

*The British Journal of Criminology*, 2021, XX, 1–3

DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azab013

Advance access publication 23 February 2021

Book Review

OXFORD

## Book Review

### The Criminology of Boxing, Violence and Desistance. By Deborah Jump (Bristol University Press, 2020, 220pp, £75.00 hb)

Boxing is a brutal and bloody sport. A recurrent justification for its continuation is that, despite its brutality, it promotes desistance. However, there is little criminological evidence to assess such claims. Unlike many studies of boxing, which flirt with this narrative, reproduce it, or engage with it on a limited basis, Deborah Jump's *The Criminology of Boxing, Violence and Desistance* critically addresses this narrative head-on and in long-form. It therefore provides a welcome contribution to sports criminology literature and broader discussions of desistance.

The text has three approximate parts. Beyond the short introduction, the first part—Chapters 1 and 2—foregrounds the empirical core of the text, situating the research historically, theoretically and methodologically. Chapter 1 provides a detailed overview of data collection: narrative interviews with three boxers provide the majority of data for the text, which were conducted as part of a wider ethnography in an English metropolitan city. Beyond this, these chapters construct boxing as a working-class, masculine endeavour, and argue that boxing provides the means for young men to construct identities attuned to 'the code of the street'. The relationship between boxing, violence and crime therefore emerges. Classic theories of desistance, and their collective shortcomings—that they are too agential, and do not sufficiently account for structural causes of action—are discussed. This qualifies Jump's *psychosocial* interrogation of boxing and desistance. Between all of this, Jump's essential argument is that through membership in boxing, it is possible to develop positive attitudes to violence and learn cultural logics through which violence outside of the sport can be justified. A stand-out statement in Chapter 2, therefore, is that: 'boxing and violence—and the relationship that men have with both these things—brings into question the very precarious nature of desistance' (45).

The second part of the book comprises three chapters, each focussing on different boxers' narrative accounts of their involvement in boxing, and how their involvement in boxing relates to violence beyond the sport. Jump prefaces these chapters, noting that 'Each interviewee presented me with different concepts, and different ways of looking at violence' (14). In Chapter 3, we meet Frank, for whom earning respect is a prominent reason for boxing. In Chapter 4, we meet Eric, now a coach, whose prior life as a boxer is marred with 'self-violence' (64), and in Chapter 5, we meet Leroy, whose career as a boxer is guided by classed articulations of shame and feelings of inadequacy. Through these chapters, detailed accounts of these boxers' lives are

**Received:** January 20, 2021. **Accepted:** January 26, 2021

© The Author(s) 2021. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (ISTD).

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

analytically reconstructed, in order to understand their experiences of boxing and violence, and subsequently assess the potential boxing has for desistance.

Though Jump notes that each boxer provides a different way of looking at violence, and that it is Frank's account that centres on respect, ultimately *between* these chapters respect is a key theme. Frank's childhood experiences of disrespect through violence led him towards boxing, and through boxing, he was able to construct a positive, respected identity. However, boxing also provides Frank with a means to ward against future victimization through development of his bodily capacity to harm others. Similarly, Jump reconstructs Eric's biography in order to suggest that the narration of boxing as suppressing violence is, at best, partial. Building an identity as boxer allows respect to be gained via public muscular masculinity, in circumstances in which it is otherwise denied. For Eric, though, experiencing disrespect outside of the ring then becomes a justification for violent retaliation. For Leroy, the construction of identity as boxer is a response to the hidden injuries of class, through which respect can be ascertained as a remarkable man, one that is successful, hard and feared. Overall then, the message is this: that because boxing produces figures attuned to violence, and who become respected through violence, engagement in the sport 'becomes counteractive to the desistance-promoting elements of the boxing gym' (61). Whilst all of these men, through dedicating themselves to the sport, developed identities which could be seen as subjectively positive and initially pro-social, a violent gender order is reproduced in boxing, which becomes embodied by boxers, and has ramifications for how boxers interact beyond the gym.

In the final section of the book, Jump opens discussion beyond these biographical accounts to host discussions both more ethnographic and theoretical. Other figures from the ethnography appear at this stage (coaches, other fighters) and these are a welcome addition aesthetically and analytically. Through these later chapters, it is possible to further locate Eric, Frank and Leroy within a larger social reality. Here, ambivalences in individual boxers' lives are not drawn out as much as Jump constructs *the gym* as an ambivalent space with an ambivalent ethos. This ambivalence centres on simultaneous promotion and demotion of violence. Jump allows us to recognize this dynamic in a way not previously achieved, and this is excellent. This then allows us to challenge the public conventional wisdom on boxing, which takes for granted that boxing unequivocally promotes desistance.

Generally, the text focuses on intersections of class and gender, embodied in the form of working-class masculinity. Race, on the other hand, receives limited attention. Race is not entirely ignored, and there are short pockets of text in which race features (32, 153). In comparison to class and gender, however, the discussion is largely descriptive. To this extent, Jump notes that Frank is 'black', that Eric is born to Jamaican parents, and that Leroy is 'of British descent' (I am unsure whether Britain and Jamaica are used to stand for race here). How race is important in understanding criminalization and desistance in relation to boxing, however, is largely unaddressed. This is notable, given how race is highly meaningful in both boxing and criminal justice.

As Frantz Fanon notes, the term 'boxer' is a term filled with white fear of 'the negro' [*sic*] (Fanon 1952/2008: 128). Boxing was central in the construction of the 'black athlete' as a separate category of being (Carrington 2010). On these lines, when Jump states that 'I came to realise that most boxers do not see themselves as humans—they see themselves as infallible machines' (49), I wonder how this maps onto processes of racialization in boxing? The black athlete is rarely constructed as 'simply' human (Carrington 2010), which seems to reflect how boxers in this study comprehend themselves. From a psychosocial perspective, the construction of self as non-human might involve internalization of racial tropes. It is therefore of further importance that respect is sought, in that receiving respect essentially means *being viewed as human*. This tension between being seen as human and non-human maps onto the project of racialization. A racialized moral economy of respect would therefore make an important area for

enquiry on the production of transposable violent identities in boxing. A further focus on race here would have almost certainly been beneficial.

A further question centres on varieties of boxing: amateur and professional boxing (on which Jump centres) are not the only forms of boxing. In addition to this, there are the umbrella categories 'white-collar' and 'unlicensed' boxing—the former, as James Treadwell notes in the Foreword as a 'burgeoning' (viii) scene. A further interrogation of the types of boxing and what they entail in terms of promoting or demoting violence would be of benefit. That is, whilst Jump's text leads a criminological charge into the debate on boxing and desistance, it does not settle the matter, as 'boxing' signifies a range of practices.

For all of the above, though pitched as a criminology text, this book will be of interest to sport sociologists, in addition to sport criminologists, and a more general criminology readership concerned with desistance. It may also be of interest to stakeholders beyond the academy. For instance, the central idea of the text—that we should proceed with caution when prescribing boxing for its transformative potential—is of importance to boxing coaches and youth justice workers. As Jump notes as a former youth justice worker, the latter consider boxing to be a productive avenue for young men on their caseload. This text demonstrates that such work is not always productive in terms of suppressing violence.

The criticisms I have presented here should be taken in context; Jump's text is very good. It certainly achieves the stated aim of the book, providing a detailed discussion of how boxing is not a panacea to social ills, and is not necessarily a transformative activity that promotes desistance from crime. Jump's analysis speaks against this idea in a detailed, reasoned way that transcends but does not ignore passionate defences of the fight game. I hope this review contributes to furthering the discussion in relation to these themes.

**Edward J. Wright**

*Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK*

## REFERENCES

- Carrington, B. (2010), *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora*. SAGE.  
 Fanon, F. (1952/2008), *Black Skin White Masks*. Pluto Press.