

What can a Martial Body do for Society? Or: Theory before Definition in Martial Arts Studies

1 Introduction: A martial what? The scramble for definitions

The question ‘what can this or that do for society’ is very familiar.¹ It is the kind of question that has been asked by philosophers, moral entrepreneurs and social engineers of all kinds throughout the ages, and it remains a staple question in many kinds of debate in all sorts of context. Just think of mainstream television and radio programmes that involve guest and audience debates, phone-ins and arguments, in response to a tabloid or headline ‘issue’ of the day. Such programmes pick up on a phenomenon and ask whether it is good or bad, right or wrong, whether it benefits society or is harmful, and so on.

So, the structure of the question in my title is familiar: ‘What can a Martial Body do for Society?’ Of course, what might be meant by the familiar-sounding term ‘martial body’ is yet to be established. It could possibly mean any number of different things to any number of different people. The same goes for ‘society’. Despite its familiarity, the term ‘society’ could have a number of different conceptualisations and configurations, and mean different things within different configurations.

Given this semiotic openness, it strikes me that an appropriate response would be to examine the consequences of such semiotic openness itself as a key part of the question. However, I am aware that the more widespread scholarly response to semiotic openness and instability is not to embrace it, but in various ways to seek to define and to impose meanings, so as to eradicate or banish predicative instability, in order to try to be clear. This is understandable. But one problem is that such definitions often give short shrift to the ways that terms actually circulate and function in the discourses of the everyday lives of the people who use the terms out there in the world. This seems problematic, especially if we are indeed interested in the things as they exist ‘out there’, rather than as they might be made to seem to exist within a scholarly discourse.

Furthermore, the scramble for definitions also gives short shrift to the vitally important moment or stage of scholarly, academic, analytical or indeed ‘scientific’² ques-

1 Acknowledgement: This paper was originally presented as a keynote presentation for the conference *Martial Arts and Society: On the Societal Relevance of Martial Arts, Combat Sports and Self-Defence*, the 5th Annual Meeting of the German Society of Sport Science’s Martial Arts Commission, held at the German Sport University, Cologne, 6-8 October 2016. For their kind invitation and this opportunity to present my work, I thank Prof Dr Swen Körner, Leo Istas and the DVS committee.

2 I understand that many native German speakers here often prefer to say ‘scientific’, in English. But, in the English language usage, ‘scientific’ refers primarily to ‘the sciences’, and not to all academic subjects, disciplines, styles or approaches. So, in English, to say that an academic field is ‘scientific’ is to

tioning – such as that which should arise when we observe a condition of semiotic instability, plurality, multiplicity, heterogeneity, contradictoriness, and so on; and when we are faced with the question of how to proceed in the face of it, or what to do about it.

I want to be clear at the outset that I appreciate all efforts to be clear; but I want to emphasize – indeed, exaggerate – the importance of the moment of non-clarity and uncertainty. And I want to pause to consider this moment so that we may ultimately be able to find some other things to do at the start of martial arts studies analyses than rush into the construction of our own definitions, as if there were nothing better that we could or should be doing (Bowman, 2015).

I am speaking hyperbolically, of course – for clarity. (Indeed, perhaps clarity is an effect that always requires a dimension of hyperbole, caricature, and maybe even polemic.)³ Questioning and defining attitudes are definitely valuable. I definitely believe that academics should not simply talk about things as if we all already know and understand clearly what they are. So no one should simply say ‘martial body’, for instance, and then enter into a big argument about ‘the martial body and society’, without explaining what this (indeed what either) entity is supposed to be. That would neither be very academic, nor very scholarly. And if there is one thing that I hope we should all be able to assume that we share in common in contexts like academic conferences and scholarly publications, it is surely our shared commitment to being academic or scholarly, at least for the duration of the conference or the words of the academic article.⁴

So, in what follows I will be pausing to ponder and question certain meanings. However, to be clear, this will not be in order to construct tighter or more rigorous definitions and meanings. Rather, it will first be in order to begin to problematize and deconstruct some easy-to-make assumptions, especially some that are made by academic orientations – including assumptions about the act of defining. Yet, I will be doing this not in order to try to wreak havoc or destroy the value and validity of any academic work on ‘martial arts and society’, but rather to try to contribute something that might help to enrich the field, if only by emphasising the ineradica-

characterise it in a very particular way, and to imply that its approaches are highly likely to be empiricist, quantitative, positivist, and so on. But this is nothing like the approach of many working in the arts and humanities. So in English the preferred term to cover all scholarly work would be ‘academic’ rather than ‘scientific’.

3 I discuss this further via a reflection on Derrida’s method of ‘hyper-analyticism’ in *Mythologies of Martial Arts* (Bowman, 2017).

4 In this sense, it might be possible to argue that at least for the duration of a conference, we become an example of an ‘academic body’. Or, rather, we are currently one contingent instantiation of congregated participants in a wider implied discourse or field of discourses constituting the implied macro-field of academia. There may be better ways of formulating it than that. There will definitely be other ways. We could easily expend energy working out ways to formulate what ‘we are’, how to think of our collective identity (paradigmatically and syntagmatically), how to define ‘we’, and reflecting on the ‘me’ and the ‘you’ in relation to the ‘we’ that it seems both possible and desirable, possibly even strangely necessary, to try to define. After that effort, we may or may not have reached a provisional and conditional agreement. And, were we to spend our time doing this and only this, we may come away from the session afterwards wondering what we had achieved.

ble dimensions not only of plurality, heterogeneity and multiplicity, but also of the *undecidability* that permeates the definitions not only of things ‘like’ martial arts and society but also of presumed or possible relations between such ‘things’.

Indeed, perhaps we should be pleased that we may never really be able to settle definitively the matter of what ‘martial arts’ means. Perhaps it is enabling. And perhaps we should embrace the fact that we may never really be able to agree on what ‘society’ means, either; or indeed whether either of these presumed ‘things’ really exist, in what ways they may be said to exist, and what the full or fundamental dimensions of what their relationships with each other might be – or if indeed the existence of either of these things could ever be said to be more than relational. So it is to relationality that I want to turn.

2 Relationality before Definition

Can an identity ever be said to be anything other than relational? As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argued quite convincingly in the 1980s, because “identities are purely relational [...] there is no identity which can be fully constituted” (Bowman, 2007, pp. 18–19; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 111). Almost two decades later, in his arguments with Slavoj Žižek about politics and society, Laclau was still making the same arguments. In response to Žižek’s now infamous (and what Laclau always regarded as an ill-thought-through) adoption of a kind of crude Marxist and quick Leninist position on the question of how to make radical political changes in the world, Laclau argued that:

“We gain very little, once identities are conceived as complexly articulated collective wills, by referring to them through simple designations such as classes, ethnic groups and so on, which are at best names for transient points of stabilization. The really important task is to understand the logics of their constitution and dissolution, as well as the formal determinations of the spaces in which they interrelate” (Butler et al., 2000, p. 53).

Laclau pitched his argument in terms of the vocabulary and concerns of a post-structuralist and post-Marxist political theory, whose essential proposition runs like this: because everything – and by ‘everything’ what is meant is *everything* – can be seen to be *contingent* and hence *conventional*, then therefore *everything* is to be regarded as irreducibly *political* (Arditi & Valentine, 1999; Marchart, 2007).

There is much to be said about this argument. I myself wrote a PhD and then a couple of books about it, and I evidently still can’t get away from it (Bowman, 2007; 2008). But I return to it here because I believe it is vital (and vitalising) to try, as Laclau urges us, “to understand the logics of [the] constitution and dissolution [of entities and identities], as well as the formal [or informal] determinations of the spaces in which they interrelate”. This is important because, for Laclau, ‘identities’ are to be understood as “complexly articulated collective wills” – which is why he believes we should not be content with the moment of “referring to them through simple desig-

nations such as classes, ethnic groups and so on”: because such terms “are at best names for transient points of stabilization”.⁵

Some may wonder how any of this relates to the concerns of this collection, whose title is after all *Martial Arts and Society: On the Societal Relevance of Martial Arts, Combat Sports and Self-Defence*. I believe it has a direct bearing on our concerns, because Laclau’s perspective challenges us to think about the *making* or *establishment* of any identity (Laclau, 1994). This is rather different from thinking about the *academic definition* of any activity, entity or identity. Indeed, although Laclau’s argument here includes the injunction that academics be rigorous and forensic in their conceptual grasp of their key terms, it is *not limited* to this injunction. Equally, it is not merely about *problematizing* and trying to reconfigure and refine the definitions and distinctions that we may use in our work. Rather, for Laclau – and indeed for the overwhelming majority of works of cultural theory developed through and since the 1980s – the fundamental point to be taken on board is not that we should work out how best to define something; it is rather that we must face up to the fact that ‘things’ are neither simply nor necessarily ‘things’: that all identities are at root contingent discursive *achievements*, or *establishments*, or – to use Laclau’s words, “transient points of stabilization”.

This has at least two dimensions: an ‘in here’ dimension (so to speak), and an ‘out there’ dimension. Our shared use of a term like ‘martial arts’ stabilizes *our* discourse, ‘in here’. But it can also impose and project a fixed view – our present view – of all sorts of dimensions of culture and society, both backwards in time and outwards across different linguistic, geographical, cultural, religious and social contexts. So, the establishment of a shared and stable term has its benefits – predication and communication being one of them, and reciprocally, perhaps, the constitution of a society or community of communicators. But it inevitably also comes at a cost – which we might render in a number of ways, including projection, simplification, hypostatisation, generalisation, transformation, or even cultural, conceptual or linguistic imperialism, and so on. As in: we say ‘martial arts’ in English here today, but did or do they say or mean anything like it there (elsewhere) or then (elsewhen), without difference or remainder, and are we misrecognising the things ‘out there’ (and ‘then’) that we talk about in our terms, here and now. These are all huge prob-

5 I believe Laclau’s choice of the word ‘stabilization’ cannot be divorced from a conversation he had with Jacques Derrida in the 1990s, which was published in the book *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, in which Derrida stated: “All that a deconstructive point of view tries to show, is that since convention, institutions and consensus are stabilizations (sometimes stabilizations of great duration, sometimes micro-stabilizations), this means that they are stabilizations of something essentially unstable and chaotic. Thus it becomes necessary to stabilize precisely because stability is not natural; it is because there is instability that stabilization becomes necessary; it is because there is chaos that there is a need for stability. Now, this chaos and instability, which is fundamental, founding and irreducible, is at once naturally the worst against which we struggle with laws, rules, conventions, politics and provisional hegemony, but at the same time it is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilize. If there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to the extent that stability is not natural, essential or substantial, that politics exists and ethics is possible. Chaos is at once a risk and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other” (Derrida, 1996, p. 84).

lematics related to the 'in here' dimension of stabilisation. The 'out there' dimensions of stabilization are the same, albeit in inverted and displaced ways.

As very quick examples, consider how frequently it is currently said that 'mindfulness meditation' has been practiced within Eastern meditative traditions and martial arts for millennia. Or before that, qigong (Palmer, 2007). Or before that, yoga (Spatz, 2015). And so on. Such propositions are all based on acts of fantasy and projection, back into a fantasized notion of "long, *long* ago" (Fabian, 1983). And such acts of projection are not just 'ideas'. As Louis Althusser taught us, ideology is principally *material*.

This is why, on a tour I was given during a visit to the Taekwondowon (the new Mecca of Taekwondo in South Korea), our guide pointed to a picture of an old statue and said, "look, this is a statue of someone doing taekwondo: that posture comes from taekwondo". The fact that taekwondo was only invented in the 1950s (Gillis, 2008; Moenig, 2015) and that its patterns (or kata) were only subsequently changed from the Japanese martial arts from which it was derived, seems to problematize the idea that an ancient statue may be depicting a taekwondo posture. The possibility that the taekwondo posture might have been invented deliberately to depict the ancient statue in order to strengthen the ideological claim that taekwondo is ancient was not really welcome at all.⁶

There is much that such examples invite us to ponder. They are extremely suggestive. But here I merely want to introduce the point that even within the English language, even within the present moment (however defined or circumscribed), even a passing encounter with the range of practices that self-identify and self-organise in terms of one or another idea of 'martial arts' reveals myriad, multiple, legion heterogeneous practices and discourses.

3 Theory before Definition

Theoretically, I am revisiting some broadly poststructuralist points briefly (all too briefly) here because I believe that remembering and taking into consideration these lessons in our various ongoing research projects into martial arts – and the international development of the field of martial arts studies – will allow us to move on from our current fixation on 'definitions'. For, rather than orientating and habituating us into an academic life of taxonomical labours centred on defining and demarcating, poststructuralist approaches proceed from the proposition that identities are always irreducibly relational and incomplete, and hence contingent and open or ongoing. Identities are constituted by and within discourses, and they always emerge as points in clusters of moving constellations of related, contiguous, cognate, differentiated, associated, contrasting and oppositional terms, in all kinds of possible relations – linguistic, semiotic, lived, institutional, legislative, and so on.

⁶ I blogged about this here: <http://martialartsstudies.blogspot.co.uk/2015/11/from-taekwondo-to-taekkyon.html>. I also discuss it in 'Making Martial Arts History Matter' (Bowman, 2016) and in *Mythologies of Martial Arts* (Bowman, 2017).

Our current collection's title itself demonstrates dimensions of this: *Martial Arts and Society: On the Societal Relevance of Martial Arts, Combat Sports and Self-Defence*. This title sets up the relation between 'martial arts' and 'society' as one of externality (martial arts and society are presented as *different*), and then sets up the question of the relevance of the former for the latter, in terms of the latter – as if martial arts must make a case for itself or themselves, pleading their innocence and their value, and bidding for acceptance or admission into society (as if society were something like an exclusive club, like Plato's version of an 'ideal' republic).

But then the subtitle switches from the macro and quickly moves into some fine internal differentiations: So, as well as 'martial arts', we are now also confronted with something different from 'martial arts' called 'combat sports' *and* something different again called 'self-defence'. These are internal differentiations that emerge within and because of a certain configuration of the kaleidoscope of the twists and turns of discourses of 'martial arts' and everything 'around' them, that feeds into, arises out of, is part of, supplementary to, adjacent, abutting, or slipping and sliding into and around what we are here and now designating 'martial arts'. Such differentiations as those between 'martial arts', 'combat sports', 'self-defence', and others, have not always and everywhere been in existence. These putatively different 'entities' that we can all happily distinguish between and discuss here and now, today and tomorrow, and in the pages of contemporary websites and publications are neither timeless nor natural, nor indeed even necessary. They are entirely contextual, conjunctural and discursive. And we can look at how such identities have emerged, and ask questions – as Laclau puts it – of their emergence, constitution and stabilization – including questions about the place and role of academic discourses and their definitions and demarcations in these processes (Bowman, 2007; 2015; Mowitt, 1992).

4 The Object(s) of academic discourses

The issue of the *kinds* of questions we feel inclined, entitled, able or even obliged or duty-bound to ask about our objects of study is an interesting and surely significant matter. As thinkers as different as **the** Jacques Derrida, Loïc Wacquant and Noam Chomsky (among many others) have noted in their very different ways, *some questions are terrible!* Certainly, all questions should be held up for interrogation before being used to organise and orientate any quest for knowledge. As Derrida once noted, the very *form* of a question always overdetermines the possible character of the answer. Approaching the orbit of martial arts studies, Wacquant once discussed at length the ways that some academics come to explore questions that have been formulated along the lines of political or business interests (Wacquant, 2009). And much closer to home, Adam Frank has detailed the hugely ideological questions that Chinese scholars *have* to pose – as if scientifically – about the 'health benefits' of taiji and qigong in China (Bowman, 2015; Frank, 2006).

Even when a question strikes us as ‘a good question’, it is still important to interrogate why it seems good or valuable or urgent or important, and so on. On this occasion, we are all responding to the question implied – almost explicitly posed – by the conference title. As you know, my own first response to the conference question took the form of the (possibly clear, possibly cryptic) question: ‘what can a martial body do for society?’ It *sounds* clear but, of course, we still don’t quite know what a martial body is. Is it even a thing? My sense is that within the communicative context opened up – or indeed stabilized – by the recent emergence and increasing stability of the language games of the field of martial arts studies, the notion of a ‘martial body’ *could easily* be postulated and elaborated and *could easily* gain traction. *We could easily* start talking about ‘the martial body’. The notion of the martial body *could easily* become a discursive trope in its own right within the field.

Of course, it isn’t – yet. But the point is: There may be no reason why not. This is because a formulation like (the or a) ‘martial body’ actually seems overdetermined by and immanent to the current discursive and conceptual conjuncture of the field. At the very least, I felt able to choose or invent the term ‘martial body’ as part of my title because it evoked several different interacting things at once. Several different dimensions feel distilled into it, in condensation and displacement, in much the same way that Freud argued different dimensions are distilled into dreams, in condensation and displacement (Freud, 1976), and in the same way that scholars of film, media and cultural studies have since argued that a range of different dimensions are distilled into film, media and cultural texts and practices, in condensation and displacement (Silverman, 1983). That is to say, a few different things were on my mind when I dreamt up the title. It didn’t emerge for no reason from nowhere.

The first dimension echoed in it is that of our title, *Martial Arts and Society: On the Societal Relevance of Martial Arts, Combat Sports and Self-Defence*. Read against this backdrop, my title hints at giving some kind of answer to the implied question or questions harboured in the conference title: what is or are the relationship or relationships of martial arts to society (and, presumably contemporary society, at that)? What is the ‘relevance’ of martial arts, combat sports and self-defence to society (or societies)?

The second dimension distilled into my title came from my most recent reading and thinking in the field. At the time the title suggested itself to me, I had been reading Ben Spatz’s 2015 book, *What a Body Can Do* (Spatz, 2015). The key allusion in Spatz’s own title and what is most distilled into the words ‘what a body can do’ is the famous question of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, ‘What can a body do?’ Spatz displaces Spinoza’s philosophical question about what a body can do firmly into the social field, and into questions of furthering knowledge of embodied knowledge by pursuing research into bodily technique.

So, from the question of the relevance of martial arts, combat sports and self-defence to society, I thought immediately of martial arts as a bodily practice (this, too, seems overdetermined – do we ever say ‘martial arts’ and not refer to embodied practices?) and therefore of the question of the martial artist’s body – or even a

massed body of such bodies – and its (or their) possible relations to and with or within society. And, as I'm sure you could all readily anticipate – much as I did when I first thought of the title – such possible relations are likely to be multiple, heterogeneous, and often simultaneously contradictory. At different times and in different places, whatever we may either vaguely evoke or precisely define and designate as martial arts could have as many different relations to 'society' as anything else we either vaguely evoke or precisely define.

Martial arts, combat sports and self-defence are themselves relatively floating and dilatory signifiers (although, as I say, they have long been strongly tied to the notion of the body – but this could conceivably change, even if it is unlikely to be any time soon). Some people – whether academic, practitioner or otherwise – would characterise one or other of these three terms as being a subset of one or another of them. Others would prefer to separate out these three terms and fence them off from each other. Some would regard them as being in porous and promiscuous relationships with each other. Others would argue that they are utterly different realms. Many have tried to define and demarcate. Some of these are academics, who may believe themselves to be 'disinterested'. Others – whether academic or not – have tried to define and demarcate martial arts, combat sports and self-defence for more obviously 'interested' or motivated reasons – whether that be arguing for the superiority of one over another, or advertising – maybe even inventing – their own style. And so on.

There are lots of different kinds of bodies and societies that are interested in defining and demarcating martial arts bodies and societies. On the one hand, academic bodies (or academic societies); and on the other hand, institutional bodies (or institutional societies) – of many kinds, martial, sportive, 'healthist', spiritualist, self-defence, and more.

So, there is always drift, and condensation and displacement going on. We think through and with inherited terms, and hence conceptual differentials and differentiations, that we are more or less compelled to work with and within (Derrida, 1976). But, as Saussure taught us, when we are thinking about our linguistically instituted categories, first and foremost we must remember that there are only "differences without positive terms". Moreover, as Derrida went on to point out, there are no easily specifiable or simply stable referents 'behind' these differences. The flipside of signification is force (Protevi, 2001). There is no stability in signification without force. Furthermore, as Gayatri Spivak added: the institution of any difference in the production of an identity in discourse, the drawing of any demarcation that distinguishes and hierarchizes entities and identities, is essentially and irreducibly a *political* act, with more or less overtly political consequences (Spivak, 1990; 1993). Such poststructuralists formulate all of this in terms of violence (Bowman, 2010a). This means that, if we were to follow this logic through to one of its conclusions, it would become possible to argue that more or less any identity is in some sense 'martial' (it has either been fought for or fought against), and is therefore in some sense both a 'body' and in some sense a 'society', or some part-society made up of

bodies that is or are part of a larger interacting body that we call 'society', stabilized but conflictual.

5 **Body and Society, Body or Society, or Body of Society?**

So there are convolutions here, and concatenations, in which one thing folds into another thing. Yet conceptually, we are still on a very familiar plane or axis, with 'bodies' at one end and 'society' at the other, in which bodies make up societies, and societies produce bodies. The problems with this kind of thinking, however, are several.

First of all, as our already-quoted poststructuralist political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe pointed out in the 1980s, for instance, "society is not a datum but a construct". In other words, we can only ever *evoke* society. We cannot put our finger on any one thing that 'is' Society. Society only ever exists in its discursive evocations, in its mode and manner of representational construction or composition (Bowman, 2007; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mowitt, 1992; Rancière, 1998). Then, at the other end of the spectrum, the same problem applies to 'bodies' or – worse – 'the body'. For, as scholars such as Spatz and others have noted, once we institute the notion of 'the body' as the disciplinary object of our attention, we hypostatize 'it' as an 'it', a unitary knowable thing, and thereby presume 'its' existence and 'its' stable, predictable knowability (Spatz, 2015). This can actually facilitate the paradoxical situation in which the very object of our focus can become a blind-spot, and something that we don't look *into*, so to speak (Bowman, 2015).

Of course, once again I am erring on the side of hyperbole here, for reasons of clarity. The point is: society is a floating signifier, as is martial arts, as is the body.

Now, although in the 1980s and 1990s, poststructuralist theory chose for strategic reasons to emphasize the negative (via the languages of lack, constitutive incompleteness, open-endedness, the barred subject, misrecognition, shift, drift, slippage, deferral, dislocation, and so on), it is possible to propose that there is no fundamental reason why we might not now be able to take on board all of the caveats and precautions found in poststructuralism – all of its alerts about the subtle and complex matters of ethics and politics in the face of alterity and the contingency of discourse, and so on – and nonetheless go on to accentuate the positive. So we can note that even 'floating' signifiers are captured and stabilised in numerous ways – like balloons filled with helium, that can still be anchored down to something, even if they bob and float about. As I have suggested, perhaps the key anchor (or what Laclau, following Lacan, would call '*point de capiton*') in discourses about martial arts boils down to the body – or rather, a range of contingent, conventional, motivated or interested constructions of the body.

Certainly, the notion of 'the body' has an overdetermined relation as both foundation and keystone – *point de capiton*, 'quilting point', or anchor. The body is *always* implied, as a mediator. This is so, even though a long and powerful line of thought, from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* to Chris Hables-Grey's *Postmodern War*, and be-

yond, all but ignores the individual body and focuses only on all of the other technical, technological, tactical, logistical, strategic, political and ideological arts of warcraft (Gray, 1997; Sawyer & Sawyer, 1993). Yet when we evoke 'martial arts' today, the term all but *always* implies the body. We should pause to reflect on this contemporary configuration of meaning. Has the term 'martial arts' really always referred to the body? Or is this a false universal – an example of a false sense of eternity that Althusser regarded as the very definition of an ideological view? Of course, we might nonetheless note that even in works that seem to take a far broader view of the art of the martial, the body is not actually absent (Gray, 1997). It is always strongly implied. And if there is always reference to a martial body when martial arts are evoked, then we might enquire into the forms that the martial body takes.

I suggest this because, for a range of reasons, I would propose that studies of the figures of what we might call 'the martial body' as they emerge and circulate in different discursive contexts would be extremely rewarding. And to refer this back to my earlier polemic: I'd say that this would be more worthwhile in martial arts studies than the production of any more definitional lists and hierarchies of what supposedly is and what supposedly is not a martial art. For if we were to pick out the contour lines of the discursive figures, configurations and representations of martial bodies in different contexts, then we would be able to reflect on how these constructions reflect back on or illuminate the contexts in which they were produced. Or, put differently, such textual analyses might help us glean more about the ideological contexts and discourses within which the texts and figures have been produced – much more so than dreaming up and trading in disputations around 'definitions'.

Figures and figurations of the martial body will be multiple. Yet they might not turn out to be all that numerous. They would vary from place to place, but I think they would certainly include the following familiar figures and forms: First, perhaps, the oriental (of Western orientalism). Then, the soldier (of any, many or perhaps all cultures). Also the underdog (a staple of Hollywood, of course). Then the wanderer (or am I still being too influenced by Hollywood and 1970s TV series?). We also have the woman (from Yim Wing Chun to Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and beyond). And then the warrior monk (a figure that has been much appropriated in Western orientalist texts and discourses, but who is not exclusive to them, and is also popular in Eastern cultural texts and discourses). We also have the gangster (whether triad, yakuza, mafia, or generic hard man). And a cluster of intermingling figures that might be called the shaolin ninja Jedi superhuman; along with the cousin species, the superhero. There is also, of course, the competitor (ideally the Olympic athlete); the bodybuilder (at least in the modern Western imaginary, the martial body has long been connected with athleticism, which itself has even longer been connected with often impossible images of mesomorphism); then, conversely, the flipside of the hyper-visible martial body: the invisible man or woman, the surprising, unex-

pected expert, who has skill without physical markings, the master of pure technique rather than hypertrophy.

There is also another figure that interests me quite a lot: the Janus-faced figure of the martial artist who also amounts to a kind of psychiatric patient-in-waiting: I am thinking here of the 'troubled' or 'damaged' figure who needs the 'therapy' of pugilistic training to be 'saved' (think of a figure like Robert Downey Jr. here). But, at the same time (on the opposite face of the Janus-mask), we also have the supposedly serene hippy, new ager, or modern mindfulness practitioner, moving and meditating via taiji and qigong, but whose *need* for such practices ultimately suggests the presence of a previous or underlying *problem* that needed the therapeutic treatment of internal or external martial arts. (I reflect much more fully on the problematic discourse of 'martial arts as therapy' in my 2017 book *Mythologies of Martial Arts*.)

For the purposes of this conference, the figures on this first draft of my surely incomplete list might be clustered into three groups: first, people in films; then, the person of moral fibre; then, the degenerate. Such groups seem apt to conclude or summarise the list – encompassing as they do, first, media or representational simulacra, second, a figure of supposed social improvement, and third, a supposed agent of social decay. And if the figure of the martial body can encompass such a range, then it is possible to see quite easily that it would be possible to pose and test many hypotheses about martial arts as socially righteous and/or socially deleterious, and come up with any number of possible conclusions. A point to consider here, then, is that actual textual or empirical studies in and of themselves may be unlikely to settle any matter or issue of 'societal relevance' decisively in and of itself.

And this conference asks us specifically to think of the *relevance* of martial arts to (or for or in) society.

As mentioned earlier, this seems like a good question. But, as I suggested earlier, perhaps we should pause to consider *why* it seems like a good question. Has it always been a good question? Will it always seem to be a good question? It will definitely not be long before we all but forget the seeming eternity that has recently started to pass, in which people asked each other: 'will martial arts *ever* be a valid object of academic attention?' Do you remember that question? It used to be asked as if the very idea were preposterous and impossible. But look at us now. Because of our success, perhaps we are already forgetting how often and with how much sincerity this question was asked. We are forgetting because now we have a mushrooming array of conferences and books and journals and even degree courses dedicated to martial arts as a valid object of academic attention. Yet we should pause to think about the fact that not very long ago at all, to devote yourself to the academic study of martial arts could easily have been to commit an act of what my friend Sixt Wetzler once in conversation with me light-heartedly termed *career suicide*. But, today it is all of a sudden quite possible to be promoted to the very top of academia by focusing on the field.

Nonetheless, the notions of martial arts do still struggle with certain stigmas in the academic world. Martial arts are still stigmatised as being ‘trivial’, sometimes ‘childish’ other times ‘mad’, usually ‘boyish’ (or heteronormative), and overwhelmingly *irrelevant* (Bowman, 2010b). The subject is easily deemed trivial and irrelevant because martial arts do not seem to connect obviously to the uber-legitimising “architectonic of knowledge” that is *politics* (Young, 1992). Martial arts are sometimes hastily deemed to be not obviously political enough to be self-evidently ‘important’ to the fields of the arts, humanities and social sciences.

Perhaps this is why so much academic work on martial arts has organised itself so heavily around political questions. Indeed, if we were to try to sum up how scholarship has assessed what a martial body can do for society, I would propose that our literature review would be likely to discover that what has most exercised serious scholars is what we might call the political dimensions subtending them. Obviously, this is not ‘politics proper’ – although martial arts have connected with proper politics many times in many places in many ways. But rather, I mean ‘political’ in the more Heideggerian sense of being shown to be complexly contingent and irreducibly ideologically-ethico-politically accented and inflected (Marchart, 2007).

Some of the main ways that martial arts scholarship has been elaborated include the following: First, in terms of questions of *nationalism*. Benedict Anderson argued that in the modern world it is nigh on impossible for us to think of the world outside of national and nationalist categories (Anderson, 1991). Studies of martial arts have time and again revealed the sometimes blatant, sometimes subtle, but always tangible connections between martial arts and nationalism. Second, and closely related, is the area studies approach, which connects martial arts styles with regions and often goes on to construct regions via a tacit equation between nation and ethnicity. Third is the class paradigm. Martial arts have been studied in relation to class. Yet, again, as classes are perhaps always constructed as national rather than neutrally socio-economic, their connection with nationalist (and ethnic) matters has never been far away. So, a focus on class cannot be unplugged from matters of the nation; nor can it be dissociated from gender. And gender focused paradigms are increasingly well represented in scholarship. There are also significant approaches organised by ideas of religion, ritual and political economy. The intermingling of these kinds of approach, and the emergence or development of different perspectives and viewpoints has also produced works that might be characterised as organised by postcolonialist and multiculturalist paradigms too.

Viewed from here, the question of the social or societal relevance of martial arts seems like a bit of a ‘no-brainer’, or an open goal. We can easily show how ‘relevant’ martial arts, combat sports, and self-defence are for society – at the same time as thereby showing how relevant we are within the university. And these are both important processes. Showing how our object of study is ‘relevant to society’ legitimises it in the face of any public interrogation or audit (Readings, 1996). Such legitimisation of our object or field reciprocally legitimates ‘us’ (Lyotard, 1984).

6 Conclusion

I have written about this, and what I take to be the important matter of the dual or double focus of *any and every* academic approach, in my 2015 book, *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries*. So I will not labour the point again now. Instead, I want to conclude by making some comments and suggestions about how to relate to or deal with the issue of definition that I have now mentioned a few times, and that has recently taken off as a problem (or pseudo-problem) within martial arts studies.

And as I have said, I am dissatisfied with the rush to define. At the same time, however, I think that the growing prominence of the matter of definition does attest to a lot that is promising in the current state of martial arts studies. It is definitely a reflection of the drive to found and ground and legitimate and build the field rigorously, and according to proper academic protocols. To this extent, our current moment is of great significance. And we should be extremely happy. However, to my mind, it seems that in the current rush to try to define and establish things clearly, there is a risk that we are labouring under certain misapprehensions. These misapprehensions could come to constitute an obstacle or impediment in the development of the field. Stated bluntly, it strikes me that the field is currently struggling with a bad case of what Paul de Man once called ‘the resistance to theory’ (De Man, 1986).

In the case of our field, I think this takes the form of much current thinking proceeding in terms of what the theorist Slavoj Žižek once termed “naïve empiricism” and “naïve cognitivism” (Žižek, 2001) – or even what Derrida decades earlier referred to as “incompetent” and even “irresponsible” empiricism (Derrida, 2001). What such thinkers mean in making claims like ‘empiricism is naïve and/or incompetent’ is that there is a kind of untenable idealism and simplicity at the heart of approaches which begin from the premise that to make sense of the world we should simply look around us, focus on things, classify them and count them; and that through a process of testing and disputing around categories, we might eventually get at the truth of reality and get it right.

The more or less opposite opinion is essentially shared in common by thinkers as divergent as Žižek and Derrida and many other poststructuralists: namely that, on the contrary, what we all always need is an explicit theory. I say *explicit* theory, and not just ‘theory’, because I believe it is always demonstrable that *everyone has a theory, even if they don't consciously know what it is*. This is why it is so common for people who are arguing with each other to challenge the other person’s argument in terms of what they perceive as the weakness or misapprehension of its viewpoint, position, or assumptions about ‘the way things are’ and ‘how things work’ – in other words, its *underlying theory*.

Obviously, I’m sure we could all agree that there is an obligation for academics to be self-reflexive and self-aware about their own viewpoint, position, premises, hypotheses, and so on. My contention is that all of this points in the direction of *the-*

ory. Nonetheless, it still seems to be the case that a lot of martial arts studies work currently lacks any clear sense of its own guiding and orientating theory. By ‘theory’, here, I am referring to anything from an overarching ontology to an actively thought-through image or sense (to use Laclau’s terms again) of how discourses and identities are constituted, and the logics of their processes of establishment, stabilization, interaction, transformation, and dissolution.⁷

So, yes: I am arguing for more theory, an injection of theory, and the permeation of theory, before definition. But, no: I am not proposing a return to the intellectual battles of the 1980s and 1990s, in which the introduction of Continental Philosophy into the humanities led to a state of trench warfare between those who ‘did theory’ and those who ‘did empirical work’. One might hope that we might have come to terms with both impulses and moved into a dialectical synthesis of such supposed opposites by now – or at least a hybrid third space, or something similar (depending on how we theorise and verify change and development).⁸

Furthermore, although I am arguing explicitly ‘for theory’, I want to be clear that I am certainly not therefore arguing ‘against empirical work’, or ‘history’, or ‘reality’, or anything like that. Moreover, I would not follow either Žižek or Derrida or anyone else who might ever position capital-T-theory or capital-P-philosophy as the start or end point of any academic work on martial arts. But I do want to insist that it will be vital and vitalising for all work in martial arts studies to embrace certain aspects of cultural theory, especially when we are – as in the current moment – faced with the apparent ‘need’ to *do something* that so many people seem to believe is *define our objects and our field*.

For, faced with the (apparent) challenge of ‘needing’ to define, as we have already seen, with even the tiniest bit of theory, we are able to pause to reflect on the fact that *before definition there is relation*. Words and meanings and practices and values travel and twist and turn and change and move in relation to larger and other forces and processes. So martial arts will always be relationally determined. Laclau

7 I use the word ‘sense’ here, because I think that we can only ever get an image, sense or feeling for ontology anyway. I hesitate to say ‘structure of feeling’. This is because, as the arch-poststructuralist Jacques Derrida himself made clear – the very idea, term, notion or (possible) concept of ‘structure’ is rarely ever much more than a metaphor anyway.

8 I am not disparaging focused empirical work. I am not arguing for theory for theory’s sake. But I would want to try to explain my point with reference to a couple of philosophers – first Slavoj Žižek and second Friedrich Nietzsche. Slavoj Žižek is fond of posing the witty rhetorical question: “that’s all very well in practice, but what about in theory?” He often poses this question as a kind of conclusion. I confess, for a long time, I did not quite understand the object of this witty quip, or the lesson it sought to convey. To me, it just sounded like an argument ‘for theory’ – the claim that capital-p Philosophy should be regarded as the king of all disciplines. But then I remembered one of Friedrich Nietzsche’s points in *The Antichrist*: namely, argues Nietzsche, even when a priest is telling the truth, or even when you agree with a point made by a priest, he should not be believed. This is because, for Nietzsche, the position from which the priest speaks is wrong – the underlying worldview, the cosmology and ontology, are all wrong. And you mustn’t be confused by the occasional appearance of something akin to reason, rationality or right thinking. In other words, Žižek’s formulation “that’s all very well in practice, but what about in theory?” and Nietzsche’s injunction to disbelieve priests even when they are telling the truth both imply the need for a strong, clear and reliable theory, otherwise we risk being led blindly, without our realising it, by the nose, into dangerous – or at least unknown, unanalysed, and unthought-through terrain.

and Mouffe theorised this in terms of 'discourse' and 'articulation' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Stuart Hall insisted on the need to establish a sense of what he called the 'conjuncture'. Any analysis requires what Hall called 'conjunctural analysis' – that is an analysis informed by an awareness of the historical moment and context, and the forces and relations that produced it. Without this, we cannot really know or understand anything about any entity or identity, such as martial arts, combat sports or self-defence.

Of course, there may be many ways to characterise and analyse a conjuncture. And, as deconstruction sought to teach us, no context is ever fully closed; so we might never know for sure that we know for sure everything salient about a context or a conjuncture. Maybe therefore we can't really know for sure that we know anything at all for sure. Yet what we can do is attempt to assess a context in terms of forces and relations, relative weights and gravities, and the ways in which forces and fields constitute, colour and condition entities, identities and practices.

In Britain, Raymond Williams long ago proposed that it is possible to formulate and look at entities, practices and identities and to assess them in terms of whether they are *dominant*, *residual* or *emergent*, and to ask whether they may be acting in ways that are either in line with a *dominant* or *hegemonic* ideology, or whether they may be *alternative* or even *oppositional* to it (Williams, 1977). This may seem like quite an old and quite a crude paradigm, but even with something as simple as this, Williams provides us with a viable and flexible framework through which many different kinds of studies of martial arts and society might be initiated – all happily liberated from the stifling imperative to define and demarcate without any real sense or sensitivity to the complexities of matters of time, place and the interplay of forces that both produce and transform meanings, practices and contexts.

Thus, to conclude: if we quickly consider a deliciously marginal or problematic example, like taijiquan, for instance; we may be able to reconfigure discourse and debate about it – away from a sclerotic fixation on the question of whether it can even be 'defined' as a martial art or a combat sport, or self-defence, or a form of what we now insist on calling 'mindfulness meditation', etc., and into an understanding of what it *has been* and *has done* and *might be* and *might do* in a given conjuncture. (Note again the way that we now 'see' 'mindfulness' everywhere, from meditation in modern America to martial arts in ancient China, even though even a few years ago we wouldn't have seen *anything* as mindfulness, anywhere, because no one was using the term. Anyway...)

As Wile has argued, taijiquan *emerged* in a discursive foment in which China was threatened ideologically, economically and politically (Wile, 1996). Its nineteenth century proponents elaborated its philosophy along obscurely yet immanently nationalist lines, so that taijiquan came to stand in stark opposition to any and all things Western or European. In this process, *residual* Taoist ideas and principles were mixed into a growing *alternative* worldview that was *oppositional* to everything supposedly non-Chinese. This is also precisely why Maoism tolerated taijiquan, of course, and why it 'survived' the Cultural Revolution: it amounted in its elaboration

to a collective, combined, non-Western, non-competitive, non-individualistic calisthenics, (made to be) avowedly rooted in a non-religious worldview. But of course this was 'survival' via a formalisation that amounted therefore to a mutation on a genetic level. So, in a sense, post-Mao, the term taijiquan essentially had a transformed meaning referring to a transformed practice. In this sense, in that context, whether we think it was a martial art or a mass ritualised socio-political symptom, taijiquan was highly 'relevant' to society. But notice that here, by 'society' we actually mean *ideology*.

In its journey to the West, as we know, in the Western imaginary, taijiquan was ostensibly deracinated from any nationalistic inflection or valence, and became articulated to a range of open-ended discursive configurations or conjunctures: from the counterculture to new age ideology and onwards into therapeutic and even medical culture (Frank, 2006). In all this, it becomes differently 'relevant' to 'society' at different times and places – and, of course, the words 'relevant' and 'society' have different meanings in each instance too. Mixed in with all of this is the fact that any of those involved in taijiquan in any of its different times and places will believe themselves to be either or both learning a martial art, either or both for sport or for self-defence, and/or involved in healthful calisthenics, and/or preserving or changing a culture, and/or involved in a religious or mystical practice. And so on.

We can multiply our examples, and look at the ways in which certain words and moves have drifted and disseminated and flipped and mutated all over the place, around the world, through time and space, and examine the processes of their emergence and development within each new context; the ways they become mixed up and mixed in with existing concerns and outlooks, and reciprocally modify and move existing situations.

I have mainly referred to the theoretical models of people like Ernesto Laclau, Jacques Derrida, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams here. (I've also used Slavoj Žižek, but mainly as a kind of *uke*.) And I have done so mainly because I believe that there is – more or less – a kind of theoretical ontology that connects their outlooks, despite their many other differences (Sedgwick, 2003). This outlook is essentially poststructuralist or postfoundationalist. And as much as many people may still have a distaste for so-called 'high theory', I maintain that martial arts studies will only benefit from a sustained engagement with what there is to be learned from high theory – as much as there is to be learned from engaging with the most intimate ethnography, the most detailed historiography, the most multi-layered sociology, and so on.

Some of the first lessons relevant to us here would relate to an awareness of the slippage and vicissitudes of signification that require us to pay very close attention to the shifting and drifting apparent referents of our focus, their different meanings in different times and places, the genetic mutations and quantum leaps that occur in 'cultural translation' from one time to another, one place to another, one language to another, even one utterance or instance to the next, and the rather frustrating fact that, despite our eternal desire to see unity and simplicity, cultures and prac-

tices are always 'in bits', always in process, incompleteness, dispute and contestation. There is no unity to any dimension of the terms martial arts, combat sports, self-defence, or society, apart from that which seems to be conferred by the use of the terms themselves – in much the same way that speaking of unicorns or fairies or justice or Father Christmas or the nation or madness or suchlike can create a 'reality effect' that can lead people to believe these are actually existing real and unitary things.

All meanings, all practices, are stabilizations. The question is, why *these* stabilizations in *these* ways? As Derrida once protested:

"All that a deconstructive point of view tries to show, is that since convention, institutions and consensus are stabilizations (sometimes stabilizations of great duration, sometimes micro-stabilizations), this means that they are stabilizations of something essentially unstable and chaotic. Thus it becomes necessary to stabilize precisely because stability is not natural; it is because there is instability that stabilization becomes necessary; it is because there is chaos that there is a need for stability" (1996, p. 84).

So perhaps an alternative or oppositional line of questioning into and of or for our 'martial body' – however stabilized – might be a line that asks why we are so often fixated on fixation, why we often seem so stuck on stabilization; and what it is that both stabilization and destabilization 'do' for this or that corpus, whether martial or social or both, whether 'in here' or 'out there'.

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