

## Article

# The Shared Sociological Imagination: A Reflexive Tale from the Boxe Popolare Field

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**Abstract:** This paper considers the personal commitment to ‘boxe popolare’ (people’s boxing), focusing on my scholar-practitioner status as a tool to contribute to the boxe popolare agenda by means of what I term ‘shared sociological imagination’. Through a reflexive tale on becoming a boxe popolare member, the article sheds light on the importance of overcoming the theory/practice divide. The first section of the paper draws on ‘habitus as topic and tool’—namely, the methodology I have adopted in a four-year ethnography of boxe popolare—and illustrates sociological imagination as a capacity that can be cultivated even in extremely carnal worlds by social agents who do not belong to academia. The second section broadens the reasoning, arguing that one characterising trait of being a scholar-practitioner in sport and physical culture may consist in working out agency both on an individual and a collective level. Echoing Burawoy’s perspective of ‘public sociology’, such an attempt can be seen as a potentially emancipatory strategy: it allows people with whom we research and practice to live with and through theory, embodying shared understandings in novel mundane activities.

**Keywords:** boxing; civic renewal; embodiment; ethnography; habitus; living theory; public sociology; reflexivity; scholar-practitioner; (shared) sociological imagination

## 1. Introduction

In April 2016, for a doctoral thesis in sociology, I approached the ‘palestra popolare’ (people’s gym) “Bread and Roses”; a self-managed gym located in Milan downtown and one of the oldest ‘boxe popolare’ (people’s boxing) centres. In the wake of the “carnal ethnography” [1] of martial arts and combat sports, and inspired by Wacquant’s reading of “habitus as topic and tool” [2], I regularly trained for (more than) three years. By embracing the principle that “the apprenticeship of the sociologist is a methodological mirror of the apprenticeship undergone by the empirical subjects of the study” [2] (p. 82), I have learnt this specific boxing style in this specific context. Apprenticeship allowed me to track down the social genesis of the “localised pugilistic habitus” [3], that is, I could reconstruct the path towards the acquisition of the bodily and mental dispositions that define the competent boxe popolare pugilist. Becoming an established member of Bread and Roses, I have also contributed in organising fight nights, participating in gym management, attending away/home matches and sharing several experiences with many practitioners who belong to the boxe popolare network [4–8]<sup>1</sup>.

Even though this information is included in my previous publications, what is missing is an account regarding my scholar-practitioner status, that is, the status of someone “who have one foot each in the worlds of academia and practice and [. . . is] pointedly interested in advancing the cause of both theory and practice” [9] (p. 49). As a “tool” of scientific investigation, habitus encompasses three strategies: “the use of fieldwork as an instrument of theoretical construction, the potency of carnal knowledge and the imperative of epistemic reflexivity” [2] (p. 81).

In this paper, I aim to return to the interlacing of three strategies embedded in my boxe popolare research, elucidating how the methodology of immersive fieldwork has informed



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my analysis and, at the same time, has contributed to the *boxe popolare* agenda. Precisely, the article dissects how I have managed my embodied membership in order to theorise according to a reflexive research design. In so doing, I have applied and stimulated a form of “sociological imagination” [10] shared with the boxing community.

Recapturing Mills’ perspective, I intend to stress that the significance of being a scholar-practitioner consists in acting reflexively so as to create a “connective tissue between theory and practice” [11] (p. 330). Since Wacquant’s ethnography on boxing [1], reflexivity is becoming a trademark of ethnographic research on sports and physical cultural practices. Research that embraces a participatory approach abundantly reflects upon the circumstances of immersive projects and how they enable researchers to address substantive and theoretical issues. Significantly, epistemic reflexivity—also defined by Bourdieu as ‘participant objectivation’ [12]—assumes importance to claim the scholarly legitimacy of carnal-based inquiries. These reflections are concerned on emphasising the ontological and ethical reasons for researchers’ involvement in social worlds, so as to avoid the risk of collapsing in auto-ethnographic solipsism [13]. Simultaneously, methodological reasoning stresses how pre-existing theory is being used and how novel theory is being produced through fieldwork.

Seeking for academic endorsement, less is said regarding the mutual influence between the researcher and the people with whom (s)he practises in a given organised context. Considering the huge spectrum of scholar-practitioners in sports and physical cultural practices—for instance, regarding martial arts, see [14]—dynamics of (sociological) co-creation is a topic that deserves a more cautious focus. On the one hand, it helps in a continuously revealing how it works to undertake research in “real-world setting” [15] (p. 706). On the other hand, this reflection allows for unpacking the opportunities and the challenges for those who identify with the scholar-practitioner continuum.

To better articulate this view, the article is structured as follows. Sections 2 and 3 provide a sort of “confessional tale” [16] regarding my presence in the field to reveal the “social condition of possibility” [12] (p. 282) underlying the shared sociological imagination that has guided the *boxe popolare* ethnography and, more generally, my presence in the field. Confessional tales are powerful forms of storytelling for showing the relational and the processual dimensions of the ethnographic enterprise: Section 2 specifies why I have focused on certain research topics and built my interpretations, and Section 3 reveals how my research findings have returned to the world under investigation<sup>2</sup>.

Sections 4 and 5 broaden the discussion in relation to sport and physical culture. Section 4 resumes the idea of sociological imagination for “someone who is dedicated to generating new knowledge that is useful to practitioners” [17] (p. 12); then, it highlights the importance of inquiring into coaching in the organised settings of sport and physical culture; eventually, it reflects about the potency of “long-term study [. . . based on] one’s corporeal involvement in the field” [18] (p. 637). Section 5 is devoted to final remarks. To conclude, I draw on Burawoy’s “public sociology” [19] to advocate the “moral” role of researching and its ability to produce knowledge that can redefine reality.

## 2. From Practice to Theory

Sociological imagination “enables individuals to understand their own experience and their personal trajectory through grasping the period they live in” [10] (p. 5). Mills considers sociological imagination as a fundamental ability of the scholarly figure whose main aim is to generate (substantive and theoretical) knowledge. However, sociological imagination does not come out of the blue. Its emergence varies from research to research as it is inextricably linked to “the instrument of the construction of the object” [12] of inquiry. Particularly in ethnography, Wacquant specifies that reflexivity “is deployed at every stage of investigation, targeting the totality of the most routine research operations” [2] (p. 88). Developing with the entire research process, reflexivity can then be equated to a “journey” [11]. “Negotiating access, building rapport, gaining acceptance, and managing degrees of immersion, participation, and separation in the field” [15] (p. 707), for example,

are common tropes in ethnography that need to be scrutinised for examining the processes implicated in knowledge production.

Here, reflecting the image of the journey, I detect the main passages, starting from the beginning of the research, that have made possible working out a shared sociological imagination in order to understand the *boxe popolare* “logic of practice” [20].

### 2.1. Positioning in the Field

When I arrived at Bread and Roses for the first time, my entrance had an “opportunistic” [21] character. I decided to train following Gabriele’s advice, one of the oldest members of the club. I had no connection with the local boxers. A few days before the first meeting with one of my main informants and boxing teammates, at the end of an interview, Gabriele suggested to me that I could have joined the group for a training session. It seemed to me a good idea. At that time, I was conducting the exploratory stage of my PhD research and I have not yet defined a clear research strategy. Training could be the chance to become inspired, meet people, and expand my network for future interviews.

I immediately felt comfortable boxing in Bread and Roses. Being a sport lover, even though I had no experience in any martial arts and combat sports, I felt excited to approach a new practice. I was a “perfect novice” [2] (p. 3) in pugilistic terms, although I was familiar with grassroots politics as I had participated in several mobilisations during previous years and I was—and still am—used to hanging out at grassroots self-managed spaces for partying, listen concerts, attending book presentations and debates. Familiarity with the political context allowed me to feel myself not a complete stranger in the environment and in respect to the DIY approach of the group. I also guess that my appearance and my spontaneous way of interacting have facilitated my acceptance among the “comrades”<sup>3</sup>.

As a PhD student, I was aware of the ethnographic research on boxing conducted by Wacquant [3]. I was not sure what I was doing though, and why it could be interesting an embodied ethnography of *boxe popolare* in Bread and Roses. I just followed my intuition. Since the beginning of the research journey, I started to fully commit myself to the “exigencies of the field” (p. 9–11) and write fieldnotes to record the interaction occurring in the gym before-during-after training. Very soon, the gym appeared to me as a busy microcosm with its history, a rich aesthetical and moral life of its own. After one month of regular practice, I decided to keep training for more clear scholarly purposes, deepening Wacquant’s writings that focus on methodology [2,24]. Reasoning more carefully upon the circumstances of practising in Bread and Roses, I purposely adopt a “carnal approach” aiming at understanding the embodiment of a political culture—namely, grassroots left—by means of a physical practice—namely, boxing<sup>4</sup>.

To profit from the potency of carnal knowledge, two main ideas have informed my positioning: first, the idea that personal apprenticeship was “mined to dig deeper into” [2] (p. 81) the symbolic and moral mechanisms of the social reality; second, the idea that the apprenticeship enables “to realize that the ordinary knowledge that makes us competent actors is an incarnate, sensuous, situated “knowing-how-to” that operates beneath the controls of discursive awareness and propositional reasoning” [24] (p. 466). I thought that positioning myself as a “fully-fledged participant” [25] would have represented the best strategy for conducting ethnography. For this reason, I had not only been boxing regularly, but also participating in the other organised activities of the group—e.g., the monthly cleaning sessions, the assemblies, the gatherings with other *boxe popolare* gyms and the fights nights, the political campaign in the city. Committing to organisational routine was necessary to penetrate “the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals” [26] (p. 125) and how they respond to their social situations. It also provides a sense of temporality, an embodied experience of how the days unfold [27]. Committed participation makes opportunities to gather information and, above everything, “develop relationships rather than manufacture them” [15] (p. 708).

## 2.2. Making Connections, Defining Topics

Much like every *boxe popolare* gym, Bread and Roses is a place where people can practise for free. Due to the accessibility policy, many youngsters with different social backgrounds come and go. The training sessions are quite crowded. Those in charge of opening and closing the gym, as well as to orchestrate the daily training routines, are the established boxers, that is, those who practise regularly for a relatively long period of time—six months at least—and possess a certain experience in fighting [4]. The established boxers are also the more involved ones within the organisation. As they actively participate in every aspect of the gym management, they define themselves as “activists” (or “militants” or “comrades”).

Personal participation gave me the chance to bond with the core members of the club. Over the years, I have created a deep connection with Gabriele, a peer who has been boxing in the club since 2008. Several factors have contributed to our relationship: we are both white able guys who grew up in a middle-class family. We attended the same type of high-school and lived in suburban areas of two industrial cities of north Italy. Moreover, Gabriele is quite familiar with academia. His older brother—curiously, the person who took him into the gym—works at University in the field of architecture and urban planning. Even though Gabriele is a physiotherapist, he confessed to me several times that, after high school, he would have studied sociology or psychology—not by chance maybe, his fiancée is a psychologist.

As Atkinson [28] illustrates, fieldworkers are engaged in a web of social relations and interpretations with the informants; central to reflexivity is “the recognition of their influence on interpretation of social phenomena” [15] (p. 686). For my boxing buddies, there was no secret that I was conducting research. All the established boxers knew about my project, despite the fact that we did not discuss it very often. On the one hand, I was too shy to talk about my research in detail—also because during fieldwork I was more committed to experience the field and make connections. On the other hand, the boys and girls of the club rarely manifested their interest towards my hypothesis and interpretations. I had proper conversations with no one but Gabriele.

One trademark of ethnographic inquiry is that researchers—and this is more relevant for those who identify with scholar-practitioner identity likelihood—need to remain sensitive to what happens in the field and to take into account what matters for the people with whom we interact [29]. Gabriele was constantly interested in expressing his opinion about the *boxe popolare* educational goals, as well as in commenting on the training sessions and the people who pass through the gym. He was eager to know my opinions every now and then convinced that the sociological analysis could understand how daily life works and contribute to a ‘truly’ antifascist practice, as the collective ambition, in Bread and Roses, was—and still is—to promote an alternative activity as compared to other combat sport contexts currently available. In this regard, the mission of the gym is to foster egalitarian power relationships among the boxing teammates by enabling every practitioner—in particular working-class youngsters with no political background—to empower herself and commit to the *boxe popolare* project in order to become a critical subject, as well as an agent of social change. That time, as Gabriele was so interested in my scholarly activity, I introduced him to the scholar community. The first time, in 2018, Gabriele and I participated in the annual conference of the Italian Society of Applied Anthropology and, together, delivered a paper about the Bread and Roses experience in a panel devoted to wellbeing in sport. The second time, in 2019, we contributed to the extended seminar “Inclusive martial arts coaching” for the Cluster for Research into Coaching (CRiC). The days we spent together strengthened our sincere friendship; spending days and nights together, I acquired enough confidence to focus straightforwardly on *boxe popolare* pedagogy with no fear of doing my duty as a sociologist.

### 2.3. Grasping the Logic of Practice

As Bowles et al. [15] state (p. 709), “Ethnographers are not participants in everyday life in an everyday sense. They are researchers of it and are thus bound by the moral obligations of that role whilst participating in the lives of others”. Then, in 2018, after one year and a half of embodied participation in *boxe popolare*, I could feel myself ready for completing my PhD thesis. Due to the trust established with community members, I conducted 46 semi-structured interviews across the gyms located in Milan, collect documents from websites—for example, radio interviews and the Facebook pages—and store the material culture and the existing first-hand literature about *boxe popolare*, e.g., books, fanzines and leaflets.

“Go ahead, go native, but come back sociologist” says Wacquant [2] (pp. 88–89). “Guided by a constant effort [...] to objectivize this experience”, I adopt *habitus* as a “sensitising concept” [30,31] as “not an answer to research question but rather as an organized manner of asking questions about the world” [2] (p. 91). The notion was crucial for fuelling my sociological imagination and explore, through the experience of becoming an established pugilist, a series of broad topics, such as the process of inclusion in *boxe popolare*, the “nitty-gritty reality of coaching” [32], how cultural values and political values are intertwined in boxing routines.

*Habitus* was key to manage my ontological separation from the field, in spite of the fact that I kept participating. In other words, being (physically and biographically) connected to people can represent an advantage to some extent for conducting research. However, proximity can create epistemic troubles as the main—as well as the ultimate—scope of the scholar is to be analytical to give meaning to the reality experienced [33,34]. Thanks to the sensitising concept of *habitus*, I could hence distance myself from my boxing teammates, comrades, and friends, as in the case of Gabriele. As a tool of investigation *habitus* serves to explore deep social and symbolic mechanisms triggered by the “pedagogy of organisms in action” [2] (p. 5). Consequently, the concept is powerful to make the implicit explicit, that is, “to get out of the dispositions and the values of the field [...] turning to the logic of practice” [11] (p. 321) by inquiring into the taken-for-granted aspects of daily experience to deconstruct shared beliefs and tacitly accepted ideas [35]<sup>5</sup>.

To put it differently, *habitus* endowed me with the opportunity to address sociologically a series of research questions of importance for overall *boxe popolare* organisation: were the established boxers promoting inclusive coaching? Were the clubs teaching boxing in a way that supported empowerment, untying the boxers from the rules and the domination of the pedagogical figures?

By applying the notion of *habitus*, I could describe how *boxe popolare* produces disadvantages. Though the gym network is designed for social inclusion purposes and activism, the practice is structured in a way that, paradoxically, tends to exclude the population that aims to attract. Despite the absence of material and bureaucratic barriers, regular attendance and activism requires a series of dispositions—“mutualism”, “combat”, “commitment”, “conviviality” [7]—unavailable in the medium and long-term period for all those who live precarious existence. For example, training hard to step into the ring does not seem to be attractive for working-class youngsters, for immigrants without visa, for temporary workers that struggle in obtaining a stable position in the labour market: fighting is illegal, as it is arranged outside the jurisdiction of the boxing federation, and there are no rewards at stake; however, the boxing practice does not look like a “fight club” of some sort. On the contrary, the boxing exhibited and taught in the *boxe popolare* clubs, tends to less harmful as possible—an “overly-civilised discipline” [37]—as compared to what occurs in the sporting field of the Italian boxing federation (FPI), but training for fighting, which is a crucial rite of passage to become and established member, is demanding. In short, only people relatively integrated in economic, social, and cultural terms are predisposed for becoming core members of the club and organising both the sporting and the political activities of the network.

In addition, *habitus* was useful to deconstruct the assumption, rooted in Bread and Roses, that the coaching is by no means authoritarian. Conversely, also in *boxe popolare* coaching pedagogy has its “dark side” [38]. Analysing language in use, forms of cultural impositions, hierarchical power relationships, and “group-making” processes are at play even in locker-room conversations, at the bar and, broadly speaking, in sociable situations when the teammates interact for leisure purposes [6]. As suggested by the previous section, my sociological imagination was propelled by Gabriele as well. At this stage, I was very keen to let him know my point of view.

### 3. From Theory to Practice

One of the significant aspects of reflexivity is that it “ceaselessly interrogates the very categories it puts into question and into play” [2] (p. 89). As far as I am concerned, I had several discussions with my PhD supervisors and the colleagues regarding my interpretations. At the same time, I submitted them to my gym mates. I did it strategically for feedback that could be of help for the analysis and the ongoing “theorising”, that is, the creation of new concepts in dialogue with existing concepts and empirical observations<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, I thought that sharing the progress of the inquiry would have represented a sign of empathy: my problematisations of (and conceptualisations upon) certain interactional dynamics were what I had to give back to the field. I knew that my analyses provided materials for critical reflection. What I did not know was that involving some of the boxers in constructing the knowledge about the practice would have affected the field of *boxe popolare*.

#### 3.1. *Interrupting Illusio*

Sticking with the image of the journey, the first thing that needs to be said is that, as a scholar-practitioner, I choose to involve my gym mates in testing the concepts not ex-post, limiting myself to give them the results of my interpretations. I rather asked them to become part of the process of knowledge production. Gabriele in particular was the person engaged in it: he honed my sociological gaze suggesting me (even not explicitly) to focus on certain topics and, not by chance, he appeared constantly in my fieldnotes. In the fall of 2019, due to the carnal bond we consolidated in the gym, as well as the shared experiences in *boxe popolare* and the academic community, I asked him to be part of an analysis of the language in use in Bread and Roses coaching from a critical perspective.

Since he did not possess the background for conducting any scientific analysis, he accepted to be part of the project as the main ‘object’ under investigation, being aware that he is one of the leading figures in the coaching structure of the gym and a well-known figure in the *boxe popolare* network. As he could not turn the daily activities investigated into the conceptual language of the scholarly discipline of sociology, he sought to act as a ‘critical friend’.

When I composed an article with one of my PhD supervisors that examines cultural reproduction in coaching via sociability [6], Gabriele provided a fundamental “member check” [40] of the ongoing interpretations. Regarding the early drafts of the manuscript, he asked me to be as ‘objective’ as possible. It is for this reason that we, as authors, decided to represent our findings through a “realist tale” [16], to quote Van Maanen’s classification again. This traditional form of scientific representation presents several limitations. We, however, thought that adopting a realist tale “can facilitate the deconstruction of common-sense and social dynamics that, without a thick, theoretically driven description, could easily remain hidden from view” [6] (p. 893). Regarding the last draft of the manuscript, Gabriele approved our submission; he only asked me to discuss privately the contents of the paper regardless of the peer review. During our conversation, Gabriele expressed his surprise in respect of the critical analysis we conducted considering his prominence in the interaction reported and interpreted in a Bourdieusian perspective. The paper indeed shows how Gabriele communicates in a way that tends to legitimise the embodied routines of the club underpinning arbitrary “systems of meaning” [41] and differentiation within

the boxe popolare. Because of his way of interacting, he is seen by other Bread and Roses practitioners as the guy standing at the apex of the club hierarchy.

Despite the practitioner's surprise, sharing the analysis allowed Gabriele to question the conformity of the daily experience, breaking with the illusion that everything was proceeding as trusted in the club. As with Brown and Jennings [42] (p. 38), our "collaboration and considerable dialogue helped to bring to conscious attention our interest, investment and, specifically, as Bourdieu (1998, 77) terms it, our *illusio* or 'feel for the game' and how through 'being caught up in that game' we possess the 'dispositions to recognize the stakes at play'". To put it differently, my analysis was a scholarly answer to a series of questions that mirrored the interests of the boxe popolare activists. The findings were the drive, for Gabriele in the first instance, to renew daily activities in this specific boxing field: if my main informant had stimulated my sociological imagination in the previous years, at this point, my interpretations were able to stimulate his imagination as a *quid pro quo*. In particular, the idea of "symbolic violence"—as the imposition of order and restraint accrued without coercive control exerted on a complicit social agent [34]—and language in use—as a means for coordinating teaching and learning mechanisms—become two elements for theoretical reflections that could be understood to rethink and reorganise boxe popolare practice.

### 3.2. *The Living Theory*

Subsequent to the publication of the paper, the co-author reduced his presence in the gym. In addition, taking seriously the findings regarding the performative power of language and subtle dynamics of cultural imposition and misrecognition, when supervising the training sessions and interacting with practitioners—both with the novice and the established ones—he started to adopt a language full of question words—e.g., "Where is your back punching the bags?", "Why do you extend your arm?", "How do you feel during sparring?"—rather than ruling with more normative sentences—e.g., "keep your back straight!", "extend your arm more!", "you are too nervous in sparring!". This form of communication aims at creating a more 'human' relationship among the teammates, but also at triggering forms of self-understanding and self-reflection, resonating with the idea of "reflection in action" [43]. Recognising difficulty in abolishing symbolic violence from every pedagogic act, this way of interacting certainly does not erase the image of the coach and the influence of one individual over others. Authority is not destroyed. However, power relationships can be perceived as less oppressive and problematised.

For this purpose, Bread and Roses collectively decide to involve more people in coaching. Very soon, more practitioners than usual were equipped with the keys to open and lock the entrance, sharing responsibility in orchestrating the training session. The principle was that, with more practitioners part of the teaching and learning guidance, it was possible "to build a new consciousness around coaching" [44] (p. 295) and reduce the dominance of one individual, or of a clique, over the collective.

As coaching "possesses a specific *doxa* constituting common sense or tacitly accepted ideals" [44] (p. 294) that some of the people in Bread and Roses were able to recognise at this point, the intention became to "engage in critical reflection and ask different questions around issues of socio-political importance (p. 295). Three assemblies were organised with other clubs in order to address a series of questions revolving around pedagogy and symbolic violence in coaching. The first meeting, held in Bread in Roses, was devoted to the negotiation of authority. The subsequent meetings, held in other gyms of Milan, were devoted to discuss why pedagogy tends to reproduce gender inequalities in boxe popolare and what to do to make boxe popolare more engaging for youngsters in the long period.

Together with Gabriele, during these meetings I could share my analysis, outline some of the concepts adopted to conduct it and, above everything, its implication for practice. We stimulated discussion and comparison about what happened in the clubs given the peculiarity of every organisation—such as the location in the neighbourhood, the population, the coaching structure, and the training routines. Gabriele illustrated

his approach in pedagogical communication. The gatherings did not end with a precise proposal of what coaching should be in *boxe popolare*. They were intended to stimulate the sociological imagination of the activists regarding both the impact of the pedagogic routines carried out in the clubs over practitioners' life and, more generally, the cultural significance of coaching.

In these gatherings, heterogeneous perspectives emerged. Several gyms exposed different approaches to coaching. This is no surprise. It is due to the complexity of the *boxe popolare* network both in terms of people's attendance and in terms of political orientations of the clubs, two organisational dimensions that influence the gyms' pedagogy and the habitus shaped through daily boxing routines [4–8]. Indeed, while several gyms consider deconstruction of symbolic violence in coaching as a meaningful attempt towards a politicisation of the boxing practice, other organisations expressed perplexity, continuing to elevate the coaching figures at the apex of the organisations for their pivotal role in ensuring the successful functioning of the clubs. In the latter perspective, thanks to their charismatic aura, coaches would remain fundamental (and authoritative) social agents in attracting (and disciplining) new youngsters within both boxing and political context.

Similar debates with similar purposes and outputs were conducted during the *boxe popolare* network meeting. Regularly, before the fight nights, the clubs assembled to discuss a series of topics, some of them strictly related to boxing—for example, the yearly calendar of the *boxe popolare* events, the regulatory framework of the bouts—some others more related to politics—for example, how the gyms can confront police in case of eviction, the participation in demonstrations organised by social movements. The assembly before the fight night that was held in Milan in 2019 was mainly devoted to coaching: different gyms located in different cities talk about their experience; at the end of the assembly, a two-page manifesto of Bread and Roses—written in the past weeks by several regulars of the gym—was distributed to everyone. The document presented the main mission of the gym, focusing in particular on the idea of promoting a boxing pedagogy based on a 'polycephaly model' and where the ultimate goal is to emancipate the boxer from the authority of the teacher/master/guru. The meeting ended with the invitation to carefully consider how coaching works on a daily basis. Since then, coaching became—and still is—part of the *boxe popolare* agenda.

### 3.3. Building a 'Legacy'

Wacquant says that "Epistemic reflexivity is all the more urgently needed by ethnographers as everything conspires to invite them to submit to the preconstructions of common sense, lay or scholarly. By methodological duty, they must be attentive to the agents they study and take seriously their "point of view". If they do their job well, they also find themselves bound to these agents by affective ties that encourage identification and transference" [2] (p. 89).

To conclude the journey, I briefly specify that the knowledge produced and shared, also because of the debates that have stimulated and the opposite feedback received, has penetrated the *boxe popolare* imaginary and other boxers have been identified—both by themselves and by others—in the scholar-practitioners continuum. Two examples are reported. One is the case of 'Le Sberle' (the slappers), which is a team built by a group of feminist activists, among those there are boxers with scholarly interests that have participated in collective meetings when we discussed the need to deconstruct the taken-for-granted aspects of coaching. Frustrated by how poorly girls are treated in other gyms and by the lack of interests in gender relationships (and inequalities)—even in Bread and Roses club—the pugilists left the gyms where they were practising to open a boxing class according to a "transfeminist" [45] approach. Precisely, the main objective of the group was to create an environment that aspires to fight patriarchy and gender discrimination in (and through) sport and exercise. In Le Sberle, boxing pedagogy works without any coaching figures. In this perspective, dismantling the coaches' authority and collectivising the boxing teaching and learning dynamics, and conceiving coaching as 'caring', all bodies can be



accepted as part of the group interacting in conditioning, regardless of their gender identity, sexuality, physical characteristics, and acquired boxing abilities. Nowadays, Le Sberle is a well-known collective in the boxe popolare network; a group that keeps experimenting alternative gender relationships in sport on a daily basis as one of the most active classes in Milan participated by many boys and girls. Here, I do not want to identify a causal relation between my research and Le Sberle. This notwithstanding, it is worth noting that some of the sociological interpretations circulated in the network, together with the identification with the scholar-practitioner role and the potential of co-creation in social research, have been sources of imagination for boxe popolare groups to develop their own boxing approach and activities.

In this vein, the second example reported is again the one of Bread and Roses. During the COVID-19 period (2020–2021), some of the oldest gym members projected a research publication on boxe popolare divided in three sections, with each section written or edited by a Bread and Roses member [46]. While the first section is a noir novel set in the boxe popolare social world written by one of our teammates and the second section is an essay about boxe popolare written by me in an easily readable style, the third section is a sort of ‘toolkit’ for practitioners edited by Gabriele<sup>7</sup>. This part of the book is the one that better reflects the polysemic and polymorphous nature of the boxe popolare social world. Due to his connections with other gyms, Gabriele edits a collective enterprise as the section contains several texts. There are chapters devoted to the exercise programmes written by practitioners of different clubs spread throughout Italy—e.g., Milan, Bologna, Turin, Florence. Other chapters are pamphlets on specific topics/concepts, such as wellbeing, violence, empowerment. The section also contains engineering advice to build up a boxing ring, the punching bags and all necessary equipment for a boxe popolare gym. This part of the book is introduced by a Gabriele’s text that outlines the concept of coaching and the possibility, through the inspiration provided by the reflections of many practitioners, of an experience alternative to the commodification and the objectification of the bodies prompted by the fitness culture and the sporting sphere.

Of course, the book does not represent the definitive answer to the dilemmas that several boxe popolare organisations face. However, it provides inspiration for practitioners of self-managed projects to ‘think philosophically’ about what they are doing [47]. Discussing with my peer about the publication, Gabriele considers it as our ‘legacy’ for the comrades. As he told me once, ‘if someone, somewhere, reads this book, it will mean something. Even if the book inspires people to reject every content and do the opposite, it will mean a lot. It would have not been possible without your arrival in the gym motivated by the will to study such a group of mad pirates’.

#### **4. Discussion: Being a Scholar-Practitioner in Sport and Physical Culture**

After the insights into my ethnographic experience in boxe popolare, I can resume the question posed by Wasserman and Kram [17] (p. 35) in regard to the scholar-practitioner role: “What can practitioners offer scholars and scholars offer practitioners in order to foster collaborations that elevate and articulate what we are learning as we do this work in the world?” Although no definite answer can be provided, a few elements of discussion arise for reflections.

The first aspect has to do with sociological imagination. Summarising the broad reasoning underlying the tale of the previous pages, I sustain that one characterising trait of being and acting the scholar-practitioner role consists in the shared sociological imagination. I insist on the shared nature of this ability in a twofold sense. On the one hand, the shared dimension of sociological imagination means that the scholar produces knowledge being sensitive to what is that matters within the field. The sociological imagination emerges in interaction, it cannot exist beforehand (and without) the support of the people studied. In the frame of the scholar-practitioner approach, taking seriously the ‘native’ point of you means what Schein [48] defines as a form of “humble inquiry”, meaning the importance of considering carefully what practitioners do and say, what they ask

and what they try to say with no words. On the other hand, the shared dimension of sociological imagination has to do with engagement. “Sociological imagination has always been open to engagement with a wider public” [49] (p. 172). If the primary role of the scholar is to produce knowledge, the scholar-practitioner may do it by sharing the process of knowledge production with practitioners. This is something very different from the act of informing people—namely, the public—about a series of understandings and hypotheses. Scholar-practitioners’ engagement is challenging, since it means “enabling dialogue between the two worlds to cocreate knowledge that is useful for practice and robust for scholars” [50] (p. 1534). In this way, interpretations can be built crossing the boundaries of the communities and their respective interests. As the previous pages have tried to show, they can circulate and the virtue of sociological imagination can be acted by the practitioners too, enlarging the agenda of the organisations involved in the sporting and physical cultural practice. In this way, shared sociological imagination has also the potential to reshape the practitioners’ identity in the scholar-practitioner role.

Another aspect of discussion and reflection raised by the tale from the *boxe popolare* field has to do with coaching. Coaching staff and coaching processes are key in sport—at different levels—and physical culture. Coaches are those figures at the core of the sporting cultures playing a crucial role both in pedagogic and “micropolitical work”. To quote Jones [51] (p. 41), “coaching is fundamentally about making a myriad of connections not only to and between subjects and methods, but as important (if not more so) to and between other persons and life in general”. Coaching is a well-established scholarly topic by now. For the scholar-practitioner, inquiring into coaching is a magnifying lens to inquiry into a series of relevant sociological issues. Based on a long-standing research experience, Jones et al. [52] discuss the logic of erasing the practitioner-scholar divide in sports coaching. Here, I want to resume the idea of the “phronetic social science” [51] (p. 366) that is built on Aristotle’s legacy. As Jones notes “Coaches thus, should not just be viewed as practitioners but practical theorists; with all the phronetic, considerate and creative wisdom that implies”. This means that people who participate in coaching activities are aware of their pedagogic relevance within the organisations. Collaborative research on coaching practice and coaching education—e.g., clinical inquiries, action research, collaborative management research—can be carried out to transform some features of the physical culture environment. These changes are often resisted prompting frustrations and difficulties [53,54]. In particular, it is challenging to clearly identify how the change needs to be achieved within a precise sociocultural context with its own history. For instance, *boxe popolare* environment is self-managed by practitioners, its organisation differs completely from other (university, amateur or elite) sporting sectors. However, as the feedback from actors who are not part of the main site of the ethnographic research conducted demonstrate, also in an ‘alternative’ physical cultural context with no institutional pressure, established ideas regarding coaching can persist for several scopes. As Bourdieu [20] (p. 91) states, *habitus* is embodied history that “guarantee the conformity of practices and their constancy across time”. Although changes in coaching has obtained relevance in Bread and Roses thanks to the role of Gabriele in co-creation, the sociological imagination shared with the teammates has created, for gyms belonging to the network, opportunities to ask questions of socio-political relevance—such as the one of “symbolic violence”—and to focus on their own organisational priorities. In sum, the reflexive scholar-practitioner is the one who can trigger debate and build new consciousness about specific topics. Fieldwork is perhaps the method that better fits with this scope.

Then, the third aspect of discussion has to do with immersive fieldwork and participant observation in ethnographic research. To quote Shaha [55] (p. 47), “by taking seriously the lives of others, participant observation enables us to understand the relationship between history, ideology, and action in ways that we could not have foreseen, and is therefore crucial to understanding both why things remain the same and in thinking about how [...] can be challenged, that is crucial to [...] social change”. To put it differently, participant observation is a powerful tool for the shared sociological imagination to flourish. As

Wacquant [2]—and Bourdieu [12] earlier—explains, immersive participation is a research strategy that requires the imperative of epistemic reflexivity, which leads, if properly pursued, to a form of knowledge able to break with the doxa or the *illusio* of the field. Both in Sections 2 and 3, I have shown the double-edged nature of this process. Breaking with doxa through the usage of sensitising concepts is necessary for the scholar in order to interpret the reality experienced and reveal the concealed and unquestioned conditions of the established order of things. Sharing sociological imagination also makes it possible to break with doxa for the natives of the field, allowing them to learn new things about their own culture and perform agency. “By sharing this knowledge, the researcher can lead a process of empowerment and emancipation [...] in order to instigate civic renewal” [11] (p. 328; emphasis added). I stress the action of instigating, as knowledge produces emancipation and empowerment if it stimulates both individual and collective agency. Through immersive fieldwork that requires a researcher to pursue intersubjectivity—being personally and affectively open with and among people—the scholar-practitioner acts to let individuals and groups discover their own voice. This idea resonates with the perspective of physical cultural studies PCS. According to Gibson and Atkinson [18] (p. 446), “the reflexive intent of PCS ethnographies means [...] viewing the social and cultural milieu of sport and physical culture as more than a breeding ground for injustice, suffering, alienation, and a host of other social problems, and, perhaps most important, enabling people to speak for themselves by decentering the (hyper-reflexive) researcher”. In other words, what matters is the process of sharing knowledge production and organisational change rather than the result. This can be seen in terms of civic renewal. Bonding with people through practice and committing the scholar-practitioner role to a carnal presence, deconstruction and reconstruction of daily practice can most likely unfold on a small-scale level.

## 5. Conclusions

To conclude, it is worth emphasising that being and acting as scholar-practitioners interrogates the very meaning of scholarly research and ‘why’ theory is produced—“theorizing for what”, Bertilsson [56] (p. 35) states to stress that producing scholarly knowledge is more than a form of style, “it is driven by a purpose [...] that serves as its engine”. Sociological imagination, as conceived originally by Mills [10], is timely to remind scholars how to build research topics and interpretations as a way to refuse the sterile empiricism and instrumental logics characterising part of the neoliberal academia—also those sectors that claim to give voice to social movements and empower marginalised populations by means of collaborative research projects. Sociological imagination can represent a key reference for scholar-practitioners to rediscover their active role in society. The well-known Michael Burawoy’s [19] (p. 9) perspective of “public sociology” is built in continuity with Mills. Recapturing the moral role of research in social science, public sociology “strikes up a dialogic relation between the sociologist and public in which the agenda of each is brought on table, in which each adjusts to the other”.

Embracing reflexivity, scholar-practitioners can encourage purposeful public activity and stimulate agency. According to Furedi [49] (p. 172), “such a contribution requires that sociology evolve through a wider engagement in public life in order to assist the influence of the sociological imagination in society”. Civic renewal can represent one of the stakes for the studies in the field of sport and physical culture considering the abundance of practitioners that conduct immersive ethnography. The tale of a research experience in *boxe popolare* is intended to shed light on epistemic reflexivity and sociological imagination as two elements that can help to value the ‘moral’ role that can be played by research.

Similar dynamics are not explicitly scrutinized in methodological debate. Co-creation is part of ethnographic inquiries. Concerning the research described here, by applying the principle of “habitus as topic and tool”, connection with a bold boxer/coach intrigued by sociology has defined the elaboration of certain research questions and interpretations. At the same time, becoming a member of an organisation concerned with ‘politicising’ boxing has prompted circulation of critical understandings among pugilists-activists, by

stimulating debates and confrontations on given topics, as well it has presented boxe popolare to a wider audience [46].

Ultimately, the research process and outputs would be different by inquiring into different contexts. How to transfer knowledge across physical culture settings and structuring stable relationships necessary to keep going through collaboration are two open challenges for scholar-practitioners, as those who identify with this role “represent two subcultures, straddling what is science and what is practice” [50] (p. 1534). This paper is based on an ethnography conducted within a political milieu, where the social agents already possess a “spontaneous” sociological imagination [57]—a precondition for the grassroots projects to succeed in complex socio-political environments—and where contrasting perspectives and debating among groups fuel collective actions. Out of confrontation may come the creation of new visions that define a better future, or conflicts and polarisation. The ambition lays in further exploration and understanding among a variety of scholar-practitioners and where experiences and priorities can connect or diverge.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In this paper, I maintain the pseudonym adopted in previous articles to name the gym where I have completed my boxe popolare apprenticeship. As already deepened [4–8], boxe popolare has blossomed in several European countries—particularly in Italy—within the leftist grassroots groups. This self-managed form of boxing is arranged outside the jurisdiction of the boxing federations with several missions: to promote an alternative approach to sporting practices and exercises, for social inclusion purposes, and for socio-political activism.
- <sup>2</sup> Embracing Van Maanen’s classification of the writing styles in ethnography [16], the “confessional tale”—with “their highly personalized styles and their self-absorbed mandates” (p. 73)—is a form of first-person narration based on the personal voice of the researcher. It represents “a self-reflective meditation on the nature of the ethnographic understanding; [in this way] the reader comes away with a deeper sense” (p. 92) of the research process, its temporality and complexity.
- <sup>3</sup> These leftist grassroots groups, also known as “centro sociale autogestito”, have been located in the main Italian cities since the 1970s to respond to global processes such as migrations, neoliberalism, and formal urban regeneration. In addition to political campaigns and participation in social movements, they provide to the general public several leisure activities and opportunities for cultural consumption alternative to the mainstream economic system [22,23].
- <sup>4</sup> The Bread and Roses club has represented the main research site for several reasons. The gym is located in a meaningful “antagonist” area of the country: The “Ticinese” neighbourhood of Milan. Even though it is massively gentrified nowadays, the neighbourhood continues to maintain a crucial significance for the political imaginary at national level. In addition, Bread and Roses is one of the first palestra popolare in Italy. These clubs present themselves as “antifascist”, “antiracist” and “antisexist”. Mirrors, benches, punching bags, ropes, gloves, pads and further boxing equipment are partially recycled, given by other gyms often. Here, in Bread and Roses, “Political icons, flags, tags and stickers quiddle the walls, the doors and the lockers, creating a patchwork that depicts the orientation of those who train in these spaces” [4] (p. 7).
- <sup>5</sup> For a more detailed reasoning about operating ontological distance from the field in order to produce scientific knowledge in this special issue see [36].
- <sup>6</sup> This is one meaning of theorising rooted in Weberian tradition. As Krause [39] (p. 25) specifies, it “presupposes rejecting both a position that believes in the complete determination of thought by facts, which would describe themselves, and a position, which would imagine concepts as entirely free-floating, thereby robbing theorizing of its objects”.
- <sup>7</sup> The second section of the book provides an easily readable version of my ethnographic research findings. The choice was made on purpose to arouse readers’ curiosity, rather than present research findings in a strictly academic fashion. This choice was

made on purpose as my gym mates asked me to adopt ‘catchier’ styles of representation as compared to the scholarly standards. Every chapter of the section focuses on a precise topic that I have inquired into over the years and it is embellished by a series of excerpts of interviews and my fieldnotes, by ethnographic sketches of practitioners and by pictures. One section, entitled “Grrlz just wanna have boxe” [37] (p. 125), gives voice to le Sberle: there is a long text written together with the collective, drawing on a long conversation we had in the form of an interview. The published text recounts how the group was born, its mission, its approach to boxing and politics, and its future projects. Arranging the work in this collaborative way, the group’s members could reason and acquire awareness about their project and manufacture their public image.

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