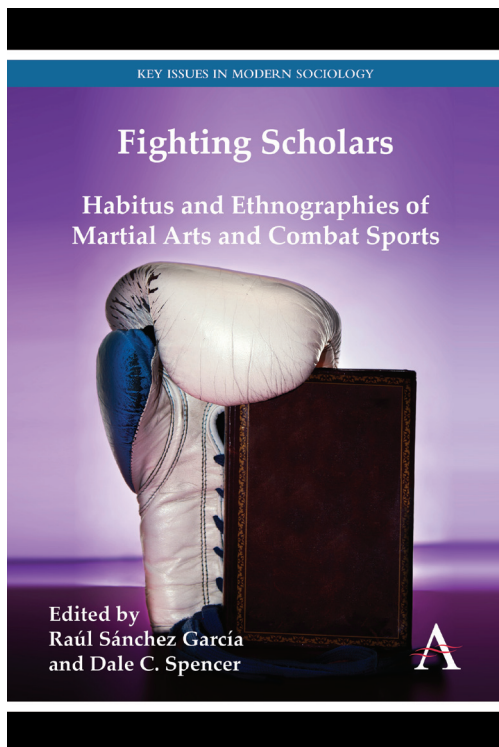


BOOK REVIEW

Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports
Raúl Sánchez García and Dale C. Spencer (editors)
Anthem Press, 2014
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REVIEWER

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Fighting Scholars is an edited collection of ethnographic scholarship on martial arts and combat sports (hereafter referred to as MACS [Channon and Jennings 2014]). This volume is the first of its kind; it brings together a selection of empirical studies that demonstrates the fecundity of ethnographic research on the one hand and of Loïc Wacquant's notion of 'carnal sociology' [Wacquant 2004, 2014] on the other. This volume is also quite timely when considered in relation to the wider context of the 'bodily turn' in the social scientific and anthropological study of sport and physical culture [Shilling 2007].

In the introductory chapter, editors Raúl Sánchez García and Dale C. Spencer outline their rationale for the volume, indicating in the process the considerable influence of Wacquant. In addition to contributing a chapter and an epilogue to the volume, Wacquant first introduced his ideas in his pioneering ethnography of boxing, *Body and Soul* [2004], in which he drew from and sought to develop the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The main idea put forth by Wacquant is to 'use habitus as a methodological pathway, through the technique of apprenticeship, to pry into the forging and functioning of habitus as a spring of social action' [Wacquant 2014: 211]. It is this idea and its implications for research in MACS with which the contributing authors all seek to engage.

Additionally, García and Spencer provide their explanation for what they see as the volume's four-fold thematic division. Their method of division highlights four key areas – body techniques, race/ethnicity, gender and religion – which they believe can be fruitfully explored with a 'carnal' approach. However, this division does not shape the organisation of the ensuing chapters. Rather, it draws attention to some of the main, recurring points of focus across the various chapters. This thematic division could have been useful for readers in allowing them to navigate the volume, explore areas of particular interest and facilitate in highlighting the aspects of their contribution with regard to the frame of reference used by the editors.

Considering the importance of Wacquant's oeuvre to this collection, it is appropriate that his chapter opens the proceedings. In his contribution, Wacquant reflects on his fieldwork in the Woodlawn boxing gym in Chicago, which was the subject of his most influential scholarship and which inspired many scholars (including myself) to take a carnal approach to the study of MACS. Following Wacquant, the rest of the chapters focus on a variety of topics and provide myriad insights across the wide range of MACS. Despite demonstrating a great deal of diversity in this respect, it is worth pointing out that the contributors to the volume all seem to approach their research from a decidedly Western/dominant point of view. This is something that future research could perhaps balance out by encouraging considerations of/ from alternative perspectives.

Along with Wacquant's carnal approach, the chapters in this volume are informed by the Bourdieusian notion of *habitus*. Regarding the latter, the chapter by David Brown and George Jennings offers interesting avenues for further research. Brown and Jennings aim to identify some core dispositions that make up a martial habitus in the context of wing chun and taijiquan. They also contemplate the possible identification of shared dispositions across MACS. Although they strongly emphasise that this is a preliminary enquiry, the idea of identifying shared dispositions that span different MACS in diverse ways and to different degrees could extend the study and use of habitus considerably.

Another highlight from this volume is Brian Hogeveen's chapter on Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Hogeveen utilizes a phenomenological framework which relies on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In doing so, he draws attention to the intricate sensory and perceptual dimensions of phenomenological conceptualisations of *habit* (rather than *habitus*) and thereby demonstrates the potential in developing an approach to the study of MACS that is truly derived 'from the body'. The central role of the sensory and perceptual dimensions of habitus is a topic explored further in subsequent chapters, including Sara K. Schneider's chapter on somatic learning in kalarippayattu and Sara Delamont and Neil Stephens' chapter on mental agility and enculturation in capoeira. However, it bears mentioning that these authors' analytical grasp of the implications of the sensory seems less systematic in comparison to Hogeveen's.

Furthermore, Einat Bar-On Cohen introduces another possible avenue for further enquiry in her chapter on kuydo, the Japanese art of archery, in which she makes use of ideas advanced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Specifically, she suggests replacing the habitus/practice nexus with poststructuralist conceptualisations of actuality/virtuality. Doing so yields intricate insights into such matters as the intertwining of combat and religion (one of the key themes highlighted by the editors). Conversely, Spencer's chapter on muay thai offers insights into the complexities of national identities through a consideration of attempts by Westerners to learn this art in Thailand. Lastly, Garcia employs Norbert Elias' theory of the 'civilizing process' in his ethnographic study of aikido and boxing. The Eliasian framework has been examined extensively in social scientific studies of sport. However, these studies have taken a more macro, socio-historical approach, with the fleshy field of practice unfortunately suffering occlusion. Garcia's timely effort to redress this imbalance thus serves as a useful contribution to further research in the ethnographic domain.

Overall, *Fighting Scholars* offers rich empirical and theoretical insights which are consistent with the stated goals of the editors. Although each individual chapter demonstrates in its own way, based on the perspectives of each individual scholar, the value of carnal sociology and ethnography applied to scholarly investigations of MACS, I do agree with the note Wacquant makes in the epilogue, viz. that the goals laid out by the editors remain to be achieved in *future* studies. One possible and as-yet-unexplored avenue would be to integrate literature not directly focused on MACS. For example, anthropological studies on *embodied ways of knowing* [Harris 2007] now encompass a wide range of corporeal and sensory bodies of knowledge. Such interdisciplinary efforts could help to make a stronger case for the relevance of martial/combat habitus to other connected fields of enquiry as well as enhance the developing field of martial arts studies.

Critical to this task is to highlight how the topics central to habitus in these contexts connect, intersect and interact with the societal contexts within which these gyms, dojos and MACS spaces are embedded. In particular, much remains to be explored vis-à-vis the dynamic structures and the everyday operation of inequality and resistance to/reproduction of relations of oppression in connection with the themes of race, ethnicity, gender and religion. Moreover, I would also add to the list of themes put forth by Garcia and Spencer the theme of 'class', which is interestingly absent from the chapters in this volume. The chapter that best demonstrates the importance of this wider awareness is the chapter by Alex Channon in which

he examines the transformative potential of mixed-sex MACS training with respect to established gender relations and hierarchies.

In conclusion, *Fighting Scholars* takes a pioneering step forward towards a more systematic, critical and corporeally-grounded study of MACS. Continuing in the tradition of Wacquant's early groundbreaking efforts, this volume aligns methodology and theory with corporeal insights. *Fighting Scholars* is therefore a valuable and essential resource for martial arts studies scholars and points the way towards a very bright future for the study of MACS and for martial arts studies more broadly.

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