Sociology and the Military

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December 2008
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Sociologists seem reluctant to court martial affairs, nor are they inclined to give peace a chance (Kurtz 1992: 62). Commentators explain this by going back to the discipline’s conception. Saint-Simon and Comte conjured sociology after the close of the Napoleonic War which ushered in a century of relative peace (Tiryakian 1999: 475). Mills (1956: 215) argued that this cessation of hostilities created the classic liberal worldview: industrialism would replace militarism. Comte and Spencer’s stage histories both posited this (Laswell 1941: 457). War, while significant for European state formation, was a thing of the past. It had its place, and that was in “the early modern” era. Peace would be the new reality. Being normal, it need not be studied.

Two World Wars and the Holocaust hardly corrected sociological vision. In 1956 Mills warned readers that the upper echelons of state, corporation and military were now of unprecedented import. Consolidated, they constituted the new power elite, the ‘command posts of modern society’. Within this structure ‘the military definition of reality … prevails’ (Mills 1956: 5, 185). Shaw reminds us that while his other sociological insights were enormously influential, Mills’ ‘appeal for a study of war went almost completely unheeded’ (Quoted in Kurtz 1992: 75). Kurtz (1992: 76) adds that Mills’ Causes of World War Three (1958) was virtually ignored. It is therefore unsurprising that Gouldner’s (1959:vii) survey of twenty-five introductory sociology texts from 1945-1954 reveals less than 300 of the 17 000 pages devoted to the causes and consequences of war: ‘More than half of the texts dealt with this single most
important problem of the modern world in less than 10 pages’.

Mainstream sociology, still avoids military engagement. Ender and Gibson (2005: 249) show that war, peace and matters military continue to be ‘relatively invisible in introductory sociology textbooks’. They performed content analyses of 31 introductory sociology texts, the earliest published in 1995, the latest just before September 11, 2001, concluding that for sociology students the military is ‘an invisible institution’ (Ender and Gibson 2005: 261). Broadening the college text survey to include both history and political science as well, Boggs (2005: xxv) reports on 36 books. Some 27 had nothing to say about the military, nine had fleeting commentary, none offered any criticism. Boggs (2005: xxv) felt compelled to comment on this ‘remarkable invisibility of U.S. military power’. Even when mentioned, the military often manages to avoid analytic engagement. Kurtz (1992: 64, 81) blames funding regimes: the biggest global sponsor of social science research is the U.S. military. War and peace research has largely proceeded at the behest of military institutions less concerned by the general human condition than the efficacy of their own force. The resulting military sociology is inner directed, considering the military as its own society. Instead of military sociology we advocate a sociology of the military, one which sees the manifold ways in which society at large is militarised.

In the paper that follows, we want to wrest the military from the near-exclusive grip of embedded sociology, which is to say that study which takes place within the military’s own institutional structures. We advance a case against the military’s continued invisibility from the disciplinary mainstream. Our argument is simple: without reckoning with the military we cannot understand the modern world. We
begin by considering the military and the social consequences of military expenditure. Following this we survey a range of topics that are of central concern to sociologists: citizenship, social policy, economic and organisational structure, discipline and the state. In every instance we trace their modern incarnations to a series of military innovations.

The Modern Military and its Study

What makes the modern military modern? For Feld (1975: 419) the great transformation from traditional to modern armed forces is attributable to revolutions in training and financing. Technical skill replaced individual ability, and military activity moved ‘from a self-liquidating form of venture capitalism into a systematically budgeted branch of public administration’. The former involved new forms of discipline, the latter a new way of conceiving war: no longer would it have to pay its own way. An obvious point of sociological intervention is to question such allocations. Would society be better served if some of this went into health, say, or education?

Buchan (2006) offers an analysis of the Trident nuclear submarine system, the running costs of which are officially priced at £1.7 billion per annum. This covers four vessels, 950 crew, 500 base guards, 110 marine police, two bases, one refit dock, storage fees for unarmed Trident missiles housed in the U.S., and the Atomic Weapons Establishment that maintains the 200 operational warheads. Returning to our earlier point about secrecy, the Trident system also requires enormous capital works for the construction and ongoing maintenance of the submarines. These costs
are ‘beyond computation’.

The warlords have their way yet Trident makes neither economic nor strategic sense. Buchan (2006: 181) writes, ‘[i]n reality, the Trident project has been by far the most costly industrial enterprise ever attempted in Britain in peacetime, or at least since the building of the Dreadnought-class battleships in the years after 1906’. But it is a defence system for which there is no enemy. With the rise of the non-state actor, the new evils are common nouns (“Terror”) rather than proper nouns (“Russia”). A warhead can point towards Warsaw, but not towards a particular person. ‘Britain’s present enemies are individuals who blow themselves up on crowded trains and can’t be located through their hydrodynamic wakes or magnetic scars’ (Buchan 2006: 182). The Trident system’s yearly running costs alone could cover the fees for all of Scotland’s tertiary education students and the salaries and research expenses of their professors, or the upkeep of the country’s roads, rail system and ferries (Buchan 2006: 181).

Lutz (2002: 726) adds that it is not merely a matter of taking the government’s military budget from its social spending. Admittedly, the military can skewer public expenditure and even affect trade relations with other nations, but the state’s organization of violence has a host of immediate and long-term effects. In the U.S. this includes altering the social geography through military migrations from north and east to south and west. In analyzing Fayetteville, the closest settlement to Fort Bragg, Lutz discovered a city reconfigured to serve the interests of the post. Soldiers come to shop. Retail work pays less than other forms of labour, and Fayetteville’s is further depressed by the massed ranks of unemployed army spouses who come to town.
courtesy of the military, plus the retired soldiers that decide to stay on. In consequence wage rates are lower there than in any of North Carolina’s other cities. Fort Bragg also undermines Fayetteville’s tax base, being exempt from government property taxes. Globally, Lutz (2002: 729) notes that U.S. military operations ‘include apartheid-like conditions, prostitution, and other retrogressive effects on women in the surrounding communities, and environmental devastation around bases’. Such effects can be felt generationally, as in the Trident system. Although developed to protect British society, increasingly it will threaten it. The Ministry of Defence estimates the cost of dismantling the D5 missiles and safeguarding against nuclear contamination at £9.73 billion. There is no budget set aside for this (Buchan 2006: 181).

Modern Society and its Study

Sociology seeks to understand collective human experience in modern society. Part of its project involves comprehending how we come to be modern. This we cannot understand until we factor in the military’s decisive role. Routinely the “Dual Revolutions” are used to explain the onset of modernity. The French Revolution transforms politics, giving us new notions of democracy and individual citizenship. The Industrial Revolution transforms economics through the factory system, a new detailed division of labour, novel forms of discipline, training and surveillance. In this section we argue that all of the abovementioned subjects are themselves the products of something sociologists scarcely acknowledge: military imperatives. Let us consider each.

For Bauman (1995: 153) the ideal modern subject is constituted as producer/soldier.
The individual is drilled as a bearer of force, directed either to construction or destruction. Docile, disciplined and regimented they find their place as cogs in a collective machine. Healthy and obedient they are always “fit for service”. Citizenship can additionally be interpreted as the rights the ruling classes cede to the masses in order to rule. Citizenship in turn obliges military service. The origins of the citizen-soldier are to be found in Revolutionary France (the levée en masse of 1793), although it was Napoleon’s Grande Armée that converted the entire country into a resource for fighting. Of course, just who has been permitted to enter the charmed circle of citizenship is an important point: historically it has been the white heterosexual male, the heroic fighting man.

Still, certain welfare benefits can be seen as rewards for military service. Modern American social policy begins with pensions to Civil War veterans, wives and dependents (Skocpol 1992: 525), the extension of Britain’s franchise to some women over 30 was seen as gratitude for services rendered in the Great War, and the Beveridge Report which ushered in their modern welfare state was implemented at the end of the Second World War (Scott 2001: 186-7).

The origins of citizenship and social policy can be attributed to the military, as can the origins of our “disciplinary society”. Weber (1982: 261) asserted that ‘[t]he discipline of the army gives birth to all discipline. The large-scale economic organization is the second great agency which trains men for discipline’. A dueller and a Prussian officer, Weber felt the effects of drill on the parade grounds of Strassburg. In his opinion mass organisation and collective action rest on rational discipline, the original of which is the barrack. Indeed, bureaucracy itself was the creation of the standing army, which in
turn came into being through state machinations and financing. The standing army was 
a necessity for policing large territories and protecting them against external enemies. 
In monopolising the means of legitimate violence the state finds its reason for being 
(Weber 1982: 212, 222, 334). Weber brings sociological attention to the important 
questions of the extent to which military organisation affects state structures and modes 
of social organisation.

Feld (1975) finds an historical location for Weber’s pronouncements in the unlikeliest of 
places, the hitherto unmilitary society of the United Provinces of the Netherlands. 
Beginning in the late sixteenth century with captain-general Maurice of Nassau, the Dutch 
rationalised and professionalised their military. Regular wages replaced looting, binding 
soldiers by contracts rather than loyalty, curing the morale problem. Discipline was no 
longer left to personal choice but was imposed by a rigorous regimen of training based on 
objective codified criteria. In 1607 de Gheyn published the Wapenhandelinghe (arms 
drill), a book of engravings demonstrating the new control. These systematised the 
necessary postures and movements required for successful use of the caliver, musket and 
pike. Correct use of the weapon was broken down into a series of sequentially numbered 
steps, and a command attached to each forming the entire cycle. The knowledge was 
easily, and fully, transmitted. Feld (1975: 424) writes, ‘[t]he illustrations and their 
descriptions were arranged to form an integrated instructional device, perhaps the first 
ever printed’, moreover in the Wapenhandelinghe we have ‘the first verifiable system of 
mass indoctrination and control’.

Such instruction produced a machine: a programmed mass working to a single end.
This was strengthened by adding the countermarch to the firearm. Ranks of soldiers were organised five deep. The first would fire then retire to the rear and reload; marching towards the front again as successive rows fired and fell back. Once at the front they would fire again, ensuring the continual production of firepower. Feld likens this to the assembly line replacing craft production, deskillling the participants so that they only needed functioning limbs and the ability to process basic orders. It is interesting to note that the efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control of people by non-human technologies that Feld constantly refers to represent all of the hallmarks of instrumental reason which defined the modern world for Weber (Ritzer 1996: 18). With Maurice of Nassau we find the first modern army, and the ‘earliest of industrial revolutions – the industrialization of military behavior’ (Feld 1975: 434). The military has continued its tradition of managerial innovation, particularly in its North American guises, developing operations research (“management science”), numerical control, “flat management” and “systems integration”.

As with the industrialisation of mass behaviour, the industrialisation of mass production can be attributed to military origins. The Venetian Republic was a major maritime power during the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. A massive arsenal was constructed there in 1104. Contemporaneous to the Dutch military reforms, the Arsenal at Venice covered 60 acres. It employed 2000 men within its confines; 3000 in states of emergency. Dante’s *Inferno* compared it to the clustered depths of hell. The Arsenal ‘was the biggest industrial establishment in all Christendom, perhaps the biggest in the world’ (Lane 1973: 362). Moreover, it foreshadowed assembly line production techniques, the use of interchangeable parts and vertical integration, arguably according it “first factory” status.
Subsequent writers have highlighted the quest for interchangeable parts in musket manufacture as modern industrial production’s driver. Hounshell (1985: 25) acknowledges the debt “the American system” of manufacture had to the Enlightened European military mindset. De Gribeauval ushered in the standardisation of French weaponry through uniform parts. This rationalisation made parts interchangeable, artillery pieces could be exchanged with small arms components. It entailed prototypical assembly lines and mass manufacture techniques (De Landa n.d.). Taken to America by Jefferson, the American system began with the Federal armories (Hounshell 1985: 26). Economic and administrative restructuring drew legislative momentum from an 1815 act aimed at “the better regulation” of the U.S. Army Ordnance Department. The fully developed mass production process employed dedicated machinery and precise systems of measurement to ensure systems of uniformity and controlled workflows. Historian Roe Smith (1985:41) called it ‘one of the great technological achievements of the nineteenth century’.

Given the points above concerning economic order and output, Karl Marx’s use of military metaphors in The Communist Manifesto and Capital are anything but misplaced. In them Marx showed, ‘that techniques, besides being means of producing, are always means of dominating, of disciplining, and of militarizing the worker’ (Gorz quoted in Hacker and Hacker 1987: 747). The explicit linkages may not be so noticeable in contemporary western society, but sports shoe production in China, Indonesia and Vietnam for instance, sees factory production frequently managed by ex-military men, with wages further depressed by militia that oppose collective organisation simultaneously backed by governments invoking national security.
interests (Enloe 2000: 291).

In Marx’s schema worker and property owner, as the two great classes of capitalism, are in a sense at war. Their opposing identities are determined by their relationship to the means of production. What we understand by history is driven by this conflict’s motor. All societies, barring the mature communist one to come, are stratified by class, the ruling class parasitic upon the subject class. Indeed, for Marx the military are proof of his thesis of historical materialism par excellence, pioneering the wage system, generating various assumptions about property rights, the value of metals and the monetarised economy, developing large scale machinery and the division of labour. ‘The history of the army brings out more clearly than anything else the correctness of our conception of the connection between the productive forces and social relations’, he said, indeed ‘[t]he whole history of the forms of bourgeois society is very strikingly epitomized here’ (Marx 1988: 341-2).

Conclusion

The central point of this article has been to highlight modernity’s debt to the military, and to criticise conventional sociology’s failure to acknowledge this. Major social theorists like Marx (1988) and Foucault (1980) have recognised the central importance of the military, yet it remained marginal to their work. Neither managed their proposed military projects. To this day, writers repeatedly stress the military’s continued invisibility in the social sciences (Boggs 2005: xxv; Ender and Gibson 2005:249; Lutz 2002: 724). As long as this remains, critical scrutiny is evaded. Yet military readiness, defence and war constitute major ordering principles – in these
senses our culture is militarised (Mann in Scott 2001: 184; Lutz 2002: 724). We cannot fully appreciate the workings of present society, our past or possible futures until we reckon with this. The task ahead is to illuminate the manifold connections between the military and modernity. To modernise is to militarise.

**Bibliography**


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