



## “Moral Crusades” Against Combat Sports

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**Abstract:** *Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, three combat sports – Boxing, Muay Thai, and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) – while different from the point of view of their respective regulatory frameworks and of their technical specificities, have alternately become the target of analogous waves of criticisms, even of “moral crusades.” These are a product of converging discourses of stigmatization coming from policy-makers, from sport managers, as well as from journalists. In a recurrent way, these activities have been accused of being extremely brutal and contrary to the values of sport, and, more so, of degrading human dignity. Formerly deemed to be illegitimate and immoral, Boxing and Thai boxing have been, however, each in its turn, progressively accepted in society, recognized as sports disciplines, and considered as having educational potential. Nowadays, the diatribes mainly focus on MMA. The objectives of this contribution consisted of specifying the socio-historical circumstances of these denigration campaigns against combat sports, between permanence of criticism and periodic reconfigurations of the targets, as well as understanding the social factors underpinning this. In this respect, we formulated the hypothesis that the successive focus of condemnations on these three disciplines could be understood at the interface of an effect of social stigmatization of their participants coming from the most marginalized social backgrounds and of the necessity to define, in a context of axiological crisis, a consensual standard of moral monstrosity.*

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**Abstract:** *Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, three combat sports—Boxing, Muay Thai, and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)—while different from the point of view of their respective regulatory frameworks and of their technical specificities, have alternately become the target of analogous waves of criticisms, even of “moral crusades.” These are a product of converging discourses of stigmatization coming from policy-makers, from sport managers, as well as from journalists. In a recurrent way, these activities have been accused of being extremely brutal and contrary to the values of sport, and, more so, of degrading human dignity. Formerly deemed to be illegitimate and immoral, Boxing and Thai boxing have been, however, each in its turn, progressively accepted in society, recognized as sports disciplines, and considered as having educational potential. Nowadays, the diatribes mainly focus on MMA. The objectives of this contribution consisted of specifying the socio-historical circumstances of these denigration campaigns against combat sports, between permanence of criticism and periodic reconfigurations of the targets, as well as understanding the social factors underpinning this. In this respect, we formulated the hypothesis that the successive focus of condemnations on these three disciplines could be understood at the interface of an effect of social stigmatization of their participants coming from the most marginalized social backgrounds and of the necessity to define, in a context of axiological crisis, a consensual standard of moral monstrosity.*

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## Introduction

Recently, when I was giving a boxing class in a public park, I was approached by two little girls, about ten years old, who wanted to share with me their pride in practicing Thai boxing (or Muay Thai). Twenty years earlier, such a scene would have been difficult to imagine, so intense was the criticism towards this discipline, considered, according to “social representations,”<sup>1</sup> as extremely violent, if not reserved to the “city rogues.”<sup>2</sup> Nowadays,

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<sup>1</sup> See Serge Moscovici. *La psychanalyse, son image, son public* (Paris : PUF, 1961). According to Jodelet, social representations constitute “a form of socially developed and shared knowledge, having a practical aim and contributing to the building of a reality shared by a social group.” See Denise Jodelet, *Folies et représentations sociales* (Paris : PUF, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> According to Choron-Baix, “The explosive turn taken by some of these first galas considerably harmed the reputation of Thai boxing. It created with its competing disciplines and the public opinion the image of a sport for ‘thugs’ from which it did not yet break free.” See Catherine Choron-Baix, *Le Choc des mondes : les amateurs de boxe thaïlandaise en France* (Paris : Kimé, 1995), 65. Oualhaci tends to support this point of view. He notices that “the “suburban youth” stands a higher risk of being

analogous criticism seems to be directed towards current popular fighting activity, Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), a hybridization between various striking, clinching, and submission techniques,<sup>3</sup> frequently accused of “degrading human dignity.”<sup>4</sup> Before Thai boxing, it was boxing,<sup>5</sup> especially at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that crystallized, within the sport communities, all the denunciations of brutality, baseness, and immorality. Once considered as illegitimate and contrary to sport values for moral reasons, boxing and Thai boxing have been, however, each in its turn, progressively accepted from a social point of view, recognized as sports disciplines, and considered as having an educational potential. Nowadays, the diatribes mainly focus on MMA.

Thus, boxing, Muay Thai and, lastly, MMA have taken turns in becoming the priority target of similar criticism campaigns, denying them the status of “sports.” These denunciations come from political leaders (especially ministers for Sports), as well as from sports managers (in charge of competing federations), and from journalists, concerned with raising public awareness on the potential threat to the moral order represented, according to them, by these fighting practices. In other words, these disciplines have been alternately stigmatized, within the sports universe, as being the incarnation of extreme violence, even of barbarity, before being recognized, at a later date, as socially acceptable sports.

How can one account theoretically for the recurrence of such a critical pattern, while at the same time being consistent in its principle and then periodically reconfigured? Is the intrinsic content of the concerned activities, be that their respective regulatory framework or their specific techniques of movement, the main explanatory factor for the moral denigration to which they are subject? Or rather, conversely, regardless of their “internal logic,”<sup>6</sup> might not the very principle of maintaining a hostility focused on an activity prevail? The successive waves of criticism that we shall examine below can, first of all, be paralleled to the “moral panic” as initially conceptualized by Cohen:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then

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depicted by the media, and perceived, as lowbrow, aggressive, or delinquent, *a fortiori* when practicing Thai boxing, associated with a violent “sport for the rabble,” to the point that the competitions could be temporarily banned.” Akim, Oualhaci, “Les savoirs dans la salle de boxe thaï : transmission de savoirs, hiérarchies et reconnaissance locale dans une salle de boxe thaï en banlieue populaire,” *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances* 8/4 (2014) : 808.

<sup>3</sup> See Greg Downey, ““Producing pain”: Techniques and Technologies in No-Holds-Barred Fighting,” *Social Studies of Science* 37/2 (2007): 201-226; Matthieu Quidu, “Le *Mixed Martial Arts* entre innovation et hybridation : genèse et développement techniques d’un sport de combat de synthèse,” *Sciences sociales et sport* (2018).

<sup>4</sup> See Matthieu Delalandre & Cécile Collinet, “Le MMA et les ambiguïtés de sa sportification en France,” *Loisir et Société* 35 (2013) : 293-316 ; Matthieu Quidu, “Le *Mixed Martial Arts*, une “ atteinte à la dignité humaine ” ? Quelques hypothèses sur les fondements de nos jugements moraux,” *Déviance & Société* (2019) ; Yann Ramirez, *Du Free Fight aux Arts Martiaux Mixtes : sportivisation, violence et réception d'un sport de combat extrême* (Thèse de doctorat, Université Montpellier 3, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> See Fabrice Burlot, *L'Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d'une discipline controversée* (Paris : INSEP, 2013) ; André Rauch, *Boxe, violence au 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle* (Paris : Aubier, 1992) ; Kenneth G. Sheard, “Aspects of Boxing in the Western “Civilizing Process”,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 32/1 (1997): 31-57.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Parlebas, *Contribution à un lexique commenté en science de l'action motrice* (Paris : INSEP, 1981).

disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself.<sup>7</sup>

For Goode & Ben-Yehuda,<sup>8</sup> several criteria allow the conceptual delimitation of the development of a moral panic: first of all, a high level of *apprehension*, generated by a certain type of behavior, perpetrated by a group of individuals considered as a threat to the social and the moral structures, has to occur; this anxiety leads to a *hostility*, expressing the moral indignation against the *folk-devils*, who are collectively indicated as being responsible of the behavior that is a threat to society, to its values, even to its existence. Such a judgment must reach a certain level of *consensus*, especially among the ruling elites and the mass media. The fourth characteristic feature of a moral panic falls under the category of *disproportion*,<sup>9</sup> which refers to the idea that the representation of the threat is widely overstated (be that quantitatively or qualitatively) and that it would not pass the test of empirical analysis.<sup>10</sup> Here, Cohen particularly emphasized the role played by the media in the dramatization of events,<sup>11</sup> thus contributing to the "spiral of amplification of deviance." We shall show that numerous analogies appear between, on the one hand, the consecutive waves of ethical devaluation<sup>12</sup> successively underwent by boxing, Muay Thai, and MMA, and, on the other hand, the sociological conceptualization of the emergence of a moral panic. We shall then have to identify the detractors involved in the successive condemnations of these activities as dangerous, undignified, even inhuman practices, for, as shown by Chaumont,<sup>13</sup> there is no moral panic without a "moral crusade"<sup>14</sup> and without "moral entrepreneurs"<sup>15</sup>:

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Erich Goode & Nachman Ben-Yehuda, "Moral Panics: Culture, Politics, and Social Construction," *Annual Review of Sociology* 20 (1994): 149-171.

<sup>9</sup> This criterion of "disproportion," pivotal for Cohen, has been, however, subject to numerous critiques; thus, for Waddington, by qualifying straightaway the social reaction as "disproportionate," the analysis would be biased from the start, since it would be based on a judgment of value on the part of the researcher, who tends to move away *de facto* from his position of axiological neutrality. See P.A.J. Waddington, "Mugging as a Moral Panic: A Question of Proportion," *The British Journal of Sociology* 37/ 2 (1986): 245-259.

<sup>10</sup> The main traumatological studies focusing on MMA (Karpman *et al.*, 2016) thus tend to show that the quantity of injuries suffered is comparable to that of other combat sports, but that they prove to be less traumatic than in the case of boxing, for instance. Hence, the violence in MMA would be more "visual than destructive." See Gregory H. Bledsoe, Edbert B. Hsu, George Jurek Grabowski, Justin D. Brill, Guohua Li "Incidence of injury in professional MMA competitions," *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine* 5 (2006): 136-14; Shelby Karpman, Patrick Reid, Leah Adeline Philipps, Ziling, Qin, "Combative sports injuries," *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine* 26/ 4 (2016): 332-334; Yann Ramirez, "L'engagement corporel en MMA : entre sportivisation et mise en spectacle d'une violence instrumentale tolérée," *Corps* 16 (2018) : 361-370.

<sup>11</sup> The tendency towards sensationalist dramatization by the media must also be repositioned in the competition for the scoop that prevails within the journalistic field (Bourdieu, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Within the framework of this contribution, the terms "ethical" and "moral" shall be used in an undifferentiated manner.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Michel Chaumont, "Des paniques morales spontanées ? Le cas de la "rumeur d'Orléans "," *Recherches Sociologiques et Anthropologiques* 43 (2012) : 119-137.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade. Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

<sup>15</sup> Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1963).

No moral panic seems to have existed without *claims-makers* and without a crusade-looking campaign. In a more or less straightforward way, we thus always find moral entrepreneurs (moral and political authorities, activists...) and reality entrepreneurs (experts, sociologists, historians...) at the origin of the moral panics that have associated youth with violence. The specificity of the moral panic is not, then, as some people continue to believe, the irrational moral reaction of "the" population or of significant sections of it. [...] The specificity of moral panics consists, moreover, in the *claim-makers'* modalities of action, knowing that, in their case, the essence of the action lies in the word, at the same time in its content, in its form and in its modalities of articulation. This is a word that tries to impose itself by generating fear, an alarming word, whose driving forces are the exaggeration (quantitative) and the dramatization (qualitative). It is this word, and, of course, also the actors that utter it, the logistics that support it, or its political consequences, that the analysts of moral panics take as their object and decrypt.<sup>16</sup>

Eventually, all moral panic would be the result of a crusade, started by the moral entrepreneurs whose demands (*claim-making*), mainly pertaining to the ethical register, aim to warn the public of the urgent necessity to defend a certain socio-moral order that is supposedly threatened. The threat that shall be examined here regards the three combat activities studied, each successively accused of degrading human dignity. A decisive aspect will seem to us, nonetheless, particularly specific to moral crusades against combat sports; it lies in the volatile and fluctuating nature of the activities targeted by moral criticism. For this purpose, we shall see, especially, how Boxing, then Thai boxing, after having been vigorously stigmatized, have been progressively recognized as being worthy of sporting values. If it cannot be denied that the two disciplines have intrinsically normalized (strengthening of the degree of institutionalization, regulation of the tolerated level of violence...), we contend that, above all, it is the look of these activities that normalized, which led to fostering their social and moral acceptability. From then on, it is a matter of considering the denigration that targeted them previously as resulting from an operation of "negative labeling."<sup>17</sup> As recalled by Le Breton, "the stigma is not a substance, but a relationship, a point of view."<sup>18</sup> Thus, rather than considering boxing, Muay Thai, or, more recently, MMA, as practices that would be intrinsically violent, undignified, or illegitimate, we shall grasp deviance as the result of a negative labeling effect, in a perspective close to symbolic interactionism.

It is important here to note that this will concern systematically, and in an entirely symptomatic way, *one and only one* activity, which shall become the focus of all the criticisms of immorality. In other words, the successive moral crusades share the particularity of having only concerned, at any given moment, one combat activity, excluding all the others, which takes us back to the theory of the "scapegoat" formalized by Girard.<sup>19</sup> Girard insisted in particular on the functional role of the scapegoat in the service of the foundation and consolidation of the community; thus, "when a group faces a crisis situation apparently unsolvable by the usual means, resorting to a scapegoat in order to charge it with the

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<sup>16</sup> Jean-Michel Chaumont, "Des paniques morales spontanées ? Le cas de la "rumeur d'Orléans "."

<sup>17</sup> See Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* ; Erving Goffman, *Stigmate* (Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 1975).

<sup>18</sup> David Le Breton, *L'Interactionnisme symbolique* (Paris : PUF, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> See René Girard, *Le Bouc Émissaire* (Paris : Grasset, 1982) ; *La Violence et le Sacré* (Paris : Grasset, 1972).

responsibility of the problems encountered represents a way of ensuring the survival of the group and its functioning." In doing so, by engaging in the collective and shared persecution of a scapegoat, the majority of the members of a group increase their unity. According to Chevalier, drawing on Girard, it is the "marginality of the victims that consolidates their credibility" as scapegoats, by providing them with a "counter-power," in the sense of an "evil power that serves as ultimate explanation to the crisis itself."<sup>20</sup> In other words, "the credibility of a given scapegoat will depend at the same time on its lack of real power and on the belief that it possesses an occult, imaginary power, of whom its marginality—its monstrosity—is the sign":

Regardless of the objective reality, the difference that "marks" the scapegoat; its credibility is based, in every case, on the belief, most often unfounded, that it holds a power that is sufficient to cause the crisis, that its position in the system allows it to act upon its functioning and to disrupt it; that it can, therefore, be the cause and responsible of what happens. A "good" scapegoat is, then, the one for which the belief in an occult power of an acceptable level is sufficiently widespread in the system for the actors to agree to consider it as such. It is also what explains that, depending on the societies and even within a society, one can find various types of scapegoats; the one who is a scapegoat in a society is the one who is the most credible, taking into account the cultural models and, therefore, the belief system that prevails in that society at a given time; and, if there are more scapegoats, simultaneously or concurrently, it is because they perform different functions—they are not used in the same contexts—or because their degree of credibility is not identical for all the social actors.<sup>21</sup>

We shall draw on this last idea by showing that, *within the sporting world*, this scapegoat function will be performed, at a given moment, by one and only one fighting activity. Girard considers, lastly, the circumstances of the exhaustion of the symbolic effectiveness of the scapegoat, leading to its replacement:

That which is institutionalized, ritualized [as a scapegoat], risks to become worn out (memory and censorship could play here a role in the wearing out of the ritual, by making the cultural models of the system evolve), and, in order to reach such an effect, either "the dose should be increased," or another scapegoat, more powerful, ought to be sought, or, finally, the very mechanism of the scapegoat ought to be given up, so as to come to terms with changes to the system organization, in order to give an adequate answer to the crisis itself.<sup>22</sup>

For the configuration that we propose to analyze (consisting of successive waves of moral crusades), it will be a matter of emphasizing that, if the principle of negative labeling of a combat activity lasts, by contrast, the activities targeted by this labeling will fluctuate, so that an activity that will be in an astonishingly systematic way the "latest newcomer"<sup>23</sup> on the market of combat sports, will appear as embodying and especially condensing,<sup>24</sup> within the sporting world, the entire range of vices, of "all that is evil in man" (extreme violence,

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<sup>20</sup> Yves Chevalier, "Le modèle du bouc émissaire : l'exemple de l'antisémitisme allemand," *Germanica* 2 (1987) : 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> "Because the perfection of the scapegoat is its unanimity." René Girard, *Le Bouc Emissaire*, 52.

immorality, cruelty...). This critical scheme, articulating the permanence of the principle of denigrating a practice and the fluctuation of the deprecated target, based on an effect of negative labeling directed at variable objects, echoes the principle of the “phony war,” as studied by Midol,<sup>25</sup> on the subject of the conflictual relations, between the “hard sciences” and the “soft sciences” in the academic field. Midol starts from the observation of a recurring metamorphosis of the antagonisms within these epistemological disputes:

For physics, chemistry is decadence; for chemistry, and especially for biochemistry, physiology ought to be immediately discarded, but the medical sciences find the human sciences to be soft, and, among the human sciences, the clinical ones, as opposed to the experimental, are the soft ones.<sup>26</sup>

While one “could think that the hard qualifies a system of solid evidence [ ... that] would be opposed to the vague intellectual procedures, largely subjective, of the soft,” there does not seem to exist “any consensus on what is hard and what is soft.”<sup>27</sup> These labels would correspond, therefore, not to an objectifiable intellectual procedure, but to a stigmatizing label. From then on, “a recurring mental structure” consisting of “holding the other responsible for the repulsive extremity represented by the qualifier of soft”<sup>28</sup> would intervene in order to “make sure of existing in the hard, the firm and the rigor.” More fundamentally, by questioning this double mechanism of permanence and reconfiguration of disciplinary conflicts, Midol wonders if the very stake of these conflicts would not be the maintenance of a permanent state of war.

In the end, we suggest examining the recurring history of the moral controversies concerning combat sports in the light of that conceptual apparatus represented by the notions of moral panics and crusades, of scapegoat and of phony war. These various tools will allow us to describe a socio-historical configuration combining the permanence of the crusades against an exclusive enemy, but one whose identity reconfigures over time depending on negative labels that are themselves fluctuating. To that end, it will be a matter, during the first part of this study, of providing evidence for the unstable character of the enemies targeted by the moral denunciation. Furthermore, we shall have to show that an opponent formerly targeted by criticism will afterwards become socially acceptable, at the end of a normalization process of the way in which he is viewed. Such a transition will prove that the stigmatization to which a martial activity is subject is not entirely reducible to its internal logic, but pertains mainly to a negative labeling effect, followed, during a subsequent period of time, by a “reversal of the stigma” causing a normalization of the way in which the one whose sporting value and educational virtues are now recognized is being looked at. More specifically, we shall start by examining the contemporary situation, after the early 2000s, within which MMA looks like the quasi-exclusive target of moral crusades currently taking place against the combat sports, while boxing and Muay Thai appear, as far as they are concerned, to be more and more recognized and valued. Then, within an approach that could be qualified as “retro-chronological,” we shall review the course of successive stigmatizations, against the historical tide, showing that, before being socially recognized, Muay Thai (in the 1980s–1990s), and, before it, Boxing (in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), had had to face stigmatization seems analogous to the one experienced nowadays by MMA.

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<sup>25</sup> N. Midol, “Les STAPS et leur identité scientifique : la guerre du dur contre le mou, ” in *Quelles sciences pour le sport ?*, ed. Gilles Klein (Toulouse : AFRAPS, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 24.

In the second part of this study, we will question the social functions and factors underlying that hostility, persisting in its principle, but varying with respect to its enemies; like the idea supported by Midol, could not one contend that what would matter in the end would be less the precise and intrinsic identity of the opponent, than the very act of leading a crusade? More precisely, we shall hypothesize that the persistence of this iterative critical scheme can be understood in terms of a double driving force; on the one hand, the moral denigration of an activity would conceal a certain form of socio-racial stigmatization of a section of its participants, coming from the most marginalized classes from the social, cultural and economic point of view; on the other hand, this tendency to focus all criticism on a single activity would answer the societal need to indicate, in the context of an axiological crisis, a consensual standard of the moral monstrosity, allowing, by an effect of contrast or repulsion, within the framework of a logic close to that of the scapegoat, to consolidate the community and redefine its moral boundaries. Moreover, these objects labeled as deviant and set up as "moral monsters" would allow imparting a consensual basis for morality in a context of axiological pluralism<sup>29</sup>; from that moment on, the opinion is able to express unanimous outrage against these "allegories of contemporary evil."

In the end, our analysis will join, in addition to the sociological reflections on deviance and its labelling, and insofar as the activities have been successively considered as marginal and unsporting on moral grounds, the general field of "moral sociology." For Pharo,<sup>30</sup> moral sociology is interested in "the action reflexively oriented towards ends that can also be moral ends, pertaining to individuals or groups". In other words, for the moral sociologist, it is a question of being interested in the "normative status of social facts."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, moral sociology starts from the postulate that "social facts are essentially or intrinsically normative, taking into account the normative sense that inevitably accompanies them in the reflexive beings that we are, their effective realization always including a set of understandings and of settled expectations that delineate the general framework of their fulfillment."<sup>32</sup> Still, not all norms can be linked to a moral nature. From then on, according to Pharo, one of the objects of moral sociology consists of "reflecting on the 'moral,' 'immoral' or 'indifferent to morality' status of the socially regulated practices of human beings."<sup>33</sup> Pharo then aims to identify a restrictive criterion likely to justify and to delimit the common moral sense that can be attributed to certain practices. He then contends that the limits of the moral field are conceptually confined by the criterion of "undue suffering," defined as "a suffering that should not occur, because it is caused by an unjust action or by one that ought to be avoided or reduced, even if it is not caused by an unjust action"<sup>34</sup>: "undue suffering, thus understood, appears nowadays as a kind of secular equivalent of evil, which one must attempt to reduce by all means, at least as long as one claims to speak and to act in the name of ethics."<sup>35</sup> Pharo goes even further: "if suffering did not exist, everything would be allowed, since no one would suffer from it; no one, that is not me, not you, not her, now, yesterday, or later."<sup>36</sup> Consequently, "all objection that claims to be moral, and which is not, in one way or another, connected to an undue suffering, is null and void as a moral objection."<sup>37</sup> According to Ogien,<sup>38</sup> only a situation implying a "flagrant

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<sup>29</sup> Patrick Pharo, "Éthique et monstrosité," *Colloque "Monstre"* (Nancy, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Patrick Pharo, "Qu'est-ce que la sociologie morale ?," *Revue du MAUSS* 28 (2006) : 415.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 417.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 419.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 420.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 421.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 423.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 423.



harm caused to another” ought to be considered as pertaining to the field of morality; which is confirmed by Boudon for whom “we tend towards a morality based on the cardinal principle that *everything that does not harm someone else is allowed*. Therefore, no behavior can be condemned, unless it can be proven that it harms someone else.”<sup>39</sup> Boudon sees in this regard in the history of morality a “progressive specification of a diffuse program to protect human integrity and respect the others.”<sup>40</sup> Differentiating what is fair from what generates an undue suffering will imply, for the actors, bringing into play a normative system of reference or of equity.<sup>41</sup> According to Ogien, the moral domain would consist of a space of confrontation of the “different views of what is fair.”<sup>42</sup> In the end, a judgment will be considered as falling under the category of morality once it aims to defend the good, the fair, the desirable, the legitimate, and not for its own personal interest, but for every member of the human community. Within this framework, the negative judgments issued against the unacceptable violence, if not against the brutality, of certain practices, especially by those who consider themselves the guarantors of a “good sports morality,” will be considered as moral judgments, appearing, therefore, as quite liable for a sociological approach to morality.

### **I. Historical Contexts of the Moral Crusades against Combat Sports. Between Permanence, Reconfigurations, and Subsequent Normalizations.**

The stake of this first part will consist of specifying the socio-historical circumstances of the “phony war” waged against the combat sports, by mapping the evolution of social representations, sometimes negative and stigmatizing, sometimes positive and valorizing, shaped with respect to the three disciplines of MMA, Muay Thai, and boxing. We shall begin, as a first step, by identifying the convergent criticisms formulated, in the contemporary era (after the early 2000s), to MMA, by political leaders as well as by sports managers and by journalists. In a contrasting way, still in contemporary times, Muay Thai and Boxing seem to enjoy positive opinion *a priori*, that we shall highlight in a second phase. However, this was not always the case: indeed, by unfolding backwards the series of views on these two disciplines, we shall be able to discover, in a third phase, that, in the 1980s–1990s, Thai boxing underwent the same criticisms faced nowadays by MMA. By delving even deeper in the past moral controversies having tarnished the recent history of combat sports, we shall underscore, in a fourth and last phase, that Boxing experienced its own critical stage of denigration at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The choice of a “retro-chronological” approach ought to be justified at this point. At the first level, this way of presentation seems pertinent to us in order to entrench the hypothesis tested here, that of a permanence of analogous moral crusades, but of one led against fluctuating enemies, to the extent that the retrospective gaze allows a better access to the progressive stratification of the social representations concerning the various combat activities. In addition to this, as a sociologist, our interest dealt initially with the present-day situation of the moral controversies revolving around the French development of MMA. For this reason, we had tried to understand the specific properties of MMA most likely to

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<sup>38</sup> Ruwen Ogien, *La panique morale* (Paris : Grasset, 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Raymond Boudon, “Une théorie judiciaire des sentiments moraux,” *L’année sociologique*, 54 (2004) : 327-357.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>41</sup> See the “justice principles” in Luc Boltanski & Laurent Thévenot, *De la Justification* (Paris : Gallimard, 1991).

<sup>42</sup> Ruwen Ogien, *La panique morale*.

explain its current rejection.<sup>43</sup> However, at the end of this comprehensive effort, it seemed to us that the singularities (technical, regulatory...) of MMA could not, in and of themselves, be enough to explain the moral denigration to whom it was subject; hence our interest in identifying analogies with the criticism that had—previously—underwent other combat sports, such as Thai boxing and boxing. Thus, the present-day rejection of MMA could be placed back into context, into perspective, in terms of the successive waves of stigmatization (then of subsequent normalization) that had been experienced, before it and independently of its appearance, by Muay Thai and, even earlier, by boxing. This is how it appeared particularly relevant to review, in reverse order of their chronological evolution, the moral controversies having interspersed the recent history of combat sports. It should be noted here that our retrospective gaze upon the successive moral condemnations is not, however, that of a historian, but that of a sociologist who simply wishes to endow his moral sociology reflection with historical depth, in order to explore the periodic reconfiguration of the disciplines subject to a stigmatization. On this basis, the classical way of presentation, chronological and linear, did not seem to us to be the most relevant. Note, in passing, that the framework of presentation of social facts, be it a chronological or a retro-chronological one, only represents, in the end, a framework among others, which is not, in itself, either right or wrong, either more or less objective, but simply a tool that ought to be mobilized deliberately, always keeping in mind the fact that this is only a conventional, non-essential framework, depending on supposed pertinence regarding the particularity of the chosen issue. In this case, it appeared to us as particularly suitable to start from the existing denunciation of MMA and valorizing of boxing and Thai boxing, in order to move on to exploring the phases of denigration previously experienced by these two latter activities, so as to identify the moments of transition from the initial devaluation to the subsequent rehabilitation, and this for purposes of better understanding the current rejection of MMA, here interpreted as the contemporary reconfiguration or transposition of a historically proven tendency to relegate to immorality and sporting indignity the latest combat sport imported to the national territory.

#### *A. 2000–2017: MMA as the Target of Choice of Moral Criticism.*

The objective consists here, therefore, of drawing up, or, more modestly, of outlining an indicative map, limited to the case of France, of the MMA detractors and of their criticism against the discipline. This will allow us to identify the exact nature of the social representations of the discipline and of the negative labeling to which it has been subject, and this since the beginning of the 2000s. Note that it was not a question, here, of creating an exhaustive collection of the various positions, discourses, and arguments revolving around the French development of the MMA, split between detractors, supporters and sceptics. For this purpose, we refer to Delalandre & Collinet's empirical enquiry<sup>44</sup> within the framework of a sociology of controversies and of disputes. Our approach shall aim, rather, in a complementary fashion, to focus on the normative discourses of the MMA opponents,

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<sup>43</sup> See Matthieu Quidu, "Le *Mixed Martial Arts*, une " atteinte à la dignité humaine " ? Quelques hypothèses sur les fondements de nos jugements moraux." We have been able to formulate various hypotheses: on a first level, it would seem that the verdicts of immorality conceal, to a certain extent, implicit economic and social stakes that do not pertain directly to the moral register (among which a conflict of the sportivization models and a fear of the licensed members' departure; see below). Certain spectators can, however, be genuinely distressed by the sight provided by the MMA fights, to the point of seeing in them a morally undignified practice. Their uneasiness seems then to stem from an emotional experience of disgust and from the discipline's transgression of numerous symbolic taboos, such as, for instance, the fact of keeping fighting while on the ground.

<sup>44</sup> Matthieu Delalandre & Cécile Collinet, "Le MMA et les ambiguïtés de sa sportification en France."

in order to understand the bases of their hostility towards a discipline that they consider as an immoral one. It is in this sense that we identified critical and deprecatory discourses concerning the discipline, and this for the purposes of identifying certain shared rationales. These convergent critical discourses have been extracted by means of a literature monitoring activity conducted for various years (especially concerning the political statements and newspaper articles), but they cannot be considered as the results of an empirical corpus, neither as those of a systematic analysis, unlike, for instance, the enquiry conducted by Masucci & Butryn<sup>45</sup> on the evolution of the presence of MMA in the American print media from 1993 to 2006. We shall not consider, therefore, in the following paragraphs, either the evolutions of the discipline detractors' speeches, or its advocates' argumentative competition, in reaction to the demonization speeches suffered. The discourses quoted below have, therefore, more of an illustrative than of a demonstrative value.

It is worth repeating that MMA is a recent combat discipline on the rise, especially on the other side of the Atlantic. It traces its origins back to the *Vale Tudo* developed starting from the 1920s in Brazil; participants coming from different combat styles faced one another, on the occasion of very loosely regulated confrontations, in order to test the different effectiveness of their respective specialties. This principle of inter-styles encounters was exported to the United States in 1993, date of the first tournament of the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* (UFC). The number of techniques forbidden by the regulations was then very limited, so much so that the combat was named *No Holds Barred* ("nothing is forbidden"). The development of the discipline faced numerous waves of criticism on this other side of the Atlantic at the end of the 1990s.<sup>46</sup> Having become, starting from the end of the 1990s, a *sui generis* synthesis combat sport combining various striking, throwing, and submission techniques, MMA subsequently experienced a dazzling success, to the point of turning into the most popular sport among the American viewers aged seventeen to thirty-five years old.<sup>47</sup> Its main organization, the UFC, experienced an exponential growth, as attested to by its sale in 2016 for four billion dollars. In contrast, the situation of MMA in France appears to be more ambivalent, this one staying on "the margins of the sport system."<sup>48</sup> If the passion for the discipline seems to be on the increase,<sup>49</sup> its development is subject to harsh criticism, first of all from political leaders. Thierry Braillard, Secretary of State for Sports under the presidency of François Hollande, went so far as to state:

The competitions allowing blows inflicted to someone on the ground, to me, represent a degradation of human dignity; they are not tolerated by the

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew Masucci & Ted M. Butryn, "Writing About Fighting: A Critical Content Analysis of Newspaper Coverage of The UFC from 1993-2006," *Journal of Sports Media* 8/1 (2013): 19-44.

<sup>46</sup> See Maarten Van Bottenburg & Johan Heilbron, "Genèse et dynamique des combats ultimes," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 179 (2009) : 32-45. In 1996, the senator McCain compared, for instance, MMA to a "human cockfighting." See Corey Abramson & Darren Modzelewski, "Caged Morality: Moral Worlds, Subculture, and Stratification Among Middle-Class Cage-Fighters," *Qualitative Sociology* 34 (2011): 143-175.

<sup>47</sup> John Brent & Peter Kraska, "Fighting is the most real and honest thing. Violence and the civilization/barbarism dialectic," *British Journal of Criminology* 53 (2013): 357-377.

<sup>48</sup> Matthieu Delalandre & Matthieu Quidu, "Arts martiaux mixtes," in *Vocabulaire international de philosophie du sport*, ed. Bernard Andrieu (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2015), 409-422.

<sup>49</sup> A petition launched in 2011 by the *Commission française du MMA*, in favor of ministerial recognition of the discipline, collected six thousand signatures.

Sport's Code, what is more, in cages, which brings to mind more the circus games.<sup>50</sup>

The same staunch opposition had already been displayed by Valérie Fourneyron, his predecessor:

The MMA is prohibited in France and I wish to carry on this prohibition [...]. I welcome a sport that is respectful of educational values, of physical integrity, of human dignity, of health, of respect for one's opponent. A sport that takes place inside a cage, that allows to hit one's opponent while on the ground, is a sport that, quite simply, does not respect these educational values.<sup>51</sup>

Such a hostility seems to transcend political divisions, since Chantal Jouanno, minister for Sports under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, did not hesitate to claim:

There will be no legalization of MMA. It is contrary to all form of ethics, to all the sporting values that we try to defend, to all form of art in the proper sense. This has nothing to do with sport. To me, this is only a betting game, and this is what sometimes destroys sport. We are not going to legalize dog fighting or cockfighting. It is the same logic.<sup>52</sup>

The successive ministers systematically draw on Recommendation no. R(99)11 of the Council of Europe, adopted in 1999, which, "considering that violence and barbaric and savage acts perpetrated in the name of sport lack any social value in a civilized society that respects human rights" encourages to "undertake all the necessary measures to prohibit and prevent free fighting contests such as cage fighting."

Beyond the policy makers, the hostility against MMA is just as sharp among sports managers, like the president of the *Fédération française de judo*, Jean-Luc Rougé, who considers the discipline as an "expression of trivialized violence"<sup>53</sup>:

Combat sports must comply with certain rules, [among which] not to put people in degrading situations, for instance in a cage, not to hit someone who is on the ground, who cannot defend himself.<sup>54</sup>

The denigration of MMA can also be found among certain boxing coaches, as reported by Burlot:

Nowadays, young people increasingly prefer going towards things such as free fight, because that resembles street fighting, and this is what interests them [...]. In these new activities, young people exchange really strong blows and without protection [...]; it is really a brawl, and not to mention the injuries. Afterwards, the organized fighting is a little clandestine.<sup>55</sup>

Numerous journalistic discourses have equally contributed to the demonization of the discipline. Let us note that, since 2005, the *Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel* recommends to

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<sup>50</sup> Interview broadcast on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2015 in the French television show *Stade 2*.

<sup>51</sup> Interview broadcast on 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2013 in the French television show *Stade 2*.

<sup>52</sup> Interview *Karaté Bushido* magazine 1012 (2011).

<sup>53</sup> "Jean-Luc Rougé: "Les arts martiaux sont des refuges pour jihadistes"," *Le Parisien* (June 25, 2015), <http://www.leparisien.fr/sports/autres/judo-jean-luc-rouge-les-arts-martiaux-sont-des-refuges-pour-jihadistes-25-06-2015-4893127.php> (accessed November 9, 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Interview given to *Équipe TV* (France) in 2011 and available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iem6Kr\\_Fn-c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iem6Kr_Fn-c) (accessed October 25, 2018).

<sup>55</sup> Fabrice Burlot, *L'Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d'une discipline controversée* (Paris : INSEP, 2013), 43.

broadcasting companies not to air MMA fights, considering that they “degrade the dignity of the participants, they are likely to severely damage the physical, mental, or moral development of underage children and they are contrary to the protection of public order.” Let us mention next two illustrations of an “accusatory” media treatment against MMA. The first one concerns the coverage by Camille Courcy aired in 2014, by M6, in the French Tv show *Enquête exclusive* show. Titled “Free Fight: the Craze of Clandestine Fighting,” it was presented in terms that were at least catchy:

It is a new phenomenon that is all the rage in the cities; clandestine fighting. No rules, no ring, no gloves; young people face one another in the parking lots or in the abandoned sheds. Inspired by free-fight, whose competitions are prohibited in France, these face to face fights are violent and everything is allowed.

This coverage provoked very strong reactions in the community of MMA enthusiasts, who denounced the misleading nature of a “masterpiece of disinformation” that would have been “totally fabricated, by making extras act, in order to scare the public opinion and harm mixed martial arts.”<sup>56</sup> The production was especially blamed for having mistaken the codified sporting activity that is MMA and the clandestine practice of free fights, whose very existence in France is disputed.<sup>57</sup> A second controversy equally involves the—involuntary?—inconsistency of certain media. Its starting point, dating from 2016, lies in the post-fighting discourse of a professional fighter who was accused, by a journalist of the Swiss daily newspaper *20 minutes*, of “having glorified terrorism and radical Islam.” And yet, this article was written solely on the basis of the testimony of three viewers who would have heard Magomed Guekhaiev “dedicate his victory to his brothers in Toulouse and throughout the world, to Salah<sup>58</sup> and to Mohamed.”<sup>59</sup> The “information” was quickly repeated in France by the newspaper *Valeurs Actuelles*, as well as by various far right websites and commented on by the Front National deputy Gilbert Collard.<sup>60</sup> But, according to Pauline Moullot, the fighter “has never uttered these words,” “there is a video to prove it”:

We can hear very well the fighter shout *Allah akbar* after his victory. But this expression, meaning “God is great,” is nothing else than a religious sign; under no circumstances an apology of terrorism [...]. Thus, no reference to jihad, but a confusion between the name of Salah Abdeslam and *Assalamu alaykoum* (“May peace be upon you”).<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> The controversy subsequent to this coverage has been analyzed by Victor Garcia, “Le reportage “Freefight” d’Enquête exclusive s’attire les foudres du milieu,” *L’Express* (2014) [http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/tele/le-reportage-freefight-d-enquete-exclusive-s-attire-les-foudres-du-milieu\\_1602937.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/tele/le-reportage-freefight-d-enquete-exclusive-s-attire-les-foudres-du-milieu_1602937.html) (accessed November 14, 2018).

<sup>57</sup> The reality of such oppositions is, by contrast, proved in the United States, in the form of *Felony fights* (Salter & Tomsen, 2002).

<sup>58</sup> Which could have been a reference to Salah Abdeslam, one of the perpetrators of the 2015 Paris attacks.

<sup>59</sup> Which could have been a reference to Mohamed Merah, perpetrator of the 2012 Toulouse attacks.

<sup>60</sup> In a tweet dated 16<sup>th</sup> of April 2016, he writes: “Switzerland: this French boxer dedicates his victory to ‘Mohamed and Salah’, shouting Allah Akbar: it is a chaos!”

<sup>61</sup> Pauline Moullot, “Non, le lutteur Magomed Guekhaiev n’a pas fait l’apologie du terrorisme,” *Libération* (2016). Available here: [http://www.liberation.fr/desintox/2016/04/22/non-le-lutteur-magomed-guekhaiev-n-a-pas-fait-l-apologie-du-terrorisme\\_1447968](http://www.liberation.fr/desintox/2016/04/22/non-le-lutteur-magomed-guekhaiev-n-a-pas-fait-l-apologie-du-terrorisme_1447968) (accessed October 6, 2018).

In an open letter,<sup>62</sup> the accused fighter blames the author of the initial article of having "played the card of buzz on a hot topic by killing two birds with one stone: the MMA and the Jihadists." It must be noted that the connection between MMA and Islamist radicalization<sup>63</sup> goes beyond this upsetting episode: in their biographical presentation of terrorists, various journalists report, indeed, on their practice of MMA. This applies to the authors of the Nice and Isle-d'Abeau terror attacks. Some people do not hesitate to generalize the phenomenon, such as Jean-Luc Rougé, who considers "martial arts as refuges for the Jihadists."<sup>64</sup> We could also quote the 2015 *l'Express* website article titled "Radicalization: the martial arts under high surveillance"<sup>65</sup>; even though the title seems to refer to martial arts in general, the journalist only mentions, in the main text, cases concerning the MMA: "group prayers improvised in a locker room, a corridor, can sometimes take place during the evenings of grappling and pankration, cousins of MMA." The phenomenon also seems to preoccupy the public officials, such as Jean-Pierre Acensi, delegate general of the *Agence pour l'éducation par le sport*, who stated on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 2015 on RTL:

The locally elected officials may not be present and attentive enough to new practices; I am thinking mainly about everything that is Thai boxing and MMA [...], which can effectively proselytize.

Eventually, the denunciation of MMA as an immoral activity converges in the statements of successive ministers for Sports, as well as of certain sports managers and of journalists. At the origin of the controversy, the discipline is frequently described as extremely violent,<sup>66</sup> as a result of its regulatory permissiveness. The criticisms have especially focused on the permission to hit an opponent on the ground, which is often perceived as intolerable, since it would mean attacking an already subdued opponent. The second point to crystallize the deprecatory judgments relates to the space where the fights take place. The one that the attackers of the discipline pejoratively call the "cage" consists in fact of an octagonal area surrounded by a flexible mesh. It is undeniable that the first leaders of the UFC, at the origin of its creation, have initially exploited its nefarious symbolism in order to impress an audience looking for spectacular images.<sup>67</sup> Nowadays, this symbolism is cumbersome, in the image of Thierry Braillard's remark associating the discipline, because of its specific enclosure, to the "circus games". Beyond the violence perceived in MMA, its structure, likely a threat to the autonomy of the established sports institutions, is certainly related to the rejection to which it is subject: the development of the discipline is driven by multinational companies marketing sports events with a view to

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<sup>62</sup> "Le boxeur accusé d'apologie du terrorisme répond aux allégations mensongères de la presse," *Islam & Info* (2016), <http://www.islametinfo.fr/2016/04/22/apologie-du-terrorisme-mma-mensonges/> (accessed November 3, 2018).

<sup>63</sup> The ideological instrumentalization of MMA would go, if one refers to the journalistic investigations, beyond radical Islam, in the image of these clandestine tournaments organized yearly by European neo-Nazi groups in the Lyon region. See the article on the 2015 tournament, taking place in Ardèche: "Un tournoi de free-fight néonazi dans la région lyonnaise," *Rue 89* (2015), <http://www.rue89lyon.fr/2015/06/05/tournoi-de-free-fight-neonazi-dans-la-region-lyonnaise/> (accessed October 2, 2018).

<sup>64</sup> "Jean-Luc Rougé: "Les arts martiaux sont des refuges pour jihadistes"." Rougé later replied that he never made this statement.

<sup>65</sup> "Radicalisation: les arts martiaux sous haute surveillance," *L'Express* (2015), [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualites/1/styles/radicalisation-les-arts-martiaux-sous-haute-surveillance\\_1737947.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualites/1/styles/radicalisation-les-arts-martiaux-sous-haute-surveillance_1737947.html) (accessed November 4, 2018).

<sup>66</sup> Matthieu Delalandre & Cécile Collinet, "Le MMA et les ambiguïtés de sa sportification en France."

<sup>67</sup> Greg Downey, "Producing hyperviolence in MMA," *JOMEC* 5 (2014).

maximize their financial income.<sup>68</sup> This is the case of a market-regulated model, beyond any state centralization.<sup>69</sup> It is noteworthy that, since its origin, MMA fell under the category of a “sports construction created by and for the television coverage.”<sup>70</sup> Initially, it was in fact practiced exclusively by professional competitors, which distinguishes it from the majority of Anglo-Saxon sports, rendered popular by an amateur basis. Sport sociologists did not fail to stress such a mercantile and media-related attachment of MMA, whose growth was presented as subordinated to “the perspective of the viewer” for the purpose of “causing a sensation among the wide audience.”<sup>71</sup> For Dalla Pria and colleagues,<sup>72</sup> the connection of MMA with neoliberalism is even deeper, since it would pertain to a “structural analogy” organized around the triptych “effectiveness-competition-deregulation”. Quidu & Delalandre<sup>73</sup> see in MMA, which develops the qualities of versatility, flexibility, and effectiveness, an excellent ludic training of the elites for the competitive requirements of the ultraliberal labor market, characterized by deregulation and instability. In an analogous perspective, Abramson & Modzelewski prove that the members of the middle-class perceive in MMA the opportunity of embodying the American ideals of meritocracy and pugnacity, while bringing to life the image of the *self-made man*.<sup>74</sup> Eventually, the dissonance between, on the one hand, that media-related, non-federal model, originating in the American neoliberalism, and, on the other hand, the amateur and associative, federalized, centralized, and pyramidal model, heir to the Coubertinian tradition and fiercely defended by the French public authorities, proves to be a substantial one.<sup>75</sup> Various detractors of the MMA, in their apparently moral diatribes against the discipline, allow the intervention of such organizational stakes to show through. This is the case of Thierry Braillard, in 2015, for whom “MMA is mercantile, we already know who is behind that”. The disagreement on the modes of governance of the sports movement is equally tangible in Jean-Luc Rougé:

It is especially the state of mind, why we do things. [As] president of the *Fédération française de judo*, I have a public service mission; what bothers me is the objective that is [in the MMA], it is not at all the same; the objective of the *Fédération de judo* is to have an educational role; and there it is not at all that, when we look at the way in which that has developed, first of all for the organization of sporting shows, and it is especially that which bothers me.

Eventually, behind the moral denunciation of the MMA seem to intervene, in a barely veiled way, criticisms of a model of sport development that eludes the state framework, as well as a stigmatization of what is pejoratively described as partaking in the mercantile deviations of sport as entertainment. It is true that the financial stakes revolving around MMA in general prove to be colossal: for illustrative purposes, the UFC experienced a dazzling economic growth, so much so that it was sold, in July 2016, for four billion dollars to WME-IMG, a Californian company representing the artists before the production

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Jean-François Loudcher & Monica Aceti, “MMA, “procès” de civilisation et sportivisation : repenser la théorie éliásienne pour mieux s’en émanciper ?,” *Corps* 16 (2018) : 371-381.

<sup>70</sup> See Matthieu Delalandre & Matthieu Quidu, “Arts martiaux mixtes.”

<sup>71</sup> Maarten Van Bottenburg & Johan Heilbron, “Genèse et dynamique des combats ultimes.”

<sup>72</sup> Yann Dalla Pria, Laurent Tessier, & W. Brubach, “*Free fight*, les paradoxes de la violence sans limite,” *Congrès de l’Association Française de Sociologie* (Paris, 2009).

<sup>73</sup> Matthieu Quidu & Matthieu Delalandre, “Être Normaliens et pratiquants de MMA,” *SociologieS* (2018).

<sup>74</sup> Corey Abramson & Darren Modzelewski, “Caged Morality: Moral Worlds, Subculture, and Stratification Among Middle-Class Cage-Fighters.”

<sup>75</sup> Matthieu Delalandre & Matthieu Quidu, “Arts martiaux mixtes.”

companies.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, it is now aired by the great national channels such as *Fox Sport*, who signed a 700-million dollars contract with the organization. In the end, it seems that, behind what is initially presented as a moral devaluation of MMA is enacted a conflict opposing various competing models of sportivization and framing of the sport phenomenon. Here, condemnations of a moral appearance could play the part of concealing the stakes, especially of an economic nature, that do not fall *a priori* under the category of the moral register. Then there would exist *amoral* grounds for our moral judgments, that is, motivations that are disjointed, indifferent, and external to any moral preoccupation.<sup>77</sup> For the detractors of MMA, it appears, though, more valuable to position their criticisms on the moral level, which allows one to "elevate oneself,"<sup>78</sup> by endowing oneself with a public image of "guardian of humanistic values" rather than to "lower oneself" to considerations that could be considered as trivial, utilitarian even.

Beyond the conflicts between models of sportivization, the institutional wandering revolving around the framing of MMA in France could equally explain the converging hostility of the political, sportive, and media sphere: indeed, its management is currently torn between various groupings, but also between various disciplines (pankration, kenpo<sup>79</sup>...), which pursue sometimes competing initiatives in order to claim their legitimacy before the authorities. Eventually, the biased perception that its detractors have of the discipline is also involved: thus, while it cannot be contested that MMA has substantially evolved since the first UFC,<sup>80</sup> the political leaders seem to have stayed trapped in their representations in these original events, sold as fights without rules (absence of weight categories and of time limitations, limited number of technical prohibitions, etc.).

The hostility towards MMA translates eventually into a particularly inhibiting legislation. Beyond the absence of state certifications that could have regulated its teaching, the practice in competition is severely hindered: thus, the public authorities forbid the manifestations considered as too permissive, on the basis of this article of the Sport's Code: "the administrative authority can, by means of a reasoned decision, prohibit this manifestation from taking place, when it presents risks of degrading the dignity, the physical integrity or the health of the participants". Nevertheless, an MMA gala was able to elude this prohibition, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2015, in Paris, but to the great displeasure of the public authorities, who have expedited an administrative investigation. This resulted in the formulation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2016 decision, specifying "the technical and security rules

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<sup>76</sup> Matthieu Quidu, "Le *CrossFit*, le *Mixed Martial Arts* et le néolibéralisme," *Esprit* 4 (2018) : 131-139.

<sup>77</sup> Let us recall that, for Pharo, "all objection that claims to be moral, and which is not, in one way or another, connected to an undue suffering, is null and void as a moral objection". One falls then in their register called of "indifference to morality," that is, neither moral nor immoral, but external to any ethical issue. This effort of distinguishing between the moral field and the register of indifference to morality is crucial; indeed, "this problem arises permanently in the social debate". Henceforth, "the value of the approach is avoiding abusively moralizing all kinds of practices whose norms and rationales do not necessarily pertain to morality, but to other normative functionalities" (Pharo, "Qu'est-ce que la Sociologie Morale?," 424). Chaumont supports the necessity of this distinction: "even if the crusaders are honest in their subjective commitment, it is not excluded that they erroneously qualify as moral a normativity pertaining to another order". Then, certain crusades and panics would only be moral in name.

<sup>78</sup> Luc Boltanski & Laurent Thévenot, *De la Justification*.

<sup>79</sup> This is about slightly different mixed fighting versions, possessing their own structures of framing within distinct federations: *Fédération française de kick-boxing, muay thai et disciplines associées* for the pankration, *Fédération française de karaté et disciplines associées* for the kenpo.

<sup>80</sup> Particularly starting from 2001, with the adoption of the *Unified Rules of MMA*, which advocate the mandatory use of gloves, the increase of the number of banned techniques, and the temporal structuring of the fights.



applicable to the public manifestations of combat sports” for “the disciplines in which the knockout [...] is permitted and not being subject to a delegation to a federation by the minister for Sports,” which is the case of MMA. First of all, this decision stipulates that “the fights take place on a carpet or on a ring with 3 or 4 ropes,” which precludes in fact the possibility of organizing competitions in a meshed octagon. Next, the fighters must be equipped with “gloves,” which implicitly prohibits wearing MMA-specific mitts. More fundamentally, the decision lists the “strictly prohibited techniques that lead to the immediate disqualification of the sportsmen”; among these, all the blows “aiming at a fighter on the ground” are banned, as well as the “elbowing.” Without being ever named, MMA is, therefore, directly targeted, which is confirmed by the lawyer specialized in sports law Tatiana Vassine.<sup>81</sup> For the latter, the text presents numerous inconsistencies, among which that of prohibiting certain fighting techniques in the disciplines targeted by the text, whereas identical gestures are allowed in the activities associated with a delegated federation. Henceforth, one understands better that “behind issues presented as being related to security lurks in fact the will to banish the discipline of MMA from the French sporting landscape”. And Vassine concludes:

Such dispositions create not only an inequality of treatment between disciplines but offer the Ministry a discretionary power to decide which discipline will be practiced in France or not [...]. We move from the “Supporting state” to the “Censoring state.”

#### *B. 2000–2017: The Moral Rehabilitation of Boxing and Muay Thai.*

In contrast to the current situation of MMA, a converging target for numerous stigmatization discourses (as a result of its regulatory permissiveness, of the supposed violence of its participants, of its extra-state way of organization...), boxing and Muay Thai seem to benefit nowadays from a certain wave of symbolical and moral revalorization. Various concordant markers attest first of all to the transformation of the social representations coupled with Boxing, from now on considered, in an extensive range of social backgrounds, as a legitimate integrative vector. According to Burlot,

At the base of this conception of a social education through boxing lies the idea that this sport contains all the ingredients to operate this transformation: it would be a kind of school of life that [...] would play upon the assimilation of rules, of respect, discipline, work. This vision is far from the tarnished one, transmitted by society, where boxing was equated to the world of petty thugs, of gratuitous violence, and of immorality.<sup>82</sup>

Besides, the journalists enjoy relaying this redeeming function by portraying unemployed youngsters who might have “turned out badly” unless having discovered boxing.<sup>83</sup> This is

<sup>81</sup> Tatiana Vassine, “L’arrêté anti MMA décrypté - Le nouveau "coup" du Ministère,” RMS Avocats (2016), <http://www.avocat-sport.fr/fr/actualites/boxe-sports-de-combat/larrete-anti-mma-decrypte-le-nouveau/> (accessed November 13, 2018) .

<sup>82</sup> Fabrice Burlot, *L’Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d’une discipline controversée*, 191.

<sup>83</sup> The participants themselves have internalized this belief, as contends Burlot (*ibid.*, 178): “the boxers often introduce themselves as individuals who nearly turned out badly, but who, fortunately, have discovered boxing.” And he continues: “very few competitors do not have the feeling that they have found boxing at the right moment; some of them present it as a tool deliberately used for social reinsertion” (191). Before asking: “does not the boxer, in describing himself as a bad boy saved by boxing, try to identify himself with the myth and, thus, to reinforce and show his adhesion to the boxing culture?” (193). Such an integration of this mystique of insertion through boxing can also be found, besides, among the Muay Thai participants: “there is, in these young people’s discourse on

the case of this article, published in 2013 by *Le Monde*, titled "the peace at fists' length" and presented in these terms: "faced with the violence preying the favelas in Rio de Janeiro, the academy *Luta pela Paz*—fight for the peace—suggests to the young people a different way: the learning of citizenship through the noble art."<sup>84</sup>

The henceforth "noble art" is equally advocated as a therapeutic support, for instance by the psychologist Richard Hellbrunn, who has been developing for twenty-five years the "psycho-boxing": this program "consists of helping people to explore the part of violence inside themselves" by means of "a boxing match where the blows are softened, with a partner in front of them and an outside observer [...]. At the end of the fight, the three people meet in order to talk about what they have experienced." Here, the attack plays the part of a psychoanalytical substitute, "where the sofa will be replaced by a ring!" The goals henceforth associated with Boxing have clearly diversified: in addition to its educational and curative virtues, certain models see in it the means to develop "toned and elongated muscles." The contemporary rehabilitation, both ethical and esthetical, of Boxing also appears at the artistic level: indeed, on the musical stage, numerous are nowadays the video clips bringing to the forefront boxers in action; this capture, from now on irreducible to the hip-hop universe alone (associated, in the social representations, with the underground circles, in connection with its genesis in the American ghettos), opens up to variety and to pop music.<sup>85</sup> The artistic revalorization of Boxing also appears in literature; Charreton shows in this respect how the representations of the activity have moved on progressively from a "staging of destructive violence" to a "praise of the noble art."<sup>86</sup> The novelists underscore in this respect its clear demarcation from the register of brawl.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, they glorify the stylistic purity of the pugilistic gesture, at the same time as the tactical intelligence of the fighters.<sup>88</sup> These are from now on described as pacifists: thus,

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themselves, a sort of perpetual reiteration and almost of conformity. The idea is a simple one and it cannot be brought back to this single equation: before, I was "rabble," nowadays, I'm not the same. Repetitive, standardized words, announcing a bygone past and a metamorphosis. There is the before Thai boxing, a time of troubles, and the afterwards, that of renewal [...]. They always depict themselves in deprecatory terms when evoking the past: "short-tempered," "nasty," "vicious," "brawlers" are the qualifiers which they regularly bestow upon themselves. As if they would endorse the negative judgment endlessly thrown back at them, seeing finally in it the irrefutable proof of the effectiveness of their boxing." (Catherine Choron-Baix, *Le Choc des mondes : les amateurs de boxe thaïlandaise en France*, 120).

<sup>84</sup>Nicolas Bourcier, "La paix au bout des poings," *Le Monde* (2013),

[http://www.lemonde.fr/sport/article/2013/11/29/la-paix-au-bout-des-poings\\_3522324\\_3242.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/sport/article/2013/11/29/la-paix-au-bout-des-poings_3522324_3242.html) (accessed November 10, 2018)

<sup>85</sup> As in Ed Sheeran's (*Shape of You*, 2017), Robbie Williams' (*Welcome to the Heavy Entertainment Show*, 2016), or Maroon 5 (*One More Night*, 2012) video clips.

<sup>86</sup> Pierre Charreton, "La boxe et ses représentations dans la littérature française," in *Regards populaires sur la violence*, ed. Mireille Piarotas (Saint-Étienne : Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2000), 159-171.

<sup>87</sup> "Boxing is to street fight what art is to nature: one must unlearn how to fight for a long time before learning how to box" Étienne Lalou, quoted in *ibid.*, 166.

<sup>88</sup> In the image of Henri Decoin's hero: "countless are those pretending that I am too intelligent for my job. I think, in spite of everything, that one must possess a certain degree of intelligence in order to defeat an opponent. The brutes who reach pugilistic notoriety are an uncommon occurrence." Quoted in *ibid.*, 166.

While foolish people imagine that boxers only dream of wounds and bumps, literature turns this popular belief on its head, in such a way that the paradox quickly degrades to commonplace.<sup>89</sup>

Beauchez sustains this tendency of literary rehabilitation of boxing:

Far from representing exceptions, the previously quoted essayists are always only embodiments of this oxymoronic link that brings together the apparent brutality of boxing and the “sweet science” of its blows; a science just as well expressed in the ring as in literature, philosophy, or poetry. Among others, we shall mention the names of Arthur Cravan—the poet-pugilist portrayed by Picabia—, Maurice Maeterlinck, Jack London, or Ernest Hemingway, just as skilled with the quill as with the glove. Even Jean-Paul Sartre used his few experiences of the ring in order to turn the confrontation of the pugilists into a scene of the comprehensibility of the fight reduced to its intersubjective expression. Before him, Albert Camus had depicted his boxers on a different stage: that of the Oran summer, where their shadows loomed over an audience sweating with exaltation in front of the performance of these “low-browed gods”, whose spilt blood was described by the writer as a propitiatory gift, or a rite as difficult as offered to the popular gods of violence and of necessity.<sup>90</sup>

The recognition of the dignity of the noble art finally shows through in the journalistic field, as proven by Rauch,<sup>91</sup> starting from a diachronic and comparative study of three media accounts of Boxing matches: the historian emphasizes in this respect how the professional fights, after having been considered, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as “shows of the cruelty of clashing bodies,” are, since then, described in terms of technical skill, even of genius. Beauchez tends to confirm this “change of tone” in the journalistic treatment of Boxing, in this case in the United States:

*The sweet science of bruising*, or the idea of a “sweet science” of blows, is the oxymoron created during the 1810 decade by the writer and sports journalist Pierce Egan to designate at the same time the technicality of boxing and its brutality. Abbott Joseph Liebling, forerunner of the “new journalism” and prominent figure of the *New Yorker*, rendered the expression popular in the America of the 1950s, whose pugilistic world he chronicled with *maestria*, from the dampness of gymnasiums up to the glory of the fights. While they gave substance to the characters who inhabited the stages, as well as the backstage of the confrontations, the journalistic news signed by A. J. Liebling did not fail to generate emulation, like among essayists such as Thomas Hauser (1986), George Plimpton ([1977] 2003), or Robert Anasi (2002). The latter two have even gone as far as to undergo the test of the ring, in order to render a bodily experience of it. This physical proximity to the fight, studied in the intimacy of the gymnasiums, allowed these authors to open a perspective on the private world of the boxers. All the art of their writing has since then consisted of making the art of pugilism appear as the antithesis of the brutality which is attached to it by a certain stereotyping

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 166-167/ For Giraudoux, “that gentleman was wrongfully slapped. He does not answer in kind: he is a boxing champion” Quoted in *ibid.*, 167.

<sup>90</sup> Jérôme Beauchez, “La “douce science des coups ” : la boxe comme paradigme d’une sociologie de la domination,” *Revue française de sociologie* 58/1 (2017) : 97-120.

<sup>91</sup> André Rauch, “Violence et maîtrise de soi en boxe,” *Communications* 56 (1993) : 139-154.

that equally confines the boxers to their supposed violence. Hence the "sweet science" of their confrontations, established by A. J. Liebling's writings as an invitation to see a certain sophistication beyond the roughest appearances.<sup>92</sup>

In the end, be it in the fields of education, therapy, art, or journalism, Boxing seems to enjoy from now on a public image that contrasts not only with the barbarity and immorality interspersing the contemporary representations of MMA, but also with the brutality for which it was previously blamed (see below). This movement of moral revalorization is materialized in the opening of the discipline to "new audiences,"<sup>93</sup> be that senior managers,<sup>94</sup> women,<sup>95</sup> children, or people with disabilities. This widening of the participants base beyond its "traditional audiences"<sup>96</sup> was made possible by a diversification of modalities,<sup>97</sup> of ends, as well as of the practice settings.<sup>98</sup> For this reason, the competitive logic no longer represents the only goal. First of all, the rehabilitation of the discipline owns a lot to the exemplary behavior, both sporting and non-sporting, of professional fighters, like the outstanding results of the French delegation to the 2016 Olympic Games. The journalists have particularly brought to the forefront the atypical paths of Sarah Ourahmoune or Estelle Mossely, who managed to reconcile their high-level sports careers, their professional careers,<sup>99</sup> and their private lives. Before them, figures like Mahyar Monshipour or Brahim Asloum, role models of integration and abnegation, had also contributed to burnish the image of the noble art. These values of courage, work and perseverance have been extolled in blockbusters such as *Million Dollar Baby* or *Rocky*, which have fueled the process of "de-stigmatization" of boxing. We could go as far as to mention

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<sup>92</sup> Jérôme Beauchez, "La "douce science des coups " : la boxe comme paradigme d'une sociologie de la domination" : 97.

<sup>93</sup> Fabrice Burlot, *L'Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d'une discipline controversée*, 197.

<sup>94</sup> See, for instance, the opening, in 2016, on the Lyon Presqu'île, of the private boxing gym called *Ksius, white collar and mouthguard*. Also see this online article published in 2018 : <https://www.capital.fr/votre-carriere/pourquoi-les-cadres-se-mettent-a-la-boxe-1271345> (accessed November 1, 2018).

<sup>95</sup> According to Fabrice Burlot (*L'Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d'une discipline controversée*, 208), from 1997 to 2006, the number of female members of the *Fédération française de boxe* has seen a six-fold increase. Also see the autoethnography by Elise Paradis, "Boxers, Briefs or Bras? Bodies, Gender and Change in the Boxing Gym," *Body & Society* 18/2 (2012): 82-109. According to Beauchez, "the women in question are usually white, coming from the middle classes, and most of them own a higher education diploma. The stakes of the sociological research concerning them stay, henceforth, those of a *dominant feminism* mobilizing the instruments of the social sciences to objectify then, above all, to fight against the male domination and its (last?) pockets of resistance." ("La "douce science des coups " : la boxe comme paradigme d'une sociologie de la domination": 112-113).

<sup>96</sup> The high-level competitors continue, nonetheless, to be recruited from among "the young men coming from working-class backgrounds, having sometimes had a disturbed childhood, marked by the absence of the father and, more generally, by complex social backgrounds" (Fabrice Burlot, *L'Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d'une discipline controversée*, 173-174).

<sup>97</sup> For instance, "if the number of female members is undeniably on the rise, it is more as a result of the creation of new modalities of practice than the real opening of the Boxing clubs towards women" (Fabrice Burlot, *L'Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d'une discipline controversée*, 215). Thus, nowadays they represent the quasi-totality of the aeroboxing practitioners; they are also very present in educational boxing (16% of members), whereas their participation in amateur boxing (10%) and in professional boxing (4%) is more discreet (*ibid.*, 208).

<sup>98</sup> Beyond the traditional gym, let us mention the private structures, the individual coaching, and the schools.

<sup>99</sup> The former, graduate of the *Institut d'Études Politiques*, started her own team building company, while the latter is a design and development engineer.

the idea of a “reversal of the stigma”<sup>100</sup> to the extent where “being a boxer” can from now on become a *de facto* revendication, associated to the possession of certain moral qualities: thus, while the perceptions of violence and immorality progressively fade in the social imaginary, boxers become examples of not giving up in front of obstacles. The socio-anthropological works on boxing, like the work by Beauchez<sup>101</sup> have confirmed, in this respect, the pervasiveness of this mystique of the will, endurance, loyalty and bravery that governs the boxing clubs. The sociologist tries to understand the private significations invested in their practice by boxers in whom “the elsewhere of the origins is mixed with the toughness of the living conditions”. For the latter, boxing is related to “a noble art of regular resistance to the experiences of the periphery and its wounds”:

Almost four years of ethnography of the boxing gym, combined with the analysis of fighter biographies—all heirs of immigrants and coming from pauperized suburbs—have shown that they understand a large part of their commitment between the ropes as the collective building of a force that has to be opposed to the idea of a lower social value, felt through the trials of disqualification and of everyday racism. First anchorage of this disqualification, marked by the stigmas of *strangeness* because of a skin color that confines to the double status of an immigrant and an *outsider*, the body becomes then the means of an overthrow of all this negativity in a display of power exposed during the public fights. Hence their importance as tests during which the boxers hope to prove their value in front of an adversity that is not only limited to the body of the opponent, but that extends to the various social figures of the opposition that they have the feeling of encountering daily.<sup>102</sup>

Beauchez goes even further, since he contends, at the time of “drawing up a summary of this sociological art of the sweet science,” that “beyond their differences, the ways of understanding or of explaining the condition of boxer are all crossed by a central question: that of dominance. While it is a key factor of the fights in the ring, researchers still perceive its expression at the intersection of ‘gender,’ ‘class,’ and ‘race.’ Thus, they do not fail to see, in the pugilistic scenes, various representations of the subordinates’ struggles against the exclusion forces that tend to keep them in socially dominated positions.”<sup>103</sup> The resistance to the dominations lying at the heart of daily life for numerous boxers entangled in a subordinate position,<sup>104</sup> the moral qualities necessary for this struggle (abnegation, bravery...) tend to become as many attributes associated, in the social representations of the

<sup>100</sup> The concept of “reversal of the stigma” refers to the agents’ strategic and creative capacity to take hold of their stigma in order to build a new identity: thus, an increased awareness can bring the stigmatized themselves to reverse their stigma and to create “a difference freed from its stigma, and, in a certain way, regenerated” Michel Wieviorka, *La différence* (Paris : Baland, 2001), 126.

<sup>101</sup> Jérôme Beauchez, *L’Empreinte du poing : la boxe, le gymnase et leurs hommes* (Paris : EHESS, 2014).

<sup>102</sup> Jérôme Beauchez, “La “douce science des coups ” : la boxe comme paradigme d’une sociologie de la domination” : 110.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> See Lucia Trimbur, *Come out Swinging. The Changing World of Boxing in Gleason’s Gym* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). Her book offers a remarkable ethnographic work in a boxing club from a marginalized New York neighborhood. She shows to what extent what the coach tries to inculcate to the boxers, even more than an aptitude to box, is a faculty to resist adversity, by exacerbating, for instance, the notion of individual responsibility: “neither the government, nor any institution of the state will provide assistance for them. They’d better know it and reject without waiting their own victimization, by choosing not a resigned, but a fighting attitude.” (350-351).

noble art, with its adherents. In a completely different context, the black ghetto in Chicago, Wacquant has shown that the boxing gym represented a "school of morality," that is, "a machine for producing the spirit of discipline, the commitment to the group, the respect for the others, as well as for oneself, and the autonomy of will indispensable for the blooming of the pugilistic vocation."<sup>105</sup> For Wacquant, "the gymnasium ensures a triple function towards the ghetto. 'Protection,' 'discipline,' and 'honor,' fostered within the boxing framework, would thus be opposed to the surrounding anomie, while the gymnasium would represent an 'island of order and virtue,' a 'sanctuary,' as well as a 'shield' against the insecurity of the ghetto and the pressures of daily life."<sup>106</sup>

A final factor likely to have contributed to the rehabilitation of boxing is connected with the progress achieved in the institutional framing of the discipline: indeed, this is taken charge of within the *Fédération française de boxe*, which is authorized by the ministry for Sports to fulfil a public service mission and delegate to organize the competitions. In addition to the creation of state certification for its coaches, the effort of legitimization was expressed through the will of a clear dissociation between, on the one hand, professional boxing, regulated by the law of the market law and tarnished by the greatest media scandals, and, on the other hand, amateur boxing, regulated by the *Fédération* and favoring the touch over the strike force.<sup>107</sup>

The public image of Thai boxing has also benefited from a clear improvement since the 1980s–1990s, when, as we shall see below, it generated numerous negative judgments. One of the first markers (at the same time one of the causes) of the tendency towards the rehabilitation of its social representation concerns the reinforcement of its institutional framework, within the *Fédération française de kick-boxing, muay thai et disciplines associées*, which has received the ministerial authorization and delegation. This structure is motivated by a will to diversify its participants, namely from the female<sup>108</sup> and student<sup>109</sup> audience. The economic elites are also concerned, like the analysis by Choron-Baix mentioning a "progressive conquest of quiet suburbs."<sup>110</sup> The social opening of the activity required an evolution of the practice modalities, with an increased prevalence for the leisure and an euphemization of the confrontations: thus, "even though Thai boxing owes the essential part of its success to its reputation for extreme effectiveness, it needs, in order to become legitimate, to agree to an increasingly extensive codification, all the more necessary since its audience becomes younger."<sup>111</sup>

This quest for recognition seems to have paid off; this is attested to by the current silence of the political leaders towards an activity that no longer appears as the priority target of moral crusades. Furthermore, the media, far from stigmatizing it, starts bringing to the forefront singular figures, who tend to break the stereotypes of a "brutal sport, practiced by rabble."<sup>112</sup> This is the case of world champion Patrice Quarteron's portrait, aired in 2015

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<sup>105</sup> Loïc Wacquant, *Corps et âme : carnets ethnographiques d'un apprenti boxeur* (Marseille : Agone, 2000), 18.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 18-20.

<sup>107</sup> Fabrice Burlot, *L'Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d'une discipline controversée*.

<sup>108</sup> See the memoir by Bois (2014), assistant technical director, on the federal strategies of feminization.

<sup>109</sup> The French Muay Thai University Championships have been taking place since 2011. This competition supposed a few regulatory conversions, aiming to restrict the permissiveness level of the fights, particularly through the suppression of elbow strikes and the interdiction of deliberately looking to knockout.

<sup>110</sup> Catherine Choron-Baix, *Le Choc des mondes : les amateurs de boxe thaïlandaise en France*, 67.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>112</sup> Akim Oualhaci, "Les savoirs dans la salle de boxe thaï : transmission de savoirs, hiérarchies et reconnaissance locale dans une salle de boxe thaï en banlieue populaire," *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances* 8/4 (2014) : 807-832.

in the *Stade 2* show; this coverage, scheduled one week after the Stade de France and Bataclan attacks, is titled “In Grigny, a Thai Boxing Champion Strikes the Amalgams.” He is introduced by the channel in these terms:

Arnaud Romera went to meet Patrice Quarteron [...], whose objective is to show a positive image of his sport, his town, and his club, exactly there where a certain Amedy Coulibaly, one of the perpetrators of the January attacks, used to train. The vital stake: transmitting the values of the Republic and fostering social cohesion, against radical deviations [...]. At the club, everything is rigor, discipline, and respect.

Sociological works confirm the pervasiveness of these values in the Thai boxing gymnasiums, such as Bujon’s ethnographic enquiry contending that “becoming a boxer supposes a moral effort: holding to the limit, having a great endurance capacity, learning how to suffer.”<sup>113</sup> During training sessions and competitions the boxers’ moral qualities are permanently assessed, be it their “will,” their “discipline,” and their “self-control,”<sup>114</sup> or their “loyalty.”<sup>115</sup> Oualhaci, starting from an ethnography of a club located in a working-class environment, shows how there is created a manhood that is at the same time “common” (valorizing manliness, resistance to hardship, combativity) and “respectable”<sup>116</sup> (more open to diversity and close to middle-class norms, aiming to fight against the stigmatizing representations). In the gymnasiums there are indeed taught the “ways of being” allowing the acquisition of a “social dignity.”<sup>117</sup> In the end, according to the sociologist, the boxers have nothing of the “offender profile”<sup>118</sup> that sometimes still clings to the image of the participant. This negative representation was created during the 1980–1990 decades, at the time of its implantation in France. The activity has then witnessed the surge of a wave of criticisms analogous to the one faced nowadays by MMA.

### *C. 1980–1990: Thai Boxing as a “Barbaric Sport for the Rabble.”*

Bujon is aware of the deprecatory judgments that have accompanied the emergence of the discipline in France:

The Muay Thai has the reputation of being violent; to such an extent that it took time to the public authorities to recognize and legitimate this practice, whose success in the deprived neighborhoods has not waned.<sup>119</sup>

Choron-Baix (1995) described the implantation process of Thai boxing, this “national self-defense art of the Thai” or “national sport of the Siamese,”<sup>120</sup> in France, starting from the beginning of the 1980s, in the urban and suburban sectors, especially in the Île-de-

<sup>113</sup> Thomas Bujon, *Boxing club : sociologie d’une salle de boxe thaï en banlieue* (Saint-Étienne : Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, 2009), 34.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>116</sup> Akim Oualhaci, “Faire de la boxe thaï en banlieue,” *Terrains & travaux* 27 (2015) : 119.

<sup>117</sup> Akim Oualhaci, “Les savoirs dans la salle de boxe thaï : transmission de savoirs, hiérarchies et reconnaissance locale dans une salle de boxe thaï en banlieue populaire” : 817.

<sup>118</sup> Thus, for Oualhaci, “if the commune is at the top of the crime statistics list, the boxers, who belong to the ‘masculine end of the conforming lifestyle space’ of the working class, rather than to the ‘gang world’, learn to control their violence and vigorously distinguish themselves from the “rabble.”

<sup>119</sup> Thomas Bujon, *Boxing club : sociologie d’une salle de boxe thaï en banlieue*, 21.

<sup>120</sup> Catherine Choron-Baix, *Le Choc des mondes : les amateurs de boxe thaïlandaise en France*, 17.

France. Its importation was initiated by "kyokushin karate specialists"<sup>121</sup> looking for a realistic way of confrontation."<sup>122</sup> This latter aspect represents one of the main difficulties of its social acceptance: indeed, "though considerably euphemized during its history, Thai boxing is perceived as breaching the acceptable norms of expression of violence," especially on account of the "important number of body parts allowed to be hit, what is more, with full contact and with a stripping of protection means."<sup>123</sup> It is all it takes to give it a "reputation of a brutal and crude activity" (p. 36). According to Choron-Baix,

It is not so much the danger incurred because of them that distinguishes the fighting practices as their degree of aggressivity. A scale of values is instituted among them all, in the name of humanism, which questions their morality more than their effective dangerousness. Boxing cannot elude this debate, and the one coming from Thailand even less than the English, the French, or the American one. Condemned from all sides for its brutality, it must reject these attacks.<sup>124</sup>

These are all the more violent since the discipline will quickly fuel "a war of practices," which erupts every time that a "sporting field diversifies" and a foreign activity comes to "disrupt the well-structured French sporting world."<sup>125</sup> More precisely, the Muay Thai will attract "the hostility of sister-disciplines", such as karate and French boxing, which see in it "a dangerous competitor": indeed, "Thai boxing brings together a set of intrinsic qualities [contact sport, self-defensive effectiveness...] that make it all the more attractive since they are considered from now on as lacking in the related disciplines. In fact, it represents a threat to the latter. Invested with the same stakes as them, it targets the same audience categories."<sup>126</sup> Numerous adherents, especially "destitute young people", are attracted by its "reputation for extreme effectiveness and its inexpensive nature."<sup>127</sup> It is true that the "Thai boxing environments in France constitute a rather young, essentially male world, recruited from the urban and suburban populations, mostly precarized from the economic and social point of view", which "represents the classical customer base of the combat sports."<sup>128</sup> Another characteristic aspect of the development of Thai boxing will generate critical hostility: its grounding in spectacularization. The first public gathering took place in 1978, in the Salle Wagram. According to Choron-Baix:

The explosive turn taken by some of these first galas considerably harmed the reputation of Thai boxing. It created with its competing disciplines and the public opinion the image of a sport for "thugs" from which it did not yet break free. It surely contributed to its marginalization and forced its leaders to look for the means of its legitimization.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> "An "absolutist" minority of karatekas is the one who takes the initiative of introducing Muay Thai in France. It gathers various adherents of the *kyokushin* school, dissident of karate as officially practised in France, who extoll kicking, bare-fist fights, and delivered blows, and who claim to be deeply unhappy with the evolution of their discipline. Considering that it 'sells myth and gestural art', these "disillusioned" of karate, as they describe themselves, are looking for a way of confrontation that they want "realistic" (ibid., 35).

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 125-126.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 65.



The institutional wandering in which the discipline was then entangled exacerbated even more, with the wide audience and the sport communities, its image as an illegitimate practice. Indeed, during the 1980–1990 decades, no federation had received an authorization. Certain media have also contributed to the enduring stigmatization of the discipline, especially by revealing the participant past of numerous terrorists, parallels which we have already noted before with respect to some MMA participants who perpetrated terrorist acts.<sup>130</sup> This is the case of that Thai boxer whose project was to strike Vatican.<sup>131</sup> We can also mention Julien Dray's portraying, titled "From Thai Boxing to Terrorism," of the perpetrator of the Porte de Vincennes attack.<sup>132</sup> Surreptitiously, such journalistic accounts have contributed to the degradation of the social representation of the activity, by an effect of "contamination," starting from the reprehensibility of some of its participants. Here, in the eyes of the wide audience, would intervene a form of uncontrolled inductive inference, to the extent that the stigmatization (whose legitimacy is not in question here) of certain of its participants comes to reinforce the global, demonized image of the discipline.

A last way of access to the negative image that accompanied the installation of Thai boxing in France, and which continues to structure a small part of the public opinion, consists of examining the digital discussion forums<sup>133</sup>. It will not be here a question of considering these digital exchange spaces as revealing precisely what would represent the "public opinion," but, rather, to see them as sharing places for collective experiences and questionings.<sup>134</sup> In this perspective, a first discussion, opened in 2007, follows the initial question of a web user: "Is there a rabble-free Thai boxing club in Paris?"<sup>135</sup> If such a question is, in itself, revealing for the tarnished image sticks to the discipline, some of the answers given are even more: "Well no, since it is a pretended sport invented by and for them." Or: "I'm not sure you'll ever find rabble-free Thai boxing! Because it's a very

<sup>130</sup> Be that the case of MMA or of Thai boxing, the journalistic rhetoric seems relatively analogous concerning these frequent comparisons between the participants of combat sports and the perpetrators of terrorist attacks. It seems to us that the logical indeterminacy of the relation between these two areas of life contributed to make the collective opinion doubtful and to erode the public image of the disciplines: indeed, any reader ignores if the terrorist was socialized to violence through the practice of MMA or of Thai boxing, or if his own aggressive tendencies led him to direct himself towards these supposedly violent practices. The journalist, just like the reader, could not decide this question, but, according to us, it is precisely the absence of an answer that contributes to raise doubts about activities that from now on ought to be distrusted, as potential breeding grounds for the incitement or actualization of violent tendencies.

<sup>131</sup> Ghita Ismaili, "Abderrahim Moutaharrik, l'ex-champion de boxe thaï qui voulait frapper l'ambassade d'Israël en Italie," *Huffpost* (16.02.2017), [http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2017/02/16/moutaharrik-italie-daech\\_n\\_14796844.html](http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2017/02/16/moutaharrik-italie-daech_n_14796844.html) (accessed October 10, 2018).

<sup>132</sup> "De la boxe thaï au terrorisme : Julien Dray raconte le parcours d'Amedy Coulibaly, qu'il a croisé en tant qu'élude de l'Essonne," *Europe 1* (January 26, 2015), <http://lelab.europe1.fr/De-la-boxe-thai-au-terrorisme-Julien-Dray-raconte-le-parcours-d-Amedy-Coulibaly-qu-il-a-croise-en-tant-qu-elude-de-l-Essonne-20634> (accessed October 1, 2018).

<sup>133</sup> For some examples of how this sociology of conversational exchanges on the internet is implemented, see Marcoccia (2004) and Von Münchow (2004), analyzing the more or less implicit rules of conversation abided by the web users; see also Matuszak (2007) and Lewinski (2010) on the forms of argumentation and the dynamic of exchanges between the members on the political discussion forums. See, lastly, Akrich & Méadel (2009) or Broca & Koster (2011) on the debates concerning scientific knowledge, particularly from the medical field, on the internet forums.

<sup>134</sup> Matthieu Delalandre, "La musculation en question," in *Sport et controverses*, ed. Cécile Collinet & Philippe Terral (Paris : Éditions des archives contemporaines, 2013), 269-283.

<sup>135</sup> <https://fr.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20071209035648AAIokmL> (accessed September 5, 2018).

popular sport among this kind of youngsters"! A second discussion opens in 2015 with the question "Why is Thai boxing seen as a sport for thugs?"<sup>136</sup> The "wild explanations" offered by the web users are, once again, symptomatic of a tarnished view of the discipline: "I think that, in its very essence, Thai boxing is sleazy. Therefore, maybe there is a certain logic in the fact that it attracts sleazy brains". Or: "Because all the guys who heap praise on Booba and Rohff [famous French Rap singers] practice that." Here, in one and the same stereotyped representation, are stigmatized both the Thai boxing participants and Rap fans, implicitly conflated with the young people coming from working-class and immigrant backgrounds. The commonplace of an extremely brutal sport practiced by thugs was so widespread that, in 2014, a Thai boxing enthusiast<sup>137</sup> undertook its humorous deconstruction: "*Do training sessions always take place in basements and parking lots?* Yes, of course, the Muay Thai clubs are the largest tenants of parking lots and basements in France, Resolution B1 of article N17 forbids them to perform and to train by daylight." Another quote: "*The Muay? A sport for the rabble!* Absolutely, besides, only the rabble is allowed to practice it, the 'non-rabble' has no right to join."

Through these most recent posts, we have been able to note that the tarnished image of Thai boxing, created starting from its implantation in the 1980 decade, was not immediately or entirely deconstructed, and this despite the fact that the discipline enjoys from now on, in many sectors of population, rather favorable *a priori*, as we have previously seen. It must be noted here that the negative labeling process originally underwent by the activity produced enduring effects in certain sectors—more and more restricted—of the population, of which the activity struggles to get rid; for it is indeed a case of "labelization of deviance" process.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, the image degradation suffered by the Thai boxing in the 1980–1990 decades does not exclusively depend on its intrinsic properties (technical, tactical, regulatory), but on the way in which the discipline is *specifically* interpreted in a given cultural and historical context.<sup>139</sup> An argument likely to support this idea of a "circumstantial judgment of values" at the basis of the moral denigration of Thai boxing in the 1980–1990s in France could lie in the fact that, during the same period of time, in another socio-cultural environment, the activity enjoyed a highly valued image. In this respect, Rennesson proves that the discipline benefits in Thailand "from a huge popularity."<sup>140</sup> There, it is considered as "the heritage of the ancient warriors of Siam" and it would carry on, "from generation to generation the feats of the heroic ancestors."<sup>141</sup> It would thus have contributed to the "construction of the national unity" at the same time as to the "fight against the colonial powers."<sup>142</sup> Far from being deprecated, the professional fighters<sup>143</sup> are considered as "model citizens" whose morality, and especially this capacity for emotional control, echoing the

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<sup>136</sup> <http://www.jeuxvideo.com/forums/42-88-40999104-1-0-1-0-pourquoi-la-boxe-thai-est-elle-considere-comme-un-sport-de-voyou.htm> (accessed September 5, 2018).

<sup>137</sup> <http://www.muaythaigalaxy.com/index.php/fr/la-vie-du-muay/dossiers-technique/1258-les-grands-clich%C3%A9s-du-muay-thai.html>

<sup>138</sup> See Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*; Erving Goffman, *Stigma*.

<sup>139</sup> But also, as we shall see below, depending on a given social background of its participants, the modification of the social structure of the participants (social background, age, gender...) not lacking in effects on the resulting reputation of the activity.

<sup>140</sup> Stéphane Rennesson, *Les Couloirs du muay thai : anthropologie d'un art martial en Thaïlande* (Paris : Les Indes savantes, 2012), 15. This fact does not rule out, in any case, the possibility of movements contesting the mercantile deviations of professional Muay Thai emerging there (*ibid.*, 16).

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>143</sup> And this even though they keep being recruited mainly from among the poorest categories, particularly coming from the rural areas (among which the Isan region) and from among the most marginalized groups of Thai society, both from an economic and a cultural point of view (*ibid.*, 16).

“valorization of detachment in self-abnegation conveyed by the Thai popular Buddhism”<sup>144</sup> are extolled.

*D. Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century: the Stigmatization of Boxing*

Before Thai boxing and MMA, boxing was the focus of the moral crusades led against combat sports. Even though the negative vision associating it with mafia deviations, fixed fights, or the star system did not entirely disappear,<sup>145</sup> it no longer has anything to do with the reprobation whose victim the discipline previously was and whose culmination can be identified at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, period starting from which a long-lasting movement of moral acceptance, allowing it to be nowadays recognized as educational and therapeutic, was initiated. Indeed, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, boxing was prohibited in almost all the countries where it had emerged<sup>146</sup>; in most cases, the decreed rules, among which those of the Marquis of Queensbury, were not observed then. If boxing repels, it is mainly because it authorizes a high degree of violence: thus, the historian Rauch considers it as “one of the last violent practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”: indeed, “while the security measures are developed and the prevention practices increase [...], boxing seems to present a kind of counter-culture condemned by the tastes.”<sup>147</sup> Thus, “if justice attempts to compensate a citizen for the suffering incurred, boxing, in contrast, rewards the one who wounds, mutilates, and knocks out.”<sup>148</sup> The denunciation of the extreme violence of the fights is first of all driven by the writers who liken it, at that time, to a “ferocious and brutal killing game, unleashing the lowest instincts of the sportsmen and of the audience”. Indeed, for Charreton,

A literary movement, sometimes inspired by certain Anglo-Saxon novelists (such as Jack London), indulges fiercely in [its] demystification, recounting the tragic destiny of its “stars” of a day, with its retinue of disappointments, failures, successive bodily injuries that soon leave them destitute, like helots of society [...]. Thus, Henri Decoin’s boxer relives his suffering, in a haunting litany: “broken jaws, broken right hand, swollen heart, enormous bloody lips, protruding from the mouth like a piece of raw meat in the jaws of a hungry dog, cauliflower-shaped ears.”<sup>149</sup>

More specifically, the flowing blood symbolizes the irruption of reality and of impurity. The surge of passions among the crowd stresses even more the impression of violence originating in the ring, like in an episode of *The Man Who Laughs* (1868) where Victor Hugo

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

<sup>145</sup> See Fabrice Burlot, *L’Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d’une discipline controversée*, 147 ; Loïc Wacquant, *Corps et âme : carnets ethnographiques d’un apprenti boxeur*, 19. Stating his epistemological posture as an ethnographer, Wacquant specifies: “this means that we shall not attempt either to charge or to exonerate this sport having a reputation for being the most ‘barbaric’, so many times celebrated and condemned, reviled and revered” (19). He further quotes Lagorce (1989): “it is no coincidence if boxing is the sport that inspired the greatest number of talented film directors and novelists. In our civilization, it is an archaism, one of the last barriers agreed upon, the last mirror still authorized to reflect our dark side”. Drawing on Sammons’ historical study (1988), Wacquant (272) mentions, regarding the social representation of boxing, a “dialectic of fascinated cult and horrified condemnation.”

<sup>146</sup> Fabrice Burlot, *L’Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d’une discipline controversée*, 23.

<sup>147</sup> André Rauch, “Violence et maîtrise de soi en boxe” : 139.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>149</sup> Pierre Charreton, “La boxe et ses représentations dans la littérature française,” 160.

recounts the antagonism between Irish and Scots, exacerbated by the boxing matches: "two national prides facing each other. Ireland and Scotland were about to clash."<sup>150</sup>

Until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the highlighting of violence also predominates in the journalistic discourses, as proven by Rauch, starting from a comparative reading of media accounts of fights during three different periods in the history of boxing. Drawing on the article published in the French newspaper *L'Auto*, and recounting the 1901 confrontation between Mac Govern and Corbett Junior, the historian shows that, until that time, the fights are recounted as true "feasts of violence." Indeed,

The report highlights the ferocity of the show: a boxer fell on the ground; propelled against the balustrades, his body collapsed under the blows of his opponent. He lies before the eyes of four thousand spectators who express an indescribable emotion.<sup>151</sup>

According to Rauch,

The exposure of cruelty and pain creates the very context of the fight, its passionnal landscape. The journalist took hold of Mac Govern's body, struck down, pushed, knocked down by punches that knead and break an anatomy that is ultimately very simple: a head, a mouth, an elbow, a stomach. At the end, a broken body writhes on the stage, overwhelmed with pain, shaken by convulsions.<sup>152</sup>

Such an exhibition of violence, brutal and messy, can only provoke "the condemnations of 'educated' people, of the bourgeois, of the middle classes who hasten to disqualify boxing by holding against it its atrocity and its brutality, terms by which they most frequently characterize it."<sup>153</sup> The exposure of the cruel violence will progressively tend to regress during the subsequent period, when the journalists start extolling the technical virtuosity of the fighters. Thus, in the 1919 account of Georges Carpentier's fight, "the technical refinement sublimates a coarse exhibition of brutality"<sup>154</sup>:

Carpentier's boxing [...] enters an enchantment of moves. Spectacular footwork, he runs and does not stop to give quick jabs [...]. Carpentier, new archangel of rings, carefree ephebe, slight cherub, slender and insolent, brilliant teenager, becomes in that moment the Adonis of boxing.<sup>155</sup>

Progressively, "the technical analysis of the blow has outrun the passion."<sup>156</sup> While previously the reader witnessed the "show of two flesh puppets, at the fringe of humanity," there are no more "exploded bodies" in this second description; "technical beings"<sup>157</sup> have replaced them. Starting from an analysis of the general and specialized press, Gros & Jobert<sup>158</sup> confirm this transition, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, towards a socio-moral acceptance of Boxing. Indeed, from 1892 to 1906, in the context of the assumption of power, since

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<sup>150</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 164.

<sup>151</sup> André Rauch, "Violence et maîtrise de soi en boxe" : 139-140.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>158</sup> Pierre-François Gros, Timothée Jobert, "Des plaies et du sang : les représentations de la violence dans la boxe et le rugby en France à la Belle Époque," *Communication au 5<sup>e</sup> congrès d'histoire du sport* (2005). The transcript of their conference is available here:

<https://www.cafyd.com/HistDeporte/htm/pdf/3-7.pdf> (accessed November 10, 2018).

1879, by the Republicans, who promoted physical education as “an instrument of nationalization of the masses,”<sup>159</sup> the French elites proved to be particularly hostile to the development of boxing. Revealing the eugenic anxiety, it is first of all accused by the medical and scientific bodies of “weakening the race and make the youth waste away”: “as *le Figaro* worries, “no illness, even the most rapidly fatal, is capable of producing in so little time such a formidable organic decay.”<sup>160</sup> Furthermore, the British origin of boxing creates difficulties to the nationalist fractions, who consider, in an Anglophobe reflex, that “France must find within itself, in the physical practices stemming from the ‘French genius’, the resources of its own ‘rejuvenation’, rather than aping the ‘perfidious Albion’” The conservative elites lastly query the compatibility of boxing with the French morals and customs:

Homeland of the “arts and culture”, France cannot accept the development on its own territory of physical activities that are, in the image of the [British] society that generated them, so “vulgar,” “coarse,” “barbaric.”<sup>161</sup>

Thereafter, the years 1906–1907 represent a pivotal period, when the original condemnation by the elites abruptly gave way in front of the societal recognition of its legitimacy. According to Gros & Jobert, this turnaround can, first of all, be understood in a climate of warming of diplomatic relations with Britain:

One notices that the years 1890–1904, when boxing [...] is most strongly rejected, correspond to a time of major diplomatic tensions between France and England. Conversely, its benevolent reception falls within a movement of reconciliation between these two nations, represented by the *Entente Cordiale* (1904), in front of the construction of an alliance system in the Central Europe.<sup>162</sup>

The perception of a growing threat coming from Germany will accelerate, indeed, the social valorization of boxing, by strengthening the patriotic fiber of the Frenchmen:

Sporting successes thus become [...] symbolic instruments of affirmation of the national power, which explains why, a few days after the outbreak of war, the boxer Georges Carpentier is chaired by more than twenty thousand Parisians, for having brought France the first world title... of the “white race.”<sup>163</sup>

Lastly,

The atmosphere of armed vigil to which French society is urged contributes to the promotion of physical activities such as rugby and boxing. The latter are no longer jeered at for their savagery, but appear as the best adapted instruments “to succeed in creating a people of warriors and recapturing the lost provinces.”<sup>164</sup>

## II. Formal Properties of This “Phony War”

As we have managed to glimpse, in the recent history of combat sports, three activities have alternately become the target of analogous moral criticism accusing them of brutality,

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 3.

incivility, and immorality. The focus of stigmatizations on a given activity took place in a successive manner: indeed, when Thai boxing emerged in France, Boxing was no longer considered as immoral; in the same way, when MMA started to spread, English and Thai boxing, which had, meanwhile, experienced a regulatory movement of the confrontational violence and of consolidation of their institutional framework, had increasingly<sup>165</sup> met with social acceptance, both in the sporting field and by the public opinion in general. Similarly to the wording suggested by Midol,<sup>166</sup> aiming to characterize the simultaneous permanence and volatility of the conflicts between "hard sciences" and "soft sciences" within the academic field, we believe it is appropriate to qualify the recurrence of this critical scheme, mobilizing surprisingly redundant arguments, be it the case of condemning MMA, Muay Thai, or E boxing, as a "phony war"; and this particularly since, like the epithets of "hard" or "soft" used to qualify a scientific discipline, the assignation of attributes such as "immoral," "barbaric", or "educational" in order to qualify the combat sports seems less related to the nature of their intrinsic technical and regulatory content than to a negative labeling leading to a stigmatization of the activity and of its participants base. What stays the same in these successive waves of deviance-labeling and of moral crusades lies simply in the very principle of condemning, in a relatively unanimous way (thus, the repulsion seems to be the object of consensus among political leaders, sports managers, journalists, writers...), a unique practice, on which converge all the accusations of vice, among which those of brutal violence, of immorality, and of anti-sportsmanship. "Exclusivity," "successiveness," and "subsequent normalization" eventually represent the three pillars ensuring the long-term functioning of this "phony war" that articulates the permanence of moral crusades and the reconfiguration of the stigmatized targets on the basis of a fluctuation of negative labelings. We must make clear that the "subsequent normalization" in question concerns a double movement, objective and symbolic; the "objective normalization" regards an increased regulation of the violence contained by the activity, particularly by means of successive reforms of its converging regulations in the sense of an euphemization of its brutality (medium intensity of the blows, number of authorized protections, duration of fights, appearance of gentler modalities of confrontation...), whereas the "symbolic normalization" concerns the nature of the way in which the activity is being seen, which becomes less reproving and more valorizing. The subsequent normalization is, therefore, simultaneously a normalization of the practice itself and of the way in which the public opinion sees it and its technical and regulatory evolutions.

After having specified the situational socio-historical circumstances of this "phony war", we suggest, in an effort towards an additional formalization, abstracting the common properties likely to explain why a given activity, at an exact moment of its genesis, will be selected as a target of moral criticisms, but also why, afterwards, it will be spared them until becoming, within the sport field and for the public opinion, a morally acceptable practice and one that is conceivable as an educational support. During the initial phase of crisis, the three criticized disciplines shared the fact of having been recently imported to France, from England, for the noble art, Thailand, for the *muay thai*, and the United States, for the MMA. Gros & Jobert have shown that, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French conservative elites, hostile to the development of boxing, experienced an undeniable Anglophobia.<sup>167</sup> In

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<sup>165</sup> Let us recall here for a last time that the rehabilitation of boxing or of Muay Thai is not finally enacted or completely unanimous. A part of the public opinion keeps raising doubts about the levels of violence and of morality of these disciplines. Some doctors, for instance, continue to advocate an abolition of boxing.

<sup>166</sup> N. Midol, "Les STAPS et leur identité scientifique : la guerre du dur contre le mou."

<sup>167</sup> Pierre-François Gros, Timothée Jobert, "Des plaies et du sang : les représentations de la violence dans la boxe et le rugby en France à la Belle Époque," 2. Denis (2003) prefers talking about

an analogous manner, would not the conflictual importation of MMA, a century later, express a certain type of anti-Americanism, at the same time as a denunciation of the ultra-liberalism whose ultimate embodiment would be represented by the United States?<sup>168</sup> On a second level, at the moment of their implantation in France, the targeted activities are practiced by the most marginalized members of the population, looking for “realistic” confrontations and for a possibility of social rise: it is the case of the proletariat for the Boxing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (particularly coming from the initial waves of Italian, Polish, Belgian, or Spanish immigration), then, for Thai boxing and MMA, a century later, of young people coming from the working-class suburbs and from Maghrebi and sub-Saharan immigrant backgrounds. The managers of the current sports federations will be worried by such an attractiveness and by the competition thus created by the emerging discipline, like the breakthrough of Thai boxing that alarmed the karate and French boxing federations or that of MMA, preoccupying mainly the judo managers. Here would intervene, behind the condemnations presenting as pertaining to the field of morality, economic stakes that, strictly speaking, do not pertain to the moral perimeter, but, more exactly, to considerations that are “disjointed from” or “indifferent” to morality, to reuse Pharo’s terminology.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, the subsidies given by the Ministry of Sports to the various authorized federations are conditioned by the achievement of performance contracts, which include mainly the evolution of the licensed members. For instance, publicly stigmatizing, nowadays, the moral indignity of MMA could allow the retention of such competitive and financial advantages. Then, a kind of strategic instrumentalization of a discourse would be presented as ethical for utilitarian purposes. Boudon states in this respect that “the moral judgment can be affected by parameters mainly pertaining to the social position of the actor.”<sup>170</sup> Such protective mechanisms are not, however, specific to the competition created by the emergence of MMA, as highlighted by Choron-Baix,<sup>171</sup> who had already signaled the “worrisome” nature, for the competing karate and French boxing federations, of the success of Thai boxing in the 1990s. For this author, such a war of practices would arise every time that a sporting field diversifies.<sup>172</sup> This kind of hostility can direct us to the

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“xenophilophobia” or “love of one’s enemies,” which would represent a powerful lever of international dissemination of sports practices: “we suggest calling “xenophilophobia” this configuration dominated by circumventing strategies aiming to foster the pedagogical qualities of the opponent, in order to politically turn them against him. This approach can be found in the circle of proselytes of the overseas imperial action, obsessed by the match to be played against England, but also by the sectors fixated on revenge against Germany: the nationalist people’s movements mobilize the youth by means of the gymnastics clubs, whose forms of organization are explicitly presented as typically Germanic. One can conclude that the choice of a model for mobilizing the youth is not haphazardly distributed and that there is a match between the network of promoters’ socio-political orientation and the form of pedagogy that it strives to bring to France.” See Daniel Denis, “Le sport et le scoutisme, ruses de l’histoire,” in *De l’Indochine à l’Algérie*, ed. Nicolas Bancel, Daniel Denis & Youssef Fates (Paris : La Découverte, 2003), 195-209.

<sup>168</sup> Jean-François Revel, *L’Obsession anti-américaine* (Paris : Plon, 2002). According to Revel, anti-Americanism is a vision according to which “[...] the Americans *only* make mistakes, *only* commit crimes, *only* talk nonsense and are guilty of *all* the failures, of *all* the injustices, of *all* the sufferings of the rest of mankind.” (ibid., 248). This is a case of “essentialist xenophobia”, the one considering that the Other has an immutable and detestable essence. See also Pierre Guerlain, “America, America : la haine, vraiment ? L’antiaméricanisme et les impasses de l’anti-antiaméricanisme,” *Revue française d’études américaines* 99 (2004) :105.

<sup>169</sup> Patrick Pharo, “L’enquête en sociologie morale.”

<sup>170</sup> Raymond Boudon, “Une théorie judiciaire des sentiments moraux.”

<sup>171</sup> Catherine Choron-Baix, *Le Choc des mondes : les amateurs de boxe thaïlandaise en France*, 37.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 36.

configuration "established vs outsiders" conceptualized by Elias & Scotson,<sup>173</sup> on the occasion of their study of the relations, in the 1960s, among the residents of an English commune of five thousand inhabitants. The objective of the research was to understand why a first group of inhabitants ("the established") stigmatize a second group ("the outsiders"), while, even though living in neighborhoods that were slightly apart from each other, both of them consisted largely of working-class populations. The authors then contend that what opposes and differentiates the inhabitants of these two areas refers to an opposition of the type "old-new" inhabitants: the inhabitants having settled at an earlier date tend to stigmatize those having settled more recently. Behind this difference of time spent living in the commune, lurks in fact a difference of power among the inhabitants. The older ones are also the most close-knit, the most solidary, those characterized by a strong degree of social cohesion. The latter allows them to reserve to their members the most prestigious social positions within the community, to dominate the local associations (political, cultural, religious, etc.), which contributes to the entrenchment of their power a little more. Such a configuration seems to echo the resources mobilized by the leaders of the federations that are historically implanted at an earlier date and in possession of stronger political support. Beyond the specter of a massive departure of licensed members, the three targeted activities share, lastly, the characteristic of being supported by a marketing and media-driven model, based on spectacularization and regulated by the laws of the market, which strongly contrasts with the Coubertinian scheme, associative and centralized, supported by the public authorities that stigmatize the deviations of "sport-business."<sup>174</sup>

Concerning henceforth the formal conditions of crisis recovery, it seems, first of all, that the emergence of a new activity, which will be deemed to be more violent, dangerous and immoral, and against which it seems even more urgent to make a stand, is indispensable. The criticisms will also spare the originally deprecated sport as it will transform in the sense of an attenuation of the violence tolerated by its regulations: the number of banned techniques increases at the same time that the quantity of protections advances; furthermore, new modalities of practice are implemented, like educational boxing for the noble art. Also, the competition stops being the ultimate purpose: thus, English and Thai boxing can be practiced, from now on, in a perspective of leisure or of well-being. These more and more varied possibilities of joining specialties originally reserved to the professional competitors are logically accompanied by a diversification of the audiences, be that in terms of gender, age, physical capacities, or social categories, diversification that, in return, contributes to improving the social representations of the activity, not only as a result of an increased knowledge of the activity by a broadened spectrum of participants, but also by means of the social valorization of certain categories of participants, which, through a repercussive effect, is transferred to the practices to which they agree to devote themselves. The same applies if one places oneself at the level of institutional recognition; the socio-moral rehabilitation of these two disciplines that are boxing and Thai boxing benefits, by a sort of positive contamination effect, from the "blessing" of established and recognized social institutions (among which, at the forefront, the school, the medical environment, the political power, the artistic field...), which from now on admit its legitimacy and which represent, in a certain way, its moral guarantors. In this respect, we note that the activities progressively abandoned by criticisms are characterized by an increased institutional structuration within the framework of the classical federative scheme: thus, the *Fédération française de boxe* was created in 1903, whereas the Thai boxing is nowadays managed by the *Fédération française de kick-boxing et muay thai*. In the two cases, these

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<sup>173</sup> Norbert Elias, & John Llyod Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders. A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems* (London : Frank Cass & Co, 1965).

<sup>174</sup> Matthieu Delalandre & Matthieu Quidu, "Arts martiaux mixtes."



structures have received the ministerial authorization and delegation. This centralized taking over is also translated through the implementation of state certification for the coaches, who contribute in building the confidence of the public opinion in a possibility of a safe practice.

Does MMA, which is the latest practice to be stigmatized, fulfil these conditions that would allow it, with time, an exit from the crisis? At a first level, we do not glimpse at this time any new activity that would be imported, permissive, popular with the working-class youth, regulated by the entertainment market, and whose emergence could alleviate the waves of condemnations underwent by MMA. The absence of a competing discipline represents a substantial obstacle to the normalization of the way in which MMA is looked at. However, other levers appear to be rather favorable to its socio-moral acceptance. This is the case of the diversification already quite advanced of the modalities and purposes of practice: indeed, it is from now on possible to train apart from any competitive objective, be that for purposes of well-being, of technical improvement, or of a ludic physical training.<sup>175</sup> A diversification of the types of audience ensues, particularly from among the teenagers enrolled in a form of education,<sup>176</sup> the economic elites,<sup>177</sup> the employees of multinational companies,<sup>178</sup> the students of the *Grandes Écoles*,<sup>179</sup> the war-wounded, etc. The popularity of MMA beyond its supposedly traditional audience has recently become intriguing for the media<sup>180</sup>, both generalist or specialized,<sup>181</sup> as well as for the social sciences researchers: indeed, drawing on the nefarious image of the discipline, various sociologists have questioned the *a priori* paradoxical commitment of population categories that ought to have been symbolically excluded from it. Abramson & Modzelewski prove, for instance, that the members of the middle-class, in the United States, see in the MMA the opportunity to practice the American ideals of meritocracy and pugnacity.<sup>182</sup> It is the same kind of a will to embody the moral values that stimulates the “Muscular Christians”<sup>183</sup> to devote themselves

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<sup>175</sup> Matthieu Quidu, “Pratiquer le MMA dans l’enseignement supérieur : un sport de combat sulfureux au service du bien-être des étudiants ?,” *Recherches et Éductions* 17 (2017).

<sup>176</sup> In the same vein than Quidu’s suggestion (2015) to teach mixed fighting in physical and sports education. It is worth noting that, in 2015, a school located on Réunion Island was the first school to include MMA in its sports Association.

<sup>177</sup> Raul Sanchez Garcia, “Informalization, ways of engagement and class habitus in the development of MMA,” *Corps* 16 (2018): 393-402.

<sup>178</sup> The Microsoft employee representative committee proposes, for instance, MMA to its employees. See Matthieu Quidu, “Le *CrossFit*, le *Mixed Martial Arts* et le néolibéralisme.”

<sup>179</sup> Matthieu Quidu & Matthieu Delalandre, “Être Normaliens et pratiquants de MMA.”

<sup>180</sup> See this *Monde.fr* article on the *a priori* dissonant practice of MMA by the students of *École normale supérieure de Lyon* :[http://www.lemonde.fr/campus/article/2016/03/21/cours-de-combat-libre-a-normale-sup\\_4887049\\_4401467.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/campus/article/2016/03/21/cours-de-combat-libre-a-normale-sup_4887049_4401467.html)). The journalists also start to show an interest in the profiles of “atypical” fighters who break the stereotype of the “bad boy”, which contributes to a reversal of the diabolization of the discipline. This is the case of Tom Duquenois’s recent mediatization ([http://www.lemonde.fr/sports-de-combat/article/2017/04/27/tom-duquesnoy-la-french-touch-de-l-ufc\\_5118504\\_1616664.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/sports-de-combat/article/2017/04/27/tom-duquesnoy-la-french-touch-de-l-ufc_5118504_1616664.html)): “with his ideal son-in-law face and standing at 5’8” tall, [he] passes more easily for a leading man than for a modern-day gladiator.” The fighter, described as an “intellectual,” is also music lover: “the man with repeatedly broken brow ridges has sensitive ears: an opera fan, he will take advantage of his visit to Paris to go see *La Fille des neiges* et *Wozzeck*.”

<sup>181</sup> In France, numerous printed or online sports magazines have from now on added MMA (and, within it, the fights of the UFC) to the list of sports they cover, like the *yaboo.sport* platform, the *l’Équipe* newspaper, or the *RMC sport* channel.

<sup>182</sup> See Corey Abramson & Darren Modzelewski, “Caged Morality: Moral Worlds, Subculture, and Stratification Among Middle-Class Cage-Fighters.”

<sup>183</sup> See Justine Greve, “Masculinity, Theology and Ideology in Christian MMA,” *Religion and American Culture* 24/2 (2014): 141-185.

to MMA, in order to give substance to the Christian values of discipline, while also embodying the Christic sacrifice. It is interesting to note that other sociologists, such as Burlot, had previously developed analogous questionings concerning the *a priori* dissonant practice of Boxing by the social elites. The recurring shift of the moral crusades from one fighting activity to the other involves, therefore, a translation in the scientific field, where it is a question of understanding how population strata considered as little inclined towards deviant practices, as well as towards physical violence, still orient themselves towards activities successively deemed to be nefarious. In the various situations, the researchers end up admitting that these adherents, supposedly atypical, practice indeed a sport that is a matter for controversy, but in a converted and strongly euphemized modality. In the precise case of MMA, it is, indeed, undeniable that the diversification of the types of audience was rendered possible by a lowering of the tolerated violence threshold, which also shows through at the professional level; Van Bottenburg & Heilbron mention in this respect a "re-sportivization" movement of MMA starting from the early 2000s.<sup>184</sup> Eventually, the main obstacle that seems to hinder the full admission of the legitimacy of the activity lies, maybe, in the lack of institutional framework (absence of a federation and of coach certifications recognized by the state), a lack in which the public authorities have started to show interest, in the image of the 2016 request of a parliamentary report by Prime Minister, Manuel Valls. The recommendations suggested by Senator Jacques Gersperrin and by Deputy Patrick Vignal seem, however, to have a limited impact, since, according to them, "the recognition of MMA as a delegate discipline is not currently relevant": more precisely, "the creation of an autonomous federation, if that ought to be an option someday, is not currently practicable in terms of the existing MMA structures." The rapporteurs more modestly contemplate "structuring and consolidating the educational and safe development of the mixed combat sports existing within the delegate federations."

### **III. Between Permanence and Fluctuations. Understanding the Social Factors Underpinning the Successive Waves of Moral Crusades**

After having specified the historical circumstances of this "phony war", as well as its formal properties, it seems now appropriate to take up the formidable challenge consisting of explaining the very persistence of these analogous waves of moral crusades, led, nevertheless, against fluctuating combat sports.

#### *A. The Moral Crusades as Covert Socio-ethical Stigmatization.*

First of all, we shall formulate the hypothesis according to which the successive denigrations to which boxing, Muay Thai, then MMA have been subject could result from an effect of social stigmatization of the populations who practiced these activities *en masse* at the moment of their implantation in France. Let us recall, following Choron-Baix, that the "classical customer base of combat sports" is found among "the urban and suburban populations, mostly precarized from the economic and social point of view."<sup>185</sup> Furthermore, the representation of these disadvantaged sectors increases as the activity is practiced in accordance with a competitive and professional modality,<sup>186</sup> and this whatever

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<sup>184</sup> Maarten Van Bottenburg & Johan Heilbron, "Genèse et dynamique des combats ultimes."

<sup>185</sup> Catherine Choron-Baix, *Le Choc des mondes : les amateurs de boxe thaïlandaise en France*, 37.

<sup>186</sup> The statistical data and the demographic surveys concerning the social structure of the MMA participants' recruitment are, however, lacking, due, at the same time, to the relatively recent nature of the practice and to the non-centralization of its framework, for instance within a federation recognized by the state, which makes the exact count of its adherents difficult. Hence, in the absence

the activity (see Burlot's study for boxing<sup>187</sup> and Choron-Baix's remarks on Thai boxing<sup>188</sup>) and the cultural environment contemplated.<sup>189</sup> The most underprivileged—mostly heirs of immigrants and coming from pauperized neighborhoods—then perceive in the combat sport a potential lever for social rise, at the same time as a “fight against the social disqualifications and for the recognition of [their] value as men”:

[These fighters] understand a great part of their commitment between the ropes as the collective building of a force that has to be opposed to the idea of a lower social value, felt through the trials of disqualification and of everyday racism. First anchorage of this disqualification, marked by the stigmas of *strangeness* because of a skin color that confines to the double status of an immigrant and an *outsider*, the body becomes then the means of an overthrow of all this negativity in a display of power exposed during the public fights. Hence their importance as tests during which the boxers hope to prove their value in front of an adversity that is not only limited to the body of the opponent, but that extends to the various social figures of the opposition that they have the feeling of encountering daily.<sup>190</sup>

Furthermore, Burlot has clearly shown how young people coming from the most disadvantaged sectors have historically moved towards the latest imported activity, deemed to be more effective, realistic and subversive:

The 1990s have witnessed the appearance of two activities competing with Boxing: Muay Thai and kick boxing. Their exoticism and the possibilities offered by them for confrontation without protective constraints have made them attractive to some [...]. Nowadays, these practices are finally

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of systematic empirical data, what seems to prevail concerning MMA falls rather under the category of “sociological presuppositions” than under that of “sociological results”. According to these presuppositions, MMA would mostly recruit from among the most precarized fringe groups of the population. And yet, various converging works, having studied professional or amateur fighters (Pellaud, 2009; Poupeau, 2009) would rather tend to indicate that the social recruitment of the mixed martial artists would be far from taking place exclusively among the marginalized sectors. This is the case of Spencer's ethnographic investigation (2012) in Canada, which, according to Sánchez García, “gives some clues about a mid-cultural capital even in professional competitors [...], when compared for instance with professional boxing. Trajectories of MMA participants, coming from martial arts and/or amateur wrestling, could partly explain such difference.” (Raul Sanchez Garcia, “Informalization, ways of engagement and class habitus in the development of MMA,” 400).

<sup>187</sup> Fabrice Burlot, *L'Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d'une discipline controversée*, 173.

<sup>188</sup> “Thai boxing thus sees a diverse and contradictory world taking shape around it. Firmly established in underprivileged urban and suburban sectors, it reaches nowadays the fashionable districts, the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris, maybe the 16<sup>th</sup> before long [...]. There, it concerns social categories little involved so far, for which it does not necessarily hold the same significance. It is plausible, for instance, that it will create few competitors there. The way in which these different adherents see their sport and the way in which they practice it can, indeed, vary considerably, determined by their position in society and by a set of predispositions connected with it. Some, kept away from social and academic achievement, invest all their promotion projects in it [...]. Others indulge in it in a more distant manner, being more inclined to favor the technical finesse and the aesthetics.” Catherine Choron-Baix, *Le Choc des mondes : les amateurs de boxe thaïlandaise en France*, 68.

<sup>189</sup> Regarding Muay Thai and Thailand, see Stéphane Rennesson, *Les Couloirs du muay thai : anthropologie d'un art martial en Thaïlande*. Regarding boxing in the United States, see Loïc Wacquant, *Corps et âme : carnets ethnographiques d'un apprenti boxeur* ; Lucia Trimbura, *Come out Swingin'. The Changing World of Boxing in Gleason's Gym*.

<sup>190</sup> Jérôme Beauchez, “La “douce science des coups” : la boxe comme paradigme d'une sociologie de la domination” : 110.

institutionalized, in the same way that their brutality is regulated. Thai boxing and kick boxing are themselves overrun by the free fighting clubs.<sup>191</sup>

In that way, in three moments of the recent history of combat sports, there was a remarkable coincidence between the activities targeted by the moral criticism *and* practiced by the underprivileged youth. In other words, the moral condemnation shifts at the same time as the most precarized strata migrate from one activity to another. This "concurrent translation" movement might well inform us about what is partly played behind the denunciation of a new martial activity: we formulate here the hypothesis according to which, behind the appearance of a condemnation presenting as moral, could hide a certain tendency towards the social and ethnical stigmatization of a part of the population, young, male, suburban, and coming from immigrant backgrounds. It seems, indeed, more socially acceptable, for the moral entrepreneurs at the origin of the moral crusades, to reject these activities in the name of their so-called immorality or of their extreme violence, rather than to admit to a fear of a certain type of populations, considered as marginalized and dangerous.<sup>192</sup> In other words, setting oneself up as guarantors of humanistic values, by designating a practice as degrading the integrity of the individual, would allow to "drape oneself in the folds of dignity,"<sup>193</sup> (whereas openly ostracizing a part of the population would amount to a form of socio-ethical racism, unacceptable both from a moral and a legal point of view and that could only debase the one indulging in it. Revealing for this "miserabilist representation that associates boxing, male fractions of the cities, and violence", Oualhaci's remark makes perfect sense here:

If Thai boxing is perceived as a "sport for the rabble", violent and relatively illegitimate, it is because the boxers are seen as suburban "rabble" who "pummel each other" using all the limbs of the body.<sup>194</sup>

And further:

The combat sports are under an essentialist fire that assigns to the participants from the working-class neighborhoods a natural quality that turns them into inveterate "brawlers," if not into "thugs." Thai boxing is particularly perceived as a relatively illegitimate practice, because it refers to the plebs and to vulgar uses of the body.<sup>195</sup>

Would a combat sport stand a higher risk of being "outlawed" from the sporting world and the public opinion if a great part of its adherents came from the "*banlieue*"? The analysis of open discussions on the internet could substantiate this hypothesis of a social ostracism hidden within the moral denunciation. Thus, to a post opening on the question "why is Thai boxing considered as a sport for thugs?", a web user sarcastically answers: "What's up? I do Muay Thai, you see. Fuck them all! Thai is for men!" [*Wesh je f  du muay thai ta vu, si si gros, w  nik  tou, la tai c  pour le haumme!*"]; this second contributor develops: "people don't practice a

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<sup>191</sup> Fabrice Burlot, *L'Univers de la boxe anglaise : sociologie d'une discipline controvers e*, 42-43.

<sup>192</sup> This association between *working* classes and *dangerous* classes was highlighted by the historian Chevalier (1958), for the case of Paris during the Industrial Revolution.

<sup>193</sup> Divina Frau-Meigs, "La panique m diatique entre d viance et probl me social," *Questions de communication* 17 (2010) : 223-252.

<sup>194</sup> Akim Oualhaci, "Les savoirs dans la salle de boxe tha  : transmission de savoirs, hi rarchies et reconnaissance locale dans une salle de boxe tha  en banlieue populaire," *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances* 8/4 (2014) : 810.

<sup>195</sup> Akim Oualhaci, *Se faire respecter : ethnographie de sports virils dans des quartiers populaires en France et aux  tats-Unis* (Rennes : PUR, 2016), 19.

sport to make others think [...] that they are “good-natured,” or for “beating up the faggots on the street! I’m really good!” [“*Kassé laggle dé pédés dan la ru yoyoyo Weshhh chui tro for!*”]. This way of “aping” the language attributed, in the collective imaginary, to certain young people coming from working-class backgrounds speaks volumes on the association made, in certain xenophobic statements disguised as moral puritanism, between a combat sport, a sector of population, and a supposed dangerousness. This socio-ethnic disqualification mechanism, insidiously camouflaged behind the veneer of moral denunciation, is perceived by this latter web-user, who, to the question “why is Thai boxing considered as a sport for thugs?”, replies: “because for Jean-FN (i.e., Jean-Marie Le Pen), sport where dark-skinned people are to be found = sport for thugs.” Cohen specifies in this respect that, even though the moral panics focus on specific *folk-devils*, the source of the panic must be sought elsewhere, to the extent that “folk-devils only come to symbolize a threat”. Thus, the groups that become the targets of moral panics play the role of distinctive social types, in the sense of “visible reminders of what we should not be”. By this effect of “symbolization”, the *folk-devils* function in fact as embodiments allowing the projection of deeper anxieties.

In the end, there might be an “amoral” basis (in the sense of independent from morality, to resume Pharo’s division, for instance when it is a case of fear, among certain sports managers, of the departure of licensed members towards a new activity attractive to the young audience), but also an “immoral” one (in the sense of generating an “undue suffering”, when it comes to stigmatizing, for socio-racial reasons, certain sectors of population) for sentences presenting as pertaining to the moral register. The critical effort undertook here, leading to expose non-moral motivations (be they amoral or immoral ones), proves to be, for Pharo, decisive within the framework of a moral sociology enquiry, in that it allows to “identify the manifest distortions that this or that type of agent imposes on the sense of morality in order to take advantage of it in its action or, at least, to point out [...] the normative inconsistencies characterizing the positions of the one or of the other.”<sup>196</sup>

### *B. The Moral Crusades as Reaffirmation of the Societal Necessity of a Consensual Standard of Evil.*

Beyond an effect of socio-racial stigmatization, the persistence of the negative labeling of the various combat sports leads, according to us, to the intervention of motivations of a moral nature, as well as their social substructure. As specified in the introduction, the moral crusades successively led against the three fighting activities can be described in terms of “moral panic”. Let us recall that, for Cohen, there is a moral panic once an incident, apparently insignificant, that gives rise to a media coverage that is at the same time sizable and sensationalistic. On the basis of a sudden feeling of alarm, moral entrepreneurs, politicians, representatives of the law enforcement agencies, and various experts invite themselves in the debate, prophesying on the risks for the public order and calling for the adoption of strong measures. Cohen particularly insists on the role of the media in the dramatization, the exaggeration, even the distortion of the events presented, in order to exacerbate the severity of the supposed threat. It follows a process of labeling of those who will become perceived as deviant, the *folk-devils*, sort of “cultural scapegoats.” The latter, often associated with teenager subcultures, are then turned into stereotypes allowing to identify, without ambiguity, those who are deemed responsible for undermining the societal balance. Finally, after quite a short while, the panic disappears just as abruptly as it had appeared, leaving sometimes behind an institutional and legislative heritage.

<sup>196</sup> Patrick Pharo, “L’enquête en sociologie morale,” 387.

Various features of the three successive waves of criticisms highlighted seem to coincide with the defining criteria of moral panics according to Cohen. First of all, this is the case of the exaggeration and of the distortion in the media treatment, which show through in the frequent use of the phrase "degradation of human dignity", in questionable analogies with "dog fighting", in catchy titles ("Coulibaly: From Thai Boxing to Terrorism"), or in a melodramatic vocabulary ("unregulated fights, where everything is allowed"). In the controversies also intervene actors that are self-proclaimed guardians of moral and humanistic values, similarly to Rouge's repeated diatribes against MMA. His apprehension, tinged with hostility, seems to be relatively shared by the successive political leaders and by numerous journalists. But the reach of a certain consensus represents a symptomatic property of moral panics. The same applies to the specific temporality of the criticism waves that appeared as volatile, with a sudden onset of crisis connected with the implantation of a foreign activity on the national territory and a relatively quick ending of controversies associated with the migration of the condemnations towards a new discipline, deemed to be more threatening. The waves of denunciation materialize, furthermore, in new legislations, like the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2016 decision prohibiting all competition that would take place within an octagon and would allow blows inflicted to someone on the ground. Cohen had, lastly, foreseen the possibility of serial repetition of the moral crises, a fact that we have proven here through the three successive waves of reprobation, integrated in the "phony war" phrase.

What does this regular resurgence of analogous moral panics say about our society and its internal conflicts? A moral panic expresses in an acute way an anxiety, be that genuinely felt or deliberately manipulated, concerning a potential infringement of a certain moral "order." The perception of a risk to destroy the very foundations of society is embodied by those that will be labeled as deviants. Indeed, what is denounced in the *folk-devils* is not so much their behavior itself (in this case, their commitment for such combat sport), but what it symbolizes in terms of transgression of the traditional values. *In fine*, behind a moral panic, an axiological conflict is latently played, opposing, on the one hand, the conservative values, and on the other hand, a counter-culture, materialized by the *folk-devils* and which favors a greater permissiveness. In a context of crisis connected with the feeling of endangerment of a value system and in front of the failure of the ordinary mechanisms of ethical formation, the moral panics will appear as "an exceptional form of moral regulation," functioning as a "redefining process of the moral boundaries of a society."<sup>197</sup>

Pharo refines this idea starting from a reflection on the function of "moral monstrosity" within the "liberal societies," that is, pluralist from the point of view of the moral frames of reference that organize its members.<sup>198</sup> Within the framework of such an axiological diversity, "the delimitation of the good that everyone ought to pursue is much too controversial to generate a spontaneous and *a fortiori* consensus to justify lessons of morality." This is where the role of the moral monstrosity intervenes: to the extent that every shared definition of the legitimate good proves to be inaccessible, "the monstrous degradation of the individual and of fundamental human rights becomes the only consensual and universal basis of morality." To that end, the "evil" has to be extreme enough so as to cause a spontaneous feeling of horror; doubt concerning it must no longer be allowed and no one will be able to contest it. In other words, "the common conscience finds itself facing a practice that *anyone* could deem to be radically inadmissible." Then, "in this case, and only in this case, morality can start again to function as a common reference, by opposing the risk of moral monstrosity". We specify here that "the monstrous appears

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<sup>197</sup> See Sean P. Hier, Dan Lett, Kevin Walby, André Smith, "Beyond Folk Devils Resistance," *Criminology and critical justice* 3 (2011): 259-276.

<sup>198</sup> Patrick Pharo, "Éthique et monstrosité," *Colloque "Monstre"* (Nancy, 2007).

only starting from a certain manifest degree of violence, of cruelty, and of scorn.” It is precisely through crossing this incontestability threshold that the monstrous can come into being as a universal unit of measure for evil, that is, valid *whatever kind of morality one may prefer*.

We formulate the hypothesis that, during three periods of our recent history, Boxing, Muay Thai, and MMA (as well as their respective participants) have played, in our axiologically pluralist societies and within the sport communities, this role of a “regulatory fiction”. Through the spontaneous repulsion generated by these activities set up as “allegories of contemporary evil,” they provide a shared basis for morality, especially in sport. It is against these moral monsters, accused of degrading the dignity of the individual, that the public opinion will be able to be unanimously indignant, and this despite the divergence of the moral frames of reference driving its members. If the “content” of this monstrosity could fluctuate, by contrast, the principle consisting of seeing in the latest fighting activity to have emerged the consensual standard of immorality and of dangerousness within the sporting field, starting from which a society will be able to structure itself in the unanimous discredit, stayed constant.

This is where the formative function, from an ethical point of view, of the moral monster, in the way of a “negative education,” shows through: did not Canguilhem contend that “the monster’s function is to teach the norm”<sup>199</sup>? The power of the norm is never consolidated more than by the pedagogical exhibition of what embodies its opposite. Cohen supports this idea by contending that the *folk-devils* are akin to “visible reminders of what we should not be.”

## Conclusion

In order to understand the permanence of the moral crusades led against different combat sports, it was a matter, in the first instance, of outlining the content and the historical circumstances of three waves of criticism that had successively descended on Boxing, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Thai boxing, in the 1980s–1990s, and MMA, starting from the 2000s. Noticing the recurrence of the condemnation rhetorics applied to activities that are technically different and in varied contexts, we have been able to formalize the structural principles of this “phony war” (exclusivity, successiveness, and subsequent normalization), as well as the shared features of the targeted activities at the moment of the onset of their crisis and their progressive legitimization. It was appropriate, finally, to attempt an explanation for the permanence of the critical scheme consisting of choosing one and only one activity, at a given time and within the sport communities, as the focus of immorality denunciations. Two types of factors that were likely to account for the maintenance of a constant state of hostility have then been considered. On a first level, it would seem that, behind the appearance of a moral denunciation, lurks a socio-ethical stigmatization of the most precarized fringe groups of the population practicing the deprecated activity. On the second level, a moral panic revealing the perception of a threat to the established moral order would express itself. In a period of crisis and axiological pluralism, it would be a matter of redefining the boundaries of morality and of sportsmanship.

Currently, MMA materializes, within the sporting field, this moral monstrosity, against which a society ought to be able to reach a consensus. Nevertheless, the discipline seems to

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<sup>199</sup> Georges Canguilhem, *La Connaissance de la vie* (Paris : Vrin, 1952). The same logic applies to the 19<sup>th</sup> century where the madman had the function of teaching reason in the “asylum” and the savage civilization in the “human zoos.” See Jean-Jacques Courtine, “Le corps anormal,” in *Histoire du corps*, tome 3, ed. Jean-Jacques Courtine (Paris : Seuil, 2006), 201-262.

have entered a stage where controversies have subsided. Even though it would be in the process of leaving the spectrum of moral condemnation, no new martial activity seems to emerge to the point of being able to play the part of cultural scapegoat and to perform the pedagogical function of a counter-norm, contributing, by contrast, to define the limits of morality in sport. Two scenarios can then be considered: in the first one, it could be that the moral monster no longer comes from the field of combat sports, but from other types of practices—sports or physical activities—that are unanimously condemnable; the second hypothesis would correspond to the disappearance of the very existence of a consensual moral monster. Would not, then, the risk be anomie within a society unable to agree on the height of barbarity and, therefore, to provide a universal basis for morality, particularly in sports?

Translated by Florina Haret

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