

**Leading the Left: Sociability and the Micropolitics of Cultural
Reproduction in Grassroots *Boxe Popolare* Coaching**

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Abstract

This article explores coaching in *boxe popolare* (people's boxing) — a style of boxing codified by leftist grassroots groups in contemporary Italy. The paper presents a micro-sociological analysis of data collected during a three-year multi-sited participant observation focusing on Patrick (pseudonym), who is the leading coach of a *boxe popolare* team. It examines the micropolitics of reproduction via the under-researched notion of 'sociability'. To contextualise this, a Bourdieusian framework, drawing on the concepts of 'field', 'capital', 'habitus', 'doxa' and 'symbolic violence', is employed. Findings highlight how *boxe popolare* is infused with far-left militant culture. Patrick uses sociability strategically, a) to reproduce an embodied ethics of this specific boxing style; b) to strengthen the collective values inherent within *boxe popolare* political milieu; c) to perform the *boxe popolare* network; and finally, d) to legitimise his own authority in the coaching structure. In conclusion, we highlight the importance of sociability for understanding micropolitical influence in coaching practice and consider the emergent idea of *hybrid field* as a way to better explore the interplay between coaching pedagogy, the political field and beyond.

Keywords: boxing, Bourdieu, coaching domains; far left, grassroots, hybrid field, micropolitics, reproduction, sociability

Introduction

Scholars are increasingly addressing the 'socio-politically constructed reality' of sports coaching practice (Jones, 2007; Iisahunter, Smith, & Emerald, 2015; Townsend & Cushion, 2017, p. 529; Cushion, Griffiths, & Armour, 2019). Sports coaching represents a complex pedagogic activity 'imbued with dominant values and common beliefs [...] arising in, with and from the culturally structured world' (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 276). Coaching has also been defined as an 'ideology' (Fernandez-Balboa & Muros,

2006). In this vein, several investigations consistently point to the strategic role of language in use ‘to coordinate inter-subjective actions’ (Jones, Thomas, Nunes, & Filho, 2018, p. 2), to create, spread and maintain arbitrary collective meanings. Language mediates experience by consciously giving expression to broad cultural values (Jones & Thomas, 2015). Moreover, verbal and non-verbal communications trigger ‘invisible’ mediations: ‘because they are embedded in sociocultural activities and related informal discourses [that] often come to define how people (e.g., coaches and athletes) internalise the social world they experience’ (Jones, Thomas, Nunes, & Filho, 2018, p. 3).

Within a research agenda attempting to critically ‘shine a torch’ on the ‘darker’ side of coaching pedagogy (Corsby & Edwards, 2019, p. 3), recent studies deconstruct the sociocultural implications of the ‘seemingly mundane’ and ‘taken-for-granted’ aspects of coaches’ in situ interactions. For example, researchers have identified how humour is used by coaches as micropolitical tactic to expose athletes to the latent, contextual social order within the coaching environment (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014; Edwards & Jones, 2018). At the same time, humour reconstructs gender power relations, particularly ‘transmitting both explicit and “hidden” ideas about “acceptable masculine practice”’ (Adams, 2019, p. 2). Similarly, Anver, Denison, Markula (2019) have problematised the disciplining effects of fun, arguing that the incorporation of fun in daily coaching routines serves to perpetuate coaches’ normal training practices and legitimise discourses about how a sportsperson should be.

The aim of this paper is to extend the examination of the ‘micropolitics’ of cultural reproduction in sport coaching (Potrac & Jones, 2009a; 2009b), by focusing on how a *boxe popolare* (people’s boxing) coach named Patrick interacts through *sociability*.

Simmel, the first cultural sociologist to address sociability, defines the term as ‘the play form of association’ occurring when social interactions are not informed by instrumental purposes and the ‘more serious purposes of the individual are kept out’ (Simmel, 1949, p. 254). Sociability concerns leisure rituals and pure conversation, which accompany the cultural consumption of goods and the pursuit of fun and enjoyment.

In general, sociability is a crucial dimension of every sporting and physical cultural experience (Giulianotti, 2005). As Crossley's (2004) research on circuit training shows, the play form of association is neither purely fun nor innocent. Sociability provides an additional context of interaction for shaping shared beliefs and social hierarchies within social groups¹. Wacquant (2004, p. 40) reported that the friendly conversations among the members of the boxing club where he conducted his ethnography conveyed ‘the values and categories of judgment in currency in the pugilist universe the core of which are those same ones that anchor the culture of the ghetto’. Here, we argue that sociability constitutes an embodied and discursive strategy adopted by Patrick to socialise the practitioners into, as well as to reproduce, *boxe popolare*'s legitimate culture.

Hitherto, critical coaching research mainly focuses on PE, elite, professional, semi-professional and amateur sport. Because *boxe popolare* (hereafter, BP) is overtly rooted in leftist grassroots groups, the paper highlights how coaching ‘does not operate

¹ Crossley proposes to foreground sociability, which is surprisingly often ignored in empirical research on sport and exercise contexts. Embracing his reasoning, human beings are indeed ‘profoundly social and sociable’; this ‘simple fact is the key to understanding the somewhat grander claim that actors make society or history in accordance with the way in which they have been made by it’ (Crossley, 2014, p. 111).

in a neutral social and political vacuum’ (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 276). Consequently, our contribution responds to calls from explorations for a greater diversity of coaching contexts to be investigated, furthering understandings of how coaching cultures connect with the surrounding milieu² (Jones, Potrac, Ronglan, & Cushion, 2011; Lyle & Cushion, 2017; Jones & Rongland, 2018; Corsby & Edwards, 2019).

Bourdieu’s work is widely used to analyse reproduction mechanisms and deconstruct taken-for-granted assumptions in sport coaching (Downham & Cushion, 2019). We adopt a Bourdiesian approach to frame the interplay between micro and macro levels of everyday experience, by deepening the connection among language, symbolic and social structures in sociability. In what follows, first we present our theoretical approach. Next, we present the BP context and our methodology. We then discuss our findings. In conclusion, we reflect on the utility of understanding micropolitical pedagogies through sociability and explore the emergent notion of *hybrid field* as a device to better contextualise the complexity and impact of coaching practice given the sociocultural structures in which it occurs.

Theoretical framework

Bourdieu’s framework constitutes ‘a powerful attempt at a corporeal sociology and the structuring of human relationships’ (Townsend & Cushion, 2017, p. 529). The ‘underlying generative principle of Bourdieu’s perspective is the idea of [...] the logic

² Beyond *boxe popolare*, collusion between radical groups, political cultures and martial disciplines is increasing throughout the globe — e.g, see Zidane (2018) ‘fascist fight clubs’ (<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/sep/11/far-right-fight-clubs-mma-white-nationalists>), Crossley (2019) ‘red gyms of England’ (<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/f-red-gyms-england-new-front-anti-fascism>), and (Pedrini, 2018).

of practice', which is both 'relational and dispositional' (Brown, 2005, p. 4). Bourdieu postulates recursive connections between human bodies, symbolic systems, and social relationships (Shilling, 2004). This perspective illuminates coaching practice as an 'embodied', power-ridden, 'contextualised' pedagogical endeavour (Cushion & Kitchen, 2011, p. 41).

The concept of 'field' / 'social field' aids contextualisation (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 63). Social field refers to networks of structured positions operating according to 'a logic and a necessity that are irreducible to those that regulate other fields' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). As Cushion and Kitchen suggest (2011, p. 47), 'coaching, then, may be investigated as a field of its own': a 'complex social system' characterised by a patterned set of organising forces, 'hierarchies, constraints and opportunities' (Ivi, p. 53).

Given the segmentation of the sporting field (e.g., elite, amateur, grassroots) we couple 'coaching field' to Lyle and Cushion's (2017, pp. 71-72) notion of 'coaching domains'. The idea of the 'domain' (which can also be viewed as a sub/delimited field) further emphasises the connection between in situ coaching and the surrounding social and cultural landscape. For each domain, coaches develop a 'role frame' through which they act to make sense of the landscape and define their responsibilities, functions and pedagogies in compliance with prevailing implicit/explicit expectations. Moreover, every coaching domain contains 'rules of the game' and has an arbitrary 'legitimate culture', which is neither wholly codified, nor wholly conscious but embedded in everyday routines (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 99).

Interconnected with the coaching field and domains, is the concept of 'habitus': 'a system of durable and transposable dispositions through which individuals perceive,

judge and act' (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 278). Habitus carries culture at the 'embodied level' and is (re)created daily by 'pedagogical work' (Wacquant, 2011, p. 86). Habitus comprises three overlapping schematic layers; 'cognitive' – categories of classification – 'conative' – kinesthetic postures – and 'affective' – attachment to routines, object and agents (Wacquant, 2013, p. 196). Importantly, habitus 'is constituted in practice and it is always oriented towards practical functions' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 52). Coaching is thus simultaneously a 'structured and structuring' process (Cushion & Kitchen 2011, p. 42), with coaches' pedagogies shaped by their own habitus, and their pedagogical work is about shaping practitioners' habitus (Downham & Cushion, 2019).

The interplay of fields and habitus is made dynamic by 'capitals'; which is the differentiated value of accumulated labour. Unlike Marx's capital, Bourdieu's 'capitals' occur in different forms: 'economic', 'social' and 'cultural', with three states of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986): objectified, institutionalised and incorporated (or as Shilling 2004, terms the latter 'physical' capital). Capitals constitute forms of relative and ongoing value which confer sociocultural power that 'does not exist and function except in relation to a field' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 101). Combinations of capitals generate 'symbolic capital': 'what is valued in the field is determined by the dominant power group' (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 279); i.e., coaches.

The 'symbiotic relationship' between field, habitus and capital entails what Bourdieu defines as 'doxa' (Brown, 2005, p. 5), that is, 'the experience of the quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization' (Bourdieu 2013, p. 164). Unlike orthodox and heterodox, which imply 'awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs' (Ibid, p. 64), doxa means the 'perpetuation of the "taken-for-grantedness" of the "objective"

world' (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 280); namely, the practical beliefs shared by the dominated and the dominating, a common 'faith in the internal logics of the field' (lisahunter, Smith & emerald, 2015, p. 16).

Consequently, the coaching practice-habitus-capital relation constitutes a 'doxic structure' (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 280), as not merely *the* dominant configuration of a specific domain within the coaching field but as *the only possible configuration*, with the unequal distribution of capitals seemingly natural and inevitable.

This perspective 'locates coaching as a de-limiting field of production that exists to perpetuate the supply-and-demand cycle for valued cultural goods (i.e., embodied perceived experience)' (Cushion & Kitchen, 2011, p. 47). Every domain in the field of coaching also involves 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In other terms, order and restraint are established through symbolic violence when the legitimacy is not accrued by coercive control. One aim of coaching micropolitics is to (indirectly) legitimise an arbitrary order of things through 'an act of misrecognition exerted on a complicit social agent' (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 280). This works to reinforce an existing logic of practice and advantage those in possession of the appropriate capitals.

Methodology

The context

BP is an emerging boxing culture arranged outside the jurisdiction of the 'Italian Boxing Federation' (FPI). It forms part of *sport popolare* (people's sport): 'physical disciplines, widespread in the main cities of the country, carried out in specific spaces and according to alternative forms of organisation' (Pedrini, 2018, p. 2).

BP comprises boxing teams, coaches, pugilists, and a network of the fellow left-wing gyms (*Coordinamento Antifascista delle Palestre Popolari Autogestite*, CAPP) that arranges fight nights across the country throughout the year. Fighting is illegal by law, but functions with reference to an informal regulatory framework. No trophies are awarded, and no records of BP matches are kept. The teams are also involved in promoting public festivals with other *sport popolare* groups.

Some *palestra popolare* (people's gym) – where BP is practiced – are located in the headquarters of street-level political organisations known as '*centri sociali*' (Genova, 2018). If not part of political headquarters, the *palestra popolare* organisation mirrors the *centro sociale* self-management structure. In a period of 'a general decline in intensity and visibility' of political engagement, BP propels what has been recently termed 'recreational activism' (Milan, 2019, p. 1); an 'unconventional [...] political commitment aimed at re-appropriating space, free time, and access to leisure' (Ibid, p. 1), conceived by leftist groups to promote bottom-up welfare and challenge commodified consumption³.

A carnal ethnography of BP

The study located in the boxing team gym/club "Bread and Roses" (a pseudonym, hereafter, B&R). B&R is a typical *palestra popolare*, created in 2003 in a squatted inner-city building. B&R boxing is a core organisation within CAPP defining itself as "antifascist", "antiracist", and "antisexist"⁴. Walls, doors, cabinets are adorned by Che Guevara portraits, flags and other political symbols. The gym also provides classes of MMA, Kung Fu, and Ysoeikanbudo. Quarterly membership subscriptions for boxing

³ For a discussion of the far-left subculture and its logics of action see (Montagna, 2007).

⁴ Henceforth, double inverted commas in the main text refer to collected data.

cost 50€; those unable to afford this attend for free. The practitioners (n=50 weekly) have heterogeneous backgrounds. They fund equipment, pay the monthly bills, clean the space and engage in discussions. Several boxers lead training once per week. They are self-selected volunteer coaches with experience in boxing fighting.

The research was a ‘carnal ethnography’ (Sánchez García & Spencer, 2013), based on ‘immersive fieldwork through which the investigator acts out (elements of) the phenomenon in order to peel away the layers of its invisible properties’ (Wacquant, 2015, p. 5). Apprenticeship constituted a suitable approach to grasp the ‘social nature of epistemic, affective, and moral dimension of embodied practice’ (Sánchez García & Spencer, 2013, p. 1). Conceiving habitus as ‘topic and tool’, Wacquant (2011, p. 81) advises that ‘the apprenticeship of the researcher can be adopted as a mirror of the apprenticeship undergone by the empirical subjects of the study’. The researcher's body is used as ‘the empirical window through which to understand better lived experience, meanings, practices, and how those experiences are articulated in socio-cultural relations’ (Sossa, 2017, p. 2). Apprenticeship, therefore, represents an instrument for ‘carnal knowledge’, for developing ‘the imperative of epistemic reflexivity’ (Wacquant, 2011, p. 81), and (re)addressing pre-existing theory.

Data collection and analysis

The carnal ethnography was part of a PhD research project. Lorenzo is a white male in his early 30s, with a background in grassroots politics and no previous experience in martial arts and combat sports. He trained regularly for three years (2016-2019) at B&R, uncovering the competent boxer’s genesis. Additionally, he conducted a ‘multi-sited’ participant observation of the boxing team (Marcus, 1995), organising and

participating in BP events, experiencing all the aspects of this boxing culture. At the end of every training session and associated activities, interactions were captured in a fieldwork diary. Forty-six semi-structured interviews were also conducted with practitioners from different gyms. Documents from websites, material culture, and the existing first-hand literature about BP were gathered as well. The analysis presented here emerged from the broader study and draws from a limited amount collected data which highlight Patrick's sociability.

David was Lorenzo's PhD supervisor. He has practised several martial arts and has experience in the sociology of sport and physical culture. During the first author's research journey, he invited Lorenzo to reflect on his carnal understanding of *becoming native* — and gaining a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 2000). The distance of David from the field enabled him to identify topics of enquiry, critically evaluate data and suggest concepts for specific interpretations.

Finally, a native of the field was invited to be involved in the paper. Gabriele is a B&R practitioner, who is sensitive to reconstructing BP coaching pedagogy. He pointed our attention to Patrick's dominance and the tacit beliefs underlying his pedagogic activity.

Data analysis of Patrick's sociability followed what Maykut and Morehouse (1994) define as 'indwelling'. The 'coding of data, construction of themes, comparison and sense-making' stimulated a connection with the selected theory (Adams, 2019, p. 4). The thematic analysis we implemented was both inductive and deductive (Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016).

First, Lorenzo assessed the key emergent themes in Patrick's sociable interactions, involving recurring spoken and unspoken language, the in-situ

environment and people involved. The analysis focused on the interactions in the gym before and after training, in the neighborhood — street, pubs, bars, restaurants — in *sport popolare* events and private conversations. Next, we shared the outputs from this inductive stage and connected the themes to the theory outlined above. David prompted dialogue among the authors, suggesting theoretical connections between sociability and cultural reproduction, while Gabriele provided important ‘member checks’ of the ongoing interpretations presented in this paper (Arora, 2017).

Ethics, reflexivity and representation

In this investigation, ethical considerations were particularly important for two main reasons: first, BP is a popular activity nowadays, but remains illegal; second, being connected with leftist grassroots groups, BP is designed to inculcate a certain degree of political affiliation.

Three procedures were adopted to facilitate sound ethical inquiry. First, Lorenzo obtained a formal approval to conduct fieldwork from his university. Second, all names used in this paper, organisational and individual, are fictitious. Third, we practiced ‘everyday ethics’ (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009, p. 289). This meant being reflexive when negotiating the appropriateness of relationships between the researcher and the researched, scrutinising the consequences of daily interactions and how these affect scientific outputs and their representation.

For this reason, we elected to use the traditional form of representation known as a ‘realist tale’ (Sparkes, 2002), characterised by third person definitive style. Realist tales have limitations but are neither ‘good or bad’ (Sparkes & Smith, 2013, p. 155).

They can facilitate the deconstruction of commonsense and social dynamics that, without a thick, theoretically-driven description, could easily remain hidden from view.

The following section begins by positioning Patrick as a dominant figure in BP. We then deepen our focus on sociable interactions and draw implications for cultural reproduction.

Findings

Patrick's coaching habitus

Several practitioners teach at B&R, but Patrick is unanimously considered the lead coach. He elaborates, “many people are good at training [...] coaching is another business. Nobody could deal with it but me!”. As figure 1 shows, Patrick occupies a central position in the coaching lineage.

Figure. 1 B&R boxing coaches' lineage. Patrick wears a USSR suit before stepping into the ring on a fight night (2014) – photo by courtesy of B&R.

Patrick is well-known figure in the BP network. Patrick's status (symbolic capital) interconnects with his attitudes towards coaching (habitus). Both originate from past experiences. Sketching Patrick's background, together with the sources of his 'relative force in the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 99), helps to introduce the core contents of BP culture and the 'micropolitical working' that the coach undertakes in pursuit of educational goals (Potrac & Jones, 2009b).

Patrick is a male in his mid-thirties who arrived at the gym in 2008. Patrick's role means he frequently communicates with grassroots groups located in the neighbourhood, such as unions, *centri sociali*, squatters, red and anarchist skin heads. He is in close-contact with the coaches of other gyms involved in the CAPPA network.

In B&R, Patrick bridges the first and third generation of coaches (see Figure 1). Patrick is in charge of scheduling yearly, weekly, and daily training regimens, as well as selecting who fights in public.

At the time of writing, he has fought six times in BP. Previously, between 2015 and 2016, Patrick boxed in an FPI gym under the guidance of Frank (see figure 1). His amateur career was short and intense. He lost his third and last fight via TKO after dominating the previous bouts. He claims the FPI took him down because he fought wearing a blue t-shirt with the message: “love sport hate fascism” written on the back. The FPI warned Patrick and the coach that the Federation discourages “political apology” in public. On principle, Patrick returned to BP. Patrick is the one who spars with the newcomers and explains suitable behaviour given the illegal environment. Along with only a few other BP coaches, Patrick referees fight nights.

Patrick has additional cultural capital via a bachelor’s degree in physiotherapy and provides physical rehabilitation in a studio close to the club. He recognises the elective affinity between boxing coaching and physiotherapy: “I’m basically doing the same stuff. I’m straightening up crooked bodies”. He had not engaged in politics before arriving at the gym. Here, he says he found his “own word”. Patrick organizes cleaning sessions, cultural gatherings, sets the assembly agendas, publicly speaks on behalf of the gym and advertises ongoing political activities across the city. According to Patrick, the educational goals of BP are threefold: a) the journey to the bout should enlarge the coaching community (generally, BP intentionally spreads self-management repertoires); b) training should produce individuals able to face political enemies (“fascists” and “cops”); c) BP should trigger self-transformation (a common aspiration amongst martial arts).

Sociability and the localised pugilistic habitus

Patrick seeks to propagate a *localised* ‘pugilistic habitus, that is, the specific set of bodily and mental schemata that define the competent boxer’ (Wacquant, 1992, p. 224). Several strategies are employed daily. One of these is sociability.

Practitioners are encouraged to bond “outside the ring”. In BP, many interactions contrast with the ‘rationalism’ of quotidian life. These include *sport popolare* festivals, fight night parties, the ‘empty idleness’ (Simmel, 1949, p. 255) of hanging out after training and sharing food and drinks. Here, ‘the relevant aspects are bodily experience and social sensuality’ (Eichberg 1998, p. 123) enlivening ‘sensual solidarities’ (Mellor and Shilling (1997, p. 174), which ‘emerge from the immanence of the fleshy body with situations of co-presence and interdependence’. These important, recurring, sociable interactions are ritualised in a ‘planned but unstated’ manner (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 282).

Boxers must participate in sociability to be eligible for fighting and coaching. The B&R gym space, whose structure and decorations are monitored by Patrick, is arranged to foster ‘togetherness’ (Simmel, 1949, p. 255). Changing rooms do not exist. Males and females share a bathroom and a bench where they change clothes. The absence of physical barriers encourages everybody to discuss or just listen to the conversation.

Patrick participates abundantly in conversations expressing his view and stimulating ‘position-taking’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 105). Discussions are often contentious and centred on BP, sport, issues of mobilisation, elections, lifestyle, and migration. Over the years, Patrick has acquired a competent ‘micropolitical literacy’ and communicates via embodied gestures, anecdotes, gossip, and meta-reflections

(Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). He quickly reads the situation in which interactions occur, and (re)acts accordingly. He alternates between roles of teacher, self-confidant, and a peer with whom all boxers, regardless of background, can have fun. Next, we discuss the dispositions that his sociability, as informal pedagogy, seeks to construct.

Embodied boxing ethics

While instruction and training have a rigid timetable in B&R, sociability represents an open-ended pedagogic process. One aspect relates to boxing technique:

Sitting on the bench after the class, Patrick talks with three young practitioners that have attended for one month: “Our boxing is very defensive. We carefully protect the body with the safe guard position. There are multiple styles, we are aware of this. We do it one way: everyone follows the tradition that originates from our first teacher”.

Chatting legitimises the B&R boxing style: a club hallmark displayed by the socialised boxers, regardless of sporting background and interest in the practice. In this respect, technical proficiency is in compliance with the club tradition⁵:

Interacting with three novices and two regulars, Patrick says: “In *boxe popolare*, there is no such a thing like weight categories [...] You should approach fighting experience with a very relaxed attitude. You weigh 60 Kg. You could fight against someone who weighs 56 or 64, I guess. There are no fixed rules and records. Fighting should be approached in terms of a nice experience. You have to enjoy... you will always find relaxed opponents, I guess”.

Since *habitus* interplays ‘proprioceptive capacities’ and ‘categories of perceptions’ (Wacquant, 2013, p. 196), achievement of certain skill structures through

⁵ BP is not formally codified and is passed by orally and kinetically. Generations of fighters / coaches embody and transmit the same basic postures in guarding position and punching (see figure 1), which they acquired by exposure to a similar ‘array of physical and moral forces’ in sociability too (Durkheim, 1995, p. 447).

practice not only re-form embodiment, but also shape cognitive dispositions coherent with this delimited field of coaching. The absence of records and enjoyment are messages boxers must be familiar with. These messages yield a specific and collective ‘sense of the game’ inasmuch as the ‘sense of the game is at once the realization of the theory of the game’ (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 81).

An embedded axiological orientation

Through forging physical and mental pugilistic schemata, Patrick also supplies practitioners with the cultural values we interpret as: *discipline*, *mutualism*, *commitment*, *toughness*, and *agonism*. These mutually compatible dispositions are conveyed by the respective idioms of “self-discipline”, “comradeship”, “heart”, “strength”, and “natural evolution”. BP gets politicised through these tropes-as-dispositions configuring an axiological orientation that intertwines and resonates with those values of the far-left milieu, thereby imbuing grassroots BP and its coaching practices with meanings pertaining to the ‘field of politics’ (Thompson, 1991)⁶.

Discipline (affirmed by the “self-discipline” idiom). Using examples, meta-reflections and advice, during sociable interactions, Patrick stresses the need of regular training for fighting, conflating this with a particular political view:

“Applying the discipline to our political context provides new generations with the idea that nothing is impossible. [...] Can I train myself to fight in a ring? I can do whatever I want on a larger scale with my posse [...] We can squat spare buildings for the poor, resist police, and face Nazis”.

⁶ Other coaches use similar idioms, although everyone emphasises slightly different values. These are expected to be performed in public by the fighters, whose bodies symbolise the gym’s pedagogics and culture. Though beyond the scope of this discussion, there are interesting parallels with ‘traditional Victorian coaching’ discussed by Day (2013, p. 152).

Evident here is a convergence between the self-discipline required to practice boxing and the self-discipline required to undertake political activism and face political enemies. On another occasion, Patrick told several practitioners: “a self-disciplined individual is a weapon against authority, cops, and fascists.”

Toughness (affirmed through the “strength” idiom). Mangan' (2000, p. 1) notes: boxing ‘develops muscle and muscle is equated with power — literally and metaphorically’. In BP, like in street-level activism, the empowered body is a crucial tool for confrontation:

7 days before the fight night. Before leaving the gym, Patrick tells an anecdote to a group of upcoming fighters: “Perhaps you don’t remember Pablo, a guy that was used to practice here and fought a couple of times. He broke the nose of the opponent with a combo once. The boxer’s face bled all over. He was in the soup and could have withdrawn [Patrick opens the eyes wide and spells out loudly] He didn’t give up and fought until the end: such a strong guy!”

The anecdote communicates a prowess that distinguishes the B&R fighters. It also provides a general depiction of toughness across the leftist gyms. When conversing, Patrick repeatedly celebrates toughness of the fighters he trained, linking this to grassroots collective action, whose main strategy is ‘direct action’ (Piazza, 2012). He adds, “if we gain physical and mental strength, passive resistance in the streets could be effective”.

Mutualism (affirmed through the “comradeship” idiom). This value is rooted in socialist culture and incorporated in the collectivist management of the club (Milan, 2019). All classmates are identified as “comrades”. Patrick emphasises comradeship when he reflects on the required attitude of a fighter towards the BP community:

Patrick comments in front of one upcoming fighters and other practitioners: "I'm happy you're going to fight soon. I hope you will control yourself a bit. Think about the opponents as someone who's giving you the chance to perform a cool show. He is a comrade: we, all, are comrades!"

Patrick regularly repeats that opponents are not "enemies" but "comrades", although they might get badly hurt. Patrick claims that, at B&R, "sparring partners" are "comrades wearing gloves", supporting each other for mutually co-constituting 'individual and collective development' (Pennetta, 2017, p. 224).

Commitment (affirmed through the "heart" idiom). The value of commitment promotes the importance of participation in a self-managed project and an understanding that grassroots groups need to be run by passionate individuals. First, "heart" identifies bravery; a fighter's main virtue (Wacquant, 2004):

While chilling during the fight night party, Patrick comments with a group of B&R practitioners the match of one of the boxing fellows [...] "Victor didn't win. He was so focused and showed such a big heart in non-stop punching. That's more than enough!"

Second, "heart" highlights a dispositional complicity among the boxers. Long-lasting participation in the practice accrues the 'appetite for the stakes of the corresponding social game' (Wacquant, 2013, p. 196). Heart provides a powerful signifier of courage, 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 2000), and attachment towards the connected social world. Patrick beats his right hand onto his heart in greeting team-mates and people involved in the BP scene. He has a heart tattooed on his backside, which he displays when he showers and changes clothes. The success of ritual communication stems from 'a systematic set of interdependent conditions' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 111), which are given by the surrounding leftist spatial and cultural landscape. The heart is portrayed on

some t-shirts produced by the gym. It appears in leaflets and stickers decorating the club and never disappears from the blackboard on which practitioners update collective events⁷.

Agonism (affirmed through the “natural evolution” idiom). The last value that embeds the BP cosmos in active leftism is agonism; or, the positive attitude towards conflict. Contentious attitude is a distinguishing trait of ‘ANTIFA’ (Mudu, 2012):

Chatting with a group of boxers in a pub, Patrick express this point: “I have an agonist view about sport, perhaps [...] In addition, I think that fighting is our political attitude. We are fighters. Our culture is a fighting one. Practicing in a *palestra popolare* transmits this view. Learning to fight is a natural evolution process. Once one gets it by boxing, it’s for life.”

Fighting is a must in Patrick’s view: he finds a comrade who avoids fighting after months or, worse, years of commitment to the martial art absurd. He uses the term “crappy” to mock those who do not manifest desire to fight. In truth, “natural evolution” towards agonism carries an arbitrary perspective that conceives fighting pivotal for reproducing the boxing community and its leftist identity.

Performing the BP network

Thompson suggests (1991, p. 2) that ‘every linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it [...] helps to reproduce’. Patrick’s micropolitical sociability imposes on practitioners a classificatory scheme through which everyone can constitute and participate in the BP network.

⁷ For the importance of the ‘heart’ in leftist grassroots imaginary, see (Associazione Dax 16marzo2003, 2014).

In the gym, Patrick's uses sociability, and specifically, nicknaming 'as a driving force in group dynamics' (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014, p. 39). All the boxers are comrades yet the nicknames that only Patrick gives practitioners (in a friendly manner), classify individuals by assigning 'the conjunction of disposition and position' (Wacquant, 2013, p. 194). Patrick shapes the hierarchy of the team by drawing on a very limited repertoire of *socially-capitalized-disposition-position relations*. For instance, "chicken" and "gumby" label practitioners scared of punches and places them at the bottom of the team. "Boar" and "mental" identify the tough ones unable to deal with aggressiveness, who Patrick sets in the mid of the team structure. "Killer" and "warrior" are nicknames given to those on top of the hierarchy, who fully embody the local pugilistic habitus.

Nicknaming deploys 'the sense of the position one occupies in the social space' (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 728). Patrick shifts nicknames in relation to individual "adherence"; a vague term used by Patrick to impose a doxa in B&R and develop practitioner's 'hierarchical awareness' (Sabo & Panepinto, 1990). These classifications are not merely instruments of knowledge. They are an 'instrument of domination', (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 13) an overt form of symbolic violence, which boxers internalise without question, the 'legitimate body and mind' and what incorporated dispositions they must work on. Sociability coordinates the entire BP doxa, granting coincidence between mental structures and social structures (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Indeed, Patrick enjoys commenting on occurrences in other organisations, so as to develop the CAPP network, both cognitively and objectively:

At the kebab shop nearby the gym, Patrick talks to some B&R regulars about the complications regarding a cycle of workshops on coaching scheduled with other

BP teams: “Well, I’m getting tired of the other groups. *Vespa* [gym’s name] is full of motivated people but zero rules. In *Basement* [gym’s name] is there any fuckin’ coach? The anarchists [he refers to a boxing team run by a libertarian group] are fishes out of water. People who participate in collective events are always the same [...] I could count on one-hand fingers the comrades in *Chaos* [gym’s name]”.

As the fieldnote suggests, the coach gives boxers a *principle of homogeneity* for the ‘vision’ and ‘division’ of their social world (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 12). ‘Everything that goes without saying’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 51), in that the more boxing teams’ organisation have in common to B&R functioning, the greater the connection between the gyms. Patrick repeatedly delivers his perspective on how to carry out BP, the group reputations and the CAPP network. The principle of homogeneity delivered through sociability is a collectivist pedagogy for building a taken-for-granted assumption ensuring ‘the construction and reproduction of a current social order’ (Cushion & Jones, 2006, p. 150).

Bread and Roses superiority

Furthermore, Patrick’s sociable interactions outlines B&R superiority, delivered through an ‘aesthetic judgment’ about the postures of the bodies circulating in the field (Wohl, 2015):

In a bar nearby a *palestra popolare*, along with other B&R coaches, Patrick comments a series of sparring between different gyms happened half an hour earlier: “Guys, I think we are the best team [...] We can be relaxed if we want to train someone to fight. I mean: regardless the verdict, none of the boys and girls trained in B&R will be knocked down!”.

Speaking in a space isolated from other organisations, the coach’s discourse promotes a ‘sectarian sodality’ among the team mates, in which the team becomes a ‘special interest group with a martial focus that seeks to demarcate itself as different, and

ultimately superior, to other [...] groups that may challenge its legitimacy' (Jennings, Brown & Sparkes, 2010, p. 552). In the extract, Patrick suggests B&R fighters are the best incarnation of BP values; epitomised by an indestructible boxing body.

Simultaneously, these recurring sociable communications depict B&R superiority over other leftist groups. Often, Patrick lists the negative habits of street-level militants, judging them as “beatniks”, “losers”, “anachronistic”. In one-to-one interactions, Patrick reveals stories of past team mates’ addictions and petty crimes. Coach’s gossiping is never challenged and masques a form of symbolic violence. While seemingly somewhat exaggerated, these confidential tales guard boxers from competing organisations. Convincing practitioners they belong to the top group, Patrick inoculates the group habitus ‘from crisis and critical challenge’ (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 61). In sum, the micropolitical usage of sociability *is* ‘pedagogical action’ responsible for mediating ‘acceptable practice’, ‘consolidating social differentiation’ (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 282), and reproducing the interests and ‘power structure of the dominant group’ (Cushion & Jones, 2006, p. 150); i.e., the B&R coaches.

Doxic experience and authority maintenance

Through sociability, the coach organises a ‘doxic experience’ (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 284), by imposing given meanings and practices. Interestingly, Patrick relishes opportunities to affirm, to B&R practitioners and other gyms, the “genuinely non-hierarchical” nature of BP:

While chilling during a BP event, Patrick says in front of coaches and practitioners of several teams: “The coach is not a god of truth. Bullshit! Sometimes, the coach is sad, has problems with the fiancée, does crap: it’s human, fuckin’ hell! [...] When we attend the fight nights, we can party hard, dammit! It’s allowed, dammit! Hierarchy should collapse outside classes: we become all equals. I want to be seen

by my athletes when I'm partying, dammit! This is part of the BP attitude, dammit!
This doesn't happen in training, when I kick everybody's ass!"

The sharp separation between boxing, fun, and the emphasis on the temporary authority of the coach is presented as common sense in BP. As Cushion and Jones (2014 p. 280) comment: 'where doxa or common sense produces unequal distributions of capital and a legitimization of the forms and production of capital, symbolic violence will be found'. Therefore, in contrasting what he considers a mainstream feature of sporting experience, i.e., the enduring belief in coaches' authority, Patrick executes an ultimate act of symbolic violence: he substitutes one cultural schema with another; a doxa for a doxa.

Paradoxically, being the only one able to elaborate the substitution, Patrick increases his prestige amongst practitioners. Therefore, to obtain a legitimate BP experience (that means, how to *properly* practice and think about the game) boxers thus rely on the coach, by setting him at the apex of BP social world.

For symbolic violence to occur, the recipient must mis-recognise the imposition (Bourdieu, 1993). When practitioners align to Patrick's doxa, they avoid his domination being felt. This clearly occurs among the self-selected coaching community in B&R, as illustrated by Faust, a recent recruit to the coaching clique:

Lorenzo: "How do you feel about Patrick?"
Faust (21-year-old coach): "Well, he's a mentor! [...] I mean: he's not that in traditional sense. We get through together. He gives me advice about boxing. We have a lot of fun [...] and gives me support. Still, I don't consider Patrick a charismatic leader; he won't be thought as such".

One of Partrick's micropolitical strategies consists exactly in obfuscating his dominant role and acts of cultural imposition. His pedagogical work appears less oppressive

thanks to the use of sociability. Without a direct indoctrination, BP is being framed and believed as it were a genuinely alternative non-hierarchical, collectivist sporting experience. Consequently, by temporarily ‘but ostentatiously abdicating his dominant position [...] the dominant [gains] profits’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 143). This occurs even when the dominant social agents are inspired by ideals of equality and cannot entirely grasp the outputs of their routines.

Ultimately, ‘a field is always the site of struggles in which individuals seek to maintain or alter the distribution of the forms of capital specific to it’ (Thompson, 1991, p. 14). Patrick’s discourses for and against pedagogic authority correspond to symbolic violence because they are self-fulfilling in relation to BP’s pattern in B&R. Consequently, when using sociability to affirm the club’s doxa, Patrick (re)gains distinction in the field and the existing coaching structure is (re)established.

Conclusions and implications

In our analysis, we framed sociability in one BP coaching experience as a powerful channel for cultural (re)production. In summary, sociability is strategically adopted by Patrick for ‘worldmaking’ (Bourdieu, 2000). Following the ‘critical yet reflective vista’ provided by Bourdieu’s theory (Everett, 2002, p. 56), we conclude with two implications of sociopolitical importance arising from our analysis.

First, reflecting on our findings about the coach’s communication via sociability, we suggest, cautiously, the idea of *hybrid field* to better grasp the complex pedagogic coaching environment. As Cushion and Kitchen (2011, p. 46) contend, ‘each field is also a crucial mediating context wherein external factors or changing circumstances are brought to bear upon individual practice’. In BP, the logic of coaching practice is not

‘wholly consciously organized or orchestrated’ (Cushion, 2018, p. 86). However, its interests and meanings interconnect both sporting and political fields. The notion of *hybrid coaching field* implies a pedagogical work which structures mixed dispositions from different fields in individuals and stimulates an emergent, hybrid ‘generative grammar’ amongst participants (Brown & Jennings, 2013).

Undoubtedly, the notion would require further research in other coaching domains, involving contextualisation and comparison of sporting and physical cultures which brings together multiple fields in analysis — in particular, religion (see Jennings, Brown & Sparkes, 2010; Watson & Parker, 2014) health (Jennings, 2014), consumption, power, and media (Hargreaves, 1987). Furthermore, the hybrid coaching field may illuminate ambivalences in areas where both reproduction and change concomitantly occur.

Second, we illustrated Patrick’s micropolitical pedagogic action through sociability and how he uses symbolic violence to structure a doxic experience; a politically self-evident, hierarchical BP world. Coaching language via sociability (taken as apparently innocent social interactions, unproblematic because of its lack of serious purposes) is the main means through which a seemingly natural, taken-from-granted environment is created. In this sense, the language of sociability mediates embodied routines and underpins arbitrary ‘systems of meaning’ (Geertz, 1973).

Forms of sociability are present in every physical culture. Our conclusion is that future critical inquiries on sports coaching might treat sociability as much more than pure fun and enjoyment and look to expose the ideological work it hides. Beyond the manifest purpose of ‘togetherness’ (Simmel, 1949), the organisation of sociability can be critically approached as a medium adopted by coaches to construct a doxa, convey

their own pedagogic vision and enforce hierarchies, divisions and symbolic capital distribution within the domain in which their practice is situated.

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