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Fight the biopower! Mixed martial arts as resistance

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Abstract

Globally, mixed martial arts has seen a staggering level of growth in participation and fandom over the past 20 years. This paper presents the results from an immersive participant ethnography of an urban mixed martial arts gym in England's North West and the experience of some of its members. Emergent is that the practices of mixed martial arts can be viewed as acts of resistance against neoliberal norms and expectations that permeate the diverse yet everyday lives of participants outside the gym's walls. This paper applies the sociological imagination of and through the body and draws from the Foucauldian notion of biopower to discuss how, in the search for athletic solidarity, an authentic community is built and maintained around this transgressive pursuit. It is evident that a diverse range of individuals are making and remaking a space in which neoliberal norms, labels and expectations are rejected in favour of a renewed connection with the body and each other.

Keywords

resistance, biopower, mixed martial arts, neoliberalism, Foucault

Introduction

Over the last decade and beyond the growth of mixed martial arts (MMA) has been stark, in both mainstream sporting culture, through the success of the talismanic promotional organisation The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), and in terms of participation. In the USA, participation in MMA grew by around 42% between 2011 and 2019 (Statista, 2020) while in Brazil the popularity of MMA has grown to the nation's second most popular sport below football (Downie, 2012). In 2009 there were around 10 MMA gyms in the UK, while today there are closer to 325 (tapology.com, 2020). Despite this surge in popularity, the advent and growth of the sport has been controversial. Due to the physicality of MMA along with the way it has been packaged and sold to pay-per-view audiences as 'bare knuckle', 'no holds barred', 'cage fighting', it has been derided in the US as 'entertainment

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in a nation entering itself into barbarism' (Will quoted in Doeg, 2013), with calls in the UK for the sport to be banned altogether (McCabe, 2013; Watterson, 2016). Scholars have also commented, from a distance, on the 'intrinsic immorality of MMA' (Dixon, 2015: 367), and the desensitising of, and adherence to, violent behaviour among its youth participants (Mutz, 2012; Sofia and Cruz, 2017).

Unsurprisingly, such a blatant and transgressive sport has been met with interest from sociologists employing the body as a conduit for knowing by entering MMA gyms, and cages, to develop deeper understandings around the meanings attached to MMA participation. Such research has returned important commentary on the role of the sport in the (re)imagining of cultural ideas around masculinity, morality and vulnerability (Abramson and Modzelewski, 2011; Channon and Jennings, 2013; Green, 2011, 2016; Spencer, 2012, 2013) along with entrenched gender roles (Alsarve and Tjønndal, 2020), anti-violence (Channon and Matthews, 2018; Staack, 2019) and the complex negotiation of medical safety and commercial reward (Channon et al., 2020a, 2020b). These findings may invoke surprise especially given the aforementioned way in which the sport is presented to paying audiences. Indeed it was this research, a participant ethnography of 3 years and counting, that was also formed in response to this duality. It began by simply asking; Why are growing numbers of men, and women, putting themselves through such a challenging training regime?

Initial findings showed that the reasons were, in part, to engage in personal development, mindfulness and to help cope with stress (Sugden, 2021). Having both witnessed and experienced the pain and injury that accompanies the sport while compiling my results, I realised that it was an acceptable trade-off given the mental health redress experienced. But what kind of society makes such a choice worthwhile? How are socio-economic structures and their effects reflected within the confines of the gym? And vice versa? The purpose of this paper then is to uncover the answers to such questions and in doing so reveal some nuances around the culture of MMA and its participants. Through this we can build on the literature above to further understand what engaging in this relatively transgressive practice means for those within the gym's confines, and the societal structure which governs human behaviour outside it. The various studies mentioned above depict a space that is par-anormal in which participants utilise the pursuit(s) to collectively make and remake challenges to hegemonic norms. What this research does is focus on the power structures which compels them towards such action. I begin with this context and a discussion on neo-liberalism before dealing with the Foucauldian concept of biopower which assists in the analysis of sporting participation as a form of resistance. Following this review, the methods detail the immersive research journey, along with the various considerations and pitfalls of such an approach. Finally, the results and discussion look at how, through accessing and building an 'authentic community' and collectively practising 'freedom and resistance', MMA participants are resisting the varied and all-encompassing technologies of power that govern the minds and bodies of so many across the industrialised 'West'.

The neo-liberal tumult

Over the past 30–50 years 'neoliberalism' has functioned as a convenient catch-all label to explain the conditions and structures fostered by the widespread practice and belief in

economic liberalism and free-market capitalism that characterises the industrialised Western world. When viewed through the specific prism of gross domestic product (GDP), its success in terms of economic growth was immediate and inarguable (Huber and Solt, 2004). Yet the concurrent growth in income inequality along with its long-term effect on the mass psyche is forcing a critical reckoning (Block, 2018; Collins and Rothe, 2019). Gilbert (2013) asked *What kind of thing is neoliberalism?* And while admitting such a question is fraught, answered, ‘it is the tendency to potentiate individuals qua individuals while simultaneously inhibiting the emergence of all forms of potent collectivity’ (2013: 21). Brown (2015: 92) goes further in describing neoliberalism as ‘a project that empties the world of meaning, that cheapens and deracinates life and openly exploits desire’.

Concurrently, Cosgrove and Karter (2018: 639) found that: ‘In a neoliberal climate, markets give us truth and individuals are encouraged to be self-concerned agents rather than members of a polis’. Indeed, both Foucault (2008) and Gilbert (2013) defer to classical liberalism that manifests in the tradition of *laissez-faire* – minimal state intervention – before considering its modern form. Neoliberalism demands greater state intervention if only to encourage competitive, commercial and entrepreneurial behaviour in its citizens. This new or ‘advanced liberalism’ according to Rose (1999: 143–144) redefines freedom by enhancing ‘economic health at the same time as it generates individual freedom’. But what of an individual or even community health?

Considering the rapid growth and hegemony of such a socio-economic system across the globe it is no surprise that behavioural limits and norms on the mind and body have been placed upon neoliberal subjects (Gill and Scharff, 2013). The competitiveness of individual units in a Darwinian tussle for capital has forged a society wherein, according to Esposito and Perez (2010), individuals must conform to a market rationality that is non-communal and competitive. A status quo that is reinforced and maintained through both overt and covert systems of power, what Foucault (1976) termed as ‘biopower’.

Theoretical framework: biopower

In the discussion of the discursive ‘technologies of power’, Foucault (1976) formulated ‘biopower’ as a more nuanced analysis of 20th-century life as a product not just of traditional sovereign power or power over, but of anatomic-politics. Here sovereign power is exercised and maintained through the production of a ‘biopolitical body’, where a sovereign’s ability to ‘take life or let live’ has not been removed but extended through the power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die (Foucault, 2003: 241). Such power is operationalised through mechanisms that extended into the gaps and voids in post-modern socio-political society and are ‘both disciplinary and normalising’, reaching into areas of life that sovereign power cannot fully exploit (Genel, 2006: 47). The normalisation of neoliberal assumptions around consumerism, competitiveness and individuality are, for example, not fully a product of the law of the land and adjunct jurisprudence. They are permeated at and through sites as diverse as schools, television shows, urban centres and social media. This overall strategy of power, for Foucault (1976), was known as ‘biopolitics’, functional through the wielding of ‘biopower’. Through employing these conceptions

Foucault has highlighted how the development of capitalism, throughout the 18th and accelerating into the 19th century would have been impossible without ‘the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production’ (Foucault, 1976: 141). Though classical liberal thinkers such as Hayek may comfort us by highlighting that the acceptance of insecurity, perpetual competition and individual isolation is natural as it reflects ‘real’ life, it also serves to highlight the inseparability of neoliberalism the ideology from neoliberalism as a codified programme of governance (Gilbert, 2013).

The dominance of such values, practices and metrics have produced a set of powerful and implicit rules that define the normative culture of neoliberalism (Brown, 2015). Such rules do not present as tangible forms of domination, rendering conformity unconscious and resistance difficult (Halperin, 1995; Pringle, 2005). This hegemony of neoliberal politics and policy led Foucault (1976: 143) to determine that ‘modern man [person] is an animal whose politics places his very existence in question’. Sovereign power is intrinsically supported by pervasive technologies of power that produce a bio-political body on which it is exercised (Genel, 2006). This biopower is exercised in the limitation of the aptitudes and capacities of individual bodies (Cheah, 2010), which occurs potentially in the dehumanisation of the modern workplace, for example (Fleming, 2014). Though Foucault’s biopower hypothesis was initially directed towards sexuality and its repression (Foucault, 1990), it has parallel currency in sport. Regarding the latter, Foucault (1988: 19) acknowledges how humans can contribute creatively to new power relations by focusing on ‘technologies of the self’. In response, research has focused on how athletes come to understand and embody technologies of the self and systems of dominance (Chapman, 1997; Crocket, 2017; Markula, 2003).

Former professional athletes have harnessed neoliberal traditions to boost their personal brand in ways that are both lucrative and somewhat necessary for success and career longevity. Professional MMA fighters in the UFC are symptomatic of this, employing an ‘affective mythology’ towards building a monetizable commercial persona/narrative that is connected to the macro-societal ideology of which they are a part (see: Kelsey, 2017). More broadly, the effect on the social psyche has been stark. Moisander et al. (2018: 394) found that ‘neoliberal governmentality appears to stifle resistance by transferring social critique and desires for change into self-critique’. This has had clear implications for mental health, with studies showing a link between neoliberal structures/policies and a dramatic increase in mental health degradation across the industrialised West (Cosgrove and Karter, 2018; Esposito and Perez, 2014; Teghtsoonian, 2009). Men are disproportionately affected (Rice et al., 2015), with recent male suicide figures across England and Wales showing a two-decade high, for example (Butler, 2020). The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on these figures is ominous yet unconfirmed at the time of writing.

Viewing sport (and society) through this Foucauldian lens – as a perpetual site for the (re)production of oppressive power circuitries – can seem overly pessimistic (Pringle, 2005). Yet the notion of biopower as it is employed here can assist in our understanding of human behaviours; it is displayed, embodied and constructed through sport in space and through time. The bio-political systems of control, security and normalisation are pressed upon the body-politic through surveillance and training, but not always passively so (see Pringle, 2005). While sports leagues, events and athletes themselves have become

entrenched in conformity to such neoliberal hegemony, other corners of the sporting world can act as important sites of resistance.

Sport as resistance

Resistance can be viewed as deviance, which Durkheim (1958 [1895]) believed could be functional in that crime should be punished. However, deviance in and of itself should not be considered as societal illness, rather social malleability, good and bad. This idea of 'tolerable deviance' (Stebbins, 1996), is very much part of society (though tolerance varies) and examples can be seen in music (Martinez, 1997), festivals and live performances (Laing and Mair, 2015), resistance art (Williamson, 2010) and in sport. Pursuits such as snowboarding, mountain climbing, skydiving and skateboarding, for example, counter neoliberal sensibilities of personal responsibility and care (Atkinson and Young, 2008) while allowing participants to explore their 'true' selves by 'negotiating the boundary between chaos and order' through the concept of edgework (see e.g. Lyng, 2004). The pursuit of edgework occurs, arguably, when the boundaries of tolerable deviance are not expansive enough and/or there is a strain between socio-cultural aspirations and institutionalised means (Agnew et al., 2002; Merton, 1938).

Indeed, like art and music, the performative nature of sport along with its unique rules and standards, that may differ markedly from the norms in everyday life, mean that it can become a potent site of resistance. Through this, therefore, a greater understanding of said norms and the reasons why they are being opposed might be reached. Sociologists have pointed to the resistance of skateboarders and free runners as a protest against the confined use of urban space; surfers use of the coast as sea-based activism against corporations; and ultimate frisbee against over-coded sport as removed from fun (Rinehart and Sydnor, 2012). Existing research on MMA has also referenced participants' quest for excitement as they push the boundaries of 'socially tolerable violence' (Sánchez-García and Malcolm, 2010: 39). Hall and Jefferson's (1975) seminal work on sub-cultural resistance highlights how these groups emerge in response to hegemonic social structures. Take *le Parkour* (Parkour/free running) for example; in his ethnography Raymen (2018: 115–116) highlights the practice as resistance against 'the contemporary post-industrial city that is geared towards mass consumption privileges and encourages a more sedentary and passive body/space relationship.'

This research began life as an attempt to look again at MMA and its associated sub-culture, to connect the dots between its media portrayal and the daily lives of its practitioners. To locate the research at the point of agency and structure to depict an impression of a sporting reality, then ask what this might tell us about the effects of the world we have built, on those that journey onto the mats and into the cage, and vice versa. From a Foucauldian position (1990), the process of liberation is bounded in the emancipation of the self and body from the dominant conditions of biopower. But where *le Parkour*, skateboarding and surfing were viewed as youth-centred resistance against physical spaces and places, what then of adult resistance through a sport such as MMA? And what of resistance against economic and structural norms that have bled into the sociology of everyday life, leaving their marks on the mind/body?

Methods

The research employed a ‘carnal sociology’ in melding thought and practice to uncover the meanings and values participants attached to MMA training and gym life more broadly (Wacquant, 2004). This was achieved through an immersive ethnography that took place over 3.5 years within an urban MMA gym in England’s North West, and three national competitions. During this time, I trained, fought, socialised with and competed against members of the gym and other practitioners across the country. The first year of the study I spent in training and observation at the gym to better understand the context and develop a deeper knowledge of both the vocal and physical language of the environment. Following this period, I began conducting in-depth interviews (40 min–1.5 h) with experienced members and senior stakeholders, though all committed members were aware of my role as a researcher. I conducted 12 such interviews (round 1) which were analysed thematically. The second round of interviews (9) were then conducted to interrogate the nascent themes and ‘member check’ initial interpretations. All participants had trained regularly for between 3 and 18 years. In terms of socio-economic status and age, the sample was mixed in reflection of the gym itself, ageing between 25 and 42 and inclusive of a doctor, entrepreneur, artist, coach and someone who’s means of income are unclear, for example. All interviewees were male, mainly white with one black respondent, and though several unrecorded conversations took place with female members regarding the themes identified here, this is deemed a weakness of the study to be reflected upon in the conclusion. Subsequently, permission was sought and granted to use the content of two gym WhatsApp groups to further inform the research – a forum particularly important during the Covid-19 lockdown and gym closure.

The research was both constantly comparative and co-constructive (Charmaz, 2006). Who better to understand, decode and explicate their experience than the participants themselves, especially as some participants could boast nearly two decades competing on the mats and in the octagon (cage). The decision to enter the context as a novice practitioner initially was not taken lightly but was taken naively. Over the three and a half years, I have trained between 3 and 5 times a week, in sessions up to 2 h, and contended with the physical, mental and temporal demands that accompany such a commitment. Yet this was necessary for the research to be situated in the gym through the practice at the ‘point of production’ and that my position be considered not above or below the embodied practices of those I shared the mats with (Wacquant, 2005: 466). Through this, the critical sociological gaze is modified from distanced objectivity to a coexistence with the language and body techniques of those under study.

The themes, which grew from both interpretation by myself and the participants of our shared environment, indicated the importance of an ‘authentic community’ and the practice as an act of ‘freedom and resistance’ from and against hegemonic, neoliberal, norms. These themes were only evident because of a closeness that developed between myself and the participants. I harnessed my subjectivity in a way shared by Green’s (2011: 282) participant ethnography into MMA in North America in which his positionality helped form the project ‘... because it exposed me to particular, shared experiences of community making and I, therefore, embraced my subjectivity as testimony to the

strengths of ethnography rather than an obstacle to conquer'. Participation was essential to build trust and to understand how trust operates in the collaborative practice of MMA (see Channon, 2019). It also bore fruit in the candid testimony offered up by participants as to why they took up the sport, which is often removed from the 'official' reason they state in their gym induction (see blinded for review). In this respect, the body was deployed as a tool of enquiry but also as a conduit for understanding. In doing so I employed my body to make sense of this socio-physical world in the same way that the study participants do so to make sense of, and express freedom from, their own daily realities. Both the use and existence of this 'somatic metamorphism' has been employed in relation to martial arts research elsewhere (Foster, 2015) and signified a unity or 'stickiness of experience to the embodied realm' (Maslen, 2020: 13). This allowed access and a closeness to the participants as people but also their embodied display/expression throughout the gym.

That said, attempts to ideate from a distance were made in the pages of a research diary that accompanied the study, in which self-conscious introspection was brought in to critique my own thoughts, feelings and (past) assumptions. In a nod to the grounded theory method, I attempted to enter the field as a blank slate, albeit encumbered by my existing, mass media curated image of MMA and the subcultures within. I was not an MMA fan or enthusiast, had close to zero experience in any combat sports and had only viewed a handful of fights on TV. Yet over the years, I was to 'go native' but armed with a sociological imagination that would critically appraise the fluidity of researcher/participant, body/mind dichotomies. In this respect, this study draws upon the unification of 'the embodied mind' in situating the research through the practice of MMA and in writing out of the gym (Varela et al., 2017).

Results

Upon entering the gym for the first time in September 2017, I was both nervous and anxious. A lifetime in mainly football (soccer) and rugby subcultures (as a player/fan of both), along with exposure to only mainstream MMA media discourses meant that I was used to relying on teammates and had a warped impression of the individuals I would find on the mats. The gym itself is a complex, self-sustaining eco-system. Entering during evening peak hours is an assault on the senses, the smell of sweat is comingled with incense burning at reception and the noise of music (from techno to reggae) that soundtracks the shouts, laughter, grunts, thwack of pads, buzzers and the clanging of weights. At any time, multiple classes on Thai boxing, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, wrestling, boxing and, during quieter periods, Yoga are paralleled.

As I began training more seriously and entering the rhythms of gym life, I came to view this world as a 'home from home' (diary 24 months) removed from everyday life, in this repurposed warehouse on the edge of the city. As the themes emerged, so did a truth regarding the importance of this detachment and the role it plays in the lives and bodies of those who share the mats/cage. Over time I engaged with the full array of disciplines that had a slow but profound effect on my body and mind and that of my training partners, with whom I have developed a close bond, perhaps because of this shared developmental journey (see blinded for review Sugden 2021). What

emerged was a sense of realness, an ‘authentic community’ built and maintained through a freedom in the expression of and through the body. Each of these themes grew from a combination of talk, observation, experience and feelings – my own and the participants. I separate the latter two as, for example, one of the earliest entries in my diary conveyed the feeling of community in the gym, which was later experienced. Each of these themes is highlighted in turn.

Authentic community

The closeness of the gym community, and a surprise at the warm and friendly atmosphere – make up the key themes from the early pages of the research diary. This is despite the image of MMA in popular discourse and the diversity in age, gender, ethnicity, somatotype and class on display. As gym owner and former UFC fighter Rick commented:

We bring a lot of different people from different backgrounds together. There’s a lot of people in here who socialise with other people who they would never socialise with outside of the gym, and... I don’t think there’s a stereotypical person that come[s] to this gym. There’s a lot of different people from different walks of life, so I like that.

Mark also spoke, more specifically, about the class diversity on show:

I did applied biology. Steve is a designer by trade.... Ken runs his dad’s painting firm...there are a few guys that survive by selling things that aren’t necessarily legal in the UK. You’ve got guys that work in offices in administration... You’ve got John who was a carpenter. So, there’s people from every different walk of life (Mark)

This theme was arguably the strongest in the research, participants talked openly and happily about the sense of community and the ‘bonds’ forged on the mats and in the cage. The practices themselves are supportive of this in nature from ‘rolling’ (jiu jitsu sparing) together, engaging in pad work or mild to near full MMA sparing, training is physical and can be highly emotional.

You go through so much with some of the lads and girls that you train with... you develop this bond with them that it’s hard to get with other people.... It’s hard to find elsewhere (Ken).

The confronting and personal nature of the training ‘gets rid of social differences’ (Rick), building a community that replaces, according to Nick, ‘something that has been lost’ in life outside the gym. Indeed, as early as the 60s this notion of ‘community as lost authenticity and common belonging’ emerged as a biproduct of the growth and grip of neoliberal ideology across the globe (Rose, 1999: 175). Here also the dialectic between the personal and the public emerges and is worthy of interrogation (see Mills, 1959). Beginning with the practice itself, the key schools of MMA – Jiu Jitsu, Muay Thai, wrestling and boxing – are deeply co-constructive. They involve close-interpersonal contact with different training partners, teamwork and an immense amount of trust. For Channon (2019: 8) MMA is ‘fundamentally dependent on

collaborative co-action' to walk the fine line between experiencing mastery of the body and mind at the risk of over-exertion and injury. In these moments there is no space for thought and discussion over differences in class or other strata of socially constructed identities. As head coach and former UFC contender Gary explains:

You might not know their dog's name or their nan's [grandmother] age and all that you just develop this bond with them [training partners] where you feel like you can trust them in a way because you've both been through the same kind of thing... you've had to rely on each other so much... Whether or not it's getting people in to help you spar, reliable training partners, just the bodies to have on the mat. Filling each other in [fighting] five times a week and then every time sitting back with an arm around each other discussing it and blah blah (Gary).

Gary's sentiment is typical, and he implies that life outside of the gym is superfluous to the carnality of the practice and the trust it entails. In relation, as we sat on the floor after a hard session, Nick explained that 'Here they have this old-fashioned community where everyone trusts each other' (Nick). The idea that the gym dynamic is at once a reclamation of a 'lost' sense of community and a resistance against community decline, is perhaps overly simplistic in not taking into account community flux (see e.g. Geoghegan and Powell, 2009). However, overwhelmingly, participants put themselves through brutal training regimes to maintain and sustain this community, and that many are dependent on it (Sugden, 2021) is perhaps an indication of its value inside the gym and its scarcity outside. Once again it is the (inter)personal that seeks to transcend the rampant individualism of neoliberal subjectivity (Foucault, 1990; Mills, 1959), something that was put to the test during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As Covid-19 ravaged the UK, various national and local lockdowns were ordered. The nature of training meant that the MMA gym and the participants were hit hard, as many rely heavily on training for mental health maintenance (see Sugden 2021). What followed was an example of the close community network engendered by the practice. The gym community moved online into Zoom sessions and communicated through social media and WhatsApp groups, in which candid stories of struggle were met with waves of support and solidarity. Members shared training/diet ideas but also joked about lapsing into unhealthy habits. There was also the standard sharing of funny and not-so-funny videos, along with blunt debates around the ethics of returning to training versus the mental health challenges of being locked in/out. I took advantage of this pause to ask committed members, separately, what were the top three things they missed about the gym; from 22 responses the top answer was the people/sociality 'mixing and getting support from a group that I would never normally have met' as one respondent put it.

The closeness and trust cemented in combat but maintained through the conversations in and around the intense activity is significant and lends itself to the elucidation of deeper thoughts and feelings (see also Sugden 2021; Channon and Jennings, 2013; Spencer, 2013). MMA is a departure from other extreme or transgressive pursuits associated with pushing the boundaries to experience one's agency or 'edgework' (see Lyng, 2004). MMA participants are co-dependent on the gym community to provide them with physical and dialogical moments of authentic self-examination (Channon, 2019).

As my training progressed, I became less surprised by the closeness of the diverse gym community, and saw it more as an inevitability:

You can learn more about someone after like a 10-minute round with someone, and you break someone or they break you, and you know them better than spending like months with them... You know what they're made of (Mike).

If somebody's like, maybe just young and somebody's well into their career, and they have roll [spar]...that natural social reticence has dropped, because you've just fought them, you're very tired, you're very sweaty, and you're sitting down and you're breathing heavy on the mats, and you can actually, you know, it feels right to have a conversation with somebody afterwards (Lee).

The intense physicality of the various disciplines under the MMA umbrella means that this moment of release following the end of the round is both common yet intense. Defeat for novices is frequent, but part of the learning process and, alongside coaches, expert practitioners serve as teachers and motivators passing down knowledge freely and regularly by way of assistance. In return, novices fill the mats with varied skills and bodies for experts to hone their abilities in preparation for competitions and professional fights. In this respect, it is not only the practice itself that is co-constructed but the learning 'journey' (as it was often referred to). Fighting knowledge is openly shared and disseminated throughout the gym and adjunct online spaces/channels. Such knowledges are accessible online in a broader sense (see Spencer, 2016), but is focused on ways of using the body and training the mind that is opposed to contemporary urban living where the self can become tethered to external neoliberal self-actualisation (see Ratner, 2019).

Moreover, when a fighter is 'in camp',¹ experienced gym members/coaches will take a great deal of time out to help with the intense training schedule and emotional build-up to the fight, along with the aftermath. As former UFC contender, Mike stated, 'we lose together, and we win together'. There is a paradox here – fighting is overtly competitive, yet trust and collaboration are vital to MMA: 'when we are training, we are putting each-other's welfare in each-other's hands' (Ken). Therefore, through shared learning, trust and both physical and emotional support, a strong and authentic community is bonded that transcends the sport itself. As this early reflection highlights 'Whatever people say about it, there's very little that's fake about the gym, there's no room for ego's or pretending and if you are [pretending] you'll get found out' (diary 4 months).

The authentic solidarity on display is indeed a byproduct of the practice but the renewed commitment of the members, particularly those at the novice level for which (through observation and experience) training can be demoralising, is significant. The desire to be a social and physical part of this community speaks to what Zukin (2009: 545) termed the 'crisis of authenticity' in the neoliberal era. Where 'hegemonic global urbanism' characterised by gentrification, chain businesses and the commodification of urban living reduces the ability and means of reinforcing diverse and 'real' historic, cultural and social identity (ibid).

Freedom and resistance

‘It’s uncomfortable, it hurts, but I love it because fighting is pure’ (Nick)

The first part of this statement was easy to grasp. Yes, aspects of training are uncomfortable (at first); jiu-jitsu sparring (rolling) for example, often involves beginning in what is best described as ‘missionary’ position with multiple and unknown training partners (see also Dutkiewicz and Spencer, 2017). It also ‘hurts’; the gym is no panacea for health, injury is common and debilitating for weeks, months and even years at a time. But the ‘pure’ aspect would only become clear in my third year of training and as I gathered more candid testimony from experienced competitors and gained such knowledge myself.

I had to stop towards the end [of the session], I have a bad cut down my arm and it’s bleeding all through my rash guard [top]. There was blood, quite a lot of blood on the floor, so I had to go and wash in the toilet; one of the other lads was like, ‘You all right, kid?’ He had a big grin on his face and a black eye...I grinned back, I just wanted to get back out there (Diary 20 months).

The implication here is a celebration of pain and violence, but this is not the case. The community in the gym is bounded by the co-construction of carnality and the management of risk, yet overtly violent behaviour is very much frowned upon (see also Channon and Matthews, 2018; Channon 2019; Sugden, 2021). Here I didn’t feel distressed; in truth, I felt mildly happy with the interaction, but apart from that a nothingness that I have come to associate with being present and focused on my body. Similar findings were returned by Green (2011: 378), who found that in North American MMA gyms found pain boosted confidence that the experience is ‘real’, established intimacy between participants, and helped establish the body as a ‘united organism’. Elsewhere, such training was uncovered to be a ‘release’ from participants over-regulated and sanitised everyday lives. ‘Fighting is the most real and honest thing’ they do (Brent & Kraska [2013] in Channon, 2019). In this respect, it is a path to authenticity and realness within a neoliberal context that has, in many ways, become less so (Green, 2019). In the neoliberal world authenticity is effectively repurposed in the pursuit of a self-managed empty individualism, or ‘autonomy’, that pervades everyday life (Foster, 2015; Rose, 1999).

As my training advanced, I began to see it as a necessary departure from my day-to-day life beginning with a relaxation of my body, a removal of tension that spread to the mind. In my weekly diary entries, alterations in mood are evident: flowing from anxiety, nerves and frustration, – ‘I’m always anxious driving down [to the gym] I don’t know what I’m doing... then I get my arse handed to me [beaten] then I just drive home sore and pissed off, this [the research] was a f***ing stupid idea’ (Diary 2 months); to a new appreciation and understanding of the benefits – ‘I now feel a real connection between maintaining a calm mind and maintaining and actually using my body through commitment to MMA, it’s so far removed from being chained to a computer at a desk all day... I don’t know how I coped before’ (Diary 30 months). These comparisons to everyday life were common in my reflections and that of gym members. They coincided with a rejection of more mainstream lifestyle choices. ‘It’s [MMA] a lifestyle and the freedom to be expressive (Nick); ‘it makes

you feel alive' (Rick). For Luke, MMA helped him quit his office job to become a fireman:

... the majority of the workforce had some sort of activity they were interested in, and once they went into that job, everyone just seemed to stop... lifestyle-wise –It was all like vending machines round work, so everyone was just drinking cans of coke and chocolate and stuff, and after work, the majority of people'd go home and get a takeaway and stay up late, and this [MMA] made me realise 'I'm not into this lifestyle'

Jan also found more meaning through movement in MMA and was able to reflect:

I think purpose in life is very important and working nine to five for some company that don't even give a f**k about you is not really purpose is it? Training [in MMA] already something to work towards. I think just living for the sake of earning money and then paying your rent, and then next week you pay other rent, it's just pointless.

Perhaps the most profound reflections came from one of the gym's most successful competitors who related the practice more directly to a resistance against the trappings of life outside the gym walls:

I'm really trying to use martial arts to create an inner state of wellness and balance so that I walk around just happy as a human being to exist without needing a distraction, or something external to fulfil my time to bring me that level of happiness... When you're living in a place that is grey buildings everywhere and we're disconnected from what we truly are in terms of nature we don't get to see much of that. We don't get to breath much of that... [training in MMA is] A journey of healing. It's a journey of undoing the shit that the world and the parents and the friends gave to me that I didn't necessarily choose but all became aspects of my character, that weren't actually myself, and only by undoing that, by being bold and brave enough to put myself under high pressure situations and to go through the discomforts of life can I be free (Tom).

Tom uses the now-familiar word of 'journey' to highlight his own and other's attempt to undo the physical and psychological aspects of society that have blocked the path to the natural self. Indeed, a byproduct of training is an inability to be elsewhere mentally, presence is imbued as is calmness and an ability to handle stressful situations that impacts life outside the gym (Sugden, 2021). I could empathise with what Tom was saying, training such as this added colour to my week and helped maintain a fit body and a calm mind. But beyond this, Tom displays a cognisance of his own in resisting the various disciplinary power relations that he had encountered earlier in life by training and using his body in ways that were previously muted. Thus combating these biopower technologies with conscious 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988). I personally came to crave this time and space to break free of everyday and historic modalities and also the potential to be expressive in my own style of combat. Speaking to a gym member, an artist by trade, he told how sparing (in jiu-jitsu) was 'feeling like you're fully expressing yourself without having to explain yourself' (Ryan).

The freedom to express the self through the body in close reliance on each other is what bonds and sustains gym life yet is antithetical to life outside it. As Rose highlights

(1999: 67) through neoliberal ‘freedom’ individuals are forced into a ‘profound inwardness’ and this is ‘the fundamental didactic of modern society – maximum individuation and maximum freedom is developed only at the price of maximum fragmentation, maximum uncertainty, the maximum estrangement of individual from fellow individual’. That participants find the gym as a sanctuary of sorts whilst, undergoing a brutal and at times injurious training regime is the conformation of the will to resist, and also perhaps a damning reflection of the society that surrounds it, the mass psyche of neoliberal culture. Yet this also indicates that the reconnection with the body and the body to the mind, unmolested by the accoutrements of neoliberalism, has become highly sort after in modernity.

Discussion – fight the biopower

For many athletes across a diverse spectrum of disciplines, sport offers a chance to experience meaning through movement, a focal point for efforts to train and maintain a healthy body and mind (Quennerstedt, 2008). I have been deeply involved in several sporting subcultures, as both a researcher and a hobbyist, but over the years the somewhat unique MMA gym dynamic struck me. Firstly, the diversity of the gym members, most notably in terms of class, is juxtaposed by community closeness in defiance of broader societal norms. The social rules of engagement, bodily contact and the co-constructed (collaborative and trustful) carnal performance of risk add an authenticity that strengthens such bonds. Secondly, the nature of the practice forces one to engage with and be present in the body in ways that are at times, an extreme departure from daily life, and this freedom has a profound effect on myself and the participants. The mats and the cage are stripped down places of openness, honesty, community, injury, defeat, victory, development and support. While the space inside is metaphorically detached from societal norms, the gym itself is a converted warehouse detached from the city, typical of MMA gyms the world over. This is itself an act of resistance. In reclaiming a space previously reserved and purposed for the production line, a community is formed, boundaries crossed, and bodily capital explored in a way that counters neoliberal societal structures and strains on the lives of those training under its roof.

Through strengthening the gym community and the techniques of its members, participants in MMA build their own technologies of the self that can, as Foucault (1988: 18) puts it, permit individuals ‘to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, wisdom, perfection or immortality’. Sport participation has potential in this regard, in its freedom from the hegemonies of everyday life, allowing for transformation and a more authentic self-actualisation. In this respect, speaking in reference to the biopower frame but in the context of women’s empowerment, Sánchez-García and Rivero-Herraiz (2013) argue that sport allows for the formation of a ‘special kind of technologies of the self’ that allow for freedom and resistance to germinate.

In the identification of such resistance, we might, as Foucault (1982: 780) states, ‘bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used’. In the pattern of resistance, we can then view the shapes and forces of

power which they reflect. As the findings show, an authentic athletic community permeates through the gym and sustains it, while the various practices and body techniques allow participants to build a meaningful connection with the body and mind that is inaccessible in their/our day-to-day lives. This is a society, and one governed by technologies of power which, Foucault (1990: 89) argues are

...the new methods of power whose operation is not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control, methods that are employed by all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus.

As discussed at the top of this paper, behavioural norms in neoliberal societies are governed by judiciary and law but also, in private life, by a free-market rationality that places both limits and stresses on the body and mind (Esposito and Perez, 2010, 2014; Sugarman and Thrift, 2020). In schools, the workplace, urban geographies and popular culture one can view the ‘inseparability of neoliberalism the ideology from neoliberalism conceived as a concrete programme for the government of individuals and populations’ (Gilbert, 2013: 15). This manifests in a mass state of body and mind that is both logical according to market demands yet fundamentally restrictive in its conformity. However, just as the neoliberal body is a product of such technologies of power, it can also be a conduit of resistance. As Atkinson (2009) found in Parkour, and Rinehart and Sydnor (2012) in surfing, skateboarding and ultimate frisbee, sport and adjunct spaces can be spheres for the making and remaking of new norms that are detached from hegemonic standards governing mainstream society. It is to such rules that we turn for moral judgement regarding deviance, for example. MMA’s existence on the apparent periphery of sport’s moral compass is in many ways well-founded. The MMA gym is no holistic remedy, injuries are common and while MMA research highlights that traditional discourses around gender, sexuality and masculinity are challenged and remade on the mats and in the cage (see Channon and Jennings, 2013; Channon and Phipps, 2017), elements of toxic masculinity, i.e. strength displays, power over and tolerance of pain, rear their head from time to time. Moreover, the gym hierarchy – displayed in belt form and assenting training group levels – and the reward of individual endeavour that permeates the gym habitus is akin to a middle-class neoliberal morality that has been highlighted elsewhere (Abramson and Modzelewski, 2011). The culture of the sport at the professional level is also opposed to many of the themes discussed here, rewarding as it does neoliberal traits such as competitiveness and a culture of the self. The distinction between the overall packaging of MMA and the modus operandi of the MMA gym is important in this respect. As is the make-up of the gyms themselves, that transcend economic status displaying ‘an integration and blend of working-class and middle-class habitus’ (Sánchez-García, 2018: 398), and perhaps a chance to (re)learn psycho-physical techniques to oppose such categorisation.

Yet both the dominant themes above and the nature of the resistance on display here, though likely mirrored in other gyms around the UK and elsewhere, is accurate to this space and time. Resistance within MMA gyms/culture is generative of a range of ideological messages. Some gyms across the US and Europe have been linked to far-right nationalist movements, for example (Colborne, 2020; Zidan, 2018). The sport also

germinated with the help of fragmented online coverage and discourse, through small websites and message boards, partially due to the initial rejection of MMA by mainstream culture and media. Yet when the prime time came such consumption habits stayed (see: Eddy et al., 2016), and became fertile ground for para-normal ideas, giving rise to various conspiracy theories such as *QAnon* in the US particularly (Zidan, 2020).

However, in this case, an uneasiness that many of the participants expressed regarding the trappings of everyday life was not, evidently, expressed in such forms of psychological or ideological extremism. Yet an awareness of these issues and their affected mind and body is clear. In this respect, the works of Mills and Foucault meet in that the individual recognition of ‘personal troubles of milieu’ (Mills, 1959: 8) are directly related to the public issue of social structures and norms. The diverse group of men and women encountered on the mats seemed, explicitly or otherwise, to be taking control of their inner life as a rejection of the neoliberal administration of social and institutional life in their Western urban setting. Foucault (1976) argued that in modernity, the law revolves less around ‘the sword’ – symbolic of direct control and punishment – and more around the ‘norm’. Institutions of justice are integrated in everyday instructions fostering a normalised society that is itself a product of self-maintaining technologies of power.

For the participants and the author, the personal, carnal enactment of resistance to such norms, through forming authentic bonds and enjoying a reconnection with the body and self, displays a control and ownership of personal agency opposed to the ‘hegemony of neoliberal common sense’ (McKay, 2015: 548). While this attempt at control may seem subconscious or indirect, many gym members are fully cognisant, showing an understanding that their biographies are not written in a vacuum. That so many men, and increasing numbers of women, are choosing to join and commit to the risks and sacrifices engendered by the membership of such gyms for these reasons is, arguably, a stark reflection of the public issues faced by the industrialised West, that form and curtail the body and mind. Namely rampant individualism, a socio-cultural life governed by market-based rationality, the erosion of social safety nets (or ‘society’ itself), and a culture of psychological self-harm that is sustained in online consumer/‘social’ spaces (Esposito and Perez, 2010, 2014; Moncrieff, 2006; Room, 2011). Such a system is supported by an overarching yet interdependent set of techniques that Foucault (1990) termed biopower. Yet, in this space at least and through the themes identified here, participants are choosing an authentic community and the carnal exercise of freedom and resistance as an antidote to such forces.

Concluding remarks

The research was initially framed to reveal the nuance of MMA culture, to better understand the role that MMA played in participant’s lives outside the gym. Over 3.5 years (and counting) I have embodied the routines of the gym and its members, employing my body as a conduit of understanding, and opening my senses to participant’s interpretations of their own diverse realities. A weakness of the current study and a focus for further research would be to focus more on the realities of female members who, though they (3) had informal input into the themes, did not feature in the recordings. I

would wonder further how the intersection of neoliberal and male hegemony impacts on their experience of the sport and visa versa.

More clearly emergent from this mixed microcosm is a need to build and maintain an authentic community and to participate in the co-construction of a sport and body that is resistant to contemporary urban living. Like corners of music and art, the sporting realm can be a canvas on which to display its own version of embodied cultural resistance. Similar to graffiti art's position on the periphery of more 'mainstream' artforms, MMA often occupies physical and metaphorical spaces on the edge of urban life, and, as this research contends, hegemonic neoliberal ideas of how the body and mind should be treated and connected. As Brett (2017: 26) believes, 'MMA does not simply produce entertainment but affective states and forms of appreciation analogous to fine-art'. I would not go as far as a direct comparison to fine art. However, the choice by gym members to commit immense sacrifices of time, finance, body and socialisation to be present in the gym several times a week, is an expressionism that is opposed to the world that exists outside its walls, yet reflects its trauma.

By practising carnal sociality, MMA gym members reflect societal norms and structures by rejecting them. Such structures exert limitations on the body and mind which act as conduits to and the physical embodiment of resistance. Increased MMA participation as reflected in this context, and perhaps more broadly across the Western world, can, therefore, be viewed as both a symptom of and an act of tacit resistance towards, neoliberal biopower. That industrialised Western societies are formed in such a way exerts enormous pressure on the mind and can inspire a disconnect with the natural body. In this gym at least, by fighting each other, members are fighting for an authentic community and a more meaningful connection with the self.

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Note

1. Being 'in camp' is generally the 4-8-week period before a fight when the person fighting undergoes an intense training and (often) weight cutting period in preparation.

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