroyed the neighborhood, it has never been really rebuilt. Families, especially Jewish ones that owned stores or properties, started to leave and therefore a lot of stores closed. Henceforth, 77% of households are single parent. The struggle that opposed the black community to unionized white teachers in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in 1968 who were told that they were fired has fragmented a big part of the New York left.

The gym is located between the imposing Linden Boulevard, the surrounding projects, and numerous car repair shops. One informant advises not to appear like a ‘*bum*’ (bowing his head, loosening his arms) but to walk self-confident, “*Like you’re tough, you know*” (straightening up his body), otherwise “*they’re gonna say: let’s fuck him up,*” but that one should also not be afraid since Blacks were only assaulting other Blacks.

The manager of the neighborhood recreation center in which the gym is located is Greg ‘Jocko’ Jackson, a former NBA player, who accepted the position in 1997 after it had been closed for six months because of gang violence. People were afraid to come because the environment was very violent. Jackson not only brought a new motivated team but a project as well and a discipline that he probably acquired as a professional athlete. He is a charismatic figure, raised in the neighborhood and former basketball star. His dynamism and the existence of the center testify for a mobilization coming from the ground against politics of neglect and abandonment towards the neighborhood.

The Thai boxing gym, the Derek Boxing, is located in La Courneuve in the French department of Seine-Saint-Denis in the northern outskirts of Paris at the heart of the infamous housing projects “*les 4000*” (because the housing development is made of 4000 units) that the common sense associated with crime, drugs, delinquents, immigrants, and poverty, and like Brownsville a dangerous place that must be avoided. The environment is at the same time similar to and different from Brownsville. There are similar forms of sociability: children playing outside, adults gathered outside who talk loudly, women with their kids walking with groceries in their bags, youths riding motorcycles. However, Brownsville look much more dilapidated than La Courneuve, buildings look more crumbling, there is less stores and less public buildings. In La Courneuve, the Derek Boxing was created by two brothers Antoine and René Desjardins who are from the neighborhood, of Vietnamese origin, born in Cambodia.

## 2) The Recruitment in a Bodily Practice in a Stigmatized Neighborhood

In both cases, membership is cheap and adapted to the local environment and to the economics of people of the neighborhood. Annual membership is \$75 for Brownsville and €122 (about \$160, it includes federal license and insurance) for the Derek Boxing that you can pay with coupons given by the municipality to poor families, which can result sometimes in free membership. If the Derek's coaches know a kid whose economic or familial situation is really difficult so that he cannot pay, it has happened that they would let him train for free. The Derek Boxing does not really need to have a recruiting policy like other sport clubs in the city because it is renown even beyond the city limits. Aimé, one of the trainers, compares the Derek to the judo club with whom they share the training space and says: "*We have more members than judo, and without doing any advertising.*" Like the Derek's coaches, partly because they want to be "socially useful," sport associations' coaches in working-class *banlieues* often are volunteers<sup>3</sup>, without diplomas and in competition with certified sport tutors from municipal sport centers. The diffusion of Thai boxing in the working class *banlieues* can be partly explained by the fact that new gym-goers have often been co-opted by a friend, a neighbor, a brother, or another member of the family who brought them to a training session. Most of the men in the gyms, both in France and in the US, are members of the fraction of the working-class that is destabilized by the precarious labor market. Like Wacquant has wrote (2004, 43-44), boxers or bodybuilders are not from the most marginalized strata of the ghetto or the *banlieue*. Some of them have relatively jobs such as bus or train driver, security agents, but others are in a precarious position as they work for temporary work agencies, and others are students who often struggle to pass their first

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<sup>3</sup> Whereas in the US, volunteers work for the "community," cf. Maud Simonet (2000).

undergraduate year at the university or who are still in high school. Those who are the most involved in the practice, especially boxing, are those who have less educational training, and they are more likely to see boxing as a job and a way to make a living. But they constitute a minority in the gyms I have studied, as Thai boxing and bodybuilding, as opposed to boxing, do not offer a lot of professional perspectives.

### **3) An Ordinary Bodybuilding Session in the Black Ghetto and Thai boxing Session in a Working-Class *Banlieue***

Typically, the bodybuilding gym in Brownsville is open everyday and all day from 10am to 10pm on average. One can choose when one wants to work out, as opposed to the Thai boxing gym where sessions are three days a week from 7pm to 9:30pm. The gym is mostly frequented between 5pm to 9pm. After having shown one's ID to the security agent, who is very often a woman, at the entrance, one may go to the locker-room in order to change clothes, but most people already have their workout outfit on and they walk directly to the weighting room and start working out. Usually, one would already find people working out, chatting while they are waiting for a machine or making a pause between two sets or two exercises. The loud African-American music that goes out of the loudspeakers that are hung on the wall, which is covered with a fresco of ancient African warriors, cannot mask the weights and metallic bars clanging. A bodybuilder asks another how many sets he has yet in order for him to use the machine. If he has few sets to do, he will wait for his turn, otherwise he will ask to "come in" and both of them would alternate, taking advantage of the other's turn to rest and maybe drink some water.

The session is usually used to work not all the muscular groups of the body but only one, two, or even three parts. The bodybuilder does a kind of circuit where exercises that

target a specific muscular group are linked up with pauses between exercises and sets. Few bodybuilders warm up, they directly start exercises with weight or on the machines. For example, if Monday is pectorals day, the bodybuilder can start with the “butterfly chest press” which is a pull exercise, the resistance is behind, requiring one to pull the resistance toward the front of the body. One brings the handles of the machine together as one tightens one’s chest, holding the contraction for a second before returning to the original position. Then, one can go to the bench press: while lying down on the bench, the bodybuilder takes the bar off the rack, lowers it to the level of the chest, then pushes it back up until the arms are straight. Often the bodybuilder is assisted by someone else because heavy weights are used during this exercise and he may have difficulties to lift the bar during the last reps and he may be stuck with the bar pressing his chest very hard preventing him to move. He can then follow up by the incline bench press, which is basically the same exercise but the bench is incline and the area that is targeted is the upper chest. Finally, he can do dips during which the bodybuilder hangs from two bars with his arms straight and shoulders over his hands, he lowers his body and then lifts it up, and returns to the starting position. Contrary to the Thai boxing gym where there are collective lessons, each bodybuilder or small group of bodybuilders trains alone without a coach, which fundamentally changes the content and the form of the session. As a result, there are much less interactions between bodybuilders than between boxers and there is no (collective) discourse, which makes ethnography of it more complicated than in the case of Thai boxing.

Inside the gymnasium where is located the Thai boxing gym, at their arrival all the boxers greet each other, the coaches require that from them, and if they do not do it and one of the coaches sees it, he will make a remark about it and often talks the boxer into shaking other boxers’ hand. While they wait for the locker rooms to become available, the boxers stand very quietly (teenagers are less quiet), they listen to i-pods/mp3, chat, greet other

people they know who walk by. There are about sixty boxers on average during each session and a couple of girls. The majority is made of teenagers and young adults and very few adults who are above thirty-five. Some youths from the neighborhood are here to watch, to see if they will take membership or because they know a boxer. One of them says about volleyball: “*volleyball? It’s a sport for children!*” after somebody who practices volleyball came down for the gymnasium above to ask the keeper for the keys.

One thing is certain, if there is something martial about Thai boxing at the Derek, it is the intensity of the training through a rigorous and Spartan discipline. The beginning of the session is very physical and can be exhausting in itself. Boxers warm up by running around the gym or by jumping the rope, and then follow up with different exercises such as flexing, push-ups, punching while running, lifting knees quickly while standing up and screaming “*hey!*” or “*pop!*” A champion, with the necessary authority, leads those who jump the rope by giving the rhythm, accelerating or slowing down. Aimé uses his loud voice to make himself heard by every boxer and to impose discipline and a sustained rhythm that gives to the group of boxers the appearance of a regiment. Discipline is very important and coaches put an emphasis on it. Rules must be respected at the risk of being called to order or even punished. Always greeting everybody when boxers arrive. Coaches insist on being polite even with people who are not necessarily boxers. Not talk during the session. Aimé separates four young adults because they talk too much and at the same time he shows all the boxers how to do an exercise on each boxer that was talking, kicking them in the abs as if the demonstration was actually a public punishment as well. During a very intense warm up led by a champion who asks boxers for “explosive power,” Aimé asks boxers who are apparently discussing “*What! You can talk?*” implying that they should be too tired or out of breath to be able to talk to each other and meaning also that they are not working hard enough. Those who do not have their membership card, which means having paid €122, bringing a medical certificate,

and a picture) are not authorized to train, although some do because the coaches do not strictly control systematically. A youth tries to negotiate with Aimé saying that he will have the medical certificate next week. “Respect” is important. Many boxers greet Sylvain the way the Thai do, hands joined and head bowed as a sign of respect. Coaches say that “*here it’s the family.*”

The warm up continues with shadow boxing during which boxers simulate a fight against an imaginary adversary, allowing them to better their pugilistic techniques, to put themselves in condition progressively. Then typically, one coach calls a boxer in order to show how to make an exercise. The boxers then have to do the exercise in pairs. After that, the coaches ask the boxers to take their protections and to put them on in order to do about five rounds of “free fighting,” that is to say settled fight but without a real referee if not the boxers themselves or the coaches that walk around, giving advice or calling boxers to order. A beginner who gets ahead of himself and who is uncoordinated confronts another beginner and tries to throw him an elbow, he does not hit him but the technique is very bad and it can be dangerous. Abdel calls him to order “*Hey, no, not the elbows, what’s wrong with you?*” the boxer is offended, stops, and lowers his head.

Often, more experienced boxers who are about a dozen per session train in another part of the gym. Other boxers spar on the ring after Alain had called them. Experienced boxers do not wait for being called, they chose a boxer and go to the ring to spar. The power of the blows is more important in the ring than during “free fighting,” and it is closer to real fighting conditions. A champion and a less experienced boxer spar in the ring, and a spectator says: “*Waow! He’s getting his ass kicked!*” Between rounds, oftentimes boxers would spit in a garbage can recovered with a plastic to this effect. It very hot and humid in the gym even in the winter, windows are misted up, boxers sweat so much that floor mats become wet and

slippery and need to be wiped. Former champions may give a hand, advise and coach younger boxers, hold *paos* (foam shields to absorb kicks and punches), spar.

Thai boxing sessions necessarily end with muscular strengthening, mainly push-ups, abs and sometimes stretching. Finally, there is the ritual of gathering at the end of the session during which boxers have to make four lines with girls, when there are some, in front. It is an opportune moment to get the boxers' attention and to communicate all kinds of messages, ideas, or announcements. This ritual closes by the collective greeting initiate by one of the coaches "*Derek Boxing heuch!*" both hands joined on the chest, slightly bowing the head the way the Thai do to show respect and deference, boxers repeat in unison "*Heuch!*" with the same gesture. This officially marks the end of the session. Boxers progressively go to the locker rooms in order to shower and change clothes. Some hang out and chat with other boxers or the coaches or with people they know in the public.

Despite the rigorous discipline, there is a certain conviviality: people know each other, they live in the city, in the same neighborhood, the same housing project. At the end of the session, after the shower, boxers and coaches share drinks and cookies. Sylvain puts an emphasis on conviviality and says laughing: "*Even if coke and cookies are not very healthy!*"

#### **4) Early Socialization**

Darrell, from the Starrett Boxing Gym in East New York, started boxing when he was fourteen in Brownsville few blocks from where he was living. His agonistic skills developed in street fights helped him when he started boxing as much as they pushed him towards practicing:

*There was a little gym down in the projects, you know in the basement in the Howard Houses projects right off Pitkin Avenue you know, a very small gym.*

*Question: So how did you know about the gym?*

*Darrell: Well, when we was kids we was doin' a lot of fighting in the street you know, we grew up fighting in the street you know and we used to like boxers, so we would go to the store to buy boxing gloves and go in the backyard and beat each other up, you know, trying to be like the fighters we saw on TV. So after a while, we heard about the Golden Gloves, it's a tournament in New York, we saw in daily newspapers, we saw guys in the ring fighting you know for real, you know what I'm saying. Where did you go to learn to to be able to do that? And we found out about the gym, and the gym is not too far from where we live, down in the projects, let's go and check it out! So me and a couple of friends we go down there and try to find the gym and we found out PAL, it's like Police Athletic League, and they had a gym in the basement. Other friends come and look at the basement to see the guys doing their boxing, they say 'waow! Those guys are the tough, man!' and they're boxers. We're gonna beat these guys up when we get in there, so I come back to join the gym, my friend, he got scared, he wouldn't come [laughs], you know, so I was by myself you know. So I get in the ring, first day I come, join the gym, meet the trainer, and he put me in the ring for the first day! I'm a good street fighter so I feel like I'm gonna beat the guy you know, I'm gonna get him right? So I get in there and I swing at the guy and the guy move away, in the street they don't do that! The guy move away and I swing at him and he move away again and he hit me boom! Wait a minute! I swing again and he move away and he hit me again boom! Wait a minute! [Laughs] this is not the way a street fight goes you know. So the guy beat me up and then the coach hold it, put me with another guy that is easy to hit. So by the time he put the*

*second guy I was tired from the first guy and the second guy beat me up! [Laughs] So I was like forget about it, maybe I can't be a fighter. So I come out of the ring and the guy says 'don't worry kid, you got a lot of heart, you got a lot of heart' a lot of heart? What that mean? Take a good beat? I didn't know what it meant, so he says 'don't forget to come back', I thought he would tell me 'okay go home you can't fight' you know what I mean, but he saw that, you know, I didn't quit, so as he saw that I didn't quit, that meant something. I went home and I was all beat up and I wasn't thinking about going back no more, man maybe I can only fight on the street! Can you fight these guys? They learn... they got a different style you know, so I said 'I wanna learn how...' so my grandma she put my favorite plate of food in front of me and I'm so beat up I can't eat, so she's 'you can't even eat your favorite...!' [Laughs], she say 'if you doin' this for me, you don't have to do it you know' so I say 'no, no I got to learn how to fight like those guys!'. So next day I got my bag, I went back down again, they beat me up again, but I stayed in there you know, and the guy won't put me in the ring and start teaching me how to fight you know, they start teaching me how to fight, and once I learned how to fight and things changed, I started to beat them guys now and now is my turn, I was beating them up, I got good you know. That's how I started off you know. Then you learn, it's a learning process, you don't jump in right away and be good, and I thought maybe I was no good, cause I thought maybe you go in there the first and beat everybody, that's the way it works, but it don't work like that. I got to be real good but I had to pay my dues in the gym, that's where I got beat up, but by the time of the fight, I didn't get beat up, cause I learned you know. First time, you know, you get in there you have to learn, the guys are dancing around, they jabbin', and in the street you just come in and you swing and the guy stays there and you know and it's easy. But these guys are moving, you got to learn all that and it takes a couple of years before you really get to know what you're doin' you know. So I got good, real good by just staying in the gym all the time you know, I came everyday,*

*even though I didn't think I was any good, I say I got to learn you know, and the other guys they encourage 'you gonna learn, don't worry' the guys that were more advanced than me, you know, so they kept encouraging me and I was gonna learn as if they would do the same thing so knowing that, I stuck with it you know.*

Omar has started Thai boxing thanks to a friend of his who has practiced it at the Derek Boxing. His words reveal an attraction for the manly aspect of Thai boxing. He says he has had watched boxing fights on TV with his father which shows that he has been exposed to boxing at an early age, has internalized a disposition for masculine social games, and has therefore developed a taste for boxing. Yet he had to confront the reticence of his mother who had preconceived ideas about this sport and so did him:

*I've always wanted to do combat sports, since I was little, but my mother didn't want to, she was afraid, she was telling me 'your face is gonna be injured'. I did swimming, and I did basketball to a level not too bad since I've been offered to go and play in the US but my mother didn't want to. I was tall but I was in the position of the playmaker in fact, it is supposedly for less tall players. My mother didn't want me to do combat sports because she was scared for me but then after a while, I was fed up with basketball and I talked with some friends, I'd like to do boxing, but I had some apprehension to go by myself to boxing gym. I have a buddy who brought me one day to the annex of the Stade de France in Saint Denis and I started to do kickboxing there. My buddy Slimane kept telling me 'I'm gonna bring you to my gym and you'll see you'll dig it'. And one day he brought me to the Derek before it burnt, the first gymnasium, five or six years ago, it's been a while, I arrived and the first I digged the atmosphere. I trained the first day. People were very cool, there were people I already knew and there was some music, I liked the spirit and all, I was doing some exercises and*

*there were some older boxers when they saw me doing mistakes and they were coming to see me telling me 'no you have to do like this, like that...' and I came back, and since then I've never dropped and stayed at the Derek. I've always wanted to do boxing.*

*Question: But precisely how do you explain that you've always wanted to do boxing?*

*Omar: I don't know, I thought it was men's stuff. I watched fights on TV with my father, Tyson and all that, at that time honestly I really liked it, Felix Trinidad, I liked, I digged boxing. And in general, when I got into a fight outside, I often used my legs so I was saying to myself if one day I have to do a combat sport, it has to be with the legs as well, I don't want to do only fists. So Thai boxing, this is true, I felt like it, but at the beginning I found this sport a little too violent in fact. The image I had is that it was a violent sport, it was tough for joints. And finally when I went to the training session I saw how it was and I realized that it was actually not that violent. Last year I got injured, I broke my Achilles tendon, I did that playing soccer. I've been boxing for years, and I've had little injuries but nothing comparable. Doing boxing, I've never had serious injuries, I've had little injuries, small bruises, but that's normal, it's not classical dance either. I've always like it being younger, whether judo or karate, stuffs like that, my mother didn't want at that time so as soon as I was able to make my own decisions, was older, I started to practice, I got into it. And she realized that I didn't have the face that injured while practicing. She told me, not long ago, 'yeah finally, maybe that at the time if I had known...' but actually that's also the image people have of things, they have prejudices about a lot of things, so they imagine a lot of things. Generally, people say to themselves 'boxers have a flattened nose, they have bruises' and all so she was afraid of that. I liked this virility in the sport.*

Omar's words on the perception that others have about Thai boxing and that he himself had before illustrate the struggle of social groups for the imposition of legitimate categories. These forms of classification determine a symbolic social order especially when they are applied to ritual or cultural practices. In other words, Omar struggles, more or less consciously, against the common sense and certain social groups that see Thai boxing as a violent sport whereas he does not see it as such violent.

Djamel, a boxer in his 30's, explains how he started Thai boxing influenced by cinema but also by his father who was himself a boxer, and whom he opposes to Sylvain, the head coach and president of Derek boxing, and that makes him an inverted father figure, in his conception of pugilistic art:

*My father put me to boxing [not Thai boxing but international style] in 1986. My father was himself a boxer, he started in Morocco, and he wanted to make me a "Djamel" Balboa. I started boxing when I was 11. He would kick my ass if my t-shirt was not full of sweat, because it meant that I hadn't trained. My father had an ancestral vision of boxing that consists in suffering and in proving you're strong and violent. He is the opposite of Sylvain in his vision of boxing. I didn't like it [Thai boxing] at the beginning. I was practicing educational boxing in a gym in Saint-Ouen [another working-class banlieue in the northern outskirt of Paris], the Red Star Olympique Audonien. During the 1989 summer, I was on vacation in Morocco. I was bored and one day I decided to go to the movie to see Bloodsport. I had heard of this movie in junior high school and I wanted to see it. I walked into the room, and it hit me. In the movie, the one who impressed me the most was the character Paco, he was practicing Thai boxing. At the end of holidays, when I came back to France, I had only one thing in my mind: to practice Thai boxing like Paco!*

One strong reason why a lot of youths from the *banlieues* end up in Thai boxing gym is that it is a way to be part of a group of peers from the projects. They share the same taste for physical confrontation, the same language, the same rituals, or in one word, the same habitus. Thai boxing is also a way oneself to others, one's fighting skills, courage, agility, or virility. Djamel liked the sense of belonging Thai boxing gave him:

*On a Monday, I went to the gym at the Courtille [a housing project in Saint-Denis, a neighboring banlieue], I tried out and I digged it. The first session was very hard, because the coach made work clinch with the national champion, he was nuts and threw me without thinking. I walked out just thinking to throw him too. I started to love this sport, and what I liked about it is that most guys were projects guys. They were known because of their reputation, and the gym was a way to confront them. It was a group, a family. In retrospect, I have the sentiment that it was a gang, and that to be accepted one had to have something special. I had one thing, my fists. I've sparred with the best boxers [who practice international style boxing].*

The gym being an institution in the city of La Courneuve, recruitment is based on its reputation. Localized within a municipal sports facilities used by schools and the municipal sports school, the young inhabitants of La Courneuve are in contact with Thai boxing, the gym, the ring, punching bags, boxers, coaches very early and quite often. They become familiar with the practice and some of its folklore, and socialize within some of its practices, and internalize it as being part of their everyday lifestyle. Stéphane, a 22 years old boxer who grew up in the neighborhood of the gym and who goes to business school explains how he started Thai boxing.

*I discovered this sport when I was in elementary school. At that time, we practiced gymnastics, judo, rolls in the Derek's room. I live and grew up in the neighborhood. When we arrived in the room with school, and at that time we can smell a very particular odor in the room. Tatamis, punching bags, at that time they were filled with sand, and the ring in the back of the room. Knee-high to a grasshopper, we dugged it! Then we saw all those movies that changed our lives: Kickboxer, The Quest... I felt like practicing boxing, and I often stopped by to watch training sessions, but I had to wait reaching my majority to join because my parents were against it. My parents [they are immigrants from Laos] know this sport, they were lucky enough to have parents who owned a store and therefore who had a TV set. At that time, there was only one channel and it was in Thai, given that TV shows in Laos did not exist. So they know it's a tough sport, and especially to know that their child is going to receive blows, they don't like it, they still give me a lecture when I come home with bumps. I had forgotten about boxing, but when I went to high school, some of my mates knew the club by its reputation, and it reminded me old memories, the fact that I've always wanted to box for the Derek. So I took my membership. I live five minutes away from the gym, its reputation, the champions, and people who were scared of boxing against somebody from the Derek. And I've always wanted to box for the Derek.*

At the Derek, the recruitment of apprentice boxers is made on the basis of the club's symbolic capital ("reputation"), considered as one of the best on a national level and even internationally since twenty years. This symbolic capital, as well as its effective success, has to do with the fact that it is situated at the heart of the infamous housing project of the *Quatre Mille* (four thousands) and close to another housing project the *Francs-Moisins* in Saint-Denis, and Aubervilliers, Stains. This geographic position at the crossroads of several

working-class *banlieues* in Saint-Seine-Denis makes available for the gym a breeding ground for boxers and shrouds the gym and its boxers with a sulfurous aura. “*Nak muays*” (Thai-boxers in Thai) from the Derek have always dragged with them not only the club’s reputation, but also the reputation of the 4000, the two being linked. There is a feeling of collective belonging comparable to the one of belonging to a gang or a “*bande*,” or to an informal sport group: “*It’s like a family*” like to repeat boxers and coaches, “*When you took your membership, I’ve already told you, you become a member of the Derek’s family*” says Aimé during a reception organized just after the last training session before New Year’s Eve and the Christmas holidays. Rafik, a 30 year-old boxer, who lives in La Courneuve, was champion of France, testifies to this sentiment close to filial love:

*I’ve been in the club for seventeen years. In my career I’ve had ups and downs, when I had downs some people from other clubs approached me, I never wanted to go there, I’ve always remained faithful to the Derek, I will always stay faithful to the Derek, even if I have, disagreement between individuals can always happen, because for me there really is this notion of being a family, and there is a lot of other boxers who come down here to train for this reason and who like the Derek, and there is a lot of people who trained in other clubs and who came over here to experience this again. We don’t function as a factory, we put an emphasis on human relationships in the learning process and I can guarantee you, for having trained in other gyms, that you don’t find it everywhere and that’s a shame.*

This symbolic capital’s value is twofold: Derek’s boxers are at the same time feared and respected. The fear that Mike Tyson could stir up in his adversaries even before the actual fight can contribute to explain his victories and especially those by way of K.O. his adversaries often were petrified knowing that they were going to fight Tyson. Conversely,

boxers from other clubs are eager to defeat a boxer from the Derek who is the carrier of the history and the reputation of club that he has, so to speak, to honor. In a way the rival does box a boxer of course, but he also boxes this history and this reputation.

### **5) Getting Involved in Bodily Practices**

The more the material or symbolic profits, immediate or differed, associated with the presentation of the self are important, the more members of different social classes are likely to invest social energy in different forms (time, money, efforts, attention, care, privation, suffering, etc.) (Bourdieu, 1979: 225-227). The practice of bodybuilding or Thai boxing can provide the well-trained and well-developed social agent with the possibility of converting the acquired bodily capital into economic capital in the market of physical labor. Bodybuilders or Thai-boxers from the lower classes can become personal trainers, professional bodybuilders or boxers, night-club bouncers, bodyguards, security agent, work for “bill collecting,” models, etc. because they “look the part” and have the skills and also because the more one goes up the social ladder, the less there is agents inclined to do jobs that said to be physical, hard, or even dangerous.

When he stopped professional competition, Darrell worked as a bouncer. His words show that the boxer gains a certain amount of symbolic capital because of his practice, or in other words he is recognized:

*I do work as a security, as a bouncer in a club you know what I mean because of the fightin' even though I'm not a big guy they know I can fight so they say 'wait a minute he's not that big but...' so you show the guys that you know big don't mean anything when I hit you, you know what I mean, so when they know that they give you the respect and it's okay*

*they let me work. Sometime I have to hurt somebody to show 'em you know cause they don't believe like 'ah you're a little guy somebody's gonna knock you down!' you got big guys, okay I take the biggest guy and I hit him and he 'awrgh!' you can't take my punch man! [Laughs] Now they see and they 'okay, I ain't messin' with you no more' you always have to prove yourself that you're a fighter, it's like fightin', you always have to prove yourself, there's not a time you can have it off night, you can't be like a basketball team or football team and have it off night where you don't like that good cause if you lose once and you look bad once then that can be the end of it you know what I mean. So you always have to be on top of the game. You always have to prove yourself, the pressure is on you all the time to win. If you winnin' you keep winnin', you know what I mean, and it's a lotta pressure that you go through mentally and you try to keep winning. When you keep winnin' you always thinkin' about what happen the day gonna come when I lose, what that's gonna be like? Will I be able to accept that, you know? Cause you never know. [...] Fights are never the same, it's always a different experience, and it's excitement it keeps your adrenaline up and it's like you feel alive, you really feel more alive than anything I can imagine you know, you feel more alive than anything I can imagine and people treat you differently, it feels like you're a movie star, that's how they treat you, they treat you like you're a big movie star, they come and they want to touch you and they want your autograph you know what I mean, and they don't even know you [laughs] and it's like a weird experience but I wouldn't trade it for anything. I'll do it all over again if I could.*

It is therefore necessary to take into account the social costs that a practice may imply. Moreover, the bodybuilder or the Thai-boxer has, so to speak, a return on investment in the matrimonial market, because like Stéphane says: *“Thai boxing is also useful to me when I go to the beach, girls really like the body type of boxers.”* Charles who practices

bodybuilding thinks that women like muscled men and says that he, himself, has experienced that:

*Charles: They like men with muscles.*

*Question: Have you noticed it yourself?*

*Charles: Yeah yeah! You know they're like [his eyes are wide-open] 'waow! Look at him!'.*

In developing his body, he is more likely to find a girlfriend who would be attracted, seduced, and reassured by a protective and imposing body. Like a peacock parading and spreading its feathers in order to at the same time seduce the female and impress male rivals, the bodybuilder or the Thai-boxer displays his muscles – his trained body – as a seducing and intimidating capital.

Although more than 80% of French says that they make sport at least once a year, the access to sports is unequally distributed across social class, and gender. It is among the lower classes that sport is the least practiced, a fortiori girls. Sport clubs have disappeared from relegated urban areas where remain associations and municipal facilities. It is important to insist on the fact that a same sport can be practiced for different reasons according to the social category considered, and even to the social agent considered, and based on the relationship to the body associated with each fraction of social class. The fact that a bodily practice intensifies and concerns (almost) all the categories of the social space is predetermined by the occultation of the variations of its usages and the balance of power they imply (Defrance, 1976: 29, 31). The most marginalized fractions (drug users, homeless,

unemployed, etc.) are more likely not to make sport. The semi-skilled workers are more likely to make more sport than unskilled and temporary workers in the service economy. (Competitive) Bodybuilding often is practiced by young working-class males with a moderate education (Klein, 1993: 113). However, the very notion of bodybuilding actually conceals the diverse ways of practice (in large hip-hop clothes with a “doo-rag” on in Brownsville, or with shorts and a tight t-shirt listening to an i-pod in a Manhattan Upper East Side gym). The way Thai boxing is practiced in the lower classes is more likely to be more engaged, blows would be stronger, competition encouraged, whereas in a middle-class gym the emphasis will be put on aestheticism, the beauty of the gesture, blows will be lighter, an hygienist and more feminine use of the practice. As opposed to members of the middle class for whom bodybuilding and Thai boxing are mainly hygienist practices that are associated with a medicalization and therefore a rationalization of discourses and practices, that produce a healthy body and mind, members of the working class expect from those some practices a useful and strong body. In the US, although the hypermasculine culture of muscles is associated with the proletariat, the renewed interest for the culture of the body for middle and upper classes took place in the 1980s, and it is women who have paved the way for the relatively “tolerant” environment of California (*Ibid.*, 186). Practiced by members of the middle class who care about their body as a healthy body and who have the rational and medicalized knowledge of the (often delayed) beneficial effects for health (fight against aging, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, etc.), or for appearance (a fatless body, a flat belly, nice curves, slim-waisted, firmer and higher breasts, etc.), especially women, bodybuilding and Thai boxing seem to be ascetic sports associated with bodily rigor (dietetics) as well as spiritual (temperance). These bodily practices are nevertheless adjusted to the *work ethic* and therefore cut across social class as ascetic practices, vocations in the Weberian sense, for which social agents from different classes are ready, at different levels according to their

dispositions, to invest social energy and to make sacrifices that will later be converted into delayed profits. The superior fractions of the bourgeoisie are very likely to feel for the pursuit of strength, muscles or pugilistic labor a kind of “transcendental disdain” (Marx, 1996: 198) and would favor hygienism and aestheticism, whereas the lower classes are more likely to value strength and utility. The keen interest or the passion for bodybuilding or Thai boxing such as it can be expressed by those who practice them is the exalted translation of the internalization of the necessity for the social group to reproduce itself, in particular through bodily practices.

Although the way bodybuilding and Thai boxing are practiced in the middle class is more individualist than in the lower classes, they profoundly remain *social* practices as they are not the result of a free choice based on individual criteria, but the product of *collective* needs, sensations, representations, beliefs, and classifications. Within the middle and upper class, the search for isolation has to do with the ascetic and hygienist function that tries to exclude any undesirable social contact and competition, rivalry or direct confrontation that is judged vulgar according to the class ethic. Members of the lower classes are more likely to confront others, from the same gym or elsewhere, often train collectively where there is motivation, stimulation, and emulation.

*A bodybuilder who is assisting another one at the bent press helping him by slightly lifting the bar with his fingers during the last repetitions that have become hard screams to his gym mate in order to motivate him: “ok one more, one more, come on!” Thai boxing lessons being collective, motivation and encouragements are mostly collective and one would hear a coach and a champion screaming to all the members “leo, leo!” which means “come on” or “hurry up” in Thai. When two boxers for instance work together on a punching bag, they would encourage each other in order to give the best out of them.*

They also value competition that can be euphemized as well as amplified in a ritualized, routinized, stereotyped, and staged mode of “privileged familiarity,” (Mauss, 1969) joking, mockery or insult (“sounding”) – neutralized by establishing a symbolic distance with challenge or confrontation which testifies to the agonistic aspect of social relations in a context where one must always save face.

## 6) The Question of Thai Boxing as a Violent Practice

Asked about the representation of Thai boxing as a “violent sport” for “thugs,”<sup>4</sup> bringing a counter viewpoint to the dominant representation of his sport and also pointing out its euphemization, Djamel answers:

*It's a tough sport but not violent. And when I say tough, it's because you have to have character, spirits. If you don't have rage, if you don't try hard, you won't last because boxing is like life, it can be easy or hard depending on your opponents, your physical condition. And it's in this way it's tough. In the 1980s, we can say it was violent. I was reading Thai boxing magazines, I remember a fight between Somsong and Prestia<sup>5</sup>. There was a lot of blood because one of the boxers had his leg opened. The old school got its hand dirty, guys boxed with their guts, not with technique. Nowadays, if you look at guys like Grégory Choplin [world champion and member of the Derek], Karim Saada or Mehdi Zatout, they are*

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<sup>4</sup> “*Racailles*” derogatory term in French that means “scum” and often associated with this practice (“*un sport de racailles*”) and the youths from the *banlieues*.

<sup>5</sup> This fight belongs to the myth building of Thai boxing in France and has been accepted as one of the most violent Thai boxing fights that ever took place in France. Somsong, a boxer from Thailand, got his leg cut on about 10 inches long and was bleeding. He was put a large bandage but continued to fight. Prestia is said to have been a courageous opponent against a Somsong too strong. Now, Prestia has become an actor, and plays in large audience movies.

*technicians. Some specialists say they don't have a fighting spirit, I think they refer to the intensity of their fights.*

The setting of Thai boxing in France can be partly explained by its sportization and its institutionalization that have started at the end of the nineteenth century and that have to do with the desire for international recognition of Thai nation. As Gaudin asserts, “The history of codified fights is shaped by the drawing power of the Western sport model, characterized by an evaluation of excellence based on objective and/or quantifiable criteria, during competitions governed by written and universal rules applied by a body of referees entitled by institutions such as federations” (2009: 5). Contemporary rules were born about half a century ago based on the model of international style boxing. Thai boxing is mostly considered in France as a combat sport, not really a martial art. But isn't tennis a combat sport as well, the main difference being that “violence” is more euphemized and racket serves as a mediation for it? The time slots given by the municipalities to Thai boxing clubs often are at the end of the day, as if the practice were relegated at the bottom of sport activities hierarchy, and symbolically as if Thai boxing should be practiced at night, a time period traditionally represented as favorable for secretive and deviant activities. This perception, socially constituted, is probably due to the fact that one of the effects of the importation of Thai boxing to France has been the despiritualization, at least partial, of the traditional form as it is practiced in Thailand. “Aversion for life styles that are different, writes Bourdieu, is without doubt one of the stronger barriers between classes” (1979: 60). Thai boxing, which does not belong to the legitimate style of life, like bodybuilding, and which is part of a certain life style of youths from the working-class *banlieues* – the “street culture” – would be a “violent sport,” a “primeval passion” (Choron-Baix, 1995: 28) that brings back to animality, nature – and therefore to anti-culture – and that may give rise to a visceral disgust for the

common sense and the profane – or the agent in position of cultural domination and holder of the legitimate taste – mostly because blows are thrown without restraint and really land on the body (contrary to the so-called practice of “touching” in other combat sports) and that there is no mediation with an instrument like in other martial arts or sports (the kimono in judo, the foil in fencing that allows to do “courteous attack”) and because Thai boxing would call for dispositions that do not necessarily imply symbolic profits within the educational field, such as the emphasis on physical strength, courage, etc., and that therefore bring the profane to regress culturally, to bring back his or her taste to primal pleasures, whereas Thai boxing draws on a lot of dispositions that common to the educational field like work ethic, concentration, autonomy, tenacity, discipline, self-control, etc. The disgust for this bodily practice judged violent and vulgar is used to delegitimize the life style of youths from the working-class *banlieues* and consequently to culturally and socially legitimize in recording the taste of those who condemn it as refined because they managed to dominate their “nature” and as the only style worth living. The sentence that makes Thai boxing a “thugs” or “violent” sport is not only erroneous, but also stigmatizing in that it constitutes an essentialization, the youths being reduced to their supposedly inherent violent nature again. Thai boxing is a sport that involves physical contact and specific injuries. It is also true that in working-class *banlieues*, it often is practiced by youths who have a certain available energy ready to be converted into pugilistic abilities. However, it seems that there is no more numerous or serious injuries than in other martial arts supposedly less violent (Gartland *et al.*, 2001), even less serious than in sports such as soccer or rugby. Thai boxing, like regular boxing, is considered as violent because hitting one’s opponent not only is authorized but it is the basis of the practice and it is foundation. But for the initiate, if there is violence, it is controlled through hardly learned and bodily acquired techniques. This emotional and somatic control is at the basis of bodily practice. There is an implicit agreement between

boxers on the degree of violence of the blows they throw. If this agreement is broken, there can be an escalation in the intensity and power of the blows, or the coach for instance would have perceived it and regulate it. Frequently, when a settled fight does not go well, that is to say when a boxer frankly breaks the implicit agreement on the level of power of blows between boxers, it is when a boxer from an outside gym comes to the Derek Boxing and that he has not internalized the implicit agreement about the violence of the blows that takes place in the Derek. Omar testifies:

*It is like family, everybody, the coaches, I think we have good coaches here who are really nice and really cool and approachable on top of it. We can talk about nothing and everything, on that there is no problem with them. And you know even guys at the gym whether those who box like Greg or Raouf, and others, and who box at the gym frankly there is no problem. Those guys are really cool and you can easily talk wit them.*

*Question: No tension or bad relationships with another boxer?*

*Omar: In general the bad relationships that could have occurred in the gym, it's more when guys came from outside to train here and you would have the impression that there was often some who wanted to prove that they were tough guys and when you spar with them you say 'all right easy' we're not here to... we spar easy, and then you see those guys hit you hard, once, twice, but after you can hit hard too. It's true that sometimes things turned out bad at the gym.*

*Question: With you or others?*

*Omar: No, with others, not me especially. I've already sparred with guys like that where me too I hit them hard but each time there was a coach who saw it and who was saying 'yo guys take it easy, when you're doing is useless' and then you tell the guy 'it's been the fourth that I tell you easy, I can hit you hard too.' In general guys understand, but sometimes, not with me but with other guys, it turned out bad.*

*Question: They got into a fight or...?*

*Omar: Yeah some of them got into a fight, some of them left with a bloody mouth, some of them got hit hard, they wanted to hit hard and the other guy hit back and then after they are surprised. Yeah especially when the guy warns you once twice and you keep hitting hard, after we're men huh, some are more responsive than others. But in general it goes well, even when there are guys who come from other gyms and who spar, in general it goes very well.*

Paradoxically, the Thai-boxer spends more time forging his body and improving his pugilistic techniques than really fighting in the ring against another boxer. In a sense, the ring is the practical finality of Thai boxing, but in fact to get into the ring does not take up the majority of pugilistic time. Thai boxing, which is said to be “eight weapons boxing” (because of the use of fists, elbows, knees and legs) is more used as self-defense according to the discipline ideology, especially in Thailand where it related to Buddhist values of detachment and non-violence through which one struggles against the “illusion of the self and desire.” It therefore is a practice that is used *against* violence, to channel it, allowing it to be expressed by giving it a meaning within a specific and codified frame. During training sessions, coaches keep repeating Thai-boxers not to hit their opponent too hard, to work out technically and *to*

*control* their gestures. Similarly the execution of Thai boxing techniques is often based on the postulate that one is hit first, and then one has to block or dodge and eventually respond to the attack. One of the goals of the countless training sessions during which diverse techniques are tirelessly repeated is to master those techniques and to be able to provide an appropriate and immediate somatic response to an attack. Thai boxing is everything but “street fighting,” as it is commonly referred to, and the beginners who have not yet understood it are quickly called to order. It is not fight fire with fire, violence with violence to use one’s opponent energy or weight to execute an action. While societies are supposed to be more and more “civilized” in Elias’s sense of the term, the control of violence being the norm, Thai-boxers are perceived as transgressors although their ordinary pugilistic practice does not stop producing self-control and follows a historical process of euphemization.

Paradoxically, to hit one another creates ties so to speak. The pugilistic confrontation is a kind of creative destruction that allows blows to be given and fabricates emotional relations between boxers. Not only there are rules that organize boxers’ confrontation, but they also have *to show* that they respect their opponent by little signs of attentions if not affection (a tap on the shoulder or the glove, a kind word of excuse, a specific body language...). In Thailand this is more visible and it is very easy to see a boxer kneeling down at his opponent’s or the referee’s feet in order to show respect. To repeat, in France boxers would never kneel but rather hit each other’s gloves, hug each other, exchange kind words or smiles and so on. This sign of affection or respect serves to show that the confrontation is not “for real,” that it is not a real fight but a sport or a game. The effects of this function of “respect” are the creation or reinforcement of social ties between boxers.

Marital arts’ purpose is less and less to kill – at least literally, we can say that they may kill symbolically – but their aim is rather self-defense with an emphasis on the their efficiency which often is a major aspect that determines the involvement in the practice. For

some boxers, Thai boxing has first of all allowed them to gain confidence. Djamel calls this self-confidence “mental”:

*Yes, I am self-confident, but it's a mental confidence not physical. There are real self-defense techniques such as krav maga, ju-jitsu that target the vitals or can lead to strangulation and so on. Thai boxing is a form of self-fulfillment that gives you mental confidence.*

Stéphane says that Thai boxing has made him “more self-confident” as well: “*Yes, we know that we have something special that can really hurt one's opponent.*” Members of the middle and upper class who practice Thai boxing are more likely to look for aestheticism and hygienism, whereas members of the lower class are more likely to look for efficiency. The euphemization of combat sports, in particular through the imposition of the Marquess of Queensberry rules in 1867 for regular boxing, and 1945 for Thai-boxing specifically) did not necessarily annihilate the search for efficiency. In Thailand, Thai-boxers are from rural origin and a professional career in Bangkok increases their chance for social mobility. Even though there is no mechanical relationship between social origin and sport practice, we can still establish some correlations between the sport field and the social space (Suaud, 1989). In France, the popularity of Thai boxing among youths in working-class *banlieues* is for a great part due to the belief that Thai boxing is the most efficient and also very aesthetic. Stéphane has been attracted by this sport because of both aspects: “*It is very pleasant to watch Thai boxing and it is also a very efficient sport.*” The coach Aimé explains the success of the practice among youths in the *banlieues*:

*It's a complete sport. You can keep your opponent at a distance, if you're not good with your fists you still have the legs, and if you're not good with your legs you still have the knees, you have the elbows, clinching... In Thai boxing we know that we're gonna be hit, it's not dancing, after a fight you don't know how you're gonna walk out, this is true. In judo, I fight everyday if they want to, you don't get hit, you seize the other guy, you throw him. It's not the same.*

Omar says that he is attracted by both aspects of the practice:

*Honestly when you see some fights, the aesthetic aspect... when you say to yourself that a fight was good, it's necessarily the esthetic aspect at first sight that is obvious, and as far as efficiency is concerned, it's very efficient as well.*

Djamel declares that he was first attracted by efficiency at the moment of his conversion to the pugilistic rite, but that now he is more and more attracted by its aestheticism, probably because he is much older than when he started, he has a regular job and is established, and the younger one is, the more attracted by efficiency:

*At the beginning I was attracted by its efficiency. When I'm talking about efficiency I mean Thai boxing was not an accessible sport according to what people were saying. And it was a sport for toughs. Now, I'm more attracted by its aestheticism, I find it really nice to combine fists with legs and knees. It's a very pleasant sport when you know how to practice it.*

In order to be even more efficient, more and more boxers also practice not only Thai boxing because it is supposed to be the most efficient at distance, but also Brazilian ju-jitsu because it is said to be very efficient for close combat, and also bodybuilding. Thai boxing and Brazilian ju-jitsu would make a complementary and formidable arsenal of self-defense<sup>6</sup>. Paradoxically, in order to construct an institutional legitimacy, the Thai boxing federal authorities had to work towards euphemizing the discipline going in the opposite direction of what had done thus far the success of the practice, that is to say against this efficiency which one of the effects is the rejuvenation and feminization of members. It does not mean that we should neglect the attraction for the aestheticism of the practice as the interviews of boxers testify to it, since there is nothing better than a nice and efficient gesture.

Thai boxing was imported from Thailand in the middle of the 1970s by diverse agents who were mobile geographically, such as Patrick Brizon, Roger Paschy, or Jacques Mairesse, and who often practiced martial arts and karate in particular and who were not fully satisfied with their discipline that they ended up judging not efficient enough, and turned therefore to Thai boxing which was a good compromise between efficiency and aestheticism, fighting and more “spiritual” values than pure boxing (only with the fists). Since the beginning, similar practices viewed Thai boxing as a new rival and in an unfavorable light. More recently, the diffusion of Thai boxing has reached more youths in the working-class *banlieues* and especially more girls because Thai boxing has become a part of the street life style or urban culture (rap, hip hop, graffiti, agonistic practices, etc.). The successful professional careers of boxers living in the working-class *banlieues*, the TV broadcast (on TF1 the most watched French channel, or Canal+, or Eurosport) of Thai boxing fights, the success of videogames

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<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the construction of a “mixed martial fighter habitus,” see Spencer (2009). The success accounted by these new forms of combat rests upon the work that has been done before by Thai boxing, kick-boxing or full contact, and the commercialization of combat sports, the feminization of certain practices and the so-called “crisis” of masculinity that has resulted. They produce a “de-sportization” of fights organized first of all as spectacles breaking with the accepted norms of violence: cf. Bottenburg, Heilbron (2006) and also Downey (2007).

inspired by combat sports and martial arts (such as Street Fighter, Tekken, etc.), the multiplication of clubs especially in working-class neighborhoods have facilitated the desire to practice Thai boxing. Djamel says that he has been influenced by TV and as a youngster wanted to follow role models that were boxers and expresses a need for social recognition:

*It's a tough sport, and it's allows you to assert yourself, to exist also, "I box therefore I am," this is what I digged for at the beginning. Thai boxing arrived in banlieue, and we identified ourselves with this sport that is complete but also because it is a sport that allows you to be accepted and recognized. One of the great figures of this sport is of course Dida Diafat, the first boxer to sign a contract with Canal+, who was dressed up by Paco Rabanne. We all dreamed of becoming like him.*

The feminization of the practice can be interpreted by the fact that girls have internalized the same norms as their masculine peers. Nevertheless, one can wonder to what extent the doxic discourse about "insecurity" has effects on the number of new members who find in the practice a way to learn self-defense, and also if the mythology about collective or "gang rapes" has impacted or not some girls in the working-class *banlieues*, if they have internalized this rhetoric, and if it has pushed them to practice Thai boxing to be able to defend themselves or to prevent any rape attempt, or even to be equal to boys in the peer group<sup>7</sup>. From this perspective Thai boxing is ambivalent: it is objectively part of this dominant law-and-order logic while challenging the monopoly over the legitimate use of force by the State through the acquisition of these techniques of self-defense. As De Welde contends, women who practice self-defense because they fear criminality go through a triple

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<sup>7</sup> On the construction of a Muslim internal enemy threatening Hindu women in India inciting them to join a paramilitary camp in order to acquire self-defense techniques, see Sehgal (2007).

process: they “reframe victimization,” “liberate the self,” and “enable the body,” which is not without troubling their femininity (2003: 248).

The “democratization” of sport has to do the formation of a breeding ground for athletes in order to build an elite through physical and social differentiation. The more important the mass of beginners or average athletes is, the better the elite. The “mass” of athletes constitutes a sort of raw material meant for favoring the emergence of an elite created by a set of rites of passage, examinations and tests. The production of an elite is a matter of collective labor and cannot be done without the participation of the “basis.”<sup>8</sup> This implies not only an internal cohesion of the club but also a hierarchy, besides the official ranking made by the federation and competitions. The mass of athletes work for the champion, and the champion guides the mass, and is a role model. This emulation is at the basis of the pugilistic or bodybuilding practice. A model – an advanced bodybuilder or boxer – works out as an engine for the will to practice and make progress for the beginner or the average athlete. Whether they reach their model’s level or not, they now at least a materialization of what could be the outcome of a regular and consistent practice of their discipline.

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<sup>8</sup> For a critical analysis of the notion of “basis” in the agricultural domain, cf. Suaud (1984).

## Chapter 3: Sensual, Aesthetic and Therapeutic Practices

### 1) Sensualization of Everyday Life

Both gyms allow the construction of a specific relation to the body. They are places where the boxer or the bodybuilder makes a reflexive return on his own body, and also to attract the attention of others. Charles' impressive muscles bring him compliments:

*I was with a friend and I was wearing a jacket, you could not see anything. When I took it off, my friend was like 'what the fuck!' and then I brought it here, now he trains here.*

There is an individualistic aspect to both bodybuilding and Thai boxing, although it is more pronounced in the case of bodybuilding. In Thai boxing, even if a boxer can be alone punching and kicking the bag, or shadow-boxing, there still must be two boxers to spar or fight, and to apply the learned techniques and strategies. However, there is an interest to collectively practice more or less individualistic practices. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing cannot be understood if we do not insist on the intense pleasure they bring to those who practice. The gym is a space where a collective egoism is legitimized by the cult of the body. Bodybuilders, especially when they are professional, are more likely to be solitary individuals who do not really like collective practices. The weight room's atmosphere is not particularly friendly unless one already knows someone. "*You don't come to the weight room to make friends, you come to make gains*" (Fussell, 1991: 45). Whereas female bodybuilders are more likely to have a higher social status and to be more likely to "socialize," male bodybuilders, "gym rats," are not really here to make friends (Klein, 1986: 117-121). As "*the most pure form of bodybuilder*" (Klein, 1993: 58), the gym rat is there *to work*, to transform

his body. This does mean that there is no joke being made, or that nobody talks. Similarly, boxers are at the gym to box, but the atmosphere is friendlier, because there is more exchange in the fact of sparring with another boxer. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are self-improving practices. The presence of numerous mirrors in the weight room is both reflexive and revealing, in that they reflect the bodybuilder's image and uncover more buried things. The mirror is a form of objectivation of the body in that it modifies the perspective on the body. It allows the bodybuilder to make the exercise correctly and if need be to correct himself. It develops or lies on a critical disposition that favors autonomy. A bodybuilder can then decide to improve his body in one way or another. It also allows a constant surveillance of bodybuilders who are therefore judged, evaluated, compared, classified. The use of mirror generates adjustment strategies between observers and observed. The mirror is an almost necessary step to accept the metamorphosing body. I have frequently observed bodybuilders (trans)posing in front of the mirror, or even shadow boxing, or dancing.

Music is an important element in the sensualization of those practices. It is a source of inspiration, a driving force that gives rhythm to physical labor and makes it easier. Music is constantly present in both gyms, only in the room where the ring is in the case of the Thai boxing gym, and in both places it is hip-hop and soul/funk music. When music stops in the weight room, bodybuilders immediately complain: *a bodybuilder says to the female security agent of the center: "Mama, the music!" and his partner adds: "You know, music is da kick!"* When the cd player stops in the room with the ring in it, the coach Alain asks somebody to put it back if he is in the ring or he does it himself if he is in the ringside. By putting rhythm to the execution of exercises, music facilitates learning while providing a sensory framework to shared bodily experiences. Partly because it supplies an alternative temporality, music has the capacity to move in the double meaning of arousing emotions and putting in movement, by removing inhibitions. It makes easier the transition between two beings, the one before

and the one after the muscular and pugilistic metamorphosis. Sabri, 20 year-old Thai-boxer, declares that music can help him to motivate himself to go to the gym when he feels lazy:

*In the morning when I wake up I'm so tired I tell myself 'tonight I'm not going to the gym, I don't care' and then I'm like in the subway, I listen to music that kick-start your day and I think about training and I tell myself 'well I'm gonna go'. Even sometimes it's at the last minute, I'm home, I'm sleeping, and I look at the time, and I tell myself 'am I going or not?' I'm too lazy, but then I think of training and all, and I tell myself 'all right, I'm going'.*

In Thai boxing, one function of music is to euphemize combat. The ring is a privileged moment for boxers to express their pugilistic and strategic inventiveness that is more controlled in the other part of the gym where exercises are often done collectively. For that reason, boxers like this moment that music enlivens. For Omar, music adds an additional touch to the pleasure he feels about boxing, and it gives dynamism, pep and enthusiasm to training:

*We're a generation that likes a little funk music. In general, I know that when I was in high school, I liked working in music, when I take a shower I put music on, it's pleasant, you have some background music, and it's lively, I like it. It gives some spirit.*

*AO: I was picturing the ring without music, it'd be weird, because we're used to it, it'd be a little...*

*Omar: It'd be really serious, whereas now it's more relaxed but not really relaxed either because when you get punched, you really feel that there's something, but it gives some charm, I like it.*

Because it authorizes him to surpass himself, music allows the boxer or bodybuilder to get close to an ecstatic or even orgiastic state that often is necessary to accomplish extraordinary tasks such as combat. During the collective warm-up in the Thai boxing gym, the trainer can give a rhythm not only with his gestures but also with screams that punctuate gestures (“*hop!*” or “*hey!*” for instance), and the boxer has to adjust himself to the rhythm. When they throw a kick or a punch, boxers usually make similar onomatopoeias. When bodybuilders lift heavy weights, they usually groan.

Most bodybuilders in the gym wear sleeveless T-shirts that leave their muscles apparent. Boxers wear T-shirts and boxing shorts and girls, when they are there, wear leggings. Those practices are a way to make the body as an object of knowledge. Thus every boxer or bodybuilder applied on himself and on others a normalizing gaze, probably to a greater extent in among bodybuilders. Whereas in the bodybuilding gym, almost nobody takes a shower, probably because they are dilapidated and look dirty, in the Thai boxing gym (which is brand new, after having burnt), the shower is a privileged moment for boxers to observe, judge each other and to express opinions on their physical aspect:

*In the showers, the floor is full of water and the flow, the pressure is very low. I ask Rafik how is training currently, and he answers ‘so so, a little hard, mostly cause I have some weight to lose’ I say ‘well yeah’ and another boxer jumps in ‘me too I need to lose eleven pounds, I’m pissed! But for me it’s food!’ and I say ‘well food is at least fifty percent of the thing’ to what he replies ‘no, more’ and a third boxer tells the latter ‘but you’re fine like that’*

*and the other one answers 'you're crazy!' pinching his belly 'I need to stop kebabs and burgers'. Rafik complains about the showers, I tell him that there is no pressure, then he says 'there's nothing that works here anyway! Maybe they haven't even pay the water bills!' Then Zoubir comes to shower as well but there are too many boxers showering, he sees Rafik whom he knows very well and asks him 'what's going on?' Rafik tells him "the showers are not working" but Zoubir meant something else 'no, I'm talking about your abs, where are they' Rafik laughs and replies 'my abs? I don't have some anymore, they're on vacations, I'm going to look for them right now!'. After the shower, Zoubir asks Rafik, who is an experienced boxer and a champion, what kind of pain he felt when he dislocated his shoulder, because he feels something bothering him when he moves his shoulder. I tell him it might be a tendinitis, and he says 'maybe I don't know'. [Field note]*

“This absolute subordination of the self” (Oates, 2006: 146) admittedly is austere and ascetic and it is associated with the ideology of the self-made man – the delinquent counterpart being the entrepreneur of the informal economy – but it also is collective and social and embodied in practices, institutions and forms of knowledge that both bodybuilding and Thai boxing are. The bodybuilder is more likely to think that he has built himself alone, while the boxer is more likely to acknowledge the pedagogical of the trainer, and the interdependency among boxers, even if he claims a relative autonomy in the ring. There is a contradiction among bodybuilders between the ideology of self-reliance and the belief in the genetic determination of muscular growth (Klein, 1993: 146). Bodybuilders are classified according to biological categories such as “endomorph/ectomorph” that are themselves racialized in the US, Blacks being perceived as having “natural” facilities to get muscles, or “naturally” good at fighting if they are boxers. The fetishism of the fist or muscle feeds this belief. Some bodybuilders or boxers believe in the “natural” gift for their practice. Although

Rafik does not see himself as “gifted” for boxing, he still thinks that some boxers are “gifted”:

*For me, I didn't really have this gift. It's by dint of hard work, that's for sure. The results I've been able to obtain, it's by means of hard work and learning. But it's true that some boxers don't need to train a lot because they have the gift for... they have the ability to... I'm not gonna say the ability to learn quickly but they're gifted, it's... it looks like boxing is ingrained in them before they even start and it's innate for them. So there's many boxers, champions I know personally, whom I find really gifted.*

Omar shares this belief according to which some boxers are “gifted” and others are not:

*I think some people are gifted for boxing. I don't pretend... I don't think I'm more gifted than someone else, I don't think so, but I work hard, and I do that for myself, to stay in shape, I like to do sport, I like it, I enjoy it, and before anything, I'm cool about it.*

*Question: When you see champions, do you think they're gifted or that they have worked hard to reach this level?*

*Omar: Some of them have abilities, but I think even if they have abilities, they don't reach that point without hard work. Even if you have abilities you need to work hard. When you have abilities maybe you work a little less than others, but still you work hard.*

Gaspard, a 27 year-old boxer, believes that some boxers are gifted and others are not. He thinks he is personally gifted for Thai boxing and talks about the gift almost as a magical phenomenon:

*Some are good because they worked hard, some are good because they're gifted, they're gifted because, they progress faster, they don't need to work as much as others. I think, and I'm tellin' you this in all modesty, without pretentiousness, that I belong to this category because I don't run, I don't run a lot, although I'll need to start running because I have a fight comin', I need to prepare it and I don't wanna have regrets. But I've made progress, I've already coached a friend of mine who boxes, she has a fight you know, I coached her for a fight in a competition out of state and honestly I was pleasantly surprised by wel first her performance, and by the analysis I made. It was a feminine fight and all, no problem, and I think there's a vision of boxing that you need to have and it's not everybody who has it you know. It means that it's not because you know how to throw a nice middle-kick that you're gonna know what needs to be done and when, and I gave her relevant advice that was coming instantly, because I was in the fight, I was like, I was both coach and spectator, I was second coach you know, I was in the corner, I was giving advice and weirdly, well she lost because the opponent was at home, and we know what it is to box in front of your public and in front of the referees, you really need to dominate her, she happened to fight a girl who is ten feet taller her! A real tank that girl, but that's the way it is. And actually I was surprised because the first coach was not contradicting me and he was even supporting what I was saying. At that moment I understood that really it was something... it's become... Thai boxing is my thing, that's it, it's my thing. You'll never... you can learn the technique, but we were talking about gift, it's something that you feel, that you... I dunno, it's weird you know. Being gifted is something I cannot explain to you, really I cannot explain it to you, I*

*experience it, I don't wanna be pretentious by saying 'I'm super gifted' or anything, I think, I see around me, but thank God, I keep a cool head, I know that... because some people remind it to me, coaches like Alain, each time I spar with in the ring, he shows me that I still have a lot of things to learn, or other nak muays [Thai boxers] when I spar with Seb [the champion of the gym], i know that I have a huge amount of things to learn, but I challenge them and it's not a matter of weight [Gaspard is a heavyweight, which is rare in Thai boxing] it's a matter of technique, of vision, that's all. For me, that's what cannot be explained. If you like the thing, it happens by itself, if you're involved in the thing, it happens by itself and then it's your own logic, how you understand things, how you make parallels with all the sports, because of you listen to a coach like Fabrice, he's gonna draw a parallel between soccer and Thai boxing, the fact of using the hip, he's gonna take examples Zidane volleying the ball, he's gonna prepare his hop, he's gonna turn and throw it, well that's the same for a middle-kick, there's a lot of parallels between all the sports, a lot of techniques to use and that's things for gifted people, who know how to explain that to you, who know how to make connections between different sports.*

In an implicit critique of racial determinism, Darrell asserts, against the received idea according to which African Americans are better than others at boxing, that black or Hispanic boxers are good and “tough” fighters because they come from poor neighborhoods and not because of their ethnic origins:

*It's because they come from poor background you know, with a poor background no matter where you're coming from, you come from a poor European background you gonna be a tough fighter cause you try to fight your way out of that. You come from a poor Latin American background, you're gonna be a tough fighter cause you gonna fight out of poverty,*

*you know, and the African American guys wherever in the ghettos, it's the same situation, they all try to fight their way out of the ghetto, the Latinos are trying to fight their way out of el barrio, the Europeans are trying to fight their way out of their poverty situation, you know, and that makes you more hungry, you become good because of that, it's not having anything to do with race because in the old days, it was the Irish and the Italians that was in boxing, and the Jewish fighters they come up out of their poverty situation they would in the sport until they learn how to do other things, you know what I mean, and the other nationalities got into boxing and it goes generation through generation, this is different you know. But no race is better, it's the situation, you know what I mean. It's how hard you really are to get really good at sport, anybody can be good, you know what I mean. It's like you got Pacquiao now from Philippines you know and he's probably the best out there now because, you know, he's from a poor country, he's fighting and he become a big hero and he's a tough fighter, you know, so it's just the situation you know, wherever you're coming from, you know, it's about the race, it's a stereotype that one race is better than the other you know. Anybody can be good no matter who it is, you know, it depends on the situation, how bad they wanna be a champion, you know, anybody can be a good champion.*

The boxer is alone in the ring, and he must find solutions to the problems he faces, helped by his corner, although boxers often think that they must rely on themselves. But the decisions the boxer will take in the ring are also determined by years of practice and are not only individual decisions. The practice of bodybuilding and Thai boxing in stigmatized neighborhoods are inscribed within certain social and economic conditions. When he enters the gym, the bodybuilder or the boxer can forget or suspend some of his social characteristics, but he usually brings in with him most of them.

## 2) Aestheticizing Everyday Life

Bodybuilding and Thai boxing partake of an “embodied ‘aesthetics’ of everyday life” (Desjarlais, 1992: 32, 65), and they oscillate between rigorism and hedonism, and they often are a passion, what bodybuilders call the “disease” (Fussell, 1991: 19). Bodybuilding and Thai boxing make possible the construction of a pleasure in hard work. The study of bodily practices reveals a quite simple but profound anthropological characteristic: to put one’s body in action is to feel alive. When Darrell stopped professional boxing in the US, he felt as if he was dying, which means that boxing was making him alive. A way to stay alive was to go to the gym to train himself and other boxers, and through them to experience what he has been through again. This affective dimension of the link with the gym and the boxers is the basis of the emotional labor that is necessary to reproduce the group:

*Not boxing, man, oh forget it! I felt like I had died! I thought my life is over. I tried to keep the idea that I was gonna go back as soon as things calm down but things kept getting worse and worse you know like a snowball effect [several deaths in his family due to cancer] and then I had to deal with all of that. But then not fighting I felt like I was dead, that was my life, you know, that was my life. I had to be around, that’s why I’m here [at the boxing gym] now, I’m still around, but that was my life. You feel like you died, ‘what do I do now?’ you know what I mean. And then after that I went into kick-boxing and had a few kick-boxing matches and I felt good about that, you know what I mean, and I got in there and fight with the young guys and was able to win still so I got a little bit of that old feeling back you know. But then like I’m thinking twice about it cause I’m like you know I’m older now, family is passed on, and I can’t afford to get hurt now cause I ain’t got nobody to take care of me now if I get hurt, you know, so before I had my family, I was like if I got hurt they gonna take care*

*of me but now they're all gone so I have to be careful not to get myself hurt so I kind of leave it alone but still I wanna go, still wanna go back in there, you know what I mean. It's always something that you never want to end, you know, and that's the sad part because it has to end. It's meant for young people, you get older and you have to let it go and that's the hardest part for a fighter to do, to let it go, that's the hardest part.*

*Question: And a way to do that is like to come and...?*

*Darrell: Yeah to be around and train the young people and you see them and you try to live through them, you like 'I trained him and look he's winning' you know so it's like you're winning. When you got a guy that you trained and he's get hot and he's winning a lot, it's like you're winning, you're up in there when he's up in there, you know. So you live through the young guy, you know, and that's practically the only way that you can do after you reach a certain age you got to get out of it and that's the hardest part but you have to, cause it's gonna end and then you gotta feel really like 'waow!' you died, 'my life is over' you know, 'that was me' the fightin', the excitement, it's a whole different type of life, it's a fast life, you know what I mean, you're in casinos, I fought at Playboy twice and I was around the bunnies and everything and Hugh Hefner and all that stuff and you're like 'waow man!' and then it come down from that to like a regular life and then you try to get a job afterwards, you're not used to workin', and you get up and have a boss tellin' you what to do and you're going to work like... when you was fightin', this is a whole different world.*

Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are sensual practices as they install a carnal bond between boxers or bodybuilders. To a greater extent for Thai boxing since there is more physical contact. As "poetics of strength and virtue" (Alter, 1992: 188), both practices are

forms of sensual and sensory education. Thai boxing is even sometimes compared to a choreographic practice.

*During a party organized by the Thai boxing club on a day that also corresponds with the trainer Aimé's birthday, spectators drink, eat, and watch a dancing show put together by one dance association of the city, and as we are watching on a big screen fights from Thailand and also fights of some of the gym's boxers, Fabrice repeats several times, moving around as if he is dancing and boxing at the same time, holding up his guard "look, it is dancing!" smiling. [Field note]*

Chérif tells me that he has recommended boxers to practice dancing and some of them "have laughed at me" he says. According to him, to practice dancing is an excellent way for a boxer to improve his movements in space.

*During the final gathering, Aimé announces that Fabien is going to fight soon and that he will give the exact date. Seb shouts from behind "and Gaspard too!" several time until Aimé hears him, and Aimé replies "I already announced Gaspard's fight, that's why I didn't say it, but yeah Gaspard and Pascal box in the same competition." Fabrice says "DJ Gaspard, you gonna play music, you gonna dance" and Gaspard responds "I'm gonna make him dance!" and Gaspard thanks Seb by raising his arm and telling him "thanks" from where he stands. [Field note]*

Bodybuilding and to a lesser extent boxers sacrifice time and sweat because they are attracted by the aesthetic of a balanced, muscular and fatless body. An approximately thirty-five year-old bodybuilder talks with another bodybuilder of the same age, both of them are

pretty muscular, and he tells him: “*you want mass and cut, that’s what I’m talking about!*” Charles, a thirty-seven year-old bodybuilder, who looks much younger, asserts that he practices bodybuilding mainly for the aesthetic aspect of it:

*I work out to look good and to stay in shape. I like the aesthetics of it you know. And girls, they like it! But they don’t like when it’s too big.*

The aestheticization of the body gives a meaning to an ordinary life in marginalized urban areas. The search for muscular balance and harmony is a demiurgic exercise of bodily geometry during which the bodybuilder shapes his body like a sculptor carves a statue, according to aesthetic criteria that are specific to the bodybuilding culture. Bodybuilders, but boxers as well, can perceive their body in pieces. In both gyms, there is a spatialization of the body, as illustrated by the anatomical posters on the walls and the African warriors fresco painted on the weight room’s wall. But if the bodybuilder or the boxer dissociates the different parts of his body objectivized in “contingent details,” it is only to make the whole – that is the phenomenal body – more harmonious, efficient and useful, since a “decomposed body is not a body anymore” (Merleau-Ponty, 2006: 495).

The bodybuilder or the boxer can be disappointed or dissatisfied with a body part or a technique, or on the contrary, happy or satisfied with another one.

*Alain tells Aimé, who is quite muscled, and who congratulates the “team” he has brought in the ring: “okay but they don’t have your body! How long have they been training? Look!” pointing at a young tall and thin boxer who is storing the punching bags with others. Aimé answers: “yeah but he’s not big” and Alain says, pinching the youth’s belly, “yeah but look, since he came back from holidays, he went to Tunisia, I dunno what they gave you to eat nigga but that was a rip-off!” the young boxer does not respond and smiles. [Field note]*

Practices that consist in forging a musculature and creating a pugilistic body are “artful” productions that compose a collective sensuality (Katz, 1999: 120) in that they allow to make metaphorically visible what socially constitute the incarnate agent.

### **3) Bodily Practices as Therapeutics**

Although bodybuilders and boxers search for a certain aesthetic in their practices, they also value physical strength and they have an instrumentalist vision of their body. Their body is like a tool that must be operative. As they see bodily imperfections, they look for improvements and their practice is as much a construction of a better body as a reconstruction of an ageing body. Those practices are therefore a struggle against the effects of time on the body, and those effects are strongly correlated with the social position and status. Paradoxically, sport does not necessarily guarantee a good health, and can even cause pain, injuries, drug consumption, medical pathologies, or psychological disorders. But bodybuilders and boxers are likely to think in the short term willing to obtain the perfect body and fighting abilities as soon as possible. Those considerations lead to a specific economy of the body. This management of bodily capital can also be a way to evaluate the quality of the training:

*Chérif asks the boxers to be paired in order to spar for five rounds changing partner every round. He insists on the fact that boxers must work smoothly not in force. He says: “If nobody gets injured, we’ll have succeed the exercise.” [Field note]*

The coach makes sure boxers work according to their physical capacity:

*Fabrice says to a chubby adult who just started training to work step by step and not to do like “a guy who is 90 pounds” pointing at a thin teenager who is warming up around the room with the other boxers. “A guy like you, or as big as you, or like him, you need to feel the thing, work in stages, don’t try to climb the ladder too fast.” [Field note]*

Even when they are injured, some boxers come to the gym to watch the others train. The fact of being injured can even be a way to make progress because the injured boxer will see what he usually does not see because he is taken in heat of the pugilistic moment. This is what Nabil explains:

*Sometimes when I’m injured, I still come to watch. And like Fabrice says, sometimes those who come to watch train better than those who are training.*

Some boxers heal their little injuries with ice or tiger balm. However, some injuries are more serious. Bilal has a very visible white bandage on the arch of his eyebrows so I ask him what happened to him and he tells me that he was sparring with Patrice, a boxer who is much taller and heavier than him, and the latter kicked him in the head and cut him. He went to the emergency department at the Saint-Denis hospital that he describes as a place with “crazy” people: *“This hospital is full of weirdos!”* and he says that he waited for a very long time, more than two hours before he could be treated, and that there are *“tramps lying down...”* He was stitched and he says that he *“caught it!”* The most serious injury during my fieldwork was a broken nose of a boxer who got hit by his opponent’s knee while he was bending over, although boxers are reminded to never bend over. Injuries can nevertheless become trophies and symbols of victories. The boxer, despite an injury, may continue the fight. Boxers are more likely to have a fatalist vision of risk that is not necessarily more

present in Thai boxing than in other sports or bodily practices (Turner, Wainwright, 2003) or in everyday life, as it is the case for:

*Thank God, I've only had light injuries let's say. I have a little scar on the arch. But it remains good memories because this scar has a story. It was when I won my belt for the title of France Champion, I was cut at the arch and all, it was on one punch, so that's good memories. Otherwise I had a dislocation of the shoulder but it was due to handball when I was playing at school, I had to get surgery. But put that aside, yeah I was tellin' you about the 2003 France championship, I also had the rib cartilage crushed, and unfortunately this time I couldn't continue the fight, it was impossible, it was extremely painful, well too bad, it was a middle-kick, not really powerful but well placed and it was impossible to continue the fight. I work on the principle that you can walk on the street, slip, fall on the ground and suffer from a cranial traumatism, and box for ten years and nothing happen to you, this is true. Regarding this, I don't really wonder, I try to take care of my health, every year I do a brain scanner, I do all the controls every year. But if you start asking yourself those questions, you don't do anything of your life anymore, you seat on a rock and you wait and you watch life flashing past you, that's clear. You don't take your car because it's dangerous, you tell yourself an accident, well yeah, danger is everywhere and under any form [...]. I don't think it [Thai boxing] is more exposed than another sport.*

Trainers too, after years of practice, have bothering injuries.

*Aimé, himself a former Thai boxing champion, days that he is injured and that he is going to see a doctor this week. He shows his knee after he has put down his knee pad, then*

*he says that he cannot stop himself from moving, and immediately he puts up his guard, hops and smoothly kicks the boxer who is close to him. [Field note]*

One of the effects of bodily practices is that the body as a tool, machine or weapon, turns itself against the agent, and those practices partake of a certain alienation of those who practice (Choquet, 2002), partly because the labor power regenerates itself when work is over, that is to say during “free time”. But precisely, in contemporary societies, it is during “free time” – that is the time when professional constraints are neutralized – is filled with “leisure” that are bodily practices and therefore energy consuming. This is the heart of the capitalist system and its temporality. At the same time, “leisure” is often perceived as a way to release tension or stress occasioned by work. Rafik relates how he feels about going to the gym after work:

*Sometimes it's a little bit tiring, but it's always the same, when you're tired and that you come to the gym, you start training and after you have a second type of tiredness that is much healthier. It's another kind of tiredness, but much healthier and more pleasant than the one you felt just before, after work. On the contrary, you come to relax, to release the tension that you have accumulated during the day and that all beneficial after.*

Health often is a subject matter of discussions at the gym.

*Fabrice starts to talk about Thai boxing with a little group of boxers. They talk about doping and its harmful effects, and they mention Dekkers, a former champion known for his amazing punch, whom they think took drugs. Fabrice tells that Guillaume Kerner, a former champion in the 1980s who trained at the gym, during a fight in Clermont-Ferrand, who hit*

*and made a Dutch boxer vomit and this boxer started to shake... Fabrice asserts that he had taken “products.” According to him, they accelerate the heart rate “it’s like when you pedal at full speed on a bike, and all of a sudden, someone removes the bike, and you still pedal, well it’s the same for the heart. You can take stuffs, vitamins, plants... but not products.”*

[Field note]

Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are practices that partake of a form of social hygiene which aim is to produce social agents who healthy, strong and resistant (Worthington, 1984), and therefore fewer responsibilities for the State and its medical and even social system. Sport is perceived as a form of immunization against diseases for that matter is promoted by the State within the framework of public health. For the first time in France, in 2008, sport and health have been associated in the same department with the creation of the Department of Health, Youth, Sports and Community Life (*Ministère de la Santé, de la Jeunesse des Sports et de la Vie associative*). During the official launching of the commission “Prevention, Sports and Health” in April 2008, the Secretary in charge Roselyne Bachelot, who considers the link between sport and health a “national solidarity issue,” declared<sup>9</sup>:

It is not a matter of preaching to the converted. It is a matter of winning the largest number of people over to the idea that a low but everyday activity is essential for their health [...]. We must now reach a large public, with targeted means. I think of youths and women in particular, whose health is one of the priorities of my department. I think of the most vulnerable of our citizens, those that the usual journalistic or pedagogical campaigns of prevention through sport have hardly reached [...]. More than a public health issue, it is now a national solidarity issue.

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<sup>9</sup> Discourse of Roselyne Bachelot-Narquin, Secretary of Health, Youth, Sports and Community Life during the launching of the commission “Prevention, Sport, and Health” and the introduction of a National program of prevention through physical and sport activities (PNPAPS), april, 4th 2008.

The presence of an institution like the gyms tends to reduce health expenditure, or at least they complement other medical institutions. Zakaria holds that the practice of Thai boxing differentiates him from his friends who, for the most, smoke both tobacco and cannabis:

*Some buddies from my hood, let's say out of ten guys, seven smoke, buddies of mine, they smoke cigarettes, spliffs and all. And me for example, only because of sport, I dunno, it's not my thing you know, but the fact of practicing sport in my head I don't see the point you know.*

Sylvie is a young woman of approximately 30 years old who comes to train to the Thai boxing gym here and there. She is friendly and talkative, very approachable. The boxers like to tease her and sometimes to laugh at her. Her body carries the stigmas of a difficult life, she says that she was “not lucky,” but she remains dignified and strong. She has multiple sclerosis. According to her, the disease was diagnosed after an emotional shock, the death of her mother. She says that she is also anorexic, and shows me her teeth that are worn out because she makes her vomit. When she talks, her bad dentition is easily noticeable. She has already been temporarily paralyzed because of the disease, it comes and goes, and firmly believes that she will end up totally paralyzed anyway. She confesses me, without any drama, almost laughing, that she thought of euthanasia but the amount of paperwork and all the constraints that this decision imply prevented her from doing it. She was raised by her grandparents because her parents were “nuts.” She has lived in the street. She says she used bad language because she has “hung out only with guys.” She also admits that she does not do her physical therapy. She had a dog for the disabled that “obeys orders.” To own such a dog, she says, “you need to take an exam, and if you don't pass it, you don't have a dog.” The dog she

had died, and she asked for the same one, a Labrador. Boxing makes her a lot of good, she loves to jog, and when boxers run around the gym to warm up, she cannot stop. She says that she is “extremely nervous,” so much so that she takes Valium, three times a day, it calms her down. She tells me her problems with different health offices that put their mistakes on her, this enrages her, and that case, she criticizes herself, and becomes rude, again because she has “hung out only with guys.” All her friends are either dead, drug addicts, or in the street... she hung out in the Landy (a neighborhood known for drug trafficking). She says that now the traffic has moved from the train station to downtown in front of everybody. She mentions a report she saw on TV and asks me if I saw it. In it, a girl from there was saying that in order to buy drug she worked as a prostitute. Sylvie was “shocked” and says that she has never done that, she has never begged, she has always worked, even “shitty jobs,” and she affirms that “my family had to disown me!” with her disease of the nervous system, she does not feel anything, therefore she takes blows, and the boxers started to avoid her because they do not want to hurt her.

One bodybuilder is already disabled and needs a wheelchair. It is as if this man trained to repair his damaged body.

*A man, about fifty year-old, with a beard, a black and white bandana on his hair, a grey tracksuit, that I see for the first time in the gym is working out pretty seriously. I am surprised when I see him finish his abs on the dip machine and go to another machine with a walker. Obviously, he was walking with difficulty. Later, while working out my abs, I notice an electric wheelchair, and few minutes later, he comes accompanied by a man who follows him everywhere and who must be something like his assistant or helper, and sits on the electric wheelchair. [Field note]*

The received idea that presupposes that Blacks are “naturally” muscular masks health inequalities of poor African American that can appear “natural” as well, like for instance obesity. In the US, obesity is a national issue. One third of adults are obese and 16% of children. Two out of three adults are considered overweight and one out of five children. The diseases linked to obesity (coronary heart disease, cancer, diabetes, hypertension, cholesterol, etc.) cost American taxpayers \$147 billions per year (twice as much as ten years ago, and than for cancer) that is 9% of health expenditure. Obesity affects first Afro-Americans and Latinos<sup>10</sup>. In poor and predominantly black neighborhoods in New York City people have almost no access to healthy food. In Central Brooklyn (made of: Bedford-Stuyvesant, Crown Heights, Prospect Heights, et Brownsville), where 80% of the population is black, 31% of the population lives under the poverty level, and where the obesity rate was 29% compared to 20% in NYC in 2002. In Central Brooklyn, more than 1 adult in 3 had no health insurance in 2002<sup>11</sup>. In Brownsville, like in other poor neighborhoods, hunger and obesity are two sides of the same coin, that is access to healthy food and fresh products. Even if some inhabitants were sensitive to nutritional campaigns orchestrated by the city, they will not have access to supermarkets or markets that sell healthy and fresh products. Brownsville often holds the New York City record of infant mortality rate: 12.5/1000, more than twice as much as the average rate of the city (5.9/1000) in 2006, more than in Central Harlem (11.2/1000). The infant mortality rates among Blacks and Puerto Ricans are more than twice as much as those among Whites and Asians, even when social class is controlled<sup>12</sup>. In those poor areas, this can lead to a “routinization of infant mortality” if not death in general (Scheper-Hughes,

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<sup>10</sup> Source : Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa>).

<sup>11</sup> Source: Community Health Profiles-New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene-Division of Epidemiology-NYC Community Health Survey, 2002-03-04.

<sup>12</sup> Source : Bureau of Vital Statistics, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygien, october 2, 2007.

1992: 272-280). As a response to hardships or as a way to transcend them, social actors rely on a moral explanation or on medicine (Kleinman, 1988: 27-28).

The will to make one's body more muscled or to box often stems from a negative vision of one's own image: too lean, not enough muscles, not attractive, not efficient in combat, and so on. In a way, bodybuilding and Thai boxing are orthopedic practices. Here is an abstract of a presentation of Thai boxing published by the French Thai Boxing federation: "really complete gymnastics of the organism, Thai boxing, by its technical diversity, develops a harmonious and flexible musculature, while naturally correcting minor morphostatic anomalies and developing cardio-respiratory capacities" (Choron-Baix, 1995: 88).

Rafik started Thai boxing to improve his body's appearance, or at least his representation of his own body:

*At the beginning, I had a lot of preconceived ideas on this sport, I didn't like it at all. And in fact, it my neighbor and friend on the same floor who told me to come and train to the gym because at that time I was a little chubby and I wanted to lose weight so he suggested me to come and train because the training was really intense, and he told me that in few months I would lose my overweight. I thought about it for a while, and I told 'all right I'll train, why not' but at the beginning it was clear to me I refused to make competitions. So it actually started like that.*

Even if he claims that he eats more or less normally and does not excessively watch what he eats, yet Omar admits watching his diet and he makes sure that he does not eat

excessively. He also replaces running with swimming when an injury prevents him from running:

*I eat, but it's true that after, sometimes, I try not to eat heavy food, I, I watch when I gain two or three pounds. But at the level of hygiene, I know that for instance I'm gonna stuff myself before going to bed, I try to drink water, to run, well right now I don't run that much because I have a little pain, I ran a little bit but I have a pain in my tendon, so I go to the swimming pool, I swim laps, yesterday I swam for an hour, I go to the swimming pool pretty often lately to precisely compensate for the fact that I can't run.*

Mounir feels guilty if he eats some food that is “forbidden” to boxers:

*I eat normally but I try not to eat excessively, it means that if I eat fries and chicken I'll put mayonnaise but I won't stuff it, reasonably.*

*Question: Do you drink sodas?*

*Mounir: Yeah I eat normally, I eat kebabs and all that. Sometimes it's you feel guilty, sometimes you eat a kebab and after you tell yourself 'tomorrow I go for a run'.*

Boxers watch their diet, not excessively when they do not prepare a competition. The coach Aimé, who is very muscular and cut, watches what he eats and drinks as well. Boxers and trainers share sodas and cookies after the training and the shower, a ritual that has something almost Eucharistic. Alain offers a cup of coke to Aimé who refuses: “*no thanks, I don't drink sodas.*” This hygienism takes both a bodily form and a moral one. Bodybuilding

and Thai boxing are both a moral and corporeal straightening, and they necessitate a physical and moral program. Djamel does not say something different when he asserts: “*yeah you’re healthier [when you practice Thai boxing], that’s for sure. You maintain your physical condition and on top of that you’re more self-confident, which impacts your health. The mind and physical health are linked.*” It seems that bodybuilders have much more rationalized diet than boxers, unless the latter prepare an official fight. Here is how Charles describes his diet:

*I don’t eat meat. I haven’t eaten meat for six years. I eat Brown rice, boiled vegetables, fruits.*

Sean follows a similar diet, except that he eats a lot of meat. He stopped taking protein supplements:

*I eat a lot of meat. I eat rice, a lot of fruit.*

*Question: Do you take protein supplements?*

*Sean: I did, but I stopped. Now I take vitamins.*

*Question: Was it efficient?*

*Sean: yeah yeah it was but I just stopped.*

Finally, bodybuilding and Thai boxing give a meaning to the ontological insecurity that those who practice may feel in order to better control it ritually, or to exorcize it. Far

from a desinstitutionalization of medical knowledge, it seems that there has been a diffusion of this form of knowledge that partakes of the disciplining of bodies and social actors. The medicalization of different social “problems” (the “homeless” for instance often are associated with the “mentally ill”) objectively obscures their socio-economic causes and delegitimizes the political struggle correlative to them (Mathieu, 1993). Furthermore, it should be understood as a double strategy of stigmatization and invisibilization of poverty (with the use of the lexical field of dirtiness/cleanliness by politicians: “sweep homeless,” “to clean up the 4000 housing projects with a high-pressure hose,” or “to get rid of the scum”). This is obvious in the case of Sylvie whose health problems are first of all *social* “problems.” Medicalization can be a step toward the *criminalization* of the same social “problems.”

## **Chapter 4: Religion of the Muscle and the Fist. Cult of Muscularity, Corporeity, and Metamorphosis**

### **1) Transcendence of Everyday Life**

Bodybuilding was born out of a religious movement of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century called “muscular Christianity” whose ideology advocated a return to virile masculinity through the practice of physical activity for the “good” of society and the nation, against sin and decadence. Similarly, Thai boxing is linked to religion as it is deeply interwoven with Buddhism. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are real askeses and partake of a construction of an ascetic disposition that is both a precondition of the practice and one of its effects. Bodybuilders and boxer are first of all ascetics. In Thailand, the career of a boxer and the career of a monk are similar. The boxer can be compared with a Buddhist monk even, paradoxically, in the agonistic dimension of their respective practice (the monk fights against the evil spirits and savage animals such as tigers in Thai forests), and most of the Thai boxers have been monk before their boxing career or will become monk (again) after their boxing career, it is Thai masculine rite of passage, and many boxers consult a monk before a fight so that he can bless them (Vail, 1998(a): 282 sqq). Their pugilistic career can be analyzed as complementary to their monastic career with at the center the valorization of altruism and compassion. At the basis of the conversion to the pugilistic rite, there is an affective state that generates illusions and crystallizations that are socially determined partly by dispositions that are themselves socially constituted. Some boxers justify their access to the practice by using the rhetoric of quasi-religious or magical revelation (they talk about “love at first sight”), which is nothing else than the concomitance of agonistic dispositions and their material

expressions (to watch a training session for the first time), or in other words the concomitance between the disposition and the situation (itself adjusted to the disposition). The practice of Thai boxing also is conditioned by an ascetic disposition, while being in competition with this very religious asceticism, religious institutions struggling for the monopoly of the distribution of “salvation goods.” We can make the hypothesis that the overrepresentation of boxers of African and North-African origin and Muslims (some of them are converts) in the Thai boxing gym is not only due to the fact that they live in the housing projects near the gym, but may be also due to the transmission of a double asceticism so to speak by a father who is likely to be an immigrant who came to France to work, both a worker and a Muslim, or even through the father’s vision of masculinity, the young boxer – or even the bodybuilder – being in charge of the reproduction of the father’s virilist ideal that he has projected on his son who cannot totally identify with a father who remains nevertheless economically, culturally, and symbolically dominated. The practice, in that it offers a legitimization of this asceticism, not to say rigorism, can solve tensions brought about by the fact of living an experience of cultural “double consciousness,” torn between a familial life that can be relatively traditionalist and a life in a more hedonistic and consumerist society. The practice of Thai boxing gives a meaning and a sensuality to this rigorism by transposing it into the experiences lived by a part of the youths in the working-class *banlieues*.

It is difficult to separate the experiences of domination from those that consist in struggling against it, or to put it more colloquially like Taussig about the tension between colonialism and magic, Christianity and Shamanism for Indians in Colombia, “There is no way by which shit and holiness can be separated” (1987: 412). The studied practices are inscribed in a dialectical relationship between suffering and pleasure, boredom and transcendence, usual and exceptional. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing immerse those who

practice in a new cosmology made of new movements, senses, sensations, emotions, and beliefs. This somatic conversion entails a form of transcendence that is more visible during a competition where there are spectators. The screams of the crowd who watches boxing fights like “the drama of life in the flesh” (Oates, 2006: 116) often are perceived by athletes as something that “penetrates” them and that “lifts” them (Messner, 1992: 49-50). Bodybuilding and Thai are collective practices also in that they constitute not only a “sublimation of the biological existence” (Merleau-Ponty, 2006: 114), but also a sublimation of everyday life made of necessities and constraints thanks to the assignation of extra-ordinary goals that goes through the metamorphosis of one’s body, the control of fear, pain, and suffering. Self-transcendence exerts a crucial attraction for bodybuilders and boxers, as illustrated in the following field note.

*During physical exercises, especially those for the abdominal muscle, the trainer Chérif shouts: “Okay! All together! Together!” One boxer starts counting up to ten aloud – if he does not, the trainer screams “louder!” – everyone is working out one’s abdominal muscles, and then another boxer takes over and starts counting until everyone has made one hundred abdominal movements on the same cadence. Aimé does the series with boxers, Chérif walks around and watches, and boxers are supposed to do as many series as there are boxers. Chérif hands over the counting to each boxer and prompts them to count up to ten out loud in order to motivate the other boxers, and to those who do not count loud enough he shouts: “Come on louder! You don’t motivate anybody!” Similarly, the exercise called the “seat” during which boxers are supposed to do as if they were sitting on a chair that is against the wall of the gym for several minutes without moving in order to work out the quadriceps. During this exercise, boxers must also work out their forearms by closing and opening their hands quickly. This exercise is pretty testing, the legs start shaking, and some*

*boxers cannot hold it, and stand up because of the pain in their legs before the trainer has ordered it, others moan or make faces.* [Field note]

The way this kind of exercises is led facilitates the development of an *esprit de corps* through suffering, or better the acceptance of suffering, and in the fact of collectively overcoming it. The fact of enduring pain is symbolically rewarded and again reinforces the *esprit de corps* according to a “theodicy of suffering.” In the middle of December, Aimé congratulates the boxers who are present at the training for having stuck to the training until today, especially since attendance decreases. According to the intensity of the training, and especially during a face to face between two boxers who frantically exchange many punches and kicks, it is easy to associate the experience with the state of trance.

*Charles and his partner, before working out with weights and machines, do hundreds of pull-ups, varying angles, changing the grip and moving along or around once they cling onto the bar, regular push-ups and with a medicine ball, and crunches. Charles says: “It’s for the cut. After we use the weights for the mass.”*

This intensity of exercises can have consequences on the physical integrity of bodybuilders especially if they are not so much experienced, but even those who are not beginners. Charles asserts that “not a lot of guys in this room can handle this.” He also reports that he used to train with a “four men team,” but he stopped and now trains with only one partner because it would slow the rhythm down, they had to wait that each partner do a set before another one could do his own set:

*Once it was so intense that one guy in our team fainted.*

*Question: The heart?*

*Charles: Yeah, it was too fast. He was out of breath [he imitates him] and the ambulance came. Even me sometimes I'm dizzy.*

The everyday practice of bodybuilding and Thai boxing in a closed and separated space does feed the vocation of bodybuilders and boxers by giving the gym the look of a monastery. Paradoxically, in the routine of training, the gyms yield a de-routinization of everyday life because of the effervescence entailed by the collective practice of bodybuilding and Thai boxing. The bodybuilder or the boxer draws from his very practice a quasi-religious energy that he will accumulate and transform into a social energy. In addition to being rites of passage, bodybuilding and Thai boxing, or better, the visible effects of these practices, that is to say muscular hypertrophy and pugilistic skills (to knock out an opponent for instance) are almost something magical. To see one's body becoming more and more muscled and more and more pugilistically skillful resembles a form of sanctification or better transubstantiation, where the non muscled body, which is profane, is transformed into a muscular or pugilistic body, which becomes sacred. This metamorphosis, certainly incomplete, necessitates a set of rites that allow affective, cognitive, and somatic transitions from a state to another, and the reproduction of a form of social identification while also transforming it (Murphy, 1987: 45), like Gregor Samsa who finds himself transformed into a beetle in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. The group reproduces itself through the transformation of its members. This metamorphosis, that can be associated with a rebirth, generates a new relation to the phenomenological world and a new way to perceive the social world. Charles also practices bodybuilding to know himself better:

*I work out to push the limits of my body. I want to know how far I can go and how far my body will let me go.*

Like the king who has two bodies, one natural and the other one political (Kantorowicz, 1989), it is as if the boxer also had two bodies: an ordinary body, and a pugilistic body. Boxers are often said to be two totally different persons once they are in the ring or even when they train at the gym. Rafik explains this phenomenon that he has himself experienced:

*Thai boxing gives you self-confidence, and first of all it allows you to discover yourself, your limits, how far you can go... honestly when I watch my fights, I have a hard time telling to myself that it's me who is fighting. I have a hard time telling to myself that I have been able to produce what I'm watching, very honestly. Sometimes, even when I get off the ring, some people come and see me: "You did a great fight!" you don't have enough time to assess the fight, you just did your job, and then you watch the tape, it's true that you have a hard time telling yourself that you have actually produced this kind of job. And yeah in fact Thai boxing has also allowed me to see that I could actually go further than I thought, in terms of courage, in terms of all that, of intensity, of seriousness...*

For Gaspard, in the ring during a fight, a good boxer talks to himself:

*You only hear coaches, well you try to listen to your coaches only and it's true that you're alone, you're alone in the ring, and you're almost not alone because the best boxers, I think, have a little voice in their head, they talk to themselves, you have to talk to yourself,*

*you can go into a kind of trance that can make me better because you talk to yourself, you're kind of two in your head, well I don't know, you tell yourself: "I need to do like this and like that," you give yourself instructions and I think it's a good exercise, it's a thing that can make you win fights, that can motivate you, it's as if you were not alone, there's someone talking to you in your head, it can boost you, help you to get through difficult moments like maybe a KO, it's for sure because it's a very difficult sport.*

This almost split personality is not a sign of schizophrenia, but rather the result of a long and repeated labor of inculcation during which the boxer learns to manufacture a body and a mind that make up a coherent ontological entity suited for fighting, a kind of *homo pugilisticus*. The boxer acquires the capacity to relatively dissociate the potential pain of received punches from the pain he feels in his flesh during the fight. Besides the ritual preparation before the fight made of warm-up, massage with ointment, concentration, the boxer goes through all kinds of rituals aiming at equipping him with the disposition to almost cut off emotions and perceptive signs during the fight, as if at this precise moment a protective bubble was created around him. One of those rites is the unremitting reminder, especially for beginners or intermediary boxers who still make the potentially irreparable mistake, of not turning the head around or stopping to box when the coach gives advice during sparring, as illustrated in the following filed note:

*"You must listen with your ears!" says Chérif after the boxers have stopped to listen to him, and he also asks a boxer who has his mouth half-open to close it: "Close your mouth!" because an open mouth is a broken jaw guaranteed. During another bout of sparring, after some boxers have turned around when he said something, Alain insists: "You'll see! We're gonna have it for sure in the ring!" [Field note]*

It is a matter of preserving the fighter's physical integrity by preventing an injury or a KO. But it is also a way to teach the boxer to cut off, or at least to limit and select the communication channels during the fight in order to be less sensitive to pain, to focus, and to be able to mobilize his pugilistic knowledge and skills. During training, boxers have sometimes the tendency to apologize if they hit their sparring partner too hard for instance, because they feel like they break the implicit norm of acceptable violence that applies within the gym. The coaches ask boxers not to apologize so that they do not get used to it, do not get "soft," and harden themselves.

*During a sparring bout, a boxer apologizes to his sparring partner because he considers he punched him too hard. Alain then asks boxers not to apologize for punching or kicking too hard. He threatens to have them remove their shinbone pads and to send his brother Fabrice [The other trainer and president of the club] whose shinbones are "stones" according to him, and he adds smirking: "You'll see what it does!" [Field note]*

It is all these injunctions ("Raise your hands!" "Close your mouth!" etc.), and these rituals that participate in the making of a sort of armor for the boxer.

As religion of the muscle and the fist, bodybuilding and Thai boxing also are "a sort of technique that allows man to confront the world with more confidence" (Durkheim, 2005: 272). Contrarily to other sports in which agents often invest themselves for positive reasons, bodybuilders is likely to start the practice for negative reasons: not enough muscles, too meager, lack of self-confidence, etc. It is often the same for those who start Thai boxing. Young men from the ghetto who lift weights or box and those from the working-class *banlieue* who practice Thai boxing do it in order to protect themselves against a social and

physical environment perceived as rough through the gym itself which is an institutional shelter where neighborhood rivalries are temporarily suspended and neutralized, and also through their own “body fortress” (Klein, 1993: 3), displaying an aesthetics of dissuasion that may avoid conflicts, a human armor made of flesh, muscles, and techniques of self-defense. The hardening of the body is a means for the boxer to get ready for the fight. But it also is a way to “harden” oneself more generally, that is to say to develop a capacity to face everyday life problems when one is from a for and stigmatized neighborhood, and also to conceal one’s weaknesses, and defects. In boxing, protection – the guard – is crucial because the absence of it can immediately lead to a KO or a serious injury.

*In the ring, Alain calls out a boxer who has a low guard: “See, he has no guard! He’s gonna be hit at the stomach and he’s gonna lay down, he won’t be able to breathe!”*

*After the training, a boxer complains to Alain that the showers are cold. Alain snaps at him: “I’m used to it, I did the military service.”* [Field note]

We can make the hypothesis that a generalized feeling of social insecurity engendered by high unemployment, growing precariousness, and therefore a fear for the future, which is the internalization of the objective life chances of the class fraction, participate in creating this need to reassure oneself and to feel protected, be it only through a bodily practice for lack of economic protection.

Joël César is a Thai boxing champion who trains at the Derek. He defines what a good boxer is as follows: “You must be tough in your head, have a strong will, and accept to get hit, know how to build up a shell. To receive blows is so important for boxers because it’s

away to check that we are alive. Not everyone can do it, because you need to be courageous to fight against an adversary, yourself, and against the audience.”<sup>13</sup> This is what Mounir tries to do, and, like most interviewed boxers, he does not complain when his sparring partner hits him too hard:

*I don't like to complain that it's too hard, because I put myself in the situation where I'm fighting I'm not gonna tell him, in the ring during an official fight you're not gonna say: "You hit too hard, be careful!" You try to harden yourself as you can.*

Sabri is convinced that one must accept to get hit, it allows boxers to learn how to correct their technical mistakes:

*Sometimes it's good to get hit to understand. Me for example, I was there I never held my guard high, and I was told to keep it high, always, always, then, after I don't know how many high-kicks and all then I understood, now my guard is always high.*

Nadia maintains that she likes to get hit because it makes her understand her technical mistakes:

*Question: Do you like to get hit?*

*Nadia: Yeah, I like to get hit. Precisely because it's like that I see my defects. For instance, it's like in everyday life, if someone tells you: "You're like this, you're like that" you don't necessary realize it, because it's you, you know. But if tomorrow someone films you*

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<sup>13</sup> Karim Ben-Ismaïl, « César de nouveau sur les rings », *Uppercut*, n°20, juin 1996, p.31.

*and shows you the video, you're gonna say: "It's me?" and in boxing it's the same, well, I compare this to boxing because when you get hit, you also see your defects. For instance if I see that my face gets hit too many times, I'm gonna tell myself that my guard isn't closed enough, if I receive too many middle-kicks and that I don't block them I'm gonna say: "Oh it's because I don't block them" and that's the way we get better, so I think that it's crucial to get hit in order to precisely to be in the position to hit, but efficiently. In fact, it's a blessing in disguise. It's vital. Any way, if we didn't get hit, this wouldn't be called boxing anymore.*

## **2) The Ritualization in Production of the Bodybuilder and the Boxer**

The first steps in the Thai boxing gym are formalized by a sort of rationalized and bureaucratized ritual that takes place in several stages, and during which boxers officially become members of the gym, and are instituted as boxers. During the first sessions of the year, they have to bring the money for the membership which comprises the official federation license and an insurance, they can pay in several times, a picture who will be put on the member card, and they also need to give a medical certificate for the practice of Thai boxing preferably established by a sport physician, and to fill out a registration form. It takes place as a real ritual. One of the coaches stands up behind a little table at the entrance of the gym while boxers stand in line, and one after the other hands out their file that act as a right of passage. This ritual nevertheless is sprinkled with negotiations. Some boxers asks if they can pay the week after, or say that they could not get an appointment at the doctor's and that they will get a medical certificate later. Some of the older members of the gym are more or less recalcitrant and not really willing to go through this ritual of accession again, because it is as if they were assimilated to beginners, and therefore as if they lost their status of more experienced boxers. During the final gathering, the coaches publicly remind them that they

have to go through it anyway, but also those, beginners or not, who have not yet brought all the papers. They insist that training will be forbidden to those who have not done all the paperwork, but still they appear relatively accommodating at the beginning of the year, and can use humor to send the message to boxers:

*During the gathering at the end of the training, Aimé asks the boxers not to forget to bring the documents for the membership for those who have not yet done it. He says laughing: “There are always individuals who want to slip through the net, the older members there, those ones make me laugh, I like them,” but Fabrice comments: “It doesn’t make me laugh, we’re gonna pull the net!” and Aimé adds: “No but they’re nice but you’ll see next time it will be a concrete net!” Aimé, Fabrice, and Alain then start to make fun of those who do not have money for the membership but who “do the smart ass” when they go out to dancing clubs, Fabrice tells Aimé: “Hey Aimé, they do the smart ass when...” and then he imitates someone who is dancing and Aimé responds: “And when they’re with their girlfriend, they tell her: ‘Don’t worry, it’s on me darling’” Alain adds: “Or they pretend, they let her pay...” and everybody laughs. [Field note]*

To repeat, the desire to get muscles and to become know how to fight often comes from a deep feeling of ontological insecurity and vulnerability. To have an apparent muscular build and to appear self-confident can prevent an aggression or another form of intimidation or humiliation. Muscles and pugilistic techniques therefore are also a defensive protection, and an offensive one, used as a potential weapon. In the “street culture,” one should not show any weakness, and *a fortiori* a weak body, but it also goes through the presentation of self, clothes, the way of talking, looking, walking, and so on. Bodybuilders and boxers spend an important amount of physical and social energy to make their body appear “naturally”

muscled or combative, and legitimate while (involuntarily) concealing the very use of this energy, which makes them acquire a certain prestige. To be muscled or to know how to fight, and the fact that is perceived or known by others, give a feeling of security and confidence. This bodily capital may be used to impress and to impose oneself in the “street” or in the gym. The gym is a hierarchized place, and the more muscular one is, the easier one has access to the equipment or weights.

*In the weight room, a man in his thirties, fairly muscular with a white wife-beater on and grey pants asked a young man around 18 years old, taller than the other man but skinny, if he had moved the towel that was on a bench, the young man answered that he did, and the older one told him ‘Don’t do dat! You have to ask before!’ He was upset, looked at the young man in the eye, the young man bowed his head, looked down and nodded.<sup>14</sup>*

*An experienced boxer shouts at a young boxer who has just entered the space where the tatamis are without saluting: “You salute when you enter!” [Field note]*

These examples of emotional labor show that bodybuilding and Thai boxing partake of an economy of emotions. The “civilizing process” as analyzed by Norbert Élias also is a learning in action of the way agents must deal with their emotions based on a continuum from expressing some emotions and repressing others. In order to go from a category of agents (beginners) to another (experienced bodybuilders or boxers), the bodybuilder or the boxer who begins must submit himself to a set of “ceremonial sequences” that are acts of separation (Van Genep, 1981: 13). This illustration of a sort of predatory behavior

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<sup>14</sup> As Labov (1972) has shown it, *Black English Vernacular* is not a vitiated language as often believed, but on the contrary a regional dialect with its own rules. “School failure” of youths from the ghetto that is attributed to their so-called “inferior” language actually is the result of a political and cultural struggle inside the classroom that precisely the dialect symbolizes.

demonstrates that the gym is an agonistic microcosm where agents struggle in order to have access to the machines, weights, or punching bags for instance by using their symbolic and bodily capital to impose themselves. It also is a ritual that is used to manage and set right deviation from the internal collective norm (Turner, 1967: 45). The older and more muscled man uses his bodily capital and his age to intimidate the young man, the “new meat,” who is himself deprived of muscular capital (Harding, 2009). Furthermore, this scene of plebeian virility epitomizes the “vexation” to which rites of initiation as described by Durkheim are sometimes associated during which agents who feel or are perceived as superior in status impose difficulties upon those who are considered inferior (younger, less muscled, etc.) in order to socialize them to the new environment and in order for them to become full members of the group. Although it is much less violent physically than during the Middle Ages, it is similar to the ordeal by fire where the neophyte is put to the test (Durkheim, 2005: 448-449). This scene is like a symbolic mortification, a humiliation in the sense that it is a matter of scaring the young man, to make him shameful, guilty, humble, to make him restrain his drives, his excesses, by ordering him to ask the permission to take off the towel in order to use the bench. The emotional spectrum that the compunctious boy goes through participates in his formation and in the transformation of his “moral career” (Goffman, 1961). Following this reprimand, he will have to correct himself or otherwise he may experience a more severe humiliation again. In the Thai boxing gym, many similar rituals occur. Here is the example how a rite takes place during two different training sessions transcribed chronologically:

*“While we wait for Alain and those who were in the ring, let’s test your abs a little bit!” says Aimé with a mocking smile and his big and chiseled muscles apparent that make him look quite powerful. Boxers are seized by a sudden excitement. Aimé puts a heavy bag glove that is pretty thin on his left hand [he is left-handed and southpaw] and starts to throw*

*a relatively hard left punch in the abs of each boxer, some take it, and others have their breath cut. It is the case for a young boxer who stands in front of me and bends over after he received the punch and to whom I say to straight up and to breathe deeply.*

*At the end of the training, boxers and Aimé are working out their physical strength. A young boxer screams and sighs after an abdominal exercise, which makes everybody in the gym laugh. Aimé asks him smiling: “What’s going on?” apparently his abs are burning. Then, while waiting those who were sparring in the ring for the final gathering and salute, Aimé asks: “Whose pair of gloves is this?” picking up a pair of bag gloves on the floor. A boxer answers that it is his, and then boxers understand that Aimé is going to submit them to what is a rite of passage. He is going to punch each boxer in the stomach to test his abdominal strength and resistance. He only puts on one glove and it is the left one, and everybody now knows that Aimé is left-handed. He does it smiling, one can feel the irony of this smile. Boxers start to understand, and there is a palpable thrill, a mix of laughs and faces that hide apprehension or even fear. Aimé starts punching each boxer in the belly, and boxers step back after being punched, especially younger ones. Aimé teases the boxer who screamed during the abs exercise and says ironically: “He sure has abs!” everybody laughs, and he suddenly hits him, the young man is doubled up, and cannot breathe anymore. Boxers emotionally react by laughing, by making faces or by commenting, the younger ones being the most restless. Aimé continues to walk around the room, and arrives near an adult and punches him in the abs. He deeply breathes out when hit by Aimé’s punch, and does not really step back. Realizing it, Aimé punches him again and says out loud: “Look guys, that’s what I want, he breathes out at each blow!” and he starts over on the same boxer who breathes out and does not really move. [Field note]*

These field notes encapsulate the idea that thanks to emotional and cognitive effects, boxers have recorded in their body the different phases of the rite. When Aimé slips his hand into the glove, during a moment of collective gathering in the gym, boxers feel that the rite is going to come about. But if, apparently, this rite seems to establish a distance between the beginner and the professor, like the stethoscope keeps the patient away from the doctor according to Foucault (Foucault, 1963), it only brings them together both ontologically and symbolically, while reasserting the status of the professor and the student. Because of its traumatizing and confidential aspect, it reinforces the sentiment of belonging to a group while re-establishing the hierarchical positions of the gym. It is as if Aimé, with his fist, killed or at least symbolically mortified the beginner's body to transform it into an initiate, the teenager into a young man, as if he symbolically killed the weak body to give birth to a resistant and strong body. It is as if he made the ethos of the practice enter inside boxers' body through the intermediary of the gloved fist so that it becomes ways of thinking and acting. Aimé's gloved fist, like a seal, institutes the teenager into a boxer and member of the gym. This rite is at the same time a vexatious practice that makes the boxer humble, and a transcending practice that elevates him. These initiatory rites are similar to "rites of terror," although on a different scale, the degree of fear being proportionate to the frequency of the rite (Whitehouse, 1996).

The ring is constantly presented by the coaches, in a equivocal manner, both as a reward for deserving boxers, those who have worked out hard, and as a potential form of punishment for the less deserving ones or those who make mistakes in the ring where the consequences are immediate.

*Aimé has brought with him several boxers in the ring for a special session of sparring. For the whole training session, they have sparred in the ring, and they have regularly changed sparring partners. Aimé have them applaud during the final gathering and*

tells them: “Congratulations guys, it was beautiful!” Coaches warn the boxers: those who do not work out enough will not go in the ring, and those who make mistakes will immediately suffer the consequences. Chérif says that in order to be able to spar in the ring, boxers should not negotiate with the coaches, “We hate it!” they must train hard and should not be a “nag.”

*During another session, Alain takes over the collective boxing class. He shows what exercises boxers have to do. After he saw some boxers who did “garbage,” he tells them: “We’ll when we’re going to close the door [of the little room where the ring is] and go in the ring! You won’t laugh!” [Field note]*

All the training aims at producing boxers capable of going in the ring, and of facing the rules pertaining to it, like avoiding to be knocked out on a technical mistake. Fear – and its control – acts as an important element in the constitution of the self-constraints of drives. The boxer must “live as close to his fear as to his fists” (Rauch, 1992: 234). Based on fears and constraints, the internalization of the rite induces a normalized boxer, and the need for the boxer to practice: boxers often express that they miss boxing if they do not train as if the practice were a form of addiction.

All those rites remind that the body is sacred and give boxers not a tribal totem transmitted to them or painted on their body, but a sort of masculine “collective etiquette” (Durkheim, 2005:165-167) that is the hypertrophied or pugilistic body.

### 3) Asceticism Against Idleness

Those who have no muscles or who cannot box are considered as profane within the gyms. As religions of the muscle and the fist, and therefore equipped with beliefs and collective rites, the cults of the body and the fist strengthen the social and symbolic relations between the agents who devote themselves to those cults (Durkheim, 2005: 50). Rites of institution are used to separate the sacred from the profane. To acquire a certain bodily capital therefore is to go from the profane to the sacred, by doing certain things as well as by not doing other things, like for example this quasi-moral injunction that two members of the bodybuilding gym gave me as we were working out our chest on the dip machine and resting between two sets: “You shouldn’t rest that long, you have to go!” and the other one: “Yeah, no longer than one minute!” This is through this kind of injunctions that a relatively docile body is constructed. There is no particular need for long discourses or explanations, only a very brief message, and the bodybuilder listens and his body obeys. Idleness is to be banned, and even the least moment of rest is only a necessary evil in order to get some strength back and to better start again, and sometimes it is an opportunity to “socialize,” discuss, and exchange. In the Thai boxing gym, more than in the bodybuilding gym where members are more autonomous, there is always somebody, an experienced boxer or a coach, to call to order those who discuss or rest too long, and to order them to go back working out. Idleness is fought because it takes boxers away from salvation, and it encourages the involvement in deviant practices. Paraphrasing Weber, we could say that salvation is brought only by a meaningful relation, specifically with the muscle or the fist. Accordingly, bodybuilding and Thai boxing are a struggle against time. It is a matter not only of not remaining idle, but of making one’s time useful. Or rather, these two practices partake of a temporalization of bodybuilders’ and boxers’ social life. The *libido pugilistica*, continually renewable, is the

driving force of this temporalization. The collective pugilistic and muscular labor done within the gym, as a quasi-religious enclosure, gives time a sacred dimension. The increase of the qualitative value of time is all the more important that it is done collectively through ritualized practices, especially in the sequencing of exercises. This temporalization is internalized and subjectivized by bodybuilders and boxers. Likewise, the fact that this relation to time is collective and therefore shared means that it ends up being objectivized. Moreover, the beginner often is seduced by this collective construction of a specific temporality when he first sees a boxing workout, and it may motivate him to come back to the gym, attracted by the sacralization of his everyday time.

Bodybuilders and boxers must follow a tight time management in a dialectical relationship between the already acquired and the future. They are, to borrow Marx's words, "carcasses of time" (1996:84). Time thus broken down in exercises, repetitions, sets, or rounds, is all the more efficient in training docile bodies. The competition within the gym fosters a search for muscles and pugilistic mastery and preferably in the more economical way. If a bodybuilder spends less time than others on average to get big muscles, and if a boxer quickly acquires combat techniques, they will gain symbolic profits and be considered as "gifted." The bodybuilder's and the boxer's muscle is not a biological quality but first of all a social relationship.

#### **4) A Specific Temporality**

This work consists in analyzing secondary socialization in that most bodybuilders and Thai boxers in the studied gyms are not professional and have another status: they have a job; they are students, etc. This almost double life demands a double temporality (in reality multiple temporalities that are function of other practices). "Time, says Merleau-Ponty, is not

a line, but a network of intentionalities” (2006: 479). The management of time by the bodybuilder and even more by the boxer, and in which coaches participate, is a pivotal dimension of the practice. The social division of time makes that the social world is made of several temporalities. The dominant temporality that structures the social life is usually the work temporality. When one does not work, one fills one’s time with “leisure.” This being said, the bodybuilder’s or boxer’s relation to time also depends on his social position, if he has a job or not, or other activities, etc. Since it is not his primary occupation, he would measure his time spent in the gym in relation to the time allotted to other activities, especially a job. It is therefore a whole temporal economy that is articulated around different practices, and not one in total autonomy. The separation between the work temporality and the “leisure” temporality actually is superficial. These two temporalities are in fact intimately linked although distinct. For instance, the boxer or the bodybuilder measures the time he spends in the gym based on industrial or domestic time. Time, or rather the filling or construction of time, especially the imposition of rhythm, cadence, regularity, is a necessary condition for the production of disciplined agents (Thompson, 1967).

Bodybuilders and boxers must manage their bodily capital, and find the right balance between the use of their body and its preservation. For instance, the pugilistic aging occurs faster than an average social aging as illustrated in the following field note:

*Chérif tells me that: “The earlier a boxer starts Thai boxing, the earlier he stops. For example, a boxer who starts at seventeen years old will stop boxing at twenty-six years old or so. There’s something like lassitude, he’ll want to turn to something else even if he likes this sport, because the training sessions are hard... A boxer reaches maturity at about twenty-six years old. Kader [One of the gym’s current champion], for example, he is twenty-six years*

*old. In Thailand, at twenty-six years old they are already old as boxes, but they started earlier.* [Field note]

Thai boxing and bodybuilding are ascetic rites, and more precisely “negative cult,” that is to say “systems of rites that do not prescribe to the faithful to accomplish effective services, but are limited to forbid him certain ways of acting” (Durkheim, 2005: 428). Like a monastery, although less constraining, the discipline that is imposed, and the (physically and morally) reformatory program that is implemented create a disposition to “the will to obey” (Asad, 1987: 159) to physical and moral norms through a moral, emotional, and bodily training. A boxer asserts that in his practice “the respect for older [gym] members” is very important.

## **6) Suffering as Driving Force of Practice and Access to Knowledge**

Thai boxing and bodybuilding are not sinecure and their regular practice provokes suffering. The exercises in the gym cause muscular, body, and moral pains. Contrarily to other sports where agents put in action strategies that aim at avoiding pain<sup>15</sup>, it is what the enlightened bodybuilder looks for. The feeling of burn in the muscles or at least muscular congestion – the so-called “pump” that is both painful and pleasurable – is what the bodybuilder seeks. However, the boxer might want to avoid pain:

*During the warm-up, boxers put their back against the wall and flex their legs in order to work out the quadriceps. Boxers dread this exercise that lasts several minutes because it is painful as the thighs intensely burn. Chérif asks boxers to drop their arms along*

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<sup>15</sup> On the management of risk in Thai boxing cf. Rennesson, 2006.

*their body and not to put their hands on their hips. Chérif walks through the rows to count the number of boxers and says to some of them to lower their body more so that their thighs are perpendicular to the ground. Then he asks boxers to raise their arms and to make flexions and extensions with their fingers to work out the forearms. It also allows to focus less on the pain in the legs. Aimé, who is also doing the exercise, tells the boxers not think about pain. He makes jokes and questions boxers about what they have eaten that is good. Several boxers take a break and stand up, they could not bear it anymore. Aimé adds a difficulty by saying that the exercise is almost done, and as by magic, the burning becomes more intense, and even more when he says that there is only ten seconds left. He then starts to count out loud and slowly, and the pain grows, and the legs start trembling, and when he reaches nine he repeats the number nine several times, which makes some boxers groan out of pain. When Aimé says ten, it is the end of the exercise and a relief for boxers whose thighs are burning. They stand up, walk around, and shake or stretch their legs as if they wanted to conjure up the pain. This is also what Aimé asks them to do. [Field note]*

The boxer tries more to avoid being hit than suffering per se. He can even find a certain satisfaction in the suffering felt during the training. The boxer or the bodybuilder, if he wants to gain or lose weight, must follow a specific diet<sup>16</sup> based on numerous privations and that emphasizes carbohydrates for energy, proteins for muscular growth, and a panoply of supplements and vitamins, or even “doping” products. Dietary practices, which oscillate between bulimia and anorexia, partake of a moral reformation, of a rationalization of practices, and more precisely of a medicalization of knowledge. Diet is at the same time a therapeutic practice and a mode of government of the body (Turner, 1982). Pain is an integral part of the bodybuilder’s and boxer’s condition. It is associated with salvation and status: to

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<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of the relation between discipline, power, and diet among female rowers who must make the weight for the competitions, cf. Chapman, 1997.

reach salvation, and to increase one's symbolic capital because one has endured pain. "The ascetic ideal, says Nietzsche, is an artifice of conservation of life" (2008: 214). Like any ascetic, the bodybuilder or the boxer gives a meaning to his suffering because he aims at a better life. He is like de La Fontaine's lumberjack who, facing death, prefers suffering. The boxer Stéphane thinks that suffering is a way to get ready to fight in the ring, and to access a state of well-being:

*I suffer a lot with all the training we go through, but on the other hand we know that it's good for us, and once in the ring we will be ready. I also take pleasure because I know it only brings me good things, to suffer a little bit to feel better in your body in the end.*

Boxers and bodybuilders must integrate pain in their training, and expect muscle burning, to be stiff, to bleed, to be cut, to have a broken bone, bruises, etc. The first sessions constitute the entry in a form of learning that consists in managing the dialectical relationship between pain and pleasure. Djamel describes his first workouts as follows:

*The first workouts are the most difficult. You get hurt beneath your feet by pivoting on them. You don't have the notions of distance when you kick with the shinbones. There is a certain period of time before you have the notions, and before you take pleasure.*

Boxers and bodybuilders learn how to tame pain while managing their bodily capital in order to make their practice last (Sorignet, 2003).

*Drawing a sketch of what he is saying to me, Chérif mentions "a study who was done on Thai-boxers by following them during the day of their fight from the locker-room to the*

*ring and by taking their pulse. And the boxer is at eighty in the locker-room, one hundred between the locker-room and the ring, and one hundred and twenty in the ring! With the stress and all that. So us, we make the boxer's pulses go up in the locker-room by doing a good warm-up, like that his pulse goes up and then once on the ring it starts to go down."* Aimé follows up and says smiling: *"You know last time when we brought Kamel to his fight, I could see his heart, he was pounding like this! [Aimé beats time with his hand on his heart] This was during the first round, and then it was over. But I think we're going to put him back to the junior category, he will be much stronger."* Chérif responds: *"We can't, it's too late, once he is in the senior category, you can't move him to the juniors."* [Field note]

However, trainers insist on the fact that boxers must enjoy when they train. During a warm-up, Fabrice exclaims: *"Pleasure, guys, pleasure, nobody is smiling right now! There is only one who is smiling!"* talking about Djamel who is coming late, and walking towards Fabrice with a smile on his face to greet him. Fabrice insists on the technical aspect by saying that certain things are easy to perform, and that it might be more difficult to link them together, but that boxers should start succeeding simple things, and he then insists on pleasure again: *"Enjoy!"* and the playful aspect of the practice: *"Play! It's a game."* During another training, Fabrice remarks: *"You must enjoy, we keep repeating it to you! When you come to the gym, you must enjoy."*

Nabil was so enthusiastic, and so young, when he started Thai boxing that he did not really suffer according to him during the first workouts:

*Question: Did you find the first workouts hard?*

*Nabil: On the contrary, because I was filled with admiration, because I remained seated outside looking at the training through the window, and the fact of being inside, it... I was happy. It's true that at the beginning it was harder, today is less hard, since the coaches are not the same. At that time it was harder, now it's more relaxed, I won't say it's less physical but it's more relaxed, it's really more based on education, whereas before for example Chérif had us doing killer sets, whereas now he has slowed down, and it's more Aimé who does the physical training. Aimé adapts the training according to the number of persons we are, like recently had us do a set like in the old days, I can tell that a lot of us didn't come the next training [Laughs], push-ups, abs... but it's good because it's positive. You tell yourself it can't be harmful for your health, far from that, it can only get you in shape.*

The dialectical relationship between suffering and pleasure is something very present among boxers. Omar justifies this relationship with the feeling of accomplished work that goes through pain:

*Actually, weirdly, the more I suffer, the more I take pleasure. I'm a little bit hum...*

*Q: Sadomasochist?*

*Omar: [Laughs] yeah I'm a little bit sadistic, but in fact I think it's peculiar to all athletes. The more you suffer during the training, the better you feel, the better you are, and generally speaking when you're in the gym you tell yourself: "Today it was hard!" but when you go back home you're happy, you're good, you're tired in a good way, you're tired but happy for having suffered. And I think that's the leitmotif when you go to the gym, the more*

*you suffer, the more you go to the gym. You know that it's good for you so you can only like it.*

*AO: It's a way to measure your progress...*

*Omar: I know that at some point I did a little bit of Krav Maga, and I would go out of the gym and my t-shirt was hardly wet, and I was telling myself: "Fuck! I did two hours!" but I didn't have the impression that I had suffered or that I had worked hard enough, and that's why I stopped afterwards. But it's true that when I go to the locker-room and that my t-shirt is soaked, you can wring it out, I'm happy, I worked hard today, and I've thrown t-shirts away more than once because I told myself that I put it directly to the garbage. You tell yourself: "I did a good workout, I spent a lot of energy," you're actually satisfied that you go out of the gym like that, tired.*

Gaspard expressed his satisfaction when the work is done at the gym and that this goes through suffering:

*I suffer and I take pleasure. When you do sets of push-ups and that you see your pecs blowing up, you're happy, when you spar and you manage to... there's a satisfaction pfff an orgasm I almost want to say. When you spar with guys who are world champions and that you manage to hold seven rounds against them, honestly I think it brings you a lot of satisfaction. Yeah you suffer, you suffer but you find your pleasure in the suffering, it's a little bit sadomasochistic, but you have to experience it, you cannot explain it, you suffer, it's like guys who pump iron, they suffer but you know. But actually I understand because their body is transformed, but it's what they look for, the transformation of the body. We look for*

*technically surpassing the opponent, establishing a technical plan, doing nice things, being maybe admired, people to like your way of boxing, your technical way of being, your tactical aspect because there's also a tactic, you're not going to start your fight at a thousand miles per hour, if you end up fighting a guy who is renowned for having a lot of stamina, that's all that, it's technical and tactical. Personally, I'd rather suffer in the ring than doing push-ups because the ring will be useful to me. Push-ups are also useful but it will never be as useful as the ring.*

To afflict pain to one's body is a way to, if not reach ecstasy, at least look for the truth about oneself and by extension about the social world.

Sometimes boxers are cross with themselves for not having done a good workout and can express it sharply: in the locker-room, a boxer shouts: *"What a nasty workout! I hate those workouts where you go home and you feel like shit!"* The bodybuilder or the boxer can feel pleasure in pain or rather he transforms it into pleasure. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are inscribed in such a specific dialectical relationship between pleasure and pain that boxers and bodybuilders often are associated with "somasochists." However, somasochists, supports of voluptuousness in suffering, simulate excess and excessively dramatize their actions, whereas boxers or bodybuilders go to the "end of their suffering," they suffer practicing an activity that gives them pleasure. Rafik tries to put into words his relation to pain and pleasure during the training sessions. According to him, he tries to control this pain. He inverts the relation pleasure/suffering as it is commonly perceived, and distances himself from masochism to which boxers often are assimilated:

*I try to suffer in taking pleasure, because there is this dimension that makes that it's not a constraining moment, I'm not masochist, I don't take pleasure in suffering, no, that's*

*being masochist! I try to transform this moment of suffering into pleasure that is this dimension that... hum... because for me to suffer is a constraint, when you suffer, when you do something and you suffer, it becomes a constraint, and boxing is not a constraint for me, it's a pleasure that is general. So from this suffering, I try to get out some pleasure to turn another corner.*

Putting an end to the received idea according to which boxers are “sadomasochists,” Djamel has a tendency to reduce the importance of suffering in his practice:

*I take pleasure, I don't suffer. Sometimes I do, when I spar with tougher adversaries, but that's fine. I come to the gym for the pleasure, not to suffer. If you suffer at the gym, I think there's a problem.*

Darrell asserts that boxing does not make him suffer, on the contrary, it has allowed him to make a lot of things like travelling, to meet people from all around the world, and to “open his mind,” and to give him an “education” contrary to those who remained in the neighborhood:

*Question: Is it hard to train or is it a pleasure?*

*Darrell: It's a little of both you know. But it's fun because you look at the fighters on TV, you wanna be like those guys, you know what I mean, you say 'they went through it' and you want to go through it too, and when you think about it, kids are rough anyway, they gonna play and wrestle and get their knees skinned up whether they play fighting or play cowboys and Indians or whatever they doing you know it's the same thing but here you're in*

*a gym you're learning something and no you don't suffer. It's a lot of fun because mainly you got to travel around, go places that you normally just be in the neighborhood, you know, when you boxin', you're in a team, they take you different places, they take you out of state, they take you, you know, out of the country sometimes you know, and you get to meet different people and see different things, it's like an education you know, it's like an education, and a lot of people wouldn't think from boxing that you can get educated, you meet other boxers from other countries and stuff and you talk to them and it's like you meet international, you box international, and you meet people from Russia, from Germany, from Latin American countries, Porto Rico, everywhere, they come from everywhere and meet the boxers and then you start talking to these people and you get a bigger view of the world you know than you would if you just stayed in the neighborhood and know nothing about foreign people because you never met any. But through boxing you get to travel and meet different people, talk to them and then you're more worldly about the world. And in boxing there's no racism, nobody is really racist, everybody is on a team, you know what I mean, you got white guys on the team, black guys on the team, Spanish guys on the team, whenever they fight you're ruling for them, you know what I mean, cause they're on your team, you don't care what color they are. So your whole prospective is different you know when you boxin' than the average person cause they don't have your type of experience, they're locked in the neighborhood, they got the same mind, they don't interact with a lot of different people, but in boxing you get to meet a lot of people all around the world cause boxers come from all around the world.*

Bodybuilding and Thai boxing cannot be reduced to a response to aggressive or aesthetic drives or to any practical utilitarianism. These practices also respond to a thirst for knowledge. Far from rejecting these forms of knowledge outside of the space of rationality,

we must assimilate them to “sciences of the concrete” although they appear as a kind of “bricolage” (Lévi-Strauss, 1962: 27-32). One of the mediations between the body of the boxer or the bodybuilder and this form of knowledge thus constituted is suffering (but also pleasure). It is as if the boxer or the bodybuilder ventures into a gnoseological way of the cross along which suffering would be a means to have access to the knowledge of practice, constituting a necessary step, as if it was necessary to make the boxer or bodybuilder suffer by inflicting pain on him in order to extirpate the “truth” out of his body.

*A boxer that Alain was bawling out holds a tissue that he put in his nostril because his nose is bleeding. Alain asks him not to remove it. There is blood on the floor of the gym. Alain decides to take him to the bathroom and then come back alone in order to clean off the blood. Some boxers show him some the bloodstains. He is angry, and says: “It will teach him a lesson! I told him to raise his guard! Leave them, they gonna start receiving blows, we’re gonna laugh!” [Field note]*

The boxer is encouraged to suffer during the training so that he will suffer less pain in the ring during a competition, and maybe even in his everyday life. To a boxer who get off the ring in order to drink some water, whereas boxers must normally always ask someone who is outside the ring and who does not box for water, Alain says: “You get off to drink so that you recover!” Nordine fought and lost against a much older opponent. Chérif confesses: *“We upgraded Nordine, he’s only nineteen years old, he’s a kid for me, the other one is in the prime of age as we say, youths can have sudden fatigues... he’s powerful, et cetera, he lost, he wasn’t good, I told Aimé to throw in the towel, but he refused.” [Field note]*

Later during the same workout:

*During the gathering at the end of the training, Aimé tells boxers that Nordine fought on Saturday and apologizes for not having said it earlier, and that next time he will do it. When he said that Nordine had fought, the boxers present in the gym started to applaud him, but Alain immediately reacts and tells them: "Wait before you applaud!" Aimé asks boxers to train hard in the gym in order to suffer less in the ring during an official fight: "You must give out everything up there! It's useless to get beaten up in the ring!" Aimé says that when he was boxing, and the trainers too, he used to give everything in the ring even if it meant "losing a leg or an arm in the ring!" and then adds: "That's always been that the Derek, so guys I'm asking you that it continues. I've already told you that we want the Derek to be a family. When we tell you to work out hard during the training, or to go for a run, it's not for nothing guys, it's for you!" Aimé mainly speaks to those who are going to fight, but not only. Nordine was not well prepared, and was out of breath at the end of his fight. Aimé repeats boxers to give out everything they have, and that it is better to lay down on the floor here rather than in the ring, because up there it's another story. The other trainers nod in agreement, Alain does not like satisfied, and makes some comments here and there. Some boxers are talking, and the trainers do not appreciate at all, and they tell them several times, and Aimé claims that this is not "respectful." Fabrice declares: "We don't fight with the mouth, some of you think it's easy!" Two boxers are sitting on the floor and stretching. Aimé sees them and tells them: "Are you okay guys, we disturb you?" and asks others to sit down and to let the two incriminated boxers standing up. All the boxers sit down and the two others remain standing up, and appear embarrassed. Aimé starts to lecture them. Alain pretends that he is having a discussion with a boxer, and then Aimé says: "I wait impatiently for the moment when you're going to go up in the ring and I swear to you I'm going to put the towel here [close to his belly under his t-shirt] and it won't move, I won't take it out, and then we'll*

*have a laugh!” Boxers are giving a hollow laugh. Alain and Aimé say that they do not force anybody to fight, and that it is up to boxers to choose whether they want to fight or not. “Us coaches we spot those of you who are capable, we suggest them that they fight, but if they don’t want to, they don’t fight. Hey guys, you should know that us trainers, we have a family, we sacrifice ourselves for you. When you fight, we get up in the morning, we accompany the boxer to the weigh-in. There are some other gyms that send their boxers alone, and they just come to massage him and for the fight. We’re there since the beginning, we’re present, we accompany our boxer, we support him, so guys, you have to be serious.” Fabrice says that some gyms do not really ask the boxer’s opinion and send him to fight, “not at the Derek” he says. Chérif follows up and says that the fight allows boxers to evaluate themselves if necessary. Aimé tells the few female teenagers who are present that it is the same story for them. He reproaches them for their behavior, they have too much fun during the training, and that they will pay for it in the ring if they do not change their behavior, because in the opposite corner, they will be ready.*

Then later in the locker-room:

*Alain starts talking about Nordine, and says that he was too soft, and that he was not ready physically, and then states: “It’s normal, we haven’t seen him for a week before the fight, his Lordship was in England! Well go to England! And yet he only has a black eye!” According to Alain, Nordine was done for at the end of the fight, but that the cornermen told him to pretend, to stand up straight and to appear tough, and simply to block, but apparently Nordine did not have the strength to do that. Alain was waving to him, “I was waving ‘no’ to him.” According to Alain, the opponent even wanted to knee him in the head by lowering it*

[he mimes the gesture]. *Alain looks upset. Alain reproaches youths not to be serious and talks to an adult and experienced boxer: "Look, you older members are here!"* [Field note]

Through Thai boxing and bodybuilding, those who practice can respond to basic anthropological drives and learn to "know their limits" and to push them back, that is to say to make a sort of transgression of one's identity that is related to the will to free oneself from one's social determinants that are constraining and stigmatizing. Rafik explains that he wanted to experiment Thai boxing in order to overcome his prejudices against this sport. The emotions he feels are so strong and lived through the body that he lacks appropriate words to verbalize them. Rafik intensely trains to fight again next year:

*I was offered to fight after a month and a half [after his first training], it was quite fast, I was a little bit skeptical, I thought about it and then finally I accepted because for me in order to understand things, you have to experience them, and it's true that you come along with an assumption about a sport, or it can even be a person while you don't know her, you should not judge. I told myself the only way to judge this sport is to practice it, to go in the ring, to try to understand why boxers fight, and then from there I could make my own opinion. So from there, I accepted, and since the moment I fought, it was the opposite effect in fact, it was true love at first sight. I had seen fights on TV, of Thai boxing, but hum... it was hum... I was telling myself hum... very colloquially: "What are those clowns who beat each other up?" I didn't understand... what is the point of beating each other up. And the day I fought, I really understood that it goes beyond the fight and because we... there are sensations that... in fact a mixture of sensations that we feel before, during, and after the fight that are un-des-scri-bable! I can describe them briefly to you: it's adrenaline, fear, joy, will, but it's a mixture, I can't explain it to you, for me it has been a unique sensation that I*

*had never felt before even in soccer and all that, and yet it's a full-fledged sport. But I've never felt something like this. So from there, that's where it was really love at first sight and I understood why they were fighting, and the atmosphere in the locker-room, all that was magic. And actually I had only one wish afterwards: it was to feel this sensation again as soon as possible. So to fight again and again.*

Sean, who has practicing bodybuilding for seven years, bears witness to the capacity of the body to adapt itself to pain:

*At the beginning, it's painful, your body hurts. But after a while the body gets used to it, and you feel less pain. Then you have to use different angles so your muscles still grow.*

And like the boxer Larry from Brooklyn says about boxing in insisting: *"It's a science, it's a science."* Boxers establish a carnal link between fight and knowledge, and we could add recognition. It is not the fact of having access to knowledge that makes suffer, but suffering is experienced by the boxer or the bodybuilder as a means of access to knowledge. The bodybuilder or the boxer who inflicts pain on himself during the training questions his body and looks for his truth, the truth of his body and his self (Asad, 1983) and discovers his passions.

Suffering, or more exactly the body itself and the vices that religion and morality have associated with it, is not so much an obstacle as a means to look for "truth" in a highly competitive social world, and a way to elevate oneself, to detach oneself from the profane world in order to better approach the sacred (Durkheim, 2005: 451). Suffering and knowledge are intimately linked and find a realization in the experience of the body, and therefore of the athletic body. Boxers are sometimes associated with "madmen" because Thai boxing is

supposed to be violent and refers to a certain animality and irrationality, like bodybuilding and muscular hypertrophy, and because the reasons why they practice are difficult to access. Bodybuilders and more particularly boxers could be compared to the madman, according to Foucault (1972: 37), as someone who has a worrying and inaccessible knowledge.

Because they intuitively grasp this idea, and because they somewhat possess this “invisible” and esoteric knowledge, boxers often offer those who have prejudices against Thai boxing to try. It may be the core of bodily practices such as Thai boxing and bodybuilding: it is not so much about winning as acquiring techniques and skills, and increasing one’s knowledge through the mediation of the physical duel which violence is controlled. Like ritual flogging brings closer to the Divine, muscular burning, the suffering of bodybuilders and boxers detach them from the profane and bring them closer to their ideal. Pain has also a truly social function in that it allows a stronger rallying of agents to the institution of the gym. It is often through emotions, like pain, that the agent communicates with the social world. It is a matter of not only being able to endure pain, but also to look for it, and finally to be able to administer and inflict it as a virile man.

Young men from the American ghetto and the working-class *banlieues* who invest themselves in Thai boxing or bodybuilding want to prove themselves that they can do something “good” and valuable that provides them with self-worth and dignity, since they are threatened by “school failure,” unemployment, or even delinquency. There is no contradiction between the passionate search for the increase of muscular or pugilistic capital and ascetic discipline, and therefore the inhibition of different forms of immediate satisfactions and the civilizing forms of self-control that the boxer or bodybuilder imposes upon himself. The accumulation of muscular or pugilistic capital is a “calling” in Weber’s sense, that is to say a utilitarian task dictated by a godlike figure, that the bodybuilder or the boxer has to ascetically carry out through a rationalization of his practice (Weber, 2002).

Rather than vainly wasting their time on idleness, debauchery, or deviance, they spend energy and time on a useful and salvational practice. Like Durkheim says: “Asceticism is not only used for religious ends. Here, like elsewhere, religious interests are only the symbolic form of social and moral interests,” and this asceticism is “inherent in all social life,” and it is “destined to survive all mythologies and all dogmas; it is part of all human culture” (Durkheim, 2005: 452). The bodybuilder or the boxer is both inside the world and removed from it by an “inner-worldly asceticism” (Weber, 1996) that paradoxically re-enchants their world.

## Chapter 5: The Gym as Gender-Making Factory. The Muscle and The Fist as Elementary Forms of Masculinity

### 1) Reproducing Gender by the Muscle and the Fist

Sexual differences are instituted through social processes of triage between girls and boys since their early age within the household, at school, or in other social institutions sport clubs or other recreational institutions. Like the playgrounds, or simply the street, where young African American from the ghetto and the youths from the French working-class *banlieues* build up a masculine identity through a differentiated socialization, the bodybuilding and Thai boxing gyms are spaces where the process of masculine identification is reproduced.

In the bodybuilding and Thai boxing gyms, there is a clear gender division of muscular and pugilistic labor that is transcribed in the division of the gym's space. Men are more likely to develop the upper body, whereas women are more likely to work on the lower body, trying to make it thinner and firmer. Men want to gain mass and muscles, whereas women want to lose weight and fat. Virility is symbolically associated with high, bulk, and hard, and femininity with low, thin, and soft. Women fighters are more likely to work out together, hit in a softer manner, execute exercises slower. Whereas men are more likely *to show* their body and their muscles, women are more likely *to hide* theirs, or at least parts of it, with long-sleeves clothes, a sweater around the waist in order to conceal their bottom from the male gaze in particular. Men and women associate their body with opposite qualities: men want their body to be *bigger* while women want their body to be *thinner*. Woman is socially defined as "physical nurturer" and "chief emotional." There is a strict and socially admitted

separation between motherhood and sexuality. They feed others, not really themselves, at the risk of being perceived as greedy for food, sexual pleasure, and power (Bordo, 1993: 171). Through binary and central oppositions such as “active spirit/corps passive body” (*Ibid.*, 11), right/left, upper/lower, hard/soft, big/thin, warm/cold (bodily) humors, sacred/profane, pure/impure, and so on, the gender line is being reproduced by the fact of being differentially associated with masculinity and femininity.

In the gym I have studied, the majority of the practitioners are men, there are around five women on average each time I have gone, for about 30-40 men, and they usually are running on the treadmills to loose fat, or if they work out in the weight room, they do it under male supervision (a personal coach, boyfriend, or brother) or in a small group. The Thai boxing includes seventy boys and two or three girls on average. The masculine order is reproduced through this collective ritual that is body-worship or the pugilistic practice, women being, if not absent, at least very few inside the sacred space of the gym and their overrepresentation would be sacrilegious.

Masculinity and femininity, as they are socially defined, are not so much reproduced through ideology as everyday bodily practices that are inscribed in time, space, and movement. These ritualized practices discipline and normalize bodies along the gender line (*Ibid.*, 165-166). The gym is a gender-differentiating social machine that self-perpetuates well developed muscles as an essential and symbolic part of masculinity, reinforces male and female sensual attributes, and the perceptions of those attributes, the social roles of the different genders such as the social and sexual division of labor. According to a sensory logic, social agents group together or separate, classify social things following, in part, their emotions according to oppositions (sacred/profane, pure/impure, good/bad, masculine/feminine, muscled/not muscled...) (Durkheim, Mauss, 1903). The contraction of feminine bodies goes hand in hand with the contraction of the space that women occupy.

Masculinity is measured in action and performance, in the double sense of theatricality and efficiency (Gilmore, 1990: 35-36). The spatial and symbolic configuration of the gym reproduces the “the sexual topology of the socialized body” that relegates women within the back room running on treadmill in order to lose weight, and saves the bigger space with weights and machines to men who want muscular growth (*Ibid.*, 110). Women are given a certain impurity, an almost “mystical disability” (Hertz, 1970). This inscription of the sexual cosmology in the spatial order tends to naturalize the differences between the sexes mainly based on body differences assigned with a social meaning. Anatomical differences, but also bodily differences acquired through the practice of bodybuilding and Thai boxing, are used to justify and legitimize the social difference between genders. The gym is a dual and ambiguous space that contains and unites opposites and that participates in the making of a “cartography of legitimate feminine spaces” (Muel-Dreyfus, 1996: 123) as well as masculine spaces. A woman walking across the gym disturbs the well-ordered masculine bodies, the temporal and driving dynamic. But it is at the same a settled ritual during which men work out in the main room, and women only cross this room to reach the back room. The legitimate definition of the masculine and feminine territories are thus reproduced. It is as if women’s access to the muscular labor as it is practiced by men was restricted. Given that socially constructed gender differences are the results of masculine domination, the latter tends to become invisible by the very fact of its basis and its practical effects are accepted as natural because they are both inscribed in the objectivity of the social space, in the forms of divisions, and in the subjectivity of the bodies, in the forms of categories of perception produced by those very divisions, which are forms of judgment since “perception is judgment” (Merleau-Ponty, 2006: 57) and that, therefore, relentlessly reinforce them (Bourdieu, 1998: 13-16). In developing a “*libido dominandi*” acquired through a differentiated socialization, men are more likely to take part in social games that are said to

be masculine (relations of domination, strong power stakes, search for honor, competition, confrontation, display of physical and symbolic force, etc.) for which an agonistic habitus is necessary (*Ibid.*, 82). Inscribed within the essentializing logic of the “eternal masculine,” the practices of bodybuilding and Thai boxing partake of masculine domination in that they collectively produce not only men who are more muscled than women, and more prone to be able to fight, but they produce and reproduce sexually differentiated dispositions that (re)adjusted to the social environment. The “fighting or competitive spirit,” strongly associated with the construction of masculinity, is developed in those practices, as in any sport, beginning with the competition with oneself.

## **2) The Phenomenology of the Feminine Body**

From a phenomenological point of view, women are inclined to perceive their body as fragile thing, as a burden that needs to be moved and protected, and that is being observed. Whereas men have conscience of and confidence in their physical abilities, women are more likely to skeptical about them because they feel rather object than subject of their body’s movements, they are limited by a kind of “inhibited intentionality” (Young, 1990: 147-148). The fact of being thin for a woman can be at the same time a sign of dependence, domination and resistance, and autonomy. To regularly practice a physical exercise, and therefore to tolerate tiredness, pain, repetition or even boredom, is a sign of self-control and moral strength.

In order to be accepted, women bodybuilders have had to “mirror male behavior” (Klein, 1993: 162). Similarly, women who box are submitted more or less to the same rules than their male counterparts, at least at the level of discourse, because on the practical level,

there is a difference: a man would hit softer if his opponent is a woman, women are placed in front of male boxers during the greeting ritual at the end of the training session, etc.

*A young girl is seated on the bench, Alain asks her what she is doing, she answers that she has a headache, Alain later says to Aimé “she has a headache,” Aimé looks at the girl, her arms crossed on her belly, and tells her ironically “you have a headache?” and repeats because she seems not to have understood the irony, then she laughs. [Field note]*

The only woman who regularly works out in the weight room in order to develop significant muscles is quite an exception and possesses many attributes that are socially defined as masculine: the physical appearance, she is very muscular, the way to present herself, very self-confident, assured walk, alone in the room full of muscular men, themselves self-confident and virile, she is able to easily do exercises that some men cannot even do, like chin-ups, she sings out loud and has headphones, in short all her bodily *hexis*. Contrary to women who have a tendency not to fully use the space (Young, 1990: 151), she moves around the weight room, does different kinds of exercises or preparations to them using wide and clear gestures. The other women that may enter the room do not occupy as much space as she does, mostly limiting themselves to the use of machines that allow them to work out the lower parts of their body and often under the authority of a man. Like a caryatid wearing on her strong shoulders all the weight of the sexual order, redoubled by the racial order, and at the same time, breaking out of the differentiated definitions of the legitimate uses of masculine and feminine bodies, inverting them symbolically, she is disturbing to men and may provoke a repulsion or at least a distaste. As if they were animated by a demoniac force, women seem to exist, move, work out and box in a “somatic theater of possession” (Foucault, 1999: 197). Sean, a thirty year-old bodybuilder, does not like women who are too muscular

like Charles, another bodybuilder, who thinks it is not aesthetic for a woman to be too muscular:

*I don't like that! When it's too big, I don't like it. A woman should be firm you know, not flabby like that [he imitates the gesture with his hand of a flabby body]. I like them when they're sexy... like that [he points at a well-built girl who is working out her legs and chats with her girlfriends].*

Denzel, coach at Starrett City Boxing, is totally opposed to boxing practiced by women. He has a clear vision of the gender division of labor:

*I'm deadly against it. You know, men should do what men do, and women should do what women do, I mean, you know, I don't wanna offend anybody but I think women are supposed to represent beauty and things like that. The toughest way to make a dollar is to fight, the toughest way to make a living is to fight. You don't want your wife comin' home with a broken nose. I remember one girl I trained, Debbie, I trained her up in Harlem a few years back, she was fighting, she was like the person, female, professional bout, sanctioned here in New York, and I was living in Charlotte, North Carolina at the time, and she wanted me to work in the corner, so the people felt, the promoters, flew me in to work in the corner, beautiful girl, gorgeous, and all through training, you know, to me, it didn't seem like she had what it took to be a champion. She surprised me because she was fighting this girl, the girl was a little tougher than her, I remember it was a four round fight, and she came back at the end of the third round, she sit in the corner, and she starts cursing 'I wanna do this, I wanna do that!' and all through the gym, all through training she never showed that kind of attitude before, so I think she would go out there and get hit a couple of times and maybe lay*

*down. She's a fighter, she went out there and for the last two minutes, 'cause women's fights are two minute round instead of three minutes, she went out there and she fought her heart out, totally totally caught me by surprise! They called it a draw. Technically, yeah, I felt the other girl might have a little edge but she fought back hard, and that's what I'm saying, she really wanted it, she really dug deep, and surprised me. So we go out to eat, after the fight we go to dinner, her, myself and one of the other managers, and she's sitting there, she's got two black eyes [laughs], her nose is bleeding and her mouth is full of blood, and we're sitting in a room where everybody is looking at her [laughs]. So she reaches over to hand me a fifty dollar bill, you know, for workin' in the corner, but I just didn't take it, I said 'nah, you know, you keep your money, I got paid' so then I said 'Debbie, you know, you don't need to do this, really'.*

*Question: She had a job or...?*

*Denzel: She was like a personal trainer stuff like that, beautiful girl.*

*Question: But she didn't mean to do that, it was just a challenge?*

*Denzel: No, right, she did it because she wanted to fight. I didn't think she would really make it. I'm sitting there and I'm looking at her and her eyes are black and swollen, the blood is still dripping from her nose, her mouth and all... you know 'you don't need to do this, you really don't, for four hundred dollars, look at you!' for four hundred dollars, you know. I understand now she's in Florida, and I spoke to her a few times after the fight, she said 'you really don't think I should do it anymore?' I said 'no, you really don't. Go do what you do'. I really don't think women should box, I really don't. I just think that there's certain*

*things that men shouldn't do, and there's certain things women shouldn't do, you know. I don't understand, you know... that's just society.*

Rafik thinks that the relatively growing feminine presence in Thai boxing is something “positive” but like some bodybuilders he dislikes women who box:

*I think it's good but... I think it's a good thing, but I don't find it... personally I don't find it, how to say it... I don't find it aesthetic, a woman who boxes. I really think that Thai boxing like boxing, like French boxing, I think that... and it's not being macho, but to me those sports are only for men. Now, to watch a woman play tennis or... I find it very nice but sincerely a woman in the ring I don't find it really aesthetic, not very nice [...]. The one who goes in the ring in the role of the woman boxer, nah, it's not... it's not my cup of tea, not really.*

If some woman bodybuilders or boxers get close to the masculine practice, they might be appreciated for their athletic qualities, but they will be judged as being not feminine enough. Conversely, if they do not practice according to the legitimate criteria of the discipline, that is to say virilist criteria, their athletic skills and performances would be judged negatively.

However, a woman who is committed to a bodily practice can be appreciated, not so much on a sexual or aesthetic level, but because she embodies will and self-control.

*Aimé is talking about a girl who practices judo with respect because she does a lot of things: “I talked to her on Monday, she does a lot of things. Look, she is a student, she works, she serves hot breakfasts in the morning, she starts at 6am, she has to wake up at 5am, she*

*practices dancing, Thai boxing, she does the housework... she told me that she was doing too many things and she thought of dropping her dance classes. I told her that she should do less things, she can even stop boxing if she wants to.*

Some boxers appreciate some qualities to women who practice and may even find them superior to men. Mounir asserts that girls learn Thai boxing basics faster than boys because they do not have the pride that boys have, they are more docile, and even if, according to him, they are more afraid, this fear is positive since it allows them to be more careful and to pay more attention to instructions and therefore to learn better and faster than men:

*They have another approach to boxing. Last year, there were two girls who had come and honestly they had been here for few months and I realized that they were learning faster than male beginners. Because a guy is going to have this kind of pride 'I know how to throw a punch' whereas her, for her a punch, he's gonna tell her 'do like this, throw a left' she's going to watch him carefully and then she's going to do it. They listen more, and on top of that they are kind of sacred a little bit, they are more careful, yeah honestly there were some girls they were learning fast, they were improving fast. Well now they are not here anymore I don't know why.*

Darrell thinks that girls are as able to box as boys, but they nevertheless have less strength than men, which implies less injury:

*Women, girls, boxing is good for them too. They're skilled, some of them are good, they're really good. They're just as good as the men. A lot of the time they don't have that*

*same power as the men, so they don't really take the type of punishment, you know what I mean. But women they do everything that men do anyway, you know what I mean, they gonna try anyway. I see them now doin' the mixed martial arts, they doin' that and that's rough! You know that's kind of rougher than boxing, you go to the floor and pound somebody but the girls do that too! But it's good for them, they learn self-defense and if they wanna do competitions it's good too cause some of them are really good you know and they're good athletes, they become good athletes. But they don't get to be like men, get all scars and stuff because they don't have the same type of power and do the same amount of damage than a man can do but they get hurt too but not like guys do. So I like to see them fightin' you know, they become good champions too, they have some very good woman champion.*

To be involved in practices that are dominantly perceived as masculine, even if it is a way to reject domestic, submissive, and reproductive femininity, is not so much re-appropriating the masculine power and privilege by transforming the arbitrary as reproducing the sexual order and the position women occupy in it, in neutralizing women as a potential rival, because they conform, and with them their bodies, to the dominant masculine ideal of strength and self-control (Bordo, 1993: 178-179).

### **3) Bodybuilding and Thai Boxing: a Men's Affair?**

Nadia has had to face male boxers who were rejecting her and for whom her presence in the gym was not legitimate. But Nadia won't be pushed around so to speak, and it's one of the reasons why she practices Thai boxing:

*Question: As a girl, how do other boxers look at you?*

*Nadia: Huh, there's everything! I've been confronted to a lot of guys who were telling me or for example I was going in the ring, they were saying 'hey come on get out of here you have nothing to do here!' well I don't exactly remember the remarks but I've been confronted to... honestly there are a lot of things, but I wouldn't close my mouth, you know, I was telling them 'but what's your problem?'*

The feminine practice of Thai boxing can be explained by the presence of “inverted gender dispositions” (Mennesson, 2004: 71) acquired during those girls’ socialization in their childhood or adolescence, especially the socialization within the family (the desire for a boy and the transfer on the younger daughter, or on the contrary numerous siblings and an influence of brothers or cousins), or within the group of peers (a “tomboy”). This inverted socialization allows those girls to build a relation to their body and its use, a “behavior,” closer to the relation boys have with theirs, because they have socialized among them, shared the same talks, the same games, the same places, and so on. For female boxers, as for female bodybuilders, there is a permanent tension between the necessities of staying feminine in a (hyper)masculine universe. As Mennesson and Clément write, “the learning of pugilistic techniques and the labor of ‘feminization’ of body appearance are simultaneous” (Mennesson, Clément, 2009: 77). The conditions of existence that are often tough in those working-class neighborhood are likely to make women’s socialization more virile, and this is redouble in a Thai boxing gym that is a symbolically masculine and tough place. Nadia says that her father does not want her to sacrifice her studies for Thai boxing. She says that she was a “savage,” that is to say that the way she was behaving did not match with what is usually expected from a girl:

*I was a savage in fact, but it's true. First I was someone who was very impolite, who was always cursing, I was always saying cuss words, I was super impolite, with everybody and if someone did anything to me, I would hit them. In fact, when I started judo it was, well I think that judo is more, well I don't know, I don't think it is a combat sport, this is weird, isn't it? But I rather see this sport, there is a lot of... I don't know this is weird, I think we really the respect between the one who teaches and the others. I liked but there was something that I didn't like about it.*

*Question: There was not enough contact, is that it?*

*Nadia: Maybe. Yet when I do something, I put a lot of myself into it, but there was something I didn't like. And then my mother suggested me to start again but I stopped.*

In the gym, girls must submit themselves to the same training than boys, and if they show a sign of weakness, they often are symbolically called to order. Women remain in a dominated position in the pugilistic space that is still dominated by men. They have to stick to the legitimate definition of genders and to conform to their attributes (sometimes to the point of caricature), even if they blur the frontiers by their involvement in a traditionally masculine practice. Nadia claims that she behaves like a real girl outside the gym and like other boxers inside the gym:

*At the gym I consider myself, let's say, like everybody else, so there is no 'ouch! You're hurting me!' unless if you really hurt me, but it is because you're going to punch me that I'm gonna say 'oh! Be careful with my makeup!' like some girls do, you know. In fact at the gym, I am at the gym, and outside, I'm outside, me, I make allowances. But no yeah, in*

*everyday life, sometimes I put more my feminine side forward because I don't people to say precisely that I'm a girl, I practices boxing, and she's careless about appearance. Because there are a lot of girls, it's true, who are careless about their appearance. Well maybe not the girls who practice for leisure, but real female boxers and all a lot of them are careless about their appearance. Well I'm telling you that because I know some girls who, well, they don't look really like girls. But then maybe it's... I don't know, maybe they see things differently. But I think on the contrary we should all put our feminine side forward precisely to say 'we are not guys.'*

While one could think that a gender-mixed socialization totally redefines gender lines, it rather seems that it reproduces them since female boxers internalize not only the masculine domination but also the tolerance of physical violence (*Ibid.*, 87). Outside the gym, women have to display feminine attributes. But inside the gym, they develop strategies in order to dissimulate their femininity for example by wearing leggings that conceal legs, bras that flatten the breasts, fastening the hair, not putting makeup, etc.

## **Chapter 6: Gregarious and Racializing Practices. Social Exorcism of Domination and (Con)Quest for Honor**

### **1) Social and Visceral Cohesion**

The social order is at the same time reproduced and transformed according to symbolic struggles between different social groups, struggles that are also inside the groups and whose the stakes are the classifying of groups and among those groups. The different classes or class fractions have an unequally distributed power over the instruments of their social reproduction. Bodily practices partake of these strategies of reproduction and, as ways of socializing affects, are at the center of the struggles for the distribution of social position and power. Despite their trivial aspect, bodybuilding and Thai boxing are inscribed within important social stakes like the struggles for the legitimate definition – at the same time symbolic and political – of the body and the representations of the body. Practices, a fortiori bodily practices, strengthen social frontiers between groups, and are related to the reproduction of the groups' honor. In the American black ghetto and the French working-class *banlieues*, they partake of the strategies of reproduction of stigmatized social categories. Those symbolic struggles, that take place between different social classes, genders, or between groups that carry an ethnoracial stigma and those who attribute it to them, decide what a body should be, the way it should be sculpted, carried and presented. Symbolic struggles for the legitimate body are projected upon the body that becomes the crystallization of the differences of the social order. Bodybuilding, practiced in the black ghetto, partakes of

the reproduction of the biological foundations of racial domination<sup>17</sup>. In France, the practice of Thai boxing feeds the opposition between “youths from *banlieue*” and the rest of the population reinforcing the received idea according to which they are “thugs” who like to fight.

Despite the solicitations of the so-called consumer and individualistic society, the working classes have the characteristic to be particularly attached to the local group and to have a taste for concrete things that can be observed in the horizontal relationships, with the family, the neighbors, the friends, or the peer group (Hoggart, 1970: 65). In addition to break out of the doxic vision of the “disorganized” African American family, Stack has shown how the exchanges of domestic goods between African American families (circulation of children, food, services, etc.) help not only in struggling against indigence but also ensure the reproduction of the group (Stack, 1974). It seems to me that bodily practices are complementary to those domestic exchanges in the reproduction of social groups, especially among dominated groups that do not have at the same probabilities to transmit the instruments of their reproduction through educational or economic capital like the middle or upper classes. The bodily practices studied here are ways of transmitting the cultural capital among the generation of the working classes. There is, inside the group itself, a struggle for the imposition of the legitimate and dominant lifestyle, between, let us say, boxers and soccer players, delinquents and non-delinquents, political activists, superior fractions and inferior fractions, municipal agents and residents, etc. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are gregarious practices that cement the social cohesion and the sentiment of belonging to a group beyond individualities<sup>18</sup>. In part because the instruments of reproduction that are used by the

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<sup>17</sup> In Thailand, a dark skin and a stocky body are perceived as essences of Issane peasants, and the attribution of the quality of “attacker” to Issane boxers feeds the stereotype, cf. Rennesson (2007).

<sup>18</sup> Paulson shows how traditional ritual food practices (re)define the forms of Bolivian national identification within the framework of a multiculturalist rhetoric and neoliberal restructurations, cf. Paulson (2006).

dominant classes elude them – school, economic and cultural capital of the family, etc. – the working classes, and notably the youths, are more likely to have a bodily capital, and to use it, within the frame of a class and classifying struggle in which they can mostly oppose their physical force, their courage and their group solidarity, and to believe that they can get something out of it on the labor market. Hence, the importance of bodily practices among the working classes and the insistence upon the notion of “solidarity.”

The coaches often repeat that “the Derek is a family” establishing the gym as the house of this family and therefore as a sanctuary where trust, fraternity, disinterestedness prevail and where numerous social relations that are perceived outside as constraining are suspended: theft, violence, the market, profit, etc. this familialist rhetoric also is a way to exclude “others” who are not members of the group. Chérif says that when they accompany a boxer to a fight, there are three or four of them, they often drive him, “we are like a family, we are here for the boxers, it’s important.” The use of a quasi-mystical familialist rhetoric allows to *legitimize* the practice as such, as well as the reproduction of relations of order within the gym through obligations, exchange of gifts, etc. (lending shower gel, a towel, a t-shirt or shorts, water, drive a boxer home, exchange picture from a trip to Thailand, a drink after the training, etc.). The familial link is also a place of transmission of knowledge. Family is not only a metaphor for the social group, and it is more than a watchword, boxers end up taking up this affective discourse of cohesion and solidarity: “*I have very good relationships with coaches and boxers. The Derek, it’s a family, a very large family even. We insist on being respectful, polite, et cetera. They’re right, the club is in a sensitive neighborhood, the coaches are like older brothers for youths. They are both trainers and educators.*” There are obviously many divergent interests, and other convergent, among boxers, and they are conscious that they are not a family in the way it is usually understood, that is to say the nuclear family, and that overall there is no family relationships based on kinship between

them, although some boxers and two coaches are members of the same kinship, but the club is like an adoptive family<sup>19</sup>. Some interests are more material:

*Aimé announces that the gym will be closed for the holidays, and that there is no training on Wednesday because the judo club have its members promoted to the superior grade, the boxers moans and some of them shout “reimburse!” in a friendly atmosphere. Aimé also declares that when leaving each boxer will get some chocolate, he was joking of course, and everybody believed him. Actually, they will have to get a form for the federal license.*

Omar explains that right from the start he liked this familial aspect of the club, that is a form of solidarity and carnal sensuality but above all practical, real, visible, that one can touch with one’s finger or fist:

*In fact when I arrived at the Derek, it’s really the familial aspect that I most liked actually. That is to say everything is there, whether you are a beginner or an elder, people are mixing and elders don’t hesitate to give some advice, to explain things to you, this is not scrapping like in other gyms where you come and it is about the one who will hit the hardest, this has nothing to do with that. This is the familial aspect that I liked and this is the reason why I stayed.*

The familialist rhetoric also partakes of the reproduction of the group’s social honor. The trainer is a father figure who transmits to his sons the club’s heritage (its “values,” skills, “reputation,” its titles, etc.), in other words different forms of capital in order to ensure the reproduction of the group.

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<sup>19</sup> In a Javanese martial arts school, the kinship relationship between students, masters, and ancestors is not based on consanguinity but on the transmission of knowledge, cf. de Grave (2001).

Within the bodybuilding gym, the notion of “family” seems to be less important. There is no familialist discourse that suggests that bodybuilders are members of a large family large the Thai boxers, only interjections and greetings such as “bro” when two male bodybuilders meet. However, black bodybuilders are not so much “brothers” by way of practicing bodybuilding itself as their racial belonging, whereas Thai boxers constitute themselves as a “family” *in the practice of Thai boxing* and not according to ethnic criteria although this plays a role and can reinforce the bonds based on the similarity of lived experiences.

It seems to me that In the French *banlieues*, the policy that aims at developing “social tie” has the effect that social agents – here Thai boxers – have internalized this injunction and therefore produce solidarity that feeds their social capital, whereas in the American ghetto the policy of “empowerment” due to a retrenchment of the social State, more important than in France, has the effect of inciting agents to invest themselves in a more individualist practice such as bodybuilding that seems, according to our observations, to produce less solidarity than Thai boxing. Because the inhabitants of the ghetto think that the State, and especially the police, is not on their side, to be able to take care of oneself is more valued than in the French working-class *banlieues*. Through the organizational structure, and especially sports like Thai boxing, youths from French working-class *banlieues* are more likely to accumulate social capital than those from the American black ghetto who are more left to themselves and have less sport or cultural structures at their disposal. The distribution of social capital has a determining influence on life strategies of dominated groups or agents. The endemic violence of the ghetto and unemployment have severely undermined older forms of solidarity. The web of associations in the working-class *banlieues* has compensated for this diminution of social capital whereas it is less true in the case of the American ghetto. For Nabil, the Derek

is a family where everyone shows solidarity with each other, and this solidarity can be transposed outside of the gym in other social settings:

*Life is tough, we need to get along, to help each other, at the Derek, as soon as we hear that someone is in need, in trouble or needs anything, we are tightly knit, we are a team, we don't hesitate to bring our help. It's more than Thai boxing because outside of boxing we also see each other. It's a family. The least problem we're here, there's a problem we're here. You need information, you have a doubt about something 'yeah hallo sorry to bother you, I just wanted to ask you...' and most of the time it's 'no problem, you're not bothering me...' and you don't see this kind of things anymore nowadays. Look, personally, an anecdote no later than yesterday, I was at the prefecture, there's an old man who fell, we were only two to run and help me out, we were only two, people preferred to stand in line. I don't care about the line, the old man falls, the least you can do is to help him to stand up. And those are things life teaches you. At the Derek you learn things like that. You learn to help your neighbor.*

These bodily practices partake of the reproduction of the group in that they allow to maintain or raise the bodily and symbolic capital of the members of the group and, indirectly, to maintain or modify the position in the class structure. Thai boxing in particular is based on duel and involves the boxer in a redefinition of his relation to the other through the mediation of a regulated fight, whereas the bodybuilder does it through a mode of distanced comparison. These bodily practices partake of *community building* in the United States and of the strengthening of the “social tie” in France, both aiming at ensuring solid social foundations of a community or a neighborhood whose main component is security. They rely upon a “*muscular bonding*” that facilitates social cohesion and the sharing of emotions

between collectively socialized agents by giving a meaning and a *raison d'être* to collective practices (McNeill, 1995: 2-3). The gyms are places where agents develop a virile and carnal solidarity – a pugilistic and muscular fraternization – that rests upon greetings, small talk, exchanges of controlled punches and kicks, the contacts of bodies and their circumscribed circulation, and their rhythm and synchronized movements, the suffering of the training and the injuries. This solidarity in the lived experience and in the present is a way to protect themselves against a future made of uncertainties. Those social groups are partly reproduced through a *memorization of collective experiences* in the practice during which “a common life awakens and similar preoccupations respond to each other” (Halbwachs, 1994: 160). For instance, each year, the Derek takes a collective picture of boxers and trainers and boxers can buy it if they want to. This collective picture is part of the transmission of the cultural capital of the group in an objectivized form that aims at the reproduction of the group.

Social memory is not only collective but it also reproduces itself not only through texts, narratives, or “places of memory,” but maybe first through practices. Duneier has shown that black men who patronize the Valois cafeteria on the edge of the Chicago ghetto get together because the food that is served remind them their past and the forms of sociability associated with it, while providing a protection against the outside world (1992: 58-61, 111). Athletes do not say something else when, for instance, after an interruption of their training because of an injury, they are satisfied with having sensations again. Memory, in what it has of performative, has nevertheless the effect of legitimize the social order. The social group (class, ethnic group, gender, etc.) provides the memory framework, both mental and material, to the agent in order for him to build his own memory. The gyms are a performative space in which a collective memory is reactivated and reincarnated by the ritualized bodily practice (Connerton, 1989). For instance, every summer, the old members of the ancestor of the *Brownsville Recreation Center* gather there and organize a

commemorative party called “*Old-Timers Week*” during which charitable basketball games, a parade, dancing and singing activities are put together. It is a way for elders to get together again, especially for those who have left the neighborhood, and to “give back to the community.” In La Courneuve, as the public housing buildings of the *Quatre Mille* are demolished within the frame of “urban renewal,” memory practices become more meaningful and more sensual. Immigrant families of are likely to eclipse the migratory experience because there is the issue of legitimacy (Lepoutre, 2005: 98, 121).

## **2) Reproduction of Body Stigma**

Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are normative bodily practices that reproduce the masculine essence of black men and youths from working-class *banlieues* as it is socially admitted. According to the ideology of the natural gift, the black man is supposed to be muscular and the “youth from the *banlieue*” is supposed to be a fighter. The gyms produce healthy and strong bodies that are molded according to dominant social norms.

Sport, perceived as leisure, can be a way to neutralize the alienating effects of work. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are perceived as leisure but they are not necessarily opposed to work as such, they are a complement to it. They have in fact a double function: to occupy the idle and to fill in workers’ “free time.” However, one paradoxes of sport activity is that it takes place during the time that is supposed to allow for the recovery of the labor power and can therefore hinder it. Moreover, what makes the peculiarity of a gym in Brownsville, in addition to the dominated position of its members in the class structure, and the incorporation of a petty bourgeois esthetic norm of a healthy and muscular body, is the highly symbolic aspect of the practice that associated with this social institution and that is inscribed in a relation between the bodybuilder and his racialized body. The gym is a *performative space* in

that it makes “race” exist, or rather the preconceived racial characteristics, by the very practice of bodybuilding.

Bodybuilding is one of those normative practices that are racializing in the sense that they partake of the race-making process, hiding the practice of bodybuilding, and in particular the social forces that are at the origin of those processes of racialization. The involvement in bodybuilding partly rests upon the availability of a cultural background of symbolic representations that associate black men to *naturally* muscular men and that is ready to be mobilized<sup>20</sup>. The black bodybuilder takes, as an elementary form of his masculinity, a principle, his muscularity, which is one of the foundations of the racial stigma that has been historically assigned to him. It is not, needless to say, an exclusively black activity, but when it is practiced in the ghetto by Blacks, it reinforces the sense of an autonomous black community, binds more specifically men into a masculine congregation (Gasparini, Weiss, 2008). The body becomes at the same time a vector of emancipation and closure. The bodybuilding, like the Thai boxer, opens up himself to a new cosmogony while yielding to an ascetic refusal of the world.

In the US, there is no clear policy towards black ghettos aiming at not encouraging the creation of practices based on only one ethnic category, contrary to France and La Courneuve in particular where the municipality fights against that.

Still, Thai boxing and bodybuilding reproduce, to a certain extent, the body stigma of African American men and the descendants of immigrants in France or those coming from the French overseas departments. In the working-class *banlieues*, and even more in the ghetto where it has a particular echo due to the effects of racial domination, the body politics has to do with the history of domination and resistance. The agent, according to his dispositions, deploys a set of practices, displays signs, demeanors, cloths, etc. that express his social and

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<sup>20</sup> On the (re)production of the belief in the innate aspect of athletic qualities of Blacks and the classical opposition nature/culture, black/white cf. Azzarito, Harrison (2008).

racial status. The bodybuilder from the ghetto and the Thai-boxer from the working-class *banlieue* find themselves attached to a paradoxical effect of their aristocratic quest for honor that is that the (sub)proletarian of those marginalized urban zones ends up cultivating a component of the stigma that is assigned to him.

### **3) Embodied Symbolic Struggle Against Domination**

Because the stigmatizing representations cast upon them a collective social dishonor on the mode of malediction, the dominated develop strategies of appropriation of their own body that aim at warding it off. Like crack consumption is a “culture of refusal” (Williams, 1992: 11) of domination, bodily practices such as bodybuilding and Thai boxing are part of those means that are used within those power struggles. During at least a training session, the agent takes over space and time, he is moved by a “new pounding of time” (Merleau-Pont, 2006: 519), and takes control over his destiny. This quest for honor does not take place so much in becoming conscious of the objective conditions of existence as a youth from the *banlieue* or the ghetto as in establishing new relations with those who practice bodybuilding and Thai boxing, more visibly in case of boxers. Paradoxically, it is, in particular, thanks to ghettoization that African American have been able to develop a collective form of identification with a symbolic force and political weight, contrarily to the inhabitants of the working-class *banlieues* of immigrant origin who have not been able to acquire this symbolic force. Sport has often been the field for social and political victories for African American: from the boxer Jack Johnson, or Joe Louis embodying American democracy against Max Schmeling who represented the Nazi regime, to the baseball player Jackie Robinson, or Jesse

Owens and Tommie Smith<sup>21</sup>. Because of the racial domination imposed upon them, African-Americans have been materially and symbolically deprived. Historically, they have tried to regain material and symbolic capital, especially through bodily practices such as sport or dance, since the body is the last (but also the first) and only thing that the dominated have left. Bodybuilding is a practice that allows Blacks to regain their social honor that racial domination has taken off, putting the stigma upside down, in a kind of '(The) Black (body) is beautiful'. Since slavery, the black body has been perceived and defined as strong, muscular, and powerful. It has been categorized at the same time as efficient for labor concerns but also as sexually threatening when male or pleasurable when female. On the whole, it has been identified as contaminated and contaminating, and therefore isolated as such. Yet, African-Americans have managed to accumulate a bodily capital, for lack of other forms of capital (economic, social, cultural). The body being an object of presentation and representation, for black men, bodybuilding is a social strategy to acquire a new social honor that they do not possess as racially dominated social agents. By way of (re)taking control over their body, they want to reshape their predictable social fate to escape nemesis, and reconstruct a world infused with a certain kind of morality and sensuality that have been historically denied to African-Americans or negatively attributed to them. Ironically, the social *effects* of the practice of bodybuilding are the (re)production of racial beliefs about the social representation of the black body supposedly naturally muscular. After decades, not to say centuries, of socialization within a racialized environment, this belief is so ingrained in the collective unconscious that African-Americans have incorporated it as well. They are expected to be naturally muscular, and thanks to the magic of the self-fulfilling prophecy, they expect themselves to be muscular. The Black man who practices bodybuilding and

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<sup>21</sup> For an analysis of contemporary struggles of black athletes that favor performance and individuality in the form of contestation based on hip-hop and street culture of rules elaborated by athletic professional federations infused with a white and middle-class athletic ethic, see Cunningham (2009).

develops a hypertrophied musculature is a *persona*, in Mauss's sense, who wears a tragic and ritual mask, and unconsciously plays the role of the Black man that society expects from him (Mauss, 1985). This racial myth has been somatized in bodies in the form of a *habitus*. The practice of bodybuilding is an expression of this habitus as a scheme of perception, appreciation, and action. The image of the historically muscularized black body, which is itself the result of racial domination, has been deposited dormant into bodies in the form of dispositions that make people (white or Black) presume that African-Americans are by essence muscular, and could later determine social practices such as bodybuilding. Those dispositions are so deeply incorporated that they are forgotten, de-historicized, and therefore taken for granted, as self-evident. It is essential to *re-historicize* those dispositions, to *de-naturalize* those representations, and therefore to insist on the fact that Blacks are not innately muscular, and when they are it is through the *social practice* of bodybuilding or other physical activities. The practice of bodybuilding keeps alive the stereotype of the black man being *naturally*, therefore *racially*, muscular. This image is widely represented in the 'popular' culture: in hip-hop video clips with rappers showing their hypertrophied body like for instance the rappers 50 Cent making abs, or LL Cool J performing his torso naked, groups of prison inmates working out, boxers (and all kinds of athletes), professional bodybuilders such as Lee Haney, or more recently Ronnie Coleman, both eight times Mr. Olympia. The Black body can be fetishized, admired esthetically, but also despised.

Black athletes often are perceived as brutes or criminals (drug dealers, gang members, rapists, murderers, etc.). They are also accused of importing "gangs war" on sport fields or at least to imitate gang members. In the US and France, because of the lack of a political backing like the unions, young African American and youths from working-class *banlieues* of north African, African, and West Indian origin have had to rely upon themselves to fight against precariousness and discriminations and in their search for dignity. They are likely to

perceive the political struggle in an individual fashion. The ascetic practice of a sport such as bodybuilding or Thai boxing partakes of this individualistic disposition to (proto)political struggle, especially knowing that sport rests upon what can be called a “sport Darwinism” that favors the emergence of an elite by selecting the best and eliminating the weak.

Offering a new cosmogony to African American, the concept of “soul” has historically been a way for them to bring a cultural and sensual response to the contradictions resulting from racial domination and the alienation associated with it. The suffering implied by domination is expressed, even transformed, sensually and bodily, in the same way that jazz, rhythm and blues, or soul music, that are cultural mediations of this suffering (Ward, 1998) and that provide an emotional and moral framework of the lived experience of domination that can be transcended thanks to this poetics, and that re-enchant a vision of the social world. These cultural forms express the creative dialectical tension between domination and resistance and they constitute forms of social exorcism of the devil of racial domination and its hypnotic force (Taussig, 1980). However, it seems that contrarily to bodybuilders from the black ghetto, boxers from the working-class *banlieues* develop a more acute sense of solidarity that can facilitate the rise of a proto-political movement. The bodybuilder or the boxer becomes a sort of shaman who treats himself and fights the ghosts of domination that he has internalized in a ritualized way. Using an anthropomorphism that transforms his “problems” into an adversary whom he fights, Djamel does not say anything else than willing to dominate his domination and the sufferings that result from it when he says:

*At the gym, I'm more aggressive [than in everyday life]. I grumble, I express myself. The gym is an intimate place where I can put the evils out of me. When I train, and it happens to me a lot, the training helps me to get out all that is negative inside me, everything that*

*pollutes my everyday life to transform it into something positive. I have the impression of making an opposition to, a fight with my ego, and my problems. I do shadow boxing or spar with my problems, not the person in front of me. And when I do nice things when I train, I feel like I have dropped and dominated everything that I'm worried about, my problems, my pains. During the training, I'm upset because I remain aggressive to dominate all that. This is one of the reasons why I walk out of the gym my head cleared and calmed down.*

In the black ghetto and the working-class *banlieue*, in addition to their cathartic dimension, bodybuilding and Thai boxing are “practices of unloosening” (*pratiques de désenfermement*) (Schwartz, 2002: 323) that resist a certain social and ethnoracial essentialization. They are a somatic means to detach oneself from certain social identities, to challenge the social and ethnoracial order by recovering a certain form of universal identity in the esthetics and the efficiency of muscular growth and pugilistic competence, and the ethic that is associated with them. However, this “suspensive power” (Merleau-Ponty, 2006: 456) of the bodybuilder and boxer is not absolute and the gyms cannot remain fully hermetic to the social world and its forces. The body of the dominated – a fortiori when it is muscularly hypertrophied – is an *antibody* in the double sense of the word, both a carnal protection and a negation of the dominant body.

#### **4) Sensual Fabrication of Honor**

Because they have deprived of the instruments of political representation and struggle peculiar to the working class and therefore of a common language, the inhabitants of the French *banlieues* and the American ghettos have invented a body language to give meaning and sensuality to a dominated existence. The gyms are social institutions that constitute

mediations between agents where the dilemmas of the body, the honor and domination are intertwined, institutions, I believe, that exist partly because they replace previous forms of socialization like the factory or the union, or at least because they play similar roles. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are ways not only to gain muscle and combat techniques, but also *social honor* through carnal and sensual forms of resistance that have a true cognitive, emancipatory and political potential. In taking control over their body, bodybuilders and boxers try to escape nemesis and to rebuild a world that is animated by a certain morality and sensuality that have been historically denied to the descendants of slaves in the US and of the colonized in France.

*In the gym, a woman in her late thirties was talking with the man who was using the bench from which she took off his towel. As I was approaching them in order to pick up dumbbells out of the rack, I could only see them smiling, and then once I was close enough, I could only hear the man, in his late thirties, very muscular, big arms, well-built, a white wife-beater, grey pants, shaved head, smiling and saying to her 'Yeah, I'm lucky, I'm still alive and not in jail'. Apparently, for him at least, but it is more general, if one is alive or not in jail, one is 'lucky'.*

*An informant confessed that 'They sell drugs everywhere here', and the justification he gave was that 'they have no jobs'. He could easily understand the participation in the drug economy for that matter, but after having told me stories of murders in the neighborhood, he then condemned the use of violence, even though youths often are forced into gangs. Once, he had stopped some young gang members who were choking a young boy to make him faint so that they could beat him up by pulling him inside a deli<sup>22</sup>.*

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<sup>22</sup> "Coercive type of gang recruitment" in Jankowsky (1991: 55).

Domination creates tensions between esthetic sensibilities, individual desires, and the social structures that are somatized (Desjarlais, 1992: 243). The struggle against the effects of domination entails a ritual revitalization of the body that transforms bodies. Practiced in the black ghetto and the working-class *banlieue*, bodybuilding and Thai boxing are social and urban forms of exorcism that aim at relieving the sufferings of domination, whether social or ethnoracial.

### **5) A Threatening Body**

The black body, and more generally the dominated body, can be at the same time fetishized, esthetically admired, and despised. The muscular black body from the ghetto or the pugilistic body from the working-class *banlieue* partakes of the perception of these dominated bodies as vehicles of dangerousness. In the US, put aside the fact that the severity towards criminal activities (« *tough on crime* ») is very popular and that many people think that prison is not meant to be a pleasant place, and that the equipment costs a lot to tax payers, this supposed dangerousness is one of the reasons why between 1994 and 1997, bodybuilding was forbidden by federal laws (*Violent Criminal Incarceration Act of 1995*, *No Frills Prison Act of 1997*, *Prison Security Enhancement Act of 1997*), and in some state prisons (such as in Arizona, California, Mississippi, or South Carolina) that did not want to take the responsibility for creating bodybuilding “monsters” and “militarized bodies” (Saltman, 2003) who would assault inmates and guards, and who would terrorize the population when freed. Those militarized bodies become a sort of reserve army, cannon fodder for the American army whose recruiting offices are in poor neighborhoods. At the entrance of the studied gym in Brownsville, there is a rack full of documentation that are free

and available to the community, and on which can be found recruiting leaflets from the American army (“*Being a Soldier in the U.S. Army*” et “*Army Reserve/Using Your Job*”) and the recruiting office located in Brownsville whose address is printed on the back of the document.

A coach at the Starrett City Boxing Gym says about boxing that “*Poor people box because they want to make it. Rich people don’t need to box, they don’t want to box, they don’t want to take the risk. It’s about managing the risks. It’s like going to the war in Iraq or Afghanistan. You can die in the ring.*” The war on bodies creates bodies ready for war.

## **6) The Gyms: Dual Institutions**

The gyms are *dual* institutions: the practices of muscle-building and Thai boxing are both a way of (re)gaining a deprived social honor, and an effect of ethnoracial belief that has been incorporated. These institutions deviate from deviance and they *produce* ambivalent citizens who at the same time have bodily skills, are healthy and disciplined, and deprived of symbolic and material value on the labor market and who remain stuck at the lower rungs of the social ladder, while keeping them ready to be put into the *precarious* labor market. Bodybuilding in the ghetto, as a socialized and somatized form of resistance, matches with the expectations of a racialized disposition and therefore partakes of the maintaining of the symbolic reproduction of racial domination. The socialization within a racialized and racializing institution that is the black ghetto makes that social agents internalize the image of the muscular and virile black man, and other racialized representations, and therefore predisposes some of those agents to this practice, among and against other practices. Boxers participate in the reproduction of the received idea according to which “youths from the

*banlieue*” are violent and inclined to fight. Those representations are not racialized as in the US, but they are essentialized as well.

Institutional sport agents often claim that everybody can practice their sport without any distinction based on gender, skin color, class, and so on. During Thai boxing training, fights have to take place between two boxers who have more or less the same pugilistic capital. There is an egalitarian ideology in the gym. The youths from the working-class *banlieues* find in the practice of Thai boxing a social microcosm where they feel that they are treated on equal terms, contrary to their situation in “mainstream society,” and that in the ring where two boxers who must respect the same rules fight, the difference will be made through work and talent. And they feel that this is not unfair compared to a lot of situations they have to face in everyday life. Not only they have totally internalized the dominant egalitarian ideology, but they also reproduce it in the context of their pugilistic practice. Djamel phrases it as follow: *“It’s a sport that has no color, gender, et cetera. I think that girls find some values in this sport and that’s what bring them to practice.”*

The trainers assert that everybody, “champion or not,” must follow the same rules. This egalitarian rhetoric is also a way to impose the pedagogical power, even if boxers unevenly submit to it depending mainly on the status of the boxers within the pugilistic field. It is also an injunction to strip oneself off one’s forms of social and ethnic identification. In his study of a boxing gym in the black ghetto of Chicago, Wacquant discerns a similar “egalitarian ethos and pronounced color-blindness of pugilistic culture” (2004, 10). However, the gym is both a fraternal and competitive universe. There is a solidarity that is due to the similar conditions of existence shared by those who practice, to the fact they know each other (they are neighbors, live in the same neighborhood or the same city), and that they endure the same conditions of training. Thai boxing is an agonistic practice where one has to prove oneself, to be at least equal to one’s opponent if not superior, technically, physically and

mentally. But paradoxically, the courage that is necessary to go into the ring or only to practice this sport where training is hard and where one gets hit produces a strong carnal and moral solidarity.

This role becomes institutionalized as what Goffman calls a “collective representation,” and the agent who plays this role, having incorporated it, ends up to accept unconsciously “self-deception.” I would add that it is inscribed not only on or in the heads of social agents but also in their body in the form of a racial habitus which is below consciousness, in case of African-Americans, in the form of ethic and esthetic dispositions toward practices that develop the body, and especially bodybuilding which therefore becomes a social need that echoes an expectation. The black body, to be *legitimate*, has to be muscular and *distinct* from the white body, supposedly less muscular by nature, without the conscious search for distinction. Contrary to the ideology of sport as disinterested, those who practice sports are interested in getting material profits especially when sport is the only way, along with hip-hop, and put aside the informal economy, to climb the social ladder, but also *symbolic* profits through a hyper-muscled body<sup>23</sup>, profits that the bodybuilder tries to get in the most economical way through the rationalization of hard and efficient training sometimes associated with dietary and pharmaceutical help, measured by weight and/or muscular gains and/or fat loss, but also by the *recognition* of people. The irony of pumping iron in the ghetto is that trying to regain a lost social honor, black men end up, consciously or not, reproducing racial beliefs by fueling representations white people have about them, but also those that black people have of themselves.

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<sup>23</sup> This is more generally true with for instance, the political success of Arnold Schwarzenegger, one of the best professional bodybuilders, who has become the governor of California thanks to his charisma, his symbolic capital acquired through acting and bodybuilding.

## **Chapter 7: Learning to Work. Inculcation, Incorporation, and Incarnation**

### **1) Learning How to Build Muscles and to Fight**

To repeat, the ideology of the “gift” is relatively common among boxers and bodybuilders. Starrett City Boxing coach Denzel gives his view of what should be a good boxer, and qualifications are, he says, innate. One of the essential characteristics must be the “will to win” that is, he says, something the boxer has “inside” him and that can not be learned:

*Basically someone who is relaxed in the ring... there's three things in boxing you gotta have to be able to make yourself a good boxer. Number one you gotta be able to dish it out. Number two you gotta be able to take it. And number three you gotta have a will to win. Those are the three key ingredients. As you go to the higher level, those things become more obvious and they play more of a part. Early on it's not as difficult because you can basically match your guy better than the opposite opponent. As you bring him along you carefully match him, but you don't wanna put him in a fight that is gonna be too difficult early on. But as they progress, you want the fights to be better caliber of an opponent so the fighter learns more in the ring and gain the experience. You can teach him, you can show him, you can tell him, but ultimately they have to do it. That's the bottom line.*

*Question: Do you think that the boxer has to learn those three important elements, for instance the will to win?*

*Denzel: You can't teach that. That has to be inside the fighter, in the fighter's makeup. You know, anybody can win when it's going easy, when you're in an adverse moment, if you get knocked down, if you get cut, you know, something like that, then you tell the boxing of the fighter whether or not the fighter is willing to go that extra, to dig down deeper in his soul, the will to win has to be there, you can't teach that, that has to be in the fighter. Because as you go to the higher level, you know, opponents get better and better, the fights are tougher and tougher, and you're basically on the same level skills-wise, the difference is the will to win, and to dig down deep. I think if you look at like Ray Leonard's fight with Thomas Hearns, the first fight, when Leonard was loosin' the fight, he came back to his opponent in the twelfth round, Angelo Dundee turn around and said to him 'you blowin' it son, you blowin' it!' He didn't sit down and tell him 'do this! And do that! Step to the left!' no, he said 'you gotta reach down deep, you blowin' it! Basically it's up to you. You gotta reach in and go down deep'. The will to win is something that has to be in the fighter. That's something that makes all the great ones, Ali, Leonard, Robinson, Armstrong, Lewis, Marciano.*

*Question: How do you think they got that will to win those guys?*

*Denzel: Everybody doesn't have it. The great ones have it. The will is just something that's there, you know, and I just said every great fighter has it, always willing to dig deep, you go that extra yard to... you know in the case of Foreman when he fought Ron Lyle, he got knocked down twice and he got up, people didn't know that about him but he got that kind of will to win, they always looked at him as being a bully. One of the guys that didn't seem to have it was Tyson. He was a great offensive fighter, but when he had adversity, he didn't*

*handle it, you know, not to say anything, you know, that he's a coward or anything like that, that's not what I'm saying but, you know, anybody that is what they call a front runner when things are goin' okay, you know they look great, you bein' cut, knocked down, hurt, staggered, you put your hand, your arm, your shoulder, and you just will yourself to win, the great ones have it.*

Bodybuilding and Thai boxing gyms are at the heart of the novitiate of the practitioners. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing, in their learning process, change the relation of the practitioner to his own body. Bodies are muscularly transformed, in the way they are carried, moved, and used. Practitioners develop an ability to do what they have learned instantly without a long process of reflection by mobilizing embodied knowledge while adapting it to the situation (such as muscle development in relation to another, changing the angle of an exercise for the bodybuilder, to find the strategic “solution” in an infinitesimal amount of time during a fight with the right combination of moves for example for the boxer). The boxer is being put in contemplative situation only temporarily during learning and not in combat, while the bodybuilder is more often, especially in front of the mirror. Put in a combat situation, the boxer has even less time to reflect on a technique than the bodybuilder. To think too much in the ring not only has the effect of obtaining a stereotypical and slow boxing, but it also endangers the physical integrity of the boxer. Bodily practice makes closer action and reflection. Learning is a very powerful form of socialization. Bodily practices are a crucial way to establish identification processes<sup>24</sup>, and produce beliefs. They are part of a work of inculcation of dispositions. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing take place in a certain division of educational and disciplinary labor. Bodybuilding techniques are not really taught by a coach. Practitioners do their training on their own. There is no, as in other

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<sup>24</sup> To learn the practice of traditional Turkish lute (saz) is a way to learn to be a “good Turk” especially a male one, cf. Bryant (2005).

sports like Thai boxing, group lessons, and a sense of “ordered anarchy” emanates from the gym, to borrow the words of Evans-Pritchard about the political organization of the Nuer (1994, 22). However, in the gyms frequented by middle and upper classes, many people use a personal trainer. This is less true in the gyms located in working-class areas, especially for economic reasons but also because members of the working classes are more reluctant to hand over the care of their body to someone else.

Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are techniques of the body, traditional and efficient, and forms of embodied and practical knowledge that are transmitted orally and bodily. Although there are few guides here and there and other training books, those somatic practices have in common the absence of exegesis in the way they are taught and learnt. Thus, the body is a mediating agent of the transmission of knowledge. Of course language suggests movements and gestures but it is not something abstract, it is a technique of the body, and to speak of “body language” may be redundant.

*Fabrice, which circulates among boxers, stops by two boxers who are sparring, and after seeing one of them land a low-kick to the other and seeing him react in a very rigid way, Fabrice says “did you see when he gave you the low-kick, it was flexible, and you, you’re too stiff, you’re like that, [he imitates him to the caricature: he is straight, fixed, and makes a very stereotyped sequence left right] nah, you must be flexible [Fabrice puts himself in a good position, moves smoothly, looks at the first boxer and goes in front of him, which means that he asks him that both show the other one how to do] like that, then look, if he throws you a low-kick, you block and you strike back smoothly,” the boxer smoothly places a low-kick to Fabrice who blocks, Fabrice warns “with the guard high, otherwise he’s gonna send you his fists,” Fabrice lowers his guard and the boxer sends his fists to show that without a guard, they reach the head, and Fabrice starts to talk to him and shows directly. [Field note]*

In the weight room, there is no real collective courses or coaches who teach bodybuilding techniques except a personal instructor who deals mostly with women by giving them individual advice when they require his help. Marcus is the manager of the gym, he ensures that all goes well, gives some lessons and advises practitioners. He says:

*I give them advice, how to do an exercise, how to position their arm, what kind of exercise is good for the part they want to work.*

There are nevertheless on the walls boards with the essential techniques for each muscle group. In the weight room as in the Thai boxing gym, there is a transfer of skills between practitioners. Bodybuilders and boxers acquire practical techniques by observing and sometimes by teaching others, more often in Thai boxing, and training, and learning them “by body.” This reflects among the working classes the importance of practical knowledge over theory. This trend has, paradoxically, been produced by the school system, particularly in guiding students in disadvantaged neighborhoods and stigmatized groups towards professional training and manual work. This orientation towards practice is valued in the working-class culture and is the assertion of the control over time and a useful skill. In order to learn how to perform the exercises correctly, one should use not only one's mind but also one's body, one's body and mind. As Merleau-Ponty says, “I can only understand the function of the living body by performing myself and to the extent that I am a body that rises towards the world” (2006: 104). In a virtually Promethean move, when an bodybuilder or an experienced boxer, like a titan, armed with his pugilistic or muscle erudition, teaches a less experienced practitioner how to lift weight or throw a kick, he shows him how to do the exercise often with few words. This practical knowledge is learned as much with language as

with the body. The bodybuilder, like the boxer, reproduces the practice by body “language games” to paraphrase Wittgenstein. Thus, pedagogy, located between art and science, is a “practical theory” as it teaches for action (Durkheim, 1925: 2-3).

*Three men, two in their 20s and the other one in his 30s, were working their biceps on the pulley together and a big guy in his 40s was showing them how to do and he was giving them advice. Then, he left. Three big guys in their late 30s were doing their pecs on the other butterfly next to me and one of them was resting and saw the other men doing their biceps and it was his turn so he sat on the machine and told his friend straight forward “show him how to do,” which he did. He went to them and showed them how to do the exercise correctly. The pulley was too high so they were working the shoulder too much. The pulley had to be at the same level than the shoulder and the elbow should not go up or down, and they had to flex only the arm without moving anything else, standing up. [Field note]*

In this example, the bodybuilder who receives the advice is docile in the double sense of being taught and obeys, as illustrated by the fact that his muscles become relaxed when the tutor arrives. Paradoxically, the more a practitioner suffers from what Bachelard calls the “complex of Prometheus” (Bachelard, 1985: 30) the more he shows docility towards the one who transmits knowledge and that he wants to surpass. “To obey is to honor,” says Hobbes (2004: 79). To obey someone is to recognize his or her power. Docility and obedience shown by the bodybuilder rest on his belief in the charisma of the bodybuilder who advises and in his legitimacy – whether visible in the case of the bodybuilder or acquired by the won titles for the boxer. Apparent muscles are like the coat of arms borne by a knight, that is to say, a sign of power and respectability. If a bodybuilder or a Thai-boxer gives way to perform the movements that he is shown, it is because he believes in their efficiency precisely because he

sees that they have worked on others. Omar says that from the first training, he has left it up to the coaches and their instructions in complete docility:

*Question: have you been surprised by the way boxing is taught in the gym?*

*Omar: I had no preconceived ideas in relation to that in fact. I thought they know better than me, so if you have to do like that well come on let's go, we'll do it this way. I had no preconceived ideas about it actually, I first came thinking I need to learn, they teach me like that, well I'm going to learn like that, that's all. There was no problem.*

Like any practice that one needs to learn and acquire, bodybuilding and Thai boxing rest partly on the plasticity of the body and the docility of bodybuilders or boxers which is based on the recognition of the legitimacy of the one who teaches. To build muscle or to box first is to let one's body build muscle or box, and it is also accepting the way that one is going to get muscle or box.

*At the end of the training, during the gathering, Fabrice is not satisfied and tells it to the boxers. According to him, there are too many boxers who do not work out hard enough and who come to "decorate the gym." Fabrice points his finger at a boxer who stopped training before the end and who is seated and watching the end of the training, and he says to the boxers that this boxer has worked out better than a lot of those who have done the whole session. "when you do abs plank and your arms are here (elbows next to the hips), well your guard is low and you get punched! No you have to raise your arms and your guard, to protect your head!" Fabrice does not appreciate either that some boxers do not accept criticism, which is "not always negative" says Fabrice. He imitates a boxer to whom a made a remark*

*by making someone who turns his head, frowns and looks down on him. For Fabrice, boxers must listen to criticism, remarks and apply them. He confesses that his was like that at the beginning of his career, then when he would go back home after the training, he would think and tell himself “they’re right”, talking about the coaches. Fabrice takes the example of a champion of the gym who stayed docile and humble and starts to extol his virtues: “take Ahmed, he’s fought in all the rings of the planet, you tell him to jump feet together and arms in the air, he’s gonna do it!” [Field note]*

Nabil says that despite the air of severity of the coaches in the remarks or the technical calls to order, they not only take pleasure in teaching boxers but they also act for their good. He points out the circulation of the pugilistic knowledge pugilistic:

*In the gym, for example, he will come to you and shout ‘no, I told you not do this or that’ but it is because he takes pleasure in exercising his function as a coach, he wants you to succeed and sometimes, like every human being, it is well to accept his mistakes and to listen to advice, because everything is good advice to take, whether whether from a kid or a grownup, we can learn from anybody, we learn every day. And Alain, you can see it, in the gym he can scream the hell at you and at the end of the training he laughs with you because the training is over, we take back our role as a human being. And the fact that he shouts at you, it’s not mean. It’s true that some boxers take it the wrong way, I can understand that, but I am a person who, for me when you yell at me it’s because you want me to succeed. The person speaking to you is the person who wants you to succeed, if the person says nothing it is because she doesn’t care about you. Fabrice sometimes sees me when I spar, sometimes he tells me ‘good,’ sometimes ‘Nabil relax! no Nabil no!’ and I listen because I know that behind the screams there is the intention for me to do well, he intends to teach me to do well.*

*Any advice is good to learn, this is what I am saying and I would keep it that way. It is important to know to listen as we like to be understood. You must return the favor, if you think the favor will only come from one sense, you're dead wrong.*

Bodily practices – and this is especially true for Thai boxing because it is supposed to be tougher – predispose agents who practice not only to be more docile if they are not already, but also to accept difficulty as a step towards a better future. The first training sessions are hard and one does not necessarily see progress. The practice of Thai boxing has made Nadia more docile, just because she realized that advice, or sometimes the harsh remarks from the coaches, serve to make her progress:

*I was relieved about that ... it took away from me ... before I was told anything, I would answer right away. Not anymore, someone says something to me, I take it the right way, even if it's something negative, there's no problem, I take it for me. And then, I will try to get better or even in everyday life. And that's precisely what I like with Fabrice, with him, you're never good enough, but because he always tries to make us better. He doesn't do the minimum, he doesn't want us to only have the basics. He wants us to be precise, that's what is also great with Fabrice, when he accompanies us in our boxing, he tries to make us very precise, he says 'if you make four thousand pieces and there only one or two hundred that are good, it's useless,' the blows, we make them again and again ' we repeat them million and millions times.*

To Mounir, during the first training sessions of Thai boxing, the difficulty did not lie so much in the physical intensity as in learning the specific techniques of Thai boxing:

*Frankly, physically, I held out, because I had come once to watch and I had told myself yeah I would never stand the intensity and stuff like that, and I held out, I was surprised, I was more bothered by the technique.*

*Question: Was it hard at the beginning?*

*Mounir: Yeah it was hard, 'throw a left' I would throw a right, but some nasty rights on top of that, as if I was beating someone up in the street, honestly, it was hard at the beginning, you tell yourself that you will never succeed to throw a good right. But after, with time, the movements and all that, you repeat...*

*Question: Didn't you have hard times with the middle-kick? When you've never practiced Thai boxing it's kind of hard ...*

*Mounir: Yeah the middle-kick too [laughs], during the very first training, we were sparring, given that I had just arrived and I knew nothing, he told me 'go and do some shadow boxing,' so I start to do shadow boxing and I try to throw a high-kick and boom I slip! [laughs] I say to myself 'that's kind of hard!'*

*Question: What about the knees?*

*Mounir: I didn't even try the knees. Honestly, the first training, I only did the fists, they sent me over to hit the bag, Fabrice told me 'the arm and all that.'*

But if you persevere, hard work will bear fruit. Zakaria said that Thai boxing reminded the principle that hard work is supposed to pay off:

*Something at the mental level that is good in this sport, you see that hard work pays off, it teaches you that in fact. Because, see, the more you go there all the time and you see that you progress, you tell yourself it is by dint of hard work that you've reached this level and frankly yeah it teaches you that, not to give up, even when you're in a difficult time in combat, you never give up, you continue to advance, it teaches you that.*

Leroy, boxing coach at the Starrett City Boxing in East New York, thinks that the boxer who moves back shows his opponent a weakness. According to him, the boxer should never retreat, make one or several steps back, but rather turn around his opponent:

*Basically when I'm training a new guy what I do is I wanna prepare him with a good guard, I want him to have an offense and defense in one package because most of the time a good well trained eye whether be his corner or the fighter, everything in boxing is open, right, it's a matter of you getting to that opening without leaving yourself open. So basically, that's why everybody starts off with the jab, it's a feel out process to find out where you gonna get up and find your opening. So you get this position that's more sideways, you noticed that all the boxing, not only boxing but all fighting positions give one side of themselves. The reason for this is because it's accessible movement, accessible to make better movement that way and it's defensively safe. You got one side to hit and you pretty much got one side to protect and you got all day to do it. So the first thing starts off with the jab. So behind the jab, you should learn how to block or duck, those two things you need, right after the offense you gotta have the defensive position. So now you have your directions, you have*

*the straight line and the circle. The only two moves you practically can do, right, although you're on a square ring, these two moves where you basically make the most out of these two shifts, straight line mostly used for attacking okay or backing out, all right. Now the circle which is a square you know it's a square really you're saying like north, south, east, and west. So what it is is that you laterally move around your center, the center of... which looks good offensively because you don't wanna judge the thinking that you're scared of this individual. Anybody backin' up even an individual that is boxing backin' up he is going to feel some sense of insecurity, even him backin' up he feels insecure. That is a dangerous move even on yourself. In this sport you're supposed to always feel defensively or... in other words you're not... feeling any sense of defense is critical on your part. You can look at an individual and see that he's feeling a little insecure about his moves. Moving back is a sure side of an insecure move. So now circling your opponent whether be left or right works for either southpaw or the other side I don't care who your opponent is if he is a left hand fighter or right hand fighter believe me circling him is a very good defensive position. It puts you in a position of defense because you can pretty much know, you're in a position to defend yourself against that punch all right and you're too far from his right hand, you're too far from his right jab. The worst boxer is a head out. If he only knows the top of your head, you're gonna be around. Number one is his arm is reaching up and he's gonna get tired. By the time the war starts you would have nothing to finish. So it's the guy who has the endurance that's gonna take the swing. So you should always learn your body parts like the ribs, the sides, the body is the best attack you can get. Everybody trains for a good stomach, abs, their abs are in good shape but right above their abs is the solar plexus and you catch that right okay you just deflate somebody's tire, so that's real good air pockets, always aim for your air pockets, no matter how long the guy's arm is, make him move his arms so you can get to his air pockets. Fake him with a jab to the head, right hooks, left hooks and then*

*aim air socks that's where you should be concentrated that's all, all right. Once we have tired the body out, right, now the head is too tired to... too tired for the body to hold it up, it's a matter of the best finishes. Now you have a way to design one of the most brilliant finishes that you can imagine. This is what separates... makes Sugar Ray winning, the Muhammad Alis, the Sugar Ray Robinsons, these are the super stars of the game because of their finish. It don't have nothing... it's the attack and the finish. It's like a painting, you understand. When you put that last finishing although when you see the start, it's like the worst piece to look at, but when that finishing hits, okay, we forget how the guy started.*

*AO: Like Muhammad Ali against Foreman in Zaire...*

*Leroy: Beautiful finish! But the way it started it looked really everybody would have betted at late everybody would lost all their money on Ali because Foreman just looked like he would kill his opponent, right. When he really lured Foreman into a trap because he knew Foreman was a killer, he helped Foreman by antagonizing him, instigating him, upsetting him, you know he did everything, talking about his mother, told him he has a little penis, did everything in the world to enhance his ego. He was practically training him to punch harder, when you punch yourself completely out, it's not that Ali hit harder than Foreman all right, it was the finish, where he hit Foreman at.*

*AO: The finish was brilliant...*

*Leroy: ...was brilliant. Put it in history! Put the game back in the lateral, you know what I'm sayin'. And this is what I look for when I train a fighter. I look for a guy who... you know he gotta be a mechanic, I look for mechanics, you know what I mean. You gotta*

*troubleshoot before you can repair and if they can troubleshoot like I want, the repair is there, that's it, it's a brilliant thing. I like guys who never do boxing, I like little kids, you know what I'm sayin'.*

*Question: It's easier to teach kids?*

*Leroy: You know who makes the best boxers? Women. You know why? Because their body, unlike men, men have that masculine testosterone thinking, you know what I'm sayin'. If I tell a guy to throw a jab, right, he wants that jab to rip through the wall, you know what I mean, when a woman naturally can stretch that jab out, turning around, even the way her lower part, that's what a fighter has a lower part and a waist. This part helps the shoulders move, get the hell out of the way, you understand, that's why I emphasize those kinds of exercise. But when a woman get in there, it's like her bottom half, it has a brain of its own, it thinks for itself. So if I tell a woman to throw the right hand, it would take me fifteen to twenty minutes to show how to throw the right hand with turning with her waist, now with a man, three four days, right, because he's not ready to disconnect this part [the upper body] from this part [the legs], he don't understand, it's just like the gun, the trigger, the hammer and the bullet, they don't realize, that's what they lose and a woman already got it, she understand, she understand her body, because she's created like Eve anyway, that's why she got the advantage [laughs] we used to think, you know, we have something to do with that, but trust me we have a lotta way to go, we now let the science tell the truth.*

One can hypothesize that this adjustment to the difficulty or even failure can be transposed by the agent who would face socio-economic difficulties in his everyday life. Because he is trained, disciplined, accustomed, the agent will be more willing to accept living

conditions deemed “difficult” because he will put in action embodied competencies acquired during his practice – mental and motor patterns – which order him to accept the difficulty in order to eventually overcome it. The practitioner is conditioned and then predisposed to set a goal and reach it. Gaspard is convinced that Thai boxing has brought him this ability to adapt to his ordinary life:

*Never give up, always excel yourself reach your goals, I mean all kinds of things that can boost you in your life, in your everyday social, professional or romantic life, It is the values we were talking about earlier [respect, solidarity, etc.] that motivate you to go further, to as far as you can go. Personally, I really draw a parallel, I work like that, I do not know if the others work like that or it is just a hobby or something like that, I really experience the thing, you know what I mean, but it's true that I could do more, I could, I don't know, go to Thailand every month, make this kind of things that I still don't have the time to do, but I think it's a thing I experience fully and that I use to advance in my professional or social life.*

He is able to accept the difficulty because he has somewhat immunized his body by dint of training. He is virtually “armored” or “vaccinated.” The training is a kind of propaedeutic that prepares the beginner to become a confirmed boxer or bodybuilder. Learning is made along a continuum going from action without words, through the explained gesture, to the speech without gesture. During Thai boxing training, most of the exercises that boxers have to do during the collective lessons are shown and explained. These pugilistic exchanges are not trivial and if the fighters watch them closely, it is firstly because they have a vested interest, and also because the coach who has made the demonstrations possesses the required symbolic capital (himself equipped with symbolic attributes such as the coach vest, the keys of lockers, *paos*, vests bearing the image of the club at competitions, etc.). Omar

describes the almost magical quality of the demonstration of a low-kick by Fabrice and highlights the fact that despite his relatively small height, Fabrice is hired as a security guard based on his pugilistic skills:

*I remember the first time Fabrice spoke to me, he was showing me how to do low-kicks, he was saying 'you have to do like this' and I was watching him put me a low-kick but it didn't really look extraordinary to me, but the first low-kick that he put me I thought he was going to blow my leg off, I was like 'Wow!' and without putting any speed at all, it was simple with just the hip.*

*AO: Alain says that his tibias are as hard as rock...*

*Omar: I imagine if he really throw a kick ... Once I had seen Fabrice I dunno where he was a in security service, he was the smallest, he was the smallest of all the guys, they were all hefty, they were all six feet and a half and all and I had seen him and I had told myself if it turns wrong frankly the guy who comes to face him frankly it's over for him, because I think he will head towards him saying to himself yeah he's the smallest but uh ...*

Boxers recognize this symbolic power and it is this same symbolic power, which finds its explanation in part out of the gym, that is at work during the ritual speech at the end of the session before the collective greeting, a privileged moment during which coaches say what they have to say to the boxers collectively. The voice of the coaches has a quasi-magical or better prophetic efficacy. Although boxers can sometimes be reluctant, it is rare to find a boxer who does not do what a coach tells him to do or who does what he is supposed not to do. And it is probably at the intersection of the social uses of the body, the use of language

and the division of time that we must seek an explanation for the inculcation of “values” specific to a particular social group (such as “respect,” “politeness,” etc.).

However, the inculcation of the practice does not operate without resistance:

*During the final gathering, Fabrice complains about some of the boxers he believes are stubborn. He says that “there's some of you, if you open their head [he makes the gesture], you find a stone,” that makes everybody laugh, he goes on “oh yeah, I swear!”*  
[Field note]

Fabrice seems to say that some do not listen to advice or instructions of the coaches, they must be more docile, more responsive, and apply what they are told. Mounir says that some boxers assimilate the advice to negative criticisms and that even him when he started, he hardly accepted criticism:

*Some of us take it as a personal criticism. Honestly, I didn't like it either at the beginning. I would throw a left ‘no that's not good’ and all, because for you a left is a left, it will lend on his face no matter what. But then ‘your arm is not here, you're not protected’ and all, you don't see that at the beginning, you tell yourself “but it's okay like this’ in your head you're sure that it's good. Then when you look you see it's not good, after a while you tell yourself ‘if he says that, it's not for nothing’. I think it's a plus in our gym compared to other gyms. In some gyms, you go there, you hit the bag, the coach looks at you, he knows that what you're doing isn't good, he's going to look at you, he's gonna say ‘go on’ while here they take the time to explain to you, Fabrice stops you, sometimes he talks to you for an hour, as long as the gesture isn't good, he doesn't let you go. That's good, because in some gyms, honestly, they don't even pay attention to you.*

This shows that resistance emerges, but at the same time these resistances provide an opportunity for coaches to reaffirm, in a circuitous course, the need for boxers to be docile and therefore redouble their efforts to obtain docility from them and perhaps convince the boxers to be docile.

*Fabrice approaches two boxers who work on the punching bags. He is not very happy with what a boxer does. He says to him, imitating him, "look at that, you bring back your leg too much on the side." Fabrice complains that the boxer brings back his leg that has just hit the bag in a way that it is too high and too on the side, it is too artificial and not "natural" enough. "Look at his leg it comes back and falls by itself" speaking of the end of the gesture of the boxer who works with him on the bag. He does not rotate his hip enough and he is too tense according to Fabrice who reproaches him that and "to seek too much the power, it's useless." Then he adds: "look, he shoots well," speaking of the same boxer, so they start looking at this boxer execute a middle-kick, and Fabrice says "look how his leg is turning," he speaks of the leg of support that should turn, then he says "looks at his leg as it comes back alone." The boxer is trying somehow to do what Fabrice just told him but it's hard, and Fabrice is a bit annoyed and tells him "see, what we teach you each time is useful" and then he continues his tour, a little annoyed. Zoubir smiles and says to the boxer: "you've upset him!" The other boxer smiles back and says "yeah I know but ..." Then he explains that he must turn hip, showing him, and Azedine shows him too how to throw a middle-kick on the bag. [Field note]*

The coaches may also insist on the external dangers that threaten the integrity of the boxers who do not improve their techniques and do not apply instructions.

*Alain says that during a fight the boxer is not alone, there is a “snitch,” a coach in the corner who, with his experience, will see everything and especially “your weak points,” so “he will tell his boxer to let you come and to throw you a right, and then you’ll see! Now on the internet, we can find the weak points of the fighters... so you block his blows, and if he advances you step back and you throw a front-kick. We bust our ass to teach you techniques, but you don’t apply them!” [Field note]*

## **2) Spatialization of Knowledge**

The learning process requires a specific temporality that itself requires a specific spatiality.

*While they are waiting for the beginning of the training, two boxers are chatting and mention facebook. Fabrice joins the discussion and says “huh facebook! I have a laptop but I don’t understand anything! My children know how to use it and when I ask them to teach me, they tell me ‘so here’s the at sign, you do like this,’ Fabrice makes the gesture of typing on a keyboard, “but it’s going too fast for me, I don’t understand anything! If you teach somebody, you need to do it slowly, when I teach I take my time.” [Field note]*

This remark from Fabrice expresses a generational break vis-à-vis technology and therefore the relation to time that is as accelerated for youth. There is every reason to believe that partly for that, the youngest boxers do not always have the patience needed to learn.

The learning of a bodily practice goes through the *spatialization* of knowledge. The one who teaches *stages* the technique that has to be executed. During the inculcation of body

techniques, “the gesture is detemporalized to be apprehended in a theoretical attitude close to contemplation” (Bruant, 1992: 209). Contemplation is nevertheless only a step in the learning process: the boxer or bodybuilder contemplates, then acts in reproducing what has observed. We could say, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty that the acquisition of a bodybuilding or pugilistic technique is “really the capture of a meaning, but it is the moving capture of a moving meaning” (2006: 178). Even though it appears to be purely technical, the teaching of a bodily practice is also a means, often denied, of transmitting cultural and moral ways of being and thinking related to social class, gender and ethnicity to a certain extent. For example, wrestlers from Northern India have to totally rely on their guru and their practice is first used to prepare them to receive knowledge from this “pure agent of transformation” that is the guru (Alter, 1992: 59, 66-67). There is a manducation, by the disciples, of the words and gestures of the one who demonstrates. The transmission of knowledge mainly is made by explaining the things that must not be done. The practitioner is under the constant gaze of another practitioner or a coach, and if he makes a mistake, a wrong gesture, somebody will tell him and correct him so that he can do it the right way by showing or telling him.

*During an exercise, a boxer throws a jab that the opponent has to deflect with his fist and then he must strike back immediately with his knee. For this exercise Aimé chooses Zakaria for the demonstration. According to Fabrice, Zakaria throws his left too high while Aimé asked him to aim at his forehead, he asks him where is the forehead, the forehead is not the skull, he shows a jab by punching Aimé on the skull, but his fist slips on Aimé’s skull and is therefore totally inefficient. He says to Zakaria, who does not look satisfied, that “it’s too important.” The fist must hit directly Aimé’s forehead. Fabrice shows several times the right movement. When he throws jabs on Aimé’s forehead, he insists on the fact that it does not*

*hurt, and that nobody is going to die. Then on a last jab from Fabrice, he pretends to be knock down to play to the gallery.* [Field note]

Not only there is a form of auto-discipline from the practitioners, but also a discipline imposed or at least diffused by the other practitioners. Discipline is both centrifugal and centripetal, a dynamic that is made possible by the spatial confinement of the gym. We can therefore glimpse how ways of being and thinking take shape. The organization of the gym shows the boxers that there is a hierarchy based on the possession of a pugilistic capital and that it has to be respected, and most of the time the coaches do not even need to show their authority and to ask the boxers that they must respect them. In both gyms, those who have more pugilistic or muscular capital take possession of the gym, by monopolizing a machine, a punch bag, the ring, etc. when a champion leads the warm-up, all the other boxers follow him and obey to his orders without hesitation, because he has proved himself. This makes inscribe within the boxers' body a symbolic and hierarchized representation of the world that appears natural, even magical. Besides its leonine dimension, the champion possesses at least one characteristic of the magician as analyzed by Mauss: he has a power over himself that allows him to accomplish certain movements, certain techniques that others cannot do (2006: 26).

In the case of somatic practices that are bodybuilding and Thai boxing, there is an alteration in action of the boundary between the mind and the body. The Thai boxing coaches recurrently appeal to the presence of mind of the boxers in the practical situation of an exercise. We can cite the example of one session entirely dedicated to strengthen boxers' endurance and resistance and to test their determination and concentration during which exercises that are said to be "physical" (push-ups, crunches, abs, series of rolls in order to simulate a knock-down, etc.) were being done one after another with very little rest. While Aimé perceives the first signs of tiredness from some boxers, he says, not without irony: "*you*

*know why we're doing this? Because I ate four chocolate bars today and I need to eliminate them. You can eat some too, but you'll need to eliminate them.*" Then, to the first signs of exhaustion of other boxers, he asks: *"You're tired guys? You have to be lucid now!"* Not only this session has a function of reinforcing the capacities of endurance, as Chérif reminds the boxers saying: *"you'll see, this session will be good for you,"* but it also allows to prepare the boxer to use his presence of mind, his lucidity when he is tired on the ring during a fight, and at that moment the learned and acquired techniques are supposed to translate into the form of "automatic reflexes" based on the fighting situation, what is often called by athletes the "vista", that is the capacity to quickly analyze a fighting situation, the possible blows and moves, and even the capacity to anticipate them. The pursuit of pain in such a session also prompts the interconnection of boxers' suffering bodies and reinforces a masculinist ethos. The experience of the suffering cements the *esprit de corps* that transcends the simple addition of individualities, the emotion making the mediation between the body and the mind.

The practice of Thai boxing is a way to challenge in action the dissociation body/mind. Fabrice clearly expresses it when, at the beginning of the training, he exhorts all the boxers to *"box with your head!"* and at the end of the same session, he repeats it and insists on it. He shows his biceps and repeats that one does not box with one's strength but with one's *intelligence*: *"you gotta be smart, if you look at champions usually they are the most smart."* Then he makes a long tirade on the opposition strength/intelligence: *"when you'll be tired, strength won't matter, it'll be intelligence... if you want to hit hard, go to other gyms, they hit hard in there! But then in a competition 'the referee stole my win'..."* Fabrice limps and staggers. He says: *"you gotta box with your head and your eyes"* not with the muscles or strength, *"if you don't box intelligently but using strength you gotta take a serious beating and you gonna wake up in the locker room and that's another story!"* Fabrice likes to take good boxers – whether in Thai boxing or international style boxing – as

examples: *Fabrice says to me “Have you seen the way he won?” I don’t understand what he is talking about, I ask him: “who?” and Fabrice answers “Pacquiao” [world champion who defended his title the day before the training], I say “oh yeah!” and him “see, that’s a boxer! I like boxers like that! He’s smart!”* Or the reference in Thai boxing and in Thailand: *during what the members of the gym call the “cup of friendship,” Fabrice and two boxers are talking together, Fabrice explains to Mounir that a boxer must be smart, and tells him, talking about a boxer who has trained in Thai gyms “ask him how smart they are in Thailand, they are small but they hit you, they touch you and they turn around, whereas us, we want to hit back right away and we lose our temper.”* As if he has given himself the mission of countering the common sense and the symbolic order of the space of practices, Fabrice declares: *“I repeat, boxing is an intelligent sport.”* The coaches know the way their boxers fight and make classifications. In the ring, Alain asks two boxers with opposite style to spar: *“he’s gonna rush at you, and you, box with your head!”* Those words has had the effect of restraining a little bit the boxer known for rushing at his opponents and has made him box more reflexively.

*During the final gathering, Fabrice tells the boxers to fight with their head and their eyes “it’s the most important things we have” and to not search for power when they work out. Fabrice criticizes those who invoke God in order to have more strength win a duel and so on, it is rather the technique and their head that will help them, not God. Fabrice uses the metaphor of the fire: he says that we cannot burn ourselves with some spark (those who will use strength as a feat), but with glowing embers, well done, real red, we really burn ourselves “go and burn yourself you’ll see!” [Field note]*

As Bachelard says, “burning, that is to say, natural inhibition, by confirming social prohibitions only gives, to the eyes of children, more value to the father’s intelligence,” and adds “if the child reaches for the fire, his father hits him with a ruler on the fingers. The fire hits without having to burn” (Bachelard, 1949: 28-29). Through the metaphor of the fire, Fabrice suggests boxer another temporality of the pugilistic action, another relation to adversity. Boxers must be reflexive when they fight, and must not rush the head down and their muscles out to the opponent.

The boxers know that the gym is divided at least into two spaces: the main room where boxers warm up, work on their techniques, physique, hit the bags and so on, and a little room where the ring is, whose function is to reproduce spatially and temporally the real fighting conditions. Omar sees the two spaces as complementary in his pugilistic formation:

*Both are complementary in fact. When you’re in the main room, you work more on the technique, you want to improve your movements. When you go in the ring, it’s as if you were taking an exam, it’s a test where precisely all what you’ve worked, you try to apply it at full speed and in actual fighting conditions. And it builds you up too. To go in the ring from time to time is good for you, you spar, you can situate yourself, if you can keep up with the pace, it’s good, both are complementary.*

*AO: In the ring it goes very fast, but at the same time physically you have the impression...*

*Omar: Physically it kills you, it’s exhausting, it’s exhausting because you have an adrenaline rush and it’s at actual speed, it’s not like where you’re in the main room where you’re kind of relax. Alain won’t let you any choice anyway, he won’t let you go, when you*

*spar with him, you have no break and when precisely he sees that you're tired, he's gonna speed up precisely to push you to the limits so that you draw from your limits so you can give out your best, that's what is good too. I like that.*

### **3) The Economy of the Pedagogical Gift: The Gift of Knowledge and The Counter-Gift of Recognition**

Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are learned relatively informally. It is often an experimented gym-goer who shows to a less experimented one, more systematically in Thai boxing, and often when the exercise is not well executed. It is very unlikely that a beginner, in both practices, gives advice or corrects someone more experimented, it would be perceived as an affront, as a negation of the skills already acquired by that person and therefore of the work that he has accomplished to acquire them. Gym goers prefer to stay at their place. Mounir says that he does not really like to give advice to other boxers because he does not feel legitimate enough, he has practicing for two years and has not done competition yet, one of the foundations of the practice lying in the search for, or better the struggle for the muscular or pugilistic legitimacy which goes through the adherence to the muscular or pugilistic orthodoxy. But considering the state of his practice, Mounir is, for now, more disposed to receive advice than to really give some:

*First when I spar with a beginner I try to make him work, but I don't really like to say something because I think I don't have the experience, for me I would be full of myself, you know. If he makes a big mistake, for example I'm going to tell him after I hit him you know, I'm going to tell him 'see, it was open.' But I don't like that. I think it would be pretentious to give advice because I'm not ready yet to give advice to people.*

*Question: And how do you feel when someone gives you advice?*

*Mounir: Honestly some guys at the same level than me or even a little bit less gave me advice, then I follow it or not, sometimes some beginners tell you stuffs and to make them feel good you say yeah, but you know that it's not... but when an old-timer gives me advice, I try to follow it.*

Omar says that he is not superior to other boxers, but he allows himself to give some advice to beginners. His words show the way the group reproduces itself through the transmission of pugilistic knowledge and skills, using also a familialist rhetoric:

*It's true that at the gym sometimes when there's beginners or when I see that some guys are making mistakes, I don't pretend to be better than them but I show them or I tell them 'be careful, do like this' or if I see that the guy is a beginner and that he wants to hit hard or fast, I tell him 'no take it easy, take it easy, try to be careful in your gesture.' It's true that you have the tendency to be willing to correct the mistakes around you, like the old-timers have done with you before, so let's say that you kind of follow the movement. That's also the familial atmosphere of the Derek that calls for that.*

The transmission of knowledge is done bodily and through the mediation of the language by explaining and decomposing the exercise, and by showing how to do it. This exchange is marked by a mechanism of reciprocal obligations that may also intensify preexisting social relationships: obligation to teach what one knows in exchange of accepting to learn it. This gift of knowledge, which is not free, is almost a poisoned chalice since the counter-gift is in the form of recognition of the teacher's charisma and therefore of his power.

“To give, says Mauss, is to manifest one’s superiority” (Mauss, 2006: 269). The one who offers his knowledge posits himself as a holder of a precious knowledge that places him on a power position. There is no completely free gesture, but a “double truth of the gift” (Bourdieu, 1997: 277) that is to say both generosity and interest. At the heart of the gift lies the denial of the interests of the gift, denial that is itself possible thanks to the temporalization of the exchange. The apparent pedagogical generosity of the experimented boxer or bodybuilder actually is a “social lie” (Mauss, 2006: 147) to himself and to others, a disposition that calls for recognition and *symbolic* reward. It is inscribed within a chain of gifts and counter-gifts. The one who transmits the technique has himself received it as a gift by recognizing the authority of his trainer, then he becomes himself a trainer and feels indebted to him and even to the practice as such. The Thai boxing coach is a disinterested agent who is most of the time a volunteer in the association that is the Thai boxing club, who “gives his time.” Chérif confesses that the volunteering coaches are not recognized and that “*volunteer work is unpaid labor,*” and that “*the right like the left, it’s the same and not only in La Courneuve, they are happy to have the associations that do the job they should do, you can ask Aimé, we have kids, they’re tough, but real tough, and we don’t know but boxing can calm them, but sometimes it’s even among them, one of them will tell another one to not get into trouble, to not do this or that...*” Fabrice, who like a lot of boxers fell in love at first sight with Thai boxing and for whom “*it’s a beautiful sport,*” says that “*nothing has brought me so much,*” his wife, his kids of course, but “*Thai boxing is something special,*” and he does not think he could “*give back what Thai boxing has given me.*” This conviction is the basis of Fabrice’s dependency vis-à-vis Thai boxing which is a passion deep seated into the body. This passion is for Fabrice like a pugilistic calling and compels him to give back what Thai boxing has given him. The renunciation of giving back would make Fabrice feels guilty and comes up against his affects. This anthropomorphization of Thai boxing functions as a

legitimation of the counter-gift that he feels obliged to give back. Since Thai boxing has given him, and Fabrice being a man of honor, he necessarily has to give back to Thai boxing, because if he does not give back, he demeans himself and becomes subordinate. This form of relation of dependency of Fabrice towards Thai boxing is inscribed in his body in the form of beliefs and passions. The fact of giving back without counting to Thai boxing – that is to say to sacrifice his family life, to come everyday to the gym, after work, to go to competitions often far away, etc. – is not a maximization of his material capital but rather of his prestige and his sense of honor. In other words, to spend social energy in order to give back a gift produces prestige. Nabil often helps the coaches to train the children who have, since recently, a session only for them just before the one for teenagers and adults. He confesses that he is very pleased to train the children. He gets a certain prestige out of it:

*Question: Do you like to teach to those children?*

*Nabil: Hell yeah! It's a great pleasure.*

*Question: Chérif and Aimé asked you?*

*Nabil: They asked me, I didn't hesitate one second. And the fact of being with children, I learn a lot, because you know the little kids when they hit, they are really relax, they're in the right mood, they take pleasure. When you see a little kid laughing, taking pleasure, there's nothing more joyful. When I tell you that it reaches the outside, this weekend I was at a wedding, one of the kids I trained at the gym was there, he went to talk to one of his cousins 'hey, that's my boxing coach!' he talked to her, I dunno what he told her, but he was smiling you know, he was happy. This shows that us, what the old-timers have taught*

*us, I have been transmitting it to the little kids, and the little kids, when they're going to grow up 'he was my boxing coach, he used to do this and that, me too I wanna do...' and then it becomes a circle.*

Nadia asserts that she will encourage her children, if she has some, to practice Thai boxing, or like she says “to put them into boxing,” with the idea of the transmission of experience:

*If I have kids, I put them into boxing.*

*Question: Whether it's a girl or a boy?*

*Nadia: Yeah. Even on an educational level, I'm pretty sure it would help them a lot, at least that's how I feel about it, so I think it will be reciprocal but hum we'll see, if I have kids I put them into it for sure. At least they will experience a little bit what I've experienced.*

This disposition to transmit one's knowledge is constitutive of the pugilistic field that rewards it economically and especially symbolically. The agents who are socialized within this field are likely to acquire the disposition to give pugilistic knowledge. By matching individual interests and the interests of the group, with the use of the notion of “family,” this mechanism partakes of the strategies of reproduction of Thai boxing, of its techniques, its tradition and its moral code. The educational strategies that social groups put in action produce agents capable and worthy of receiving and then transmitting the different forms of capital of the group in order to reproduce the group with the least loss possible, and because men from the ghetto and the working-class *banlieues* in this study only have a small amount

of economic or cultural capital. The first capital they have is bodily capital that also is an embodied cultural capital and that is, paradoxically, less visible than other objectivized forms of capital (because they are materialized under the forms of objects, etc.). This work of transmission, which necessitates time and investment, from the one who transmits as well as from the one who receives, is a way to struggle against class downgrading, and to maintain one's position in the class structure, or to favor an upward mobility, by putting boxers and bodybuilders on the right track (to make them avoid a deviant career, whether it is delinquency or idleness by putting them pugilistic and muscular labor). The inculcation labor allows the group members to adhere to the collective interests of the group by making individual interests converge. To a question on his will to transmit what he has learned in Thai boxing, Rafik answers by mentioning the idea that not to share what he has learned would be a selfish act and he inscribes his relation to the practice within an economy of the gift and especially the pedagogical gift:

*Yeah absolutely! It would be selfish to keep that for yourself! The goal is to transmit what you've learned. Currently, I take classes to take my BPJEPS [Brevet Professionnel de la Jeunesse, de l'Education Populaire et du Sport, that he will obtain few months after the interview and he starts to have training responsibilities in the gym, for instance he holds paos] in Thai boxing, I transferred credits last year, I got six credits out of ten. This year, I'm gonna do it again to get the missing four credits. But at medium and long term, yeah it's one of my goals in life, to be able to teach and transmit all what I've learned during those years, yeah that's for sure. I think it's fair for people like Fabrice, like the Desjardins brothers who have given a huge amount of time, of their life and it's also a form of sacrifice, the fact of coming after work, not to be with your children or your wife, it's a form of sacrifice. Simply to do like them.*

Rafik clearly states it, he wants to “do like” the coaches, and he is on the way to reproduce the group and its ethos. Besides the fact that the economy of the gift creates alliances, it also is profoundly agonistic. The Thai boxing fight is at the same time an exchange of blows and of knowledge. This agonistic dimension of the gift is less linked to material goods as the logic of honor according to which agents struggle for prestige. Mauss says that “to give already is to destroy” (Mauss, 2006: 201). The gift, like Thai boxing, is a fight. This implies that social cohesion and the unequal distribution of social positions rests, partly, upon agonistic social relations. One of the foundations of the pugilistic reason is the reciprocity of the blows, as says the coach Aimé who reproaches boxers who have gone in the ring with him today. He asks them to be more relax, some of them are too tense, he raises his guard and shakes his arms: *“you’re too tensed. You get hit, and then bang, you lose your nerves and you hit, that’s not boxing guys! You gotta learn to receive punches, you have to give and receive. Be careful, I’m not saying this for daddy or mummy, no! Here you gotta learn to receive. I took blows early on and I didn’t hit back on purpose just to see.”* Beginners abhor a vacuum and rush to hit back, often in a muddled and inefficient way, whereas more experienced boxers are more prone to temporize, to accept to wait before they hit back, in other words, they box in a more economical fashion. Aimé’s instruction sheds light on the fact the time interval between the gift (to hit first) and the counter-gift (to hit back) allows to conceals the contradiction of the gift as a generous and free act and as a moment of relational exchange that transcends acts of individual exchange. Implicitly, Aimé conveys a criticism of the selfish eagerness to reduce the time interval between the act of hitting first and the act of hitting back, and therefore to pay off a debt of blows that the boxer has incurred vis-à-vis his opponent, and finally to prevent a form of submission or acceptance of the opponent’s superiority that can be transmuted into “respect,” “fear,” etc. To allow

oneself some time to counter, to “temporize,” is to play with the social efficacy of the pugilistic time, it is to give oneself an instrument of power in that the boxer has the initiative of the fight resumption, and therefore a hold over time. By advising boxers not to return blow for blow, Aimé instills in them the generous refusal of fair’s fair that commonly appears as too aggressive. According to the pugilistic ideology, a boxer that spends his energy without counting and who receives and gives a lot of blows is said to be “generous.” The gift is something dangerous as well, and there is a risk in accepting a gift in that it binds durably the one who accepts to the one who gives. The pugilistic exchange illustrates that quite explicitly.

A Thai boxing champion or a very muscular bodybuilder is more likely to transmit his knowledge. The intermediary categories of boxers or bodybuilders, those for instance who have not been champion or who have not led the sole life of a boxer or bodybuilder, can be tempted by teaching, but they are less likely to be as invested as those champions, and often limit themselves to the informal transmission from boxer to boxer or bodybuilder to bodybuilder. Djamel, even though he does not perceive it that way, transmits, or “shares” as he says, his pugilistic knowledge informally:

*I’ve volunteered for two years, I’ve transmitted rigor, seriousness and what I knew of Thai boxing. And I stopped because I didn’t have time. Now I only want to enjoy, I’ll transmit this sport to my kids, if they want to. Otherwise, I don’t want to transmit what I’ve learned, I gladly share at the gym.*

There is a chain of transmission of knowledge based partly on the obligation to give back. The charismatic boxer or bodybuilder transmits his knowledge. But at the same time, the very fact of transmitting his knowledge, a transmission that he *must* do, increases his

prestige because he is recognized as an experienced and knowledgeable boxer or bodybuilder, and the others to whom he has shown and said how to do accept his charismatic authority because he is muscular or knows how to box. It means that he has the quasi-magical knowledge of the way to build up muscles or to fight. The variation of the muscular or pugilistic capital implies a hierarchy inside the gym where agents make classifications according to this capital. The more capital one has, the more likely one is to have access to the machines, punching bags, and so on. These operations of symbolic ordering can be refined by sizing up a bodybuilder's body parts that are particularly developed, or the quality of boxer's pugilistic technique, which does not go without a certain fetishization of those body parts. The appropriation of the gym space can lead to some tensions:

*A forty-year-old man is working out his legs on the machine. He is not very tall, nor very muscular, rather chubby. When he sees that a group of very muscular bodybuilders leave the bench press space, he looks at me and says out loud: "Huh, they dropped that shit!" but immediately after, a group of three men rushes at it. He complains about it, smiling, and I reply smiling too and in a way sympathizing: "yeah, it's always taken." [Field note]*

#### **4) Imitation**

One of the practical foundations of power – and also its least subtle form – is the capacity to lead a group, to make the group of agents do what the dominant does or wants then to do, or that those agents believe in what the dominant does (it is the Weberian charismatic agent). The subtlest form of this same power is reached when the dominant does not even need to make the group follow him anymore, the dominated do it instinctively (it is

the Bourdieuan symbolic power). The analysis of bodily practices, and especially their teaching, makes believe that we deal with an elementary form of power when we observe an agent transmitting embodied knowledge or leading a training session, particularly through his mastery of a technical gesture. The transformative labor of the body as a “pantomime’s organ” (Merleau-Ponty, 2006: 474) partly goes through practical imitation. According to Stoller, the phenomena of “spirit possession” among the West African Hauka, those “crazy masters” filmed by Jean Rouch, are a form of mimicry that implies the reproduction of power relations (1995: 37; Comaroff, 1985). If, therefore, to learn partly is to imitate, then forms of learning – imitation among them – also are relations of power and domination: between professor and pupil, master and slave, colonizer and colonized (Saada, 2005), etc. “A movement is learned, says Merleau-Ponty, when the body has understood and included it, that is to say when it has incorporated it to its ‘world’” (2006: 173). After having imitated someone practicing an exercise or a technical movement, the agent does not need to think before or during the exercise anymore, and even less to imitate, the exercise or movement is done almost “naturally” or “instinctively,” not mechanically, but without having recourse to a model or a rationalization. Once the movement or technique is embodied, it is only a matter of *doing* it without really thinking about it, since the body reminds it, whereas what we call “memory” does not necessarily recall exactly when it has learned it. Memory is brought back *in practice*, as the famous episode of the Proust’s madeleine reminds us. By acquiring a set of techniques specific to bodybuilding and Thai boxing, the agent also acquires categories of thought that are the result of the practice and that are reproduced through the results and improvements that he notices and the pleasure he feels, especially for exercises that he was afraid or not capable of doing before (like the bench press, chin-ups, going in the ring, etc.).

However, to obey, it is not enough to imitate. The disposition to docility needs to be inculcated by a disciplinary practice. In our previous Field note, an experienced bodybuilder

has noticed that another one was doing an exercise incorrectly because he was *watching* him. The bodybuilder under surveillance then puts others and himself under his surveillance. In addition to TV shows on the criminal justice system or injunctions to denunciation (like the vocal and visual advertisements in the New York City subway or bus system “If you see something, say something,” or those in the Parisian public transportation under the “Vigipirate Plan”), the practice of Thai boxing and bodybuilding in a closed and collective space, and that is my hypothesis, partakes, even infinitesimally, to the (re)production of a certain social *panoptical disposition* first applied to oneself and then to others. Since it is difficult for the coaches to put everybody under surveillance, they make sure – through injunctions, calls to order, repetitions, and exercises – that the boxer or the bodybuilder internalize the coach’s gaze and become his own coach. Hence, the bodily constraints would need less social energy and would be all the more efficient if they fall within the competence of the agent rather than imposed from someone else or the outside. The bodybuilding and pugilistic categories of perception being before anything social categories, we can hypothesize that this disposition is transposable to other social settings, even though it is not systematic or mechanical. Aimé, who expresses his dissatisfaction during a training session that is more hectic than usual, says: “*You know, I see everything!*” However, some experienced adults who stand in the back of the four rows during the final gathering are “*fed up*” and express it: “*If I had known I would have gone before!*” another one: “*Yeah me too!*” The moralizing discourse annoys older boxers and does go without some resistance.

However, in order not to reduce bodily practices to disciplinary practices that domesticate “docile” bodies, even if disciplinarization is a dynamic process, we must add that agents are not particles under the action of a field of forces, even if it is a social one. If boxers and bodybuilders learn their respective practices, it is also because their interest in doing it is superior to the interest in not doing it. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are for the agent a form

of competence but also a way to show that he has competences (Klein, 1993: 250). This embodies knowledge is transformed into muscles and pugilistic techniques, but more important transmuted into symbolic capital. Through the learning process, boxers and bodybuilders acquire not only efficient techniques of the body but they also internalize indigenous categories of perception and action. They become capable of judging the execution of a technique, a boxer's style, a bodybuilder's muscular symmetry, etc.

### **5) Schools of Life**

The State has favored the importation of out-of-school practices in order to fight against failure or "drop-out" by developing children's disposition to learning within more recreational activities. Those practices are inscribed within a "pedagogization" of social practices. Those forms of knowledge transmission are inseparable from forms of power and domination. The pedagogical action that Thai boxing or boxing represent for youths from the French working-class *banlieues* and the American black ghetto is crucial if we want to understand these practices and their implantation in these relegated zones of the urban space. The mode of learning of Thai boxing is more or less based on the school system: the young boxer collectively learns boxing in a separated location and exterior to the household and knowledge is transmitted by "professors" with a specific temporality, and in both gyms one does "exercises" like in a classroom. The link with school is not only symbolic. The sport ideology wants sport to be a real "school of life" that teaches athletes "good values." In the Thai boxing gym, not only the coaches insist on the fact that they check on their boxers' studies, but they also intend to open a section that aims at helping out youths who are not necessarily boxers with their homework. Furthermore, a second project is to have junior high

school classes come to the gym in order to make them discover Thai boxing and more particularly to target “tough” pupils.

*Chérif thinks that it is a way to deviate from deviance especially for the “toughest, to channel them.” Fabrice arrives and Chérif calls upon him as a witness: « right Fabrice? You remember, I was saying that guys who come here, they want to fight, and they understand quickly...” Fabrice cuts him and says “Yeah we already talked about that, even the biggest crook, I’ve seen him after completely different!” and Chérif confirms. [Field note]*

The coaches, in collaboration with the junior high school teachers, would spot the potential deviant pupils, make a triage and therefore a work of both prevention and marking, anticipating or preventing an intervention of the criminal justice system, by inserting the so-called “difficult” youths in a set of rituals of manipulation of violence and strength and therefore warding off deviance.

Darrell not only says that he trained hard and that he studied a lot in order to become a fighter within a time framework specifically dedicated to that task. Once his professional career prematurely interrupted after his mother’s death, Darrell wanted to transmit his knowledge in the East New York’s gym and also to help kids not to get involved in a deviant career. Being a boxer, according to him, allows one to get respect from others. This recognition is part of the symbolic profits given to boxers especially those from stigmatized urban neighborhoods, whether in France or in the United States, where social honor is central in everyday life:

*Question: Did you get injured?*

*Darrell: No I never got injured, I was good man! [laughs] I was good, I never got injured, I thought I was going to be one of the best. I really trained hard and I studied a lot you know.*

*Question: When you say studied, did you watch old fights?*

*Darrell: Yeah old fights, the old champions. I like Joe Louis, my favorite fighter, and Muhammad Ali so between the two guys I tried to take a little from each of them and make my own style you know, I think they were the two best, I would study them and read books and everything. You gotta, you know, you gotta study, it's like a job, you know, it's like anything. If you wanna go to college, you know, if you know how much is it like going to elementary school, then you going to pros is like you going to college, so you gotta always study because you never stop learning no matter even if you become champion, you still learning, you know, you can get a title, but now you gotta keep the title, to get it is one thing, to keep it is another thing, so now you gotta know how to keep it, not to lose it, you know, so you always learning, you never get to this point where 'I know everything, nobody can tell me anything' you always gotta learn, you gotta keep an open mind and that's what keep you from losin' you know. You stay undefeated as long as you keep studying and you pay attention to what you doin' because once you get to a point where you distracting, you hanging out and you drinking and partying, now that's when the end comes. But if you keep your mind straight and you know there's a time for that and there's a time for this, then you do all right. A lot of fighters they make that mistake of going to the point where they get distracted by hanging out, then they start to go down, but I was never like that. I know the time to party and the time not to party. I was pretty good, but life is funny, you never know how life is gonna go, so my life went that way, and my family passin' its way ended my*

*career, but I would have been a champ, I would have probably been one of the best, but life is funny, you know. So after that, I helped some of the guys here become champion. I trained Shannon Briggs for a while, he became world champion twice, he just had another title shot against Klitschko which he lost few weeks back which was his third fight for the title, the world heavyweight title. I work with him and I work with Monte Barrett, he had a fight with Klitschko and he lost and he had a fight with the big Russian guy that had the title and he lost that, that was his title shot. But I work with all those guys and help them get started you know and they get out there and they change their life, they make money, they change their life you know, they probably wouldn't have been where they were if I hadn't been in the gym you know.*

*Question: How do you feel about that, giving advice to other boxers, do you like it?*

*Darrell: Yeah I like seeing people change their life, it might be going down the wrong rope you know and end up in jail or something and I tell 'em 'try boxing I been there, I done it, it worked for me, it's not as hard as you think if you dedicate yourself to it' and when they listen they see the results. I had to talk with Shannon cause he was going down the wrong path at one time when he was a kid, and getting locked up and going to jail and I sat him down and I tell him 'listen, what you wanna be? You wanna be a bum or you wanna do somethin' with your life? You gotta make decisions now while you're young, you know what I mean, or you wanna throw your life away or what you wanna do?' so he listened and he took it seriously, now it changed his whole life. He's able to own houses and cars and money in the bank and make movies and stuff. Some day he called me up and he tell me 'I'm living my dream' and give me thanks, it's because of me, he tells me 'it's because of you' 'if it hadn't been for ya, I would never have done it' you know what I mean. So I feel good about that. I*

*changed one person's life that he could be in a jail or dead, going down the wrong path in life, and he's been in movies, he's been a world champ, he's got big houses, cars, beautiful wife and you know his life's changed, his whole life's changed and he's happy and I'm happy because of that, you know what I mean.*

*Question: Do you think that guys from tough neighborhoods like Shannon need a person like you to advise them or help them out?*

*Darrell: Yeah yeah, they need some guidance. When you're young, it's easy to go the wrong way, you got people in the streets, the guys hanging out on the corner, you know what I mean, they influence you, you got the rap music that making you crazy tellin' you to be a gangster and stuff and that's bad influences. You need somebody to wake you up and say 'listen, you're going down the wrong rope, it's gonna lead nowhere, there's a better way for you' and this is easy for a lot of people because you don't have to be really educated, you know, you don't have to... a lot of the guys that made it they couldn't even read or write, but they made it, they got something out of it. But they coming here and wonder what they would have done otherwise, they probably would have went totally opposite direction, they would been down in the dumps you know what I mean, this is not a bad thing, people think it's a bad thing but it's not, it's saved a lot of people's lives, take the good with the bad, and it's more good than bad in boxing, it helped a lot of people, changed their lives, they probably wouldn't even have a life you know, they probably wouldn't even know what to do with their life 'what am I gonna do? Where am I gonna go?' this changes because when you become a fighter a lot of people look at you like you're a hero, you know. People give you a lot of respect for that. Even now I'm finished with boxing, people know I was boxing, and I still can go to bars and get free drinks [laughs] I get respect from a lot of people, you know what I*

*mean, because of that, you know what I mean, so a lot of people give me respect for that, you know, a lot of people may not think so but you live that type of life and you see what happens, a lot of people respect fighters, you know [laughs].*

The learning process is, to repeat, based on discipline. However, Fabrice keeps saying boxers that they must “enjoy themselves.” The relation professor-disciple in the context of learning a martial art is crucial if we want to understand the practice. In all relation of inculcation, the symbolic value of the teacher is always important, but it might be all the more important for martial arts. Even though it is even truer in Thailand than in France, the trainer is not only in charge of transmitting pugilistic knowledge and techniques, but he also is a moral authority. He has in charge the physical formation of boxers, but he must also make sure that they receive a civic formation, and school formation in Thailand (more and more French gyms organize homework workshops). There is a poster on the window’s office of the Thai boxing gym that enumerates the seven cardinal “rules” of the “Athlete’s Code” that dictate the boxers’ behavior that he is supposed to have within the gym as well as outside:

*Every athlete, beginner or champion, undertakes to*

- 1. Know the rules of the game and conform to them*
- 2. Respect the referee’s decisions*
- 3. Respect adversaries, partners and officials*
- 4. Refuse any form of violence and cheating*
- 5. Be self-controlled under any circumstances*
- 6. Be loyal in sport and everyday life*
- 7. Be exemplary, generous and tolerant*

Furthermore, an affective economy takes place between the boxer and the trainer. Boxers and trainers often present their gym as a “family” or a “second home,” which illustrates the protecting aspect of the gym, the family being perceived as a bulwark against everyday life’s harshness. The trainers do not miss the opportunity to celebrate a boxer’s birthday when they know the date and to make him applaud by the other boxers during the final gathering. This charismatic domination of the trainer facilitates the learning process because it makes the boxer more docile, more “open” to the instructions and the advice and his body becomes more malleable when the boxer is assigned exercises to do. Djamel testifies to this relationship with the trainers and, at the same time, to the division of pedagogical labor as follows:

*A trainer is an older brother, a father or even a friend. My first trainer made me understand that boxing, and even any sport activity, was based on pleasure, sensation. It’s the same feeling than when you go and see a good movie, read a good book, or watch a good fight, it must give you sensations. Those of my generation went through a lot of work, repetitions. I’ve discovered this work method with Fabrice, at the Derek, who teaches you to work in a relaxed way. As he puts it, with his great experience, the taste! Currently, to go to the gym, to train, to listen to his advice allows me to understand subtleties. Each trainer has his specificities. There’s Chérif who has a more physical approach, to learn to push your body’s limits, Aimé for the mind, and Alain for the practice. You just need to know to listen to forge your boxing. I believe a boxer is the reflection of his trainers. If they promote positive values, it will be reflected in his boxing, and on the contrary if they are negative, it will show in his attitude.*

This labor of education is not necessarily done on a coercive mode and can also be effectuated through the mediation of symbolic rewards:

*Before the beginning of the training in the locker-room, boxers arrive one by one or by little groups. Alain arrives and prompts the boxers to get ready for the training. A boxer, who is a fireman, is ready first, he is on his way out and Alain says: "Here is the serviceman! That's the way it is in the military!" Then another boxer gets ready quickly too, and Alain congratulates him: "I like guys like that, that's good!" tapping him on the shoulder. [Field note]*

However, those examples of enchanted relations should not conceal the disciplinary dimension of the relation between the trainer and the trainee. One of the Thai boxing trainer insists a lot on the discipline that boxers must have, and he relentlessly controls them to the least detail: if they have greeted each others, if they have the appropriate boxing outfit, Thai boxing shorts and a T-shirt tucked into the shorts (it is also for the opponent not to have his foot stuck in a dangling T-shirt), if the boxers have a big bottle of water, slippers, their member card, etc. This constant surveillance necessitates an unremitting educational vigilance from the trainer.

The learning of Thai boxing mainly is made through the unceasing repetition of gestures and techniques that boxers watch and imitate, being corrected by the trainers, another boxer, or by themselves. During the training, we often hear "Keep up your guard!" "Turn your hip" "look up," "Block," etc.) or also by the looking themselves in the mirror. While sparring, boxers correct and advise each other, the facing boxer being like a mirror.

The inculcation of bodybuilding and pugilistic techniques changes, more or less according to the degree of practice, the acquired dispositions and gives more athletic or

physical look to the life style through the incorporation of driving, cognitive, and aesthetic schemes, of “rules,” injunctions, etc. (Defrance, 2006: 56). Like many other bodily practices, the teaching of Thai boxing or bodybuilding techniques happens below consciousness. Boxers and bodybuilders often say that Thai boxing and bodybuilding is a “way of living” and that those practices have brought them “a new way of thinking.” Sabri claims that Thai boxing teaches boxers self-control:

*Boxing teaches us to calm down. For instance, when we arrive, we box, you get punched, you wanna hit back right away, go to fight, go to war! But boxing also teaches us to calm down like “be careful” if you are brutish, you’re gonna lose, so at the same time it teaches to calm down, to calm down our impulsiveness and all that.*

Mounir asserts that the practice of Thai boxing has changed him and has taught him to control himself. Let us notice that he expresses the will to “move himself,” which echoes the injunction to “move themselves” that is often given to youths from the *banlieues* at least, meaning not to remain idle in front of their housing projects:

*Question: What has Thai boxing brought you?*

*Mounir: First physically, I arrived at the gym, I was 140 pounds today I’m 128 I think, I really lost weight, physically and all that, the physical condition and all. I run, but I’m not gonna lie to you, I don’t run every week-end, I run when I have time, sometimes I play soccer, yeah outside I play soccer almost every Sunday, I try to move myself as much as I can you know. It has also brought me reflection, because Fabrice often tells us that we must think and all, even in my everyday life you know before I used to charge and now I slow*

*down, I say 'okay do like this'. It also taught me discipline. When you know that you're not going to the gym, you're gonna laugh during all the training, you laugh and then you work out, the same at school too.*

The learning of a new way of thinking and acting can be observed in action:

*Alain is really not satisfied with what he sees is going on in the ring and let the boxers know it: "what's that? This is not Thai boxing!" And he calls to witness two boxers who are waiting to go in the ring to spar: "Is it nice honestly?" Alain says to the boxers in the ring: "all right stop!" the boxers stop, look at him and listen to him, Alain says: "it's nasty! We tell you to be technical, to be focused, but you don't listen! This is not the Derek!" Alain tells them to start over and to apply themselves. As soon as a boxer makes a mistake, Alain asks him to leave the ring. Then, Alain, who was upset, asks all the boxers to get off the ring, and sends two boxers among them. He wants them to show what needs to be done technically and he wants them to "punish" the boxer who does not apply the instructions by using head and liver punch so that he understands. [Field note]*

Some instructions are supposed to resonate in boxers' head and body so that attitudes, positioning, and states of mind become like a second nature, as in the following sequence during which Aimé draws a parallel between the pleasure of eating and the pleasure of boxing:

*Fabrice, who has spent a lot of time explaining some techniques to an intermediary boxer, repeats that boxers must take pleasure and be less tense and that when a boxer hits his opponent, he should not stop and must go on because "the other one isn't reading the*

*newspaper, I'm tellin' you! Some of you throw a blow and stay like this!" [Fabrice throws a punch in a very rigid fashion, then drops his arms and stands still crazed]. Aimé remarks: "you enjoy eating right!" and a boxer replies: "we don't eat, we swallow!" and then adds hiding himself a little bit with a touch of humor: "we have no money!" [Field note]*

Whereas the profane – or the common sense – often only sees, in the sport, a set of gestures or a supposedly inherent violence in the practice, sport is a “total social phenomenon” and cannot be reduced to its kinesthetic, “violent” or even aesthetic aspect only. Bodily practice allows to analyze the incorporation of social and ideological structures and the translation of dispositions into the form of practices or strategies (why will such a boxer look for a knock out, another one a very aesthetic technique?). A boxer addresses the question of the uses of Thai boxing in everyday life outside the gym:

*Yeah of course you use it, even unconsciously, it's something that you absorb for weeks, months, years, after that it's part of your personality, so it will inevitably goes out of your personality, I mean self-control...*

Through the studied bodily practices, we can observe concerning the bodybuilder or the boxer that “the creation of a direct relation between the way of being, the way of doing and performance puts him in the situation of assimilating ideological contents through technical norms” (Bruant, 1992: 101). Athletes’ bodies are malleable bodies that are both the targets and the agents of their own physical, moral and ideological transformation. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are a way of reproducing basic social relations such as the reproduction of masculinity, or class and racial inequalities.

## Chapter 8: A Muscular State

### 1) To Contain in Order to Better Prevent

The gym is a bastard institution in the sense that it couples up two supposed essences of African Americans, physical power, and dangerousness that they share with the “youths from the *banlieue*.” The regular practice of bodybuilding takes time and keeps agents busy. The gym can minimize the involvement in a deviant career<sup>25</sup>, and legitimate the disciplinary power, and, like the police, the justice and the prison, limit and therefore control illegalisms, although in a quite different fashion. Not only the gym fixes and neutralizes deviant and threatening populations that are “symbols of impurity and danger” as far as they are associated with “social disorder” (Douglas, 1970: 81), but it is also a formidable transformative machine that, while saving energetic expenditure of power, fructifies social energy and profit that can be made: it increases the corporeal production of agents, develops their competences, and tailors their moral dimension (Spitzer, 1975: 642). To be involved in militant activities is often to be at or to go back to work in order to be in contact with colleagues, whereas precisely, one function of the gym is to operate a separation, at least spatial and temporal, from the workplace and some of its constraints. To be cut off from workplace is to be away from one’s hierarchy and its constraints, but it is also to be cut off from the forms of access to the instruments of political struggle against the forms of domination at work. The regular practice of bodybuilding and Thai boxing, which tends to

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<sup>25</sup> The creation of a training camp is supposed to neutralize the delinquency of youths in Northeastern Thailand, their materialism, their drug consumption and “to inculcate them the good values” so that they can become “good citizens,” the camp is therefore an institution that regulates the social order. Rennesson (2007).

break class solidarities, leads to (or keeps alive) a *de-politicization* but that is not without any link with a de-proletarianization.

## **2) Managing Deviance**

The trainers say that among the boxers of the gym, some of them are “*tough kids, they are into troubles, we’ve followed since they were children. We do more than sport, we have an educational mission.*” The bodybuilding gym, or the Thai boxing gym to a lesser degree, may be seen as a complementary or substitutive institution to parole in that it constitutes a relative form of social control – less coercive – over those who practice and of normalization, between the prison and the community or the neighborhood. It is not so much a matter of rehabilitating former inmates as neutralize their potential dangerousness and maintain the social order, and it is precisely the main function of sport activities in prison (Gras, 1004: 68, 74). Agents practice in a way self-management of their own freedom and deviance. They partly neutralize deviance by the practice itself. In addition to be the entrepreneur of their own body, they are in a certain way their own parole officer. It is hard to empirically measure the degree of involvement of boxers or bodybuilders in a criminal career, and it is therefore difficult to validate the discourse on the deviation from deviance, which is at least a strong belief shared by most of my informants. Yet, I have taken this discourse and belief seriously. By providing elements of direct observation and declarations of boxers and bodybuilders, the ethnographic immersion has helped me formulate this hypothesis – that would need to be tested more systematically – that boxing and bodybuilding gyms are institutions that may prevent youths from the ghetto or the *banlieue* to get involved in a deviant career. One could check their criminal records, before and after they have started to practice, which at the same time is not easily feasible and poses serious ethical problems. I have not done that, I have

only collected numerous discourses that express this belief or that give examples of young men who have stopped a deviant career because of their involvement in the gyms. I should add that my hypothesis is that the gyms can indeed prevent to go into a deviant career, but that there are other explanatory factors that need to be taken into account such as the social aging of the young man and with it, a possible more stable job, housing, marital situation, the loosening influence of the peer group, and a more reflexive attitude on their life.

In France, in the absence of real educational project, prison can be an “annex of the housing project” for the incarcerated minors who come from working-class *banlieues* and often from the same neighborhood or even the same housing project (le Caisne, 2009). In order to account for the “emerging translocality of carceral social life” (Cunha, 2008), we need to see the gym – this is my hypothesis – as a vector through which some subproletariat members of the ghetto transit. It offers two main possibilities through disciplinarization: (i) straightening up agents who are refractory to work and inserting them into the lower rungs of the contemporary economy in normalizing the limited opportunities, and (ii) setting up along a “carceral continuum” (Foucault, 1975) a symbolic bridge with prison which also relies on the discipline and underpaid employment of its population. Although prison loosens kinship ties and labor affiliation, it has become more porous materially but also symbolically in interrelations to other social institutions and according to its routinization in stigmatized neighborhoods to the point of becoming a “domestic satellite” that created a “secondary prisonization” (Comfort, 2008: 103). It is not by chance if the National Correctional Recreation Association (NCRA) if they declare that “Inmates who are involved in constructive physical activities such as weight lifting are less likely to become involved in disruptive behavior” and justifies bodybuilding in prisons like this: “The vast majority of incarcerated criminals committed their offenses during leisure time. Programs such as weight lifting give offenders leisure skills to utilize during free time after parole or release.”

Bodybuilding inside and outside of prison provides a similar *temporality* that duplicates and normalizes behaviors. A former inmate who has practiced bodybuilding inside the prison is likely to pursue this activity outside and the gym is therefore a sort of “*buffering agency*” for the ex-inmate especially if he is on parole (Irwin, 1987: 128) and that he has to be rehabilitated after the traumatizing and desocializing experience of incarceration. As such, the gym is both an agency of control and re-socialization.

### **3) The State and the Monopoly over the Legitimate Definition of Bodies**

The forms of organization and exertion of power are to put in relations with the production and circulation of different cultural productions and symbolic goods, for instance in privileging such or such practice or institution. The State, or better, the bureaucratic field, is the place where power is exerted and where struggles between different agents takes place for the definition of the legitimate public action. Historically, it is only recently that the State has developed the monopoly over the management of deviance and crime, the judicial authority was then shared by several institutions. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was in the hands of private or non-governmental authorities such as the Church, the family, feudal lords, employers rather than the criminal justice system (Morris, Rothman, 1995: 50). Body discipline has been instrumental in this. The interest of the State in bodily practices lies in the fact that the use of physical force can be justified as being part of the game while being denied as a form of domination in a field of bodily practices that thinks of itself “as an inverted social world where effort is transfigured into pleasure and labor into a game” (Defrance, 1987: 181-182). The American State, whose power is more horizontal, is more decentralized than the French State, whose power is more vertical. Moreover, the US has not inherited a tradition of public service as developed as in France, and the interweaving

between the public and the private is more pronounced. However, and despite an anti-government sentiment, the American State is not that weak, a dominant discourse that partakes of the myth of “American exceptionalism” (Novak, 2008). In order to contain the street delinquency created by economic deregulation associated with the retrenchment of the safety net which is supposed to absorb the effects engendered by precarization and unemployment, the State, as the holder of a “meta-capital” (Bourdieu, 1993: 52), has the material and symbolic means to neutralize the “techniques of neutralization” (Sykes, Matza, 1957). In contemporary France, and especially the US, the State, this “mortal God” which Hobbes talks about (2004: 142) that owns the power of categorization, that is to say the capacity to produce forms of fundamental classification, has masculinized itself (partly in reaction to the feminist movement) and has strengthened its strategy of management of poverty and deviance in mixing interventionism on one hand and laissez-faire on the other hand (Wacquant, 2009). As far as the stigmatized categories of the urban (sub)proletariat are concerned, the paternalist State uses at the same time penalization to put recalcitrant fractions to (precarious) work, and socialization to contain useful driving forces less in repressing them as molding them. The State has the monopoly over the legitimate definition of bodies that matches the order of bodies with the social order. Under the guise of universalization, this monopolization does not go without a dispossession that imposes a legitimate style of body and another one that is illegitimate. However, the State, despite its power, cannot act alone, and needs relays, mediations, and supports both at the institutional and individual level. Its retrenchment, after the neoliberal revolution, invigorates individual responsibility. Bodily or sport activity stands for the substitution of the social State as it fights against anomy, creates “social tie,” pacifies the public space of working-class *banlieues* or urban ghettos, and allows the agent to take care of himself. In 2008, the Minister of Health, Youth, Sports and Community Life, Roselyne Bachelot, has nominated Dida Diafat, a former Thai boxing

champion who used to train at the Derek Boxing, and who is also municipal councilor and youth advisor in the town of Chaumontel, as a representative whose mission is to organize combat sports in the “*banlieues*.” He also acted as mediator during the 2007 uprisings at Villiers-le-Bel where he grew up between the Minister of the Interior and some youths among whom one was suspected of having shot at the police. Here is what Dida Diafat says after having been contacted a first time by the former State Secretary of Sports Bernard Laporte: “It hurts to see people I know lapsing into alcohol or drug. For me, nothing is inevitable. What I am today, I owe it to the *banlieue*. In those so-called tough neighborhoods, there are gold nuggets”<sup>26</sup>. The trainer Chérif says that cities that paradoxically are governed by the right do more for Thai boxing than those governed by the left. According to him, they think that Thai boxing can be used to control youths from “tough neighborhoods.”

The state agents endowed with a certain amount of bureaucratic capital, often out of touch with the contemporary social reality or not equipped enough to face it, have the capacity to distribute material and symbolic resources, both money and honor. Some boxers from the Derek have been rewarded by the city of La Courneuve during a ceremony called “Trophies of Success” where prizes (cups with the name of the laureate on it, gift-vouchers, a grant up to €1500) are awarded and given by the mayor to youths who distinguish themselves at school and in their sport activities. This ceremony, which was held in a room of the city hall, took place in the presence of elective representatives, municipal agents, the public who was made of members of different sport clubs of the city, families, friends. It was the illustration in action of the capacity of the State to instill forms of classification, here school and sport success, and through them all sorts of “values” such as work ethic, discipline, meritocracy, and so on, *against* others practices, “values,” etc. such as delinquent practices, idleness,

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<sup>26</sup> *Le Parisien*, « Laporte a aussi son plan banlieues », 18 janvier 2008, <http://www.leparisien.fr/sports/laporte-a-aussi-son-plan-banlieues-18-01-2008-3295984306.php>, consulted on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010.

failure, etc. By providing a social frame of memory common to a group of agents already socialized in similar conditions, this festive gathering has only reinforced the dispositions of agents towards certain practices for which they have been rewarded, or better honored, the adherence to the dominant vision and the instruments that allow agents to build the social reality, strengthening illustrated at the micro-level by the applause of the public for each award or discourse.

#### **4) Learning of Citizenship**

Eugène-Henri Moré, deputy mayor of La Courneuve and also in charge of sports, asserts that sport has a very important position in the city, but that it has also become a political issue:

*It has an important position but nowadays sport is too much of a political issue before being an educational issue. And unfortunately, the populations buy into that through, for me, the perverse game of the media. We tell kids 'you'll succeed by playing soccer' so the local authorities must follow, whereas it's not necessarily their job, it's more schools and so on, soccer is optional, there are some municipalities that don't even have a sport sector, they don't have to. But well the stakes are that people hope to find a job this and that and of course the first interlocutor, the interlocutor of proximity, it's the local authority, they resent the city for not having put more money this and that, whereas sport is given a role that can be its role for the citizen, but that is not necessarily its role, because it can be a lever, but it's not an obligation.*

*Question: Is there an official policy of the city of La Courneuve towards sport?*

*E-H Moré: Yes. Us, it's the increase of public awareness, practice, discovery, health. It's not competition. [...]. What we are interested in implicitly is citizenship, the learning of collective life, the fulfillment of the individual. If there are one hundred persons who play volleyball, who are happy to gather, I'm more interested into that than having a team of five persons that is regional champion, I kind of don't care. They can be regional champion of volleyball, it doesn't change anything to the situation of Courneuveiens, well, there will be five happy persons, others who will live that vicariously, but I prefer that it generates social tie, citizenship, involvement, knowledge, environment quote unquote and so on. When there is one hundred persons who are really concerned, they wonder about what is the public space, interventions, institutions and so on because they have ties with the people who intervene, who are answerable to them 'we didn't get this or that', citizens who are conscious of their environment and responsible. I prefer that rather than having champions [...].*

Sport is often perceived as capable of stimulating the learning of citizenship and the acquisition of “positive values.” Within the framework of the “Social Development of Neighborhoods” (*Développement social des quartiers, DSQ*), the French State has implemented, often through combat sports since the 1980s in response to “urban violence” a policy of “integration through sport” (Dervaux, 2000), that, after some resistance from agents on the field, has been taken over by the latter. In France, after the policies of decentralization in the beginning of the 1980s, “insertion” or “integration through sport” is a field of public intervention where the State, local authorities, and sport institutions meet: for instance, the ministry of Sports and the ministry of the City conjointly take actions towards populations of the working-class *banlieues* in collaboration with municipalities in particular through “city-contracts” (*contrats-ville*) or “local security contracts” (*contrats locaux de sécurité*) that

involve not only the police and the inhabitants, like in the US, but also many other institutions, by encouraging the “restoration of the social tie” since problems would come out of the de-socialization of individuals, whereas in the US, the emphasis is on the fight against “disorder” that would be the beginning of swing into criminality. The “Hot Summer Operations” were created after the Lyons “riots” of 1981 and are implemented in eleven departments. In 1995, this project became “City, Life, Holidays” (*Ville, Vie, Vacances*) and spread out to 91 departments in 1997 (Lapeyronnie, 2003).

Measures such as “City, Life, Holidays” are used in order to pacify the “sensitive” neighborhoods at least for the hot season, in the two senses of the word. Sport is a cornerstone of educational policies of the State and is part of municipal plans of urban policy because it would be the carrier of “positive values.” This use of sport has to be inscribed within the larger process of retrenchment of the State and of de-policization of the working classes especially in luring the access to leisure and pleasure to the citizen raised to the status of consumer. The State, instead of tackling the structural causes of inequalities, tries to alleviate the effects by delegating certain missions to the local authorities through urban policy and associations that have to guarantee social peace by working on the “social tie” (Gasparini, Vieille-Marchiset, 2008: 130). It is a matter of giving the youths of poor urban neighborhoods the access to cultural practices and to support their participation to community life. Sport as “a vector of integration” often stands for a substitute for policies that have failed or precisely is used for hiding the political failure of the treatment of what is now called the “neighborhoods”: the so-called “policy of insertion” that aims at inciting young adults from “difficult” neighborhoods to become youth worker specialized in sport in order to manage youths and to “insert” them as well. Those “elder-brothers” become the mediators between the State and the youths “in difficulty.” Since the dominant and miserabilist discourse on the “*banlieues*” claims that the latter lack “social tie,” sport would be the appropriate tool to

(re)create this supposedly lost “social tie.” The content of the declaration of object of the Derek Boxing association to the Seine-Saint-Denis prefecture is the following:

*The practice of physical and pugilistic activities in competition and for leisure, to create ties between associations, to make the city of La Courneuve shine, to gather children, teenagers, adults around activities; to develop and carry actions of socio-educational, cultural, environmental, and sport animation in the neighborhoods; to fight against exclusion, to encourage citizenship and social insertion of the inhabitants of the neighborhood.*

The comparison between the US and France brings to light the fact that citizenship in practice is more emphasized in the French Thai boxing gym than in the American bodybuilding gym.

Mounir says that boxing has calmed him down because he was insolent with teachers at school:

*Thai boxing has made me show more respect. My problem was insolence, I was insolent with teachers. Thai boxing has taught me to calm down, and first to show respect to the trainers. Even if teachers are real pains and stuff, at the end of the day they teach you things, but to be honest I don't respect teachers the same way I respect Fabrice or Alain. You know, sometimes I used to be an easy starter.*

*Question: Why don't you respect them the same way?*

*Mounir: Because it's school and it's not the same, it's friendlier, it's like I don't know let's say a father, like family. The teacher tells you 'do this do that' and then they don't pay attention to you, whereas with Fabrice we can talk about anything, like last time we talked about computers and stuff we can joke around. I was actually an easy starter, a teacher would tell me something and I would overreact immediately, I was aggressive. Then I don't know if it's Thai boxing or getting older, but it's true that Thai boxing helped me. Sometimes I was a scrapper, you'd better not pick a quarrel with me. Now I know where to hit, I know plexus, the liver that's it he's down but I say to myself I won't hit him for nothing. Before when you would hot someone you don't tell yourself 'I'm going to hurt him' or you know what I'm saying, for you it's nothing you hit him, you punch him, you get hit too, it's almost a game sometimes. But then you know you can hurt someone, it can be serious, a harsh blow can happen fast, it's trouble for nothing, it's useless.*

Some youths from working-class *banlieues* end up to feel the responsibility of the civic education of younger children, in part since they have internalized the injunction to take care of oneself, and since they feel like if they do not do it themselves nobody will do it for them, and finally also because the honor of group is at stakes as well as its reproduction. Nabil, who works as an educational supervisor in a high school, declares that Thai boxing helps him in his work but also with children at the gym and in his neighborhood:

*Thanks to Thai boxing, thanks to everything I've learned through boxing and at the Derek, it also allows me to transmit that to students. Sometimes I go and talk to students who are going to be dragged into troubles by the effect of the crowd, the fact of taking them aside and telling them 'look when there is a lot of people like that, they want you to fight so that they can have a good time, and you, you're going to be kicked out and who's going to cry*

*then? You, because you acted...'. So in fact it goes well beyond, I would say it's like a nuclear bomb, it explodes, you have the center that is totally demolished, but it has repercussions around. And honestly, it has brought me a lot in my life, and now it's my turn to bring something, and I hope that it will continue from generation to generation because I think that if there are no people like us who are exemplary, motivated, who want kids from our neighborhoods succeed, because when you say neighborhood you say banlieue, sensitive neighborhood, it's right away delinquency, theft and all that, whereas put all that aside, I mean all this bullshit, when you live in the neighborhood, you say to yourself 'it's not like that whatsoever!' like what the media say, it's nothing like that.*

*AO: It's like what happened recently, on TV, they talked about drugs [a young man got shot in the neighborhood and the media talked about a "gang war over drug-trafficking] ...*

*Nabil: Whereas it's not that at all! It's not that at all! It has nothing to do with that. It's like in 2005 when there was this shooting, when the little Sid Ahmed died, they said 'yeah it's related to drug-trafficking' but it's not that, it was a family problem, it has nothing to do with that! This week I even asked two journalists who were asking questions to fifteen years old kids. Basically they write down nonsense. They're going to say 'yeah the project, that's cool, us we steal' and all that and the media are happy, they're happy it's what they want. And us our goal, first the people who are at the Derek, after it can be at La Courneuve, Saint-Denis, Bondy, in all the neighborhoods, what is good also is that with the Derek, it allows us to teach others. When we are told not to fight, because at the Derek we are told many times not to fight in the street, the fact of learning all that, it also makes you... well it's also the individual's intelligence. But it's also about responsibilities, it allows us to straighten out*

*kids, 'stop talking like that', 'respect your mother', 'do this', 'do that'. Personally I was happy when I told Fabrice that I got my baccalauréat with distinction, he was super happy because he met me when I was in need, I was struggling. Boxing taught me quite some stuffs. I'm not saying that boxing gave me my baccalauréat, it's the fact of coming to the gym, it brought me something extra to get my baccalauréat.*

Gaspard too wants to be useful and possibly to help kids to get out of trouble or to avoid being involved in a deviant career:

*It's in my mindset you know. If you like, it's been ten years since I've been into music, ten years ago I couldn't mix, I couldn't scratch, today I start making albums, I want to bring something. I like to go a step further, to really develop the thing. I necessarily want to transmit, I want to teach or to develop what I've learned, the values I've learned. If I've myself never done something really really stupid, I've done a lot of stupid things you know, I've done a lot and if through sport I can avoid any type of stupid thing you know, because no stupid thing should be done you know what I'm saying. But I don't regret anything I've done because on one hand it taught me to become a man too. It's values, and my pleasure goes through the success of the boxer that I was able to train if I manage to reach this level of transmitting to kids who are motivated by muay thai.*

### **5) The Co-Production of Security**

Whereas prison, as a total institution, acts afterward, the gyms are prophylactic devices that presuppose a potential threat associated with the deviance of the inhabitants of ghettos or working-class *banlieues* and that neutralize it before it takes shape. It is a matter of

drying up the source of this deviance through discipline of agents especially by providing a frame that allows one to contextualize a reactive violence and to transform it in controlled violence, and it seems more true in France, where it is more likely to treat the causes of problems, than in the US where it is more likely to contain the effects of the identified problem. Since a boxer knows what he is capable of physically within the frame of an organized fight and that he has learned not only to master techniques but also emotions, he will be more likely to be able to have control over a confrontation outside the ring or the gym. It is often for these reasons that those who practice combat sports are approached as mediators especially in urban zones that are said to be “sensitive.” The participation to a sport allows agents to be the co-producer with the municipality of the “social tie” of their neighborhood. The purpose is to bring “out of structure” youths who are in street playgrounds to sport clubs and associations where they will be under the supervision of a trainer, their behavior framed by rules or in other words under control. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing, especially through the carnal organization of muscular and pugilistic labor, the techniques and the peculiar temporality and sociability of those bodily practices, make possible the territorial fixation and civilization (in Elias sense) of young men from neighborhoods that are perceived as dangerous or problematic. Stéphane says that he is often perceived as being “dangerous”: *“people who are close to me don’t really see that I’ve changed but those who are less close often see me as someone dangerous, aggressive, but once they start to know me they see that it’s the exact opposite.”* The paradoxical effect of this policy of installation of “proximity” devices is that it reinforces the separation of cities into neighborhoods and therefore the identification of youths to those segmented territories and to specific forms of socialization. This policy of supervision presupposes a managerial spirit. Another effect of this type of devices that have been institutionalized is the reinforcement of the overrepresentation of boys, even to have contributed to a “masculinization of the public space” in working-class

*banlieues* marginalizing girls, masculinization that is inscribed in mirror effects with the masculinization of the State.

By providing a moral and physical frame to boxers and bodybuilders, as well as a *raison d'être*, the gym offers a protection against the threats and the temptations of the street, as Wacquant has already observed (2004, 14, 26). A young basketball player who is a member of the Brownsville Recreation Center claims that the center is a safe place where outside violence does not penetrate:

*“I recommend that they have more after school activities and more centers like the Brownsville Recreation Center. Everyone at the Brownsville Recreation Center gives and gets respect. Thugs respect people and staff at the Brownsville Recreation Center. They do not bring violence in the center. It’s a safe place to be. They all know Jacko”* (Barrow, 2004: 52).

Shawn, 21 years old, who also plays basketball and works at the center, says that he stays busy not to be influenced by the neighborhood and its bad aspects:

*I’m not one of the people that is easily influenced, I don’t easily fall under influence, so the neighborhood really doesn’t affect me, I know people but I don’t stay too close to people you know. So I say ‘hi how you doin?’ they know me ‘oh I know you work at the job over there at the gym’ ‘yeah I work there’ they see me ‘yeah you know how to play?’ ‘yeah I know how to play’ and that’s it. But me once I get familiar with the neighborhood and the neighborhood gets familiar with me, I’m pretty much set. That doesn’t mean that I’m always safe you understand cause anything can happen. So that’s why I keep busy. I just work on myself, focus on myself, really, really, and focus on my surroundings cause it’s all about the surroundings you keep, cause if you keep negative people around you negativity is gonna*

*come to you, but if you keep positive, positive things is gonna happen. This is like they say, if you have broke friends you know people that have no money you're not gonna have any money. But people that have money, they gonna work on you to get more money, you understand, so it was like, this is the same thing.*

Darrell asserts that boxing has prevented him from ending up in jail, like most boys from his neighborhood. It seems that boxing has the effect of inverting the world in pacifying the street and expressing violence in the gym:

*I grew up fighting on the streets so it wasn't too much of a surprise that I was going to go that direction but a lot of people would tell me 'you're gonna be punch-drunk' all the fighters end up bad you know when their career is over you know. I like it, it was fun you know, it kept me out of trouble. A lot of boys I came up with, they end up in jail and ... going to jail and getting in trouble.*

*Question: Why did it keep you out of trouble?*

*Darrell: You're not in the street, you're in the gym, you're learning something, while the other guys are in the streets, they don't get nothing to do, then they find trouble to get into. But I had to start again in the trouble too at one point, I started running with the gangs and stuff and I wised up and said 'this is gonna end up no way of fighting in the street' so I went in a gym where this is, you know, legal, you know you're getting in no trouble, and all those other guys, a lot of them got killed, got shot, and went in jail for life, those are guys I grew up with, you know what I mean. Being in boxing kept me away from that, you know. When you boxing, you get all the aggression out, you don't go out in the street looking for*

*fight. You're more peaceful, you're regular, when you leave the gym, you're peaceful, you put all the aggression here, the bags, the sparring and you don't have nothing to prove when you gonna fight somebody, you even try to avoid fighting outside you know, especially you know you can do a lot of damage to somebody and they gonna lock you up for a long time so you try to avoid that type of thing cause that's something you don't want to get into because you're smarter now, you're going in the ring and do it, and now you see things differently you know. It's not being a bully and go out and beat up people, you have a different attitude you know. Being a boxer you have a different attitude, you don't go out trying to show off, and people know you, what you can do, and basically won't bother you. When they don't know, they might have to find out the hard way [laughs] but once they know, they don't bother you and you're peaceful, and life is... violence is the gym and outside, the other side of the coin is the peaceful side, you coming in, you see your girlfriend and you want to relax you don't even want to fight with you girlfriend, 'why are you fighting with me? I fight with the guys in the gym!' you come and you talk with your girlfriend and she start fighting 'I fight with the guys in the gym, I don't want come and fight with you too!' you don't want to fight anymore once you leave the gym, you leave all the fighting in the gym. So that's basically what happens, you get more peaceful as everyday life. Most boxers are the most peaceful people you can ever meet. They don't go out just jumping on people. But people may think that, you know, you meet boxers they're the most peaceful kindhearted people, you know, you wouldn't even think if they didn't tell you they're fighters, you wouldn't believe it. This is a whole different type of personality outside of the ring.*

However, the degree of violence, physical as well as social and symbolic, in Brownsville and in La Courneuve, or even in American ghettos and French working-class *banlieues* are not the same. Death and prison are more likely to occur in the life of ghetto

dwellers than inhabitants of working-class *banlieues*. The bodybuilding and Thai boxing gyms are the place of reproduction of categories of thought and action that are at the center of the social life of these stigmatized urban areas: the sense of honor, a pronounced virility, a territorial groupism, a clear-cut individualism attenuated by a strong sense of solidarity in the *banlieues*, an emphasis on bodily performance and challenge.

Thai boxing can deviate from deviance and prevent what psychoanalysis calls “acting out”<sup>27</sup>, it is for those who practice a way of salvation. Wacquant writes that many of his informants claim that they would have been involved in a criminal career if they were not boxers (2004, 27). I have collected similar assertions. Nabil clearly thinks that Thai boxing prevented him to get involved in a delinquent career:

*Once again it brought a lot, it allowed me to meet people, honestly that's cool, really. It allowed me to move on, and the fact of coming regularly to the gym, I haven't deviated into delinquency. Thai boxing has guided me rather, since at the Derek they teach us respect, greeting, if you are foul-mouthed they rectify you, they put you in place. It's also thanks to Aimé, knowing that I was often with him, I was less in the hood, I was less confronted to delinquency. Because when you're in group, one only needs to throw out a stupid idea like 'yeah come on let's take this!' like s sheep you follow, but the fact of being aside, here you go. The fact of going to the gym allowed me to learn quite some stuff, to calm down, to channel my energies. And as soon as I am in a situation where I can fight, instead of throwing myself because I practice boxing, no, I try to push back, push back, push back as much as I can, almost to the point where the guy insults me and I leave. But sometimes, as we say, like every human being, there's a limit to my patience, but it taught me to control myself, to really channel my energies. How many times people insult me, I prefer to go for a walk,*

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<sup>27</sup> In Australia, Vietnamese who practice kung fu give the same function of “prevention of delinquency” to this martial art. Cf. Carruthers (1998).

*calm down, and come back rather than clashing with someone, because you don't know how it can end. A heavy blow can engender death, and death can engender problems, prison and all that. And I think that life is not that easy, no need to make it worse.*

*Question: You'd rather not use Thai boxing?*

*Nabil: From the point of view of the State, I think, because I work in education and I think I've heard it, once you are registered for a combat sport, if you fight in the street and the police finds out that you box, they can tell you that it's like a weapon, the same for judo, martial arts. If there is an investigation, you can be implicated for murder, it depends on the state of the other person. That's why you'd better be smarter, anyway there's an African saying that goes like this 'do not respond to a donkey's kick, because if you respond you are the donkey' [laughs]. This one is not bad. So I'm not a donkey, so I don't respond that's it.*

Aside from himself, Nabil claims that some young men have quitted a deviant career thanks to the practice of Thai boxing:

*Many guys from the neighborhood who were into trafficking and stuff, once they started boxing, they dropped everything, that's really cool, we're all brothers and sisters.*

Rafik also says that boxing calmed him down:

*I was much more unruly when I was younger. Thai boxing was taking so much space in my life that I didn't have time to think about acting stupid and stuff, I mean once you get out of the training and that you're exhausted, you don't want to hang out, you just want to go*

*home, eat and go to bed to wake up in the next day to go to school and then after school, homework, and then sport. So we were busy since we had like five training sessions a week, plus school and so on, honestly we didn't have the envy or the time to act stupid, on the contrary. As far as I'm concerned, it has brought me any positive things in the sense that even the fact of having been more or less unruly, it has calmed me down. It can be paradoxical, some guys can use Thai boxing to act stupid and stuff, but through this sport there are so many noble values that you don't use this sport to act stupid. This sport is so tough that you can't allow yourself to act stupid with what you've learned. So generally speaking, it has an extremely positive effect on the individual.*

For Omar, Thai boxing allows boxers to let off steam and to externalize a certain “rage” and, by keeping them busy, to avoid youths to be tempted by deviant acts:

*Thai boxing calms you down, it calms you down a little. When you go to the gym, you let off steam, all this frustration, this rage that you can have, at the gym, you evacuate it. And even the fact of going to training sessions, three times a week, it takes time, it keeps you busy, and at the same time it's motivating, you tell yourself I'm going to the gym, I make progress... so your mind is elsewhere, maybe you're less likely to get into trouble. For example you're with your buddies 'let's hang out', 'I can't I'm going to the gym' it also gives you priorities, other goals.*

During the training, the harsh forms of street sociability are bracketed off, even if they penetrate the universe of the gym from time to time. The trainers of the Derek insist on politeness, on the fact of saying systematically hello, etc. it is a ritualized way to mark a break from the universe of the street perceived as anomic, and from some of its “codes.”

Athletes often say that they “let problems home” when they go and practice their sport. Whereas many parents are afraid of their children practicing Thai boxing because they perceive it as a violent sport, others, on the contrary, see it as a means to keep their child busy in an environment where “bad influences” are supposed to be legion. Nabil says that his parents were satisfied only because they knew he was in the gym and not in the street:

*Question: How did your parents react when you started Thai boxing?*

*Nabil: My parents, they didn't even pay attention to me! It means that whether I come home or not, because we were a big family so there was a lot of comings and goings. We are eight in the family, I have seven brothers, some of them are gone, God rest their soul, but there was a lot of comings and goings. As long as they knew that I was at the gym, for them it was all right. They knew I was boxing, but only the fact that they knew that I was at the gym, for them I was under supervision, I was not into trouble, because at the beginning before I started Thai boxing I had started to get into trouble, like all kids, but the fact of having met Aimé and hung out with him, to practice sport, you stay away from provocation, you stay away from all that. You're tired, you go home and you go to bed, you go out again, but as a child I was really motivated by sport, because I was always bullied when I was fat. For example, there was a soccer game, I was always the last one to be picked up, nobody would care about me when we would do sport activities, now my cell always rings 'come on, let's play!'. But since I was little, I can tell you sometimes it was snowing or raining in the morning and I would still go for a run, even if I would run for a short distance, I would run for about twenty minutes, but I would run, run, and run. Like that I was able to change the picture, and there is even one guy in the neighborhood who calls me “all sports” [laughs] because I am often at the sport center, or with Aimé, I would come, look at the sport that was*

*played and I would play. I happened to play handball, basketball. And this guy when he would come to see Aimé, he would see me and tell me 'you do canoe, you do...' he would call me "all sports" and until today he calls me like that. But I'd rather be called "all sports" than Nabil the weed smoker or something like that.*

The idea that sport can “struggle against delinquency” is a common sense idea, as Djamel says: *“When I was a kid, I was calm because my father was very strict. I’ve always been calm. The education my father gave me was strict, he used to hit me with belt. It’s my father who prevented me from getting into trouble. It’s also a cliché this discourse that says that boxing prevents you from getting into trouble, because I know boxers who box and are into trouble. One can go with the other.”* Even if the “toughest” ones, as they are called, are difficult to co-opt, and that it is more likely to see them pursuing their deviant career rather than starting a sport career, it seems to me that we need to take seriously the numerous declarations of boxers and trainers claiming that Thai boxing has diverted them from delinquency in a redemptive discourse.

*Chérif says that “Thai boxing allows tough kids from the neighborhood and around to channel their energies. We’ve had a lot of them who were in delinquency and who calmed down thanks to boxing. They were into trouble and all that and the fact of coming to the gym, to learn values, to respect the other, the rules, and all that, they realize that what they were doing was wrong and they stop. Not all of them of course, but a certain number.”*

If Thai boxing has always been perceived in France as a “sport of thugs,” Fabrice asserts that it is like everything else, and that it is important not to reduce a sport to few

persons who may have been into trouble. He claims that Thai boxing “transforms” those who are initiated into it and practice it.

The practice is a way to express an agonistic habitus and to convert a form of raw energy into controlled and codified pugilistic technique. Most boxers in this study say that they are calm but also impulsive. Zakaria, twenty-two years old, says that he is calm but also that he can lose his temper in certain situations:

*I'm calm but impulsive. If there's something that I'm really gonna dislike, I don't control myself anymore, after that's it, but I'm super calm.*

Omar declares that Thai boxing made him neutralize somehow his impulsive side and was useful when he started to work as a youth leader:

*Physically, mentally, Thai boxing has brought me a lot. On top of that, I started practicing when I started to work a little bit, I was a youth leader, I was working with kids. Let's say that before I was a really turbulent boy, and when I became a youth leader, I started to calm down a little bit, and then I started Thai boxing and I became more peaceful. And it teaches you perseverance, to endure blows and all that, so it's beneficial. And you can feel it in everyday life, to have a certain healthy lifestyle, a certain balance and all... it necessarily gives you more self-confidence in the sense that you train, you feel good about yourself. Actually, it's the fact of practicing sport.*

Some boxers react against what they consider as a received idea about their practice, like Stéphane who thinks that Thai boxing is not a “sport of thugs”:

*I don't think it concerns me. Those are stereotypes, people often generalize, and I try to make them understand that it's a sport with codes and a lot of respect... a thing that thugs don't know about.*

Gaspard talks about a certain agonistic disposition of youths in the *banlieues*:

*It's not a thug sport, it's true that most of those who practice Thai boxing live in banlieue, in the projects, you know, it's normal because... you know, we have to identify with individuals and the first ones that have been really good in this domain are people who were coming from the banlieues as well, guys like Dida, Joël César, those are guys who live in the banlieues, who live in Villiers for Dida and La Courneuve or Saint-Denis for Joël César, those are banlieues, sensitive banlieues and people identify with this kind of persons and they are necessarily guys from the projects and it has some repercussions on the rest of the population from the projects you know. But there are clubs in Paris too, not as much as in banlieue. A sport of thugs, well we have to dissociate, there are some people in the banlieues who are not necessarily thugs, there is a small group that we can say they are thugs yeah there are some thugs who play soccer, there are thugs who play tennis, you know what I'm saying, maybe less because it's an elitist sport. Some of them don't do any sport, I know thugs who like golf. It's my sport, I don't want to see a pejorative aspect to it, but it's true that in terms of percentage it's more practiced by guys from the projects you know, I'm talking about percentage, I'm not gonna talk about thugs or whatever you know because some thugs play soccer... maybe there is also the fact that often thugs have to fight in the street for nothing because it's their temperament, and maybe they have to learn to defend themselves you know. And I see people who practice Thai boxing who are passionate about Thai boxing, who have never watched a fight, who only want to give courage to themselves*

*you know, because it gives you courage you in this case Thai boxing, and everyday life, if you apply the principles of Thai boxing to your life, it can help you a lot you know, in confronting certain hardships, like I don't know looking for a job, being confident in front of your boss, being able to look at him in the eye and tell him hum to sell yourself you know, here it's the same in the ring you have to be strong and to look your adversary in the eye so that he doesn't take the upper hand on you. Basically, for me it's a thing that helps me a lot. On top of that when you know your value, it channels your energies for certain things, it's funny, this is paradoxical it's weird because you learn how to fight, to defend yourself and it can help you not to do it, not to use it, it can help you not to push yourself too hard or actually to calm down when facing a tense situation. So thug, it's a stereotype, but I'm not saying that there is no thug who practices. Some thugs practice for sure but like some of them play soccer, basketball, all kind of sport, but it's true that you'll find thugs in popular sports like soccer or Thai boxing, Thai boxing is popular in the banlieues even if it's not really in the media, everybody wants to be the strongest, to know how to hit hard, it's not within everybody's reach, it's a very tough sport, you have to go the gym, to train, you have to be motivated.*

The trainers consider deviance as something unacceptable at least inside the gym, which is a sacred enclosure. It is a matter of honor: by stealing inside the group, the thief disgraces himself and undermines the collective honor of the group, theft being the opposite of the gift. The trainers make sure to have the boxers respect this essential rule, and when a boxer breaks the rule, they appear voluntarist. *A girl complains to the trainers that she lost her little chain that was attached to her bag or that somebody stole it. She accuses two kids who left before the others. The trainers assure her that "we're going to find it, don't worry."* *She doesn't look that worried, she just wants her chain back, as if she trusted the trainers' capacity to get it back.* The trainers are pedagogical as well as moral authorities. Here my

observations slightly differ from Wacquant's claim that inside the gym "everything takes place as if a tacit pact of nonaggression governed interpersonal relations" (2004, 37), but he also remarks a "complex and finely hierarchized structure" (2004, 39). Although I have seen a similar form of sociability in the gyms I have studied, some breaches to this implicit agreement can arise. The following field note shows that violent conflicts can emerge inside the gym, especially when there is a breach of this consensus, and can even be exported outside of it in the street, creating a symbolic order and hierarchy both inside and outside the gym.

*Alain, Fabrice's brother, has to take care of a young boxer's cell phone that was stolen. The mother of the young boy came to claim her son's cell phone and to ask for the trainers' help. She says that she doesn't live in La Courneuve anymore, but that she lived there, she knows it well... Alain, the mother, two adults, and a young boxer are talking about the theft after the training. The young boxer says "yeah but Alain those are tramps! Me if my little brother steals something, I'm going to see him right away and tell him to give it back! But then when you tell them that, they say 'man I don't know'... The discussion ends and the mother thanks Alain for his help.*

*It's time for the boxers to gather, it's 9pm. Aimé tells everybody that he has two important things to say. He announces that yesterday somebody stole a cell phone in the locker room number two where most of the boxers are teenagers except two adults and one of them got his cell phone stolen and Aimé says that it's important for him to get it back because he needs it for work. Aimé asks the person who stole it to bring it back, even if he puts it in the mailbox anonymously. Aimé says that the cell is useless since it's locked and that it's for work. The*

*trainers, especially Fabrice, are not happy at all. Aimé says that it has never happened in the club which is based on respect, there only was an I-pod stolen recently to a teenager (who is in the gym tonight). Aimé repeats that the Derek is a family and the club wants to keep that. Fabrice says that it's because a person is rich that she is somebody, if we are alone, we are nobody, we always need others. Fabrice advocates solidarity and execrates selfishness. Aimé says that the boxers have given an example of that by bringing supplies for Haiti. Fabrice is really angry and let the boxers know it. He says that the one who did it is going to pay for this. He gives the boxers a lecture for a few minutes, everybody listens without a noise. He says that "we protect ourselves from the outside by locking the locker rooms, and the enemies come from the inside! Those who want to steal, they should steal outside, I don't want that here! Once, ask Thibault [the former head coach and founder of the gym] who's here, he can tell you. We caught a guy who had stolen a wallet from a guy here, we beat the hell out of him, I swear that if he wasn't there [Thibault], we would have killed him!" Fabrice adds that "I now come across him in the street and believe he looks down when he sees me." Fabrice says that "nowadays, there is no value anymore, at the time, even the bigger gangsters had values, even cops would respect them, now that's all over!" Aimé introduces Thibault who passes by as one of the founders of the gym, he steps forward and everybody applauds and greets the Thais do, and says that "if the club has been created and continues to exist it's because we've insisted on respect, the rest is claptrap, if you have come to the Derek, it's because you've heard of it, you came for its technique, etc. and I'm proud of that. Respect, guys, it's the essential value, that's all I wanted to tell you." [Field note]*

Fabrice opposes the gym to the street. While a lot of them come from the "street," boxers have to learn to separate themselves from it, at least the time of a training session. In addition to rejecting deviance outside the sacred enclosure of the gym, it is also a way to

neutralize the social markers that revolve around the nearby environment of the gym. Accordingly, during this sequence of moral inculcation, Fabrice imposes a symbolic distance between the sacred and the profane, between the gym and the street, the boxers and the others, “honest” people and “dishonest” people.

Inculcation to be productive, and not idle or inactive, one has to be doing something, and even to surpass oneself, to go beyond pain, tiredness, one has to clench one’s teeth, otherwise, as Alain says, “your jaw is going to there” making a gesture of lateral translation with his hands to show that the jaw is broken. This injunction to labor can be much more literal:

*The trainers mention to the boxers who are gathered at the end of the session a job fair that is taking place upstairs in the large room of the gymnasium above the boxing gym. They advise them to go there, “it’s for you guys, those who have no job, just go,” Chérif says “even those who want to be oriented after their studies,” Aimé adds “however, don’t go for unemployment benefits, it’s for work up there, there is no unemployment benefits.”*

This discourse, even in a gym, can have a certain resonance, especially among working-class youths who are particularly targets of unemployment and precariousness. Karim is a temporary delivery driver and claims that this temporary status suits him because he has periods of inactivity during which he can do what he likes. Zakaria, who works as a salesman, declares that he is going to find a new job soon and that he will look based on Thai boxing hours of training:

*Even when I’m looking for a job, it’s almost part of my criteria, I say to myself it’s gonna be a hassle if I have a job that prevents me from going to the gym, I don’t how I would*

*do, I don't know how I would do. Now you know I'm in a situation where it's fine, my schedule is perfect, but my contract ends soon so I'm going to find something else, it's a fix-termed contract of one year, I don't know how I'm gonna do. If I find a job let's say that I finish at 9pm and all I would be mad, I would be so mad not to go to the gym. I don't think I could go on like that, without going to the gym and all, I can't.*

## **6) Physical Force as (A)Political Force**

It would be a romantic vision of the (sub)proletariat, and a mistake, to see in some forms of revolts in the *banlieues* or in some practices the expression of a kind of revolutionary avant-garde. We can put forward the hypothesis that the practice of bodybuilding or Thai boxing can channel subversive energies that some young men from the black ghetto or the working-class *banlieues* potentially have. It is sometimes one of the reasons why this kind of practices is encouraged, or at least, tolerated by institutions. The formation of an *esprit de corps* in the Derek is devoid of a specifically political content or orientation. It rests upon neighborhoods solidarities, commitment and experiences in the pugilistic practice. Some boxers are conscious of these forms of solidarities among the working classes, like Zakaria:

*In the banlieues, what I notice in the projects it's that generally speaking people stick together. You know because we're all in a certain situation, we're not loaded we really don't have money and all, people help each other, I mean, I don't know, you go to your buddy's home, his mother will come and make you get inside, she will tell you eat and all, you'll never see that some other places you know. Them, they will talk about cars that are burning and*

*all, they will talk about that kind of stuff, whereas there's a hell of mutual aid in the banlieues.*

Within both gyms, there are no collective claims that could lead toward a political action as such. That being said, boxers are conscious of certain aspects of their objective situation in the class and place structure like in the following example and often communicate it in the mode of (self-)mockery as if to protect themselves:

*The showers seem to be less and less functional, there is less pressure than usual, the water is colder, the boxers are complaining about it. In addition, the drain trap is clogged up, the water threatening to spread over the locker room. A boxer says "even the showers are in ZEP<sup>28</sup>!" which makes the other boxers who have heard the sarcasm laugh.*

The labor movement has been subjected to the advent of the so-called "consumer society," and it has become difficult since then to neutralize the fission forces that scatter the members of the working classes and to drag the latter out of the immediate materialistic satisfactions in order to orient them toward a centripetal political struggle. But the labor movement losing its hold over the working classes also is a consequence of the crisis of the reproduction of the symbolic instruments of political comprehension and communication. Sabri expresses the lack of tools, especially among the younger, that make possible the decoding the political language, but he also shows a certain civic consciousness and a beginning of political good will:

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<sup>28</sup> *Zone d'Education Prioritaire* (Priority Education Zone) is a plan of assistance to underachieving schools in designated disadvantaged urban areas.

*I think that people get interested in politics when they understand something to what is going on. I wasn't interested before because when I was listening to a discourse of Sarkozy, or others, I didn't understand anything, it was nonsense to me, I was saying to myself 'I'm not interested.' But now, I understand a little better, sometimes I'm in the subway, I see the newspaper Le Monde on a seat and I read it like that, I'm going to read it, it's not that I'm really interested like 'I need politics' but more than before. When I come across it I listen, since I'm going to college and they talk a lot about it, sometimes I say to myself that it's a duty, it's normal, you live in a country, you have to know what's going on, the rules. I vote, I voted for the European elections, the general elections...*

*Question: Do you think it's a duty or a way to make yourself heard?*

*Sabri: First of all I think it's a duty, we're French citizens we have the right to vote, some don't have it and would like to have it, so for me it's a duty, you have to go and vote. It takes you five minutes of your day, you know that the polling station is going to be empty, you're not even going to be on line, so for me it's a duty. Then it's also a way to make oneself heard, we don't have a lot of opportunities to make ourselves heard nowadays, especially us, youths from the banlieue, it's like... there's nothing for us. So at the same time when you vote, you feel involved, when you hear 'there is 75% of the population that has voted' you say to yourself 'I'm part of it, I'm proud' that's quite all right.*

Shawn says that he is not interested in politics:

*I'm not really interested in politics. All I know is that we have a black president.*

*Question: How do you feel about that?*

*Shawn: I mean I feel like as a black president he's a target but then again... I mean everybody that tries to make change is a target you understand. But he said he was here to make change and I'm waiting on the change you understand. I've seen some changes you know. Right now the change I really admire the most is the medicare you understand cause I have a lot of medical bills comin' in and say I owe this I owe that but this medical thing, it really has a set good effect on me, yeah I really like that.*

*Question: As a black person, do you feel represented now that Obama is president?*

*Shawn: The only way I feel represented is the fact that we have the same color of skin that he's now president you know there wasn't really a black president before, he's the first one but other than that he's here for the people and the people is black and White, Spanish, Black, White, Spanish, Hispanic you know whoever country, Chinese, he's here to represent all. So whoever lives in the United States he's here to represent you. So I'm not gonna say he's here to represent just a black man you understand cause this is the United States not just the United States of black people.*

If they get interested into politics, it often is on an individual mode and this reveals the relation that members of the working classes have with politics and politicians, that is an often distant and distrustful relation that is expressed in a denunciatory and moralizing tone, and that illustrates the dislocation that has taken place between them and the left in particular, since the 1980s, as exemplified by the abstention rate for the elections or even the non-

registration on electoral rolls. Rafik considers politics and those who are practicing it professionally on the disenchanting mode of moral indignation:

*I'm interested in politics in general, but that's my personal opinion, I think that 80% of those who are in the world of politics, it's my own opinion, for they're not honest people, they hunger for power and they're ready to tell you everything and anything. I'm interested but at a distance, because I don't want to mix with those people, I do my civic duty, when it's time to vote, I vote, for the one who seems the most honest to me. Based on appearances, they share the same values, but behind, I'm absolutely convinced that they don't share the same values and that they couldn't care less.*

Class morals is what is left to the dominated, in addition to their courage, physical force, and virility in their opposition to the dominant. The political rebellion often expresses itself on a corporeal and emotional mode. This distrust towards politics often is based on a bad experience on a practical level that is lived as a sort of betrayal and disappointment whose limit expression is the “urban riots.” Members of the working classes are likely to feel like they have been “taken for a ride,” manipulated by politicians and at the end abandoned. Djamel thinks that the club has brought a lot to the city: *The history between La Courneuve and the Derek Boxing is a long history. This club has brought a lot to the city in terms of social peace, and also for the youth of the city. It has often been put forward in reports with one of the icons of this sport in the 1990s Dida Diafat.*

For Eugène-Henri Moré, the Thai boxing club, like the other associations in La Courneuve, must build a solid project and submit it to the city in order to get subsidies. He

claims that the club has had difficulties to do that in recent years, and that they start to do it partly because they are helped by a city employee who is the associations' coordinator.

We can put forward the hypothesis that the political force is present in the gym in a potential form, based on the asceticism of those who practice and who would feel entrusted with one or other of their goals to reach through discipline, or to put in Marxist terms, there is a "possible consciousness," especially knowing that some boxers declare that they are interested in politics.

Omar thinks that the 2005 "riots" are something that can happen again. His testimony illustrates the fact that athletes, and those who practice Thai boxing in the working-class *banlieues* in particular, are not totally apolitical and this even makes one think that there is a certain energy that can be mobilized if supported by a political goal and expressed with words:

*I think it's something that happened and maybe it will happen again given the state of the banlieues in France and precisely all this negative aspect that is put on them, all this confusion that is made on the banlieues, I think that it was meant to happen. On top of that, with what happened to Bouna et Zyed [the two teenagers who died electrocuted after being chased by the police, which triggered the 2005 "riots" in Clichy-sous-Bois], this has been the detonator, the way it happened... I don't support the fact they have burnt buses, cars, schools and all, it's wrong because at the end of the day who suffers from that, it's the inhabitants who will sweat blood, some people have lost their job because of them, some people have lost their car, schools that have burnt so it means children who don't go to school, it's the very inhabitants of the banlieues who suffer from that. I don't support that, but I understand the gesture, I understand the reaction without actually supporting it. Maybe there would be*

*something better to do, but you can understand that people are angry because... honestly I've experienced that, having your ID checked three four times a day sometimes by the same team, I'm like 'is it fun?' 'we're doing our job' 'you did an hour ago', you did it an hour ago why are you doing it again! Honestly, it's a pain, it's annoying, it's annoying, it's annoying, whereas you know that people who live on more residential neighborhoods have hardly their ID checked, while you, because you live in a banlieue, in a project, you're going have your ID checked fifteen times, honestly it's a pain...*

*AO: Or at the supermarket, the security guard...*

*Omar: [pronounced at the same time] The security guard yeah, being followed by the security guard yeah it happened to me several times. It's the same, it's annoying, it's annoying to experience it on an everyday basis, you're going somewhere, the way you're dressed, they're going to look at you 'he's from the banlieues, he's going to make trouble' they expect you to make trouble. People expect you to do something, they are prejudiced and it happened to me several times to go to some administrations or to Paris, all right at that time I was looking like a banlieue guy, hood or baseball cap, Cartier glasses, and it's when you arrive and start to talk, they expect you to talk like a thug and I arrive like 'hello, excuse me' I was talking like that calmly, nicely 'excuse me I would like' with a formal language and all and I could see in their eyes they were a little like 'that's all right, the savage can talk nicely!' that's roughly the impression I had and then when you say 'thank you have a great day, bye bye' they tell you 'thank you you too' but you could tell that they were surprised by the way you were talking. Based on your look, if you talk to them like a thug it would be more obvious than if you talk to them nicely, that's a shame. We say that you can't judge a book by its cover, but on the contrary I think we do judge the book by its cover unfortunately in this*

*society in which we live nowadays. Just look at what they're doing now with the integral veil, we judge a book by its cover.*

The Marxist tradition has associated the dominated – the *lumpenproletariat* – with a reactionary force. This study puts this orthodoxy into question without considering the dominated as a revolutionary avant-garde. We can that the Thai boxing gym, and to a lesser extent the bodybuilding gym, is a place where we can find a collective protopolitical energy that is often denied to youths from the *banlieues* and the ghetto partly because they are not necessarily members of institutional political parties. But it is not because they do not have the card of an institutional political party that they do not have political ideas or practices. Many associations and organizations exist or are created in those stigmatized neighborhoods whose object is political struggle. We cannot reduce the production of a political disposition only to the socialization within the political field, like being a member of an institutional party. According to Schmitt, the essence of political existence is the capacity to make the distinction between “enemies” and “friends.” This boxer, who “follow politics from far,” is not a member of a political party, which does not mean that he does not have a disposition towards politics, acquired through everyday life experiences and that can be transformed into a discourse, and especially the social and temporal insecurity that can represent the fact of living in the working-class *banlieues* or the ghetto. We can say that politics is a sport where one blows below the belt and some boxers or bodybuilders identify some political “enemies” and can also identify “friends” who can be the peer group, youths from the project, the *banlieue* or the ghetto. For a boxer who claims to stand out for “values” of fair play and respect, such a sport can only inspire suspicion. The disdain here expressed is a sort of inverted class aristocratism: politicians are corrupted and only support on the surface the ethical “values” that this boxer possesses and that Thai boxing reproduces. The gathering of

individualities who have been socialized in more or less similar economic and social conditions and who are involved in an agonistic practice condenses an important social energy that one can feel as soon as one penetrates the gym and that is confirmed by the ethnographic immersion. The gyms, with their odors, their vapors, and muscling and boxing actors, are like a testosterone concentrate. It would be possible to convert this raw energy into political energy, because this raw energy is not sufficient to build a political movement as such, to convert this force of pugilistic combat into a political force that can be mobilize within the framework of class struggle or political struggle.

The fact remains that “youths from the *banlieues*” or from the black ghetto as a group do not have a significant political weight and do not have the collective capacity to exert an influence, in a strong and regular fashion, except when some of them let their anger explode during those so-called “riots” precisely because those youths lack the symbolic instruments of political expression mediated through language. All the conditions – unemployment, precariousness, violence, discriminations, school failure, etc. – are gathered to make of those youths what Marx calls a “sack of potatoes” and some of them can even act against their objective interests, that is to say *grosso modo* against the subversion of the established order.

To transform a social condition, a necessary and preliminary step is to overthrow the symbolic order that is also a semantic order, it is therefore necessary to put words on forms of domination. One of the problems of the dominated is that they do not necessarily have the adequate language to be able to verbalize their domination, to put their experiences with words, or in other words they do not possess what Bernstein calls the “common language” that is a predictable language that is descriptive rather than analytical, with a rigid syntax, reduced possibilities of elaboration, and that favors collective social relationships (Bernstein, 1975: 30-32, 49). When the interviewed boxers are indignant at the injustice that is done to them, on a mode that is less rational than emotional, there is not necessarily a hint of a

revolutionary consciousness. It can, on the contrary, express an adherence to the established order and its “rules.” If one demands things like more equality, less discrimination, and so on, or in other words that one’s social existence be recognized as legitimate, it is because one recognizes the legitimacy of the established order and that one wants to be recognized by it.

The gyms, and often the working-class *banlieues* and the ghettos, lack a charismatic agent endowed with a necessary cultural capital and a political sense who would have gone through the learning of Marxism (“*pédagogisation du marxisme*”) like the French Communist party militants (Pudal, 1989: 179), capable to give an autonomy, to mobilize the group on political ground and to adequately master the instruments of communication of protest, to produce a critical discourse based on a verbalization of experiences of domination lived individually, because this agent has the necessary theoretical knowledge and because he has an interest in doing it. The members of the gyms do not have a spokesperson for the group who has the ability to mobilize the symbolic and material force of the group. But maybe more important, bodybuilders and boxers go to the gym in order to precisely forget, at least during the training, the conditions and the experiences of everyday life and especially in relations to (un)employment.

Nevertheless, the conditions of subversion of the established order cannot be reduced to a heroic vision of the social world that would put these conditions of possibility on a charismatic agent’s shoulders alone, even if he is the producer of a prophetic discourse. He must at least share the conditions of perception of his feeling of revolt with other agents although it remains unformulated for them. Since they do not possess an “elaborated code” but rather a “restrained code” that is linked with the division of labor whose function is to reproduce the collective forms of social relations (Bernstein, 1975: 70-71), youths from the working classes are more likely to be spoken rather than to speak for themselves. But through bodily practices, they are not acted, they gain control over their body by putting it into action.

In the past, youths from the French working classes were socialized within institutions or groups in relation with a political organization like the “Communist Youths” (*Jeunesses communistes*). The break between these social institutions and a political group such as the Communist party has deprived the youths from the contemporary working-class *banlieues* of places of political socialization and access to political categories of interpretation of the world, in particular based on language. Moreover, within the working classes, whether French or American, the spatial dispersion of people, the attachment to a territory, a neighborhood, a housing project, etc., disturb the symbolic and material relations between agents or groups of agents and conceal the common interests to the benefit of a “constellation of interests” both material and symbolic. In order for a revolutionary disposition to be built, social agents must have a strong hold over time and their future, which gives them an ontological security. Yet, young men from the black ghetto and the working-class *banlieues*, affected by unemployment, and racked by social as well as temporal insecurity, do not have this control over their future that others, whose economic capital authorizes to make projects in the future because it assures them a security, possess. Paradoxically, the most capable to become conscious of their domination are those who have already been able to detach themselves a little bit from this domination partly because they have been able to build a rational representation of the future and to guarantee a present security. Similarly, the boxers or bodybuilders should not be put in the same sack of potatoes so to speak, and some of them have more developed than others, as we have seen it, an acute political sense that can be a necessary but not sufficient precondition to the construction of a revolutionary consciousness.

Bodybuilders and boxers in particular start to subvert categories of perception when they struggle against the commonsensical representations of their practices and more generally of youths from the *banlieues* or the ghetto. The inhabitants of contemporary French working-class *banlieues* have developed a collective identity that is less strong than the one

developed in ghettos by African Americans. Youths from the *banlieues* are more or less aware of sharing similar life experiences because they live in stigmatized neighborhoods. Until the 1980s, the “red *banlieues*” had institutions that made a connection between organizations, the labor market and the municipalities. With the de-industrialization, those ties have slackened and the inhabitants of working-class neighborhoods have been dispossessed of a political representation, and with the decline of the labor movement, the class struggle has been relegated to a rearguard action. Furthermore, new forms of struggle have appeared many of which have “identity” as a basis such as multiculturalism, the anti-racist movement, feminism, or the LGBT movement, the human rights movement, and more and more people become involved in (“grassroots”) associations or organizations and less in unions or political parties, and these new militants often possess an important amount of cultural capital, which is likely to exclude the participation of members of the working classes. The distance expressed by boxers and bodybuilders towards politics reflects the distance between the inhabitants and the traditional working-class organizations of collective mobilization and that prevents them from gathering around a common political goal and even from building a certain social honor of the group. The inhabitants of the American black ghetto have historically been able to political organize themselves in a much more important fashion than in the French *banlieues* because of their ghettoization, which means their racialization and the fact that they have developed their own protective and identity-making institutions (churches), and even some cultural practices (jazz). The political solidarity that African Americans have been able to build is at the same time an ethnic solidarity and a solidarity based on the life experiences as a stigmatized group and has allowed them to make the foundations of racial domination shake, even if this solidarity has been challenged recently with the large incarceration of black men, unemployment, precariousness, and the stigmatization of those neighborhoods. Paradoxically, it has been easier for African

Americans to bring to the foreground representatives and spokespersons than the inhabitants of French working-class *banlieues* and especially those of foreign origin because this has been done on a racial basis. The worshipped boxer Muhammad Ali is an example of an athlete with a strong symbolic capital who has been able to emerge as a representative of African Americans and even to a certain extent of all the dominated of the planet.

*At the end of the training, the champion of the club is to celebrate his recent victory in an international competition where he was at the top of the bill. A boxer is asking him 'Steve where are we having a drink?', Steve replies 'at the entrance', then smiling 'be patient guys, be patient!'. Boxers are coming little by little. Steve puts the drinks, appetizers, crackers on a table. A boxer helps himself without waiting for others who are still in the locker rooms, Omar says to him laughing that he is helping himself before others, and he replies that he really has to go. The group is asking Steve for a discourse and he says that he waits for Fabrice. Steve and others serve the drinks, the group starts to eat and drink. Fabrice arrives and says 'I hope you're going to train like you eat!', smiling he says to a young boxer Tayeb who seems to eat well 'you're fimeu<sup>29</sup> in front of food!' and he starts laughing. Later, the trainers ask Tayeb to take off his cap and his hood, Alain says 'we've already told him on top of that!', Chérif laughing says 'those kids!', Tayeb takes it off and bows. Fabrice goes behind the counter and starts to talk. Everybody is listening. He says that he doesn't do Steve any favor during training, but that "hard work pays off. You can all here reach Steve's level, but you must work." Alain adds 'each his own way.' Fabrice insists on solidarity, he says that 'money is useless and that if one day someone falls, he can be a billionaire, his money won't pick him up, a human being will do it. That's what I like in life. Alone we don't have strength, but all together we are a force.' He insists on the fact that "when someone is in trouble, it's*

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<sup>29</sup> *Fimeu* means "technician" in Thai, it is a category applied to boxers who possess good technical skills as opposed to punchers.

*necessary to stick together. When Steve wins, everybody is here,' he gets closer to him and touches him, 'yeah I know him,' and when he loses, I don't wish him that, everybody leaves' he pretends to leave, lowering his head 'like I don't know him' which makes the group laugh, 'no it's not like that, in victory like in defeat, it happens, it's human, we must stick together, we need it in both cases.'* Then Fabrice talks about Bush, Sarkozy and even about 'the most powerful man in the world, Obama. If there's no solidarity, money is useless.' Everybody applauds. Steve starts to talk, and it is necessary to call the group to order so that they can focus again on what he is going to say. He says that his victory is a 'collective victory, from the younger to the older of the club,' if he won it is also because 'we all work together.' Everybody applauds again, he raises his hands and smiles. Aimé announces that it is going to be time to go, the keeper is going to close the doors of the gymnasium. Some boxers start to leave and others still hang out and keep talking. [Field note]

The State leaves a certain margin of freedom to agents, but this freedom is also driven by different forms of control. Klein sees bodybuilding, and in particular the system of competitions, not as a perfect structural equivalent of capitalism, but rather as a pre-capitalist institution that is inscribed within a set of feudal relationships that hide contractual relations (Klein, 1993: 103-107). I think that we can go further and say that the gyms and their management by a State apparatus partake of a more general historical movement that is what Foucault calls the "statization of the biological" in which the State starts to take care the anthropological practices through a "biopolitics" (Foucault, 1997: 213, 216) that targets, if not the whole social body, at least, part of the "population" especially when it is deviant and dominated (Arnaud, 2008). The bodybuilding or Thai boxing gym, where one works on one's body shape, health, strength, and against obesity and death, is a place where the forces of agents are optimized and channeled. The socialized body is the interface on which power is

exerted and on which a resistance to it begins. When resistance to domination is transformed into a bodily practice, it loses some of its subversive and political force, even if it wins individual and collective social energy. This dynamics of de-politicization does not mean that boxers and bodybuilders are totally depoliticized, simply because those practices are a criticism of the dominating reason in action and that often ignore themselves as such.

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

To conclude, let me gather what I consider as the main analyses of this study. The comparative study of bodybuilding in a black American ghetto and Thai boxing in a French working-class *banlieue* has allowed me to account for the way stigmatized agents from working-class neighborhoods reproduce themselves *in practice* by at the same time incorporating and putting to work mental and sensory schemes acquired in and out of the practice. The ethnographic inquiry has been a methodological device used for grasping in action the incorporation of the social and its translation into strategies within the framework of an economy of virile practices in marginalized urban zones.

The historical and social mechanisms that are specific to the American society and to the French society have instituted some groups as carriers of an ethnoracial and class stigma, and they have also ascribed a territorial stigma to the neighborhoods where those groups were most likely to live. In both societies, the members of those groups have experienced a “double consciousness” and its effects on their social life. Those groups are involved in a dialectic relationship that oscillates between consent to domination and struggle against it of which bodybuilding and Thai boxing are the expression. These bodily practices have as a driving force, among other things, the injury of domination and the sufferings it generates. Nevertheless, a dominated type of social life also is made of joy that is partly brought by bodily practices and the effervescence and the solidarity that they imply.

The dilapidated American black ghettos and French working-class *banlieues* are linked to a spatialization of “social problems” in that populations deemed “problematic” (lazy, delinquent, dangerous, carrying a ethnoracial and class stigma, etc.) are confined within a delimited and degraded urban space, racially homogeneous in the United States, ethnically heterogeneous in France. This spatialization makes invisible relations of

domination by designating the inhabitants of those neighborhoods the only responsible of their own fate. Those two urban spaces have undergone the destruction of their institutions, the flight of their middle classes, the transformation of their working class into an economically redundant group and a treatment of their members, the young men in particular, that is more and more punitive.

Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are both individual and collective bodily practices in that they gather agents for action by providing them with a spatial, moral and emotional framework so that they can exchange in muscular and pugilistic action. Because they don't quite understand, or rather they understand too well the rules of the social game in which they are dominated, boxers and bodybuilders of our study find in their practices relatively transparent rules that, according to them, leave no room for cheating and allow them to observe the concrete effects of their labor and the recognition associated with it. Those practices are means of sensualization, aestheticization, and medicalization of the ordinary life of bodybuilders and boxers. These self-improving practices are intensely reflexive and give the agent a strong consciousness and knowledge of himself through the mediation of a series of rites. It looks as if youths from the working class were less capable of being involved in collective political struggles but ready to develop the control over the means of production of their own body. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are sensual and artful practices that create a carnal link between those who practice and their sweating and suffering bodies. Those practices partake of a *virile aestheticization* of the lifestyle of the members of the working class. The hygienism of the studied bodily practices creates healthy bodies that are ready for work, while hiding the social causes of the "problems" that have been medicalized.

The bodybuilding and Thai boxing gyms are the places of reproduction of dominant sexual differences. Despite a euphemization and femininization of practices, especially of Thai boxing, that has to do with their institutionalization, both gyms are mainly frequented by

men that the structures of socialization, since childhood, have oriented them towards agonistic social games. Because it separates men from women, homosociality is a necessary step towards the construction of a masculine disposition in that it keeps a temporal and spatial frame dedicated to virile ritualization. These virile institutions institute the muscle and the fist as elementary forms of masculinity in the very division of muscular and pugilistic labor as well as in the symbolic meaning that is given to these practices. We have seen that men are more likely to develop the upper body to appear bigger, whereas women are more likely to work out to become thinner and tighter. Female fighters are more likely to train together, and less likely to fight with a boy, unless there is no other girl available in the gym. They are also less likely to punch or kick hard and fast. The muscle and dexterity in combat are more likely to be symbolically associated with virility. Yet, the relatively growing involvement of women in those masculine practices results in a redefinition in action of the processes of gender identification, starting with the phenomenology of the feminine and masculine body.

I have considered bodybuilding and Thai boxing less as sports as rites. Through a metamorphosis of the actor, those ascetic rites constitute the foundations of a transcendence of the everyday life for the young men in the stigmatized urban areas in the United States and France. By putting the actor in action and by providing him emotions, those bodily practices gives a meaning and a direction to his life. Because they acquire a certain ontological security, boxers and bodybuilders work towards the control over both their body and time and therefore over the future. This control can be a bulwark against the uncertainties of the deep social insecurity that is experienced in poor neighborhoods. The will to build up muscles and to acquire combat skills often is linked with a profound feeling of ontological insecurity and vulnerability, and can be a way to prevent intimidation or aggression, especially by the self-confidence that is learned and by applying a capacity to neutralize a threat, whether facing it physically or being able to defuse it.

The study of bodybuilding and Thai boxing in poor and stigmatized urban areas shows that it is in the intimate interweaving of the social uses of the body, the manipulation of language, and the relation to time that lies the formula of the incorporation of the social and its translation into strategies that are themselves transmuted into lifestyle. The temporal framework, the spatial separation, and the grueling physical training establish the necessary conditions of the access to embodied knowledge, one of its driving forces being suffering. The visceral link between bodybuilding, boxing, and knowledge constitutes a cognitive mediation that institutes the boxer or bodybuilder as a competent and knowing actor. Inscribed within an epistemology of the flesh, this embodied and difficult knowledge is manufactured in transcendence and in the framework of an economy of the pedagogical gift that introduces relations of knowledge and power inside the gym.

By means of the transmission of specific categories of perception and action (virility, courage, abnegation, fighting spirit, solidarity, etc.), bodily practices, such as bodybuilding and Thai boxing, are parts of the instruments of reproduction of the group that is taken in a struggle for the legitimate definition of the body and its (re)presentations, in that they reinforce or transform the social boundaries between social groups, secure the transmission of bodily capital and the reproduction of those stigmatized groups' social honor. Because it leads to more losses, the transmission of bodily capital is more strenuous than the transmission of economic capital which is more safe and steady (for instance inheritance by a juridical act), and therefore entails a whole set of mechanisms and rituals aiming at securing the optimal conditions for this transmission in action. Practiced in a black ghetto, bodybuilding partly reproduces racial beliefs, such as the "natural" physicality and muscularity of Blacks. In France, practiced in a working-class *banlieue*, Thai boxing consolidates the prejudice according to which "youths from the *banlieue*" are "thugs" who like to brawl, prejudice that is, among others, likely to become essentialized and to cut them

from the rest of the population. But those beliefs are less “naturalized.” The racialization of the American social world makes that bodybuilding in a black ghetto is a racialized practice, which is not the case for Thai boxing in France. In the bodybuilding gym, all bodybuilders are black, whereas in the Thai boxing gym, boxers belong to different ethnic groups with nevertheless an overrepresentation of boxers of African, North African and West Indian origins. The sport policy of the city of La Courneuve is explicitly against the monoethnic access to practices by its inhabitants. It seems that the social and visceral cohesion that those practices induce is more intense in the case of the Thai boxing gym than the bodybuilding gym, which has a lot to do with the learning methods, one being more collective than the other, but not only. In France, the “policy of the City” having established the “restoration of the social tie” in the so-called neighborhoods “in difficulty,” many actors have internalized this injunction – boxers and trainers claims to be a family – and put it to work in practice and it has some concrete effects of solidarity. In the US, the “*empowerment*” policy rather corresponds to the incitation to take care of oneself, one of the effects being the involvement in a relatively more individualistic practice such as bodybuilding which seems to produce less solidarity than Thai boxing because of its mode of learning, but not only. My ethnographic observation makes me believe that boxers in a French working-class *banlieue* are more likely to develop social capital than bodybuilders in an American black ghetto because one of the foundations of the socialization structures is precisely the development of the “social tie.” Previous forms of working-class solidarity have been undermined by deindustrialization, unemployment, and the endemic ghetto violence. However, in comparison to the American black ghetto, the effects of the decay of social capital have been relatively cushioned by the density of local associations in the French working-class *banlieues* and a more active presence of the social State. My study shows the making or the crystallization of a group

logic that is so much reproached to “projects kids” and that is associated with “gangs” and delinquent or criminal activities.

Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are forms of social exorcism and quest for social honor. The boxer or the bodybuilder enters a process in which he both refuses and forgets domination. Because he regains the control over space, time, and his own body, and also because he acquires a new cosmogony, the boxer or bodybuilder from the ghetto or *banlieue* sees his social honor that has been denied being relatively regenerated. The practice of Thai boxing, more than bodybuilding, allows the boxer to divest himself of certain forms of social or ethnic identification. Bodybuilding and Thai boxing gyms provide an objective alternative to a deviant career, and also produce ambivalent citizens who are at the same time competent and competitive, healthy and disciplined, but with no symbolic and material value especially in the labor market, and totally excluded from the field of power because they are held apart from the access to it (mainly the school system).

The comparative analysis of the social uses of bodily practices in stigmatized urban neighborhoods in the US and France shows that those practices are given the function of training disciplined agents and responsible citizens who turn away from delinquency, in more voluntary and interventionist fashion in France. The studies bodily practices are linked with the withdrawal of the State that encourages the inhabitants of those neighborhoods to take care of themselves and to be the producers of their own security and their neighborhood's security, and as such they are forms of socialization of violence and deviance. Because they are perceived and experienced as salvation paths, through their ritualistic aspect and the fact that they cut youths from street socialization, bodybuilding and Thai boxing are practices that deviate from deviance. Thus, deviance is not so much contained by a repressive apparatus as partially neutralized by *producing* competent agents endowed with a partially regained social honor. We can even ask ourselves, with Robert Castel, if we are witnessing the generalization

of a technology, neither totally repressive, nor totally assisting, of differentiation of agents between those who are competitive and those who are not, unless this social technology already is an established fact (1983).

Bodybuilding and Thai boxing are practices that partake of the reproduction of the peer group in the American black ghetto and the French working-class *banlieue*, and that, in a way, compensate the weakening of the carnal tie between the labor movement and the working classes which has had as an effect the major crisis of the reproduction of the symbolic instruments of political comprehension and communication. The gyms, the Thai boxing one in particular, remain bastions of masculine and working-class sociability in a historical period during which the labor movement and its institutions are disintegrating and an individualistic mode of existence tends to take place in more working-class families than before. It seems to me that there is no “loss of the social tie” in the French working-class *banlieues* as the common sense wants it. Rather, there has been a reorganization of the forms of working-class sociability that has been challenged by deindustrialization.

The physical force as it is present in the bodybuilding and Thai boxing gyms is at the same time an apolitical and political force in that these practices cut off the bodybuilder or the boxer from work where the forces of collective mobilization of political struggle (the unions) while building a carnal and fraternal solidarity, and even racialized in the US, that can be a basis for a collective mobilization for political aims. However, it is not because bodybuilders or boxers are isolated from forms of political sociability during a training session (or even in their everyday life) that they do not have any political opinion or practice. The cult of the group may *potentially* lead (especially) the boxers as a constituted group to political action. As virilist rites riveted to a metaphysic of the flesh, bodybuilding and Thai boxing orient the bodybuilder or the boxer towards an ascetic discipline, a sacrifice of the self, commitment to values, an agonistic disposition that might be transmuted into political

energy, in a more pronounced way for boxers in the French working-class *banlieue*, to be valued in a class and classification struggle in a social world that is first of all a carnal world. But maybe because they have a certain amount of bodily capital, and less cultural capital, bodybuilders and boxers are not necessarily the fittest to have a revolutionary consciousness.

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