



A Commentary on Boxing and Culture

One of the blessings of the free exchange of ideas is their eventual reduction into those which have substance and are retained and further refined, and those which prove to be inherently flawed and are subsequently discarded. Thus has Western Civilization re-invented itself and its institutions over the millennia and bestowed upon us the freedoms we enjoy today.

We, in the West, have, over time, woven a tapestry of values from the fiber of our common experiences that has proven workable, if imperfect, and largely just. Much has been recorded; the successes overemphasized in ink, the bloody stains of failure still visible on every page of history. The contributions of the Greek Philosophers and Roman Lawgivers, the Western Enlightenment and the American Experiment; all the great accomplishments have been well credited, dark ages and darker deeds minimized, if not excused.

But between, behind, beneath and before those events were the people; the farmers and ranchers and tradesmen, the artisans and craftsmen, the architects and engineers and common laborers, who gave form and substance to their traditions and provided the foundation and framework for the great ideas, as did the soldiers who fell in their defense. It has been “We the people ...” all along who first shaped the cultures whence the great principles emerged. The law cannot determine culture, it can only attempt to define it, to reduce and codify the common understandings between people.

Much of culture is born of the land; the land, plants and animals which give us the materials for our homes and dress and furniture, and from which we take our sustenance. The cultural differences between Arctic Inuit and Kalahari San Bushman begin with their geography and climate. Irish knit caps, potatoes and corned beef, whiskeys and wools blended and woven, stone and thatch piled and patterned are as unique to the Irish as the wines, cheeses and marble columns of Italy are unique to Italians ... sauerbraten, beer, lederhosen and steeply-pitched-roofs to Germans, and wide-brimmed-hats, flat-roofed adobe buildings, tortillas and tequila to Mexicans. The physical aspects of culture are largely an organic representation of their environment. In every culture finer arts and higher ideals evolve later.

Once fed and housed, we sang and danced and postured and painted in celebration of our various cultures. Pattern and poetry, carving and costume, ritual and custom during holidays and holydays alike. We delighted in the work, the play, the art and artifice, in the world we had made for ourselves. Our relationship with the land has always been a source of great joy. The relationships between people, on the other hand, while a source of even greater joy, have been harder to understand and even more difficult to manage.

The differences and disputes we have had amongst ourselves; the pain and heartaches which ebbed and flowed against the joys and pleasures hidden behind the solid doors of every home, we handled as best we could. Outside the home, we did the same, adopting certain practices and principles we thought best to maintain order, to protect the defenseless and to minimize our long history of violence, recognizing the need for civility, for fairness and for a certain amount of gentlemanliness in all of our affairs, whether cooperative or competitive. We made, almost without knowing, silent agreements as to what was acceptable and what was not, what was desirable and what should be scorned, what was a crime and what could be done about it.

Lawmaking goes back a long way, all the way to the Ten Commandments, at least. Over the ages, we passed laws to criminalize the things we decided were bad enough to warrant punishment. And we passed other laws which demanded adherence to the values we had adopted; marriage permits and birth certificates, property deeds and rules of fair trade, death certificates and taxes. And so our institutions were established, some formally, while others simply remained ensconced within the common understandings between people, understandings which became the basis of civil society.

It was not much different in the East, where their own close ties to the land offered their own unique manifestations of culture; Japanese gardens and Chinese silks, curved gabled rooflines and bowls of spiced rice, different dishes with different seasons in different seasons. Celebrations and rituals, ethics and morals, rites of passage and rights of people that often (though not always), matched our own. No theater is much different from others, regardless of the stage. What we had in common was a richness of culture and tradition, born of the land, shaped by creativity and hard labor, and cherished by all.

Between us we competed and cooperated; man against man, culture against culture, nation against nation, and people against people. We fought and we traded; we learned from one another and we exchanged things - material things mostly, and ideas when we

understood them - or thought we understood them. East and West, reflections of one another and of the things that are common to all peoples - marriage, family, work and play, birth and death, crime and punishment, rules of fairness, civility and justice.

But in the West we had a passion for freedom that seemed to be embedded within us. We think ... we like to think ... we hope anyway ... that it is a human universal, that all men and women share that passion. Let us assume that we do, that it is as human to desire freedom as it is for any poor animal locked in a cage, disdainful of any gild, pacing. In the West, the great leap forward in satisfying this passion for freedom came during the Age of Enlightenment, when, through the triumph of reason, human rights and individual freedom took center stage in the advancement of Western Civilization.

Scholars may debate the particulars of the multitude of changes which coursed their way through the Western Tradition after the Age of Enlightenment, but no one disputes its significance. Democracy, religious tolerance, the end of slavery, the rise of the scientific method, modernism, liberalism, capitalism and socialism have all been ascribed to the influence of the Age of Enlightenment. Freedom, however, and human rights, were at its core.

“Nothing is required for this enlightenment ...” wrote Immanuel Kant in the midst of it all, “except freedom.”

One of the ways in which the Enlightenment manifested its influence upon human rights in the West was in the way we looked at politics, and at war. Modern political theory owes much to the writings of Enlightenment philosophers, as did both the French and American revolutions. Cries of "Liberte', egalite', fraternite'" in France or the somewhat less elegant if more direct "Liberty or Death" and "Don't Tread on Me" in America were simply great ideas of the Western Enlightenment reduced to their essence. The effects of Enlightenment philosophy on war took a little more time, unfortunately, and didn't really come into fruition until after the horrors of World War I. The League of Nations, The United Nations Charter, the Conventions in Geneva and The Hague, the Nuremburg Principles, can all be traced back to ideas which took hold during the Age of Enlightenment.

At long last, it became established, in international law, that certain actions, certain tools and tactics, were deemed unacceptable, even in that most desperate of occurrences, war. The “Rules of Engagement” had changed, as a direct, if not immediate, result of the Western Enlightenment. And though those rules are now widely accepted (in the West, anyway), they have proven difficult to enforce, sometimes difficult even to adhere to. The debate about what is acceptable in time of war, and how we treat our enemies, is still front page news, as much now as ever.

But as with all aspects of culture and of civil society, the law is simply a refinement of the common understandings between people, and there is as much conflict between people as there is between nations. The differences are largely a matter of scale. Intuitively, we know the difference between what is right and what is wrong. We know, for example, almost as a human universal, that it is wrong for a big guy to pick on a little guy (or a big nation to pick on a little nation). We must pass laws because some of us (apparently) don't have that sense

within them, or haven't been schooled properly, or forget, or can't control themselves, or maybe some of us are just more bad than good, and need to be kept in line, or punished.

Throughout history, fighting, between young men, has been a part of life, a part of growing up. It seems to be in our nature, and has always sorted out those who had more of an inclination to fight, often (though not always), those who had some natural advantage. Not infrequently, they became the law, informally at first, being more willing to step in and settle disputes, then as constables, marshals, police and soldiers (or, whether by choice, necessity or fate, they became criminals). Or they found their place, along with the rest of us, in some other line of work, and provided some useful service to society, as did the constabulary and the military.

In the West, fighting has long been divided into two separate forms, boxing and wrestling. Before that, fighting had no rules, and the earliest accounts of man-to-man combat include reports of both wrestling and boxing tactics undifferentiated. In very recent times, that style of fighting has made a re-appearance in the Mixed Martial Arts, Ultimate Fighting and the like. Why though, did boxing and wrestling evolve along different lines in the first place? And why so clearly in the West? To understand that, one must understand the difference between boxing and wrestling, for they are not simply different tactically, they are different philosophically.

For much of their history, the differences and distinctions between boxing and wrestling were not clearly described, the rules were not clear, and there was considerable overlap in tactics. It was not until Jack Broughton wrote the first London Prize Ring rules in 1743, at the height of the Age of Enlightenment, that the philosophy behind boxing began to manifest itself, particularly with the stipulation that "no person is to hit his adversary when he is down", the only real tactical restriction. Later, the Marquess of Queensbury endorsed a revised set of rules which further stipulated that "No hugging or wrestling" be allowed.

Wrestling, after all, is about submission, and submission is the antithesis of freedom. No free man wants to be made to submit. But more importantly, neither does he want to make another man submit, because in either case, neither is completely free any longer. In an ideal world, all men would be free; no one would be made to submit, or need to be made to. Indeed, the very idea of submission would be abhorrent. Prior to the Age of Enlightenment, submission was a fact of life. All men served someone. Even the absolute rulers, the Kings and Popes, were bound by their responsibilities to other men. Surely we all have responsibilities to other men, but that should be a choice, not an edict. Just as surely, unless and until we ever get to that ideal world, there will be men who need to be restrained and made to submit. That is the place of wrestling, and the reason and philosophy behind it.

But between truly free men, when it comes to combat, the ideal can be found in boxing.

By the beginning of last century, when Gentleman Jim Corbett discovered what that meant in terms of tactics and developed a style that he called "scientific", the philosophy behind boxing had been completely absorbed by Western Culture, particularly in America. Hitting a man when he was down or restricting his freedom (of movement) became as unacceptable as big men beating up little men. This was not only true in the ring, it was true outside the ring,

