

Tyson vs. Paul on Netflix and the degradation of American culture

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18 November 2024

On Friday, streaming giant Netflix hosted its second major live “sport” event in Arlington, Texas—a boxing program that featured as its headliner an exhibition match between 58-year-old former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson and 27-year-old YouTuber Jake Paul.

The heavily marketed and commercialized event provoked revulsion on the part of many who watched it, with large numbers taking to social media to register their disgust and characterizing the match as “sad,” “sick” and even “elder abuse.”

The Tyson/Paul fight was a degradation that should have never been sanctioned, much less widely played up and viewed. It is a sign of a social order beset by economic, political and cultural illnesses that have reached an advanced, in fact, incurable stage.

According to Netflix, which began (incessantly) promoting the fight over eight months ago, some 65 million people around the globe tuned into the event as it happened. This would make it the second-most watched live broadcast this year after the 2024 Super Bowl (with some 124 million viewers). Major sponsors of the event included gambling sportsbook Draft Kings, Meta and credit company Experian.

Even between individuals of relatively equal age and weight, boxing is an extremely dangerous sport. Repeated blows to the head, even when headgear is used, which was not the case in Friday’s semi-freak show, can cause concussions and lead to chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). Prior to Friday’s bout, Tyson had boxed 215 rounds.

In addition to the large age gap between the two men (nearly 31 years), there is also the fact that Tyson suffered a serious medical problem this summer that delayed the fight, initially scheduled for July 20. At the end of May, the former champion, who hasn’t fought a sanctioned bout since 2005, suffered a serious ulcer that required hospitalization.

In a promotional video released by Netflix prior to the fight, Tyson admitted that during his hospitalization he asked his doctor if he was going to die, “and she didn’t say no,” he recalled, instead telling him, “We have options, though.” Tyson said he lost “25 pounds in 11 days” and had to undergo several blood transfusions. “The doctor said I lost half my blood. I almost died,” he recalled.

Tyson’s health is of little concern to Wall Street and Netflix’s investors, eager for the streamer to “diversify” its content by carrying more live unscripted events, such as sports and wrestling, in order to retain and grow its 265-million person subscriber base.

To this end, in January, Netflix signed a 10-year, \$5 billion agreement with TKO Group Holdings to stream World Wrestling Entertainment

(WWE) events on the platform. This was followed in May by the company’s announcement that it would be streaming National Football League (NFL) games on Christmas Day 2024 to 2026 at a cost of \$150 million, according to Bloomberg.

As great amounts of money are being spent on “sports” programming, following last year’s powerful dual actors and writers strike, there is a serious dearth of significant film and television shows on Netflix and other streaming services. While one-off sporting events are relatively cheap and potentially lucrative, the financial oligarchy has no interest in intelligent, complex films and television shows produced by thinking artists and writers that point to the conflicts and contradictions in modern society.

In addition to the streaming audience, some 70,000 people, without a mask in sight, were packed into the AT&T Stadium (in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area) to watch the repugnant spectacle. Attendees included ultra-right Texas Republican Governor Greg Abbott, who had a front row seat for the fight; Republican National Convention speaker Amber Rose and billionaire owner of the NFL’s Dallas Cowboys Jerry Jones.

Jake Paul is not a professional fighter but a wealthy Trump supporter. He and his brother Logan garnered a following on Vine and then YouTube, which Jake has parlayed into a celebrity boxing career while Logan “wrestles” in the WWE. In the walkout before the fight, both brothers rode into the arena on a low-rider while Jake wore a diamond-studded outfit that fight commentator Mauro Ranallo informed viewers cost “over \$1 million.” In support of anti-vaccine crank Robert F. Kennedy Jr., one of Paul’s corner men wore a “Make America Healthy Again” hat throughout the fight.

While official figures haven’t been released, Jake Paul has indicated he will be paid \$40 million for the “fight,” while Tyson was paid a reported \$20 million.

As for the “fight” itself, Tyson entered the ring with a brace on his knee and his legs were essentially shot after the first round. After 16 minutes, the bout ended in a lopsided decision for Paul after Tyson landed just 18 punches throughout the eight, two-minute rounds compared to Paul’s 78. After each round, Tyson struggled to get up from the stool and could barely move for the last five rounds. Throughout the spectacle, boos and jeers rained down from the crowd as Tyson spent a majority of the bout ducking Paul’s punches and chewing on his glove.

Unfortunately, Friday’s event was not an aberration but one of a series of events that underscore a genuine cultural regression in the US, a regression instigated at the highest levels of the political and corporate hierarchy.

On Saturday night, Ultimate Fighting Championship 309 was held in New York City's Madison Square Garden and attended by President-elect Donald Trump, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, Tulsi Gabbard, Vivek Ramaswamy, billionaire Elon Musk, RFK Jr. and president of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) Dana White.

Three weeks after Trump held his fascist rally in the same arena, he was greeted with cheers and applause from most of the roughly 20,000 in attendance. As with previous UFC events, Trump, walking alongside White, was given a "fighter's" walkout to the arena, punctuated with jingoistic chants of "U-S-A."

Trump and White's relationship goes back to the early 2000s, when the future president allowed White to host UFC events at his now-defunct Taj Mahal resort and casino. In return, White has cultivated a base of support for Trump among UFC fans; White spoke at the 2016 and 2024 Republican National Conventions in support of the right-wing billionaire.

UFC 309 featured a heavyweight fight between Jon Jones and Stipe Miocic. Unlike boxing, UFC and other mixed martial arts in general allow a wide range of strikes, including kicks, knees, elbows and spinning backfists.

In the third round of the fight, Jones landed a spinning back kick to Miocic's ribs, buckling him immediately. After Miocic fell, Jones threw several punches to Miocic's head and body before the referee stepped in to end the fight.

As the crowd cheered Jones' victory, he took to the center of the ring, pointed at Trump (who was seated in the front row) and began mimicking his stilted dancing to the delight of Trump, podcaster Joe Rogan and other Republicans in attendance.

As noted above, the rise in "live sports" and the human cockfighting that is the UFC are symptoms of a diseased society that is circling the drain and has nothing left to offer. That either of these events drew an audience testifies to the debased cultural and educational level in the US, for which the ruling class bears entire responsibility.

At its democratic highpoint, American society produced a Lincoln, who drew the final phrase of his First Inaugural address about "the better angels of our nature" from Shakespeare (*Sonnet 144* and *Othello*) and Charles Dickens. Now, in its decay and putrefaction, US capitalism dips into the slime and dredges up a Trump, who praises UFC's White:

He is somebody you really have to respect. He gets these fighters from all over the world, and they are some really talented people. I have respect for fighters. When you can take 200 shots to the face and then look forward to the second round.

There is a "bread and circuses" element here, with the powers that be attempting to divert public attention from war, disease, job cuts, inflation, climate disaster and the threat of fascist dictatorship by encouraging, staging and profiting from backwardness of every sort.

Moreover, in lauding mixed martial arts and its mindless aggression, Trump and his associates (Musk, etc.) are hoping to advance the wider project of inuring the population, or sections of it, to the far greater scenes of savage violence they have in mind, to "normalize" in

advance, for example, the arrest and deportation of immigrant workers, bloody war with China and the rest of their authoritarian agenda. They want the population to share and become complicit in their reveling in brutality.

This immense cultural decline will only be reversed through the development of a mass socialist movement in the working class, which consciously embraces the noblest ideas and sets out to better society and humanity, and the expropriation of the oligarchy and reallocation of the billions wasted on the rich and their cruel, debased circuses.

However, for the complacent middle class "democratic socialists" at *Jacobin* magazine, the Tyson/Paul event is not a symptom of capitalism in severe crisis but a "disgrace to boxing with zero compelling narratives," writes Carl Beijer.

"This is just capitalism," Beijer wrote. "Sometimes it doesn't have profound stories to tell us; sometimes there aren't profound insights to be gained with the right level of Marxist analysis."

In fact, such people are organically incapable of "profound insights." Commenting on the rise of boxing in the last century, Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon, writing in "A Dead Man's Decision," observed:

It is a commentary on the times and the social environment out of which the boxing business rises like a poisonous flower from a dunghill, that nobody came forward with the simple demand to outlaw prize fighting, as it was outlawed in most of the states of this country up till the turn of the century. Cock-fighting is illegal; it is considered inhumane to put a couple of roosters into a pit and incite them to spur each other until one of them keels over. It is also against the law to put bulldogs into the pit to fight for a side bet. But our civilization—which is on the march, to be sure—has not yet advanced to the point where the law and public opinion forbid men, who have nothing against each other, to fight for money and the amusement of paying spectators...

Blows over the head never did anybody any good. And if anybody ever got any fun out of it, he hasn't been heard from yet. The "sport" in prize fighting is strictly for the spectators and the managers and promoters.



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