The Pacquiao phenomenon in the Philippines

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In a much-hyped event, Philippine boxer Manny Pacquiao defeated American Shane Mosley by unanimous decision last Saturday in Las Vegas. Vast sums of money were involved in the fight. Tickets for the event were sold out and there were well over a million purchases of the fight on Showtime pay-per view. Advertisements, promotions leading up to the fight, and gambling rounded out the revenue stream of well over $100 million for the 12-round boxing match.

In the Philippines, Pacquiao has become a social and political phenomenon. The Saturday night fight was broadcast in the Philippines on Sunday morning. In this ostensibly Catholic country churches stand vacant. The crowded streets of Manila are empty. Bar after bar is filled with a crush of patrons raptly watching the event on big screen TVs. Cinemas across the country sell out tickets to view the fight in the theater. In remote locations entire communities huddle around radios to listen to the broadcast of the fight. Sports arenas fill to capacity with viewers who have paid to watch the event on the hanging cube TVs. In shantytowns, large crowds gather tightly together around small TVs which have been balanced precariously on plywood window frames for community viewing.

Manny Pacquiao's face is seen upon countless billboards and in endless televisions ads. He sells milk, beer, motorcycles, hotdogs, clothing, medicine, and political candidates. Pacquiao has himself become a politician and was last year elected to congress. Both the Philippine and international press has depicted Pacquiao's fame in the Philippines as the result of the racial and national pride of millions of Filipinos in the triumphs of a 'great Filipino.' But is this truly what is at stake?

There is no disputing that Manny Pacquiao is a great boxer. He has remarkable athletic prowess and fights with a speed and agility that have overwhelmed his opponents over the past decade. Pacquiao has won world titles in eight different weight classes from flyweight—below 112 pounds—to super welterweight—above 147 pounds, an accomplishment unique in boxing history.

Like almost every boxing figure before him, Pacquiao came from a life of grinding poverty. It is this history—the intimate shared reality of suffering and struggle and hunger—that the vast majority Filipinos identify with.

Pacquiao was born in the rice-growing region of the war-torn southern island of Mindanao in 1978. He was the fourth of six siblings. His father abandoned the family when he was six and his mother managed to eke out a living in General Santos City by running a *sari-sari* store, a makeshift corner shop where goods are sold through a window. This is the life of millions of Filipinos: days spent repackaging peppercorns, salt, sugar or oil into one inch square plastic sachets for resale. The practice is called *tingi* and is widespread because entire communities cannot afford to purchase basic necessaries in any larger quantity.

Pacquiao dropped out of school in sixth grade and began working in the marketplace to help support his family. At fourteen he ran away from home, and stowed away on a boat bound for Manila, hoping to become a boxer. He wound up living in a run-down training facility for boxers, sleeping in the ring. He was not fighting, he was working in a metal recycling facility in Taguig, Metro Manila, scraping rust off of old scraps of metal. He was paid 160 pesos a day, well below minimum wage.

Throughout the streets of the Philippines, there are people who push *kariton*—carts constructed from whatever scraps of wood are at hand. They collect used bottles and metal scrap—*bote't bakal*. These recyclable materials find their way into factories such as the one where Pacquiao worked alongside hundreds of others, scraping away at rust.

Pacquiao got his boxing break at the age of 16 when a spot opened up for him. Pacquiao had travelled from General Santos City with Eugene Barutag, another teenager who aspired to boxing. Barutag boxed two matches, winning one by knockout. In his third fight he was beaten unconscious in the eighth round and died. Pacquiao took his place in an upcoming fight. He stood 4 foot 11 and weighed in at 98 pounds. He had to put scraps of metal in his shoes to reach the needed minimum weight.

His early fights were in seedy, raucous arenas in crowded, rundown neighborhoods. Each pitted one desperate, starved youth against another. The boxers flailed at each other without finesse or grace, blows driven by hunger and the promise of a 100-peso peso purse. Pacquiao won. And then won again and again.

Pacquiao's rise to fame, first in the Philippines and then internationally, is the story of his athleticism, and a courage born of desperation, but it is also the story of lucky break upon lucky break. In 2001, Pacquiao was given the chance to fight in the United States in Las Vegas when another boxer dropped out of the Super Bantamweight match and Pacquiao was brought in on two

weeks' notice. This was his international break.

Heavyweight boxing, long the mainstay of income for the financiers of gladiatorial sports, has been in the doldrums for the past decade. The energy and excitement of a Pacqiuao fight has become the primary source of income for the boxing industry.

As Pacquiao gained international prestige, Philippine politicians glommed onto him with their customary parasitism. Chavit Singson, governor of the northern province of Ilocos Sur and self-confessed head of a massive illegal gambling organization, follows Pacquiao to the ring in every fight. He can be seen hovering over Pacquiao's shoulder during post fight interviews. Former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo made speeches about the 'heroism' of Pacquiao and the restoration of Philippine national pride.

The Philippine mainstream media has told the same story. Pacquiao is the story of 'the Filipino' proving his worth to the world. This is not the reason why millions of Filipinos follow Pacquiao's fights. It is the story of Pacquiao's life, and the poverty from which he emerged, which have made his bouts so compelling.

But the class identification is beginning to wear thin. Pacquiao still retains many of the mannerisms and habits acquired from the meager and mean life of the streets. He still seems humble and affable. But he is now worth $US70 million. He is a congressman and has begun to conduct himself in the cynical horse-trading mode of bourgeois politics. In last weekend's fight he wore yellow gloves to signify his shift in political allegiance from Arroyo to Aquino. He urged his fans to wear yellow as well. Few did.

Pacquiao has stated that if he can rise from poverty then other Filipinos can as well. As if in response, boxing gyms have sprung up all over the country. Yet more desperate young men will try their luck, more will be beaten and bloodied, and possibly die, but none will rise to the wealth or fame of Pacquiao.

Spun as a Horatio Alger moralistic lesson, his life story becomes a painfully obvious falsehood. It was not determination or his extraordinary prowess which brought Manny Pacquiao fortune, but a series of chance events and of victories which, by their very nature, could only happen to one man among millions.

Pacquiao had a skill, fighting, which a life of poverty and of the streets inculcates in many young men. It is a skill that capitalism is readily able to commodify and to profit from. That Pacquiao came from desperate grinding circumstances is not unusual in the history of boxing. It is, in fact, the norm.

The history of boxing reads as a microcosm of the poverty in the twentieth century. Jack Johnson was the son of former slaves, he dropped out school after five years of education and took up a job as a dock worker. Jack Dempsey, who dropped out of grade school because he had to work, travelled under trains and slept in hobo camps. Joe Louis grew up in rural Alabama, the son of sharecroppers. Sugar Ray Robinson's family moved from the South to Detroit, where his father worked two jobs as a cement mixer and sewer worker, before Robinson took up boxing at 14. Rocky Marciano was a ditch digger. Sonny Liston was one of 13 children of a sharecropper. Muhammad Ali's father painted billboards. Joe Frazier worked in a slaughterhouse; the scenes in Rocky where he trains by pummeling meat were taken from Frazier's life. Roberto Duran grew up in the slums of Panama.

Capitalism is all too able to take the worst forms of poverty and mint their brutality and backwardness into profit. A few young men are given the chance to punch and beat their way out of poverty; most are sent bloodied and bruised back to their oppression. Many are scarred for life, physically and psychologically. And the handful of successes like Pacquiao are exploited not just for profit, but to divert the attention of the downtrodden masses from the systematic failure of capitalism and a struggle to abolish it.

It is only by the most unlikely of chances that remarkable athletic talents like those of Louis, Frazier, Ali, or Pacquiao are discovered under capitalism. The vast wealth of human potential is stultified. Many more human talents than the ability to box wither, because capitalism is incapable of turning them into profit and has condemned their holders to a life of poverty and ignorance. How many Mozarts are now pushing *kariton* through the streets of Manila? How many scientists and artists, great minds and talents, has capitalism condemned to undeveloped oblivion?