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Queering the box(e)

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Abstract: this analysis starts with an ethnographic research (participant observation as a data collection method) that aims to compare two types of boxing gyms: a "commercial" gym (a gym that does not prepare a competitive level athletes but offers a fee based courses) and a "community" gym (usually in occupied spaces, often for free and it is based on shared values among athletes such as anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-ableism). The purpose of this part of the research is to investigate the construction of masculinity and femininity through the exercise of this discipline that is traditionally considered a masculine one in the two different contexts. The second part of the research will focus on the specificity of the "community" boxing gyms that are spreading more and more in recent years in Italy and that are forming a national network redefining the lines of this sport. In particular, the aspect on which we will focus is the discussion on the categories of masculine and feminine in the matches. The proposal is to form the sports categories according to different parameters from those of biological sex and gender, in this particular case based on weight and height. This because biological sex does not necessarily match the gender and these are not binary. Unhinging these binaries would allow on the one side to avoid the medicalization practices still provided by IALF and by the CIO to bring certain bodies through the exercise of this discipline that is traditionally considered a masculine one the two categories (we refer here to the cases of intersex people undergo mandatory to hormonal treatments to confirm their competition category) and on the other to untie the sports categories from those gender. Can "community" gyms change the rules of the sport? What is the relationship between sports categories and gender categories in the broadest sense? Does seconstructing the first have an effect on the latter?

Keywords: queer theory in sports; boxe; bodies; masculinity; femininity.

Introduction

This analysis starts with an ethnographic research that aims to compare two types of boxing gyms: the first is a so called "commercial gym" (a gym that does not prepare competitive level athletes but offers lessons at a fee), the second is a "community gym" (usually an occupied space that often offers free training to athletes who share common values such as anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-ableism).

To begin with, I will try to give a definition of these two types of gyms and see which are the differences between them.

After a first general definition, I will focus on the issue of gender construction.

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The purpose of this first part of the research is to investigate on the construction of masculinity and femininity in the two different contexts through the exercise of boxing, traditionally considered a masculine discipline. For this reason, studies on masculinity are fundamental in this analysis.

Following the results, in the second part of the research I will focus on the specificity of community boxing gyms that are recently becoming more widespread in Italy whilst also making a national network that redefines the way to practice the sport, including gender perspective.

In particular, the aspect we will concentrate on is the discussion of male and female categories in sports.

The proposal, existent in some cases, is to create sports categories based on different parameters other than biological sex and thus gender, focusing instead on weight and height. Proposed in belief that biological sex does not necessarily match gender and that the two are not binary (Bernini 2010).

Dismantling these boundaries would avoid the medical practices still provided by the IAAF[1] and the IOC[2] aimed at matching an individual with one of the two categories (we refer to cases of intersex individuals which undergo mandatory hormonal treatments to confirm their competition category).[3] This would also divide sports categories from gender catego-

1 The International Association of Athletics Federation was born in 1912 in Stockholm (as International Association of Athletics Federations and it was founded as the world governing body for the sport of track and field athletics. The IAAF was founded "to fulfill the need for a world governing authority, for a competition program, for standardized technical equipment and for a list of official world records" [...] athletics is no longer just about high performance, gold medals and records, but also about "sports for all" and about ensuring that the maximum number of citizens are able to partecipate in athletics". The IAAF has a number of athletic educational program in order Although this it shown a medicalizing attitude toward intersexual people in the past. A new plan has been presented in Durban by the former IAAF vice president, then president of the CIO medical commission Arne Gunnar Gunnarsson Ljundqvist, who stated that there is a rule, in force since 2000, which sets out the possibility of undergo athletes to certain examinations to verify their sex, in case of doubt. Now this rule has been implemented, after some studies made by CIO medical commission, and parameters have been established to determine the hormonal levels necessary to race in the masculine or feminine category. If beyond those levels, athletes need to undergo to some therapies to balance hormones, to *be included* in the *right* category. This is a choice that tries to *normalize* bodies, figure them in categories that somebody has built, rather than create rules based on the reality of existing bodies.

2 The International Olympic Commitee. On its website is even declared: "The goal of gender equality is enshrined in the Olympic Charter, which compels the IOC to "encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels". The Women in Sport pages display the IOC's commitment to gender equality in sport.

3 Several athletes have been subject to the wrongly called by IAAF "gender tests", with the

ries, focusing instead on the construction of dominant masculinity and femininity.

Can we think of community gyms as places to change the rules of the sport? What is the relationship between sports categories and gender categories in its broadest sense? What effect would deconstructing the first category have on the latter?

Methodology

As already mentioned, the method used to conduct this research was participatory ethnography.

The analyses were conducted from July 2016 to December 2016, period in which I trained twice a week in a commercial gym and 1 to 2 times a week in a community gym.

The first is a neighborhood gym on the northern outskirts of Milan, the second one is a community gym in an occupied space close to the city center.

Since, as we shall see, the community gym does not have a unique definition and every gym is very different (much more than commercial gyms), the training did not take place in a single gym but in 4 gyms that are part of the same network in Milan.

In addition to regular training it was important to partake in other normal aspects of gym use and membership such as discussions in dressing rooms, social dinners or meetings in the case of community gyms.

At an early stage of the research interviews had not yet been conducted since it is at first considered necessary to build relationships of trust with the individuals that take part in the research itself in order to be able to ask personal questions and receive meaningful answers; all the research depends heavily on informants and their acceptance (Satta 2007), their role is not merely passive (Fabietti 2000).

aim to verify if their sex was masculine or feminine. We say wrongly called because these exams are used to test the sexual belonging through analysis that refer to chromosomal tissue. It would be better to talk about sexual tests, as the investigation is on sex, on the biological structure that concerns hereditary determination of sexuality and that identifies us as male, female or intersexual. These tests don't investigate on gender that, as we will deepen in the next chapter, concern the so called cultural and social aspect of being male or female and it's not verifiable through chromosomal tissue examinations, although sex and gender are equivalent for many. As we will see further, these exams are the expression of a power trying to classify and discipline bodies, as Foucault would say, through medicine.

The definition of the research subject is the result of the negotiation of a theory previously drawn up by the researcher (coming from a philosophical background) on sexual binarism and the survey conducted in gyms.

The devices implemented are the classics of ethnographic research, namely the drafting of field diaries and notes related to everyday life that takes place in and outside the gym.

Along with these methods, extensive literature was utilized, such as magazines, boxing literature, filmography as well as gender studies and queer theory literature.

The methodology was face-to-face direct observation and interaction as a primary analysis tool (Goffman 1969), analyzing the gym like a theater in which the actors' positions are never random.

It is necessary to take into account the positioning of the researcher.

The path and training to become *boxers* allowed us to use our body to better understand what it means to actually be *boxers* and what it means to embody the role of a woman boxer in different gyms.

Knowing the technical details of the physical discipline required in boxing has allowed me to ask questions and discuss with training partners topics such as the body and its sensations, its performance and its performativity.

The feminine gender of the researcher on one hand excluded her from certain areas such as men's dressing rooms, but on the other it has allowed her to view matters from the opposite perspective (Woodwark 2004). My feminine body made me observe even more closely the construction of masculinity especially in its relation with heteronormativity.

As a final methodological question it should be noted that the analysis was conducted with an intersectional perspective, taking in account not only gender as a factor, but equally so class, race and sexual orientation.

The commercial gym

The commercial gym increases its popularity during the Eighties (the same period of its birth), together with the neologism "fitness center", which sums up the idea of an activity that produces better physical shape and well-being; It is thus distinguished from gyms that prepare the athlete for a specific competitive discipline (Sassatelli 2000).

Historically this type of gym can be placed in a historical process whereby the disciplining techniques of the body, linked to the emergence

of national states and liberalism, have spread to areas of recreation and leisure (Foucault 1977).

The body is disciplined through the growth of its capabilities without any form of repression. More so, the disciplining techniques, which also include the heterosexual norm and gender binarism, extend to leisure time (Vigarello 1978). At the beginning, the body disciplining techniques used to have institutional and collective purposes (it concerned for example health, public hygiene, morality), that we could define biopolitical inside the national states. This tendency saw its peak in the totalitarian regimes.

Beside these activities, especially after the fall of totalitarian regimes, other activities were developed with the aim of self entertainment and self enhancement, for example the bodybuilding gyms.

During the Fifties sports were depoliticized, they shifted from being political to individual and finally commercial, although always remaining disciplined. For these reasons the subject of neo-liberalism is willing to pay a price to achieve a "beautiful body", hence it becomes the reward of discipline itself (Turner 1984).

According to the commercialization of disciplining techniques, subjects pay for themselves, and this leads also to the construction of the neoliberal subject.

Some scholars judged the spread of these gyms as a democratization process which involved also women, less involved in sports before, others defined it as a contemporary hedonist mirror, most of them as the spread of body culture. The body, young, thin and firm, efficient and dynamic, became a powerful and very common image of consumerist culture, in which gym and sport are fundamental elements. The "clients" mainly belong but are not limited to the middle class. During research I had the chance to meet people from very different professions, almost all the individuals were however Italian. This context favors the construction of that type of virility, perceived as an "abstract political ideal that marked profoundly for more than a century the languages, images, behaviors of male subjects" and which concerns a "dimension of a social construction of the imaginary that we could define collective, public, normative". This type of virilism is "generically connect to the principles of social hierarchy, gender and race; order and authority; and to an idea of compact strength nationality" (Bellassai 2011: 9-10).

As noted by various scholars, there are in fact a series of rhetorical

strategies that aim to connect masculinity, youth, and national identity. Violating a gender rule, not having a normative masculinity, is tantamount to violating the norm of national identity (Benadusi 2005).

The coach is a key figure: on one hand he has to present all the physical activities as meaningful and customized, on the other he has to promote them to be as accessible as possible to the public.

Group exercises require coaches to reinforce the impression of equality among members, hence the equality between males and females. However, sometimes this equality is perceived both by male and female athletes as forced.

The areas dedicated to the various exercises are defined as areas in which the body loses its sexual connotations and becomes purely a tool, so the male and female body are recognized as equivalent in the physical exercise.

Being now officially eliminated from the training areas, the relevance of the sexual binary code may be re-introduced, like a watermark, in the ancillary interactions regarding the execution of the exercises. These can be loaded with aesthetic and sexual connotations linked to the sphere of seduction according to a heterosexual matrix. If on one side, inside the gym there is an incessant construction of hierarchies of masculinity and boundaries that work to exclude women from male homosocial spaces (as traditionally a boxing gym is), on the other side, the athletes readmit women in this space only as an object of seduction.

The dressing rooms are transformative environments where one's own social role can be summarized before returning to the outside world. In the women's dressing room, the boxers stressed the traits of their femininity through the use of cosmetics and clothing as well as through language and the chosen topics of conversation.

On the other hand, the male changing rooms are experienced as an exclusive space, the background for the construction of masculinity. In this space, masculinity is strengthened by the exchange of jokes about sex and women and confidences between men, which establish and reinforce the alliance between men that allows them to preserve their dominant position.

The community gyms

Community gyms are one of the many activities offered by social centers in Italy, a project inserted in a particular sub-culture which attempts to rethink sports.

The question we are trying to ask is: today, how sport activities affect social order? If we intend this as an "ongoing practical achievement", as Garfinkel defines it (1967), we do understand the importance that many recognized on the *implicit social pedagogy* in sport practice. With this term we refer to a double process undergoing the sport process. Firstly, toward the production of legitimacy of action courses, of representations, of social relations that happens in the situated action contexts. Secondly, the term refers on how sport experience affects others decisions – choices and sense attributions – which build the subject. This leads us to further investigate the relation with reality, the contemporary social and cultural context, and the smaller sport community, in this case represented by the popular gyms. In other words, how the practice of these kind of gyms affect the external world?

Born within the anti-fascist, self-managed and occupational movements, community gyms are interesting projects that not only reflect and ponder the use and the concept of the sport, but also the inclusion of the body in society as a political body that can and must be reasoned upon and recreated.

The phenomenon is not new as it sees its birth in the 70s, related to the expansion of the social left wing movements. What makes a contemporary analysis rather interesting is the current speed and success that these projects are having in the last few years.

Since 2000, inside the squats and housing occupation European movement, gyms have multiplied, in opposition to the "commodification of the cultural consume" *trend*, (Sassatelli 2000), and on the other side in opposition of the growth of neofascist movements, replying to the economic crisis which took place in the last decade.

Starting from concepts of "incorporation" and "habitus", we can see how the activities of community gyms actually unveil a dualistic purpose. Indeed they manage to escape from the logic of normed incorporation by proposing a new form of incorporation.

By offering sports activities at no cost, community gyms manage to non-market sport and succeed at the same time in escaping from the emulation and consumistic logic, thus remaining inserted in a form of incorporation which is completely in line with the ideological position of social centers offering sports activities.

Boxing (together with other similar combat sports) is the key sport through which community gyms create their own identity.

Since boxing is a widely encoded sport (Wacquant 2002), consolidated institutionally and extremely overloaded with narratives, we sought to investigate how boxing is perceived, especially in relation to gender in Milan's community gyms. Is it an alternative to federal boxing clubs or does it reproduce the activities of a federal club? What are the effects of subjectification?

The construction of masculinity in gyms

Starting from the concept of masculinity and gender identity in general we can see how both are constructed inside the two gyms.

Assuming that gender identities are not natural but formatted in the repetition of their gestures (Butler 2006), we can say that trying to be masculine by being bearers of "indicators of masculinity" (Flood 2008) shapes the lives of males by influencing their attitudes and behaviors, whether they adhere to a hegemonic ideal of masculinity or are built in reaction to it. Hegemonic masculinity is the "dominant" way of being human, the most desirable in a given society (Connell 1996) characterized by a decisive heterosexuality and aversion to everything that is feminine or homosexual. In the same manner, on the opposite side, also femininities are constructed (Halberstam 2010).

Because masculinities are socially and culturally constructed, they need contexts to exist; although experienced singularly by individuals they are in fact created and modeled collectively, thus being kept in use in the institution's practices.

Within the debate of critical studies on masculinity, the core concept is "hegemonic masculinity" which describes masculinity not as a natural characteristic, but as a *habitus*, changeable in time and space, and determined by gender relations. Specifically, hegemonic masculinity is something that gives form and legitimacy to a specific hierarchy in which man is placed in a dominant position (Messerschmidt 2012), well known as patriarchy. Therefore, masculinity is understood here as the set of social norms that represents the ideal to which men refer in the construction of their masculinity (Connell 2005). However, it is only one model, one type of possible masculinity, created through the exclusion of all other possible ways of being male (defined as subordinate masculinities). In particular, homosexuality and effeminacy are characteristics that are excluded in the construction of masculinity in general, and in particular, in that achieved through boxing.

Given the role that homosociality and competition have in dominant masculinity, some places are traditionally considered "more masculine" than others (Camoletto e Bertone 2017): the sporting context surely being one of them (Flood 2008).

As emphasized in his research, Messner (1990) says that the analysis of the relationships between social actors allows us to understand the process of the production of genres. In particular, a research concerning the construction of adolescent masculinity through sport shows us the importance of socialization among men. Although boxing training isn't reserved for men only, in many moments (changing rooms, certain exercises) it recreates a homosocial environment.[4]

Certain practices, in fact, serve the construction of hierarchies of masculinity and boundaries that exclude women from male homosocial spaces (Campbell 2000).

In fact, it is not a matter of spaces exclusively reserved to males, but in the gymnasiums, it is a matter of highlighting how there is a priority given to the links between the males and the relationships with subjects belonging to the opposite sex. Building masculinity for men is "Homosocial enactment, in which the performance of manhood is in front of, and granted by, other men" (Flood 2008: 341).

Boxing gyms are environments generally permeated by masculine values – respect, courage, competition, physical strength – claimed inside the gym as if related to a specific gender belonging (Woodward 2004).

Women boxers in the gym are few, and even fewer are those who set foot on the ring.

The male presence that characterizes the gym is considered natural by all its members, unlike the female one which in turn is exceptional and that must be discussed and legitimized (Scandurra and Antonelli 2010), in particular in commercial gyms.

The female body in a boxing gym continues to be perceived as a foreign body, acceptable only if de-feminized, only if it has less accentuated feminine traits and if the female boxer "hits like a man".

4 Very often homosociality is directly related to homophobia, an instrument that serves the construction of the hegemonic and limitless masculinity that marks which relationships between men are legitimate and which are not (Kimmel 1994), what behaviors can athletes have among them? In sport, especially in contact sports such as boxing, it is difficult to understand what kind of physical contact is "allowed" and what is not, how to embrace the opponent at the end of a match and how to say hello when you arrive at the gym.

Particularly in commercial gyms there are continuous displays of manhood seeking gestures to confirm the image of strong men that many young boxers want to give of themselves – talking to each other frequently about women as sexual objects and displaying possessive feelings towards their significant other, particularly in areas outside the gym dedicated to socializing.

During our research we have identified several factors by which masculinity is constructed differently in the two types of gyms:

– The division of space: as we have already mentioned, the dressing rooms have an important role. It is very marked in commercial gyms, on the other hand you can't often find it in the community gyms, also for practical reasons. A first division between genders is thus eliminated, albeit with some reluctance by some women, in particular the very young ones. The absence of dressing rooms also alters the passage between gender role outside of the gym and the one taken during the workout. From a meeting made by the athletes of the community gyms on this subject, it emerged that the mixed dressing room was a path to be faced together. Nobody felt comfortable at first, but it was a common decision to continue on this path. Many women have also perceived it as a path of liberation of their body and their physicality, feeling at that time an athlete and not a sexualized body.
– Clothing: in commercial gyms female and male clothing are extremely coded and functional to highlight their bodies, unlike what happens in community gyms where clothing is rather equal between genders.
– The exercises and *sparring*: in both cases the workout is technically equal for men and women, even the exercise partners that practice boxing are chosen based on height and weight and not based on gender. Only a few phrases said by the coach (always a male) push men to continue the exercises, to "not to give up", whilst instead inviting women not to try too hard. However, talking to athletes, they show that sparring with a person of the opposite sex is not easy: sometimes men make it easier for women, underestimating them. A large part of women prefers to sparring between them because they feel more comfortable. In this problem the coach takes a key role, their task is to encourage the mixed sparring without forcing it.
– Music: an element that is often missing in community gyms, it is al-

ways present in commercial gyms where hard rock music serves to motivate those who are training.

The results of the research show that the construction of dominant masculinity is much more pronounced in commercial gyms. In community gyms, even if it is not entirely absent, there is an attempt to change this trend and make it a subject of reflection. More and more the community gyms reserve spaces for assemblies to address this issue, and debates are organized. On many occasions men have told their experience, they said that these moments of discussion and the practice of a mixed and conscious training, allowed them to see what sexist behaviors were taking place and of which they did not realize. Therefore, they recognize the need for a moment of reflection to build new practices together.

"Social symbolic autonomy" (Thonton 1995) of Boxing practiced in popular gyms compared to federal Boxing cannot be complete. Sport techniques and reference exercises are the ones of official Boxing. Of course the difference lays in the context in which this sport is practiced (Vigarello 1998) and the value position of who trains in the popular gyms. Who enter these gyms has already something in common with regular clients, there are political premises, above similar economical and often social conditions. On the other side there is a big distinction between subjects that attend the gym, with different backgrounds. If it's true that there is a common value system, it's also true that this is discovered during the training. Anti-sexism, for example, is a common value but different aspects, practices, and hints are discovered and elaborated together during the gym session.

Deconstructing categories

The research conducted during workouts in community gyms and during meetings which are regularly carried out by them has therefore shown that there is an awareness of the construction of gender identity in boxing.

For this reason community gyms have questioned the very concept of sport gender category and are currently looking for solutions to undermine these categories in sports and consequently in society.

Some authors and scholars who have dealt with the inclusion of intersex people in sports categories have already started a few years ago (following the imposition of hormone treatments on the part of the IOC and IAAF to

intersex athletes who had to fall into the male or female category) to think about alternative solutions.

A project by Prof. Stefano Scarpa seems to propose possible and viable solutions to this problem (Scarpa 2012), and one in particular is close to what community gyms would like to adopt.

This contemplates that the categories should be organized according to sports standards regardless of gender, thus destroying traditional sports categories (Virgili 2012).

This solution seems to somehow be in line also with the reflections of the American philosopher Judith Butler.

The scholar published an interesting article entitled *Wise Distinctions* on the LRB blog the day after the IAAF's decision not to give the gold medal to the intersex athlete Caster Semenya. In the article she claims to be happy with the decision taken by the federation, a decision that in principle has supported the need to separate the issue of the athlete's true sex, which is to be decided in a definitive way, from the one more closely linked to the category in which to compete. A decision, says Butler, which honors the complexity and vulnerability of a person. At the same time she reiterates that gender is linked more to cultural representation and society than to sex, which is perceived as a biological fact.

Butler says in her article, and we agree, that the issue of sports sexual categories must be kept separate from those of a person's gender. In short, the characteristics to belong to a certain category should be based on sports standards inherent to physical capability, which in the case of boxing may be weight and height.

The community gyms put these practices into action on a daily basis during workouts, as well as organizing mixed gender matches (always within their circuit). The idea of the mixed meeting initially encountered many difficulties within the community gym: the first concerns the real effectiveness of categories based on weight, height, experience; the second concerns the non-explicit fear of the male athlete of being defeated by a woman or the risk that a man would hold back in order to not hurt the female opponent, starting from the prejudice that a woman athlete is weaker.

Starting from this problem, also the concept of victory has been questioned. The problem remains the lack of female athletes who want to get in the ring, despite the fact that the number of women at workouts is consistent. This is a problem they are thinking a lot about: what is still hindering

women? Women athletes often think they have to be good "at least as much as a male" to get in the ring, they feel a lot of pressure to have to prove something. Many female athletes attribute they reticence to combat to their personal disposition (shyness, fear), while this position is socially built. Women are socially accustomed to a role, not as protagonists and society expects them to be less aggressive and less competitive. To this is added a practical question that many athletes underline: the care work that they often have to deal with does not allow them the necessary constancy of training.

The thesis brought forward is that the deconstruction of sports categories does not only affect sports.

On one hand, those who practice sports in this manner begin to incorporate gender in a different way inside and outside of the gym, on the other hand, public matches held in this fashion contribute to a different, non-normative perception of masculinity and femininity.

The question still non replied concerns to what extent the practices conducted at the popular gyms succeed affect society outside of them.

Although the construction of the hegemonic masculinity seems to have permeated much of the analysis carried out here, the practices put in place in community gyms leave other possibilities open: multiple forms of masculinity. As Anderson (2010) argues, the socially legitimate forms of masculinity are changing to the detriment of hegemonic masculinity as we have known so far. More "inclusive" forms of masculinity are emerging that foresee behaviors that until now had been excluded from the norm. Different types of masculinity can coexist, even if a hierarchy persists, especially in certain areas. In the commercial gyms it is certainly not possible to say that all types of masculinity are experienced in the same way, in fact they remain subordinate masculinities.

Is it enough that there may be different types of masculinity and that these do not crush us or should there not be masculinity (and femininity) at all? Deconstructing categories, starting with sport, means having as many categories as possible or not having them at all?

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