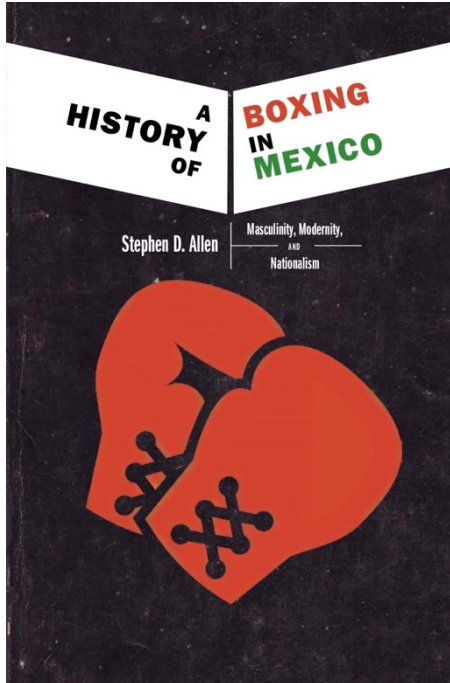


**Stephen D. Allen, *A History of Boxing in Mexico: Masculinity, Modernity, and Nationalism*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2017, Xiv, 281 pp.**

ISBN 978-0826358554

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Stephen D. Allen, assistant professor of history at California State University, Bakersfield, offers an analysis of the role professional boxing played in shaping national identity in Mexico from 1945 until 1982. The periodization reflects the beginning of boxing's transformation after World War II as sports became "increasingly commercialized, internationalized, and intertwined with mass consumption" (4). He ends the study in 1982 which marked both Mexico's debt crisis and an important milestone in boxing with the death of Salvador Sánchez—the first major Mexican boxer who was *not* a product of an "impoverished childhood" to succeed in the sport, thus marking a "professional turn" in Mexican boxing (195). This ambitious book examines professional pugilism's complex relationship to the three hard-to-define concepts: masculinity, nationalism, and modernity. The author seeks to reconcile the seemingly contradictory relationship between a violent blood sport like boxing with characteristics of modernity. Geographically, Allen's work transcends national borders as he demonstrates

how Los Angeles was instrumental to the development of boxing in Mexico after World War II. Mexican boxers frequently sought out higher winnings there and the boom in Mexican and Mexican American populations constituted a growing and avid audience in the postwar city. He argues that "many Mexicans associated boxing with modernity and national progress" (5) and that "masculinity played a key role in both defining and representing the Mexican nation" (6). Allen aims to connect his analysis of masculinity with the study of emotion. His work explores "the 'hard' and disciplined masculinity promoted by boxing but also the other, "'softer' traits of masculinity" when he maintains that "sense of humor, charm, compassion, and the ability to instill excitement in fans were highly valued in boxers and suggest a complex relationship between Mexican nationalism, masculinity, and emotions" (7). The author examines the postwar period and finds that by the end of the era under consideration (circa early 1980s) several changes had occurred: poor neighborhoods in Mexico City were no longer the most important source for producing Mexican boxers as pugilists from all over the republic gained prominence; Los Angeles was no longer the mecca for Mexican boxers as the professional sport in the U.S. became centralized in Las Vegas and Atlantic City; and the sexual revolution of the 1960s produced a different type of masculinity—one that allowed boxers and journalists to talk more openly about sex, alcohol, and personality traits. Largely a work of cultural history, Allen examines a plethora of prominent daily newspapers in Mexico City and Los Angeles, specialized sporting publications, and other cultural productions like film, political cartoons, *corridos*, and, to a lesser extent, poetry and literature.

The book is organized into six substantive chapters in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first chapter tells the history of sporting culture in Mexico and details boxing's development in both the Mexican and international contexts. The author provides readers with a lengthy description of all things sport in Mexico and examines the relationship of the elite and popular classes to a variety of sports. In the late nineteenth century, elite classes often used modern sports to maintain their power. By the 1920s, the elite considered sports to be transformative for the masses as public spectacle and nationalism increasingly intertwined in large sporting events. Next, Allen details the history of boxing worldwide from its inception until the 1940s. While the modern sport emerged in eighteenth-century England, its popularity soared in nineteenth-century U.S. cities, particularly among the Irish and Irish American population. This chapter also provides historical context for industrialization and urbanization in Mexico City and Los Angeles in the twentieth century. The remaining five chapters each take a somewhat biographical approach and examine the following well-known boxers in Mexico: Rodolfo "Chango" Cassanova, Raul "Ratón" Macías, Vicente Saldívar, Rubén "Púas" Olivares, and José "Mantequilla" Nápoles. These chapters follow a chronological approach with overlapping time periods for the boxers highlighted in each chapter; Allen identifies the period from 1933 to 1937 as the first "golden age" of Mexican boxing, followed by the second "golden age" from 1968 to 1982.

Allen's analysis of Cassanova, the only boxer to fight during the first "golden age", relies heavily on the postwar memory of his career and the popular 1945 film *Campeón sin Corona* (*Champion without a Crown*). He opens with the tragic story of Cassanova's public hunger strike and failed attempt to receive recognition and remuneration for the film that was based on his life. Allen uses the opportunity to analyze masculinity and national identity in the press coverage of Cassanova's very public demise and in a variety of Mexican films related to boxing produced from the 1940s to the 1960s. He argues that the narrative constructed around Cassanova's life, especially the film, "helped establish the 'typical' narrative of the Mexican boxer: a man from humble origins who rises to fame and fortune only to succumb to excess and fall into destitute poverty" (11). In the 1950s, a new champion materialized in Macías, a success story out of the gritty Mexico City neighborhood of Tepito, who managed to avoid the excesses of Cassanova's life and proved to be an exception to the rise and fall boxer narrative. Macías communicated a positive image in his public demonstrations of Catholicism and as a spokesperson for consumer products. Allen envisions Macías's success story as having larger ramifications for the nation: "In a society affected by rapid industrialization and technological innovation, Macías provided a hybrid example for how to successfully wade through the vast array of changes confronting Mexican society" (104). Moving forward chronologically, Allen uses the boxer Saldívar to examine "the softer side of Mexican patriarchy" as narratives presented in print media also "underscored the importance of boxers' relations with their mothers, wives, girlfriends, sons, and friends to their personal lives and presented them as well-rounded and fully functioning members of society" (106). He argues that Saldívar never attained the status of idol because although well-behaved, he "appeared to lack compassion and seemed to have forsaken his working-class roots" (106). Allen rightfully points out how society underwent fundamental transformations in the 1960s; he maintains that the three previous boxers (Cassanova, Macías, and Saldívar) "fit one side of a disciplined/undisciplined dichotomy and refrained from discussing their drinking or sexual habits" but notes that this changed by the mid-1960s as print media coverage discussed formerly taboo topics more openly and "this dichotomy had faded" (136). The last boxer featured in the book is Nápoles, an Afro-Cuban boxer who left his homeland for Mexico in 1961 after Fidel Castro banned

professional boxing. His story is compelling because the Mexican population largely embraced him as their own.

This wide-ranging study of boxing will be of interest to scholars of modern Mexico, academics examining sports and masculinity, and boxing aficionados. I found the biographical schema to be an interesting approach to the topic—particularly given the celebrity status many of these beloved or maligned boxers commanded. Allen deftly matches boxers' childhood experiences highlighting economic deprivation, work, and evidence of fighting as youngsters to particular neighborhoods in Mexico City. Nevertheless, at times, the connection of each chapter to Allen's main argument and the larger historiographical intervention are obscured. He traces discourses of masculinity in Mexican culture and details several important characteristics attributed to manhood, but a stronger sense of what was considered "ideal" masculinity in different periods could have been more clearly articulated in the book's introduction and threaded throughout each chapter to demonstrate continuity or change over time. Regarding Allen's characterization of previous scholarship on both the macho and the charro, Anne Rubenstein does not use the terms interchangeably as he contends (53), though she certainly acknowledges overlapping characteristics. While the evidence presented from the individual boxers matches the time span presented in the overall periodization indicated in the introduction, the main argument of the book seems to rely more heavily on the early part of the post-1945 period. Allen gives great weight to the fact that boxers did not challenge the authority of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) during this era of economic growth and supposed political stability. He states: "the vast majority [of boxers] publicly supported the PRI and often dedicated their championship matches to the Mexican president. Any sort of political contention or disagreement is almost impossible to find during this era, even though the sport drew attention to Mexico's urban poverty and economic inequality. What boxing did, then, was substantiate elite discourses of stability and harmony during a politically contentious time in Mexican politics" (10). The ramifications of boxers' public support for the PRI seems overstated. These upwardly mobile boxers born into humble economic conditions more than likely understood the machinations of the PRI—as did their audience members and fans—and practiced self-preservation by paying lip service to those in power. *Boxing in Mexico* adds to our understanding of the importance placed on sport and culture in modern Mexico in a richly detailed analysis.