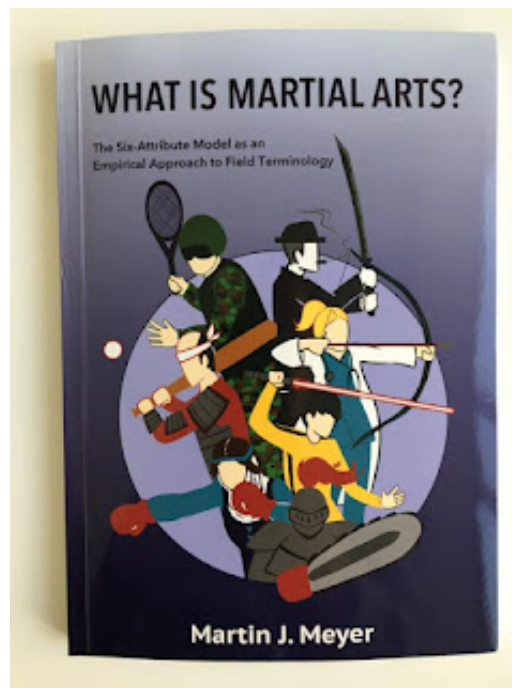


21st April 2021 In Violent Agreement: Martin Meyer's Approach to Definition



[\[https://web.archive.org/web/20240724111006mp_/https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-9pjJllkugC4/YH_CL_C9Evl/AAAAAAAAAb8Q/IJXPL0Dy_eYVE6Mw0FelX1CQdNKkbqrgCLcBGAsYHQ/s960/meyer.jpg\]](https://web.archive.org/web/20240724111006mp_/https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-9pjJllkugC4/YH_CL_C9Evl/AAAAAAAAAb8Q/IJXPL0Dy_eYVE6Mw0FelX1CQdNKkbqrgCLcBGAsYHQ/s960/meyer.jpg)

After a long time away from campus, I was pleasantly surprised on my return to find that a copy of a new book had been sent to me. This is *What is Martial Arts?* by Martin J. Meyer. I initially met Martin at our first Martial Arts Studies Conference at Cardiff University in 2015. Since then, he has participated in many of our events, published in our journal, and become elected chair of the German Martial Arts Studies research network, DVS-Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport. So, I was delighted to see his new book.

On the inside of the cover, he had written me a note, saying that he was very hard on my work in chapter one, but in chapter four he uses ideas, arguments and concepts from my work in a much more positive way.

I was intrigued, and I read the book cover to cover in one session. It is not my intention to review the entire book here, which is filled with many interesting ideas, arguments and – crucially – new approaches.

It does not feel appropriate to offer a full review for several reasons. First, as mentioned, Martin Meyer is a colleague who has also over the years become a friend. So, it would be hard to give an objective review, and especially hard to be fully critical, should I so desire to be so.

Secondly – and this is perhaps the main reason – the book is defined by complex data analysis and interpretation that I am simply not competent to comment upon. The book is based upon large survey data, which is surely innovative and valuable to all who know how to read and respond to such material. But unfortunately, that is not me. I suffer from number blindness.

However, the third reason it would be tricky for me to review the book properly is because my own work is used somewhat polemically to set up the entire argument. This boils down to Meyer's critical reading of my

past arguments that scholars should not get bogged down in the question of the definition of martial arts. Against this, Meyer insists that we can approach the matter of definition in a way that is theoretically literate, empirically informed, and scientifically tested. This is the main work of the book.

I leave it to others to assess the status of Meyer's reading of my own arguments and his use of them. With regret, I also have to leave to others the assessment of his analytical method. I sincerely look forward to reading critical responses to that.

Nonetheless, I have been asked, both by Martin and others, what I think of the book. So, I will say something about his critical-polemical use of a part of one of my arguments in setting up his project, in chapter one.

First, let me say that I was honoured to be given such a central place in the discussion. Doubtless, this is because I am one of the few voices who has given reasons why we should not worry about the question of definition, hence I was an obvious choice in this respect.

What follows, after Meyer's initial engagement with my arguments, is a wide ranging and interesting overview of attempts in the field to establish definitions. By the end of the chapter, he explicitly agrees with me that his review of attempts to define martial arts certainly reveals that definitions will fail or be limited, limiting, partial and unstable. It is at this point that he makes his move into an innovative empirical data-driven approach.

I cannot really fully review Meyer's use of my work in setting up and setting out his own project, because doing so would require reiterating a complex argument with many aspects and moves. And these are all already out there, in the world, available for people to read. But I wanted to note that what he picks out as key for him is a binary in my argument where I contrast 'literalist' approaches – which insist that martial arts can be defined according to precise timeless features – with more contextual or open-ended approaches – which say that martial arts will really only ever be whatever people say and think they are, rather than displaying some eternal essence.

This latter approach is more of a discourse approach, that holds that the meanings of social and cultural terms, entities and identities, values and practices always shifts over time. My life steeped in discourse theory, studies of textuality and intertextuality, deconstruction and poststructuralism leans me towards this argument. Meyer regards it as a cul-de-sac. Hence, he polemicises against it.

In doing so, Meyer sets up his entire book as a disagreement with my argument. Then, in order to prove that you can define martial arts, and not just be happy with the idea that they are whatever people say they are, he goes on to conduct a survey in which he asks people what they think martial arts are.

On my reading, this strikes me as a profound agreement with me. I say the meaning and understanding of terms can only be grasped by looking at their use and understanding. Meyer says he disagrees with me, and goes on to try to prove that my argument is wrong by looking at how a large number of people, surveyed at one moment in time, use and understand the term martial arts, and cognate terms related to it.

To be clear, I don't think I ever said that this kind of work was not valid or valuable. I genuinely think it is. I would never be one of those academics who disses empirical research and then refers to it to support my

theory. I value empirical studies. I just tend to do textual and non-data driven qualitative discourse analysis myself.

So, I just wanted to suggest that maybe Martin's polemical set-up was not strictly speaking necessary. Maybe we are actually in what might be called 'violent agreement' rather than 'violent disagreement'. We both completely agree that you can establish what martial arts are by looking at the real world uses and features – it's just that I prefer to look at cultural texts and he prefers to carry out interviews and surveys.

Of course, the twist is that, in taking this context-bound snapshot of what people think martial arts are at a given period of time, Meyer believes that he can establish more enduring and essential features of martial arts and hence establish a future proof definition.

Certainly, the empirical grounding of his approach is infinitely superior to the many approaches which seek to define martial arts based on the individual preferences and prejudices of the person doing the defining. But I would suspect that one would need to carry out similar studies – reiterations of the original study – periodically, in order to establish enduring continuities in meanings. This is after all the time-honoured way that writers of dictionaries such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* approach the problem of establishing what words mean.

So, in sum, Martin Meyer's *What is Martial Arts?* strikes me as a novel book that gives an interesting overview of some vital and vitalising discussions in the field. Meyer incorporates insights from a lot of work that has emerged in the pages of the *Martial Arts Studies* journal and elsewhere over recent years, and brings to the table a commitment to empirical work and data analysis that is admirable.

His final chapter is a fascinating read too. This is the point at which he pulls it all together and attempts to construct his framework, model and definitions, referring both to his study results and to a range of different theoretical and analytical concepts and constructs.

I will not say what his framework is, because this would take me too far away from these quick summary comments. And, simply put, you should read the book yourself.

The book is available from Amazon Germany and other outlets:

<https://www.amazon.de/-/en/Martin-J-Meyer/dp/398073160X>

[https://web.archive.org/web/20240724111006mp_/https://www.amazon.de/-/en/Martin-J-Meyer/dp/398073160X]

MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES RESEARCH NETWORK

Podcast [https://web.archive.org/web/20240724111006mp_/http://masresearchnetwork.apps-1and1.net/our-podcast] - Journal [https://web.archive.org/web/20240724111006mp_/https://mas.cardiffuniversitypress.org/] - Newsletter [https://web.archive.org/web/20240724111006mp_/https://mastudiesrn.us11.list-manage.com/subscribe/post?u=47e02ee5133e34fa9acc48c12&id=803b68c77e] - Free Book [https://web.archive.org/web/20240724111006mp_/https://cardiffuniversitypress.org/site/books/10.18573/book1/]