

Chickenfighting for the Soul of the Heartland

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Friday Night at the Cockfights

By the time I finally found the Mid-America Game Club outside of Muldrow, Oklahoma, David Chávez's roosters had won the afternoon five-cock derby. For a moment I thought I had traveled to Muldrow in vain. Oklahomans had narrowly passed a referendum making cockfighting a felony and many cockfighters feared Mid-America's derby could be one of the last legal cockfights in the state. The afternoon derby was over, no one was taking tickets, and most of the cockfighters were in pens behind the arena, fussing over their surviving roosters who crowed like attention-starved children. Trails of blood led to a hole in a plywood wall that read "ROOSTERS." The smell of fresh roadkill and the smattering of blood around the hole left no doubt that this was where defeated cocks went to spend eternity, or at least the next few days, until they were incinerated. It was an ignominious end for an animal whose symbolic power is as universal as it is controversial.

At Mid-America's bar (yes, you can drink Oklahoma's notori-

Cockfighting has enjoyed a curious cultural history in the Americas: in many Latin-American countries, the sport has become a symbol of national identity. In the Southern United States, where cockfighting was once immensely popular, the sport is a bête noire of regional and class differences between South and North. Like many sports, cockfighting throws into relief profound cultural values while dramatizing social status in a symbolic language. Thus, the present convergence of Latino and Anglo cockfighters in the Southern U.S. — where the Hispanic population has more than doubled in the past decade — represents an interesting moment in which ethnic, regional, and class identities fuse and are redefined vis à vis a controversial, non-mainstream sport.

ously watered-down beer while you watch the cockfights)m Sherry McNeeley, daughter of Mid-America's owner, Ken McNeeley, introduced me to Chávez. If I wanted to know what made a good cocker, McNeeley said, I should talk to Chávez; he was the best around.

If Chávez was a smart cocker, he was an even smarter dresser. He was decked out in über-cowboy gear: a massive silver-and-gold belt buckle, starched Wranglers, silver-tipped cowboy boots. His face was long and chiseled with a full mustache beneath an aquiline nose. As we walked from the bar to the cockfight arena, I noticed he had the aura of the Lee Van Cleef character in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*: terse, confident, and shrewd.

When one of Chávez's handlers explained that Mid-America's cockfighting matchmaker, Hayden Hise, was matching his cocks with the competition for an evening derby, I felt excited and nervous; I would see a cockfight after all. During the lull between the afternoon and evening fights, Chávez and his three handlers lounged in the smoke-filled arena, sipping Budweiser in Styrofoam cups. All three handlers—the people who train, feed, massage, and generally dote on the cocks until their fateful day—were young men from Ark City, Kansas, and only one—Butch—was white. Chávez and the other two handlers, one of whom was his son, were Mexican immigrants who brought a penchant for the sport with them to their new home, unaware of its attendant controversy.

Cultural Fusion in the Heartland

While anthropologists — Clifford Geertz being the classic example — have long scrutinized cockfighting as a cultural phenomenon of “traditional societies,” that is, societies supposedly unaffected by the political economy of global capitalism, cockfighting continues to thrive in hybrid, postmodern locales such as New York City, Southern California, and even small towns in the U.S. South and Southwest, where newly arrived immigrants from Latin America revitalize the dying subculture of rural cockfighters. Although cockfighting often receives sympathetic treatment as an expression of “native culture” — Geertz famously compared the drama of cockfighting in Bali to the novels of

Dostoyevsky — it continues to function as a *bête noire* of U.S. culture — especially in the South, where it is most prevalent. It has even been suggested that cockfighting is part of a larger pattern of a white Southern bloodlust that extends to lynching, NASCAR, and American football.

This apprehension over cockfighting is not new. Ever since the sport fell out of favor with European aristocrats in the 17th century, elites have worried about its symbolic power to corrupt moral virtue and blur class lines. Indeed, the rhetoric against cockfighting is as protean and enduring as the sport itself. Opponents at various times throughout history have labeled the activity as “barbaric,” “vicious,” and “evil,” although for wildly different reasons. The most serious charge lodged against cockfighting in the contemporary context is that it constitutes “cruelty to animals,” an ethical position virtually nonexistent prior to the second half of the 19th century.

Previous to the Oklahoma referendum in November 2002, cockfighting was legal in only three states — Louisiana and New Mexico are the other two — and Arizona and Missouri had also recently banned the sport. Still, cockfighting maintains a small, devout following, especially in the South and Southwestern U.S.; cockfighters travel across the nation to cockfighting states for weekend-long “derbies,” providing what the Gamefowl Breeders Association claims is a multibillion-dollar boon to the states’ economies. (All three rank among the ten poorest states in the U.S.) Indeed, cockfighters in Oklahoma — citing the economic importance of the sport to the state — managed to force a court injunction against the ban in many rural counties, where local sheriffs proclaim their disinterest in the new law. “‘We don’t know how much time we’ll have to be the chicken police,’ is what they’re saying,” James Tally, president of the Oklahoma Gamefowl Breeders Association told the AP in November 2002, referring to the rural sheriffs. “If it wasn’t just so sad, it’d be funny.” (Hockstader 2002:A03)

As antediluvian and obscure as it may seem, however, cockfighting is at the center of a larger culture war, exposing class and racial fault lines in the rural New South which simply did not exist ten years ago. On one side, rural white cockfighters align themselves politically with newly arrived Hispanic immigrants — a group that un-

doubtedly increases attendance and revenue for cockfights; on the other side, social conservatives distressed about the “vice-ridden” ambience at cockfights find themselves allied with animal-rights activist groups such as the Humane Society and PETA, which have campaigned against cockfighting for decades. The result is a mini “Clash of Civilizations” in which a region — in this case, the rural South-Southwest — is redefining itself vis à vis an arcane sport. The current battle over cockfighting, in other words, is a story about regional identity in the NAFTA era — a space of cultural fusion by *antonomasia*. Still, cockfighting as it stands today must be understood historically, since attitudes about the sport have fluctuated greatly over the past four centuries in Europe and the Americas.

Toward a Cultural History of Cockfighting in the Americas from Colonialism to NAFTA

Public debate over the virtues and perils of cockfighting dates back as far as the theological treatises of St. Augustine, the medieval philosopher. For St. Augustine, a rooster fight threw into dramatic relief his doctrine of theodicy, in which an omnipotent, good God permitted evil to exist in the world. Augustine, like many contemporary observers of cockfighting, was at once repelled and seduced by the “natural” fight:

Suddenly we noticed barnyard cocks beginning a bitter fight just in front of the door. We chose to watch. For what do the eyes of lovers [of truth and beauty] not encompass; where do they not search through to see beauteous reason signaling something hence? — reason which rules and governs all things, the knowing and unknowing things, and which attracts her eager followers in every way and wherever she commands that she be sought. [Dundes 1994:4]

Augustine viewed the cockfight as beautiful because the cocks acted out their “natural” role in God’s world. Cockfighters today adopt a similar rationale: God put gamecocks on earth to fight and something in the cock’s genetic makeup forces it into battle, whether humans take

interest in the fight or not. The argument has philosophical consequences; it is a variation on a Cartesian worldview which privileges “man” as a completely rational, autonomous subject in opposition to all animals, which know nothing but base urges and needs. Whether chickens feel pain, or whether their sense of pain is something entirely different from ours, is beside the point. As John Berger reminds us, it is impossible to bridge the ontological abyss between human and chicken; we stare at animals, and animals reciprocate our gaze from a “narrow abyss of noncomprehension.” (Berger 1980:3)

Although cockfighting continued to be a source of moral preoccupation for European Enlightenment elites, it was of particular concern among rulers of the vast empires of Spain and Britain. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial officials primarily feared the sport’s ability to blur class boundaries and threaten efforts at social control in the Americas. Shortly after being introduced to the New World by Spaniards in the 16th century, the sport met with controversy. By 1688, the Spanish King banned cockfighting in New Spain by royal decree, blaming it for the “ruína temporal y estpiritual” [temporal and spiritual destruction] of all of metropolitan Mexico. While the King and the local aristocracy publicly fretted over errant Spaniards — “muy adictos a los juegos de cartas, dados y peleas de gallos” [addicted to card games, dice, and cockfights] (Sarabia Viejo 1972:10) — they were primarily motivated by decreased revenue brought in by the taxation of card games and increased miscegenation with Indians and blacks.

Yet cockfighting continued to flourish within the Spanish Empire, principally in the Caribbean and Mexico. In the early 19th century, the sport reached its high point in the latter region, where it was now taxed and heavily regulated. Cockfights in state-of-the-art, elegant cockpits such as San Agustín de las Cuevas in Mexico attracted all sectors of society, including lepers, African ex-slaves, mestizos, Indians, and even aristocrats and politicians — most notably, the Mexican general António López de Santa Anna. Traveling to San Agustín de las Cuevas shortly after Mexican Independence, the Scottish-Mexican aristocrat Fanny Calderón de la Barca noted the heady atmosphere of Mexican cockfight culture in her travel account of 19th-century Mexican customs, *Life in Mexico*. Contemporary historians

Ruth Olivera and Liliane Crété summarize Calderón de la Barca's observations on Mexican cockfights at the time:

Gambling of another sort flourished in the afternoon at the cockfights in the Plaza de Gallos, where money was on the birds. This primitive sport, which was sanctioned by tradition and accepted by the gentle sex, was popular in every corner of the Republic...As for Santa Anna, who was often observed at the cockfights of San Agustín, he was in his glory, placing bets on fowls, overseeing the action, and mingling with the throng [1991:115]

Calderón de la Barca goes on to describe how, after the cockfight ended, gala balls in the Plaza de Gallos attracted many social classes, including "ultrafashionable people of *mucho tono*" [high class] (116), who, in a 19th-century version of "slumming," dressed down to intermingle with the commoners.

Despite the carnivalesque atmosphere permitted at Mexican cockfights, the ubiquitous presence of government officials, who benefited from revenue brought in by the gambling on the cocks, helped maintain rigid social hierarchies and preserve authority. This tension between existing class structures and social anarchy permeates the debate over cockfighting in many contexts. Thus, cockfights in 19th-century Mexico, 20th-century Bali, and 21st-century Oklahoma may threaten social order by diffusing boundaries between social classes and ethnicities, but, in the words of Geertz, "no one's status really changes" (Dundes 1994:117). The cockfights are "'really real' only to the cocks" (117). This is precisely the problem, animal liberationists would argue. Animals are sacrificed for a spectacle which accomplishes nothing except the death of a few innocent birds. Such utilitarian arguments against the sport betray a particular ideology, again, appear only in the modern context, and are still highly contested.

Similar historical patterns emerge when one shifts attention from Latin America to the Protestant sphere of influence. In England, cockfighting endured for a time as an aristocratic "Sport of Kings" under Henry VIII and James I, only to be banned in 17th-century London by Puritan regent Oliver Cromwell, who observed rampant gambling in the city's

cockpits. By 1870, the sport was wholly prohibited in England. Other areas quick to industrialize followed suit, including England's former colonies in the American continent. In the northeast United States, Pennsylvania became the first state to formally ban cockfighting in 1830. Still, cockfighting was once immensely popular in the United States. During the first half of the 19th century, it enjoyed official sanction in most states, particularly within the South, where everyone from presidents to the hoi polloi participated in the sport. If there was ever a Golden Age for cockfighting in the U.S., it was this period, which coincides with Santa Anna's cockfighting obsession in Mexico. No figure better embodies cockfighting's Golden Age than Andrew Jackson. As almost any U.S. cockfighter will concur, regardless of his or her knowledge of history, Jackson was the "cockfighter's president." The first written document purportedly published by the future president was a series of notes on how to win a country cockfight; the young Tennessean was twelve years old at the time. As president, Jackson reportedly held cockfights on the White House lawn. The Southerner seemed to personify the cocking *weltanschauung*: he was brazen, belligerent, fearless, and, well, cocksure. "Jacksonian democracy," whether deservedly or not, still holds connotations of an "everyman's democracy," shored up by Indian-fighting sporting men of the Western frontier.

Ironically, one of Jackson's contemporaries and military foes was none other than that great cocker to the south, Santa Anna, who reputedly enjoyed cocking more than governing and once retired from the presidency to spend more time on his ranch with his world-famous cocks. Both Jackson and Santa Anna are remembered primarily for their military failures and victories, not for their diplomacy or intellectual contributions to their respective countries' histories. Both men's intense interest in cockfighting, then, seems to serve as the perfect metaphor for their place in history.

It was only after the Civil War that cockfighting became marginalized in the U.S. In fact, the popularity of cockfighting, along with many other animal-based sports such as bear-baiting and gander-pulling, declined precipitously with the economic vicissitudes of industrialization and modernization across the globe. After the Civil War,

Northern elites increasingly viewed cockfighting — primarily a rural Southern occupation — with suspicion. This suspicion increased as the South became more integrated, and indistinguishable from, the nation as a whole. If the South often stands in for the most chauvinistic and decadent elements of American culture, cockfighting would place perhaps only second to the lynch mob as the symbol par excellence of Southern “blood lust.”

Ironically, many of the qualities ascribed to rural, working-class Southerners have been applied to other “ethnic” groups, often by white Southerners themselves. Terms such as “white trash” or “redneck” racialize poor whites, “othering” them in a way that would be unthinkable for more privileged Anglo groups. In fact, “redneck” may be the only ethnic slur still acceptable in the contemporary press. It is as if “white trash” or “rednecks” somehow fail at being white — that is, proper bourgeois consumers.. Indeed, calling cockfighters “rednecks” or “hillbillies” not only betrays a latent racism, it is also inaccurate: cockfighting in America is no longer (if it ever was) a purely white, Southern subculture, nor can it be characterized entirely as an anachronistic practice of backwoods, technophobic “folk.” Today, cockfighters maintain a “fraternity” that transcends national boundaries using chat rooms and weblogs (or “blogs”) which unite cockfighters from Manila to Monterrey to Mobile — a “brotherhood” that would have been unthinkable before the proliferation of the internet. In its current incarnation, the sport exists more as a mirror of global transformations in technology, immigration, and trade than as a remnant or “survival” of bygone eras.

Contemporary Cockfighting and Identity Politics

In Mexico today, the *pelea de gallos* (cockfight) is wildly popular and about as controversial as horseracing in the United States. Unlike their stateside counterparts, Mexican cockers are openly proud of their sport and their animals. Like bullfighting in Spain, cockfighting in Mexico is high drama for the masses; *plazas de gallos* attract thousands of spectators from every social stratum. Furthermore, cockfighting — like bullfighting, mariachis, and the Virgen de Guadalupe —

has become a symbol par excellence of *mexicanidad*; Mexican tourist agencies and chambers of commerce promote the sport, while regional pop stars sing its praises. *Ranchera* legend Vicente Fernández scored a hit with his song “Hoy Platiqué con Mi Gallo.” Scenes of cockfights — birds with heckles raised and spurs ready to attack — appear emblazoned on pickup trucks and on men’s arms as tattoos. Cockfighting is macho business: a fighting cock, according to Clifford Geertz, is a “detachable penis” ready to prove its manliness against other detachable penises (Dundes 1994:98). Cockfighting in Mexico wears its misogyny on its sleeve, as it were, and refuses to blush at the all-too-obvious double entendre of male chicken and human penis.

By contrast, cockfighting in the U.S. is a marginal, regional subculture found largely, but not exclusively, in the South (traditionally among rural Anglos) and the Southwest (traditionally among Hispanics). Finding a cockfight in the U.S. is next to impossible, even where it is legal. While mainstream Mexican cultural institutions promote cockfighting as a tourist attraction, American moral authorities — everyone from government officials to policy experts to activists to church leaders — repeatedly demonize cockfighters as “white-trash,” vice-ridden barbarians right out of the film *Deliverance*.

“Cockfighting is deviant behavior,” Eric Sakach, the Humane Society’s West Coast Director told me. “This is not a victimless crime; society pays a price for cockfighting.” According to the Sakach, who spent years working undercover in cockfighting circles for the Humane Society and local law enforcement in California, cockfighting coarsens the psyche and corrupts the morals of all involved. “I’m not going to say all cockfighters are drug users,” he said, “but at 99 percent of cockfights, drugs are there. It’s an excellent way to launder drug money. And I doubt many cockfighters report their winnings to the I.R.S.”

Still, the most important subtext — beyond moral virtue and machismo — in contemporary debates about cockfighting is the ever-prickly issue of identity politics. In Louisiana and New Mexico, for example, cockfighters managed to persuade voters to defeat referenda against the sport on the grounds that it is an expression of “authentic” regional culture and therefore worth preserving. Cajun cockers in Bayou country and Hispanic cockers in New Mexico had one thing in com-

mon other than a love for cocking: they came from marginalized communities whose ways of life were rapidly being swept away by the forces of suburbanization and corporate homogenization. Cockfighting, then, became a metaphor for the resistance of autochthonous culture to globalization. Who had the right to tell Cajun or Hispanic cockers that they were “backward” when the same logic was put to infamous use by conquerors and colonizers? In both Louisiana and New Mexico, the referenda smacked of cultural snobbery at best, racism at worst, and voters rejected the cockfighting bans.

In Oklahoma — a state with a permanent identity crisis¹ and inferiority complex in relation to its massive neighbor to the south — the case for cockfighting as an authentic folk practice became even more fraught by issues of race, class, and economics. Most Oklahomans, of course, had never been to a cockfight, nor had any idea about the sport’s legal status before the November initiative became the issue of the year. Although the ban passed by a 54 percent margin, state judges from rural counties almost immediately began placing injunctions on the new law. The vote split heavily along rural-vs.-urban (or suburban) lines. Fifty seven of 77 of Oklahoma counties voted against State Question 687, while Tulsa and Oklahoma City overwhelmingly voted for the ban.

Many rural voters, cockers or not, felt insulted by the rhetoric of the anti-cockfighting crowd, which used words like “barbaric,” “backward,” and “cruel” to describe cockers. They viewed the debate as the precipice of a slippery slope: this time it’s cockfighting, next time it’ll be hunting, fishing, and rodeos — or so the logic went. Cockfighters, “a clannish bunch,” as one breeder characterized them, closed ranks.

What was not clear to me until my Friday night in Muldrow, however, was how racially and ethnically diverse the cockfighting “clan” was. Unlike, say, churches, restaurants, or neighborhoods in the rural South, there was no segregation at the Mid-America Game Club; Mexican, Chicano, white, African-American, and Native-American cockers alike engaged in the spectacle of blood, feathers, and dirt. All were equally eager to show off their prize roosters once I expressed interest, just as all were equally mistrustful of city-slicker “humaniacs” who, they thought, wanted to impose their values on rural folk. Frankly, I

was shocked to learn that, for a cockfighter, solidarity with other cockfighters trumped deeply rooted mistrust of different racial and ethnic groups in the South.

When Frank Keating, the conservative Republican Governor of Oklahoma, declared his support in the fall of 2002 for State Question 637, which would make cockfighting a felony statewide, cockfighting enthusiasts speculated that the governor was in the pocket of the animal-rights lobby. Keating echoed animal-rights activists and the suburban middle class when he declared to the *Washington Post*: “Cockfighting is cruel, it promotes illegal gambling and it’s simply embarrassing to Oklahoma to be seen as one of a tiny handful of locations outside the Third World where this activity is legal” (Hockstader, 2002: A03). The national media jumped on the story, and suddenly cockfighters — not a group given to public grandstanding — found themselves in the spotlight. The media found the temptation to spin the cockfighting story as a culture war between colorful, backwoods rednecks and do-good suburbanites irresistible.

Although many — perhaps most — Oklahomans were unaware the sport was even legal in the state, analogies between Oklahoma and the Third World brought back painful memories of the Okie migration to California and the crushing double blow of the Depression and the Dust Bowl. For Oklahomans, it looked like *The Grapes of Wrath* all over again: here were poor, pathetic Okies spending their last dime to groom barnyard roosters to kill each other. What really troubled many Oklahomans about cockfighting, however (although this was rarely, if ever, commented on), was that the booming population of Mexican immigrants to Oklahoma managed to reinvigorate a dormant blood sport. According to the Census Bureau, which notoriously underreports immigrants to the U.S., the Hispanic population of Oklahoma increased by 108 percent in the last decade. News reports failed to mention the demographic reality of cockfighting that I witnessed on a Friday night in Muldrow: that it is practiced by poor, rural whites as well as African Americans and, increasingly, Latin-American and Southeast-Asian immigrants. One finds a cultural melange at cockfights along the Oklahoma-Texas border that would simply be unthinkable elsewhere.

Back at the Cockpit

When I ask some of the white cockfighters about the increasing number of Hispanic immigrants at the cockfights and their effect on the sport, they gave me an answer I wasn't expecting.

"The way I feel about it is, you have one Mexican cocker, he brings seven of his buddies to a fight. A white guy brings two, maybe three," Sam, an Oklahoma rooster farmer near the Texas border told me. "It's good for the sport." Contrary to the image the anti-cockfighting lobby tries to present, cockfighters, for the most part, seem to accept and even welcome diversity, as long as the individual in question is pro-cockfighting. "Who cares what color you are," another cocker told me. "The question is: do you fight chickens?"

"We're a live-and-let-live bunch," Ken McNeeley proclaimed, only to warn me later about "queers, lesbians, and vegetarians...funky people in the cities with hair down to their ass and rings in their nose." But for all of McNeeley's bigotry, it was surprising to see a cockfighter like Chávez, a Mexican immigrant, not only accepted, but lauded for his achievements by rural white cockfighters.

The cockpits themselves, according to the anti-cockfighting lobby — led by the Humane Society and the Oklahoma Coalition Against Cockfighting — are dens of iniquity full of drugs, prostitution, cruelty, and gambling. Yet, somehow, the atmosphere in Mid-America felt only slightly more decadent than bingo night for seniors at the VFW: kids drank huge sodas and ran circles around the pit, men discussed cocks' blood lines in the jargon of geneticists, and David Chávez and his handlers returned to business, readying their roosters for a long evening of cockfighting, which he would eventually lose in a marathon bout.

To Hayden Hise, a 77-year-old veteran and retired referee of the sport, cockfighting is anything but backward. "Cockfighting is an art and the best cockfighters are extremely dedicated to the sport," he said while grabbing two roosters and setting them on scales for an evening bout. Hise fought and raised cocks for 44 years before acquiring his current post as Mid-America's announcer, matchmaker, and cockfight supervisor. Hise has a nuanced view of the sport. Unlike most cockfighters, who justify the violence of the actual fight by reverting

to a “natural law” argument, Hise claims there are deep bonds between the handler and his cock. Man has bred the rooster over the past 2,000 years to become more aggressive, quicker, and stronger, Hise says, and everyone knows that the rooster is a natural fighter. It’s the handler that makes him a winner. “A good handler can bring a dead rooster back to life,” Hise claims. The psychological connection between the cock and the handler can be the difference between life and death: “I’ve seen plenty of fights where the handler gives up and the rooster just dies.”

If this is true, then the notion that cockfighting is “barbaric” becomes much more complicated. Cockfighters are quick to argue that they treat their animals with much more dignity and respect than your average chicken farmer. “What’s really cruel,” Sam asks me, refusing to give his last name, “a guy who takes care of his roosters for three years, or these farms packed with chickens that they electrocute after a few weeks?”

While some of the arguments cockfighters put forth to legitimize what is, in fact, a blood sport do seem far-fetched, Sam’s comparison of cockfighting to poultry processing is apt; just across the border — less than an hour’s drive from Muldrow, in Springdale, Arkansas — sits the corporate headquarters of Tyson Foods, the world’s largest poultry producer, and a \$7 billion-a-year business.

Tyson operates what is known in official parlance as Concentrated Animal Feedlot Operations — more commonly referred to as “factory farms” — all over country. *Multinational Monitor* magazine named Tyson one of the “World’s Ten Worst Corporations” for its use of child labor and exploitation of undocumented workers. Conditions in Tyson’s farms, or any large-scale poultry farm, are notorious: hens are densely packed in cages so that they cannot move, while their beaks are sawed off to prevent them from pecking each other to death. Phosphorous, a by-product of chicken waste, runs into nearby waterways, becoming a major source of pollution.

Although the Supreme Court acquitted high-level Tyson managers of human trafficking charges by in 2003, the company has been known to actively recruit undocumented workers from Central America for its plants in Arkansas. These workers, despite the unscrupulous hiring practices of their employer, today revitalize small towns in Arkan-

sas and elsewhere even as they struggle to hold on to their low-wage, dangerous jobs.

It occurred to me that it would be an incredible stroke of irony if some of the Latino cockfighters in Muldrow were initially recruited to work in a Tyson poultry plant in Springdale. After all, for better or for worse, the poultry industry in general, and Tyson in particular, are responsible for some of the most sweeping cultural and economic changes in the South since Reconstruction. Still, none of Tyson's controversial policies for processing chickens or hiring undocumented workers ignited as much controversy as the cockfighting fracas in Oklahoma, even though the sport affects comparably few people and birds.

What could explain this discrepancy? Perhaps Geertz was right all along: cockfighting is not a sport, but a story we tell about ourselves. For Geertz, a cockfight could dramatize social relations as aptly as a Shakespearean tragedy:

[I]f...we go to see *Macbeth* to learn what a man feels like after he has gained a kingdom and lost his soul, Balinese go to cockfights to find out what a man, usually composed, aloof, almost obsessively self-absorbed, a kind of moral autocosm, feels like when, attacked, tormented, challenged, insulted, and driven in result to the extremes of fury, he has totally triumphed or been brought totally low [Dundes 1994;132].

In the end, the debate over cockfighting in Oklahoma was not so much about the welfare of roosters or gambling in at the cockpits (many more chickens are killed in a Tyson poultry plant in a day than are killed in a year of cockfighting in Muldrow), as it was about regional identity in an age of global capitalism. Cockfights today — just as they did in 19th-century Mexico — blur social boundaries by subordinating them to the bloody spectacle of a fight between two chickens. This spectacle has obvious sexual connotations as well, which makes cockfighting an altogether threatening representation of local culture

for those Oklahomans who would rather shed the “Okie” stereotype for a more mainstream, bourgeois self-image.

ENDNOTES

1 Many government bureaus, including the Labor Department and the Census Bureau, classify Oklahoma as part of the Southwest. Historiographers such as C. Vann Woodward have seen Oklahoma as an extension of the South in terms of its political and economic orientation. Still, many people, including Oklahomans themselves, refer to the state as part of the Midwest. The Oklahoma Tourist Department, attempting to turn what is clearly an identity crisis into an affirmation of cosmopolitanism, calls Oklahoma a “cross-roads” of all three regions.

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