Boxing Cultures and Perceptions of Violence in Venezuela[1]

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Abstract

This article stresses the ways in which Venezuelans came to understand and explain the connections between boxing and violence from the 1960s through the early 1980s. As in other Latin American countries, Venezuelans were consumed during the Cold War by what they saw as a dramatic rise in societal violence often associated with the perceived ills of rapid urbanization. However, the public narrative about violence in boxing had little bearing on that wider understanding of social problems. Like other narratives about boxing, the cultural construction of boxing violence in Venezuela derived almost exclusively from US media and other popular transnational narratives, which reflected the weight of the United States on the business, practice, and development of boxing in Venezuela.

Keywords: Boxing; Violence; Venezuela; Sport; Poverty

Resumen

Este artículo enfatiza las formas en que los venezolanos llegaron a entender la relación entre boxeo y violencia, entre los años 1960 y 1980. En Venezuela, como en toda América Latina, la época de la Guerra Fría marcó un incremento dramático en la violencia social, asociada muchas veces con el crecimiento de la pobreza urbana. La narrativa sobre boxeo y violencia, sin embargo, se vincula muy poco con con problemas sociales más amplios. Como en otros países, la construcción cultural de la violencia boxística en Venezuela estuvo relacionada casi exclusivamente con medios norteamericanos y otras narrativas transnacionales populares, en una representación del peso de Estados Unidos sobre el negocio, la práctica y el desarrollo de boxeo en Venezuela.

Palabras clave: Boxeo; Violencia; Venezuela; Deporte; Pobreza

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Many boxers find degrading the characterization of their sport as "violent." In fact, many fighters view boxing as the inverse of violence. As has the US boxer Mike Tyson in his autobiographical narrative, many hold that as adolescents, boxing lifted them out of the violence of extreme, vicious poverty. The discipline of boxing allowed kids to channel their energies into sport and away from brutality on the streets. Boxers dislike how middle-class observers imagine them as inherently ferocious people by virtue of their profession. Venezuelan boxers-turned-trainers Jairo Ruza and Alexander Jiménez share Mike Tyson's views, as does former Venezuelan national boxing commissioner Nicolás Hidalgo. Ruza and Jiménez, who each run state-sponsored gyms in working-class Caracas neighborhoods, reason that boxing has lifted adolescents from poverty, drugs, and "delinquency."[2] At the same time, among boxers, the non-violence boxing narrative has never been framed as a denial of what fighters know all too well. Understanding boxing as an antidote to the dangers of adolescence does not negate many violent elements of the sport that include the exploitative quality of the business of boxing and the physiological damage of hundreds of blows that have, in turn, contributed to an unusually high rate of violent behavior among veteran and retired boxers.[3]

During Venezuela-based Gilberto Mendoza's tenure as World Boxing Association (WBA) president (1982-2015), boxing faced growing condemnation and its popularity declined. The damage to the sport and its participants had long been evident. In the 1960s, fans up and down the Atlantic coast of Colombia and Venezuela followed the plight of Cartagena-based super lightweight Mario Rossito, an excellent fighter who once challenged the Venezuelan Carlos "Morocho" Hernández unsuccessfully for the combined WBA/World Boxing Council (WBC) world championship. Rossito fought his last fight in 1968. Forty years later he lived in abject poverty in Cartagena. Able to speak only in a broken whisper, his face, featuring a still shattered eye socket, a badly distorted nose, an absent cheek bone, and a displaced jaw, spoke volumes on the physical toll of his profession.[4] In 1992, the great Venezuelan WBA world light heavyweight champion Vicente Rondón died at age fifty-four from health problems related to the physical damage he had suffered in the ring. But Rondón's boxing-related health problems had begun before his retirement in 1974.[5]

As did other national and international boxing organizations, amateur and professional, Mendoza's WBA consistently ignored the science on head trauma, and hushed up related criticisms. The organization in particular did this in a cynical manner very different from the sensible and heartfelt complaints of boxers dissatisfied with their vilification as thugs in middle-class media. Evidence continued to accumulate of the dangers of concussions, the threats of Atypical Parkinsonism, and the risk of a growing range of ailments linked to the physi-

cal trauma of boxing. All the while, boxers in the Americas never managed to unionize, as did professional athletes in other sports. As a result of this, while baseball and soccer players found ways to overcome financial and physical adversity in retirement through collective bargaining and the advocacy of their unions, undercard and retired boxers remained for the most part impoverished. Meanwhile, the WBA devoted millions of dollars to portraying the sport disingenuously as non-violent by supporting anti-drug addiction programs in dozens of communities, by dismissing evidence of brain damage and other ailments, and by working to bury stories of retired boxers down on their luck.[6]

This article is not focused on the binary that pits the boxer's narrative about non-violence against the clearly devastating impact of boxing on the mental and physical health of thousands of boxers. It stresses instead the ways in which Venezuelans came to understand and explain boxing and violence from the 1960s through the early 1980s. As in other Latin American countries, Venezuelans were consumed during the Cold War by what they saw as a dramatic rise in societal violence often associated with the perceived ills of rapid urbanization.[7] However, the public narrative about boxing violence had little connection with that wider understanding of social problems. Like other narratives related to boxing, the cultural construction of boxing violence in Venezuela derived almost exclusively from US media and other popular transnational narratives, in a reflection of the weight of the United States on the business, practice, and development of boxing in Venezuela. That the public discourse on boxing brutality in Venezuela remained markedly detached from how Venezuelans worried about the escalation of societal crime and unrest also underlines the success of pre-Mendoza boxing promoters in the Americas. In the rough-and-tumble business of professional boxing that often muddied the line between legal and illegal practices, promoters in the United States, Venezuela, and elsewhere built an image of boxing as exciting, enticing, but not toxically violent. That story was consumed and reproduced by US journalists, adhered to by Venezuelan media, and accepted by fans at a time when, after baseball, boxing was the most popular and lucrative sport in Venezuela.[8]

Violence in Venezuela

From 1952 to 1958, President Marcos Pérez Jiménez undertook the transformative modernization of Caracas through massive public works and building projects, while adopting an authoritarian style of rule featuring torture, politically motivated killings, and disappearances. A capstone of modernization was Unidad 2 de Diciembre, a massive housing development of some 9,200 apart-

ments that was built over 220 hectares and was architecturally representative of similar projects around the country. Financed by earnings from Venezuela's vast oil resources, these building projects reflected the need to house some 60,000 new migrants to the cities from the interior of the country and from neighboring Colombia. At the same time, and through the 1960s and 1970s, the exponential growth of Venezuelan cities led also to the rapid expansion of impoverished neighborhoods—in the case of Caracas up the side of the city's low-lying mountains. The so-called *barrios* or *ranchos* were formed in the absence of municipal services or regulations. There was an explosion of media reports of criminal violence linked to the quick growth of urban poverty and the fear of mounting disorder and vice trades.[9]

Fueled by alarmist media, there is little doubt that the public perception of an increase in violent crime was greater than the violence itself. In fact, despite a strong impression to the contrary in the media, the national homicide rate *declined* by 50% from 1960 to 1970. Some read media stories of violent crime as a cautionary tale of societal breakdown in the absence of a strong federal regime. Considering that mainstream media (to which articles cited in this section belong) were censored under Pérez Jiménez, it's possible that the dictatorship fostered, or was at least not averse to, that message.[10]

Print media referenced in this section fall into two categories. Newspapers, like *La Esfera,* were directed at a broad readership across class lines, but primarily toward middle-class, urban Venezuelans, many of whom lived what they believed was a precariously middle-class life. Magazines like *Bohemia* and *Momento* targeted an upper-and upper-middle-class readership, with more content directed specifically at women than in newspapers. As did equivalent readers across much of Latin America at the time, magazine readers in Venezuela aspired to European and US models of societal success in urban planning and city life. They were unnerved by both the dictatorship and the populist democracies of the 1950s and 1960s and what they saw as the potential for ongoing political instability. Both magazines and newspapers reproduced the arguments of dozens of sociologists and other experts who argued that rising social inequality was directly correlated to an equivalent increase in violent crime. However, criminologists Freddy A. Crespo and Andrés Antillano have shown that there is no linear correlation between violent crime and rising inequality in Venezuela over the past sixty years, or proof that the latter has necessarily been a catalyst of the former.[11]

Even so, Crespo did find that there was, in fact, a correlation between rising violent crime and the declining perceived legitimacy of state institutions, as suggested in 1950s and 1960s Venezuelan media, and also on the minds of people across class and regional lines.[12] The fear of violence was further reflected in a

broad range of cultural production that included Miguel Otero Silva's novel, *La muerte de Honorio* (1963), José Vicente Abreu's novel, *Se llamaba SN* (1964), and Jesús Enrique Guédez's film, *La ciudad que nos ve* (1966).[13]

The media coverage of urban violence focused on a perception of growing chaos in urban landscapes shaped by exploding poverty and the arrival of migrants. This was offset and reinforced indirectly by prominently featured nostalgic reports on what many middle-class Venezuelans imagined as a quieter, more respectful, less turbulent past. In September 1956, the journalist Valentín Frontado contrasted the drive for modernization in Caracas with a more tranquil, less complicated recent history. Writing about reports of plans for a new building to house the Ministry of Justice in the colonial-era Plaza de San Jacinto (now, the Plaza El Venezolano), Frontado noted that many would recall a rapidly fading recent past, "now seemingly very distant by virtue of the dizzying pace of growth in Caracas." He evoked moral nostalgia for the past regarding the presence on the square of a "*pulpería criolla*"—a classic Venezuelan restaurant/kiosk/small shop—selling "essential items" to passing *caraqueños* that included cinnamon, oranges, and "*pelo de guama*" hats. The latter were felt hats not only indicative of traditional Venezuelan identity, but firmly linked to a simpler rural antiquity of the *llanos* (plains) region to the south. Unlike the growing class-based divide in "modern" Caracas, in that "distant, sleepy Caracas," on Sundays "where there was nowhere to go," activities in the plaza flourished for the children of elites, the middle classes, and working people alike. In contrast to the concrete carpet being laid across the new city, Frontado recalled that it has been "almost a ritual for many *caraqueños* to watch the birds in the plaza before going to lunch."[14]

In contrast to this journalistic nostalgia, the media filled the news with assaults, robberies, rapes, and murders. On May 30, 1956 alone, the back page of the Caracas daily *La Esfera* carried stories on the rescue of Jesús Celestino Hurtado from an attempted suicide; the capture of Isidoro Ramón Ascanio and Pedro Guillén, two thuggish jewel thieves; the trial of Hector Páez accused of slashing his wife to death; and the killing of Luis Ramón Pérez by Alfredo Toscano in a machete duel.[15] As in other regions of Latin America where people had imagined criminality as imbedded in unchecked urban growth, the stories of violence often implicitly underscored a perceived breakdown of traditional morality among individuals, families, and communities.[16] In early 1960, newspapers and magazines printed the unusually graphic image of Mario José Medina Villalobos' bloodied corpse, slumped on the front seat of his car. One night the married Medina Villalobos had driven to pick up his lover, Silfide Luzardo, at her home in Zulia. He honked his horn upon arrival but Luzardo had not emerged.

Instead, her mother, Julia Rosa Prieto de Luzardo, walked to the car and with an eerie serenity (according to reports) shot the wayward husband multiple times.[17]

Experts struggled to explain the violence. They often attributed juvenile delinquency to rapid, uncontrolled urban growth manifest in the lack of schools and the absence of municipal truant officers to ensure that children attended classes and studied. Social scientists perceived the problem as especially severe in the new, impoverished *barrios* where children—some claimed—were escaping into the hillsides of Caracas, running wild, and forming dangerous gangs.[18] In 1972, the criminologist María Día de Nazoa claimed (without compelling empirical evidence) that Venezuela had the highest rate of juvenile delinquency in the world. Here, as elsewhere, the culprit was a mix of state inefficiencies, the slide into urban chaos, and the abandoning of what Día de Nazoa and others imagined as a moral order upheld jointly by respectable families, *gente decente*, and supportive neighborhood institutions, such as the church, social clubs, and youth centers. Solutions to the problem were generally vague and pedantic. Juvenile criminality was attributed to the lack of state assistance for social programs and a dearth of family aid to unruly homes. Increased funding for social services might break growing patterns of violence, as well as the trend toward parental tolerance of their children's bad behavior. The only solution, according to Día de Nazoa, was to "cleanse society morally, a fairly complicated task." The family was in crisis across the capitalist world, she went on to say; everybody wanted more material goods and disregarded the moral formation of their children.[19]

Media reported that drug trafficking by homicidal street gangs had become a scourge in Caracas, Barquisimeto, and other major cities. People followed the intense political killings in confrontations between the military and guerrillas in Western Colombia, and watched with alarm as bloody leftist insurgencies spilled into Venezuela.[20] In 1959, Caracas police reported 377 missing children. Many others begged for food downtown. Record numbers of children were forced to work, selling goods in the streets, washing cars at midnight in front of lavish homes, or begging door to door. There were new reports of dozens of girls from the countryside brought to Caracas with the promise of schooling but now enslaved in domestic service. Child protection laws were non-existent.[21] At the same time, in the aftermath of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship, middle-class Venezuelans equated military dictatorships with populist regimes, viewing the governments of Pérez Jiménez, Juan Perón (Argentina), and Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (Colombia) as equally repressive tyrannies. This reflected the sensibilities of South American middle sectors that rejected both populist and dictatorial alternatives to liberal democracy.[22] Supported by strong data, journalists linked poverty to violent crime in reports written in a narrative of hyperbole.

In February 1963, Luis Ojer echoed the sentiments of many when he wrote of "two Venezuelas" existing together in a tragic symbiosis: the wealthy in their luxurious mansions squandering their money on expensive luxuries far from the "subhuman" *ranchos* which swarmed with pot-bellied, hungry children alongside open sewers.[23] Sometimes concerns over violence and poverty came across in humor. In September 1975, a full-page cartoon in the magazine *Bohemia* showed an impoverished *caraqueño* atop a hill. The cartoonist highlighted the bitter irony that while Venezuelans had US$8,364,000 in Treasury reserves, were the owners of their vast petroleum resources, and had begun building the Caracas subway system, dilapidated *ranchos* continued to pop up on Caracas hillsides.[24]

While middle-class Venezuelans lamented the fate of their impoverished fellow citizens, they also blamed working people for violent crime tied to the lower classes' perceived moral bankruptcy and brutal lifestyles. A January 1960 article on a massive Caracas workers' protest in the magazine *Elite*, directed at middle-class women, noted encouragingly that some striking workers appeared "with their clothing ironed and in clean shoes." By sinister contrast, others were disruptive *trasnochadores de la farra* (all-night partyers). The workers began their protest "in an orderly fashion," the article noted, but "demagogues" (that is, labor leaders) took advantage of the "socially resentful" present at the demonstration to force concessions from the government through violent protests by killers, thieves, and *maleantes*. The protesters hijacked cars, closed businesses and schools, and had *forced* the police to use tear gas in response. According to reports, they torched and looted the western part of the city.[25]

Venezuelans blamed not only impoverished Colombian migrants to the cities but also gangs of recent Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian immigrants who ostensibly controlled the supply—and price—of food in Caracas, thereby fueling poverty and violence. In 1960, such was the outcry that a presidential commission was formed to investigate price gouging. Unable to find evidence of criminal wrongdoing, the commission nonetheless stoked popular resentment by reporting that of the 3,000 food warehouses in Caracas 2,700 were in the hands of Portuguese, Spaniards, and Italians and that the latter group owned 1,400 of 1,500 meat supply shops.[26]

After 1960, as Venezuelans became increasingly preoccupied with societal violence, boxing thrived as both a business and a spectator sport. In Japan, many mid-twentieth-century professional boxers came from middle-class or lower middle-class backgrounds. The proportion of middle-class boxers was lower in other countries, though the same is true of the Argentine world champion Miguel Angel Castellini, and US boxing greats, Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray Leonard, and Oscar de la Hoya. However, the most prominent Venezuelan boxers from the 1950s through the 1980s came uniformly from the impoverished

neighborhoods of Caracas, Barquisimeto, Valencia, and other Venezuelan cities reported on with alarm in the media, as well as from working-class districts of cities along the Atlantic coast of Colombia. As in other countries, boxing gyms functioned as a reflection of the poverty-boxer linkage. Located in urban areas most tied to economic distress, these gyms were generally little more than a roof, four walls, a punching bag, a makeshift ring, and some weights. A boxer trained for free with the understanding that if he ever made it as a professional, an undetermined cut of his winnings would go to the gym owner.

Venezuelan fans saw boxing as a sport for especially tough athletes in the context of linkages established in the media between poverty, brutality, and social ills. Sometimes they vilified working-class boxers for their misfortune, as they did working people more generally. Often, media stories on boxers' trajectories came in a two-staged arc. As boxers won, they were celebrated as having *overcome* the adversity of their difficult social backgrounds. However, boxers in athletic decline were often recast by fans and in the media as reflecting their troubled community and family pasts. In addition, as middle-class fans increasingly perceived cities as dangerous, they circulated more infrequently at night. In the 1970s and early 1980s, many downtown Caracas restaurants closed for lack of business as did theaters and sports venues. Boxing promoters tried staging boxing during the day to offset this cultural shift, but enthusiasts stayed away. According to Nicolás Hidalgo, "boxing had always been a night sport. People couldn't get used to afternoon events."[27]

A violent origins narrative

As in much of the Caribbean basin, the beginnings of boxing in Venezuela are difficult to pinpoint. Until the early twentieth century, there was an ill-defined continuum between street fighting, criminality, and loosely organized, poorly regulated bouts for a paying audience. Venezuelans often set the starting point for professional boxing in a larger context of imperial violence—though boxing aficionados do not usually see it this way. The United States Marine Corps and the U.S. Army introduced organized boxing, which they carried out in their own ranks, to the Caribbean basin nations that they invaded in the early twentieth century including Cuba, Panama, Nicaragua, and Mexico among others.[28] In 1922, Ernest Swamberg (an American) and Eduardo Pacceiro (an Argentine) fought one another in Venezuela's first recorded bout. They then called for local challengers. Daniel "El Rayo del Catatumbo" Alvarado, "a strongman capable of removing the bottom sack of coffee from a pile of twelve sacks, and who they said could break a coconut with his bare hands" fought Swamberg in

Maracaibo, which had begun to experience an oil boom marked by the arrival of US companies and workers from across the Caribbean. Many of the latter boxed in unregulated, informal matches. The Swamberg-Alvarado fight was scheduled for June 25, 1922 at the Circo Variedades. Like the Nuevo Circo in Caracas (Venezuela's most important twentieth-century boxing venue), and as in other locales along the Caribbean coasts of Venezuela and Colombia, the Circo Variedades was a site that combined other violent pastimes, specifically bullfighting and cockfighting, and was originally built to house the former.[29]

Alvarado lost by knockout in the first round. There was an immediate angry reaction against the violence of the sport. As had been the case decades earlier in the United States and two decades before in Buenos Aires, the public called for a prohibition on boxing and the sport was banned immediately in Maracaibo. Swamberg and Pacceiro headed for Curaçao where Swamberg died not long after his arrival. On the rumor that Swamberg had died of a blow to the liver issued during the Alvarado fight, the latter was nicknamed "Mata Hombres" (Man Killer).[30]

Boxing Violence

Venezuelans were aware of the link between political violence and sport in the case of the 1958 kidnapping of the Argentine race-car driver Juan Manuel Fangio by Cuban revolutionaries and the 1963 kidnapping of Argentine soccer star Alfredo Di Stéfano by Venezuelan revolutionary insurgents. Even so, as awareness grew from the 1960s through the early 1980s of the link between boxing and the physical destruction of the body, Venezuelans rarely saw boxing violence as directly relevant to political violence in Cold War Venezuela, despite their fascination with modernization and its attendant urban problems.[31] As they did with Ernest Swamberg, Venezuelans recalled other Americans who had fought in their country less as violent men than as models for toughness, strength, and raw power. The featherweight, Sandy Saddler, remembered fondly as one of the dirtiest fighters on record, fought nine of his 163 professional bouts in Caracas. He steamrolled through his first three Venezuelan fights in July 1947, knocking out Oscar Carles, Lino García, and Emilio Sánchez in the fifth round. As did most Argentine and Colombian fans, Venezuelans remembered Sadler as an admirable athlete not as a practitioner of head butts and eye gouging.[32]

While many stories covering violence in boxing often focused on Venezuelan fighters, these narratives' aesthetic was American and was reproduced regularly in US sports magazines and newspapers. Most commonly, fans cast boxing violence simply, as the ferocious beating of a boxer by a superior rival. As in

the United States, the story hook was often the shocking upset of a champion. During the Cold War period, most high-level professional fights were "fixed" in that promoters sought rivals for their ranked fighters among less experienced and less talented pugilists who were expected to lose. While those promoting contracted "losers" understood these informal rules of the game, most fighters always hoped to win and even believed they had a chance. When an underdog won a fight, fans were genuinely surprised, particularly those who had bet substantial sums on the prohibitive favorite. Such was the case in March 1960 in one of the most famous bouts in Venezuelan boxing history. Carlos "Morocho" Hernández defeated the world champion featherweight, US boxer Davey Moore, in a stunning victory before 15,000 fans at the Nuevo Circo in Caracas. In a particularly ugly fight, Hernández knocked Moore down six times before winning by technical knockout in the seventh round. After the fight, a battered Moore was taken to the arena medical station where x-rays revealed a broken jaw. The next night, Moore arrived at Maiquetia airport outside Caracas without fanfare. Somebody spotted him crying as he climbed the stairs to his aircraft. Moore later died in 1963 at age twenty-seven from injuries sustained in his bout with the Cuban-Mexican boxer Ultiminio "Sugar" Ramos. In 1958, Ramos had killed José Blanco in a fight. After Moore's well-publicized death, Pope John Paul XXIII called boxing barbaric.[33]

On October 3, 1976, when the Mexican Miguel Canto defeated the Venezuelan Betulio González at the Nuevo Circo, retaining the WBC Flyweight world title, the explanation for his victory was a one-sided beat down. Media language itself was violent. The sports writer Jesús Cova described Canto's "unflinching left that hammered his rival's face and body without end." The champ lay in wait for Betulio's attacks, responding with left crosses, upper cuts, and hooks. The punishment he meted out was slow and seemingly sadistic. The champ used his left in measured blows, without sufficient power to knock out his opponent, but with precise, unrelenting damage.[34]

Most claimed that Venezuelan world champion Luis Estaba earned the nickname "Lumumba" for his likeness to the Congolese revolutionary leader Patrice Lumumba. Others insisted that this was simply a reflection of the racism African-Venezuelans faced every day where, in this case, a boxer was given a moniker that dismissively identified him as "black."[35] In February 1978, when Estaba lost his WBC Strawweight world championship to the Mexican Freddy Castillo at the Nuevo Circo, writers cast the defeat as a dreadful sequence of blows to the body. Heading into the fourteenth round, Estaba held the advantage according to judges scoring the match. Then, Castillo started to turn things around with a powerful right to Estaba's face. After the fight, Estaba's trainer

Juan Rivas told the media that the punch had been so hard that the Venezuelan could not recover.[36]

In this, as in many fights, the media structured fans' understanding of boxing violence in formulaic language that was often speculative as to the emotion and pain of the fighters. In Jesús Cova's vivid description of the Castillo-Estaba bout, he refashioned the story in retrospect as the tragic defeat of a great world champion. Estaba began struggling in the tenth when Castillo took him to the ropes, inflicting a series of blows that culminated in a strong right to the face that had clearly hurt Estaba. He endured "intense punishment," with his gloves crossed over his face. He shook in response to the combination of rights and lefts from Castillo. Blood trickled from Estaba's mouth. In the twelfth, Castillo was back on the attack with a left hook to Estaba's chin. Again, Estaba fell back onto the ropes, dazed. "The ex-champion tried to smile but his face contracted into a gesture of pain and he doubled over at the waist." Castillo followed with a quick flurry of rights and lefts to Estaba's face. The latter fell backward into the northeast corner of the ring, standing slowly to take an eight-count. In the fateful fourteenth, the Mexican unleashed his career-ending attack on Estaba, landing a "violent right" that dropped the Venezuelan to the canvas, with half his body outside the ring. After the fight, most agreed that the referee, the American Jay Edson, a veteran of thirty-nine world championship bouts, should not have allowed the fight to continue as long as it did. An avalanche of blows from Castillo left Estaba without a defense and against the ropes. Fans screamed for the fight to be halted, which Edson finally did.[37]

The narrative mode of chronicling a boxer's fall figured prominently in how Venezuelans interpreted boxing violence, often influenced by foreign media. The Caracas-based *Sport Gráfico* was inspired in form and content by the Argentine sports magazine, *El Gráfico,* and often reprinted parts of stories from foreign publications. A 1972 story in *El Gráfico* reproduced from the Mexican sports magazine, *Boxeo Ilustrado,* romanticized the decline of a great boxer, laced with brutality in multiple forms. The popular Mexican bantamweight Raúl Macías was called a *coliflorista* (a cauliflower puncher). The term, used commonly among Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, referenced a style weak on defense that led to a "cauliflower ear." It was equivalent to the term "*guapo*" in Colombia and Argentina, a hyper-masculine fighter without fear, who charged into his opponent in the ring, willing to take severe blows in the pursuit of victory but almost as likely to fall to one of the blows received. The Macías story looks backward on an archetypal unhappy fate—a meteoric rise, a period of success, and then a tragic fall. There were important victories along the path of his transformation into an idol and his world championship victory in March

1955. In his fall, Macías took up acting which, for some in the media, was his "siren song," "as though he were a Clark Gable."[38]

The story Venezuelans read feminized Macías, as he became more "vedette than gladiator."[39] Because of his acting, when he signed to fight the French boxers Marcel Cerdán and Alphonse Halimi, Macías had not been training. Promoters exploited his popularity as an actor and idol, while Macías's "*dolce vita*" (in the form of binge drinking and partying) had led to weight gain. On November 6, 1957 he suffered "the hardest blow in the history of boxing" when he lost to Halimi. After that "Waterloo," Macías "died" in the boxing world. Fans never forgave him for what the media cast as a shameful loss.[40]

Another criterion of how the media hyped violent tragedy was the common story of the boxer surrounded by, and surviving, extreme brutality but eventually consumed by it. Venezuelan fans followed boxing in Colombia with almost equal fervor to that shown toward Venezuelan boxers. There were two reasons for this. First, from the 1950s forward, in the search for work and a better life, dozens of ranked professional and amateur boxers migrated from the Atlantic Coast of Colombia to Caracas and other Venezuelan cities, alongside tens of thousands of working-class Colombians who did not box. Fans came to view the best of those boxers, including world champions Ricardo Cardona and Antonio "Kid Pambelé" Cervantes, as their own. Second, despite the national frontier separating the two countries, regions along the coast of both countries shared a strong boxing culture and promoters regularly scheduled fights up and down the long Colombian-Venezuelan Caribbean coast. One of the Colombians that Venezuelan fans and media celebrated was the great middleweight Rodrigo "Rocky" Valdés.[41]

At age two, Valdés confronted the death of his father. As a young boxer, one of his brothers also died. In 1976 shortly before Valdés's fight with the Argentine middleweight Carlos Monzón, a second brother, twenty-four-year-old Raimundo Valdés Hernández, was stabbed to death by Reinaldo "El Chino" Talaigua Quintero at a bar in Cartagena. Valdés' mother, Perfecta Hernández de Valdés, told the media, "I don't want Rodrigo to know about his brother's death. It might affect his fight with Monzón."[42] When a cable reached Valdés informing him of the killing, those around him thought the fight would be cancelled. "But Valdés made clear that he is strong of heart and ready to face a giant of his weight class [Monzón] who has not lost a fight in two years. Far from skipping the bout, Valdés made clear that he would fight." Valdés lost the fight.[43]

In 1983, the distinguished Venezuelan sports journalist Leo Benítez told the story of the Puerto Rican fighter Esteban de Jesús, celebrated by Venezuelans in October 1971 when he beat Nicaraguan Leonel Hernández in ten rounds at the Nuevo Circo in Caracas. De Jesús had had a spotty career whose high point

was a 1972 non-title victory against Panamanian Lightweight world champion Roberto Durán. De Jesús later lost to Durán in a 1974 New York lightweight title bout, and lost a second title shot in 1975 against the Venezuelan-based Colombian fighter Antonio Cervantes (Kid Pambelé). He finally won the WBC world lightweight championship against the Japanese fighter Ishimatsu Suzuki, in Puerto Rico in 1976, which he then lost to Durán in 1978. At the time, De Jesús complained that he had fallen into drug use and that his boxing was not up to his usual standard. In 1981, he was convicted of the murder of Roberto Cintrón and sentenced to life imprisonment.[44]

In Venezuelan media stories of boxers' falls (and in how fans repeated and embellished those stories with each retelling), a retrospective gaze often included harbingers of tragedy not noted at the time. Many saw the Venezuelan light heavyweight Vicente Paúl Rondón as a national hero when he won a WBA world championship in 1971. But just as Mike Tyson famously handed out twenty-dollar bills on the streets of his native Brooklyn, Rondón showed what the media portrayed as generous, if irresponsible and self-aggrandizing, behavior with ominous implications for the boxer's stability. In October 1971, hours after he had defeated the Bahamian Gomeo Brennan, Rondón lined up the housekeeping staff in the hotel at which he was staying to give them each a tip of up to US$100. Profligate spending, "the occasional woman friend," and betting heavily on horse races marked Rondón's time as champion. He lost his title in April 1972, blew through at least US$160,000 in winnings, fought his last bout in 1974, and by 1978, was destitute and moving about "*con la razón perdida*" (having lost his wits—an oblique reference to undiagnosed boxing-related brain damage). He had become a violent, aggressive alcoholic, robbing people in the streets of a watch, a purse, or some other low-value item. After he checked into a hospital, Rondón ran off, escaped into the impoverished Carapita neighborhood of Caracas, "having lost his mind." Jesús Cova allowed Rondón a tiny measure of dignity when he noted that, "like those who crucified Jesus Christ, he doesn't know what he's doing."[45] The story was a version of the *trasnochadores de la farra* characterization of disorder and irresponsibility tied to poverty, as was that of Morocho Hernández's decline.

Venezuelans charted the slow fall of the country's first world champion Morocho Hernández with equal parts sadness and disdain. In 1965, he fought José Ángel "Mantequilla" Nápoles four hours after having consumed two bottles of brandy in a bar near the Nuevo Circo. While world champion, he punched a former fashion model, crashed a car in Caracas, and quarreled constantly with his promoters. He fought on through an alcohol-fueled fog against mediocrities that he mostly beat or tied until losing his last fight on May 11, 1971 to the Scottish boxer Ken Buchanan in London's Wembley Stadium. Seven years later,

his face still bloated from blows suffered in the ring, he survived on marginal jobs that allowed him to support his family precariously without a penny left of his earnings from seventy-six professional fights.[46]

In Venezuela as elsewhere, boxers were severely injured and sometimes died after a fight. The African-Venezuelan Victor Adams fought ninety-six fights as Sonny León, having hispanicized his name to avoid the discrimination black Venezuelans descended from Caribbean English-speaking migrants frequently faced. In 1982, in his last fight, he was knocked out for the first time, retiring thereafter. A former lightweight national champion once ranked sixth in the world, León had been a celebrity in Venezuela for a decade. A year after retirement he was almost blind and suffered severe brain damage as a result of blows to the head. With no savings and unable to find work, he lived in poverty. In 1983 León described himself as beaten down by boxing, "a form of sadism."[47] The boxer León had died a kind of social death in Venezuela, according to one journalist, survived by "a tranquil Victor Adams."[48]

Many of the most dramatic stories of fallen boxers reproduced by the media and by fans focused on famous foreigners. Stories charted the hopeless inevitability to boxers' often violence-ridden declines. This narrative freed fans from concern over the sport itself as the cause of an athlete's tragic end. Venezuelan fans knew the sad story of the Mexican Tony "Torito" (Little Bull) Ayala, a sensation in the United States at nineteen with several spectacular victories. Venezuelan sports writer Rafael Fuentes Plaza saw his violent fall as both inexorable, linked to similar stories of Venezuelan boxers, and the result of moral turpitude, as an excess of drugs and sex brought him down. At twenty-five, Ayala was convicted of assaulting a woman in San Antonio, Texas for which he was sentenced to ten years in prison. Released early and poised for a second chance and a possible world championship, Ayala sexually assaulted another woman and returned to prison.[49]

In sporting circles, save for the anecdotal stories like that of Victor Adams, attention was infrequently paid to the systemic violence in boxing manifested represented in the devastating health risks and the exploitative character of boxing's cruel economics in which managers and promoters profit much more than boxers ever do. Media stories on retired boxers focused in equal measure on those living tough lives and on others with cheery representations of their careers, featuring fighters still in full command of their wits. Venezuelans understood the business of pugilism to be fiercely exploitative of boxers. But fans, the media, and everybody else generally held that story apart from their enjoyment of the sport, except in occasional truthful media references. In 1980, sports journalist Ali Ramos wrote a puff piece on Rafito Cedeño, the legendary Caracas boxing promoter who, at the time, had forty-three fighters under contract and organized

widely attended weekly boxing cards in the capital. Like other promoters in Latin America, Cedeño's relationship with "his" fighters was difficult to decipher. Records of contracts or of payments open to public scrutiny rarely emerged. After the fact, boxers complained that Cedeño controlled their finances, held onto their winnings, and doled out meagre, humiliating "allowances," that left them no means for a dignified retirement. Ramos was responding to a complaint from the Argentine journalist Ernesto Cherquis Bialo. Joining a chorus of Venezuelans who regarded Cedeño as a "gangster," Cherquis Bialo accused him of breaking contract provisions and otherwise mistreating foreigners who came to fight in Venezuela, much as he did Venezuelan fighters.[50]

Ramos offered a contrasting "fan's view." Rafito was a "boxing benefactor" and the man responsible for the very existence of the sport in Venezuela. Ramos' source for this analysis was the boxers themselves. That is, he based his story on the comments of athletes who owed their livelihoods to Cedeño and whose careers Cedeño could end instantly. Ramos highlighted a recent (confidential) contract between Cedeño and the Venezuelan fighter Fulgencio Obelmejías, the second case in Venezuela in which a promoter had paid a fighter a fixed salary. Rafito had supposedly agreed to a salary of 30,000 bolivares a month (equivalent at the time to US$7,009.35). If true, this was a good salary for a ranked fighter yet to contend for a world title. In similar cases in the Americas, Cedeño's company also paid boxers' living expenses. However, in an interview twenty-five years later, Obelmejías was asked about his relationship with Cedeño. "I broke things off with him because he never paid me what he was supposed to pay. I won $500,000 in my second fight with (Marvin) Hagler and he only paid me $62,000."[51]

Another of Cedeño's fighters, Rafael Oronó, lived in the impoverished La Vega neighborhood of Caracas before he signed with Rafito. At the start of their relationship, Oronó wanted a loan. This practice also was a common part of the boxer-promoter relationship where records of loans and payments were often hazy, and boxers had no experience with large sums of money. Ramos spoke of Rafito's generosity—his willingness to advance funds to boxers in need. Even so, the story itself emphasized indirectly the manner in which promoters often denied boxers their winnings with ludicrous claims of deductions for dozens of fraudulent expenses. The journalist Tirso Valdéz infantilized Oronó in this context and his relationship with Rafito as that of a child begging for an allowance from his father: "When the money he had won in a fight ran out, just like the other professional boxers, Oronó ran to Rafito looking for yet another advance on his next fight or a loan."[52]

Embedded in the perils of urban growth and modernization in Caracas, poverty formed a backdrop to many of the narratives of pathology and violence

in Venezuelan boxing. Poverty background stories drew upon and bore the contours of similar longstanding narratives associating poverty, boxing, and violence in the United States and other countries. The lack of opportunity for good jobs and education among the working poor gave young men few if any options other than boxing for a decent living and for celebrity. Moreover, the narrative on poverty in boxing sometimes inverted the relationship between penury and good moral behavior, evident in how many Venezuelans viewed criminality in society. In boxing, unlike in larger society, poverty sometimes marked the starting point for athletic and human triumph. In 1976, the Venezuelan welterweight Pedro Gamarro hoped that his silver medal at the Montreal Olympics might help him get work that would allow him to "live better" with his children. Despite that triumph and a congratulatory call from Venezuelan president Carlos Andrés Pérez, at twenty-two Gamarro labored only occasionally as a construction worker. "We're a very poor family," he told the media.[53] According to his mother, Cristina Facunda Medina, "luck and merit" drove Gamarro's victories because "a child of poverty never achieves anything."[54] Perhaps counterintuitive in light of Gamarro's Olympic success, the comment may have appeared ominous to fans familiar with a common trajectory in Venezuelan boxing from extreme poverty to fleeting fame back to extreme poverty once again. A photograph in the Caracas daily *El Nacional* showed eleven of Gamarro's siblings living under the same roof in the small city of Machiques. Pedro Gamarro, the boxer's father, was less interested in his son's jump from amateur Olympian to professional status than in his leap to fame, popularity, and the opportunity to make money to uplift his parents and siblings. In a twist on the massive urban housing projects of the 1950s and 1960s, another photograph showed a sign indicating that the local municipality was building a house for Gamarro, described as "A Glory of National and International Boxing," in the poor neighborhood of La Sabana. Scheduled for completion three years earlier, the house still stood under construction. The family lived in a small ramshackle section near the back.[55]

The media and fans constructed Gamarro as "*humilde*." The common English translation of "humble" doesn't do the Spanish term justice. In Venezuela and in other Latin American countries, the word describes a form of purportedly virtuous poverty reflecting humility, moral character, hard work, and human decency—the opposite of Vicente Paúl Rondón's supposed profligacy. When used by the middle classes and elites, the term can also signal the sort of denigrating description that is central to bourgeois ideals of worker passivity and acceptance of their lot in life and that appeared earlier in this article in reference to working people in jackets and ties at a protest. In the boxing world, athletes have sometimes rejected these combined descriptors as humiliating, underlining

the middle-class imprimaturs of "good conduct" and their equally disparaging obverse, the boxer as savage.[56] The touchstones of Gamarro's *humildad*, according to his mother, included his always bringing a gift from his travels for everybody in the family. That's how they all knew, according to the media, that he would devote a considerable sum of his future winnings to helping the family. In a rebuke of typical Venezuelan political corruption, when given a job in the Machiques municipal office, where he would only have to show up on Fridays to get paid, Gamarro refused it. The noble boxer would only accept a salary for the days he had worked.[57]

While 1928 had marked the first of a long list of famous professional boxing deaths in the ring across several countries, there was a remarkable, infamous, and unprecedented sequence of nine quick deaths from July 1979 to September 1983. At the same time, in the United States and Europe there was a rapid expansion of activity undertaken by groups dedicated to brain injury advocacy and education. The combined effect of these changes led to a new public awareness of the links between boxing and brain trauma throughout the boxing world. In Venezuela, the media and fans had long read foreign reports of the health risks endemic to boxing. A 1972 study from Germany that appeared in *Sport Gráfico* called boxing "organized homicide."[58] However in the early 1980s, Venezuelans began to question more widely why promoters, trainers, and government sports agencies seemed unable to protect boxers from financial exploitation and physical violence. In January 1982, the charismatic Venezuelan boxer Ramón Cotúa lost a bout in Barquisimeto to the South Korean Eu-Do Ku. During the fight, Cotúa complained of poor medical attention from the Venezuelan National Sports Institute, founded to promote the interests of amateur and professional athletes. Cotúa lost in a technical knockout that might have been fatal. In the weeks that followed, he complained of an arm injury. When Cotúa went for treatment at the Institute facilities in Caracas he was x-rayed but the treatment was poor even though boxers paid 3% of each purse they won as insurance for medical treatment.[59]

Boxing and national politics

A new awareness of boxing's impact on traumatic brain injuries was only a marginal contributor to the decline of the sport in 1980s Venezuela. Live fight broadcasts on cable television from Las Vegas and New York were the prime culprit for boxing's slide throughout the Americas, prompting rapid drops in gate earnings. The business of local boxing went into a severe, associated slump. By the mid-1980s, the Nuevo Circo had begun to fall into disrepair. It

closed in 1997. Beside the lure of cable televised fight, as stated earlier, fans in Venezuelan cities had long stopped going to live fights in part because they feared nighttime criminal violence.

Unlike Cold War Venezuelan leaders, Juan Perón (Argentina), Omar Torrijos (Panama), and Fidel Castro (Cuba) were among the many Latin American politicians and military men who promoted boxing as well as specific boxers as part of their determined political agendas. After 2000, during Hugo Chávez's presidencies, boxing became linked to Venezuelan politics in important ways. Following Cuba's 1960s lead, in 2006 and 2007, Chávez contemplated banning professional boxing as violent and exploitative.[60] He never did, largely because the state began to find other ways—including what fans believed were false medical prohibitions against individual boxers—to severely restrict the number of bouts in which a boxer could participate. But in 2007 his government blacked out televised boxing before 11:30 PM to protect children from the brutality. As with many multinational enterprises, federal authorities quarreled with the Turmero-based WBA and its longtime president Gilberto Mendoza over profits, both legal and hidden. In response, Mendoza did what hundreds of other companies did. He left Venezuela, moving the WBA to Panama. Government permission for organizing fights became harder to obtain. Partly because of the difficulty of staging fights after 2000, several world-class Venezuelan fighters left the country and settled elsewhere, anticipating by a decade the larger outmigrations of thousands of Venezuelans after Chávez's death in 2013.

The former WBA world super lightweight champion Jorge "El Niño de Oro" (Golden Boy) Linares is the most prominent case of Venezuelan fighters-for-export. Still battling in 2020, Linares had boxed professionally fifty-two times since his debut in 2002. His first seven fights were staged in Japan, most at the storied Korakuen Hall in Tokyo. Linares fought only three fights in Venezuela in the past two decades. On his first arrival in Japan, Linares immediately established residency in Tokyo where he still lives and trains. He endeared himself to fans by quickly learning to speak fluent Japanese and by adopting local customs that include bowing to fans after a fight.

Despite the longstanding rejection in the boxing world of the link between fighting, violence, and brain trauma, many trainers, promoters, and officials balked at the idea of women in the ring. "This is not a sport for women. I can't watch them getting hit in their breasts or in the face," the late Argentine light heavyweight and trainer José Menno told me in 2009. As women's professional boxing grew quickly in the late 1990s, some of the toughest fighters emerged in Venezuela, including bantamweight Carolina "La Fiera" (The Beast) Álvarez. Though she trained in Turmero, from 2005 when she launched her professional career, until late 2013 she was unable to fight in Venezuela as women's boxing

was banned.[61] Venezuelan *machismo* expressed itself oddly in this case. Discrimination against women was unheard of in early twenty-first century boxing gyms. Álvarez and other women boxers trained side-by-side with their male counterparts, and often sparred with them. Even so, many older trainers, officials, and promoters remained uncomfortable with women being hit in the ring.[62]

In 2008 I interviewed Manuel Sayago who fought professionally in Venezuela from 1982 to 1989. We met at a small *lunchería* (lunchtime diner) in the La Paz neighborhood of Caracas. A longtime Chávez supporter, the boxer now expressed doubts at the slow pace of reform in education and health care. At 4:00 PM sharp, the boxer excused himself. Once a dynamo in the ring, he now told me that he had a long climb ahead of him up the nearby La Vega neighborhood, one of the poorest and most violent in Caracas. He was afraid and had to be inside his home with the door locked before dark.[63] The killing of super bantamweight world champion (WBA) Antonio "El Coloso" (The Colossus) Cermeño shocked the Venezuelan boxing world and confirmed the worst fears of many *caraqueños* about growing street crime during the Hugo Chávez presidency. In February 2014, Cermeño pulled up to a Caracas gas station in his white, 2001 Chevy Suburban. The passengers included María Carolina Salas, Cermeño's wife, a never-identified friend, and a second giant of Venezuela's boxing past, Fulgencio Obelmejías. As Cermeño was pumping gas, two men approached him for what the boxer thought was an autograph request. He greeted the men with a smile. One of them told him, "Te vas a morir, güevon" (you're going to die, asshole). Obelmejías quickly helped Salas flee. The assailants forced the other two passengers back at gunpoint then kidnapped Cermeño in the Suburban. The boxer was found dead the following day. President Nicolás Maduro went on Twitter to lament the killing of "our world champion Antonio Cermeño."[64]

The most jarring overlap of boxing, societal violence, and politics came in the rise of Edwin "El Inca" Valero who, according to some, was the best and the fastest boxer in Venezuelan history. In 2006, Valero became Super Featherweight world champion (WBC), winning the WBC lightweight world championship in 2009. He racked up a record of 27-0, with an impressive nineteen wins by knockout. In a reflection of the racialized identity his nickname denoted, media and the boxing world characterized him as an indigenous savage. Valero made no secret of his politics; a tattoo on his chest depicted Hugo Chávez against the backdrop of the Venezuelan flag. Moreover, Valero was a Chávez favorite whom the president cast as a multi-racial "new" Venezuelan citizen. In 2010, at the height of his fame and success, Valero killed himself in jail, after being arrested for murdering his wife, Jennifer Carolina Viera de Valero. The international media and the anti-Chávez press in Venezuela reported the story with racist overtones that revived the dismal trope of the brutal, working-class, black

boxer, represented by the Argentine middleweight Carlos Monzón in the 1970s (racialized as "black" in Argentina) and US heavyweight Mike Tyson in the 1990s.[65] Some stressed Valero's violence. Unlike most boxers, but similarly to Monzón and Tyson, Valero was convicted of criminal violence toward women (rape in Tyson's case, murder in Monzón's case). There were also media rumors of Valero's drug addiction. Supporters, on the other hand, spoke of a great Venezuelan patriot. The lawyer Martín Padrino called the criticisms of Valero an attack on the nation carried out by Time Warner, the Walt Disney Corporation, Spanish media, and others. The *chavista* writer Cecilia Canelón described the vilification of Valero as a low point in Venezuela's relationship with its boxers. She insisted falsely that Valero had not killed his wife. Canelón argued further that the false accusations of domestic violence drew on racial tropes, a common denigration of Venezuelans of color and of boxers in a way that had never been so graphically or openly expressed before 1990.[66]

Valero did kill Jennifer Carolina Viera de Valero. Moreover, as in other rough, contact sports such as football in the United States, there is a disproportionate rate of femicide and domestic violence among older and retired boxers, likely related to chronic traumatic encephalopathy. That said, the racialization of Valero's crime and suicide underline that while the business of boxing has changed dramatically in Venezuela over the past half-century, how fans and the media understand the ties between poverty, race, violence, and the sport have varied little. In a 2020 interview, the current WBA president, Gilberto Jesús Mendoza (son of former president Gilberto Mendoza), spoke as though Venezuela had not spun into its worst economic and health crisis in a century. He celebrated the memory of Rafito Cedeño as a great promoter of the sort Venezuela lacks today. And he venerated the three-decades-long "KO Drugs" program as a successful initiative in poor neighborhoods of Venezuelan cities. Structured by the WBA as an answer to poverty and the lack of opportunity for young people, the program has had no measurable success even as opportunities for boxers, such as they were, have all but vanished in Venezuelan cities.[67]

The intersections of boxing and social violence

After 2000, through Edwin Valero and others, Venezuelan media, fans, and many with no real interest in the sport, saw sharp links between boxing violence and social change that were not evident before 1980. This is not to say that there were no such connections in the earlier period. The narrative of the impoverished boxer destined for tragedy dovetails with the sense of inevitability in mainstream media that violence was on the rise thanks to growing

poverty. That said, boxing violence was read for the most part at a distance from social ills. There are two explanations for that distance. First, just as US (and to a lesser extent European) narratives linking progress, urban planning, and successful modernity more broadly influenced readers of *Bohemia* and other Venezuelan media, US boxing narratives in magazines like *The Ring* had a profound influence on Venezuelan sports media. When journalists told stories of Vicente Paúl Rondón's rise and fall, they were only peripherally attentive to social ills in Venezuela. They were replicating narratives made famous in US boxing media and in a long tradition of Hollywood boxing movies like Mark Robson's *The Harder they Fall* (1956).[68]

Second, as a variant on the boxer's narrative of the sport as an inverse of violence, many scholars have pointed to the tendency among fans to find an ordering of violence in boxing that not only distinguishes boxing violence from everyday social and political violence, but that allows the sport to function as an island of order for fans, in the midst of social tensions or disorder. In the confinement of spectacle to the ring, in long lists of rules governing how violence is contained, and in the notoriously peaceful stadium audiences across class lines and in close proximity (compared, for example, to the hooliganism of soccer), in many countries boxing has offered a psychological and social respite from the grind of everyday violence.[69]

After 1980, the decline of boxing as a massively popular sport, the Venezuelan economic crisis of the early 1980s, and the subsequent exponential rise of violent crime in Venezuelan cities paved the way for a new, explicit linkage made by media and the public between boxing and societal violence. By the late 1990s, international boxing organizations, national boxing authorities, and the Venezuelan media could no longer ignore the overwhelming evidence of the physiological damage caused by boxing. Hugo Chávez followed the Cuban revolutionary lead in vilifying professional boxing as exploitative. And *chavista* discourses on race, class, and identity in Venezuela—what the poet Ana Enriqueta Terán called "orgullo de mestizajes" —linked poverty to people of color and to *chavismo*, in the case of boxing and far more broadly.[70]

Notes

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