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POLITICS AND SPONTANEITY: REFLECTIONS ON THE POLITICS OF AIKIDO AND THE MARTIAL ARTS

ABSTRACT

Examining the relations between the martial arts, nationalism, and security has been the main framework for thinking about the politics of the martial arts in recent historical and cultural studies. However, the mechanisms of power implied in tying the martial arts to the activities of the state or state actors are not always clear. By applying insights from Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben to the phenomenon of the practice of the traditional martial arts as a practice of the self, the relationship between politics and spontaneity can be explored. The argument is made that martial arts can become a form-of-life that deactivates sovereign and biopolitical relations of power.

CONTRIBUTORS

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KEYWORDS

Aikido; deep ecology; fascism; form-of-life; self; spontaneity

Accepted for publication on 26 February 2026



Budō is a divine path established by the gods that leads to truth, goodness and beauty; it is a spiritual path reflecting the unlimited, absolute nature of the universe and the ultimate grand design of creation.

Morihei Ueshiba, 1938/1991, p. 27

Examining the relations between the martial arts, nationalism, and security has been the main framework for thinking about the politics of the martial arts in recent historical and cultural studies (Benesch, 2016; Bowman, 2013; Judkins and Nielson, 2015; Katz, 2025; Wile, 1996; Xu, 1999). This research raises the issue of martial arts as a type of political means deployed for state-political or nationalistic ends. The martial arts are presented as an arm of state power, either directly as means to security, (or the opposite, as a means of insurrection), or indirectly as an ideological resource for nationalistic identities and narratives. For example, Judkins and Nielson (2015) describe the New Culture Movement in 1920s-1930s China, as a state sponsored appropriation of the rich traditions of Chinese martial arts for its project of national salvation (p. 112). This research has proven to be a very productive vein to explore the historical context of the development of the martial arts, especially in critically examining the over-determining myths that tend to obscure their political elements.

However, the mechanisms of power implied in tying the martial arts to the activities of the state or state actors are not always clear. If operations of power are the “moving substrate” of politics in a “complex strategical situation,” as Michel Foucault once put it (1978, p. 93), how do they operate with respect to martial arts practices and traditions exactly? There are two registers of power to consider: the sovereign power of the state and the disciplinary or regulatory powers of biopolitics. In the first, politics is understood as “an activity directed towards the state” (Magnusson and Walker, 1988, p. 50); the “striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state” (Weber, 1919/1969, p. 78). In the second, politics is understood as the outcome or terminal point of numerous power relationships, state or non-state, that administer corporeal life and encounter resistance throughout the social body. In the first register the politics of the martial arts refers to how they are used to achieve political goals external to them such as promoting a particular national identity or suppressing enemies. In the second, the politics is more like what Foucault means when he discusses various sites where power is “disassociated” from the body, turned into “aptitudes” and “capacities” in relations of “strict subjection” (Foucault, 1995, p.138). In different institutional contexts such as military, policing, sport, health, lifestyle or work applications, the martial arts can be seen as disciplinary practices in this way. In both registers, the politics of martial arts is a matter of political *use*.

We might recognize however that it is common for martial arts practitioners to train to acquire their own corporeal “powers” in

clubs, dojos and similar social forms, which are to some degree independent from the state and biopolitical programs. These are not so much powers that are *used*, to force compliance of others for example, even though they can certainly be presented that way, especially in sports, self-defence, policing or military applications. For the practitioner they are more like the “powers of action” that Gilles Deleuze describes: powers that actualize or fulfill an internal potential (1998, p. 101). To learn to deliver a perfect sidekick as Bowman (2016) illustrates, is to develop a power of action in this sense. It is not actually *for* something necessarily but brings to fruition an internal potential built up through training. It increases a power within the subject. Rather than separating or disassociating a power from the body for an external use, the joy of delivering the kick well expresses the feeling of an expansion of power and the overcoming of resistance (of one’s clumsiness for example). It is a power, but strictly speaking it is also useless.

Thus, while martial arts training can be used by states for security or ideological purposes and often resembles many of the minute political technologies of the body that Foucault describes, in practice they imply a free use of the body which has no direct or necessary ties to state politics, nationalist agendas or disciplinary apparatuses. It is therefore not clear in this context whether the martial arts can be properly viewed as a political *means*, as something that can simply be put ‘in use’ to implement political strategies or achieve goals. They may be captured by states as Judkins and Nielson show, but as lineages of martial practice they also cultivate a life of the body according to criteria that have different origins and goals. For Hannah Arendt violence is a pure political means (Arendt, 1970; Hanssen, 2000; Vahabzadeh, 2019). Can the same be said of the martial arts?

The development of Aikido offers an interesting angle to review these questions. Formulated after World War Two by O’Sensei Morihei Ueshiba as “the art of peace,” Aikido was received in counter-cultural circles in North America and elsewhere as a practice in the skills of violence that was also, paradoxically, a practice of non-violence. The way (*do*) of *ai-ki* was about the harmonization of energies or forces, not the cultivation of destructive energies and forces. It promised to diffuse the toxic relationship between violence and politics. Nevertheless, the history of Aikido is entangled in the rise of ultra-nationalist movements and violent colonization projects in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s. The precursors to Aikido like *Daitō-ryū Jujutsu*, or the idea of *bushidō* in general (the way of the samurai), were certainly “used” as ideological emblems in the formation of pre-war Japanese identity and the rise to power of the military class within the state (Benesch, 2016; Goldsbury, 2008b). They were also used directly to train officers in the means of violence.

Morihei Ueshiba himself was closely associated with Deguchi Onisaburu, the leader of the Ōmotokyō Shinto sect, which articulated a messianic *Yo-Naoshi* (world renewal) project based on the divine expansion of *Kokutai*, a transformed and enlightened Japanese Emperor system. Ueshiba trained Ōmotokyō disciples in

his first dojo in Ayabe and famously provided personal security for Deguchi's ill fated imperialist project to establish a Divine Kingdom in Mongolia in 1924. Deguchi Onisaburu was imprisoned by the Japanese government from 1935 to 1945 after Ōmotokyō was suppressed for the second time, (the first being in 1921 for *lèse-majesté* (treason), shortly after Ueshiba's association with the group). As Amdur (2015) explains, "Ōmotokyō was not suppressed because it was a peace-loving, New Age religion" but because of "Deguchi's active support of the messianic terrorists of the Strike North faction, who intended to destroy the political institutions of the nation and install the emperor as a kind of divine mannikin" (p. 151). Despite his involvement with the insurrectionary activists, Morihei Ueshiba evaded arrest due to his connections with senior police officials, who were also his students (Goldsbury, 2008c).

In the 1930s Ueshiba was also closely associated with members of the Sakurakai ('Cherry Blossom Society') proto-fascist factions within the Japanese military and intelligence community, who met, it is reported, in Ueshiba's prestigious Kobukan Dojo, established for members of the military and the Emperor's family in Tokyo in the 1930s (Amdur, 2015; Goldsbury 2008c).

Goldsbury (2008c) notes that:

the 'young officers' of the Sakurakai met in Morihei Ueshiba's dojo and were advised by three notorious civilian ultra-nationalists. Okawa Shumei, who was a lifelong friend of Ueshiba, was behind the scenes in several coup attempts; Inoue advised the assassins who carried out the May 15 Incident [the assassination of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi in 1932]; and Tachibana, a suspect in the same Incident, went into hiding in Manchuria. Yet here they were, holding meetings in the Kobukan dojo. (n.p.)

The Sakurakai was disbanded in 1931 after two coup attempts, but Ueshiba's friend Okawa continued to play an important backroom role in Japanese politics as a Strike South faction ideologue and intelligence agent manipulating and neutralizing opponents. He was eventually tried in the Tokyo war crimes tribunal after WWII as a class-A war criminal. In addition, Ueshiba held numerous posts training officers and spies in various military academies in Japan and Manchuria throughout the Japanese invasion of continental Asia and the early years of World War Two. These associations indicate his at least tacit support for the secretive currents of messianic, proto-fascist, and militarist Japanese imperialism that sought to "reform" Japanese democracy through intimidation, terrorism and assassination.

Ueshiba's concept of Japanese martial arts at this time also tied them integrally to the imperial national policy. The tenor of this is summarized in a 1932 article in *Budo*, the magazine of the Dai Nippon Budo Senyokai or Great Japan Budo Enhancement Association, an Ōmotokyō paramilitary organization that Ueshiba chaired:

the true task of Japanese martial arts is to become the leader of all the martial arts on earth as part of the continuing

process of realizing an Imperial Way for the whole world. Japan is the suzerain of the globe, the model for the earth and the will of the entire world is Greater Japan. Japan is the model form for the perfect world. It is only after this spirit is completely understood that one can really understand the true meaning of Japanese martial arts. (cited in Goldsbury, 2008c, n.p.)

As Goldsbury (2008a, n.p.) puts it: "There is no question but that Aikido was fully part of the military culture of the time." In this regard, Morihei Ueshiba can be seen as giving the prestige of his martial mastery to ultra-nationalist causes and Japanese imperialism. When not directly providing the venue for training and meetings at the Kobukan dojo in Tokyo, he used his martial arts skills to train its soldiers and intelligence agents on location in Japan's expanding colonial empire.

On the other hand, the vagueness of the available histories of Ueshiba's relationship with the rise of Japanese militarism and imperialism opens the possibility that the points of conjunction between Aikido and the nationalist project were more ad hoc and provisional than fundamental. The development of Ueshiba's martial art from Daitō-ryū Jujutsu in the 1920s, to Aiki-budo in the 1930s, to something recognizable as contemporary Aikido after 1942, was tied sequentially to these political events. But there are also indications of something divergent in this development that resisted being reduced to use as a pure political means, not least of which was Ueshiba's own resolutely apolitical stance throughout (Goldsbury, 2008b).

This other trajectory culminated in Ueshiba's mystical transformation in 1942, when he sought to thoroughly disassociate Aikido from imperialism, militarism and the idea of violence or conflict altogether.

The military is dominated by reckless fools ignorant of statesmanship and religious ideals who slaughter innocent citizens indiscriminately and destroy everything in their path. They act in total contradiction to God's will, and they will surely come to a sorry end. True budo is to nourish life and foster peace, love, and respect, not to blast the world to pieces with weapons. (Ueshiba, cited in Stevens 1987, p 47)

He retreated to Iwama and gave up his formal titles and duties, leaving his son Kisshōmaru to run the Tokyo dojo and his *uchideschi*, Hirai Minoru, to oversee the military government's amalgamation of the martial arts into the Greater Japan Martial Virtue Association. Arguably the development and export of post-War Aikido as an "art of peace" could be seen as serving the political and diplomatic purpose of rehabilitating the post-war Japanese state, but the specific details of Morihei Ueshiba's transformation and the birth of Aikido are part of the puzzle of the relationship between martial arts and politics where the pieces do not fit.

The premise that the relationship between the martial arts and politics is one of means or use needs to be further examined. In a brief but illuminating commentary, Deleuze and Guattari (1987;

see especially pp. 395-400) describe the martial arts as a form of what they call the “war machine,” a social form that generates the capacity to deliver war or violence but which, in its organizing principles, is fundamentally at odds with the nature of the state and biopolitics. Whereas states do go to war, have standing armies and police forces, and otherwise exercise their legitimate monopoly over the *use* of violence within a territory, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the war machine itself is nevertheless a distinctive formation that in many ways agitates against its use by the state. Its nature and capacity to deliver violence is a byproduct of a different mode of organization more suited to the fluid conditions of battle than to the administrative tasks of government. While states and disciplinary apparatuses “striae” or compartmentalize the domains or activities they control—they “parcel out a closed space to people”—the war machine “sees all things in relations of becoming” (1987, p. 352) and effectuates a “nomadic” distribution of people in a smooth space “without borders or enclosure” (1987, p. 380). Like the nomads of the desert whose terrain is unmarked and undivided *except* by the shifting availability of forage and water, the war machine’s effectiveness is given by its responsiveness to the shifting exigencies of war.

The primary determination of nomads is to occupy and hold a smooth space: it is this aspect that determines them as nomad... On their own account, they will be transhumants, or itinerants, only by virtue of the imperatives imposed by the smooth spaces. (1987, p. 410)

For Deleuze and Guattari, the war machine’s activity is not so much about making war as it is about nomadism *per se*: creating a form of life and conditions suited to responding to the contingent circumstances of continuous variation.

Thus the war machine and the martial arts are altered when they are subsumed to the state’s juridical and institutional apparatus. If they are *used*, they are detached from their own milieu and their own trajectory, namely to be oriented to operations in an open strategic situation or “smooth space” such as open combat. The war machine itself “seems to be irreducible to the State apparatus, to be outside its sovereignty and prior to its law” (1987, p. 352), owing to the fluid ontological conditions involved in combat.

This distinction entails numerous other characteristics of the war machine and martial arts in Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis. The martial arts and the war machine are components of an “assemblage” of elements (1987, p. 406), which include their unique relationship to space, to organizational composition, to technologies (like weapons), to the expression of affect, or to forms of thought. So, for example:

[T]he martial arts do not adhere to a *code*, as an affair of the State, but follow *ways*, which are so many paths of the affect [of active discharge, of counter-attack]; upon these ways, one learns to “unuse” weapons as much as one learns to use them, as if the power and cultivation of the affect were the true goal of the assemblage, the weapon being only a provisory means. Learning to undo things, and to undo oneself, is

proper to the war machine: the “not-doing” of the warrior, the undoing of the subject. (1987, p. 400)

Key to this passage is the idea that the martial arts cultivate powers and affects that destabilize fixed codes of behaviour, the instrumental use of violence (weapons) and ideological structures of personal identity. In particular, one would think that the undoing of the self/subject sits uncomfortably with efforts to construct fixed national identities and rhetorics. In matters of style of thought, affect, movement and action, the martial arts are adapted to a different set of conditions. Like the war machine, they might coincide with the projects of the state or be appropriated, but “returned to its milieu of exteriority, the war machine [and by implication the martial arts] is seen to be of another species, of another nature, of another origin” (1987, p. 354).

Instead of beginning with examining how the martial arts are appropriated for state projects and political programs, I would like to approach the political meaning of the martial arts the other way around. Rather than a political means used by state actors, or by ‘the state’ itself as a kind of political actor, I would like to view them politically starting from their existence as contemporary practices of the self: as “*ways*” or “so many paths of the affect” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 400). The martial arts provide a form in which individuals seek to act upon themselves to “undo” or transform themselves in relative autonomy from the state and other institutions (Foucault, 1997a; Little, 2018). Martial arts are, from this point of view, not a form of state politics or biopolitics but an *ethopolitics*, a practice of self-conduct or self-cultivation (i.e. an ethics) built on the underlying acquisition of martial “powers of action”. One key component of this ethic is their focus on the spontaneous generation of martial forms (Little 2018), which we will discuss further below. As Deleuze and Guattari describe in their analogy of the war machine to the game of Go, (in contrast to the “state” game of chess with its fixed movement of pieces), in martial arts “it is a question of arraying oneself in an open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point” (1987, p. 353).

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the war machine is therefore an interesting analytical tool for reassessing the politics of the martial arts and especially their place in recent political life, in which the stable reference points for traditional political analyses—the state apparatus, the postwar political spectrum, ideology critique—seem increasingly tenuous and simulacral (not unlike political life in the 1920s and 1930s). This framework opens an avenue into understanding two different politics. One forms from our dominant image of the state and biopolitics. It operates through capture and appropriation of powers, including the capture and appropriation of the martial arts. In this model, the martial arts have a politics that is confined to being either an instrument of police, military or rebellious violence or an ideological resource for national identity, hegemonic masculinity or insurrectional counter-hegemonies. The state, ideology and disciplinary institutions, etc. are taken to be stable analytical entities that can

explain how the martial arts are used politically. The other has no particular image. It operates through a displacement or decoupling of powers from their assigned or predetermined uses. It is a politics of the “outside” as Deleuze and Guattari put it (1987, pp. 376-377) —a politics that does not attempt to re-establish the centrality of the state or the logical template of its “interiority.” It does not gain its meaning by reproducing or referring back to “common sense” or the alternating poles of a state’s mythical foundations and bureaucratic rationality. Instead, its politics is sketchy. It operates ethopolitically by cultivating a form of life and extending its powers of action. It creates open spaces for itself in which a way of life can thrive, link up with other ways of life and form “relays,” invoking and awaiting “a people to come” to give it its force.

In the context of the latter, we might begin to explore the ways martial arts practice runs counter to the operations of state or biopolitical types of power, even when they are sometimes closely associated with them. In particular, we might examine how they cultivate a *politics of spontaneity* and what this might mean for the significance of practices of the self in political life. This also reverses the order of explanation to some degree: not how does politics define the use of the martial arts, but how does the practice of martial arts define a politics?

THE POLITICS OF THE MARTIAL ARTS

In the back of our minds today must be a number of examples of martial arts in which embodied practices of the self, which trace a lineage to an ethopolitics of self-cultivation, nevertheless align in “practical” everyday terms with a quite other politics. Recent investigative reporting on white nationalist “active clubs” in Canada reveals a network of white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups who have been training mixed martial arts in parks and private gyms to recruit members and prepare for the “upcoming race war” (Szeto et al., 2025; Paas-Lang et al., 2025). This is consonant with reports over the last decade of MMA “Fight Clubs” recruiting far right members to train for violent confrontations at Neo-Nazi rallies (Zidan, 2018). More reports have followed tracing the relationship of MMA training and tournaments with the extreme right in Europe, the US and globally (Schatz, 2018; Colborne, 2019; Zidan, 2019; DW, 2020; GPAHE, 2023). The accounts of “bushido meditation” from the Norwegian neo-Nazi and mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik, the scenes of martial arts training in Cuarón’s film *Roma*, based on the historical *Los Halcones* paramilitary group in 1970s Mexico (Cuarón, 2018), and of course the literature on nationalist appropriations of the martial arts noted earlier all seem to indicate that the martial arts, even when they represent themselves as embodied practices of self-transformation, are means that can align with, or be used for, a variety of fascistic political ends. This can be quite explicit in the promotional literature: “The Battle of the Nibelungs [an MMA event planned in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany] does not want to understand sport as part of a rotting

political system, but as a fundamental one to establish an alternative” (DW, 2020). The “alternative” in this case seems much like a return to the tried and true anti-democratic fascisms of the past. This is also not to overlook the way martial arts have been aligned with revolutionary types of politics either, like the explicitly anti-fascist physical culture and Wehrsport training of the Viennese Austro-Marxists in the 1920s (Deustch, 2017). But in each of these cases we understand martial arts as a form of violence used as a political means.

These examples conflict with my own introduction to Aikido in an undergraduate philosophy course on deep ecology and the philosophy of the environment in the 1980s. My professor, Alan Drengson, presented Aikido as a type of *Lebensphilosophie*, or a way of living a philosophy. Aikido addressed the question of how to live a grounded, coherent, ethical life. It was not just a martial art that one might practice as a hobby, a self-defence technique or as exercise and recreation, but a “whole art” that had profound ontological and epistemological implications for being in the world and knowing the world. In particular, it embodied the conduct of “right livelihood” based on principles of deep ecology, non-violence, reconciliation, community building, and self-realization (Drengson, 1992; 2007).

Deep ecology’s signature distinction was between “shallow”, reformist ecology and a more radical “deep” ecology (Drengson, 1983). If the former was based on the idea of sustainable, but nevertheless anthropocentric, use of natural resources, the latter was based on a non-anthropocentric, “eco-spheric egalitarianism” in which all members of the eco-system have intrinsic value. The ecosystem and members of the natural world are not resources to be used; nor is the self. All beings are equally important members of a biospheric community on inviolable paths to self-actualization (Naess, 1995). In this context Aikido was presented as one amongst other whole arts that could transform a student’s relationship to the world at a fundamental level. It was in this sense a practice of the self much as Michel Foucault was describing more generally in his lectures about the care for the self around the same time (Foucault, 2005). Aikido was more than a martial art or a set of fighting skills, but an embodied practice of philosophy, or as Drengson preferred, *ecosophy*, in which the self-realization of selves would be attained “by and through direct appreciation of the ways of other beings” (1983, p.7).

Thus Aikido is said to be a Way to harmonize ourselves with the universal energy of nature. The various meditations, movements, evasions, submissions, exercises, postures and throws that form its practice have as their unifying principle the realization of our oneness in nature. In Aikido the participants express through their movements the fundamental principles of the natural world (Drengson, 1992, p. 60).

In affiliating Aikido with deep ecology Drengson presented the politics of the martial arts in the guise of an earth first, ecologically centered practice of cultivation of the self: the martial artist as a kind of eco-warrior or eco-monk.

This deep ecology paradigm person is balanced, integrated and developed in all parts of self. He/she is aligned with, centered in, and in harmony with, natural processes, both within and without. They are non-violent in their approach to all of life, themselves included. They do not seek to bow or bend nature to their will, but instead bow or bend to fit nature as it is (Drengson, 1983, p.64).

I will come back to the relationship between deep ecology and Aikido in a future research project, but what is presented here is a practice of the self in which a different use, or non-use, of the body becomes the site for a reconfiguration of politics.

The contrast between these different examples cycles back to the questions about the politics of martial arts and how we might begin to think about martial arts politically. Do the martial arts have an intrinsic politics due to their traditions of self-cultivation or are they instruments or arbitrary signifiers available to any politics? If traditional martial arts are defined by practices of self-cultivation, how do practitioners' political opinions, actions and usages become separated from, or even hostile to, their "whole art" principles? Moreover, how do they fit within the "complex strategical situation" of power relationships that Foucault describes?

Broadly speaking, the literature on the politics of the martial arts has been influenced by the arbitrary signifier approach. It regards the traditions of the martial arts as ideological resources available, like any other signifier, to be "articulated" with other signifiers to generate political meanings, whether these be to establish national identities or subaltern resistance movements, hegemonic masculinities or women empowered to take back the night, etc. One of the strengths of this approach is to resist the temptation of essentialist analyses on one hand—the idea that the fighting arts have an unadulterated essence independent of the historical, political, ideological or gender narratives that circulate around them—and of hagiography on the other—the idea that the stories of ancient traditions, secret knowledges, superhuman powers and heroic founders should be taken at face value. Yet, as we have argued with the war machine reference, there are important elements of martial arts practice that elude this approach when it comes to understanding the martial arts as powers of action. An approach focused on the development of the powers of action themselves, and how these come to express a form-of-life, offers a different point of departure to examine the politics of the martial arts.

An indication of how to answer these questions is suggested *firstly* in the way that Michel Foucault describes practices of the self – "an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being" (1997c, p. 282) – as *practices of freedom*. In the Western tradition, he traces them to the ancient lineage of Greco-Roman practices of *care for the self* by which citizens cultivated themselves to be fit and able to participate as credible, autonomous political actors in civic life. For Foucault, these practices bear on politics then and now in that they both require a political condition of

freedom to exist and are the outcome of a considered reflection on the form that that freedom should take. The idea, as he puts it, is "that ethics can be a very strong structure of existence, without any relation to the juridical *per se*" (Foucault, 1997b, p. 260). To engage in these practices of self-transformation, individuals must not only grant themselves a freedom from being *used* as the instruments of external juridical-political powers and structures of domination but find a means to free themselves from slavery to their own inner demons and passions through ongoing self-monitoring, self-reflection and self-discipline. "Not to be a slave (of another city, of the people around you, of those governing you, of your own passions) was an absolutely fundamental theme" in the ethico-political life of the Greek and Roman citizen (Foucault, 1997c, p. 285). The cultivation of the self was a means to construct a sphere of autonomy with regard to their relations to themselves and others.

"Traditional" martial arts in contemporary societies stand in an interesting relationship to the lineage of practices from the Greco-Roman world with which Foucault was concerned. Whether these types of martial art have formed as a property of how the "West" has received the "Eastern" martial traditions, or whether this type of care of the self has always been a property of martial practice East, West, North or South is obviously a complicated question (Bowman, 2016). But certainly in the counter-cultural context of North America and Europe in the second half of the 20th century, the traditional martial arts of the Far East came to provide a unique instance of what Alan Watts' (1957) referred to as "ways of liberation." These *ways*, like Taoism and Zen, were as Watt's described them, "highly difficult technical disciplines" through which "the unthinkable ingenuity and creative power of man's [sic] spontaneous and natural functioning" could be attained (Watts, 1957, p. 27). They implied a buried Taoist fluidity or Zen-becoming in each subject weighed down by rigid layers of law, regulation and control, a trope that became very influential in the overall counter-cultural reception of the martial arts (*pace* Bruce Lee's "liberate yourself from classical karate" (1971)). On the one hand this framed the practice of the martial arts as a matter of repressed 'nature' waiting to be liberated, in a manner that the Foucault of *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* poignantly criticized. But on the other hand, it led individuals to cultivate a deliberate way of life and care for the self through continuous self-monitoring, self-improvement and self-experimentation.

So if the first point about the politics of the martial arts as practices of freedom is the formal requirement that a degree of freedom is needed for the practice to take place, or even that the social form of the practice itself creates this space, the second point is about the content of the practice itself: how do the martial arts embody the exercise of power? As noted earlier, the practice of the martial arts typically involves the cultivation of a repertoire of *powers of action*; the various throws, kicks, punches, joint locks and combinations, etc. that make up the training. Continuous self-monitoring, self-improvement and self-experimentation hone and expand these powers. What is perhaps more interesting politically in the counter-cultural context, is how the martial arts cultivate

these powers of action within a practice of spontaneity (from Bruce Lee's "liberate yourself" (1971), to the processes of becoming-animal in Chow Gar (Farrer, 2013), to Aikido's *waza* that flows freely (Ueshiba, 1987)). Martial arts are practiced to attain free powers of action: an unlimited capacity for spontaneous martial variation. To the degree that the goal of training is to not only learn effective technique but to overcome barriers to complete martial fluidity and spontaneity (Farrer, 2013), the "certain mode of being" that the practitioner seeks to attain through their practice of the self is spontaneity itself. They are oriented towards powers of action as expressions of pure potentiality.

One way of thinking about this politically is presented by examining martial arts practices in relation to Giorgio Agamben's concept of the form-of-life: "a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life" or "a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself" (Agamben 1993/2000: 4). This admittedly obscure formulation provides a basis for thinking about what the "non-use" of the body might consist of. For Agamben, it presages a "coming politics" freed from operations of sovereign power and biopolitics. In his analysis, sovereign power and biopolitics reveal their essence most clearly when they coincide in a political state of emergency and the subsequent exceptional measures that enable "the sovereign" to suspend the law and strip citizens of their rights and social status. The resulting *homo sacer*—the extra-judicial camp detainee as the paradigm case—is the human being reduced to naked life and exposed to unmediated power, that is, reduced to a biological substance or "simple fact of living" shared with livestock or other animal life and deserving of no more protection than them. This biological substance is the same life that is extracted, administered, disciplined or *used* in biopolitics in everyday fields like health, insurance, productivity, risk management, algorithmic government, etc. so that, as Agamben puts it, the very biological concept of life "is actually a secularized political concept" (1993/2000: 4). Moreover, "[t]his is the case also and above all because naked life, which was the hidden foundation of sovereignty, has become, in the meanwhile, the dominant form of life everywhere" (1993/2000: 3).

To go back to the theme of "use" and spontaneity in the martial arts then, a life that *can* be used is a life whose potential or powers have been separated from its way of life. Agamben opposes this to his concept of a form-of-life—"a life that can never be separated from its form"—to describe a milieu or way of living in which the potentiality of life and its powers of action are cultivated in "absolute and reciprocal immanence," independent of any predetermined uses or ends (Marmont, 2022, p. 194). Like in the examples of playing with toys or the use of a limb to which Agamben variously refers (eg. 2007, pp. 85-86; 2015, p. 51), a form-of-life emerges as an expression of pure potential when its activities are defined immanently, not by predetermined functions. The use of the toy is only given in the unfolding of the

play; the use of the limb in the manner of its groping that "invents its use."

Therefore when he describes a form-of-life as "a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself," he means that *intrinsic* to the practices we have described above as ways, whole arts, care of the self or practices of the self, a relationship to the self correspondingly transforms the self as a property and outcome of its *way* of living. In training martial arts with others even the self-possession of the individual gives way to the fluid and contingent conditions of immanence that come to define what the individual needs to do in any particular martial exchange. In order to *do* martial arts, the martial artist must become *undone*. More specifically, the development of spontaneity in the martial arts depends on a type of practice of the self which Foucault described as "se dependre de soi-même," a letting go of the self (as opposed to the individualistic focus "practice of the self" can sometimes be taken to suggest) (Rabinow, 1997, p. xxxviii; Agamben, 2015, p. 34). The martial artist is both effector and affected. "At stake" in the practice to become spontaneous is the ability to let go of predetermined ends and "ego" to enable a responsive use of the body to emerge. To be able to deliver the sidekick a considerable amount of self-transformation and "groping" has had to be accomplished first, not only in learning to move the body and deliver the kick effectively, but also to be sufficiently in the moment to respond to the situational emergence when an opening for the kick unfolds. The use of the body in the delivery of the kick emerges in, or is immanent to, the unfolding situation of the martial exchange. In every kick, correctly delivered, the martial artist gains experience of the pure potential of life expressed in spontaneous martial technique.

Perhaps more significantly, with respect to the overall ethic of spontaneity and Deleuze and Guattari's "*ways*, which are so many paths of the affect," cultivating spontaneity is an instance of activating, instilling, conserving and extending the potential and projective qualities of counter-attack as a kind of permanent, self-propelling, kinetic motor force. Deleuze and Guattari make an analogy between the free action of the martial artist and the force and speed vector of a hunted animal:

[W]hat the warrior borrows from the animal is more the idea of the motor than the model of the prey [in which] the release of a Speed vector ... becomes a free or independent variable. ... In free action, what counts is the way in which the elements of the body escape gravitation to occupy absolutely a nonpunctuated space. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 396, 397)

It is not surprising then that the cultivation of spontaneity of the martial artist is often linked to animal-becomings in martial arts lore—the praying mantis in Chow Gar, for example, "where the mantis is a vehicle for the development of the hidden powers of the human body" (Farrer, 2013, p. 151).

This is why the focus on spontaneous generation of technique in the martial arts is so fascinating and uniquely instructive

regarding political life. It is the cultivation of a power of action which is “radically open to situational emergence... [and] denotes a drastic removal of use from the logic of utility and tyranny of ends” (Marmont, p. 192). If the “moving substrate” of sovereign power and biopolitics is defined by the operations or practices of subjection in which the life of individuals is divided (seized, separated, manipulated, disciplined, exposed to violence), a practice in which a form-of-life is elaborated *deactivates* these operations. Agamben argues that forms-of-life are precisely ways of living that cannot be put “in use” for sovereign or biopolitical ends. They intrinsically resist, disassemble or render inoperable this usage:

The question of the possibility of a nonstate politics thus necessarily has the form: is it possible today, is there today something like a form-of-life, namely, a life for which, in its living, one has to do with the living itself, *a life of potential?* (Agamben, 2015, p. 210)

It is very difficult to find a better instance of this life of pure potential than the cultivation of spontaneity in martial arts practice.

Nevertheless, if Foucault is correct that the care of the self was constitutive of Greco-Roman political life, it is by no means clear what its politics are today. Foucault (1997c) argues that the field of care for the self today has been largely subsumed by “religious, pedagogical, medical, or psychiatric institutions” (p. 282). It has been looped into the general biopolitical model of security and incorporated into the disciplinary practices and biopolitical operations of power that have progressively taken charge of the living bodies of individuals and populations in the modern era. The idea of martial arts as a health or fitness practice would be an example of this. Moreover, in the field of politics defined by sovereign power and the state, where and how do contemporary practices of the self, like the martial arts, come into contact with something “political” today? Where, in the intersection of practices which are typically described as “cultural”—self-cultivation, identity formation, dojo etiquette, ways of life, ethical practices, ways of liberation—and practices which are typically described as “political” – democratic contestation, activism, liberation struggles, the return of fascism, political violence, ideological identifications, state rivalry, etc.—do the martial arts fit? Foucault himself seemed to defer the question of how practices of care of the self related to contemporary politics for future research, noting that in contemporary analyses the modern political subject is still “conceived of essentially as a subject of law” in which ethopolitics and “the question of the ethical subject” (i.e. the subject constituted by practices of care for the self) was allowed very little room (1997c, p. 294). In many respects, the problem continues to rest on what we mean by politics and how we tend to privilege a fixed set of ideas about where and what politics is (Walker, 1993). What in fact does it mean to act politically?

POLITICS WITHOUT AN IMAGE

Foucault wrote a preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1972/1977) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which seems directly relevant to the question of the politics of the martial arts. Thinking about the MMA “active clubs” and similar fascistic phenomena, if the idea is plausible that the martial arts express a *form-of-life* as Agamben has described it, how do practitioners become divorced from the principles of their practice? Foucault actually proposes renaming *Anti-Oedipus*, an “Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life,” (after St. Frances de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life*) in order to emphasize what he sees—perhaps partly tongue in cheek—as the primarily *ethical* framework of the book. What Foucault extracts in his brief summary is a number of specific ethical procedures that comprise the “art of living counter to all forms of fascism” (1972/1977, pp. xiii-xiv).

What is interesting for us about Foucault’s insight into Deleuze and Guattari in this preface is the way he acknowledges their rethinking of the problem of fascism. Fascism is not simply an external political formation in the form of a social movement, party organization, state structure or ideological formation, (on the model of numerous comparative studies of the historical fascisms of Hitler, Mussolini and Shōwa era Japan for example), but “also the fascism within us all, in our heads and our everyday behaviour” (Foucault, 1972/1977, xiii). In other words, it is in part a problem internal to practices of the self. Fascism is in crucial ways a state or nation-building project but it is also an *ethopolitical* matter of self-conduct and self-formation. The “true believer” or “authoritarian personality” is not simply an ideological agent or psychological profile, but an ongoing process of self-construction, or the product of a process of self-construction that goes awry. Therefore the political question of a non-fascist ethics is: How does one construct oneself otherwise? “How does one keep from being fascist...?” “How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism? How do we ferret out the fascism that is ingrained in our behavior?” (1972/1977, xiii).

Here I would like to briefly focus on the second procedure in Foucault’s summary of the ethos of non-fascist life and cautiously sketch a method for thinking about a non-fascist politics discernable in the relationship between aikido and deep ecology, mentioned earlier in the essay. As an entry point into thinking about the politics of the martial arts, the second procedure goes: “Develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchization” (1972/1977, p. xiii). This is a distinction concerning the ordering of ways of life in which Deleuze and Guattari define a key tendency of fascism. Fascistic politics privilege static representations or images of race, nation, tradition, virility, destiny, etc. over processes of transformation and becoming. Representations or images enable the subordination of practices of life to hierarchical schema and externally imposed directives, whereas proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction enable the disassembly of representations and identities. Where the former refers to the

organization or interiority of the state, the latter refers to the smooth space and exteriority of the war machine. Clearly this distinction is not as neat and tidy as it might appear because Deleuze and Guattari also define fascism by its tendency to transform the “line of flight” of the war machine into a suicidal “line of pure destruction and abolition” (1987, p. 230). However, the path to the fascist line of destruction passes through the “subdivision and pyramidal hierarchization” of hardened categories—purify the race, make America great again, let men be men, etc. —whose impossibility of realization ultimately propels the drive to annihilation.

Although it might just be an artifact of translation or a difference in emphasis, where Foucault says “proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction,” Deleuze and Guattari settle more on the theme of the conjunction “and” early on in *Anti Oedipus*—the “... and ... and” that draws connections between elements in a processual chain of becoming (1972/1977, p. 5). Develop action, thought and desire by making or studying *conjunctions*. What happens when seemingly separate things, like ecology and martial arts, connect and are brought together into new compositions and new ways of life? In a future project I would like to develop an analysis of the conjunction between deep ecology’s practice of harmony with nature and Aikido’s practice of harmony in martial technique. Somewhere in this conjunction I would argue that a form-of-life opened up in which ecology shifted from the shallow to the deep and martial arts shifted from the preparation for violence to a freeing relation to violence.

This procedure therefore proposes a particular way of thinking about the issues of martial arts and politics. Instead of beginning with a secure definition of what martial arts and politics are and then examining how they interact, one is obliged to begin more tentatively. It is necessary to closely examine the components that constitute a life in the martial arts as well as the connections made between martial arts and other practices like deep ecology to see what new (or old) embodied and collective powers they lead to. At the risk of sounding too “postmodern” in answering the question of what it means to act politically, this procedure evokes a politics without an image, which takes shape only through “relays, intermezzos, resurgences” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 377), and in its fragility and fugitive nature awaits its people.

Declaration of competing interests

The author affirms that they had no competing interests relevant to the work underpinning this manuscript.

Declaration of artificial intelligence use

The author affirms that no artificial intelligence applications were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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ISSN: 2057-5696



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