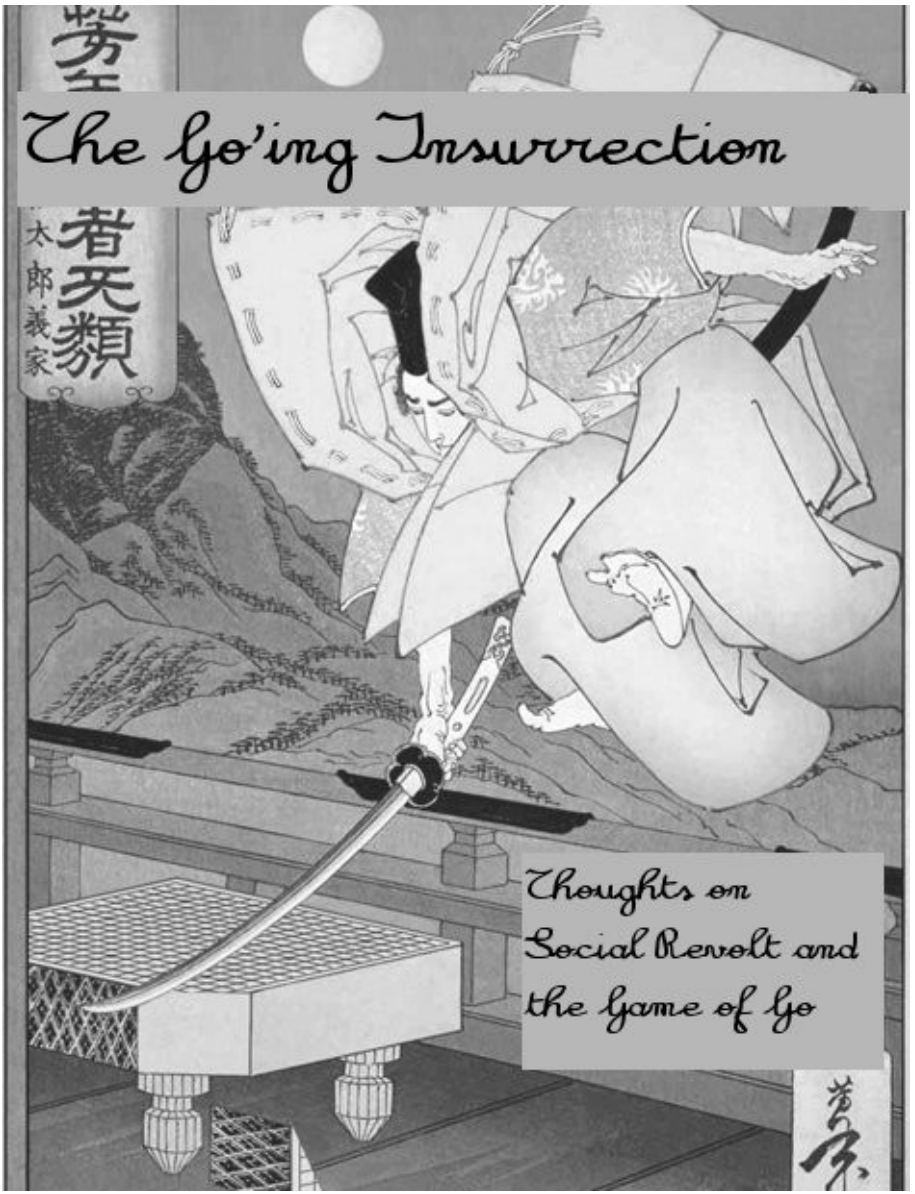
The Go'ing Insurrection



Thoughts on Social Revolt and the Game of Go

Introduction

The game of Go originated in China or Tibet at least 3500 years ago, and in its simplicity and complexity, it remains the greatest strategic game that exists. Part of its interest is that it is quite abstract, just stones on a grid, and so it lends itself well to interpretation. The most obvious analogy for the game is war, but Go is not chess, where the pieces have military names and are lined up facing each other, making the war analogy inescapable. In fact, in many ways, the traditional image of war as opposing nation states advancing on each other is not applicable to Go. The lines are not so clearly drawn, and rather than starting with a full army that gets picked apart, the Go board begins empty and the players create the geography of the game together. Through its simplicity, Go can become a metaphor for thinking about conflict and struggle more generally.

In modern North American society, conflict is everywhere, and overwhelmingly it is a one-sided battle constantly waged by the economic and political elites against everyone else. This conflict is visible in the spread of security cameras and other technologies of surveillance; in the growth of prisons and the expansion of police forces; in the ongoing wars of occupation waged by imperialist nations to secure access to resources; in the ongoing colonization carried out against Indigenous Peoples to undercut their resistance and steal their territories; in the threat of being fired or evicted if we aren't subservient enough; in the mass media that teaches us to submit; and in our relationships where we exploit each other, mirroring the systems of domination we were raised to

identify with.

As an anarchist, I seek to see this society for what it is: a permanent state of war. And I seek to join into that conflict to attack the systems of domination and create territories where new kinds of relations and affinities become possible. In this, I have found the game of Go to be a valuable tool for reflection on how to skillfully fight back. The purpose of this text is to apply some strategic concepts of Go to anarchist resistance.

I have been playing Go for more than five years, and have reached the rank of 1 kyu in online play. This level, with the kyu ranks almost behind me but looking out over the wide gulf to shodan, is enough to truly appreciate how little I really know about Go. It is not my purpose to speak authoritatively about Go or even to teach the game here – there are many excellent resources available, and I'd suggest starting at Sensei's Library, senseis.xmp.net or at gogameguru.com. If you do not know how to play Go, I hope you will still find this text enjoyable, but to really understand it, you definitely need to learn Go and play a few games.

The diagrams and analysis in this book rely heavily on resources produced by stronger players, professionals wherever possible, and I have simply tried to curate and interpret them. I do offer my own analysis of positions and do use examples from my own games, but those instances will be clearly indicated. In my examples of struggle, I have tried to use examples as local and as recent as possible, so there is a lot of discussion of the ongoing campaign against Enbridge's Line 9 pipeline that would move Tar Sands oil through Southern Ontario.

This text is divided into three parts. First, continuing from the paragraphs above, I will offer my reasons for why I feel Go is useful in strategizing for how to confront power. In the second section, I will offer a series of proverbs from the rich body of Go lore that apply as well to social struggle as to the

game (there are also some anarchist sayings that can be mirrored on the Go board). Finally, we will look at how to fight in handicap games, where one player begins with a material advantage and the other player has to use special techniques to catch up.

Go is a system for describing struggle

Above, I wrote Go's power in making analogies with conflict comes from its simplicity and complexity. By simplicity, I mean that Go has very few rules and the equipment is uncomplicated – just stones and a grid. This simplicity comes with a certain abstractness – Go resists being forced into any single interpretation. Go is so simple that it can be learned in about ten minutes, but it is so complex that even the most powerful computers in the world still cannot match the strongest amateur players (and the professional levels remain totally out of reach). It has been said that there are more possible games of Go than there are subatomic particles in the visible universe – its potentials are amazingly vast.

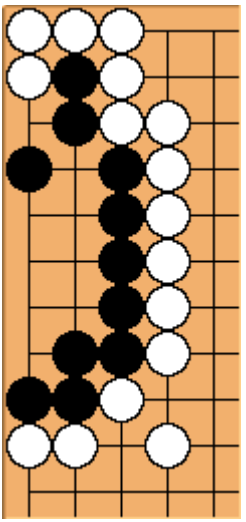


Illustration 1: An endgame position. The obvious move is to atari (reduce to one liberty) the two stones in the top left, but does better technique offer us a better outcome?

Go is also a non-zero-sum game, which means that the outcome is not simply win/lose, like chess. Every game of Go ends in a score, with each player having a certain number of points, and the game is considered to be won by the player with the most points. However, the score precedes the idea of victory, so in interpreting the game, we can set aside the binary idea of win/lose and consider the outcomes in other ways. For instance, an insurgent force stealing 25 points away in a high handicap game could be thought of as a victory of sorts. Even if black

still leads overall, 25 points for white is still way better than the nothing they would have had if they never entered into conflict.

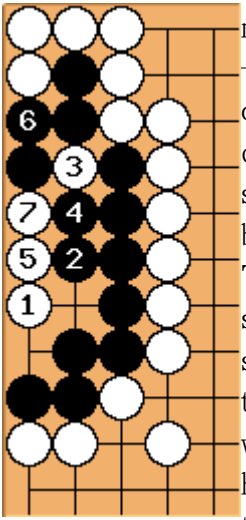


Illustration 2: The placement at 1 and the sequence through 7 give a seki. Black has zero points locally, compared to seven with the usual move.

Because Go is based around points, it means that sequences can be quantified – it is possible to look at different ways of playing in a given area and provide a quantitative analysis of why one sequence is better than another, because they result in different scores. This can be useful for seeing that small shifts in tactics, when repeated in several encounters, can be decisive over the whole board. Similarly, in our real-world struggles against power, a hopeless situation can often be transformed by a minor shift in tactics that succeeds in generalizing to different regions, rather than by inventing a whole new strategy.

There are also many aspects of Go that are not easily quantified, as we will see. These are what give Go its artistic, stylized flare – they give humans an advantage over machines similar to the one that passionate rebels have over lumbering bureaucracies.

Go is a territorial game – it is about controlling space. The analogy to armies taking land is obvious here. To my knowledge, the only other text comparing Go to real-world conflict is *The Protracted Game: A Wei-Ch'i Interpretation of Maoist Revolutionary Strategy,* very much within the tradition

of seeing Go as a contest between two armies facing off on a battle field. However, the idea of taking territory in Go does not need to be reduced to the shifting border lines of nations at war. In *The Coming Insurrection*, territory is presented as being densely textured with fluid meanings and relationships, not the flat, regular representation given on a map:

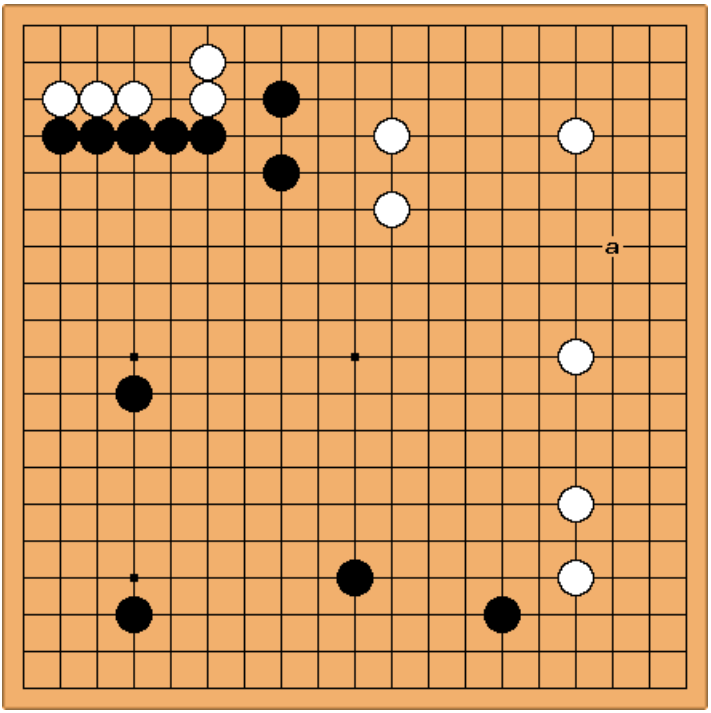


Illustration 3: White has territory in the top left, and a moyo in the top right. Black has a moyo on the left side and the bottom is their area of influence

"Every practice brings a territory into existence – a dealing territory, or a hunting territory; a territory of child's play, of lovers, of a riot; a territory of farmer, ornithologists, or flaneurs. The rule is simple: the more territories that are superimposed on a given zone, the more circulation there is between them, the harder it will be for power to get a handle

on them. [...] Local self-organization superimposes its own geography over the state cartography, scrambling and blurring it: it produces its own secession."

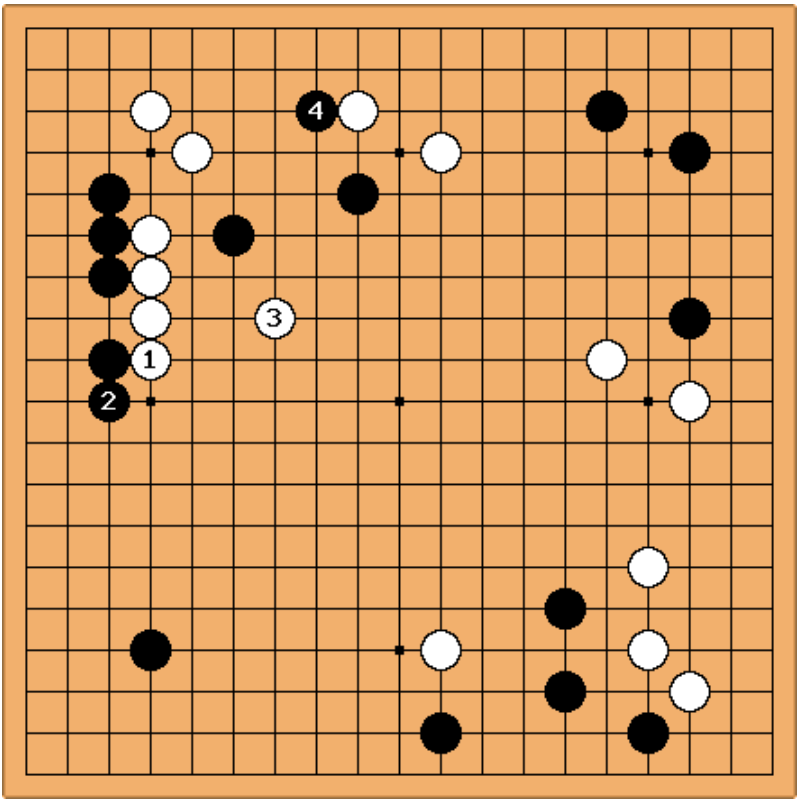


Illustration 4: The geography of the Go board is the constantly shifting relationships between the stones, co-created by both players. After 1 and 3, white might have felt their position on the top was secure and the two black stones were almost captured. However, black plays 4, the relationships between the stones shift, and suddenly it is white's two stones that are under attack.

In Go, the word "territory" has a technical meaning: an area of the board that one side has surrounded so securely that it is almost certain to count as points for them at the end of the game. An area that is not yet territory is referred to as

a framework, or a moyo (the Japanese term). This is a section of the board that one side has begun surrounding and where it would be challenging for the other side to invade. Even looser than this, we have 'area of influence', where a few stones sketch out a potential moyo early in the game.
The difference between these three kinds of areas (territories, moyos, areas of influence) is the relationships between the stones that make them up and the kinds of strength those relationships possess. *The Coming Insurrection* presents space as being relational, and Go is precisely this way. The empty space on the Go board crackles with potentials, with hidden threats and opportunities, and complicities in the form of connections between groups and stones. These webs of power shift with every move, and a single play can utterly transform the meaning of a position.

The board has deep layers of meaning and potential that shift and manifest with each play. What starts out as my area of influence is not very likely to end as my territory. My strong positions may be sacrificed to strike a blow against my opponent – stones that appeared captured may gain new life as the position evolves.

There are clearly some ways, too, that Go is far from a precise model for the kinds of conflicts we're engaged in. The board is finite, there are only two parties, there is a clear beginning and a clear end, players alternate turns and draw from equal pools of resources. And obviously, it's a board game, not real life. It is far easier to play Go well than it is to effectively confront power, because Go is much simpler. However, I believe that Go is a powerful enough system that we can draw important conclusions from it that can guide us through situations that are much less, well, black and white.

Proverbs

There is a tradition of applying proverbs from martial theory to Go. The most well known of these is "The 36 Strategems Applied to Go" by Ma Xiaochun, and many people cite the Art of War in their thinking about the game. However, it's much less common to go the other way, to take proverbs from the world of Go and to apply them to real-world conflict. Proverbs are not rules – they are intended to instill in a person the fundamentals of good strategy, to improve our instincts so that making strong moves becomes natural and obvious. Rather than memorizing patterns in order to mechanically replay them, proverbs ask us to become someone in whom these strategic truths are alive.

I'm drawn to insurrectionary anarchism because it encourages us not to wait, to live in revolt now. It takes struggle beyond being simply something that I do, by going to meetings or putting up posters, and makes it an extension of who I am, how I engage with the world on a fundamental level. The fault lines of power are everywhere, and moments of rupture are both constant and unpredictable. If I want to effectively engage these moments of rupture, I need to

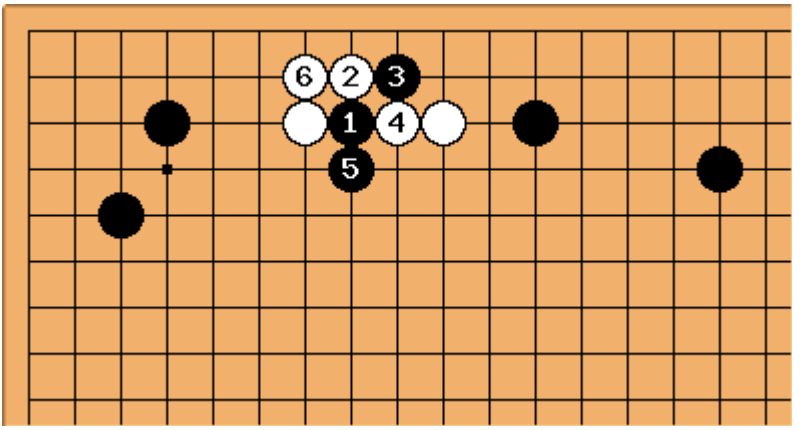


Illustration 5: This is not an attack on white. White solidifies their position while black creates a weak group with 1 and 5.

internalize strategic thinking, so that I can quickly recognize and respond to them.

Some of the Go terms used below take a fair bit of work to properly understand. It's easy to say the word "attack" but it's not obvious to beginners the difference between playing moves that actually encourage your opponent to strengthen their position and moves that actually threaten to capture enemy groups. In general, attacking involves three phases in order: splitting your opponent's groups apart, sealing them in so they are confined, and finally undercutting their base and stealing their eye-space. It's similar in struggles against the powerful – are we dividing them from their allies, reducing their ability to control the terrain, and delegitimating and undercutting their power? Or are we forcing them to simply fix defects in their position, allowing them recuperate our struggles by appointing police oversight boards and ministries of the environment? An attack in this case would be a campaign where the state could not survive the campaign's success without a real material loss, while it's a false-attack if the state can claim to adopt the goals of the campaign as its own.

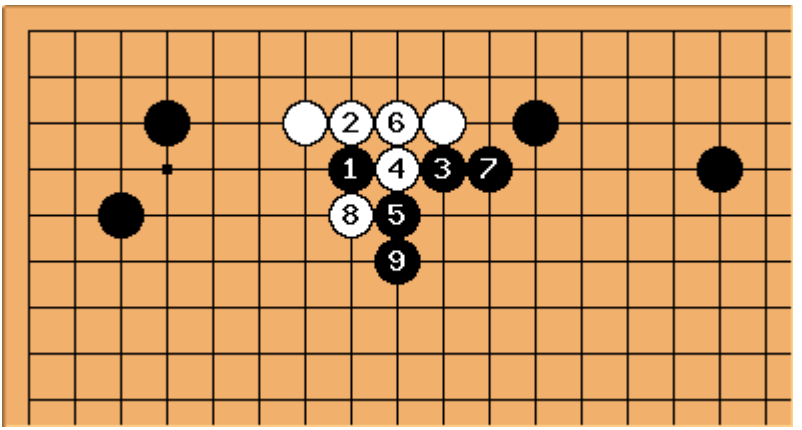


Illustration 6: This is also not at attack on the white stones. White secures their position on the top and is out towards the centre with 8.

Now that it's come up, **Don't peep where you can cut** is a go proverb describing this perfectly. Why make a move whose goal is to force the opponent to fix their shape? The opponent shares the goal of the peep, they would like to play just where you are forcing them to. There is also a proverb from chess that the **threat is stronger than its execution** – sometimes, leaving a dangerous move like a cut on the board unplayed can shift the terrain, those relationships between the stones, in powerful ways.

The term 'aji', literally taste, refers to the subtle, latent potentials that exist in a position, and leaving an opponent with the bad aji of a potential cut can force them to play guardedly elsewhere, or to eventually spend a move to deal with it.

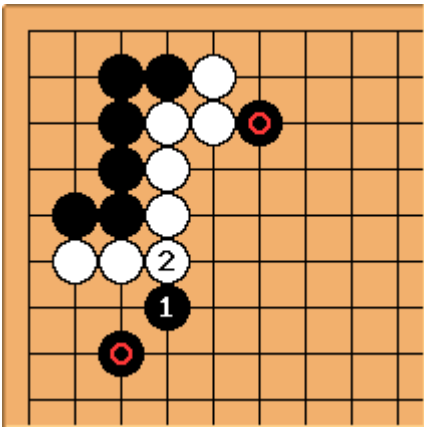


Illustration 7: Black 1 peeps on the cutting point at 2. By forcing white to connect, black deactivates the aji of their town marked stones. It is best to just cut immediately and go on the attack.

Alright, now that we've begun, let's get into some more proverbs!

Take and Maintain the Initiative!

A key concept in Go is 'sente'. Roughly, sente means 'leading the play', and its opposite is gote, 'following the play'. You win in Go by taking and holding sente, by finding ways to do what you need to do (for instance, protecting a cut point) in sente, even if it involves a sacrifice. Conversely, you can't win if you're always responding to your opponent's moves, no matter how safe and secure the positions you create are.

When fighting a powerful enemy like the state, we cannot afford to fight only on its terms, to be content to defend ourselves when it attacks us. We need to be able to strike and force responses of our own, and then strike again without being bogged down by responding to their response. To put it more concretely, campaigns against political repression, most anti-gentrification and anti-development struggles, and of course the innumnerable "hands off where/whoever" campaigns are hopelessly gote. If we are not choosing where and how to fight, how can we expect to do anything other than fall behind?

Usually, gaining sente means attack (or at least threatening attack). One of my favourite writers of any kind, and certainly my favourite Go writer, is Toshiro Kageyama, a 7-dan professional, wrote "This may be human nature, but if you save your own stones first, you have to postpone attacking your opponent's stones. That cannot be allowed."

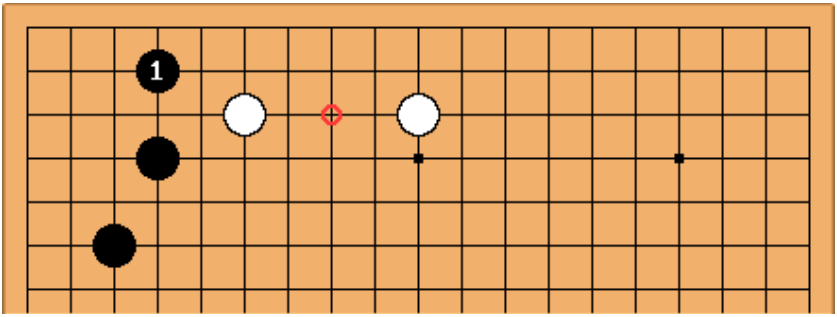


Illustration 8: Make a fist before striking -- black reinforces with 1, taking territory and aiming at the cutting point in the centre of white's position

But this is not an argument towards haste or thoughtlessness. There is a proverb that says **攻彼顧我 - Take care of oneself when attacking the other**. This is from a text called The Ten Golden Rules, written during the Tang Dynasty sometime between 618-907 CE. A related saying is **Make a Fist Before Striking**. We cannot attack

if our position is not secure. This means that securing our own position can be a form of attack – if securing our position exposes our opponent's weakness, forcing them to defend, then our defensive move was double-purpose.

A recent example of this in Southern Ontario (Sept 2013) is the large rally against the Line 9 pipeline reversal that took place on the final day of a regulatory hearing. A large, family-friendly rally at first seems like the furthest thing from attack. However, it brought people from across the region together, allowed for many meetings and exchanges of information and materials, and to do a lot of public outreach. It undoubtedly strengthened the movements opposing the pipeline, including the combative elements who see the campaign as an opportunity to expand and escalate. And even though the rally was a defensive/strengthening move, it was in fact sente. In response to opposition movements consolidating their strength, the industry and regulatory bodies cancelled the last day of the hearings – by playing solidly, building strength that might allow for attack, the rally forced a defensive response as well. This brings us to....

Use Thickness to Attack!

A thick position is one that contains no defects and is rich in eye-making potential. This means that it cannot easily come under attack itself, and so is ideal for attacking your opponent. But how do we use thickness to attack? Do we push

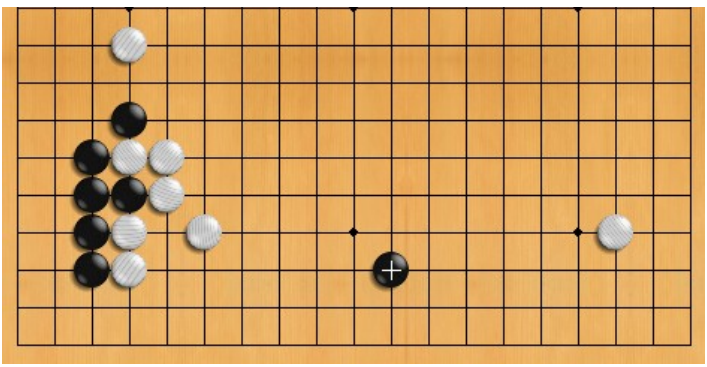


Illustration 9: White is thick in the lower left. From which side should white approach the marked black stone?

out from the thick position towards the opponent's weak stones? No! We force the opponent towards our thick position, crush them against our walls.

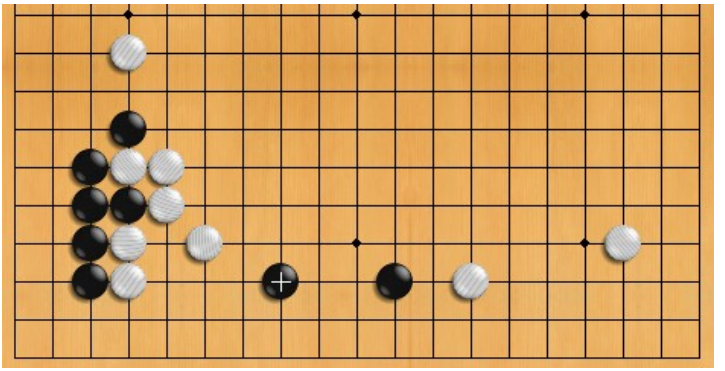


Illustration 10: White extends from the corner stone, squeezing black against the strong white wall. Use thickness to attack!

When deciding on which extension to make in relation to thickness, there is a second proverb, **Play away from thickness**.

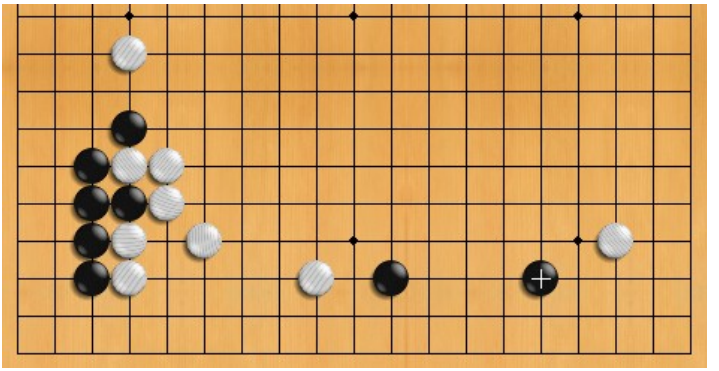


Illustration 11: White approaches from the wall, wasting the wall by making a small territory and allowing black an ideal extension.

This means both **Don't use thickness to make territory** and, when dealing with an opponent's thick position, it's better to keep away from it, or to neutralize its influence from

a safe distance. Instead of black's initial splitting move on the lower side in the diagrams, an approach to the white stone on the right side would be a better move, denying white the chance to attack using the wall.

In our conflicts with power, it seems we rarely get the chance to build thick positions and that no matter where we look, the enemy is already strong. Even in this situation, the proverb to play away from thickness still applies. We should avoid committing ourselves to conflict where the powerful have built up positions to attack us. Summit protests are an example of the bad habit of throwing our stones right into where the enemy is strongest. However, sometimes we can't hope to win unless we enter our opponent's strong positions (especially in handicap games, where the opponent has a material advantage, as we will see in the third section). So when we have no other choice, we should approach the thickness gradually, to neutralize its strength.

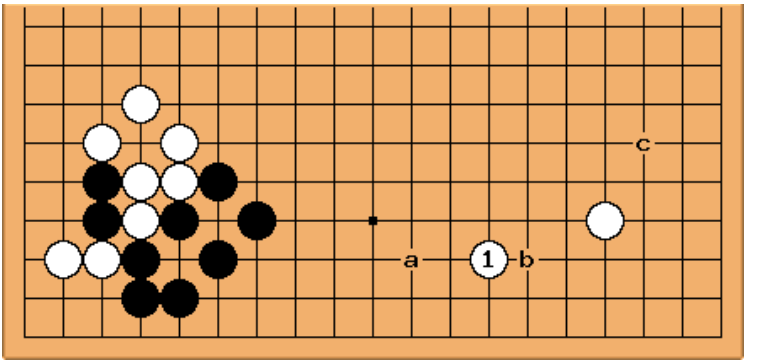


Illustration 12: White needs to be cautious of black's thick position. The play at 1 or 'b' is perfect. 'a' would be too far, black would counter attack at 1. If it were black's turn, the approach move at 'c' is best, playing away from thickness and pushing white towards it.

Go is a surrounding game, and in life and struggle, we want to avoid being outflanked – let us then advance from our

own strong positions wherever possible. Continuing to consider summit protests, it's common to begin with a strong position (a mass and, usually, avowedly "peaceful" rally) and use that as a starting point to extend towards the opponent's thick position (by lauching a confrontational breakoff march).

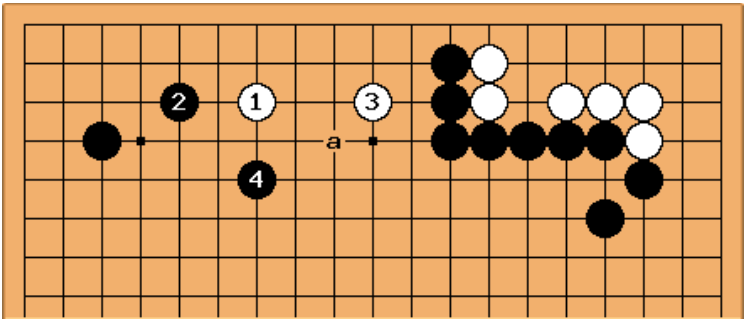


Illustration 13: Black secures the corner with 2 while pushing white towards the wall, then launches a powerful attack with 4.

Another way to do this is to play away from thickness is to maintain anonymity – we advance from the darkness, from the faceless and undifferentiated mass. When we are identified, we are cut off from that mass and can be surrounded by our enemies.

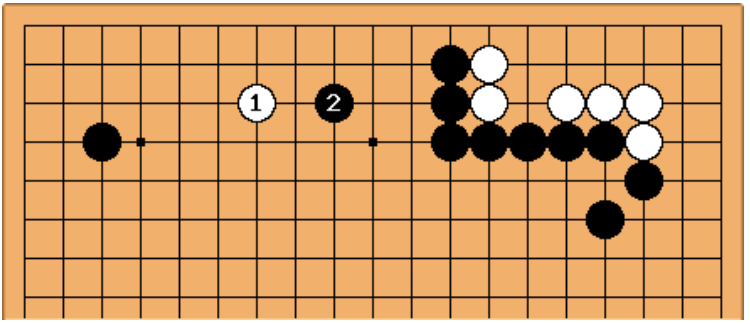


Illustration 14: Black uses thickness to make a cramped, tiny territory.

We need to maintain our connections, whether those be relationships or material supply chains (a blockade is most

effectively broken by isolation). We play away from thickness, approach it from our strong positions, and are always sure to **maintain our connections!**

Often, liberals violate this proverb by spending their time building a strong position, only to immediately try to convert that strong position into territory – **Don't use thickness to make territory, use thickness to attack!** The obsession with building contact lists, raising funds, recruiting members, doing endless outreach, only to sell out their demands to the first politician or business leader who condescends to them. If we are going to use tactics like that, let's keep our goal clear that we build a strong position in order to attack, not to inefficiently cash in for too-little territory. When I advocate a more conflictual approach to this sort of liberal person, I am told that attacking is no way to make gains. But there is a proverb in Go that disagrees...

Make Territory by Attacking!

Kageyama once said to his opponent, during a game where he had stayed relentlessly on the attack: "I'm starting to feel sorry for you. Considering that I never asked for any territory, it's surprising how much I've gotten. That's one of the benefits of attacking."

This might seem to be a contradiction to the proverb against using thickness to make territory. But by attacking an opponent's weak position, we can play stones that build large moyos towards a different part of the board, or that help turn moyos into solid territory.

A related principal is the leaning attack – if you are having trouble building a strong position to attack (making a fist before striking), consider pressing on one of your opponent's positions. Make an exchange that lets you build up thickness, towards a different group of your opponent's stones, and then

crush them against your wall using moves that build territory for you as well!

This brings to mind that tactics of anarchists who insert themselves into groups like solidarity networks. The goal of these anarchists is not simply to convince "bad" bosses or landlords to obey the relevant laws – they are trying to build up their strength by leaning on those capitalists in order to launch a larger attack against the social order.

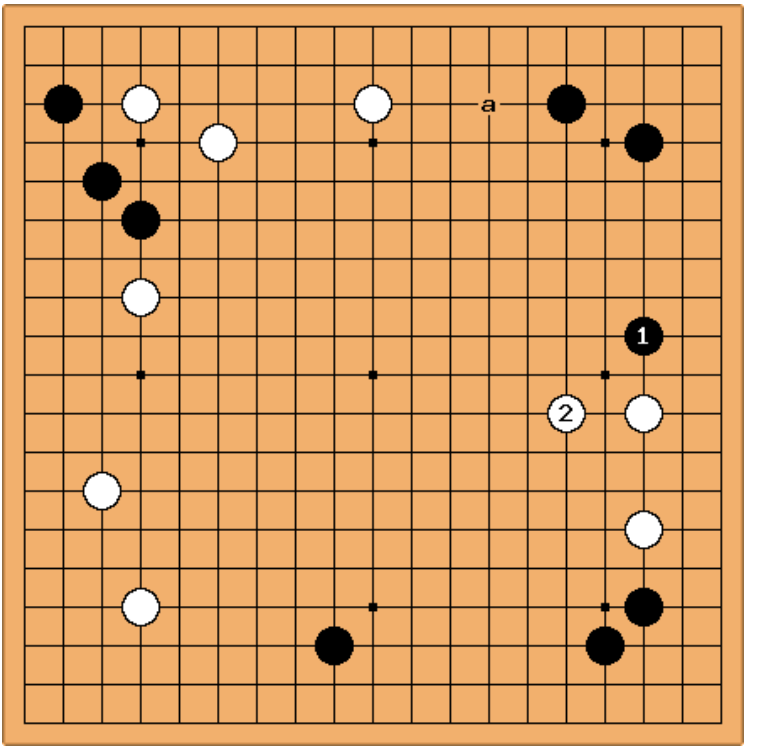


Illustration 15: This long extension from the black enclosure in the upper right is sente because it is also an attack on white's two stones -- white would like to invade above 1, but they must get out into the centre with 2.

A common pitfall in leaning attacks is to get distracted by the stones we are leaning on, to believe that, since we have been pressing on them, we should try to capture them. But then we

have forgotten that our goal in leaning is to build up a strong position – trying too hard to capture will leave us with cutting points, a position that's thin (many defects, little eye-making potential) instead of thick.

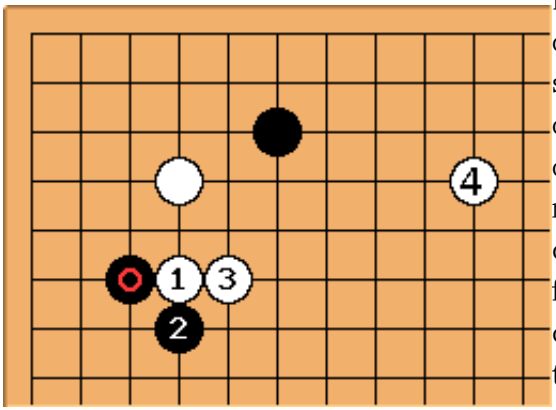


Illustration 16: White 1 and 3 lean on the marked stone, building strength to attack on the upper side with 4. If we imagine that white has a stone in the upper right, then 4 is alsobuilding a moyo while attacking.

If we engage ourselves in strategies like leaning on slumlords or the owners of sleazy restaurants to build capacity, let's not forget that gaining concessions from them is not the goal of the manoeuvre – we are gaining strength to strike elsewhere, in an attack that can gain us some real ground.

We can see what a leaning attack looks like, but what does it look like in our struggles to gain territory by attacking? The concept of territory from Go, a secure area that is likely to count as points at the end of the game, defies a simple analogy into life. One way of understanding it could be actual liberated space, or incremental liberation of space. Remember how *The Coming Insurrection* understands territory as being primarily social? "The territorial question isn't the same for us as it is for the state. For us, it's not about possessing territory. Rather, it's a matter of increasing the density of the communes, of circulation, and of solidarities to the point that the territory becomes unreadable, opaque to all

authority. We don't want to occupy the territory, we want to *be* the territory."

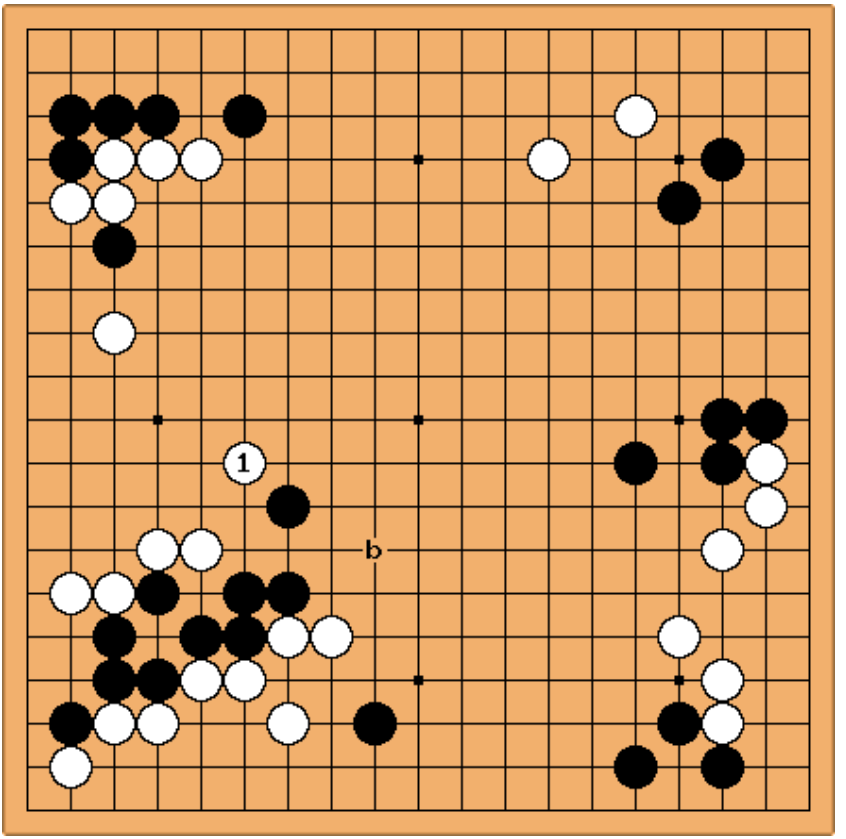


Illustration 17: White 1 attacks the black stones while securing territory on the left. A play at 'b' would allow black to destroy white's territory while escaping.

A campaign that uses the capacity built pressuring landlords to begin self-managing other parts of local life: tenants committees that can run the building during a rent strike, hold barricades during an uprising, or in the absence of these situations of over struggle, undercut the authority of the landlords and police and act as a hub for a local underground economy. It can even be as simple as anarchist graffiti that no longer gets painted over, or as subtle as seeds of rebellion left

in the heart of someone for whom the state has lost legitimacy.

In Indigenous struggles, "territory" can often be literal land. Building capacity through protests, blockades, and outreach campaigns builds capacity for a community like Six Nations of the Grand River to take and hold contested land permanently.

Ask Yourself Three Questions

The Go board is very large and there are usually any number of area calling for attention during our turns. Figuring out what area to play in is often as challenging as finding the right move in one of those areas. To determine priorities, Go players are encouraged to ask themselves three questions each turn:

Are any of my groups vulnerable to attack? If so, defend.

Are any of my opponent's groups vulnerable to attack? If so, attack it.

If no groups are vulnerable, what is the biggest point? Identify the area that is worth the largest number of points and play there.

These questions are similar to the three-phase strategy famously employed by revolutionaries in China and Vietnam: "the first was based on survival and the expansion of revolutionary networks; the second was guerrilla warfare; and the third was a transition to conventional engagements to decisively destroy enemy forces." The third question, finding the biggest point, is perhaps the most challenging to analogize. I believe it is similar to seeking "conventional engagement", because it involves taking and holding large areas of territory such that open conflict with the opponent, if they are actually to contest you, becomes inevitable.

Most of us participating in resistance are not dreaming

of a day when we can organize into armies and openly confront the state. As it says in *The Coming Insurrection*, "Against the army, the only victory is political." But the idea of taking and holding ground still appeals, as writers like Seaweed elegantly articulate:

"If having a reciprocal relationship with a natural environment is inherently healthy because this creates habitats, which in turn sustain their living inhabitants, then a focus on occupying a land base would seem always positive. Local or regional undertakings in acquiring these bases seem the most sensible. Actions around re-appropriating land, because they undermine the state and the market's control over our shared environment, help detroy the global institutions which prevent us from having land in the first place.

"Isn't it likely that the planetery network of authority and economics can only be defeated through multitudes of local and regional uprisings, ruptures and occupations, coalescing in an organic way?"

The overall lesson is that we should rank our priorities. First, to build networks, increase our capacity, and gather intelligence. Then, we can identify points of intervention, levers (times, places, and means that increase our strength), and bottlenecks (critical points in infrastructure or social mechanisms that, if obstructed, have a cascading effect). Finally, we can let our communes manifest themselves visibly – this may be less determined by our ability to resist militarily than by broadbased political support, the threat of solidarity attacks (as is the case in Indigenous land reclamations), or by a general weakening of centralized authority, perhaps due to climate change or fuel scarcity, as described in the excellent text, *Desert*. As well, there is the time-honoured practice of making our autonomous zones temporary. Remember that in

an insurrectionary view, the terrain is not merely physical, but is made up of relationships. Those relationships and networks can often be flexible as to their physical location, making the defense of this or that building or piece of land an unneccesary burden (build light positions that are flexible and can be sacrificed if need be...)

And remember to pose those three questions in order! Even if there is a very big point, make sure it's the right time to play it: **Don't go fishing when your house is on fire! Urgent moves before big moves.**

Fight to win!

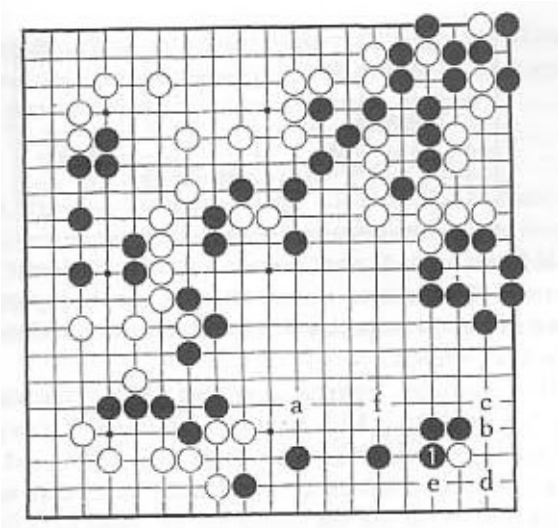


Illustration 18: Kageyama's diagram. 'a'-'f' represent possible plays in the area, but 1 is the solid play in line with the fundamentals.

This is a proverb from social movements that I've often applied to Go. Do not adopt a strategy that, even if it were totally successful, would still lead to defeat overall. Kageyama illustrates this point in his book *The Fundamentals of Go*:

"Provided it does not put him behind in the game, the

move black wants to make is the 'correct' one at 1. Any true professional would feel this way. [...] a condition is that it not put Black behind, and if it does, then he can only try to enlarge his framework with some move like 'a', whether it be correct or not. The point of all this is that moves have to be chosen with regard to the balance of the whole board. To be overcome with admiration for the superficial correctness of Black 1 is to miss the real professional attitude."

Black could play safely because they were confident that it would not put them behind. The ability to play the correct move thus depends on three things: a knowledge of the fundamentals to identify the correct move among many possible moves; to not be trailing in points; and the ability to properly assess the whole board position to *know* that you are not behind. Many players still feel threatened by the potential gains of their opponents even when their leads are iron-clad. To make dangerous overplays (like 'a' in Kage's diagram) even when you are ahead will just give your opponents the opportunity they need to create complications and catch up.

In our struggles against power, we are undoubtedly behind on points. But, if it happened that in a particular place or time we were not, would we even know it? How can we assess our gains? How can we tell if we're fighting to win if we are unable to tell if we're winning? And have we studied the fundamentals of good strategy, so that even if we can't afford to make solid moves, we at least know what they are?

A lot has been written elsewhere about fighting to win. It variously involves setting impossible demands ("Steven Harper has to get ACAB tattooed on his forehead and his band has to play our victory party") or refusing to have demands. It can involve a strictly revolutionary approach that seeks to overthrow the current elites or it can be a strategy based on demanding reforms and concessions until it

bankrupts the system (for instance, OCAP's use of "fight to win" is reminiscent of the American welfare rights movement of the 70's, seeking reforms to welfare that were intended to bankrupt the state).

The essential thing is that when we fight, we choose fights that will allow us the possibility of actually achieving our bigger goals. In the current campaigns against the Tar Sands, for instance, does focusing on government oversight actually bring us any closer to our desires, even if it was totally effective? Is urging the prosecution of killer cops actually doing anything to break the power of the police or the courts?

In an insurrectionary analysis, freedom is closest during the times of uprising, so "winning" is to create a permanent state of ungovernability, where the questions shift from how to build the barricades to how to supply them once all the stores have been looted. Fight to win then can be understood as, when you're behind or in a handicap game, make situations dangerous and uncontrollable, because victory lies in the leading player losing control of the game.

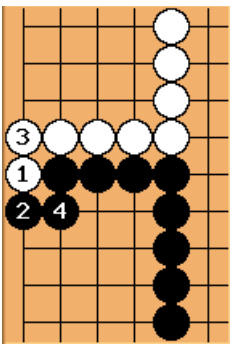


Illustration 20: This area on the side is double-sente. White 1 is sente and so would be a black move at 3 if black played first.

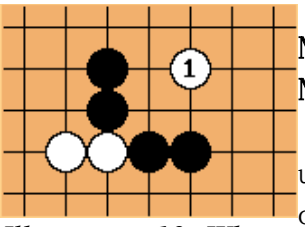


Illustration 19: White 1 is on the vital point of black's shape. Black wants to play there to make an eye and avoid being cut, but when white gets it, it's called the eye-stealing tesuji (skillful tactical move).

My Opponent's Move is my Move

When a move is urgent for your opponent, there is a good chance that it's urgent for you as well. This is true of vital points in life or death situations, where the life or death of a group of stones depends on

who first plays on the vital point of the shape in question. There is also a proverb that says **Play double sente sequences early!** Double sente means a move there is sente for either player, so the one who plays there first will profit locally and retain the initiative to turn elsewhere afterwards. This means that if a move is sente for both players, it should be played at the earliest opportunity.

(There is also a proverb that says **"Do not passively respond to your opponent's sente moves"**. Sometimes delaying a response to an opponent's sente move by playing a sente move of your own, even if it potentially risks a local loss, is the biggest way to play, because you do not concede the initiative.)

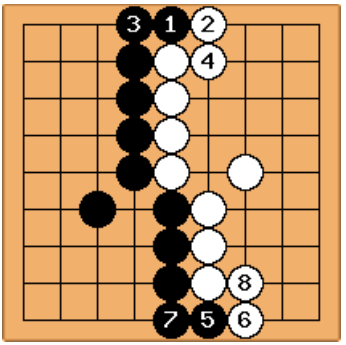


Illustration 22: Here, white passively responds to black's sente move on top, allowing black to get the other double-sente point on the bottom -- a disaster for white.

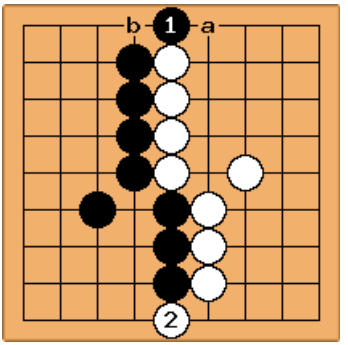


Illustration 21: White applies the strategy of mutual damage, taking one of the double-sente points in response to black taking the other. This is the only way to play here.

In Southern Ontario, there are many urgent ecological and social issues, but many radicals have made organizing against Line 9 a priority because getting a Tar Sands pipeline to a port for export is urgently important for the political and economic elites of Canada. The Line 9 pipeline

is an urgent move for our enemy, so it is urgent for us to prevent it. Although these same elites are advancing other related agendas, few are as critical to the overall economy and power structure as the Tar Sands pipelines, so fighting it on the local terrain is crucial.

Learning Joseki Loses Two Stones Strength

...but studying joseki gains two stones. Joseki are established lines of play based around the corners of the Go board that have been shown to provide an even result for both players. The seemingly paradoxical statements above refer to the difference between merely memorizing these joseki patterns as opposed to delving in to them and understanding the meanings of the moves.

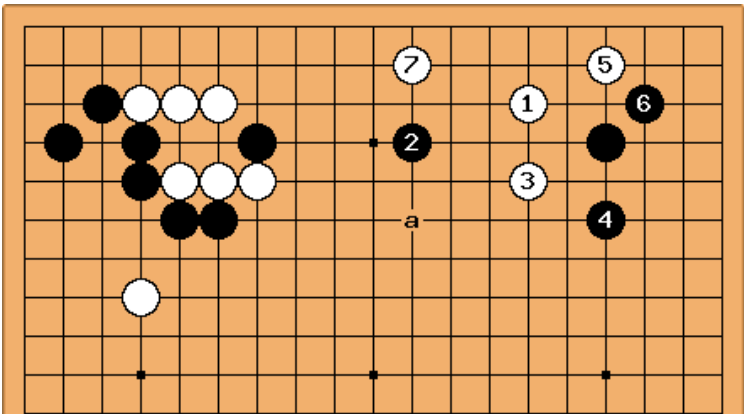


Illustration 23: White mindlessly follows the joseki, playing 7 in gote and leaving black 2 in a perfect position erasing any white moyo

The moves in a joseki are considered by a consensus of the world's best players to be the best available move in the local position, but if one doesn't understand *why* a move in the joseki is best, one will be at a loss when a player deviates from the pattern.

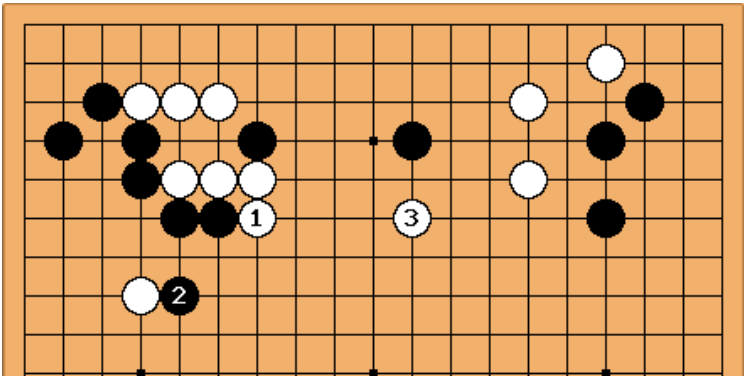


Illustration 24: Now white chooses instead to play a forcing move at 1, building thickness to cap and seal in the black pincer stone with 3. The difference between this and the previous diagram is huge.

When joseki are approached with an eye to understanding each move, these simple patterns suddenly reveal a huge depth of lore about exactly why it is right to play this way. Then, one can accept or reject those moves as you please, because it is better to play a move that you understand and that excites you than one you have just been told is right.

The world of "activism" is often hopelessly formalized. People's passions are funnelled into a small number of channels (oh, you're concerned that people are going hungry? Then pack boxes in the food bank until that feeling goes away, and if that doesn't work, see how many names you can get on this petition). I want to reject formalized modes of behaviour, but I also want to look at exactly why those ways of engaging became established, so that I can reject them rationally, rather than just out of revulsion at such a mindless way of living life (although the purpose of studying proverbs is to build up your instincts, so a reaction like revulsion is also a valid way of knowing).

Activist josekis like petitioning or lobbying are heavily critiqued, but the tendency to adhere to patterns turns up

elsewhere too. The “break window, write communique” joseki, the “block up at the demo and try not to get kettled”, the “newspaper boxes in the street” joseki… These may well be useful and appropriate forms of struggle, but how to what extent are we taking those actions because they seem to us the best moves versus how much are they just valorized within our scenes by an “established consensus”? Again, like, josekis in Go, these patterns emerged after years of experimentation and fine-tuning, and I’m not advocating against throwing them out all together. What I want is to understand the meaning of each move in the pattern (and of course the anticipated response by authority) so that I can be flexible and have access to a wide range of special plays depending on the circumstance.

Lessons from Handicap Games

One of the aspects that gives Go its enduring appeal is its system of handicaps, which allow players to compensate for different skill levels to be able to play mutually challenging and rewarding games. The player receiving the handicap always takes black, as black traditionally goes first. Above, I described my rank as being 1 kyu. The ranks in Go begin at around 30 kyu and work downwards towards 1, afterwhich one

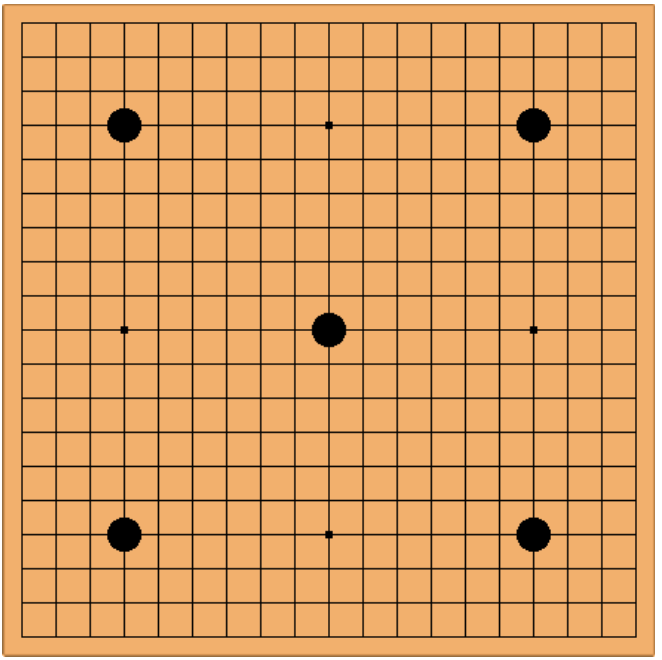


Illustration 25: If I were to play with a 5 dan, I would place five handicap stones before the game began.

becomes 1 dan and begins counting up towards 9 dan, which is the highest attainable rank. The difference between each rank is a one stone handicap. If I were to play a game with a 5 dan player, I would accept a five-stone handicap (and be very grateful for the opportunity to play such a strong player).

In the local club, I commonly give handicaps ranging from four stones to nine stones (sometimes with an additional fifty points to black on top of that). In fact, I give a handicap in almost all of the not-online games I play, and I would say I'm fairly experienced in them.

I have left some of the most crucial and relevant elements of Go strategy to this third section. I believe handicap games mirror the situation we find ourselves in when we seek to struggle against the systems of domination – surrounded on all sides before we even begin, disadvantaged in every area, struggling to build positions and take territory, always in the enemy's area of influence. The key ideas I want to explore here are **light play, invasion, and sabaki**, and to generally build a sense of the attitude required to approach a handicap game. Taking white in a handicap game is a recognition of superior skill, so it is black who trembles when white makes a seemingly impossible invasion.

In his book about handicap Go, Kageyama wrote: "Amateurs' playing strength is so unstable that even a slight shift in mood can affect them considerably. To stabilize that instability, you must make people regard you as strong at handicap go. If you are needlessly afraid of a stronger player, that fear will paralyse your hand and deaden your game. I have good news, however, for those many of you who tend to yield to the stronger player's moves and give in the instant he tries anything rough. Read this book thoroughly and **say farewell to those days of submission.**"

When taking white in a handicap game, the usual patterns simply won't do. Because a joseki by definition is a pattern that gives an even result, in a situation where we start at a disadvantage, even results guarantee a loss. This analogy extends to social struggle quite exactly. We could say that

traditional protests are a form of joseki, where the state is content to follow the established pattern for as long as the usual outcome does not put them at any risk of losing control.

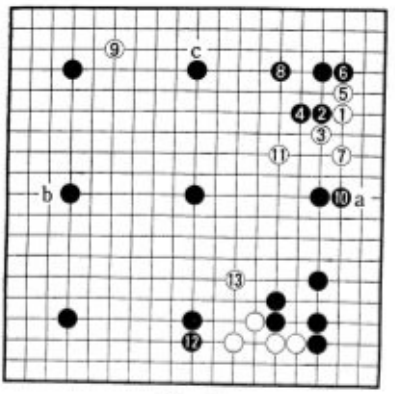


Illustration 26: Nagahara Yoshiaki provides this illustration of the hopeless situation of following josekis as white in a high handicap game.

From The Coming Insurrection: "...henceforth a real demonstration has to be "wild", not declared in advance to the police. Having the *choice of terrain,* we can, like the black bloc of Genoa in 2001, bypass the red zones and avoid direct confrontation. By choosing our own trajectory, we can lead the cops, including the unionist and pacifist ones, rather than being herded by them. In Genoa we saw a thousand determined people push back entire buses full of *carbinieri*, then set their vehicles on fire. The important thing is not to be better armed but to take the initiative. Courage is nothing, confidence in your own courage is everything. Having the initiative helps."

Typically, it is to white's advantage to complicate the game, because, as white is the stronger player, they can usually **read further ahead**, meaning they can see the outcome of more complicated sequences than can black. Our ability to be unpredictable, to deviate from established patterns, is our strength – but let's not be chaotic. When we make our moves, let it be that we've read out several responses and know our follow-up plays.

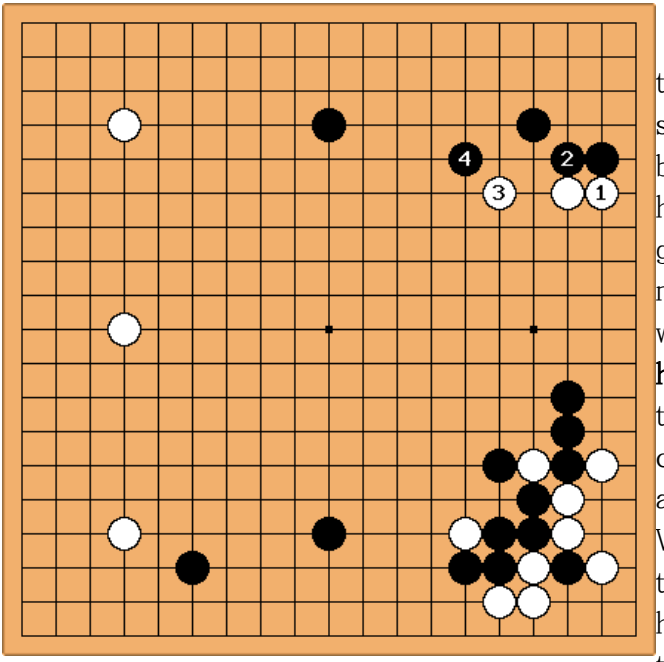


Illustration 27: White's play is heavy, leaving them with a bulky group deep in enemy territory that it would be disastrous to sacrifice.

A typical strategy of black in handicap games is to make the white stones **heavy**, so that they come under attack. White on the other hand wants to keep their positions **light** until there is a chance to build a moyo or attack some black stones.

This distinction between heavy and light play is thus vital to handicap Go and social revolt. A heavy group is one that has poor eye shape, cannot easily be connected to another group, and is too big to sacrifice. A light group on the other hand is flexible. The stones within it can develop in different directions, and some or all of them can be comfortably sacrificed. Light play has been summarized as "don't connect two stone solidly unless you are sure you won't want to sacrifice one."

Before I continue, I want to say a bit about this idea of "**sacrifice**". I'm obviously not imagining turning to our imprisoned comrades and saying, "Don't worry, you were light". This is a situation where the abstractness of Go is

particularly important. Stones aren't soldiers the way chess pieces are. When we talk about sacrificing a group, we are talking about letting something we created be destroyed. In this sense, a light group is more like a Temporary Autonomous Zone – it is a position we've created within hostile territory for a purpose, and once it has achieved that purpose, why should we fight to hang on to it?

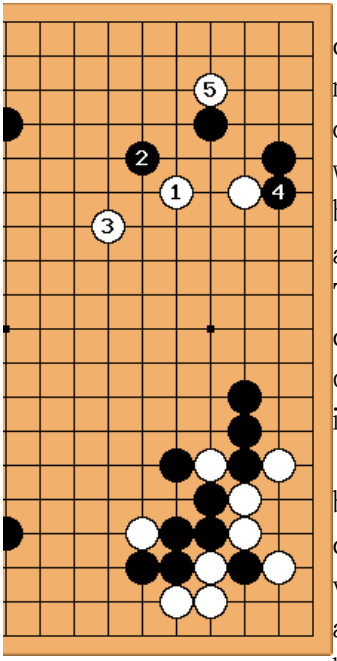


Illustration 28: Same position as above, but now white's light play skips into the centre and maintains sente for an invasion of the corner.

The quote above from TCI continues: "Everything points, nonetheless, toward a conception of direct confrontations as that which pins down opposing forces, buying us time and allowing us to attack elsewhere – even nearby. The fact that we cannot prevent a confrontation from occuring doesn't prevent us from making it into a simple diversion."

In practice, occupations tend to become heavier the longer they continue. The first few days are very dynamic – the action grows and shifts unpredictably, easily keeping the initiative and leaving corporations, police, and government off balance. But as time passes, the position is slowly surrounded – both physically and in the public narrative – and the group becomes heavy. Rather than a dynamic *movement* of people and energy, it becomes a static position that had to be defended in itself, because it is perceived as too important to lose. At Swamp Line 9 for instance, although there were other

construction sites on the pipeline nearby that they could have shifted to, the group chose to attempt to hold the pump station, even though police controlled all the access points and the site was under an injunction.

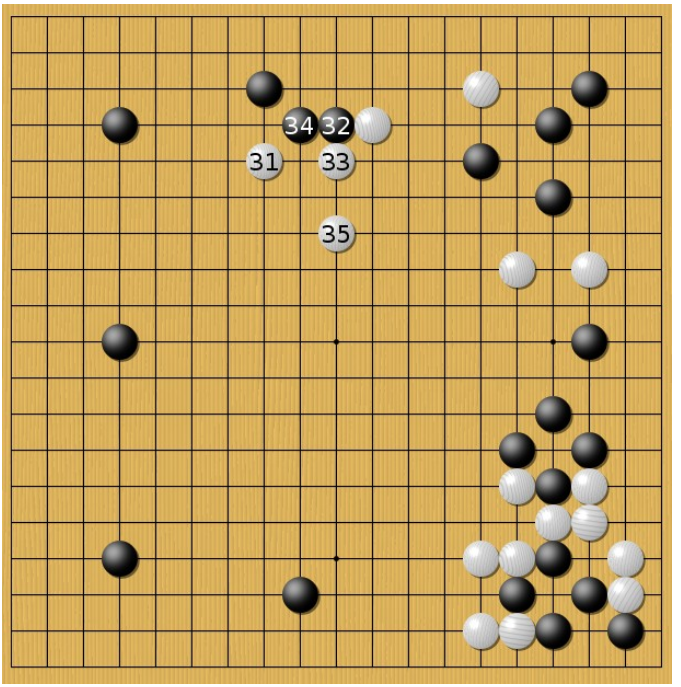


Illustration 29: This is a sequence from one of my games. My opponent had a four stone handicap and black just jumped out in the top right corner, splitting my two weak groups. 31 and 35 are light

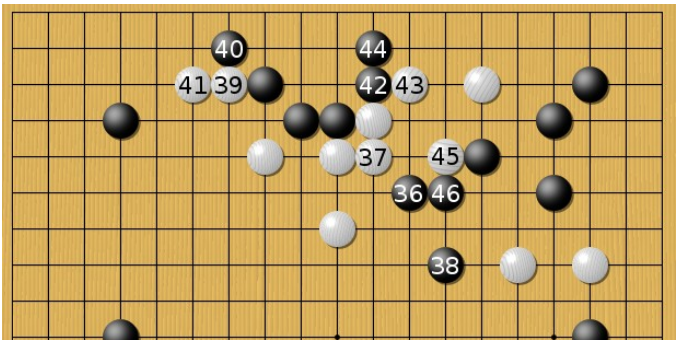


Illustration 30: I left a lot of cutting points in the previous diagram, but my shape was light so it was hard for black to find a way to attack. Black 36 peeps where they could cut, and after forcing moves at 39 and 41, all my stones are joined up.

It's true that the pump station was the most critical site, but by allowing the group to become heavy, the position could be surrounded and ultimately captured. (However, one could argue that we were able to trade the captured stones for outside influence.)

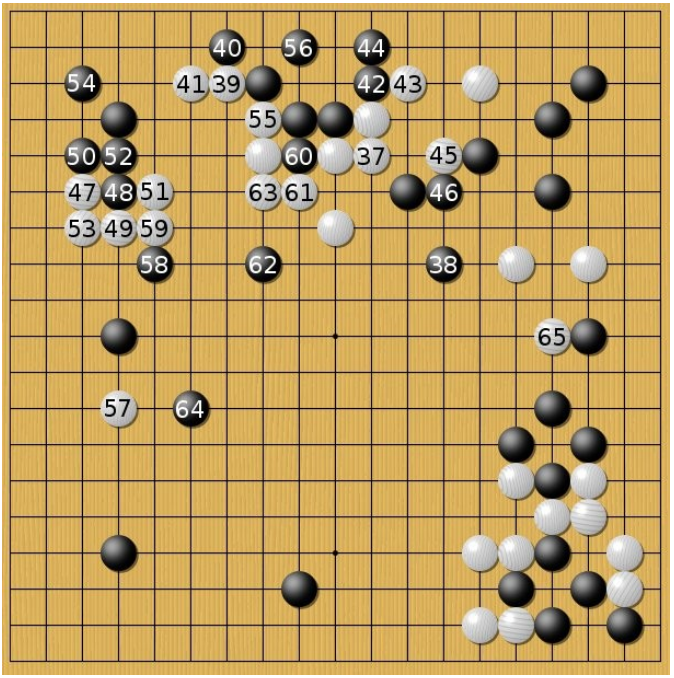


Illustration 31: The fighting continued with my taking sente to both attack the upper left corner, invade the left side with 57, and then finally, thirty moves later, return to the right side to begin saving two stones with 65. At the risk of bragging, this is one of the better examples of light play I've ever personally managed.

An example of light play occurred in the 2012 Quebec student strike, when people responded to new police powers targeting protests by decentralizing the movement into

neighbourhoods. By staying light during the conflict in the centre of the board (downtown), radicals were able to shift their focus to the sides (the south-west and east, mostly) and take territory there. Here, lightness looked like being willing to sacrifice some parts of their position in order to gain over all.

Another example (I'm drawing from way back in 2008 simply because it illustrates the point well) was the defense of the Guelph wood squat. Rather than stay on the site and wait to be evicted, the squatters called for a surprise march on the city's core, targeting the police station and city hall with vandalism before establishing a presence in the middle of the downtown instead of out in the woods. This shift of emphasis both gave a boost to the struggle and also allowed people to continue living on and using the woodsquat site more quietly into the future. In this case, they sacrificed a permanent, physical presence on a site for a more diffuse and unpredictable presence throughout a larger part of the city.

When we choose to resist, we are often making unsupported invasions inside our enemy's area of influence. A common way to begin an invasion is with a **probe**. This is a stone played inside the opponent's area just to see how they respond. Will they choose to prioritize the corner or the outside? Once we know which areas they are valuing most, we can choose our strategy accordingly. Sometimes we might use the probe stone to live in the corner, or we might treat the probe as light. By analogy, a probe is perhaps some combination of provocation and reconnaissance – put a bit of pressure on your enemy and force them to commit to their position so that you can attack more forcefully. If they have chosen to value a certain area, then that is precisely the area you want to deprive them of.

In the Line 9 campaign, an interesting probe was made by anonymous comrades in Kingston, who distributed a leaflet

and sent around a press release advising that an oil spill had occurred. There was no spill, but it forced Enbridge to adopt a defensive posture with respect to the risk of spills and how they would notify the public.

When Exxon spilled diluted bitumen in a suburb in Arkansas, Enbridge's committment to their exiting processes became heavy – the processes were simply not strong enough to stand up to the level of scrutiny that followed images of oil-covered suburban lawns, but Enbridge had invested too much in them to sacrifice them. They had to stick to the line that their processes were just fine. These obvious weaknesses made it easier for other communities to mobilize grassroots outrage against the pipeline.

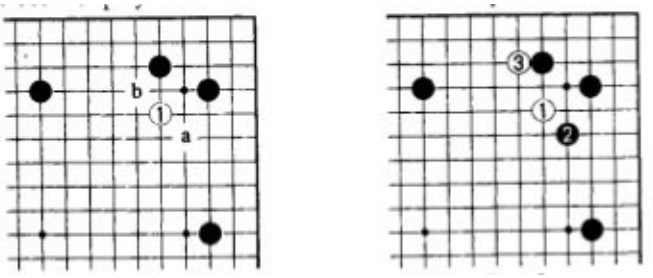


Illustration 32: White probes with 1 then begins to make sabaki with 3. Sequence continus below...

Similarly, in Hamilton, folks probed the local police by symbolically blockading a highway for an hour while they were really planning a full-scale occupation of an Enbridge facility.

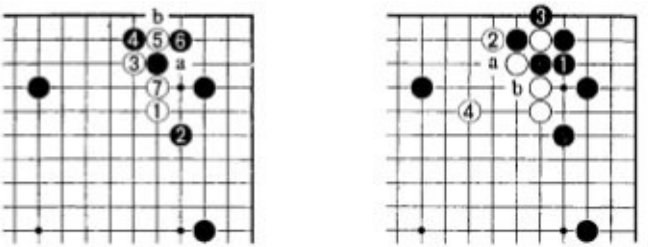


Illustration 33: White goes on to make sabaki and a successful invasion of a corner where black had invested four stones already. Note that white isn't worried about the cuts at 'a' or 'b' in the second diagram -- the position is light.

By seeing that Hamilton police and OPP didn't want to be perceived as taking sides in pipeline politics, Hamilton radicals attacked them for taking donations from Enbridge, depriving them of the air of neutrality they had already committed to cultivating. These tactics made it more difficult or politically expensive for the police to intervene forcefully once Swamp Line 9 got under way a month later.

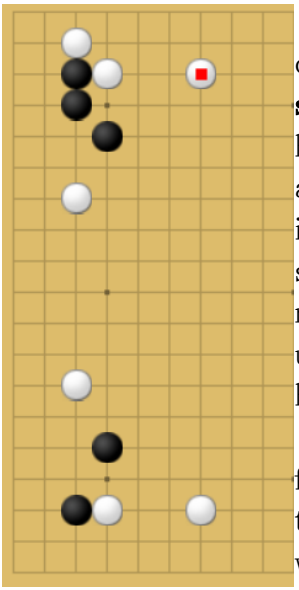


Illustration 34: White's way of playing in these two corners is currently popular in Korea. It treats the stones in the corner as light. If black adds another move, wrapping around the white stone at the top or bottom, white would make another two-space extension along the side of the board -- white invites black to force them to expand.

One of the key strategic elements of Go, and one of its most elusive, is **sabaki.** Roughly, sabaki means handling a tricky situation skillfully and lightly, usually in the context of invading an opponent's area or settling your stones. I admit, this remains something I struggle to understand, but I want to offer it here as a point of discussion.

How do we quickly establish a flexible position inside enemy territory? How do we leave weaknesses in our opponent's position as we do so, so that we can exploit the bad aji (dangerous potential) left behind? How do we establish these positions in sente, so that our hand is free to initiate a similar invasion elsewhere, before our opponent has a chance to add a stone to close off the possibility? Can inviting our opponent to cut our position or capture a stone be a way of getting them to force us to play where we wanted to anyway?

Asked a different way, these questions might be: How do we organize ourselves to free territory from police control? How do we create fissures in the alliances that support existing power structures? How do we maintain the initiative in these encounters, so that we are free to begin another elsewhere, before the state has a chance to crack down? Can we provoke responses from power that escalate or expand situations in ways that we want them to, or that provide context for us to fight back in the ways we might have desired to all along?

This text only scratches the surface of how Go can help us build up our strategic thinking as radicals and insurgents. I hope it motivates anarchists to take the little time required to learn this fascinating game and that folks will be able to have fun with it. I hope other Go playing anarchists (I know you're out there) take this zine as a starting point and add their own ideas and analysis. I hope for waves of decentralized uprisings that break the hold of the systems of domination over the territory, opening up new possibilities for freedom and resistance.

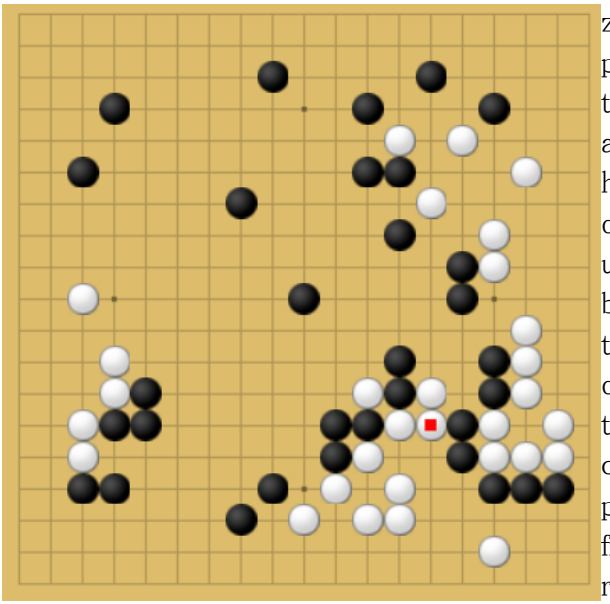


Illustration 35: Takemiya Masaki, 9 dan, giving a five stone handicap to Zen, currently the world's strongest computer go program. With the marked stone, Takemiya kills the lower right corner.

See you in the streets and at the Go board.