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Pretty fly for a white guy: the politics of race, nation and difference in professional boxing

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ABSTRACT

In 2008 Joe Calzaghe (from Wales) fought Bernard Hopkins (from the USA) in a light-heavyweight boxing match. Prior to the fight Hopkins had taunted Calzaghe with the refrain that he would never lose to a white boy. This paper assesses the interplay of discourses surrounding race and nation in the build-up to the contest between the two boxers. The analysis highlights how simplistic binaries are used to perpetuate notions of difference and considers how this accentuates divides in contested racial and national terrains.

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I would never let a white boy beat me
I would never let a white boy beat me
I would never let a white boy beat me
I will never let a white boy beat me

(Bernard Hopkins, 7 December 2007)

The case-study that forms the focus of this paper looks at the interplay of race and nation to explore (re)presentations of some of the ways in which identities are (re)created in relation to another. As Hall (1996) has noted, it is precisely because identities are constructed within and not outside of discourse that ‘we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites’ (p.4). Early work in the area of social identities was carried out from a (social) psychological perspective, but it is now increasingly acknowledged that identities should not be conceptualised as fixed and static.

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entities but as being provisional, contingent and relatively unfixed (Jenkins 2014). Sport provides a particularly fertile space for examining common ground and/or the manifestation of difference.

Whilst much valuable scholarship has looked at race and racism in relation to sporting celebrities within mediated sport (e.g. Buffington 2005; Burdsey 2014; Hartmann 2007), far less work has considered the interplay between various identity markers. The statement above from Bernard Hopkins received rather limited media attention although it offers a useful point of departure to begin to explore the ways in which various identity markers are used in sport. It is important to highlight here that the focus of this paper is not a discussion of the statement made by Hopkins himself, but an analysis of the ways in which race and nation are (re)presented within and around media discourses of a boxing bout. This work has a slightly different focus to most of the published scholarship that would fall under the heading of ‘race and sport’ for it looks at the (re)presentation of a white male athlete (Joe Calzaghe). It attempts to explore the relationship between race and nation, and offers an analysis as to why Calzaghe may represent an acceptable ‘other’ in US media narratives on account of his flexible and fluid identity markers as being Welsh, British and European. Whilst the primary focus of the work is on the interplay of race and nation, there are also class-based identities clearly visible within the media discourse. At times these descriptors are used incorrectly to accentuate and emphasise racial differences.

As a means of exploring the interconnected nature of social categorisations as applied to one particular boxing bout, the focus on different identify markers offer fluid ground on which to critically examine similarities and differences in boxing. Whilst Calzaghe may indeed be viewed as coming from a position of privilege as a ‘white athlete’, this is tempered somewhat when we consider him as a ‘Welsh athlete’. The Welsh have been described as being in something of a colonial relationship with neighbouring England (Johnes 2019), although discussions of postcolonial Wales remains a contentious and contested topic (see Aaron and Williams 2005). Space does not allow a detailed discussion of this particular subject here, although the subordinate position of Wales in relation to England will be looked at later in this paper when discussing the ways in which Calzaghe was represented in various media discourse.

Media accounts were identified from a number of different sources in the build-up to the Hopkins versus Calzaghe fight as part of some wider research into the cultural politics of sporting celebrity in Wales. These were solicited from a variety of different sources, primarily from online national media sources within the USA (e.g. ESPN, USA Today). Articles were tracked in the build-up to the fight although no attempt is made to search for some ultimate ‘truth’ in the coverage. It is also worth noting here that there was little coverage of the statement by Hopkins in the various publications or in the build-up to the fight itself, which perhaps reflected Calzaghe’s somewhat
peripheral position in the wider boxing world, particularly in the USA. The HBO preview programme to the fight was also recorded and analysed for references made specifically to the topics of place and national identity.

The aim of this paper then is to unpack some of the key themes surrounding the interplay of race and nation within media discourse. Before looking at the specifics of the Hopkins versus Calzaghe bout itself, a brief overview of previously published work on the sport of boxing is outlined. It is noticeable that with issues surrounding race central to many of these analyses, the role of the nation has occasionally been excluded. The work then focuses on the politics of difference by examining the ways in which the nation and social class intersect with various discourses around race. It then briefly considers a supranational identity and the positioning of Calzaghe as a European fighter. The paper concludes by revisiting the importance of the representation of binaries in the promotion of professional boxing and considers the multidimensional aspects of various identity markers.

**Boxing, race and society**

The sport of boxing has been the focus of the work of a number of sociologists (Burdsey 2007; Cashmore 2005; Sugden 1985, 1996; Wacquant 2004; Woodward 2004, 2007). Hopkins is proud of his roots on the tough streets of Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) and such a life-history is not dissimilar to the background of many boxing champions (see especially, Cashmore 2005; Heiskanen 2012; Sugden 1985; Weinberg and Arond 1952). Having spent some time in jail for armed robbery as a young man, Hopkins regularly referred to this period of his life in the build-up to fights. In boxing, where man-to-man combat critically exposes the strengths and limitations of fighters, it is easy to caricature and portray individuals in relation to what the opponent is not (Cooley, 2010; Woodward 2007). Boddy (2008) states that the symbolism of boxing ‘does not allow for ambiguity’ (p.7). Sugden (1996) describes boxing as ‘the essential theatre of activity through which one man’s physical mastery over another became manifest’ (p.33). He goes on to suggest that it was sustained by notions of social Darwinism and that success in the ring could ‘symbolise not only individual achievement, but also racial and national superiority’ (Sugden 1996, 33).

Discussions of sport and race, similar to analyses of gender issues in sport, tend to focus largely on one group. For scholars in the USA and the UK the focus of much academic work has been on the oppression and discrimination of black athletes (e.g. Carrington and McDonald 2001; Cashmore 1982; Edwards 1970; Hoberman 1997; Powell 2008). There is no denying that black athletes in these countries have faced decades of discrimination across a range of sports (see also, Bardowell 2019; Carrington 2010; Entine, 2000;
Lapchick 2001; Mocarski and Billings 2014). The scholars cited above, in addition to many others, have cogently outlined the contested place of sport in relation to the politics of race and representation. Within this paper some of the simplistic binaries presented in the contemporary sports world are discussed and attempts are made to further unpack the inter-relationship between various identity markers.

Part of the problem with employing binaries, as critiques of race in feminist studies has shown, is that this often ignores the experiences of whole groups of people (hooks b 1981). A look at of much of the sociology of sport literature under the titles of ‘race’ and ‘gender’ in the UK and the USA would show that these works could conceivably be described as women’s studies and black studies. A single chapter about (for example) Asians in sport in a collection on racism and sport, or on sporting masculinities within a text on gender and sport, are examples of this. This reflects the pressure to be inclusive but at times these can also appear as rather tokenistic gestures and the bulk of the texts would be better placed under a different title that more accurately reflects the content presented. Moreover, a similar observation could be made for texts where the title suggests that they are about (a) sport in Britain but where the content largely focuses solely on England.

The discrimination faced by black athletes has been well documented in the scholarly literature. In the UK, Cashmore’s (1982) work on black sportsmen was one of the first accounts to consider the experiences of athletes across a range of different sports. Carrington and McDonald’s (2001) edited collection of essays on race and sport in Britain was another important contribution to this area and capably highlighted the many different sites where discrimination occurs and the struggles faced by different groups. In the USA, Harry Edwards (1970) wrote of the revolt of the black athlete and detailed the discrimination and oppression of this group. Edwards was a key figure in the protests of sprinters Smith and Carlos on the medal podium of the 1968 Games in Mexico City. Hoberman (1997) noted how the fixation on the athletic achievements of African-Americans led to the glorification of the physical aspects of black athletes (and black people in general) presenting a dominant ideology which suggested that black men are good at sport but little else.

Powell (2008) critically assessed how black athletes are both winning and losing in sport across the USA. Hartmann (2000) suggested that sport in the USA is a contested racial terrain serving as a very public presentation of racial interaction in a highly segregated society. Indeed, it is important to note that sport is a site where the meanings and ideologies underpinning race are always in a state of flux and constantly contested. The positioning of race as a ‘floating signifier’ is also important to note here. This highlights that while skin colour is something that may have meaning in a particular culture, this meaning is not fixed (see Hall 1997). Andrews (1996), in his work on the
basketball legend Michael Jordan, highlights how ‘racial identity is not stable, essential or consistent; it is dynamic, complex and contradictory’ (p.126). It is beyond the scope of this particular paper to acknowledge all of the important studies of race and sport, although the above are included as a brief overview to indicate some of the key research published in this area and affords a point of departure to consider work on race specifically in relation to boxing.

Some writing has highlighted how boxing has been used as a means of characterising the perceived savage nature of black athletes (see Hoberman 1997; Myler 2005; Roberts 1983). Presenting a black boxer in this way, it was suggested, ‘confirmed both his primitive nature and his inevitable failure in the competition with civilized whites in a modern society’ (Hoberman 1997, 209). Within the sport of boxing, race has been a central theme for many years. The very existence of the ‘the great white hope’ of the heavyweight division powerfully conveys the duality employed to portray sameness and difference in this particular sport (Myler 2005; Roberts 1983; Sugden 1996). In his biography of the 1984 Olympic silver medallist, Shawn O’Sullivan, Brunt (1987) noted that:

Boxing is the last overtly racist sport, especially in the United States, where battles between black men and white men are still a draw for all the wrong reasons. (p.76).

Yet even here, within the context of a changing (inter)national and increasingly globalised sports world, other areas have perhaps been sidelined and need to be better integrated into future analyses (see Woodward 2014). Where, for example, does a discussion of social class or the nation fit in this domain?

A number of scholars have looked at the (re)presentations of elite boxers across a variety of nations. Work on fighters such as Barry McGuigan (Hassan 2005), Kelly Pavlik, Ricky Hatton (Rhodes 2011), and Oscar De La Hoya (Delgado 2005) show how media sources offer character portrayals of individual fighters. Arnaldo’s (2020) ethnographic research examined how performances of racialised masculinity were enacted by boxing fans in relation to the Pacquiao v Marquez fight.

These identities are constructed around various identity markers that often (re)position an individual athlete as representative of much broader collectives. Rhodes (2011) offers an insightful analysis of the ways in which relatively little attention has been paid to the role of whiteness in the construction of the boxing hero. Normative conceptions of whiteness feature prominently in sport and the wider societies in which these activities take place. Garner’s (2007) work on the construction of whiteness offers a useful introduction into the many ways in which this shapes the ‘othering’ of non-white groups (see also, Arnaldo 2020; Delgado 2005). Rhodes (2011) notes that both Hatton and Pavlik received detailed media coverage throughout
their careers and points to a link between the whiteness of the majority of boxing writers and the number of in-depth, personalised and favourable coverage that these fighters received. Yet such an observation could not be applied as easily to Calzaghe who often received little coverage or recognition despite his longevity as a world champion (see Calzaghe 2007). This could perhaps be linked to his national identity and his position on the periphery of the boxing world (Harris 2011; Johnes 2008). Rather than speculate too much on this, we return to the build-up to specific boxing bout that forms the primary focus of this paper.

_Calzaghe versus Hopkins: the politics of difference_

There are many ways of reading the pre-fight build-up to Calzaghe-Hopkins. Hopkins’s statement about not losing to a white boy could be perceived as just something to promote the bout, for the promotion of boxing matches often include various attempts to garner attention and engage audiences in some pre-fight hype. This then also requires an acknowledgement of the gendered nature of the fight game and recognise it as part of the performance of masculinity that lies so central to the sport (see Arnaldo 2020; Woodward 2004, 2007). Calzaghe said that he just laughed when he heard Hopkins insult him and stated ‘I don’t care if it’s a black guy, white guy, green guy, any coloured guy, I’m not going to lose’ (in NBC Sports 2008). Some months later, in an interview with an English newspaper, Calzaghe noted:

_I can’t say I’d never lose to a black man – I’ve beaten 35 of them. I’d be called a racist. Imagine, there’d be a f****** outcry (in Anthony 2008)._

Little was made of a white boxer’s boast of this type regarding a black opponent over a century before in the racially charged build-up to the match between Frank Slavin and Peter Jackson:

_He (Frank Slavin) was also an unabashed racist, and had loudly declared that ‘to be beaten by a black fellow, however good a fellow, is a pill I shall never swallow’. Savin had to swallow the pill, but it was administered with care (Boddy 2008, pp.180-181)._  

Some writers did question what would have happened had the roles ‘been reversed’ (Ciani 2008) in the Hopkins case or the comments had been made in a different sporting context. Idec (2008) noted that:

_Imagine the international incident it would cause if Jason Kidd belittled Phoenix’s chances of defeating Dallas in the NBA Playoffs because he would never allow someone of Steve Nash’s skin color to defeat him?_

Ciani (2008) suggested that:
While it is true that if the roles had been reversed, with Calzaghe stating he would “never let a black man” beat him, there would have been an uproar from politically correct factions bitching and moaning about ‘racial slurs’. So what? This is simply a product of the times we live in, and would not have made it right nor would it have given merit to such outcries. The simple fact is, there was nothing racist about what Hopkins said, and anyone who took offense to these remarks must be suffering from some major sensitivity issues.

Hopkins then in the view of the above writer was merely making a statement and employing skin colour in his descriptive assessment. Willis (2008) made reference to Hopkins’s loss at the hands of Jermain Taylor and noted that ‘apparently it is OK to lose to Taylor, a fellow African-American. But losing to Calzaghe, a pale-skinned Welshman, means a loss of street cred’.

In later interviews Hopkins refused to retract his statement and argued that ‘it’s a cultural fight’. He also developed this theme and stated that ‘it’s always a race issue when its black versus white, whether it’s basketball or tennis’ (in Smith 2008). Hopkins continued to discuss the significance of race and racism in further interviews where he drew upon (amongst other things) the stories of Jesse Owens, Bill Russell and Jackie Robinson. Each of the above had faced vicious and hostile discrimination during their careers. He also talked of Barack Obama’s quest for the White House and the threats he would face if he were to be elected as the first non-white President of the United States of America.

Research by Chaplin (2012) found no statistical evidence of race, per se, serving as a determinant of pay in world championship boxing. There have been cases in which boxers were better-compensated than otherwise may have been the case as a result of the racial tension the fight generated – with the pay parity of 10,000,000 USD each for Holmes and Cooney for their 1982 clash being arguably the most famous example.

When the fighters are of the same racial group then other strategies may be used to signify difference between the opponents for as McKinney (2004) has noted:

Just as there is no one ‘blackness’ (i.e. blacks belong to diverse socioeconomic, religious and political backgrounds), there is no essential whiteness – white people are divided by ethnic, regional, religious, class, and gender differences, among others (pp.3-4).

The heavyweight title fight between Lennox Lewis and Mike Tyson (both black boxers) was portrayed as one between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. This shows how binaries extend beyond just a racialised demarcation and that sameness and difference are an integral feature in the promotion of all championship-boxing bouts. This is important, for as mentioned at the beginning of this
paper, the work here is not a commentary on the words used by Hopkins, but more a consideration of the ways in which difference may be accentuated through various media discourse.

Racism is not confined to national boundaries and one of the weaknesses of some discussion in this area is that race is focused upon whilst all other categories are hidden or ignored. Hyperbole and controversial talk are customary features of the contemporary fight game and boxers may embark upon a strategy of being deliberately provocative and/or controversial to gain attention for upcoming fights. Hopkins himself later acknowledged this in the build-up to his bout with Calzaghe (HBO 2008). Gerald Early (1988) provides two illuminating examples of boxers veiling racial division in ardent nationalism:

World champions from the British Isles such as middleweight Alan Minter and Jim Watt disguise the urge of racial identification under the cloak of nationalism. Those of us with only a passing acquaintance with the history of Britain are well aware that the British nation is, in truth, the British race and that the British wish to stay as alabaster white as the heroine of an Ann Radcliffe or Jane Austen novel. Besides, when black British junior middleweight Maurice Hope has fought, no band of brass-playing beefeaters file in the ring before the fight to play national airs and the British fight fans at ringside do not sing “God Save the queen” with tears in their eyes - which is actually what happened before Minter’s defense against Marvin Hagler and Watt’s defense against Sean O’Grady (pp.29-30).

The build-up to the fight between Minter and Hagler some years previously had also incorporated controversies surrounding issues of race when Minter was reported to have said that he did not intend to lose his title to a black man (see Bardowell 2019; Pye 2011). Bardowell (2019) offers a powerful personal reflection on watching this bout on television as a young boy. His recollections highlight the tensions surrounding race and nation. The nation would seem to present fertile ground for further exploring multiple and contested identities given that at times these may challenge and/or further interrogate racial binaries.

One of the best accounts to attempt to unpack the multiple identity markers in boxing is Burdsey’s (2007) work on Amir Khan. Khan won a silver medal for Great Britain and Northern Ireland at the 2004 Olympic Games and was presented as a role model for multi-ethnic Britain where he spoke of being British but was also very proud to talk about his Pakistani heritage and Islamic faith. Burdsey (2007) discusses the significance of Khan as an important figure in many media accounts after the bombings in London on 7 July 2005 where Khan’s embracing of Britishness was contrasted to the actions of those who had carried out the terrorist attacks. Gilroy’s (2004) influential work is also key to note here for highlighting the ways in which whilst race may appear to have become irrelevant for some, it has
simultaneously become more relevant for others as concerns around terrorism in particular becomes ever more visible. The work of Burdsey (2007) is important for what it tells us about multiculturalism within the realm of professional boxing. Each sporting body can become the site for articulations and contestations of various identities. Sport then is not just a place where such identity markers are stated and/or advanced, but a site where these are struggled on and over. Burdsey (2007) highlights the ways in which racism and exclusion continues in a number of places and that we need to be wary when an individual athlete is used as the site for the discussion of much broader societal issues. The next section looks at the importance of national identities and also briefly highlights some of the ways in which social class is also woven into a number of these narratives.

**Boxing, social class and the nation: beyond race**

Miller et al. (2001) note how ‘the sporting body bears triumphant national mythologies in a double way, extending the body to encompass the nation and compressing it to obscure the social divisions that threaten national unity’ (p.31). Johnes (2008) looked at the importance of Calzaghe to representations of Wales in the boxing world. Known as the ‘Pride of Wales’ or as the ‘Italian Dragon’, Calzaghe carried multiple national identities with him into the ring. Born to a Welsh mother and an Italian father he was very much a local hero in the south Wales valleys where he grew up. Under the tutelage of his father, he remained firmly rooted in this area throughout his professional career and always spoke very fondly about his home and noted how the landscape provided an ideal place to train (Calzaghe 2007).

Coakley (2007) also emphasised his pride in his Italian heritage. A number of Italians moved to Wales during the time of the industrial revolution where some opened coffee shops that became an important part of many mining communities in the south Wales valleys (see Chezzi 2013). Chezzi (2013) observes that there has been little academic work exploring the experience of Italians in Wales and also draws attention to the paucity of studies on ‘white’ migration to ‘white’ societies. In his autobiography, Calzaghe is pictured in an Italy football shirt and highlights how proud he is of his Italian heritage and his family roots on the island of Sardinia. He notes how his World Boxing Organisation championship belt is in his grandad’s house on the island and how he returns to Sardinia every year (Calzaghe 2007).

Harris (2011) has commented on the significance of Calzaghe to promoting Wales and a Welsh national identity in the USA where it remains very much a peripheral nation and lacks the recognised brand identity of Scotland or Ireland as a tourist destination (see Pritchard and Morgan, 1996). Calzaghe is described in different media narratives as Welsh, British and European. All of these are accurate descriptors and many individuals
are comfortable with these multiple identities. It is also important to note that they each also mean different things and there needs to be more considered analysis of how these various national/supranational identity markers are weaved in and out of narratives in constructing representations of difference. It would be remiss not to consider the ways in which social class is also incorporated here.

Whilst this work initially set out to explore the interplay between race and nation, it became apparent that class-based ideologies were also very important in the ways in which the two fighters were represented in the HBO build-up to the fight. As indicated previously, the ghetto has been acknowledged as a key site within boxing narratives (Sugden 1996). One of the implicit assumptions is the seemingly unproblematic coupling of race and social class. The visibility of black athletes in some of the main professional sports in both the UK and the USA promote a perception of blacks excelling in sport but little else (Coakley 2007). Yet as Coakley (2007) noted, in the USA there are in fact more African-American doctors and lawyers than professional athletes but the visibility of sports such as basketball and (American) football in American culture means that sport serves as a very public presentation of racial integration in a ‘highly segregated society’ (Buffington 2005, 20). The HBO pre-fight build-up accentuated the differences between the two fighters by showing numerous images of the lush, rolling hills of south Wales and positioning Calzaghe as distinctly middle-class. The following words featured at the start of this programme:

You could not find a pair of fighters from two more different places. One hardened by a childhood in the ghetto and five years in the state penitentiary. The other a humble and respectful figure who emerged from middle-class Britain.

(HBO 2008)

Bale (2003) highlighted that professional boxers tend to come from areas of heavy industry which today have relatively high levels of unemployment, and also notes the significance of south Wales as the major region in terms of the ‘production’ of boxers across Great Britain. Areas like this tend to be viewed as symbols of post-industrial decline (Smith 1990) and are not usually positioned with the discourse of ‘middle-class’. Calzaghe’s maternal grandfather, like many men of his generation in this particular region, worked in the coalmines. By the time Calzaghe reached adulthood these mines had closed. The area within which Calzaghe grew up, and continued to live throughout his career, was a place that had experienced significant change during a period of marked de-industrialisation. A group of internationally renowned musicians, the Manic Street Preachers, attended the same high school as Calzaghe and spoke openly of the boredom and
oppression growing up in the south Wales valleys where high unemploy-
ment and a whole host of social ills characterised their ‘crap little town’
(Price 1999, 43). Smith (1990) looked at the ‘Welsh fighting class’ and the
tradition of champion boxers from south Wales. His work offers an impor-
tant overview of the geographical area and the social conditions that
shaped it (see also, Stead & Williams, 2008).

More broadly, the area identified as ‘the valleys’ have been viewed as
places of severe social and economic decline. The south Wales valleys wit-
tnessed exponential growth during the early years of the industrial revolu-
tion and at one time could lay claim to be the industrial centre of the world. The
tough conditions prevalent in the everyday lives of many inhabitants of these
places are cited as important factors in directing men towards sports such as
boxing (Smith 1990; Stead and Williams, 2008). The so called ‘valleys initia-
tives’ aimed at alleviating a range of social ills has been a regular feature of
many political speeches but the reality of life for many people within these
communities is of a harsh existence (Welsh Government 2019). Parts of these
areas remain some of the most deprived places in the whole of the United
Kingdom.

The rural idyll presented in HBO’s pre-fight promotion is indeed a part of
Wales, but such places can also be found in the state of Pennsylvania where
Hopkins is from. Whilst Calzaghe may have been ‘othered’ here in ways that
marked him as different to Hopkins, it should be noted that Pennsylvania is
the US state with the highest number of people of Welsh descent. The
influence of the Welsh in Pennsylvania is shown by the existence of place
names such as Brynmawr and Bangor within that state as a number of Welsh
people moved to the area in the mid-late nineteenth century.

Calzaghe’s ‘middle-class’ portrayal could be read as a means of extending
the racial binaries used in the build-up to the fight. Yet it is also important to
acknowledge here that the choice of descriptor is also guided by the market-
ing activities of HBO and their attempts to sell the fight to a pay-pre-view
television audience. The fact that Calzaghe had a very limited profile in the
USA may have also been significant here. Of course, there are multiple read-
ings of any discourse and it is important to note that the terminology referred
to above may well be something that means different things in the two
places. The same is also true of the descriptor ‘Britain’ which can sometimes
be used interchangeably with the word ‘England’ in certain media without
acknowledging the differences between the two. That being said, ‘middle-
class Britain’ is a phrase that carries markedly different connotations to ‘work-
ing-class Wales’ which would seem to be a more accurate descriptor of the
place where Calzaghe actually comes from. Yet even if we briefly move on
from discussing Calzaghe’s place as Welsh, British and European, what cannot
be disputed is that in each and every one of these descriptors he is still
positioned outside of the hegemonic core of boxing.
**Boxing on the periphery: putting Calzaghe in his place**

Within the particular context of international boxing, it is also important to note that the USA represents the core whilst other nations are very much on the periphery. Sugden (1996) noted that ‘for more than a century the United States has been the centre of the boxing universe’ (p.56) and in many ways little has changed in the past 20 years. Coakley (2007) himself acknowledged that many of the American boxing fraternity did not rate him. After he comprehensively out-boxed the previously undefeated American Jeff ‘Left Hook’ Lacy in 2006 the Welshman noted how ‘doors suddenly opened for me’ (p.13). Lacy was billed as ‘the next Mike Tyson’ and was highly rated by the US boxing press. Here then was the man to highlight the limitations of the fighter from across the Atlantic who was sometimes positioned in media accounts to be a reigning champion only because he avoided the best American boxers.

Woodward’s (2014) work offers an important overview of some of the ways in which boxing is changing and adapting to a new world order although the USA in some ways remains as the hegemonic core. Trying to gain acceptance, and recognition, within the dominant US market proved a significant challenge for Calzaghe throughout his career (Johnes 2008). Hopkins regularly criticised Calzaghe for not coming to America earlier in his career and for fighting only in Europe and belittled the list of fighters who had been beaten noting:

> He’s going to get exposed as an ordinary European fighter that’s called great on the other side of the world but over here nobody knows him … They think it’s the infomercial for him, but now the world gets to see the difference between American athletes and European athletes (in Houston 2008).

Here then we have another marker to apply to Calzaghe where the boxer is now positioned as a ‘European’. Many accompanying narratives clearly positioned the USA as the core and the centre of the boxing universe. Hopkins also noted of Europe that ‘even the basketball players go over there when they can’t make it here … this country sanctions who’s the best’ (NBC, 2008). Calzaghe turned this dynamic around and noted:

> I’ve been in this sport long enough that there’s nothing you can say to me I haven’t heard … being a champion, this is what it’s really about. Would Hopkins ever come to Wales, to England? Of course he wouldn’t (in Beacham 2008)

Calzaghe, despite being world champion and undefeated for more than a decade at the time of the bout, was not very well-known in the USA. As a reflection of the hegemony referred to above, it could be argued that the politics of boxing dictate that to be recognised as a legitimate boxer an overseas fighter must compete in the USA. Johnes (2008) noted the obstacles
that Calzaghe faced during his career noting that he was a victim of boxing politics and the general state of the sport. During the first nine years of Calzaghe’s time as world champion, the other super middleweight titles were held by nineteen different fighters. Yet what is also important to acknowledge here is that unlike a number of other fighters, Calzaghe actively sought to avoid media attention during the course of his professional career and remained firmly located in the hills of south Wales (see Calzaghe 2007).

The descriptors of European, British, Welsh and English were used interchangeably across the coverage. In a pre-fight promotional news conference Hopkins proclaimed that ‘It’s England v the U.S’. to which Calzaghe muttered ‘Wales’. Calzaghe may be described as European and/or British yet he can still remain Welsh within these wider collectives. Wales though is different to England and in many ways Welshness is created largely in relation to not being English. As noted earlier, there are also some that would view Wales as England’s first colony (see Johnes 2019). The situation between Wales and England is ‘hard and complex’ (Williams 1983/2003, 26) and is a relationship that remains a complicated one. Calzaghe’s identity as ‘The Pride of Wales’ and boxing under the Welsh flag has been important in promoting the country on an international stage (Harris 2011). When one of its athletes is able to compete under the Welsh flag in the international sporting arena it offers a key opportunity to put the country on the map and raise its profile given its limited visibility in many other areas. His surname and family ties to Sardinia are also important to note, where the descriptor of Calzaghe as ‘The Italian Dragon’ refers to both the symbol on the Welsh flag and a figure in Sardinian folklore. Here then the national identities ascribed to Calzaghe, in conjunction with the markers of race and social class, collectively provided a good contrast to the mediated representation of Hopkins. Yet, we must be careful not to over-simplify these identity markers by adopting a crude binary approach in our efforts to better understand such representations of difference.

**Concluding comments**

Woodward (2004) noted how the construction of boxing is one that depends heavily on binary oppositions. As evidenced in the published literature and some of the examples referred to in this paper, it is clear to see some of the different strategies that have been employed to market boxing bouts based on such differences. The language surrounding the ‘great white hope’ is an obvious case in point to show the ways in which ‘character portrayals’ of a particular fighter are created in relation to what his opponent is not.

We need to more carefully consider the multi-dimensional aspects of identity incorporating the various layers that constitute our social identities. Boxing provides a site where differences are easily identified, magnified and
reframed. Manufacturing difference is a key marketing strategy used in the build-up to fights but these may obscure wider issues. A false bifurcation also exists in women’s professional boxing between the ‘babe’ and the ‘butch’, where both of these categorisations serve to trivialise the athleticism of the female professional boxer (Heiskanen 2012). Whilst it is beyond the scope or focus of this paper to comment in any detail on the gendered discourse of boxing, the inclusion of women’s boxing in the London 2012 Olympic Games marked a significant moment in terms of the progression towards greater gender equality in the sport.

It is also important to note here that although this paper has attempted to highlight some of the ways in which difference is accentuated within the media coverage, it is important not to reproduce such binaries. There are of course a number of mixed-race fighters. This further highlight the contested terrain of racial identities within the sport although normative conceptions of whiteness could mean that some of these boxers are still largely defined as non-white. Privileging a particular discourse of whiteness is visible in some contexts but would not be something recognised in accounts of successful white fighters from traveller communities. Tyson Fury, a World Heavyweight Champion, offers a particularly interesting case to explore here in contemporary boxing. The media portrayals of female fighters, who often continue to struggle for acceptance within a sport that is perceived as perhaps being the most masculine of all, also offer avenues for further research (see Channon and Matthews 2015; Woodward 2014).

Calzaghe (2007) has always been proud of a hybrid identity based on living and fighting out of Wales whilst celebrating the Italian heritage of his paternal family. The fighter is also both Welsh and British, a dual identity that many are comfortable with. His Italian surname also makes it easy to ascribe the label of a ‘European’ within the American media narratives. Prior to the fight discussed as the focus of this paper, Calzaghe attempted to play down talk that it was a competition between Britain and America or black against white noting that ‘It’s me against a guy called Bernard Hopkins, who’s got a big mouth and thinks he’s better than he is’ (in Velin 2008). Boxing is a sport that is all about man-to-man (or woman-to-woman) combat and focuses on the individual (Boddy 2008). Calzaghe always appeared to be trying to bring the focus back to this level rather than attempting to position the fight within the context of wider groupings centred upon race, nation or any other collective identity markers.

Calzaghe defeated Hopkins to show the futility of the American’s pre-fight claim. The dualistic (re)presentations used in the build-up to the fight seemed to construct simplistic binaries which failed to move beyond a black and white issue. Reference to ‘middle class Britain’ and positioning the fighter as a ‘European’ may invoke particular meanings that create a very different image to that of the ‘Pride of Wales’ or a working-class hero. Within various media, and
across a number of academic areas, it is not always acknowledged that discrimination and stereotyping can, and indeed often does, operate across categories of visible difference (Woodward 2004). In some ways, portrayals of individual athletes as representatives of something much bigger tends to obscure wider social issues and problems (see Burdsey 2007). It is clear that identities are (re)created within and around notions of both sameness and difference. Research into individual and collective identities have often varied in that work on individual identities usually focuses on difference whilst work on collective identities emphasises similarity. Rather than being viewed as mutually exclusive it is important to note how identities emerge through the interplay of the two (Jenkins 2014).

Calzaghe’s whiteness served, in this context, as a signifier in marking him as ‘the pale Welshman’ (Willis 2008) in a discourse that emphasised the fact that he was not black. Viewed in broader terms then, this shows how meanings about race are not fixed and are best viewed as a ‘floating signifier’ (Andrews 1996). As a man from Wales, Britain and Europe, Joe Calzaghe was always on the periphery in an arena where the US boxing world in many ways still represents the hegemonic core.

In focusing on a specific boxing bout at a particular time, then it is acknowledged that what is presented here is merely a snapshot of wider issues around identities. Although the bout that forms the focus of this paper took place more than ten years ago, it is clear that numerous fights which preceded it, and many others that followed, have been shaped within similar discourses of difference for boxing is a sport that depends heavily on binary divisions (Bardowell 2019; Woodward 2004). This paper tries to draw attention to the multiple and varied ways in which difference is portrayed at the intersections of race and nation, and also notes the importance of other identity markers such as social class. Future research may well further unpack the multi-dimensional aspects of sporting identities and the way(s) in which forms of stereotyping are used to accentuate difference within media narratives. Whilst there is a vibrant and expanding scholarship on the subjects of national identities in sport, and on race and sport, greater consideration needs to be paid to the role of the nation in the construction of racialised identities in an increasingly globalised sports world.

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