

Heather Levi

The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity
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In many cultures, the spectacle of two men's bodies in physical confrontation is often seen as the essence of masculinity. However, Heather Levi, in *The World of Lucha Libre*, sees far more in Mexico City's popular lucha libre wrestling events. In her first book, she explores the ways gender relations, identity, and nationalism are manifested in lucha libre, a particularly Latin American form of professional style wrestling. Numerous scholars have pointed out that varieties of performative wrestling may function as commentary on politics, gender, race, and identity, and Levi makes clear that lucha libre is no exception. She gives an in-depth account of the ways lucha libre exposes the contradictions of daily life in Mexico, including the futility of political protest, corruption of authority, and women's influence and subjugation. Specifically, she shows how the dichotomous universe performed through wrestling—that of *técnicos* and *rudos* (good guys and bad guys)—constitutes sport in the melodramatic mode. This creates a space for social commentary, even while audiences acknowledge the performances' contrived and overly simplistic portrayal of good and evil.

Overall, Levi approaches her data as an interpretive anthropologist, suggesting that lucha libre is a key to understanding an essential, hidden element of self-conception. She began her research by speaking with luchadores and luchadoras, their trainers and promoters, their families, and lucha libre audiences in Mexico City. Combining these interviews with archival research on the history of Mexican wrestling, she relates her data to various facets of life in Mexico. Levi explores how lucha libre has both reflected and influenced politics and how media and other globalization processes have affected the sport. She also pays careful attention to the ways gender relations and ideologies play out in the ring, as well as how wrestling challenges rigid notions of gender roles. Through all this, Levi demonstrates that lucha libre is a story Mexican popular and working classes "tell themselves about themselves."

But these sources of secondhand data were only Levi's starting point. She supplemented her analysis by entering the ring herself, taking lucha libre lessons from a well-known Mexico City trainer. She attended classes alongside Mexican men and occasionally Mexican women. Because she was often the only female among the luchadores in her class, she discusses how she was treated differently than the men at times, but resisted, hoping to be treated as an equal. Although her position as a woman researching a masculine sport precluded access to some information, her gender also throws into stark clarity the implicit sense of masculinity present among the community of wrestlers.

Levi's analysis owes much to her multiple modes of research. She begins the book with a description of her own experiences learning to become a luchadora. This provides both embodied experience of wrestling as well as introduction to many of the luchadores and trainers, undoubtedly essential to her project. In addition to this participation, she was an avid spectator and audience member for lucha libre matches. This kind of dual access—to both the "inside" or "backstage" of wrestling, as well as the vantage point of observer and audience member—allowed for nuance in her perspective on the events.

The multiple viewing angles Levi uses add to her understanding of the ways lucha libre performances are deeply embedded in their cultural context. History, political economy, and an abundance of cultural forms figure prominently in her consideration. By constructing such a framework through which to view lucha libre, Levi then discusses the ways popular consumption of lucha libre is implicated in national identity and political life in Mexico. She traces the history of lucha libre's regulation, including bans on female wrestlers, its expulsion from television, and laws creating age restrictions for audience members. Lucha libre has indeed reflected a Mexican national modernizing project, which simultaneously promotes the global and progressive aspects of lucha libre, while grounding it as cultural custom and deeply embedded in traditional conceptions of the nation. Lucha libre then, which historically excluded women, but has more recently incorporated them, provides an apt reflection of the gender relations underlying tensions between tradition and modernity. Levi also explores pop-cultural appropriations of lucha libre, such as films starring popular luchadores, progressive social activists who don luchador costumes, lucha libre imagery pop art, and luchador characters in popular genre writing. These

examples further underscore her point that lucha libre, while seen as modern, has also been appropriated in a number of forms as something central to Mexican identity and steeped in gendered connotations.

Levi concludes that wrestling everywhere is fundamentally about the exercise of power. The physical power exerted in the wrestling ring through clashes of two or more bodies stands in for other modes of power and is highly dependent on the forms of power at play in the local context. Implicit in her analysis are the ways that power is gendered and thus, manifestations of tradition, modernity, and identity are inherently gendered as well. Indeed, Levi's work is an excellent inroad to understanding the ways sport, performance, political economy, gender, and identity are interlaced. From conception, through fieldwork, and now in written form, her project is innovative and informative, useful to scholars in gender studies, performance, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and art history.