

# The Public

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A Weekly Narrative of History in the Making

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## EDITORIAL

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### The Negro in the Prize Ring.

American Negroes are jubilant about the prize fight victory of Jack Johnson, one of their own race, over a white champion. Their sense of race patriotism is stirred by it. Nor is their enthusiasm over an event of that low grade any indication that the Negro is behind the white man in civilization—not the American white man, at any rate—or, if behind, not more than fifty years behind, which is only a moment in the life of a race. Some of us are old enough to recall the shrieking patriotism of American white men in 1860 over the news that "America had licked England" in the Heenan-Sayers prize ring. Even now white Americans are affected dolefully and to the point of race anger by the defeat of Jeffries, quite as generally as Negroes are affected jubilantly by the victory of Johnson. A race war is predicted in consequence, and little race riots have already broken out.

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We might go further. The most popular American of the hour—more popular than Jack Johnson with Negroes, or than James Jeffries would have been with white men had he won the prize fight—this most popular man is popular for no other apparent reason than that he is a very type of the prize fighter, albeit he sings of the joy of the fight and the thrill of victory with reference to bloodier contests. All the way from Long

Island to Alameda one can almost hear his teeth gnashing at the necessity (springing out of the decent regard of a practical statesman for the prejudices of the pious) for playing mollicoddle in the midst of the excitement over Jeffries and Johnson. Isn't their sport also of "the manly" kind, though in these days of sporty battleships a trifle obsolete?

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It must be admitted that Johnson, the Negro prize fighter, has won with his fists and the brain behind them, a victory not only over Jeffries in the prize ring but also for the Negro race everywhere. He has given his despised race an uplift. Condemn prize fighting as you will, you must nevertheless grant that he has proved his superiority in the kind of contests which, in one form or another, white men themselves make the test of superiority—a fighting contest. Nor was it by brute strength that he won; the white man was bigger and stronger. He won by superior fighting science and superior fighting skill. The race that produces a man who, by brain more than brawn, can win in such a combat—why may not such a race produce superior men for winning battles in war or swinging big sticks in politics, if given a chance? Would the unfairness of these larger contests tell against the qualifications of one who wins under the fairness that governs the prize ring?

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While adopting the declaration of the Rev. E. A. Wasson in *The Crown* for June, that he does "not approve a prize fight," we also agree heartily with him in his estimate of the civilizing effect upon both blacks and whites, of the Negro's victory in the prize fight at Reno:

Regrettable as it may be, probably nothing that could take place in our present fallen and imperfect state would do so much to elevate the Negro race as the success of Johnson in this fight. . . . Taking men as they are, the white man's appreciation of the black man will move up many notches, if the black man knocks out the white man. Those who doubt that the Negro is a man will doubt it less. And those who recognize him as a man will recognize him as a good deal more of a man. Booker T. Washington is doing much to elevate his race. Jack Johnson, if he wins, will do much too; and, from some remarks of his I believe Washington thinks so. Progress does not move in the nice conventional grooves laid out by parlor philosophers. It cuts out its own rough, unpredictable channels. The greatest need of the Negro race is the respect of the white race. If white people thought more of Negroes, Negroes would think more of themselves. We are all apt to live up or to live down to the

opinion held of us by our neighbors. If they respect us, we will respect ourselves.

To the good people who put their hands to their faces in shame that a clergyman should hold such unrighteous opinions of a brutal sport, we commend the remainder of that clergyman's article—a vigorous article unashamed—in the *June Crown* (738 Broad street, Newark, N. J.), and by way of sample make this further quotation:

If prize-fighters are brutes, just because they are prize-fighters, a good many church-going, Europe-going, thorough-going gents are worse than brutes. Prize-fighters don't hurt themselves, nor anybody else that is not willing to be hurt. But what of these "gentlemen," who take the weak and helpless by the throat, and who choke the babies, to reap fortunes that they don't need any more than I need rings on my fingers and bells on my toes? Brutes indeed! Yet bishops and college-presidents and charity-workers chase after them and sprawl down on their bellies to lick up their spit,—for the sake of their blood-stained dollars. And the prize-fighter, who fights fair, who fights a man of his own size, who fights only the man who wishes to fight, who fights in the open, with judges and referees and watching thousands all around him, who does not fight a man when he is down, nor when he is getting up, who doesn't hit beneath the waist, who doesn't employ any weapons but the hands that the Lord gave him, and them gloved, who quits when his opponent is knocked out, and quits anyway every two or three minutes, for a breathing space, who divides the winnings with the loser,—these men are perforce brutes, and the others are Christian and Jewish gentlemen! Good Lord, deliver us! What cantists our self-appointed moral guides are, to be sure. . . . Is there a greater joke than these moral spasms? Proctor's is a funeral in comparison.

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### The Peoria Conference.

When the Peoria conference assembled last week (p. 611) to consider the break down of representative government in Illinois and propose measures to restore it, there was no certainty and not much probability that it would take the bold step it did take. But Senator Bourne's speech at the night meeting of the first day's session, was so convincing as to the merits of the Initiative and the Referendum as a remedy for misrepresentation in government that on the following day the conference declared unanimously for their adoption. The value of the Initiative and Referendum as adjuncts to representative government has been so thoroughly demonstrated in Senator Bourne's State, Oregon, and the facts are coming to be so generally known—thanks in no small part to Mr Bourne's speech in the Senate (p. 616),—that their opponents cannot much longer hinder their adoption everywhere.