

## 'FIGHTING IS THE MOST REAL AND HONEST THING'

*Violence and the Civilization/Barbarism Dialectic*

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*Over the past two decades, the activity of 'cage-fighting' has attracted massive audiences and significant attention from media and political outlets. Underlying the spectacle of these mass-consumed events is a growing world of underground sport fighting. By offering more brutal and less regulated forms of violence, this hidden variant of fighting lies at the blurry and shifting intersection between licit and illicit forms of recreation. This paper offers a theoretical and ethnographic exploration of the motivations and emotive frameworks of these unsanctioned fighters. We find that buried within the long-term process towards greater civility rest the seeds for social unrest, individual rebellion and ontological upheaval. By revealing the dialectical relationship between contemporary mechanisms of control and these uncivil performances, we argue these transgressions are a visceral reaction to today's highly rationalized modes of state and social governance. More broadly, we attempt to understand the interrelationship between contemporary controls and sport fighting as a microcosm of the long-running struggle between civility and barbarism.*

Keywords: fighting, violence, late modernity, civility, barbarism, MMA, masculinity

*Introduction*

'Steppin' in and throwin' [fighting] is the truth. Most won't get that. It's easier to point and shame than understand .... They say its nothin' but violence and we're all baby eaters or somethin' [shakes his head]. No one understands, maybe they don't wanna'. (Cory, 26 years old, unsanctioned fighter)

Over the past decade, it appears that the public consciousness has been gripped by a profound sense of insecurity, leaving the criminal act to symbolize little more than a threat to public order (see Garland 2001; Hudson 2003; Simon 2007; Young 2007). Cory, an unsanctioned fighter, points to the growing hesitation towards uncertainty by expressing that most dismiss his 'fighting' as merely delinquent or criminal. While sitting aside a concrete wall behind an abandoned gas station, he shares his underlying motivations for fighting and his experiences of 'steppin' in.<sup>1</sup> Over the past 15 years, criminology has begun to take careful note of such experiences and motivational frameworks (Ferrell 1996; Ferrell *et al.* 2008; Hayward 2004; Katz 1988; Lyng 1990; Presdee 2000; Snyder 2009). This scholarship has at its core the study of how cultural dynamics intertwine with crime and crime control within today's social landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Steppin in' was a common term used by fighters to signify entering into a fighting—that is, 'stepping into' the fight space against another. As time in the field progressed, this term was also employed, then, to mean 'stepping out' of their regular life and into another.

Sport fighting, like Cory's involvement, is conceptualized here as the combat between two or more willing individuals who seek to exercise force, power and domination over one another by way of physical aggression for the purpose of recreation and/or entertainment. Such fights deviate from commonly held notions of assault as participants engage in consensual violence without malice or a need to resolve some interpersonal conflict. In addition, their voluntary nature places them in a highly blurred area of criminality. Although such activities are generally violations of the law, sport fighting is legally problematic given the participants' willing involvement and unwillingness to press charges against the other participant. Moreover, an emerging body of legislation seeks to regulate, control and license this activity as 'mixed martial arts' (MMA) or 'cage-fighting' through various state sports commissions.

However, many sport fights fall outside the formally sanctioned and controlled world of organized fighting—occurring in backyards, schools, basements, garages, parking lots and gyms. Consequently, the status of this activity is fluid and its reputation has shifted considerably within just the last five years. Whereas criminology is generally concerned with criminalization, little recognition has been given to the way in which seemingly illegal activities are legalized.<sup>2</sup> At the same time as criminal statutes legalize one aspect of a phenomenon, they often criminalize another. Thus, criminal activities are often defined in relation to their legal counterparts. Applied to sport fighting, the same act that defined MMA as being a 'legitimate' state-sanctioned activity also defined a wide range of informal recreational forms of sport fighting as criminal.

As a result, the entertainment industry has helped to successfully transform what was once an illegal activity into a sanctioned sport, recognized and regulated by most US states and foreign countries under the title of 'mixed martial arts'. By showcasing the spectacle of blood, violence and skill, this new sport's reputation of being 'as real as it gets' has generated massive audiences and has rapidly become normalized within mainstream culture (Anderson 2007: 648; see Duane 2008). This is evidenced by MMA's status as the most popular sport in the United States among males between the ages of 17 and 35; the rapid growth of MMA video games, magazines and apparel, the establishment of numerous training facilities and fight leagues such as the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), Elite Extreme Combat (EliteXC), or the International Fight League (IFL); and the first ever TV contract featuring an MMA reality show *The Ultimate Fighter* in 2005. According to Meltzer (2010), the UFC accounted for six of the top ten pay-per-view events in 2009, with the number one spot secured by UFC 100 with an estimated 1.6 million purchases.

Alongside these highly publicized and commodified offerings, a parallel phenomenon has emerged—evincing a less noticeable, but perhaps even more consequential, form of violence. Existing beneath state-sanctioned MMA is a growing subculture of alternative, and generally illegal, fighting events. Criminologists have begun to reveal the now stratified market for real violence appearing in the form of unsanctioned fights, uncensored DVD's containing hours of schoolyard beat downs, video clips and internet sites featuring 'happy slapping' compilations transforming criminal assault into entertainment (Ferrell *et al.* 2008: 143; Salter and Tomsen 2012). Most recently, Salter

<sup>2</sup> By way of example, this line of thought is consistent with scholarship surrounding the legalization of illicit drugs (Best 1979; Inciardi 1999).

and Tomsen (2012) illustrate that new media technologies have influenced depictions of violence beyond common associations of combative sports. They highlight the ties between illicit fighting and other forms of popular culture:

Regardless of the original allegorical purpose of the violence depicted in the film *Fight Club*, in which men organize underground, no-rules fighting, it now finds a literal reference in the self-made videos of boys and men who record and distribute their backyard or street fighting for fun or profit online. (Farhi 2006)

With little restraint, individuals fight on camera; these events are then tracked to background music and posted online as consumable entertainment. Separating itself from the sanctioned world of sport fighting, this illicit subculture provides raw, unvarnished displays of physical violence, power and domination that skirt the boundaries of criminality.

Aside from Salter and Tomsen's (2012) study, little research effort has gone into the growth and theoretical implications of contemporary sport fighting.<sup>3</sup> Embedded within the shattered eye sockets and fractured collarbones of both licit and illicit sport fighting are a fascinating array of emotive frameworks and macro-cultural conditions that drive such performances. Whether fights exist as symbolic conduct between contextually situated actors (Messerschmidt 1997), are highly gendered acts responding to a historical crisis in masculinity (Butler 1999; Miller 2001; Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Kimmel 2006; Liddle 1996) or are merely carnivalesque performances reflecting the omnipresent 'media culture' (Kellner 1995), there is more to this form of violence than its physical attributes.

The primary purpose of this article is to provide much-needed ground-level data, and to offer from these data some initial theoretical interpretations for why individuals participate in this activity. We seek to understand the intimate motivations and experiential underpinnings of sport fighting by empathetically exploring what fighters experience, yet rarely share, given the marginal status of their trade. As we will show, these violent events are social performances where fighters seek excitement, power and control and even a type of self-actualization. More broadly, we assume that understanding contemporary crime and crime control requires an exploration into the tensions and contradictions of contemporary social conditions, as well as an understanding of the ways in which those factors driving this phenomenon are both consistent with and diverge from the history of recreational violence.

This article begins by noting the historical rise of modern sport fighting while underlining state efforts at restricting and endorsing the emerging sport of MMA. We then offer data in the form of thick description, interviews and direct observations highlighting an illicit fighting underworld thriving beneath the surface of sanctioned MMA. These grounded data are then used to develop a theoretical framework at both the micro-interactive as well as the macro-cultural level. As noted above, this trend is rich with theoretical possibilities. However, we concentrate primarily on just a few of the more important aspects of the ontological and structural-cultural conditions influencing participants' motivations.

<sup>3</sup> During this multi-year project, we did not locate any academic work in this area. However, we did discover just recently Salter and Tomsen's (2012) highly relevant work published in the *British Journal of Criminology* (see note 7 also).

Our conclusion submits that buried within the long-term process towards greater civility rest the seeds for social unrest, individual rebellion and ontological upheaval. That is, the ongoing struggle between the mechanisms of governance and uncivil performances like sport fighting, and similar events throughout history, represent an ongoing dialectic between civilization and barbarism. It is the path-breaking work of those scholars illuminating the historical and contemporary significance of acts of incivility being celebrated, while at the same time the pressure towards social refinement and civility intensifies, which provides the theoretical centre for this argument (Elias 1978; Meštrović 1993; Dunning 2000).<sup>4</sup>

### *An ethnographic approach*

Data were collected through a year-and-a-half-long ethnography using field participation, direct observation and in-depth interviews. Throughout the project, an active membership role was assumed to ensure high levels of trust and to maintain close levels of involvement (see Adler and Adler 1987). After gaining access, the authors immersed themselves into the fighting culture by collecting both hard-copy and electronic documents; attending formal and informal gatherings, parties and other fight events; and participating in various aspects of fighting to achieve an experiential understanding.<sup>5</sup> Most participation took place in training environments where research subjects worked on improving their fighting skills. During the study, significant time was spent in MMA training classes that included boxing, muay thai, judo, wrestling, jiu-jitsu, SAMBO fighting and mixed martial arts. Classes often included sparring sessions in which two people trade strikes, attempt take-downs and force submissions to secure a 'tap-out'.<sup>6</sup> During the time this study was conducted, a number of fights, both sanctioned and unsanctioned, were observed. While there is controversy regarding this level of direct researcher involvement within a 'deviant' phenomenon, these experiences afforded a deep appreciation of the phenomenon that more conventional methods would miss.

Data were also collected through qualitative in-depth interviews so as to achieve a more comprehensive understanding. While levels of involvement varied, subjects were selected due to their prior or current participation in unsanctioned sport fighting. Purposive methods were used to identify cases for inclusion and, after building a rapport, snowball sampling proved beneficial for locating additional study participants as well as securing a role in the field. A total of 26 ongoing in-depth interviews were conducted between the summer of 2007 and the spring of 2009: 41 additional subjects participated in this research. Research participants ranged between 18 and 51 years of age and included both males and females. The interviews were both unstructured and semi-structured. Informal arrangement of these interviews fostered a more conversational and relaxing atmosphere.

<sup>4</sup> We are indebted to Keith Hayward for his suggestion to use Meštrović's work for structuring some of our findings in this research project.

<sup>5</sup> As noted, participation in fighting was limited to sanctioned and legally allowed venues, classes, and events.

<sup>6</sup> 'Tapping out' or a 'tap-out' is an act of submission in which a fighter stops the fight by tapping the mat or the opponent as a result of unbearable pain or imminent harm.

*Sport, Civilization and Counter-Movements*

Proponents of modern-day MMA often trace its historical antecedents to 648 BC. Introduced at that time and serving as the climactic finish to the 33rd Olympics, *pankration* was a cherished freestyle fighting sport featuring full-body combat (Buse 2006: 169; Poliakoff 1995). Sports of ancient Greece, similar to pankration, were based on the certainty of war within the ancient world as states were riddled with conflict, violent integration and territorial insecurity (Dunning 2000). Given the frequency of state conflict, sports were firmly grounded in a warrior ethos in which the generation and maintenance of honour were emphasized over fairness (Dunning 1990). Consequentially, the rise of ancient combative sports such as wrestling, stick-fighting and pankration were frequently marked by high levels of barbarism and violence (Poliakoff 1995).

However, during the Middle Ages, a long-term *civilizing process* occurred that involved the continuous refinement of social standards and escalating social pressure to employ greater levels of self-control (Elias 1978; Dunning 1990; 2000). As (Murphy *et al.* 2000: 93) uncover, this process influenced the development of sport given two dominant trends: the growing regulation of violence and what Elias terms 'a dampening of angrißlust' (lust for attacking) which included 'lowering the threshold of repugnance' and the 'internalization of a stricter taboo on violence' (Murphy *et al.* 2000). Guttman (2000), as well, documents that the progression from medieval to renaissance sport offers a 'textbook' example of the civilizing process, where medieval sports displayed high levels of violence compared to their descendants which emphasized finesse rather than force. Accordingly, tournaments and contests were often more standardized as actual displays of violence were replaced by simulated performances (Barber 1974; Dunning 1990; Guttman 1986).

According to historians, modern sports represent an acceleration of these civilizing tendencies that advanced through the eighteenth century: that is, refined social standards led to sporting activities that were increasingly rule-bound and less violent. Elias (1971), exploring the civility of recreation, advanced the notion of 'sportization' in which 'rules applying to sport become stricter, including those rules attempting to provide for the fairness ... rules governing sport become more precise, more explicit, written down and more differentiated and supervision of rule-observance become more efficient' (Murphy *et al.* 2000: 95). Here, athletic competitions including soccer, rugby and hockey became highly rationalized, quantified and controlled (Guttman 2000).

Compared to their predecessors, modern sports have generally tracked towards greater civility, tighter restrictions on physical violence and increased pressure towards internalized self-restraint. However, numerous scholars note how attempts at civility often lead to counter-efforts. Rojek (1992), for instance, documents how societies often develop counter-measures to sporting civility—enclaves of violence that relax pressures of social and personal restraint. Elias (1978: 186) contends that 'the civilizing process does not follow a straight line'—that, within the process of human development, there may be periods of decivilization. Similarly, Dunning (1994) demonstrates how combat sports such as prizefighting offer points of departure; blips in the long-term processes towards civility as individuals return to physical brutality to stand victor over an opponent.

Prizefighting during the nineteenth century was part of such a sporting underworld geared towards working-class citizens (Gorn 1986: 140). In contrast to more civilized

sport, it offered the brutality and spectacle needed to attract masses from all backgrounds (Gorn 1986). Although prizefighting was eventually superseded by the sportized profession of boxing (Sheard 1997), it embodied the brutalization of fighting contests—a trend opposed to the process of sportization (see Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006). More recently, Bottenburg and Heilbron (2006) argue that—akin to prizefighting—the rise of MMA represents a process of ‘desportization’ whereby civilizing tendencies shift into reverse, thus marking a period of decivilization.

Today’s MMA industry began from a hybrid of martial arts disciplines including boxing, wrestling, kickboxing, muay thai, jiu-jitsu, judo and others that were used in contests such as Brazilian *Vale Tudo* (meaning *anything goes*). While these earlier forms of no-holds-barred contests were underground events, the ‘sport’ of MMA was catapulted into the mainstream with the emergence of the UFC in 1993. The original goal of the UFC was to host—in a single event—a fighting tournament featuring various martial arts disciplines to determine the *ultimate fighter* (UFC.com). Standing as the premier fighting league, the UFC featured a full-contact combat sport allowing a variety of fighting techniques from MMA disciplines, all taking place within an octagon-shaped, chain-link cage.

Aside from capitalizing on the schoolyard dispute regarding which martial discipline was most effective, the UFC’s real attraction came from its sheer displays of brutality. As Bottenburg and Heilbron (2006) argue, in order to gain popularity, these contests had to be offered as spectacles by intentionally amplifying the level of violence. They further argue that the desportization of no-holds-barred fighting loosened restrictions, abandoned rules designed to protect fighters and cultivated a disregard for fairness and sportsmanship—all leanings that counter ongoing civilizing tendencies. Although ‘anything goes’ brutality was a key selling point of the UFC, it also created an avenue large enough for an opposing campaign to march through.

In 1995, Senator John McCain sent letters to all 50 states asking them to ban the sport, stating in an interview: ‘It is an incredibly brutal spectacle that is on the level of cockfighting, only we’re using human beings. This is as close to anything I’ve seen to the days of the gladiator.’ McCain’s symbolic politicking pulled on the moral strings of those with economic and political power in an attempt to culturally marginalize this new development. Acting in classic moral entrepreneur fashion, McCain and followers began constructing no-holds-barred fighting as a major social problem (see Best 2008). Manufacturing this shared contempt resulted in the UFC—and consequently the MMA industry—being marginalized by the political and social landscape.

Although McCain’s efforts fell shy of inducing a moral panic, the results were significant. Nearly 40 states banned no-holds-barred fighting and major pay-per-view distributors dropped the UFC from their network. In 2001—reacting to widespread protests—the UFC, under different management, was firmly in the civilizing grips of (re)sportization by standardizing contests and redesigning its rules to offer greater fighter safety. Today, the UFC, and the MMA industry more broadly, are seen as a legitimate part of the sporting world—and it is a legally sanctioned sport in most states. Nearly every league promoter we talked to shared the following perspective as Max, a local MMA promoter discussed:

Naw, those days of MMA are over. Now that we have state backing and sanctioning committees the sport is doing great, sky’s the limit for us. Even McCain’s attitude has changed. Now it respectable.

It's true that the earlier days of the UFC were sexy but it was so sloppy. The rules and standards have really helped the sport. Without them, this (referring to the sparring gym he also owns) wouldn't be possible.

State approval of MMA also established legal boundaries that unavoidably resulted in defining a wide range of sport fighting as law-breaking, thus marking a legal distinction (not a behavioural one) between illicit fights and regulated cage-fighting. Dustin, another league promoter, explained that 'Those events [referring to unsanctioned fights] posted on the internet are no more than circus shows that give the MMA a bad rep. That's what people think we are all about, and that couldn't be any more wrong.'

With MMA undergoing state regulation, the pleasures, excitements and thrills of the more informal dimension of sport fighting have increasingly shifted outside state control. Presdee (2000) helps us to understand this better through his notion of *carni-valesque* (see also Bakhtin 1984). He asserts that 'when the state regulates and licenses our symbolic and recreational life, the spirit of the carnival ... fragments, penetrating all aspects of social life' (Presdee 2000: 135). These fragments, void of regulation or supervision, become offerings of the carnival—the illicit—for the social world to engage during their daily activities. Thriving in the cracks of civilized society, now, is an underworld saturated with unsanctioned fight videos offering stylized, uncensored and oftentimes more extreme acts of violence taking place in backyards, basements, training facilities and public spaces (McCarthy 2006; Schneider 2007; Wachter 2008; Muir 2008; Dexter 2008; Salter and Tomsen 2011).

Even a brief look into this underground world reveals a lucrative market producing uncensored DVDs featuring hours of brutal footage of sport fighting. One of the more intense examples is the long-running series of video instalments known as '*Felony Fights*' noted above. We discovered in interviews with its creators that *Felony Fights* began as a simple idea: pay recently released convicts to do no-rules fighting, tape these fights and sell them as DVDs on the internet. As their website states, *Felony Fights* 'makes the UFC, MMA, and martial arts look like child's play' by offering 'chick fights, 2 on 2 fighting, Girl vs. Guy fights, all the eye gauging, throat chocking, head lumping, punching and viscous knockouts you've come to expect from *Felony Fights*' (FelonyFights.com).<sup>7</sup> The underground sport fighting subculture, as embodied in *Felony Fights*, substantiates the idea that attempts at civilizing cage-fighting will inevitably lead to counter-movements, which attempt to revitalize its original purpose of no-holds-barred violence. We will further examine this dynamic within the context of the civility/barbarism dialectic discussed later.

### *Meaning and Motivation*

*'My days are too managed'*—Collin

'Knuckle up and knock that fool out' is shouted from the crowd as three people enter the informal ring: two males, both around 20, volunteering to fight and one unofficial referee from the crowd.

<sup>7</sup> Salter and Tomsen (2012) published a fascinating and worthwhile article specifically on the content of the *Felony Fights* website.

Though the ‘fighters’ had the opportunity to wear 4oz. gloves, they opted not to and elected to fight bare-knuckle. This minor detail proved significant as the excitement level intensified amongst the group by upping the ante of the fight. With the fighters face-to-face rocking back and forth, the acting ‘ref’ waives them on and shouts ‘Get-Some’ to start the fight.

Shirts off, bare knuckled and ready to ‘throw’, the fighters start closing the gap between one another. Cautious of the other, each fighter takes a defensive stance – both wary of being too aggressive and ‘gettin tagged’. ‘Get em, get em’ and ‘Fuck ‘em up’ are common remarks being shouted from the crowd. As each fighter becomes more confident the fight progresses from distance checking jabs to full on ‘hay-makers’. As the fight becomes more aggressive so do the posturing, attitudes and emotions of those observing. Spectators turn into informal corners offering encouragement and advice: ‘He aint got nothin on you, get in there’; ‘He’s quick, you gotta get up, you gotta move’. Each blow landed, no matter how damaging, elicits an electrifying reaction from the crowd: adding to the thrill and excitement that has gripped the social atmosphere.

Just after two minutes into the fight both fighters are seemingly exhausted from the rigors of such physical aggression. After multiple failed take-downs, attempted ground maneuvers, and missed right hooks, the fight immediately comes to an end. Untrained and unconditioned, one fighter drops his hands and is caught with a wide right hook across the left side of his chin. As he falls like a brick to the concrete the entire crowd simultaneously cheers: not for the fighter who won, but for what they had just seen. (Field note 2009)

As this field note suggests, it is tempting to fixate on only the physical exchange of these violent events—by describing clinched fists and bloodied bodies. Undoubtedly, a fight’s most immediate and gripping quality is oftentimes its physical attributes—the bloody lips, gashed knuckles and black eyes. However, Ferrell *et al.* (2008: 8) remind us that a fight may be just as much ‘a symbolic exchange as much as a physical one’. Arendt (1970: 51) similarly notes that ‘violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues’. Therefore, redirecting the intellectual gaze beyond the objective physical elements of these fights illuminates that these violent social performances harbour a situated meaning and cultural significance.

While participants discussed specific motivations for participating, common threads ran through their narratives. The field note above, for example, illustrates the excitement of the event, the adrenaline circulating through the crowd and how the visceral experience of such raw violence gripped all those in attendance. Clearly something more cultural, ontological and social exists alongside the actual physical exchange.

A central theme, shared by all those we worked with, ran counter to criminology’s typical view of raw violence: fighting enriched these participants’ lives. Adam, a former unsanctioned fighter with two years of MMA experience, discussed that ‘steppin in is such a break’ from the daily grind. He shared how his days had become routine, so much so that, when asked ‘How’s your day’, he mechanically responded ‘same shit different day’. Numerous fighters such as Adam not only expressed how repetitive their life had become, but how they also felt ‘managed’:

Look, I have to wake up at a specific time, put on ‘acceptable’ clothes, get in my car to drive in a specific lane, stop at a red light, and park between some lines—all of this to go to a job that requires me to say certain things and act certain ways. There’s not much room for anything beside what I’m expected to do. Fighting has none’a that.



Collin, an 18-year-old college freshman and part-time restaurant server, similarly expressed that he was always 'punchin in that clock and answering to someone else', that 'my days are too managed'. During a sparring session in the backyard of his rented two-bedroom residence, he explained that 'steppin in and throwin' with someone gives me time away from the other shit'.<sup>8</sup> When pushed to describe what fighting provides a break from, Collin replied:

I've got school on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursdays. After school I work, and on my days off I work, or I study, or I see my family. Sometimes I feel that my entire day is full of things others have told me to do.

*'Man, the shit's simple, fighting is fun'—Mark*

As time in the field progressed, we came to better appreciate the participants' view of their routinized, highly managed and, oftentimes, dictated livelihood. An analytic memo from one of our field journals reads:

During the past two weeks I have been doing a lot of interviewing about what participants do from day to day. As of now, a number of fighters have expressed how boring and routine their days are (this is definitely something that should be followed up on). For instance, Adam and Tom talked at length about how other people and set tasks dictate most of their day. Others have also shared that there is little they can do aside from what they are supposed to do. So, waking up this morning, I looked over my agenda and found a day packed with work, meetings, tasks, and other obligations ... I am starting to appreciate what they are saying; noticing that today is not my day at all—it has been preset and fixed by others. The 'to-do' list, events, and tasks are imposed and forced, not freely chosen. (Field journal 2009)

While reflecting on their routines, participants often expressed that fighting offered an outlet from their day to day—that steppin' in was a 'release' and even a 'liberating' experience. Tom, an underground fighter, stated that 'Fighting is the ticket brother. When I step in that cage nothing is holding me back and the only thing that can is me. I know for me, fighting gets me to let go.'

When asked 'what he let goes of', Tom continued:

Of everything, but I guess mainly everything pent-up inside that I have no control of. I like having the power. My whole life has been dictated for me, where I go to school, what sports I play, how I live.

Getting to speak with a league owner and MMA instructor, Jason illuminated that 'Fighting is a release for most people .... People get to come in here, start throwing with someone, let it all out, and then go back to doing whatever they gotta do.'

Jason said that fighting regularly became an outlet for participants, an escape from the commonplace. The work of Elias and Dunning postulates that the routinization of social life within civilized societies leads to unexciting societies and that some individuals 'suffer from "leisure starvation"' (Dunning 1990: 29). That is, once internal and external regulations break the threshold of being too encompassing, counter-currents in the form of decivilized behaviour emerge that loosen restrictions (Mennell 2006:

<sup>8</sup> The term 'throwin' was a general expression used by participants for fighting, from 'throwin fists' or 'throwin bows'.

519). Oftentimes, this forces individuals to travel to the edge for an uncivil experience as an ever-broadening set of behaviours become subject to refinement and civility. Fighting, thus, seemed to provide the mimetic activity, the ephemeral experiences of excitement needed to temporarily lift them from the routinization of an ever-increasing civil life. The following field note describes how this is true as well for the spectators:

During the time before the fight, anticipation builds with every mention of the upcoming brawl—humdrum attitudes are not in this crowd. More people begin to arrive: newcomers are initially shy to the group but their excitement is coaxed out when chatters of the upcoming fight excites the social atmosphere: ‘So, who do you think is winnin this’; ‘I hope they go all out’; ‘I could throw’. The crowd now reaching approximately twenty-five people and most have begun capturing the event through their video capable cell phones and digital cameras. One individual comments: ‘Put this shit on youtube, get a thousand hits. If I was smart I’d sell it and make bank like others’.

The contained excitement breaks as the two willing fighters and their few friends enter the scene. The physical space of land, brick-walls, and chain-linked fences has now taken on a new meaning and purpose. Spectators usually surround the fighters making an informal ring but today, fences, brick walls, and bodies now enclose a space to fight. Twenty minutes earlier this land and its material composition had little meaning to passersby, now it’s a carnival-ground. As each fighter enters the ‘ring’ the crowd grows more eager as chattering turns into all-out cheering. Onlookers and fighters are both tuned to the atmosphere and primed for the event ....

Immediately after the first fight, soft rumblings were coming from the crowd: ‘Get in there and throw’; ‘I think I’m gonna step in’. The rush and excitement of the fight had entered the minds and emotions of others. Before realizing what was occurring, two others had ‘stepped in’.

Fighting events, similar to the instance above, often encouraged expressive attitudes and behaviours throughout the crowd. According to Young (2000: 383), this level of enthusiasm among spectators is common as contests often involve ‘emotionally charged behavior on the part of participants and spectators alike when proceedings can, under the appropriate conditions, “get out of hand”’. It was clear that those watching cared less for the skill and discipline of fighting than for the excitement produced by acts of raw violence and the subsequent transgression of rules and boundaries. Interaction with fighters also revealed that excitement was central to this phenomenon—a stark comparison to the boredom of the daily routine. Mark, a fighter of nearly three years, substantiates this point:

Man the shit’s simple, fighting is fun. Oh please let me sit in class or go to work for hours. Steppin’ in that cage is somethin’ I like to do n’ I look forward to doing it. People got their hobbies, my hobby just happen t’be throwin with some people.

Interestingly, participants frequently discussed how the fears and risks of fighting played a fundamental role in moving beyond the commonplace and achieving a sense of excitement. Will, another participant who began fighting in unsanctioned events, discussed his fears:

I get so scared sometimes that I lose my peripheral vision. I actual begin to have tunnel vision in the ring. But after a few seconds when we get to taggin’ each other I begin to relax, and that’s the fun part.

Eric, who is now Will’s ground and striking couch, reaffirmed:

Being nervous and *skerd* is good, it makes you more aware. Everyone is a little scared before they fight whether they'll admit it or not, but that all goes away when you get in there n' start rollin. The excitement comes from not knowing, being scared, and getting in there.<sup>9</sup>

*Fighting is the most real and honest thing*'—Chris

While sport fighting provides moments of illicit excitement and an alternative to drudgery, it also offers a window of understanding into its ontological rewards. To begin, participants were quick to establish that fighting was 'real', that it was 'the truth', often contrasting with the unblocked jab with a meaningless consumerist lifestyle. Fighters argued that standing toe to toe with someone delivered more than the world awash in mediated goods and simulated experiences. Scott, for instance, argued that:

Nothing else can tell you more about who you are than *throwing* with someone. People get all wrapped up. Aldo shoes and polo shirts can't tell you who you are. Let some heavy fists rain down on ya, then you'll know.

Chris, a fighter who started in the underground, elaborated this point on the inner search of authenticity: 'Standing toe-to-toe, ready to roll, really makes you look inside. Fighting is the most real and honest thing you can do with yourself. All the other bullshit doesn't matter when trying not to get tagged ....' He continued: 'When you step to some-kid and both you are ready to throw, then you know. Throwing and getting tagged is real, more real than any the other stuff I do.'

In an online discussion about a *USA Today* article regarding teen fight clubs, a post illuminated that fighters want power to control their own actions outside of today's more regulated recreational offerings:

Anything remotely dangerous that we are allowed to do has been tested and tweaked so that we aren't in any REAL danger. Six flags, rated R movies, video games. We don't have the chance to do anything ourselves; we have to interact with danger through certain filters: video game controllers, roller coaster seats and seatbelts .... We don't want our servings of violence portioned out in harmless amounts.

This same theme presented itself as fighters shared their dissatisfaction with, what Elias terms, mimetic activities that offer 'a limited and controlled emotional arousal' (Dunning 1999: 26).

In addition to delivering a more real, authentic experience, subjects discussed that being a 'fighter' was central to their identity and far more important than their mainstream status as 'landscaper', 'server' or 'college student'. In Lyng's (1990) conceptualization of 'edgework' (the immediate experiential frameworks of voluntary risk taking), he states that individuals can gain a sense of self-actualization or self-determinism while participating in various illicit behaviours. This framework applies well here as informants routinely demonstrated that their ontological framework of being a 'fighter' coupled with the act of fighting provided the metaphorical 'edge' needed to achieve a sort of self-actualization. Mike, for example, commented: 'Being a fighter is a big part of who I am and I'm proud of it. Yeah, there's school and work and shit but fighting makes

<sup>9</sup> Fighters, oftentimes jiu-jitsu artists and grapplers, used the term 'rollin' to denote their practice of sparring or fighting.

me, me.’ Dave, Mike’s training partner, added: ‘Sure I gotta life outside a’here but being a fighter is a big piece of me.’

Social theorists note that the unstable grounds providing the base for identity construction are central to the ontological insecurities experienced by the masses within late modern society (Hayward 2004). Campbell (2005) and Featherstone (1995) posit that a major source of these insecurities stems from the inability to construct lasting identities: that they have become a ‘life project’ never to be fully completed. This quest for a clear and meaningful identity was reflected by Zach, an owner of a MMA gym:

We get all kinds of people through that door—young and old, those trying to stay in shape or train to become a fighter. We also get people that want to call themselves a fighter and wear their tap-out t-shirt. Those people aren’t frauds but they’re not fighters either.

Lyng (1990: 860) details this dynamic well. Here, subjects develop and employ their self-made fighting skills to garner a sense of ‘exhilaration and omnipotence’; participants ‘see their real selves revealed only in moments of uninhibited behavior, emotional outbursts, or spontaneous expression’. In response to a landscape highly mediated by governing bodies, commercial forces and legislative restrictions, the act of fighting is an alluring avenue for individuals seeking ‘authentic experiences’ outside their daily, pre-fabricated routines. ‘Steppin’ in’ and ‘throwin’ were essential to these fighters’ ontological security—allowing them to unplug, for at least brief moments, from what we academics might label as the ‘stifling circuitry of controls’ and the ‘mundane existence of late modernity’ (Kraska and Brent 2011).

*‘I want the power in my hands’—Sean*

Although the two-minute exchanges featuring uncontained brutality pave an outlet for ephemeral excitement and self-actualization, fighters often pointed to something even more central and elemental in their motivations. The rush of ‘steppin in’, the construction of a ‘fighter’ identity and the pursuit of an authentic experience were all emotive rewards, which build from the pursuit and fetishization of *power* and *control*. The fighters emphasized that a central reason for fighting was their need to establish and exercise power. This emotive framework fits with the early work of Mills’s (1956: 171) as he recognized the utility of violence, noting that ‘the ultimate kind of power is violence’. Oftentimes, fighting for participants provided such means through wielding raw violence, thus adding weight to (Arendt’s 1970: 83) assertion: ‘I am inclined to think that much of the present glorification of violence is caused by severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world.’ Amanda, an illicit fighter for a year and a half, shares: ‘I love beating the shit out of people and not getting into trouble for it. Where else can you smash someone’s face in with your elbow or nearly choke someone out.’ When asked about others’ thoughts regarding cage-fighting, Amanda continued: ‘People can say all they want. When it comes down to it, let’s just say I would love for them to just touch me. Just one touch and I’d fuck their shit up so bad ... they may understand after that.’

Perhaps, here, the basic clinched fist represents the quest to gain power through the most elemental means. Before gearing up for a local title fight, Ben articulated that ‘There is something primal bout ‘it (fighting). I mean it’s nothing about the person

you're fighting, but landing a few solid shots or getting someone to tap out before you bust one of their joints is just basic.'

Clay, now a defensive tactics instructor, recalls that, during college, he and his 'buds' would:

Always go behind the gym of the school, put on the gloves, and just unleash on each other. There wasn't anything else but you and the guy in front of you – no worries, no nothing. We did what we wanted.

Oftentimes, these crude exchanges of violence represent outward attempts to regain autonomy. Sean clearly expressed 'I want the power in my hands, the control over my own danger and interactions. Sometimes we need an outlet and that's why people are fighting'. Brian similarly responded: 'What I do in the ring I can't do anywhere else. Out there I have t'be on my best ya-know. Coming here and fighting gives me the power, not my neighbor, boss, or nobody ... just me.'

Clearly, then, fighting for these participants provides the means necessary to alleviate existential pains. Returning to Arendt, she concisely pens: 'violence appears where power is in jeopardy' (Arendt 1970: 56). Perhaps this insight adds to Goldaber's conclusion on how sporting events are driven by its followers and spectators:

More people aren't making it. You work hard, you exist, but you haven't got much to show for it. There are increasing numbers of people who are deeply frustrated because they feel like they have very little power over their lives. They come to sporting events to experience, vicariously, a sense of power. (Cited in Young 2007)

While violence is often condemned in modern civil values, it also must be understood in conjunction with pre-existing cultural and structural conditions. As the fighters in this project have illustrated, the transgressive nature of this phenomenon offers both a seductive appeal and an attractive outlet that many of those caught in the tangles of advanced civility desire. Sport fighting provides, for these individuals, the means to establish a sense of power, a form of control and a type of self-fulfilment—as skewed as it may seem to those with mainstream civil sensibilities—in an unstable, banal and excessively regulated world.

### *Embracing Barbarity and Visceral Experience*

Our grounded data demonstrate that these sport fighters see this activity as life-enriching, providing them with a sense of identity, excitement, authenticity, and power and control otherwise not available to them within the confines of contemporary social life. This next section situates these findings within a more developed discussion of the larger structural and cultural forces at play. As Thomas (1993: 9) argues, it is vital in any critical ethnography to contextualize the micro-level data collected, no matter how repulsive or mundane, within their macro social, cultural and political context.

Meštrović (1993), to start, provides an expansive theoretical framework for understanding this historic struggle between hyper-regulation and counter-movements of incivility. His work, at its core, explores the dialectic between modernity's quest for 'civility' and the base human emotions and desires he refers to as 'the barbarism temperament'—a potent social force that operates as the opposition and the inevitable

outgrowth of the enlightenment project (see also [Horkheimer and Adorno 1972](#); [Marcuse 1955](#)). This concern has received growing attention as scholars investigate the expanding apparatus of control—a development closely coupled with a movement toward greater levels of civility.

For instance, [Beck \(1992\)](#) and [Giddens \(1990; 1991\)](#) proposed that ‘risk has become a central, generalized preoccupation, to the extent that it is configuring contemporary institutions and contemporary consciousness’ ([Hudson 2003](#): 43). Consequently, social control practices and policies have made predicting, identifying and managing irrational risks that threaten the rational order a central objective ([Ericson 2007](#); [Simon 2007](#)). However, as the state apparatus intensifies its energies to control risk and ensure safety, it, in turn, exposes its own limits as a sovereign entity to do so. Attempts to regain sovereignty have translated into the state’s relying on excessive and intrusive forms of control. Individuals today face an unprecedented ‘culture of control’, including the rising circuitry of governance aside from coercive state control ([Garland 2001](#); [1996](#); see [Foucault 1979](#)). This strengthened triad of state authority, social regulation and internalized self-restraint has created hyper-controlled subjects where avenues for thrill, excitement and authentic experience are dramatically diminished ([Dunning 1999](#); [Hayward 2004](#); [Young 2007](#)).

These intensified efforts toward greater civility and control have led an array of leading scholars to closely examine the theoretical significance of various visceral acts of incivility that have arisen as a result of these efforts ([Elias 1978](#); [Elias and Dunning 1986](#); [Curtis 1986](#)). According to Freud, at the same time as civilizing tendencies offers safeguards in the form of social and personal restraint, it also breeds misery and psychosocial discontents as individuals repress their pleasure principle ([Freud 1961](#): 38). Other classical theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer similarly posit that imposing institutionalized self-constraint generates its own opposition in the form of destructive ‘non-civilized’ tendencies. More pointedly, Horkheimer argues that acts of barbarism cannot be abolished, that pressures toward civility and destructive tendencies are opposite sides of the same coin. [Dunning \(1999\)](#) argues that civilizing processes have led to an emotional staleness, and that instances of decivilization often emerge in the performance of sport. While civilizing norms and practices attempt to ensure civility and rationality, they also cultivate resistive tendencies toward these constraints in the form of barbarism.

Today’s sport fighting industry, therefore, can be viewed as a counter movement, a pushback of incivility in the long-running struggle between civilization and barbarism. As [Hall \*et al\* \(2008\)](#) importantly note:

Individuals are allowed to take their quests for personal pleasure and infantile thrills right to the edge of morality’s toxic core because the counterculture...has glamorized the violation of norms as a blow stuck against the system that represses us all. ([Hall \*et al\*. 2008](#): 168)

The intense popularity of today’s sport fighting partially rests, then, in its ability to alleviate the pressures associated with a rapidly changing cultural existence. [Fromm \(1941: 182\)](#) similarly saw such barbaric and destructive activities as the overflow of hostile passions filled only by the social conditions that suppress life. As noted earlier, both detractors and fans view cage-fighting as ‘barbaric’, and the combatants we studied are outwardly and, in most instances, consciously violating norms of civility. The rise of MMA, presence of unsanctioned fights, and participants’ rationales reflect [Mennell’s \(1990: 205\)](#) description of decivility as yearning for ‘higher levels of danger

and incalculability', the 're-emergence of violence into the public sphere' and 'reduced pressures on individuals to restrain the expression of impulses (including freer expression of aggressiveness)'. Indeed, the fighters, as well as the legion of mostly young male fans, are in a sense rallying against the constraints of civility.<sup>10</sup>

Recalling Presdee's notion of the *carnival of crime*, he states that 'disorder and destruction becomes in itself a "delight" to be sought and savoured' (Presdee 2000: 19)—a response certainly expressed by our informants. He affirms that such transgressions reflect individuals' desire for a sense of autonomy—to wrestle free from the regulatory matrix emanating from a preoccupation with safety and order.<sup>11</sup> Returning to the work of Meštrović, he ties all of these lines of thoughts together in arguing that 'barbarism lies at the core of modernity' and that social constraints 'cannot contain the forces of barbarism—that the will is stronger than rationality' (Meštrović 1993: 278). Seen this way, cage-fighting, and the audience that supports it, are a modern-day manifestation of the historic dialectic between the forces of civility and barbarity.

To the casual reader, the civilization/barbarism dialectic may seem too simplistic. After all, did not our grounded data reveal that sport fighters share numerous laudable motivations? Finding meaning in dominating another human being by physically harming them may seem a warped means to pursue purpose in life. And it may be that our data are inaccurate: these sport fighters could have misled us, spouting simple rationalizations masking a mere barbaric endeavour in need of *post-hoc* justification. However, their views about the virtues of the sport coincide with society's long-running paradoxical culture of violence. On the one hand, we are repulsed by and reject raw violence and/or public displays of harming others; yet, we revere the disciplined combatant/warrior capable of inflicting massive harm on others. Some sport fighters we studied would indeed fit the characterization of 'human cock-fighter'. Other fighters, though, approach their 'martial arts' activities as honourable—similar to how nations steeped in militarism consider the activity of war honourable. Truly understanding sport fighting, therefore, requires acknowledging this cultural ambivalence towards violence and recognizing a level of complexity involved here equal to the human condition itself.

### *Sport Fighting and Crime Fighting*

Few would have predicted just 20 years ago that the most popular sport among 17–35-year-old males would be cage-fighting and that major television networks would celebrate this violence by offering prime-time airing of real one-on-one fights featuring massive head cuts, broken bones, choke-holds, painful submissions and vicious knockouts. As remarkable has been the growth of illicit underground fighting—as found in the vicious fight videos sold on '*Felony Fights*'—that both mimic and support this multi-billion dollar industry. This research provides grounded data on what this

<sup>10</sup> We realize that the label 'barbarian' has a long and oppressive history found in both the ancient Greek and Chinese civilizations. Meštrović's uses the term more generically and concentrates on the universal problem 'barbarism' of all civilizations: can the human animal be tamed?

<sup>11</sup> This line of thought coincides with Lyng's discussion of 'edgework', as recreational fighting provides a means of asserting personal control by voluntarily participating in an activity where there is 'a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being of an ordered existence' (Lyng 1990: 857).

activity means to its participants: excitement, recreation, authentic experience, self-actualization, personal autonomy, power and control. In addition, we contextualize these motives and emotive frameworks within the tensions and contradictions of historical and contemporary social conditions, leading to the conclusion that intensifying efforts at law, control and order may be fuelling a desire for resistance through watching, engaging in and profiting from sport fighting.<sup>12</sup>

Based on the theoretical analysis thus far, the keen reader might be perplexed about whether the reasons for the emergence of contemporary sport fighting are unique to the late-modern era, or best explained through long-running historical patterns. Our data and analysis indicate both are valid concurrently: this phenomenon both coincides with and diverges from the social forces that have fuelled similar movements. That is, underground fighting is driven from and consistent with past cultural and structural conditions while also having distinct attributes and validations reflective of the social, cultural and economic forces unique within late modernity.

Earlier forms of violent sports, for example, were often based in the preparation and training for war. Boxing during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries served as a vehicle for social action and mobility (Gorn 1986; Brailsford 1988; Wacquant 2004). Neither of these rationales was cited by the fighters studied, nor in the literature examined, as significant factors.

And, while we uncovered no evidence that cage-fighting is driven by the preparation for war or war training, there can be little doubt that the ideology of militarism plays a role in sport fighting's appeal:

It's not an ignorant way of going about things. It's about the highest form of competition you'll come across. Let's be honest: all forms of sport are just watered down versions of war. So, here we go, this is the closest thing you can get to true battle. And if anything humans have definitely shown we have a propensity, if not reverence, for war. (Barnett in Enzensberger 2011, documentary on fighting)

Fighters more often than not, in fact, clarified that they are not fighting for money but, instead, for emotional and psychological reasons that revolved around self-fulfilment and constructing what they view as an authentic identity—overcoming what they see as contemporary society encouraging shallow, unanchored and of course emasculated identities.

Such discontinuities, of course, are reflective of the different social forces and figurations discussed above as found in the late-modern era. We posit that the contemporary fetish for rationality, security, safety and strict order results in the increasing civilization of societal members. While these 'civilizing processes' no doubt constrain and control the individual, they also provoke opposing destructive tendencies as they have in the past (Dunning 1990; Mennell 1990). The return to primordial violence as a means of achieving a sense of power and control signifies a response to losing authority—stripped of an ability to exercise personal will. Here, acts of conflict, marginality and deviance become a mechanism of resistance against ontological oppression and

<sup>12</sup> The danger in framing sport fighting as 'barbaric' is that we appear to be condemning these fighters and their activities. This is not our intent. Rather, we agree with Meštrović's thesis that barbarity is an inevitable component of enlightenment—one dimension of the dialectic. And, while the MMA industry is desperately trying to civilize this activity, it is still fundamentally a blood sport with many similarities to the Roman gladiator spectacles. This ethnography asks us to both understand cage-fighters as well as situate the activity within a critical socio-historical context.



socio-cultural restraint. This spectacle of raw violence thus sprouts from the same soil as the preoccupation with order and control. The same system that places a premium on tight governance and social regulation also propels individuals to the marginal fringes to assuage the tension it produces. Through this lens, illicit fighting, like alternative sports prior, disturbs social rules maintaining civility; it is a momentary liberation from the dominant order; it is a liminal outlet to the banal realities ushered in by restraining conditions.

However, despite the evidence for viewing sport fighting as a type of late-modern ontological project, the historical continuities are striking. Today's cage-fighting still reflects the same barbarism/civilization dynamic discussed above, and it coincides with thousands of years of hyper-masculine scripts rooted in militarism. The focus on physical strength, skill and domination in today's sport fighting industry without doubt parallels numerous combative events dating back to pankration during the early Greek Olympics. In that same vein, the central emphasis on combat owes its presence to sports emerging from an early militaristic and masculinized culture that trained its citizens for warfare and encouraged a warrior mentality. Also, just as football and prizefighting once stood as counter-movements against civilizing processes in sport and society, the rise of modern sport fighting represents a phase of decivility—a departure from greater levels of social control.

As understandable as this might be, we should take no comfort in the form this response is taking. While certainly not as barbaric as war, this sphere of 'petite barbarism' signifies some of our society's worst cultural traits. Sport fighting, for example, has historically been a masculinist sport featuring high levels of violence. Cage-fighting's rapid rise is no doubt an indicator of the attempt to re-reify hegemonic patriarchal conditions due to a 'crisis in masculinity' (Connell 1977; 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Dunning 2000; Wetherell and Edley 1999). Liddle (1996), for instance, traces how state formation has provoked fundamental shifts in the construction and structural arrangements of masculinity. Rather than being bound to a historical moment in time, reassertions of hegemonic masculinity signify an ongoing struggle to develop and (re) construct identities that will bolster traditional views of patriarchy. Young, in a similar vein, argues that the cultural meaning of sports violence 'is linked to issues of gender legitimacy and power' (Young 2000: 392). Dunning (2000: 229) similarly suggests that the participation in and rewards gained from modern sport and have become a 'male preserve' where:

... in the context of relatively pacified and, in that sense, relatively civilized societies, some fields of sport—along with such occupations as the military and police—will come to represent an enclave for the legitimate expression of masculine aggression and the production and reproduction of traditional male habitudes involving the use and display of physical prowess and power. It will come, that is, to represent a primary vehicle for the masculinity-validating experience.

Punishing another human being by beating the consciousness out of them—or making them submit to you by putting them through excruciating pain—provides these fighters and their audiences with a profound sense of patriarchal power and control.

Of course, various Western states have also behaved in a hyper-masculine manner through waging 'wars' on crime, drugs and terrorism. Imagining these social problems through the ideology of militarism advances the view that violent domination is

an appropriate means to solve problems and gain power and control (Ericson 2007; Kraska 2001). Violent combat—whether engaged in by the criminal justice system, the military or fighters in a cage—seeks similar remedies through similar means: an entrenched cultural pattern that should make us question just how ambivalent society may be about violence.

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