Woodward, Kath. "Transforming the Fight Game." *Globalizing Boxing*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 129–150. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849667982.ch-007>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 00:31 UTC.

Copyright © Kath Woodward 2014. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Transforming the Fight Game

This chapter looks at change and explores the extent to which boxing might contribute to change as well as reflecting and responding to shifts in social relations and cultural worlds beyond the sport. Sport presents a distinctive social world in many respects: one that is marked by competitive embodied practices and an exaggeration of market forces and reward by outcomes, as well as being an integral part of globalized economies and culture. Boxing is also particular within globalized sport through its mix of traditional affiliations, practices, oppressions and resistances as well as its associations with hegemonic masculinity. Although this sport is strongly competitive and based on the success/failure, winning/losing binaries, it has long been a site targeted by systems of governance as a space for the promotion of good citizenship and social inclusion and cohesion through wider participation in its practices. Boxing has a legacy of recruiting disadvantaged and excluded people, especially young men who might otherwise engage in illegitimate and less-acceptable forms of aggression and deviance, which accounts for the periodic resurgence of interest in boxing as a means of containing disaffected young men. Boxing is already actively involved in the promotion of diversity, although as this book has already demonstrated, boxing has also been part of exploitative systems and processes of oppression that are internal to the sport.

This chapter focuses on the transformations within boxing in relation to widening participation, and to the capacities which boxing has to generate other associations and cultures. Boxing and the wider cultural terrain are implicated in debates about the promotion of social inclusion through using sport to engage communities and underrepresented groups of people into wider creative and cultural projects. Both these issues have resonance with and are illustrated by developments in the 2012 Olympics when women were permitted to participate in competitive boxing in the games for the first time. The connections between sport and the arts, as a particular dimension of culture, have been incorporated

into the 2012 Cultural Olympiad, which was the most ambitious to date at the Games and extended for a longer period than has been the case with other games in modern times. The Cultural Olympiad offered the promise of cultural diversity and a democratization of the arts in conjunction with a particular sport. For London 2012 there were attempts not only to build the canon of British heritage, for example, through the work of Shakespeare whose plays were performed in a vast range of languages at different venues in 2012 (Shakespeare, 2012), but also to integrate local heroes, such as young sport hopefuls and amateur artists through programmes like the Lloyds TSB Art of Sport project (Woodward, 2012a). This chapter explores some of the possibilities and promises afforded by a sport like boxing, both for change within the sport and for the impact which boxing might have through its connections to and encounters with other social, cultural and political systems.

Change is uneven and has not followed a linear path into late modernity and the twenty-first century and many transformations have been incremental. Social and cultural change involves more everyday popular engagements with boxing which have reconfigured what is democratic and egalitarian about the sport. Boxing presents a social and cultural puzzle; what seems to be an aggressive and violent a sport appears to be an anomaly in the twenty-first century in neoliberal democracies and those which aspire to neoliberalism. One of the routes through which change can be explored and traced is through the governance of sport; boxing has a large number of governing bodies and occupies a very public place in sporting controversies to which the regulating bodies of the sport have responded in various ways in order to effect change. This means looking at what the rules are inside boxing, at who decides and at how decisions are made.

Playing by the rules

Boxing has governing bodies; the British Boxing Board of Control (BBOFC, 2013), the European Boxing Union (EBU, 2013) and Nevada Athletic Commission (Nevada, 2013). The sport also has sanctioning bodies, which award titles; the WBA (World Boxing Association), WBC (World Boxing Council), IBF (International Boxing Federation) and WBO (World Boxing Organization) each of which, in the tradition of global sport, has a women's section. Women's sport rarely has its own separate governing bodies. Boxing, like most sports, is divided into the amateur and the professional game and the women's and the men's game, with the women's game as a subsection of the men's. Amateur boxing is an Olympic

(and Commonwealth) sport and has its own world championships besides being practised in colleges and clubs and regulated by the Amateur International Boxing Association (AIBA, 2013).

Professional boxing, as the form of the sport that is most popular across the globe, is what is generally construed as boxing within the more public discourses through which ideas and practices of the sport are reproduced. This emphasis on the professional game arises from its emergence from prizefighting dating back to the seventeenth, through to the nineteenth century, but amateur boxing has achieved much higher status in many parts of the world not the least because of the growth of the modern Olympics. Cuba has dominated the Olympics over the last 40 years, having fielded seven of the last ten heavyweight champions. Cuba's boxing culture is distinctive in its emphasis on amateur boxing culture, which illustrates the best of the Olympics and the amateur sport. This spirit is exemplified by the statement of three times Cuban heavyweight champion Teófilo Stevenson, from the medal podium in 1980 that despite having been reputedly offered one million dollars to fight Muhammad Ali professionally, 'What is one million dollars compared to the love of eight million Cubans' (in Goldblatt and Acton, 2011:107). It is, however, the professional game that receives more attention, generates more profit, has the attraction of remuneration for boxers and is more likely to be tainted by criminality and corruption. There have been some instances of questionable practices at the Olympics, although most of these have been around politically questioned or challenged decisions such as the victory of the South Korean boxer Si Hun over the American Roy Jones Jr on the basis of three times fewer landed punches. Amateur boxing carries less of the weight of wider corrupt financial practices and more debate about decisions and the political context, for example, in relation to the host city and nation of the Olympics.

Hence the IOC (International Olympic Committee) (IOC, 2013) plays a key role in the development of all Olympic sports, including boxing (Boxing IOC, 2012). The games have most powerfully provided a stepping-off point for great boxers who have, like Mohammad Ali, won gold medals and then moved into the professional game. London 2012 offered possibilities for women to embark upon a route into wider public recognition and visibility when women were at last allowed to join in for the first time since the exhibition in 1904 (which was a display and not a medal competition). Amateur boxing offers opportunities and technical possibilities which have wider applications. For example, the point scoring system of amateur boxing lends itself well to measurement technologies such as automated scoring systems which have been

introduced by the Australian Institute for Sport. Time and temporalities are central to sport, as is manifest in particular ways in boxing (Woodward, 2012b).

The amateur sport retains not only popularity, but also some status because of its more local identifications with the nation, in some parts of the world such as states formerly within the Soviet Union and most notably Cuba (History of Cuba, 2013, Sugden, 1996). It was not until 2013 that Cuba ended five decades of commitment to amateur boxing by banning the professional game, when Cuba joined the international semi-pro league (Cuba Boxing, 2013). Nonetheless Cuba remains a model for the celebration of the techniques of amateur boxing. Apart from the Olympics, amateur boxing like most amateur sports remains the poor relation of the professional sport, not only financially for participants but also in relation to global visibility and involvement in the media-sponsorship nexus. The amateur–professional split at the Olympics has, of course, become blurred and these boundaries have been crossed and in many cases they have been all but obliterated (Lenskyj and Wagg, 2012).

Amateur boxing has the advantages of greater protection for participants: three rounds per bout with one-minute breaks, headgear and gloves with a protective strip and low-level belts. Professional boxing, on the other hand, has 12 rounds (reduced from 15, after the death of a boxer in the early 1980s). There are variations, notably in Australia, although professional bouts do not permit headgear, but do allow boxers to suffer considerable damage before the referee intervenes to stop the fight. Some of these consistencies also arise from the risks and dangers of prizefighting and are part of the demand for the governance of the sport to negotiate the tensions between the excitement boxing offers and the reality of its enfleshed risks to those who participate (McIlvanney, 1996).

The organizing bodies and regulatory frameworks of boxing have emerged at key moments in the sport's history through Broughton's rules and Queensberry rules into the growth of ruling bodies and concomitant titles of the twentieth century. The rules for men's boxing have remained fairly constant since the Queensberry rules were instated in 1867. The original 15 rounds may have been reduced to 12, but each still lasts three minutes with a minute in between each round when boxers return to their assigned corners. Boxing rounds have generated another expression which has wide currency, viz. that of 'going the distance'.

The system for judging who wins each round is well established as are the criteria for a knockout. The rules about where punches can be targeted, notably the prohibition in western boxing against hitting below the belt, tripping, holding, pushing, biting or spitting, for example. Similarly, the rules demonstrate

fair play in relation to the specificities of the body: boxers are not allowed to hit the back or kidneys or back of the neck or head, known as a rabbit punch. Such violations are classified as fouls, which can lead to the disqualification of a boxer (Hatmaker, 2004). The regulatory system, although challenged by, for example media accounts which post their own scores, remains the purview of the rules of the sport as agreed by all governing bodies. Rule breaking can be informal and flexible, however, as sports writer Ed Smith, albeit about a different sport (his own being cricket), argues (Smith, 2009). It is not only the rigid framework of the formal rules of governance which apply; in boxing those in the ring, including referees (and those ringside), also exercise their own judgement and this too is hotly disputed, for example in debating whether a fight should have been called before further damage was incurred by a boxer.

Regulatory systems are an important element in the processes through which sport is made visible. Contradictions and debates which take place in the public arena often include challenges to those rules, for example in relation to knockout countdowns, when a fight should be called and even more general issues highlight the wearing of head protection. There are formal and informal rules as well as visible, public shifts that can be subject to criteria of measurement and quantification as well as more everyday practices and marginal, incremental changes in the routine practice of boxing within the local space of the gym. The possibilities of transformation may be largely incremental and small-scale in boxing and even if they have to be sanctioned by the international governing bodies, they are often implemented and inspired by local practices in the gym. Some of the most important changes are taking place in the gym, not least in relation to women's participation.

Everyday in the gym

The routine and ordinary practices of boxing, as lived and experienced in the local gym, are central to boxing culture and to the endurance of the sport in the twenty-first century. Gyms too are changing. In the late twentieth century, although there was variance in the communities served by boxing gyms and ethnic and generational and even social class composition of different gyms, there were very few gyms where women routinely trained (Sammons, 1988, Sugden, 1996, Wacquant, 1995a, 1995c, 2004, Woodward, 2004). For example, Sugden reports that 'While women may be allowed in the arena they are almost never seen inside the boxing gym. Not once in the many months I spent in boxing clubs

in Hartford, Belfast and Havana did I encounter a woman' (Sugden, 1996:193). Wacquant also describes the sexualized aspects of the exclusion of women which is evident in many sports, where sexual abstinence is demanded of male athletes in the period just before a competitive event (Wacquant, 1995a). This phenomenon is a patriarchal taboo which still has strong currency although it might be less simplistically expressed and construed as the need for athletes to focus on the embodied performance of their sport, which in boxing is also coded as aggressive, pugilistic acts.

In the twenty-first century, there is evidence of change, albeit with varying degrees of impact (Boddy, 2008, Lafferty and McKay, Woodward, 2008). Some researchers, however, suggest that women's participation is becoming taken for granted and is rarely now called into question (Heiskanen, 2012). Heiskanen does include social class variances in her sample. The women boxing in the Texas gyms are more likely to be middle-class students or faculty members, whereas the men are more consistently Latino working class. These shifts involve the intersection of global change, such as the development of the women's game and decisions made by governing bodies like the IOC and more routine engagements in training and in the gym and in expressions of interest in boxing at different levels. This is also the case with martial arts which in its translation into different locations across the globe has become popular among different groups of people, including more of a social class and gender mix as well as more diversity of ethnicities. Women, for example middle-class professionals, are attracted to forms of boxing, like kick-boxing, which has recently increased in popularity among women in the west, because of its possibilities for self-defence as well as the fitness regime it affords (Women Kickboxing, 2013). Thai boxing too has achieved some popularity among women (Moore, 2012).

Boxing has always had different temporal identifications because of the sport's strong links to diasporic and migrant people who have moved in and out of boxing as they have experienced social change. The transformations in boxing can be traced to different factors. First, there is the changing social and political terrain in which social inclusion and more democratic policies have been developed and implored in accordance with, albeit uneven but nonetheless more, egalitarian participation in the workplace and in public life, for example through shifts in gender and race equality. Second, these forces that are in play across different fields of social life are in dialogue with the enfolded practices of boxing, which generates its own transformations and manifests particular relational shifts. For example, the pugilism of the Noble Art and its associations with defensive body practices and the promotion of embodied self-esteem

and self-respect make boxing attractive as training in self-defence. Women, in particular, have taken up martial arts as a means of gaining confidence in self-defence. This is linked to the impact of the women's movement and feminist politics, some of which has entered the discourse of equality politics to challenge the sexualization of women and of women's bodies in sport (Hargreaves, 1996, 1994, Woodward, 2009) as in the wider field of social relations (Levy, 2006, Woodward and Woodward, 2009). Self-defence is also predicated on fear and the risk of attack which are implicated in the practice of masculinity and of patriarchy as political and social forces which underpin inequalities in social relations. Violence against women, whether in the domestic arena or in more public spaces, remains a cultural assumption as well as a routine practice. Women's participation in boxing, even non-competitively, subverts some of the narratives of traditional masculinity, coded as aggressive and physically powerful, which have endured in boxing culture.

Women's engagement in sport, which extends across a wide range of activities, is based on a desire to participate in a set of embodied activities which carry positive and productive meanings rather than being implicated in an exploitative regime in which women are either marginalized or sexualized and objectified (Lenskyj and Wagg, 2012). The body projects of late modernity (Shilling, 2008) have increasingly been translated into sporting projects by women too. Women having greater access to boxing clubs (Heiskanen, 2012) means that boxing and martial arts have been put into discourse and now constitute a possibility for women in ways that hitherto might have been unthinkable.

Local access is central to the possibilities of participating in boxing; the gym and the trainer are where it all starts (*A Bloody Canvas*, 2010, Heiskanen, 2012). Because of boxing's links with local networks which are usually located in impoverished districts, the sport has a head start in the equality stakes, however contradictory the dialogue between exploitation and the promotion of inclusion may be. Boxing already attracts those who are often underrepresented in other fields, notably those of respectable citizenship and more areas of affluent employment. It is, however, only recently that women, as an underrepresented group within the sport, have been offered the possibility of boxing competitively. Thus, gender politics are the locus in which debates about equality are most pertinent in boxing. Whilst self-defence might motivate the desire to participate in boxing in its various forms on the part of women, boxing does not carry the same weightage as a sport which systems of governance can deploy and promote to channel the energies of the disaffected, for women as it does for men. However, the politics and policies of social cohesion offer another means of exploring change.

Promoting diversity in sport

As a distinct field of inquiry and as a globalized phenomenon which invokes strong affiliations, locally, internationally and nationally, sport, including boxing, is attractive to governments for the promotion of social inclusion and cohesion (Wagg, 2004). Equality and difference and the politics of multiculturalism play out in specific ways in sport and boxing has its own distinctions. Sport has often not been acknowledged as political; it has even been suggested that sport and politics do not mix, although few serious commentators or critics would agree, but the links between sport and play, and between boxing, in particular, and bodies and corporeality, mean that sport is not always addressed in wider political debates. Sport is a domain that has enormous social, cultural and economic importance in the contemporary world, which can clearly be mobilized for the purposes of promoting social inclusion and cohesion. Paul Gilroy argues that, although sport is an anti-political terrain, lacking the orientations of 'respectable politics' (Gilroy, 2005:112), sporting events follow the pattern of racialized politics and political conflicts are reflected in the rhythms of sporting events. Sport also generates conflicts and is complicit in the politics of race (Carrington, 2010) and the politics of difference (Woodward, 2009, Woodward and Woodward, 2009). Boxing, however, opposes the trend in many ways. Whilst representing collective endeavour in resisting racialized, ethnicized class oppression, it has been represented as an individualized project. Boxing also incorporates intentionality into the mix.

Sport presents many possibilities for the creation of a more socially inclusive society by offering opportunities for engagement and participation to those on the margins, whether through economic disadvantage and poverty or subjection to the social forces of racism, ethnicization or on grounds of sex, sexuality or disability. There has been an explosion of the promotion of the politics of diversity as part of neoliberal governance which in recent years has increasingly included sport, although sport demonstrates some of the particular dilemmas of diversity, especially in relation to the tension between equality and difference and between policies and outcomes. Practices include governmental and non-governmental initiatives, for example the work of anti-racist organizations; in football, these organizations engage with the relationship between clubs and fans and address the tension between 'outsider' communities, classified as disadvantaged, and the related notion of belonging and 'insiders'.

Such interventions can be seen as creating an assemblage of persons through the mechanisms of governmentality (Rose, 1996, 1999), where cultural diversity provides the framework for new sets of practices and re-conceptualizations.

In sport, this is not so much recognition of multiculturalism, because the promotion of inclusion is in a bounded, mono-cultural field of achievement; sport is highly competitive and the main criterion by which success is measured and decisions made remains outcomes in competition, that is, winning or losing. The *mens sana in corpore sano* – mantra of policymakers and practitioners who promote sport by arguing that healthy minds and good citizenship are strongly linked to the healthy, fit body – plays out in contradictory ways in boxing, especially in contemporary societies. The physical damage which haunts boxing is more troubling in the context of pugilism than in most other sports. The emphasis on corporeality and healthy bodies does offer a more varied set of outcomes than success in competitive sport but in professional sport, there is little scope for positive discrimination or affirmative action in selecting players or choosing champions. Multiculturalism in the western neoliberal states has often failed to acknowledge the heterogeneity of people who are the target of such policies, a critique which has particular resonance in sport. Boxing already attracts the disadvantaged and marginalized, although there are temporal shifts in the participation of different ethnic groups and migrant peoples in the sport. Boxing, like many sports, has long been seen as the route out of the ghetto or poverty and a means of achieving success through the investment of physical capital, especially by young men.

Boxing presents its own line on the promotion of diversity and social cohesion, but one which still has resonance with other strategies and policies in this growing field of the interventions of governance. One of the recurrent tropes in the history of modern boxing is the promotion of boxing as a means of regulating the behaviours of young men who might otherwise turn to less disciplined and less legitimate, if not illegitimate, modes of combat (Wacquant, 2004, Woodward, 2004). Trainers in local gyms frequently reiterate the justification of their devotion to the Noble Art in the opportunities the sport provides for a regulated framework of physical activity in which to expend their energies, raise their own self-esteem and possibly provide an income, if they are able to turn professional (Woodward, 1997b). Boxing, in all its manifestations, provides a particular avenue into the deployment of sport for the promotion of social inclusion and cohesion. MMA offers different possibilities and has also been taken up as an alternative to western boxing (Channon and Matthews, 2013, Hirose, 2010).

Policy interventions to promote social inclusion are concerned to ‘mobilize prevailing interpretations of the word “community”’ (Wagg, 2004:16). Community is a problematic concept, both within the academy and critical commentary, and

in the spaces and places of lived experience. In the context of diversity policies in sport, those included are seen as belonging to a community because they are in some way 'outside' the mainstream. The notion creates difficulties nonetheless for a number of reasons. First, social change has led to reconstituted allegiances of class and kinship and in the geographical location of communities. Boxing communities, although spatially located, do not have the same configurations as communities in, for example, mass participation sports like football. Second, economic factors have led to the exclusion of some social groups which do not have bounded local communities and are part of the mobilities of migration, especially in boxing. Third, the notion of community has been distorted and undermined because it has been added to all manners of government initiatives to spread the rosy glow of inclusivity and indicate feelings of inclusiveness and the overcoming of social deprivation, whilst doing little if anything to address economic and social inequalities. Community also carries troubling relationships to fans and practitioners. In boxing, the practitioners are from the disadvantaged, marginalized and racialized communities and the spectators are often from the most affluent (Ali and Durham, 1975) and even the mega-rich celebrities who watch fights in audiences that include superstars like Madonna (Woodward, 2006).

Boxing has its own sense of community through the networks of local gyms. The spatial dimension of boxing is crucial to a sense of belonging (Heiskanen, 2012). However, gyms and camps in Muay Thai have traditionally been the site of exclusion on grounds of gender. Although there may be some elision between mixed competitions and the categories of those classified as men and those as women each having their own separate but equally valued competitions, whereby embodied differences are used to justify the exclusion of women from the sport at all, the enfleshed bodies of the participants are crucial to the debate about widening participation.

Boxing presents a material version of the equality and difference debate which has informed feminist discussion (Pateman, 1989, Scott, 1997), for example, in relation to employment law and the specificities of women's needs as mothers. Debate has been focused on the incompatibility and conflict between equality and difference: if you have equality you cannot also allow for difference. There is little potential for the application of equal opportunities policies in terms of equal meaning the same treatment of women and men in sport because of the materialities of corporeal difference. Arguments about equality and difference in the experience of pregnancy and giving birth demand recognition that in order to participate fully in the labour force women have to be treated differently from men. As Joan Scott has argued when 'equality and difference are paired

dichotomously, they structure an impossible choice. If one adopts equality, one is forced to accept the notion of difference is antithetical to it. If one opts for difference, one admits that equality is unattainable' (Scott, 1997:765). It is worth reviewing some of these debates because they provide an important context for the discussion of the promise of transformation which is one of the strands of globalizing boxing.

Whilst feminists have engaged with debates about equality in relation to childbirth and the specificities of women's embodied experiences, they have far less often, if at all, considered the relevance of a sport like boxing. Arguments have been made for the recognition of women's enfleshed capacities and for the visibility of, for example, mother-daughter relationships (Irigaray, 1991), as well as the traditional father-son, patriarchal lineage that so permeate boxing. Sport is a site at which differences and inequalities are maintained and forged and even created. Joyce Carol Oates's statement about the gendered dichotomy between childbirth and boxing (Oates, 1987), rather than reinforcing the opposition, can be used to present fuller support for arguments about the politics of difference (Irigaray, 1991, Woodward and Woodward, 2009) and the power geometries of sex gender.

The problem in boxing, however, is largely not that women want precisely the same treatment as men, especially not if this means mixed fights, although as boxing is classified by weight, it affords the possibility. Upper body weight and strength differences between women and men suggest that overall body weight might not be the only criterion of measurement. A consideration of equality and difference in relation to the regulation and promotion of boxing is more concerned with how difference is constituted and why, in the sex gender binary, one side of the relationship is so privileged over the other. Arguments about women's participation in boxing, even within the context of the amateur sport at the Olympics, although often expressed in the language of enfleshed difference and material embodied inequalities, are more often about the privileging of one set of bodies over the other set of bodies so that the men's game is visible and has the potential for much higher financial rewards than the women's within existing systems. A more productive use of debates about equality and difference in this case, is 'not to privilege one term at the expense of the other, but to explore the cost of their maintenance' (Grosz, 1994:32). It is useful to unravel some of the processes through which inequalities are maintained and how a politics of difference might play out in a field in which corporeality is so central. One such area of investigation is recent developments in women's boxing and the inclusion of the sport at the London 2012 Olympics.

Women fight back

In 2009 the IOC agreed to add women's boxing to the list of Olympic sports for the London Games in 2012 (IOC Decision Women, 2012). The IOC approved the inclusion of women's boxing under its systematic review of the sports programme which revealed that, whilst men could compete in 164 events, women could only enter 124. Although it was the recognition of the inequity in the number of events that triggered the IOC decision, the number of events also proved to present something of the challenge to women's inclusion. Some of the opposition was expressed in terms of the loss of events in men's sports, which given the previous privileging of men's events might seem unreasonable, but this discussion was allied to other debates about which sports were and were not to be included. For example, although squash is a popular global sport, it is not part of the Olympics. However arguments are expressed, there is a blurring of rationales in the debate which in boxing was mainly based on a defence of the traditions of male privilege, which are the legacy of the modern games.

Three women's events were staged along with the ten men's Olympic events. Boxing had been the only sport reserved for men at the games and the decision was contentious, sometimes framed by the impossibility of boxing as a civilized practice in the twenty-first century for men or women. Boxing, as a sport, has been subject to medical criticism for a long time. Mostly the debate centred on whether women should engage in a sport, the main purpose of which is to inflict damage on your opponent and, in the professional game, possibility to knock the other person unconscious. The decision was viewed as an incongruous development as if women's boxing was a completely new Olympic sport for women. So invisible has women's boxing been and so hidden from history that few know it has a history that dates back to the eighteenth century in many parts of the world (Hargreaves, 1994). The display of women's boxing at the third modern Olympics in St Louis in 1904 represented a brief and largely unremarked moment in the twentieth-century Games. Its invisibility during much of the twentieth century can partly, if not mostly, be accounted for by an almost complete absence of the women's sport on television, as well as from professional fights with big purses. Women amateurs were not participating in the Olympic Games, during a period when men's boxing can be seen to have reached the height of popularity, especially in the heavyweight division up until the last decade of the twentieth century when it began to decline, but the sport was being practised. The celebrity status of men's boxing and its associations with masculinity in the twentieth

century made any ordinary, everyday participation by women unthinkable, even if women continued to box through the twentieth century.

The history of women's boxing is somewhat different from that of many other sports, which may account for some of the controversies which have surrounded it. These differences largely arise from its associations from the 1720s with prizefighting and fairground performances (Hargreaves, 1996), a legacy which also haunts contemporary debate even if there is generally lack of recognition of the extent of women's participation. In the nineteenth century women's boxing was prohibited in many US states and in Europe and banned in Britain in 1880 which contributes to the negative configuration of the women's sport and its associations with illegality and the marginal activities and the encounters of fairground booths. Up until the mid-twentieth century, there had been exhibitions and bouts on both sides of the Atlantic with popular fighters like 'Battling' Barbara Buttrick, who actually did have a fight screened on television in 1954. At the London Olympics in 2012, Buttrick – at the age of 82 – at last received some public visibility and recognition, which is evidence of the transformations taking place in boxing culture. At the London Games which featured the most ambitious Cultural Olympiad of the modern games, there was an exhibition of women's boxing staged at Buttrick's home city of Hull in the UK, which included images of 'Battling Barbara' (Boxing Cultural Olympiad, 2012). Other such events are discussed later in this chapter. Change may be incremental but it is only through being 'put into discourse' (Foucault, 1981) and made visible and thinkable, however gradually and incrementally, that women's boxing will be part of the wider culture of boxing.

It was not until the 1970s that any US states allowed women to box, permitted new licences and approved bouts with more than four rounds. So, the marginalization of the women's sport continued. The men's sport might still be haunted by, and always in conversation with, corruption and illegality but men's boxing successfully negotiated the transformations of communications and broadcast technological advances in the twentieth century in ways that were never available to the women's game. Illegal practices enhanced the dominant version of masculinity, but could only damage any conceptualization of heroic femininity. Although in 1993, women's amateur boxing was integrated into the rules of the US amateur programme, it was not until 1996 in the USA that women's professional boxing was formally accepted. Christy Martin's bout with Deirdre Gogarty marked the birth of modern professional women's boxing in the USA and it was another two years before Jane Couch won her legal battle on grounds of sex discrimination with the British Board of Control in the UK.

The three types of women's boxing, amateur, professional and unlicensed have been acknowledged, but the media has only recently been at all attentive to the possibilities of the women's sport, although cage fighting has had some visibility if not always for the most legitimate and transparent of reasons. Boxing's regulatory bodies cover women's and men's sport and amateur and professional boxing are two officially sanctioned codes of boxing, regulated by internationally recognized bodies (Woodward, 2009) with responsibility for managing change in boxing (Women Boxing, 2012). In 1994, at its 13th congress in Beijing, the Amateur International Boxing Association stated that amateur boxing was to be divided into men's and women's competitions and accepted new rules for women's boxing, and approved the first European Cup for Women in 1999 and the first World Championships for women in 2001 (AIBA, 2013, AIBA Women, 2012) which opened up the possibilities for the IOC decision for London 2012.

Boxing remains controversial, both for women and for men, and new regulations have been brought in to make the sport safer, although boxing is far from the top of the tables of severe injury risks. According to an Australian survey in 1998 reported by AIBA (AIBA, Women, 2013) boxing came tenth in a league table of sporting injuries with rugby league well ahead, followed by sports such as rugby union, motorcycling, cricket and soccer. Risk of injury however remains a strong element in the arguments about women's boxing. There are attacks on boxing *per se* and there are arguments against women's specific engagement in the sport which draw upon the gendered legacies of boxing and its patriarchal cultures.

Women boxing London 2012: Lead-up and legacy

Amateur boxing is, however, a long way from prizefighting. In the twenty-first century, there is considerable interest in the sport at all levels. Boxing is a highly regulated sport which many women enjoy (Women Boxing, 2012), as a means of keeping fit, as a disciplined regime through which you can gain self-esteem and feel good about your body and as a competitive sport in which you can not only achieve a personal best but also gain pride in representing your country and engaging in global sport, for example at the Olympics. Women have fought for the right to join in and in 2012 they made it to the Olympics, which means that the women's sport is generating its own key players with the potential to become heroic figures within the sport and within the wider cultural terrain. The Olympics presented the promise of the configuration of such figures

within particular locations with national attachments as well as international recognition, such as four times world amateur boxing champion, minimum weight boxer, MC Mary Kom of India (Mary Kom, 2012).

The popularity of women's boxing is apparent not only in the increasing number of women taking part in local gyms but also in engaging in international competition. This enthusiasm was demonstrated at the 7th edition of the AIBA women's World Boxing Championships in Qinhuangdao in May 2012 (Women Boxing, 2012). 343 boxers attended from 77 nations including nations which had not hitherto been represented in women's boxing at this level: Afghanistan, Armenia, Austria, Bolivia, Columbia, DR Congo, Honduras, Jamaica, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Uzbekistan. It is the inclusion of particular nations which has been the source of some of the most voluble and visible media coverage of women's boxing, the most unlikely and hence remarkable nation being Afghanistan, with its tradition of patriarchal culture and most specifically Taliban rule which excluded women for any aspect of public life.

The vast majority of media coverage in the lead up to 2012 focused upon the anomaly of women who had been banned from participating in any sport in a Muslim country where women as a class have experienced powerful forces of exclusion through the patriarchal proscriptions of Taliban rule, taking up boxing as their chosen sport. Although the war-torn nation of Afghanistan does not have a tradition of participation in the Olympics for men or women, it was still surprising that boxer Sadaf Rahimi, the only member of the Afghan team, was only the third woman ever to represent her country. Rahimi, aged 18, who weighed in at 118.8 lbs (54 kg), became well known both within and outside Afghanistan. She was reported as saying that she was proud to fight for women and Afghanistan and that she was inspired by seeing Leila Ali boxing (Afghan Women Boxing Guardian, 2012). This story is one that is resonant of male boxing legends configured within boxing mythologies within the lineage of heroic figures gaining honour and self-respect in circumstances of deprivation and disruption. However, the distinctive factor about Rahimi as a heroic figure, is that although she was avowedly fighting for her country she also gave voice to a feminist politics of difference by saying that she is also fighting for women. Male boxers are usually fighting within the iterative performance of masculinity which is made and remade through their engagement, but this is not a disruptive process. Rather it is one of the reinstatement of conformity and collusion with hegemonic masculinities. By boxing, women like Rahimi were able to make a political statement which upsets the order of things and opens up possibilities of change. Women boxing in such circumstances constitutes a

political intervention and more than an empirical shift in which categories of person are involved in sporting events; it is indicative of change.

The western media was not slow to note the irony of such athletes training at the Ghazi stadium in Kabul where the Taliban regime held public executions (Afghan Women Boxing Guardian, 2012). Another irony is the celebration of resistance through a sport which might appear in other discursive fields to be outdated and primitive in its enfolded practices. Women's engagement is interpreted in different ways, many of which are translated as resistance to oppression and an example of Afghanistan participating more positively in world affairs (Afghan Women Boxing, 2012).

In London 2012, the final of the women's flyweight boxing was held at the Excel arena in London on 9 August 2012 at 16.15. Team GB's Nicola Adams fought the Chinese champion Ren Cancan. In the semi-finals Adams had already defeated India's MC Mary Com. This was competition of some significance and not without contestation outside rather than inside the ring. However, inside the ring this was a fast-moving competition, fast moving and clean. In round two, Adams landed a great left on Cancan, followed by a right to the temple. Adams looked good and by round three was dancing. The *coup de grace* was a left hook to finish it off (Woodward, 2012b). These are not just my words; they are the kind of language used in commentaries of the fight such as those on the BBC (BBC Medals, 2012, Nicola Adams Stats, 2012).

Adams's gold medal was the culmination of a long journey, for women's boxing as well as for the athlete herself. The build-up to this fight can be traced through a process of conflicting feelings and emotions as well as a circuitous narrative of institutional resistance and negotiation, which had led up to the IOC's decision to include the women's sport in the Olympics.

During the games themselves we heard stories of the life choices of boxers like Katie Taylor and especially Nicola Adams which has opened up new ways of thinking which can inform a cultural legacy. These narratives included the traditional biographical journey not dissimilar to that followed by young men on the margins taking the boxing route out of the ghetto. In the case of Nicola Adams this route was produced within a discourse of the intersection of different inequalities (Guardian Women's Boxing, 2012). Adams had experienced marginalization through her class position and sexuality and as a black woman. Boxing has traditionally been a sport for the investment of physical capital chosen by migrant young men but what is significant about the ways in which women's boxing was put into discourse in 2012 is the inclusion of gendered exclusion and the politics of difference in relation to sex gender and sexuality.

Whether large numbers of young women take up the sport or not, it is now at least on the agenda. Sex gender and sexuality are now more explicitly part of the assemblage of what makes up boxing and its culture.

The debate is ambivalent and contradictory in relation to the political possibilities of women's boxing. On the one hand, it is expressive of challenge and resistance but on the other the field which women have not entered is one which is also deeply patriarchal and traditional in many of its values. Women who are caught up in a sexual politics of intentionality and resistance now meet the restrictions of the governing bodies of international sport which welcomes the new entrants to boxing with suggestion that women should wear skirts in the ring so that viewers will know that they are watching women and not men (BBC AIBA, 2012) Although the decision was rescinded if it ever got further than a few public statements, it demonstrates the culture of sport and the contradictory nature of what can be read as liberatory and what is repressive. Such statements by regulatory bodies, when others have been issued in relation to women's attire in sports like basketball, also suggest that a simple Orientalist binary (Said, 1978) between the progressive west and what is construed as the reactionary east or 'other' is far from convincing. Patriarchy permeates the global culture of sport as it does other fields and social and cultural terrains. The inclusion of the women's event in the games in 2012 is instructive in exploring some of the points of connection and disruption between power axes as well as demonstrating the uneven processes through which change takes place.

Boxing and culture: Culture and boxing

One of the strategies through which social inclusion policies are directed links sport to other cultural activities and target communities which might have more involvement in one area than another or might be excluded from or underrepresented in sport and other cultural fields. The Cultural Olympiad which accompanied London 2012, but which included activities across the UK, is an example of such a set of practices which are informed by widening participation policies.

The inclusion of women's boxing in 2012 triggered the inclusion of cultural practices connected to women's boxing, and to boxing culture more widely, demonstrating the two-way relationship between the enfolded practices of sport and those of other forms of social and cultural engagement. For example *Girls in the Ring* was a contribution to the Cultural Olympiad which was assembled

by journalist Lee Karen Stow who came from Hull, which is in the part of the UK where flyweight boxer Battling Barbara Buttrick was born. The exhibition featured 20 women boxers including Barbara Buttrick, who started her career in 1948, initially in boxing booths that toured fairs and carnivals and became an early female champion.

The project was avowedly inspired by the inclusion of women's boxing in the 2012 Olympics and the realization by the journalist who compiled the exhibition that boxing was increasing in popularity among women. Stow was surprised that within 12 months of the International Olympic Committee making women's boxing an Olympic sport in 2009, the number of female competitive boxers increased by 25 per cent to 868, according to the British Amateur Boxing Association.

Buttrick had to leave the UK, of course, in order to pursue her career in boxing and at the time of the 2012 games, she was still living in Florida, and remains the president of the Women's International Boxing Federation (WIBF) at the age of 82 (Cultural Olympiad Hull, 2012). *Girls in the Ring* is one example of a cultural project which puts women's boxing into discourse and onto the public agenda with links to place and to central figures, even boxing heroes.

The exhibition was also displayed in the northern English city of Bradford, which has a strong boxing tradition. Bradford is home to the women's boxing academy and has more women boxers than any other British city. Thus the exhibition was linked to boxing events and displays of the embodied practices of boxing by women as well as its cultural representations (*Girls in the Ring* Bradford, 2012).

The Cultural Olympiad also inspired a series of cultural events associated with the culture of boxing, its specificities and histories, especially as represented in men's boxing. King Pea's *Great Boxing Booth Revival* toured a contemporary version of the old fairground boxing booth to 15 agricultural shows across Cumbria, Northumberland and Durham in the north of England during June 2012. This series of events demonstrates the role of objects and things in generating affects in sport. The booth plays a key role in the history of boxing for both women and men and is a strong element in what made and makes boxing a source of popular entertainment and an opportunity for engagement. The booth is an artwork, containing a boxing ring in which demonstrations are staged including a variety of sports and cultural performances (Cultural Olympiad North East, 2012). This event in the 2012 Cultural Olympiad brought together objects, things, artefacts, boxing bodies, spectators, entertainment and art. Such exhibitions reclaimed the ring – and the booth – for women as well as

men and, to deploy Foucault's terms, put women's boxing 'into discourse' and made it possible to think seriously about women as boxers.

The Cultural Olympiad also included music as one of the art forms used to provide synergies and connections between art and sport. The Cultural Olympiad's music festival for 2012 used jazz with its legacy of race and resistance to re-create the drama behind one of the most historic fights in boxing history. The 1938 rematch in which hard-hitting American legend Joe Louis defended his heavyweight title against former German champion Max Schmeling was the subject of a new musical composition for the Cultural Olympiad. Louis reigned as heavyweight champion for nearly 12 years and was the first black champion since Jack Johnson more than 20 years before.

The Brown Bomber was one of the 20 new 12-minute music pieces from a range of styles which won a competition to be part of the Cultural Olympiad arts programme. This cultural event was inspired by involvement with diversity and social inclusion strategies bringing together heroic boxing legends, racialized struggles, the politics of race and the contemporary politics of diversity through a combination of a jazz composer and pianist Julian Joseph and a more local community group, the Hackney Music Development Trust, to work on the relationship between Louis, *The Brown Bomber* of the title, and Max Schmeling, 'Hitler's Champion', during the height of the German propaganda campaign when Schmeling had been billed as a supreme being in Germany after beating Louis two years earlier. This piece was one of the 20 selected by a panel chaired by BBC radio three controller and director of the London prom, Roger Wright, from the submissions to a competition for pieces inspired by the dynamism of Olympic and Paralympic sports and the passion of human endeavour. The pieces were performed at official events in the Olympics and on BBC radio three (Cultural Olympiad Joe Louis, 2012).

Another part of the UK which has strong links to boxing was the site of a Cultural Olympiad event which combined art and boxing. Northern Ireland's Cultural Olympiad programme offered the Ulster American Folk Park's Fighting Irishmen project directly involving young people from boxing clubs near Omagh in the interpretation of an exhibition on emigration through the story of the Irish history of boxing as one of the Inspire projects of which there have been 12 to mark the Cultural Olympiad programme (Cultural Olympiad Northern Ireland, 2012). These events, with points of connection between the arts and boxing, demonstrate social and cultural change and an interrelationship between boxing and the arts, rather than boxing simply being the source of inspiration for individualized artistic projects, or even commercial artistic projects like

films. Discourse and enfolded practices are part of the relational processes through which boxing culture is made, remade and transformed. These events draw upon boxing's capacities for diversity, opportunities and even heroism in a relational and iterative process, whereby change involves transformations in boxing and in its impacts and representations, for example in the translations of boxing into other cultural forms which seek to capture and interpret its expressions and intensities. Some of these cultural events also use the notion of a heroic figure who is constituted through processes of representation and through associations with boxing and especially with its body practices and social and political narratives.

Conclusion

This chapter has suggested some of the mechanisms through which change might be effected and has considered the relationship between the different and diverse elements which make up transformations, however incremental. Progress is incremental and it is unlikely that any transformations will be revolutionary given that the synergies between the social worlds of boxing and other social and cultural fields are always affected by the centrality of market forces and the persistence of inequalities in the wider social terrain.

The regulatory bodies of boxing have played key roles in the transformations of the body practices of the sport, as the historical development of the sport and the increase in apparatuses of health and safety and the protection of boxers and the reduction of risk demonstrate. The development of the amateur sport and the role of boxing in the Olympics have also contributed to the ways in which boxing has changed and progressed in relation to other social and cultural changes as well as conforming to particular trends. These developments have also taken place within the context of the globalization of sport and the growth in boxing's regulatory bodies has also facilitated more title fights and more scope for public visibility, including the amateur game and the Olympics, which has had particular impact on the women's sport.

The discussion in this chapter demonstrates both the promise of sport in general and boxing in particular, however contradictory such aspirations may be in a sport so deeply embedded in traditional values and especially traditional masculinities. Whilst sport has been the target of government interventions to promote good citizenship and social inclusion for example, through policies which have become embedded within neoliberal regimes governance, boxing

can be seen as a particular case. Boxing's affinities with migrant people and those who have experienced poverty, racism and deprivation mean that the sport has long been attractive to those living on the margins. The very disaffected young men whom the government might seek to draw into respectable citizenship as stakeholders within the neoliberal state and contain through boxing are those who are already most likely to be drawn to the sport. These attractions, as Chapter 3 argued, have also meant that boxing has a plasticity and flexibility in the movement of migrant people in and out of the sport. The constituency of boxing's practitioners changes over time. One of the most recent shifts has been the formal recognition of women in the sport. Boxing is globalized through its associations with migration and mobilities as well as its international governing bodies, which include the IOC.

Women are increasingly attracted to the self-defence properties of martial arts across the globe, in particular to the body practices of boxing, either competitively, for example in amateur boxing and the Olympic Games. Some of these changes have been situated within traditional discourses of boxing as narratives of heroic resistance, for example in the case of Afghan women, who had been barred from all sport and, under Taliban rule, experienced severe restrictions in all areas of their lives, choosing to take up so apparently unlikely a sport. This is not, however, entirely consistent with traditional male narratives and can be seen as disruptive through its challenge to the enduring powers of patriarchy and of dominant masculinities. The position of women in boxing is not only a matter of empirical presence or absence; it is also about the meanings and affects of women's participation and the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Women's involvement disrupts the assumptions of hegemonic masculinity and makes that masculinity visible and thus subject to scrutiny and critique. It also made the gender mix ordinary in 2012, when commentators gave up asking questions about whether women should be allowed to box and delivered professional commentary based on the skills, competences and enfolded practices performed in particular bouts (Woodward, 2012b). The discussion of women in boxing and the transformations of sex gender in this chapter are concerned with material and representational affects which demand explanation; it is about sex and gender, both of which are inextricably connected and provide the explanation of change. This discussion is also demonstrative of the messy business of change and progress and their uneven and irregular paths.

Some of the strategies for the promotion of social inclusion as manifest in the 2012 Cultural Olympiad involved synergies between the arts and sport through bringing together different cultural and sporting practices, elites and

local communities and amateur/early career athletes and artists. Boxing offers particular artistic inspirations and the visibility of boxing, including the arrival of women's boxing, in the games meant that the sport has been changed in many ways and it is transforming regimes of culture. The presence of boxing in the Cultural Olympiad has, for example, local-, regional- and community-based affiliations, which plug into the local, everyday attachments of boxing as well as contribute to the legitimization of a sport that remains contentious. These interventions of the Cultural Olympiad were framed by heroic narratives which rehearsed the relevance and power of the politics of race as well as sexual politics. The Cultural Olympiad, like all interventions of governance within the discursive frame of diversity, always has to negotiate the tensions between promoting a discourse of equality through inclusion and recognizing difference.

There is no simple, linear trajectory of progress and change, but a series of disruptions and realignments which do, however, suggest that new accommodations are emerging, even in boxing and, more importantly, that some recent shifts in the politics of boxing have led to some traditional identifications feeling uncomfortable.