
The Moral and Conceptual Universe of Cockfighters: Symbolism and Rationalization

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Cockfighting is an ancient sport that has deep roots in rural parts of the world and in certain areas of the United States. It also has great symbolic significance to its practitioners and aficionados as an affirmation of masculine identity in an increasingly complex and diverse era. Although the activity is illegal in most jurisdictions, it continues, generally in a covert setting. Because cockfighting is subject to criminal sanction and informal social disapproval, cockfighters have developed rationalizations which they use among themselves and offer to outsiders. These rationalizations are complex; some are overtly religious in nature. Cockfighters do more than merely talk about their pastime – they actively engage in formal and informal lobbying to keep criminal penalties for their activity at a low level of severity. As the nation continues to urbanize, these lobbying efforts, while effective in the past, are gradually losing legislative support. For a number of reasons, the pastime is losing respectability and adherents and will probably be criminalized nationwide before the end of the century.

Over the past fifteen years I have engaged in a detailed criminological, ethnographic study of cockfighting in several venues: the Midwest, the South, and Latin America and the circum-Caribbean area. In this research I have attended cockfights and conducted structured interviews in all areas visited. In addition I have eaten with and interviewed informants in smoke-filled diners and truck stops, visited in cockfighters' homes, attended meetings of organized cockfighters and carried on correspondence via telephone and mail with numerous informants. During the course of the research these correspondents and widely dispersed field informants provided me with invaluable information and with an entree to different pits and cockfighting circles. A "snowball sample" was employed in which each informant led me to new sources; all the while the critical mass of data grew, stratified, and awaited analysis.

Due to the illegal status of cockfighting in many jurisdictions and to basic ethical considerations which preclude becoming overtly participative in research, I developed a conscious stance of “observer-participant,” reversing the traditional, participant-observer role of the ethnographic investigator in the field. In an early stage I had accumulated enough oral literature, observations, and archival material to arrive at the preliminary notion that cockfighters espouse a hypermasculine world-view. They value machismo and its ritual reiteration and reification much more than does the population at large. However, as the activity is illegal in most jurisdictions, and subject to strong normative sanctions in all venues, they have developed a deeply held set of rationalizations. An analysis of these *apologia* is critical for understanding the survival and future of this pastime.

As in earlier folklore research conducted by this author, tape recorders and cameras were rarely used. Few cockfighters wanted to have their voices, tales, and life-histories recorded and only a few were willing to have any type of photograph taken, even if the chicken was to be shown in a completely passive and noncombative posture. Confidentiality and anonymity were promised to all who wished it. Significantly, some did not want it. As one old timer said, “I’m man enough, and game enough, to stand behind anything I say.” As I discovered, this pugnaciousness masked a definite defensiveness and was evident among almost all whom I interviewed. It also was apparent in the cocking press and in other accounts of cocking.

My initial interest was to conduct a wide-ranging study of the activity itself, its material culture and folklore, and its persistence in the face of social disapproval and legal sanction.² I proposed an explanatory model of a deviant recreational subculture based on an anachronistic view of reality. Most cockfighters are blue-collar, rurally-oriented (even if urban domiciled) white males – rednecks, perhaps the only “politically correct” ethnic epithet in the academic and media lexicon. As such they should have been easy to study and analyze.

The actual conduct of research proved much more complex and arduous than I had imagined. The ideology of the cockfighters is more involved than early superficial studies indicated. The subcultural themes which constitute the *Weltanschauung* of the cockfighters is built around the following notions: game-ness, individualism, authoritarianism, teleological totemism and vitalism, sexual animism, excitement, rationalization and proselytism (Hawley, 1982, p. 80). Perhaps the most commonly invoked ideal in this view of reality is totemism/

vitalism, since the other themes noted are subordinate to it in any hierarchy of values. Totem, in this context, refers to an animal, bird, or sacred object that serves as a central point of reference to those in a tribe, group, or society. The transcendent symbol for the cockfighter, is of course, the gamecock.

The Gamecock as Symbol

Cockfighting can be said to have a mythos centered on the purported behavior and character of the gamecock itself. Cocks are seen as emblems of bravery and resistance in the face of insurmountable odds. This is not devalued as vainglorious but is seen as a trait to be emulated. In fact, boys are frequently exhorted to follow the example of the gamecock in protecting his "turf" and family constellation. Paradoxically, while cockpits are violent and loud, and at times, bloody places, fighting between human male competitors or gamblers is taboo. Violators of this sanction (and those obviously intoxicated, always potential trouble-makers) are usually summarily ejected from the pit and banned from many others. This is done to enhance group solidarity and to maintain a low profile. As one senior cockfighter said, "we don't have any disputes that call for the law [to become involved]... we take care of our own business." One only one occasion did I see a fight between human players begin to coalesce. In the cockpit one rooster would not continue to fight after a lengthy and arduous derby. An onlooker made a disparaging remark about the owner's birds and their lack of "gameness." Before the aggrieved party could land a blow, the potential combatants were separated and the indiscreet offending party was shown the door. Several cockpit operators indicated that local law enforcement agencies allowed them to operate as long as they did not attract a "rough crowd," become a locus for other form of crime, or otherwise become a "disorderly place." In fact, one midwestern deputy sheriff gave me a grand tour of an arena with security devices and armament that would have done an elaborate casino proud. Indeed, at several pits I saw law enforcement officers in uniform openly acting as security (large sums of money are exchanged as wagers or sometimes as a gate fee) or just dropping by to watch the action. Pit operators told me that they sometimes hired off-duty deputies or "big ole boys" in plain clothes to insure security. That no one seemed discomfited by the presence of officers, uniformed or in mufti, spoke volumes.

Historical examples of ancient generals using the gamecock as examples for their troops abound (Hawley, 1982). Interview data reveal that high school coaches

occasionally have been known to inspire the flagging spirits of their teams with cockfights – this was routine practice at a summer football camp for boys in a midwestern state during the early 1960s, according to one unwitting participant. Similar reports from informants were noted from Mississippi, and from other rural states. In these situations, the connection between the bird's behavior and that expected of young athletes was made quite clear. In football and life, as in the cockpit, one cannot run away, but must stand his ground (virtually all cock fighters are men or boys) in spite of overwhelming odds or certain defeat. A cock who "chickens out" is derisively referred to as a "dunghill" rooster (i.e., one of common, low breeding), suitable only for stews, gumbos, and chicken and dumplings. Similarly, cockfighters use this metaphor to derogate individuals and groups with whom they may differ.

Many cockers have adopted the gamecock as a totem. At cockfighting venues one may expect to see men with caps displaying the cock in a combative or terrifying aspect. Cars and pickup trucks may be painted with similarly belligerent imagery; this may appear on placards on front license tag spaces in those jurisdictions where state-issue front plates are not required by law. In the homes of some cockers, especially of those of Hispanic or Acadian extraction (Roman Catholics), one might find a truly unique addition to traditional hagiography – what appear to be shrines devoted to the glorification of the gamecock or of one particular bird of great repute. On several occasions, cockfighters waxed long and emotionally over their departed champions while standing in front of these "shrines." One French-Acadian (Cajun) Louisiana cocker told me that the bird (whose "icon" we were examining) was "the bes' damn cock that ever fought in the South." Similar sentiments were expressed in Puerto Rico, predominantly Protestant north Florida, and south Georgia. Several Ohio cockers, well removed from the cultural influence of folk Catholicism, also had elaborate trophy cases, artifacts, and collections of memorabilia of their favorite and celebrated cocks. Thus, a generalized decor in which gamecocks are at rest or in belligerent or erect posture may predominate in even Protestant or secular homes. At the very least, scrapbooks are kept replete with articles from the cockfighting press and photos of a man (and sometimes, son) holding cock.³ Odes appear in that selfsame press honoring old-time cockfighting enthusiasts and their birds. In these epics, as in mundane conversation, the attributes of the man are favorably compared to those of the gamecock. The linkage between man and bird is, therefore, somewhat blurred. Rather than anthropomorphizing

attributes of the gamecock, human beings and their petty limitations pale by comparison to the much-beloved bird.

It seems highly unlikely from the love and care lavished on these birds prior to the fatal denouement that the cockfight usually provides, that the cocker would stoically regard the dead bird with irreverence. Although at times the vanquished may be dumped in an oil drum or tossed in a pile to be disposed of later by the pit operator, more often than not the opposite is true. Frequently I have seen cockers with misty eyes leaving the pit cradling their limp, winged champions. However nostalgic the cocker may feel about his birds, I have never noted a theme of bird as friend or companion among mature cockfighters, foreign or domestic. The cockfighter may raise the cock from a chick, feed and work with the cock every day for months; and yet may not relate to the bird other than as a fighter or, if the bird lacks requisite combative qualities, a meal. Clearly, the cockfighter views the bird on several levels: bird as totem, emblem of bravery, sexual potency, and perhaps symbolic sacrifice. One is reminded of the care lavished on human sacrificial victims prior to the sacrifice by pre-Columbian Meso-American civilizations (Peterson, 1962, p. 147).

Western civilizations have followed similar practices. Huizinga (1950, p. 74) notes that among the ancient Romans (who also employed chickens as auguries [animals used for divination]), a “vicarious attitude is quite in place in ritual, where the contestants are regarded as representing – i. e., fighting on behalf of the spectators.” Agonistic (conflict-oriented rather than pleasurable or aleatory) contests of this sort were regarded as sacred, and as among modern cockfighters, took on a teleological significance. As in ancient times, contemporary winged gladiators fight in an arena, often to the death. Wagers are made; honor is lost and won. It should be emphasized that the pit or arena, as in antiquity, is sacred space. Only the handler, the referee, and combatants can enter its confines. Overexcited spectators who may incautiously trespass on its sacred circle, will be reprimanded or escorted from the cockfighting arena entirely.

Rationalizing Cockfighting

The cockfighter regards the modern world around him as chaotic and stressful. The cock serves as a living symbolic link to a vibrant though mythic and heroic past, hence my attribution of a vitalistic element in cockfighting. As with the Native American peoples of Meso-America, it would seem that the blood of the sacrificial

“victim” feeds the gods, and indeed, renews fertility, the cosmos, and the earth itself. The cockfight provides ritual, structure and purpose for the traditionally-oriented enthusiast caught in a complex, changing and dissonant world. Again, like the ritual sacrifices of antiquity, the beloved bird must die, it would seem, for the sun to rise and set, and the seasons to come in their appointed order.

To be sure, cockfighters have adopted a seemingly profane and instrumental view of the fighting cock and the animal kingdom, generally. While few among them have heard of Descartes, features of Cartesian dualism are omnipresent. That notwithstanding, the apparent dualism in the moral universe of the cockfighter is rather more the product of St. Peter’s vision of the animal kingdom described in Acts 10:10-16. In this fasting-induced vision “all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air” materialized and Peter declined to eat them as they were “common” or “unclean.” A voice “spake unto him a second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (Acts 10:14-15). This notion of giving humankind dominion over the animal kingdom is a Hellenistic reordering of what occurs in the Old Testament following the Fall and the Flood of Noah. Frequently, cockers resort to Biblically-based rationalizations for their sport, calling on Peter, Noah and seemingly every patriarch between. Lest this seem unconvincing, nowhere in the Bible can any specific condemnation of cockfighting be found, although the activity was known in Palestine well before Peter’s time; it is established that even before the time of Themistocles (528-462 BCE) cockfighting was well entrenched in Asia Minor (Hawley, 1982, p. 47).

Cockfighters value tradition, and traditional biblical interpretation carries with it a certain credibility and salience that the animal rightists cannot summon, at least in the eyes of the cockfighting fraternity. In the Judeo-Christian tradition animal rights and sensibilities can only be inferred. Clearly, even though individual Christians can cite a saint or two who lived in harmony with their environment and fellow creatures, there is little scriptural basis for any view other than the Pauline. Quotations from the Bible which could be selectively used to criticize this activity are conveniently ignored or met with ill-disguised scorn from the cockfighters. Additionally, the early church fathers such as Augustine added to the apostolic conceptualization of the place of animals in the Christian world view. Indeed, the cockfight became an early church symbol of humankind fighting against its own lower nature, or of the struggle between good and evil. Again, an interesting paradox presents itself due to the undoubtedly pagan origins of this activity and its

apparent animistic aspects and practice today.

Cockfighting apologists also cite historical precedent as an argument listing Washington, Henry VIII, Lincoln and Andrew Jackson, as active cockfighters, and Woodrow Wilson as a passive supporter. The catalog of celebrated Americans devoted to cocking is impressive and full of surprises. In my own collection of photo materials I have a copy of a daguerreotype labeled “outside Vicksburg” clearly showing U.S. Grant or his double disinterestedly watching a cockfight in front of his tent. While one may well imagine the hard-drinking Grant engaged in this activity, one may be surprised to find that the the pious and ascetic General Lee was also an enthusiast.

Another oft encountered rationalization, is the view that the activity, far from being brutalizing, actually builds character. An anonymous ditty from old England states:

... Cocking is the Game I sing,
Worthy of the greatest Captain, greatest King,
This Pastime I above the rest prefer,
In that it fits a Man for Peace or War.
Cocking breeds Courage, where before was none.
And makes men Stoute and die that us'd to run,
Cocking breeds cunning too, and makes men contrive,
And puts them in a way to live and thrive:
And if the pious Indians say true,
It makes men witty, Good and Godly too...
(Smith and Daniel, 1975, p. 78)

As mentioned earlier, young men are taken under the wing of an older male relative or father, and taught all aspects of chicken care and lore pertaining to the sport. Females are generally not significant players in this macho milieu, though a liberated daughter or paramour may take part in a “powder puff” derby, a competition in which only women pit and handle the birds. This is male activity that takes place in “male space,” perhaps like the ancient Greek gymnasias, but without the homoerotic elements. In any event, discipline, if not character, is certainly instilled by the constant care that domestic fowl demand, as many early rising cockers can attest.

Cockfighters often resort to arguments based on pseudo-physiological notions: the birds feel no pain. Some allow that perhaps the birds feel pain but if they do it is of a qualitatively different order than that perceived by higher forms of animals. "They (chickens) have completely different nerves [nervous systems] than people do," several informants vouchsafed. Cockfighters remain unmoved by contrary scholarship and are bemused and increasingly angered by the negative image that their pastime has in the popular imagination. They are especially incensed by the activities of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and other advocacy groups whom they view as effete intellectuals and kooks, of whom the best that can be said is that "they just don't understand" what the activity entails and what it means to the enthusiast.

Cockfighting Under Fire: the Current Situation

When a speaker addressed a meeting of well-heeled cockers in a midwestern state in the early 1980s and warned of the threat that animal rights advocacy groups represented to the continuation of their sport, he was thought to be an alarmist. In fact, his words were much more prophetic than even he could appreciate. In the last decade, cockfighting has come under fire in a number of jurisdictions. In the four states where cockfighting is legal, picketing and confrontations have occurred. In these states, certain individual (usually urban) counties or parishes have enacted prohibitions against the pastime or have so restricted the activity as to render it moribund. Other states have raised the penalties for involvement from a misdemeanor to a felony. That this has had a deterrent effect is certain, according to informants. Federal laws, however, are seldom invoked to deal with cockfighters. In the words of one prosecutor, "Man we've got crack and violent crime out the wazoo and some folks want us to bust people who like to watch chickens fight. Our priorities just can't accommodate that."

Not content with inaction from enforcement agencies and public indifference to insure the survival of their pastime, cockfighters have also, quite sensibly, been active on the lobbying front. While individual state senators and/or representatives would be more circumspect than to take a \$500 "campaign contribution" from the Iowa Game Fowl Association, few would quail at the thought of accepting that much or more from individual "contributors" who happen to be cockers. These transactions are common and some cockfighters brag about "their legislators" who are "in our pockets" and who have bottled up anti-cockfighting legislation in

committee through one subterfuge or another. In Louisiana, as well as Ohio, certain legislators are known recipients of this bounty. It should be noted that some legislative support comes from those who advocate cockfighting's "authenticity" as a form of folk life and cite its historical antecedents. As one legislator from south Louisiana told me, "these folks are good country people and they've been at it [cockfighting] for years. Hell, their daddies and granddaddies were cockfighters, too. I'm not going to do anything to antagonize them by taking away something they enjoy... Hell, its just chickens we're talking about!"

Moreover, since most opposition to cockfighting comes from urban legislators, rural legislators and cockfighters can legitimately claim an urban animus toward rural folk and rustic lifestyles – yet an additional rationalization. Thus, occult "Chick-PACs," or pro-cockfighting political action committees exists in certain states, and *quid pro quo* rules the day. It is not known how much influence cockfighters can claim in Washington, though I expect it is negligible.

However one approaches the issue, one quickly notes an inescapable fact: this is a clash of cultures and world views (Hawley, 1989). Under the circumstances, there is very little room for accommodation or compromise. However, accommodation and compromise may not prove necessary in the long run. Organized cockfighting is fading from the scene; rural populations and accompanying folkways are in decline. Cockfighting will pass into obscurity along with bear-baiting, fox hunting, and other blood sports. In part this is due to the more accessible and respectable world of televised agonistic sports such as boxing, wrestling, and football. Some cockers have dropped the activity at the behest of wives, paramours, and children. Many of these women had previously referred to themselves as "chicken widows," the attraction of their men for the pastime was so all-consuming. Others have been deterred by legislation raising penalties from misdemeanors to felonies in some states or full criminalization in others. Yet the persistence of cockfighting in the modern age demonstrates a deep need among its devotees for ritual reaffirmation of male bonding in a setting fraught with conflict, ambiguity, and agon. Given the tenor of the times, the growth of animal rights sentiment and the visibility of highly engaged and articulate animal advocacy groups in even the most isolated and unsympathetic venues, one may expect more restrictions on and increasing criminalization of agonistic animal sport activity such as cockfighting.

Notes

1. Correspondence should be sent to Fred Hawley, Criminal Justice Program, Louisiana State University, 1 University Place, Shreveport, LA 71115.
2. For a detailed description of a typical cockfight, see *Organized cockfighting: A deviant recreational subculture* (Hawley, 1982).
3. For an account of the sexual symbolism and innuendoes obvious in the lingo of cockfighters, see Hawley (1982).

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