

COMMENTARY

CIVILIANIZATION OF THE US MILITARY IN THE ERA OF COUNTERINSURGENCY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS FOR APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq brought controversies regarding anthropological involvement with the US military to the forefront. These controversies stem from the US military's adoption of counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in the mid-2000s, as a means to overcome stalling efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. One major result of the transition to COIN was emphasis on civilianization of military operations, thereby generating employment of social scientists, including anthropologists. Consequently, some anthropologists, most notably Roberto González, challenged this practice as being ethically and scientifically inappropriate. Yet, as this commentary suggests, the issue is not simply one-sided. This is because of the complexity of warfare in the 21st century, a complexity that complicates straightforward assessments about the role of social science in US military efforts. In sum, not all types of anthropological involvement with the military are negative.

KEY WORDS: military-industrial complex, counterinsurgency, civilianization

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In the mid-2000s, the US military hit a juncture, with respect to resolving its engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. In brief, the military adopted the doctrine of counterinsurgency (COIN) to replace a failing effort at the more traditionally utilized enemy-centric approach, which, in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, relied on defeating adversaries and eliminating terrorist organizations, such as the Taliban, Saddam Hussein loyalists, and Al-Qaeda (Jones 2009). More specifically, COIN is associated with practices that emphasize improving relations between the military and the local population in ways intended to deprive insurgents of legitimacy, thereby rendering insurgent activities ineffective and without appeal among the larger population. That is, COIN is based on military participation in the local society to provide not only physical security, but other services, including those identified with institution- and state-building, such as the construction of infrastructure, the strengthening and development of governance, and in generating and fostering the local economy. Subsequently, this makes COIN a long-term, labor-intensive, and expensive strategy that relies on a host of non-military actors, including social scientists (Kilcullen 2009; Galula 2006; Field Manual 3-24; Marston and Malkasian 2008).

Despite COIN having led to improved outcomes for the US military in Iraq, it is regarded by both military and non-military critics as a complex and controversial strategy. Within the military, COIN is viewed as politically risky and too expensive, in terms of monetary and human costs.

Moreover, military critics see COIN as untested and difficult to prove as effective, given its long-term nature (Freuhling 2009). Likewise, COIN is labeled as problematic by social science critics who regard it as a type of social engineering, since it involves manipulation of a local population in a manner suitable to the goals of the military performing COIN (González 2010). Within this context of critique, I raise my commentary about the complexities surrounding the processes associated with the civilianization of the military and what this means for applied anthropological work on behalf of the military. I argue that to understand better the realities of doing such work, we need to utilize a more nuanced approach grounded in critical social theory. Accordingly, it is possible to overcome a one-sided perspective that identifies such work as entirely negative or positive.

Controversial Perspectives

To begin, I contend that the US military and many militaries around the world are becoming increasingly civilianized due to the growing influence of non-military forces that pervade their strategies and operations, especially since the onset of COIN as a viable alternative military strategy. COIN became a thinkable option in the mid-2000s not only because of insurgent issues, but because of a plethora of changes in Western societies that, strongly and often unpredictably, permeate how the military functions. For example, privatization and the reach of global business interests do not allow the military to do business

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as in past conflicts. As scholars have noted (e.g., Chatterjee 2009; Singer 2003; Avant 2005; Scahill 2007; Shearer 1998), the impact of international business leaves no aspect of the US military untouched. Recruiting is done by private contractors. Weapons systems are developed and operated by contracting firms, whose personnel commonly have no formal military experiences. Likewise, logistics and some security work within military campaigns are largely the domain of private companies that do the brunt of the work, from managing fuel supplies to running mess halls. Even certain high-level research and analysis with strict military consequences is handled by contracting firms (Van Arsdale and Smith 2010). Thus, military operations are heavily influenced by thinking and behavior that have roots in non-military environments such as the business world, making traditional military philosophy open to civilian-oriented transformations.

Of course, there are those who see the arrows moving in the opposite direction. Scholars, such as Lutz (2009), González (2010), Giroux (2007), and Turse (2008), argue that we are really experiencing the militarization of civilian life. González, for instance, argues that evidence for this is abundant, as our schools and universities are targeted by the military-intelligence-industrial sectors for recruitment by means of campus visits, scholarships, and outreach programs to minority-dominated areas of the country. And, perhaps most obviously, our popular culture is saturated with images and content of a militarizing nature, from Hollywood films to television programming to video games about war and espionage (González 2010). Yet, I argue that the patterns González describes should not be read simplistically. González is correct as far as one body of evidence is concerned. That is, there is no denying that the military-intelligence-industrial complex is well represented within numerous aspects of American life. Nevertheless, if we examine how such a military-intelligence-industrial complex actually functions, we see a somewhat different picture crystallizing.

The military-industrial infrastructure has changed significantly in past decades and for a variety of reasons. The rise of COIN to prominence in the mid-2000s is primarily informed by trends existing outside the military. That is, the military had to turn to civilian institutions, personnel, and practices to implement COIN in both Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, military scholars, such as Collin Gray (2006), have long lamented the slow transition of the US military into the 21st century, with respect to accepting a drastically changed global security environment that no longer is simply about a bipolar struggle between the USSR and the United States. And as scholars and observers, from Peter Van Arsdale to Derrin Smith (2010), have demonstrated, the military has had to quickly implement outreach to the

non-military population for lessons learned and best practices when trying to implement COIN. For instance, the military now works closely with NGOs and private sector actors that have no stated military interests, so that the military may better implement its strategy of COIN.

One specific manifestation of this is the National Guard Agribusiness Development Teams (ADTs) employed in Afghanistan. While essentially a military operation, the ADTs cannot exist without a majority civilian infrastructure, which includes US farming bureaus, agribusiness firms, universities (e.g., Texas A & M), and civilian agencies (e.g., the USDA), as well as Afghan civilians, ranging from farmers to agricultural professors and government officials (USDA 2010; Leppert 2010; Center for Army Lessons Learned 2009). Thus, a central argument I make is that we need to be cautious about our interpretations of whether the military-industrial complex informs civilian life, or the other way around. Thus, while I do not disagree with González's trepidations, I believe closer analysis reveals the opposite trend.

Moreover, if we reexamine González's evidence, we might disprove some of his assessments. For instance, González (2010) points to popular culture content as proof that American society is being militarized. Yet, González's content analysis is relatively weak. One could as easily draw the conclusion that popular culture content reflects broader concerns within society, as opposed to ones pushed down into society by an alleged Pentagon agenda. In other words, the civilian imagination informs the Department of Defense imagination in powerful ways that González does not acknowledge. This interpretation might even raise a more serious concern about military-society relations, given the susceptibility of the military-industrial complex to the workings of a civilian society that not only informs its content, but also is constitutionally and legally in control of it. Perhaps, then, it is better to frame the analysis in terms of a dynamic construct through which society interacts with the military-industrial complex to produce, perpetuate, or reinforce behaviors and norms that define military-society relations.

Returning to the implementation of COIN by the US military, COIN represents a rediscovery of the value of social science and humanities research for the military. This dynamic is not new, but represents an extension of past practices that extend back into the history of the US military. That is, the US once made concerted attempts to recruit and incorporate members of the social science community for military and intelligence-related efforts, with varying degrees of success. For example, the use of area studies experts was common during WWII to combat Germany and Japan and, in the case of geography, several leading scholars, including Isaiah Bowman, played an active role in the WWII war-fighting effort as academics (Desch 1998;



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Price 2008). This trend fell from popularity over time for a number of reasons, including ethical concerns about how particular kinds of knowledge are used by the US military and its allies. The most prominent case involved reliance on (and probable abuse of) anthropological knowledge during the Vietnam War. This included highly detailed knowledge about society that was ultimately abused by US allies against not only its proclaimed adversary, the Viet Cong, but also against many within the ranks of southern Vietnamese allies (cf. Van Arsdale and Smith 2010). Thus, when the US government again reached out to the social science community in the mid-2000s, accusations and debate erupted over the role of social science in US military doctrine and practice, and critical eyebrows were raised about issues of ethics, power, and colonial-like practices.

In this manner, critics of US military engagements outside of the US consider them to be extensions of hegemonic power that serve US interests above all others (e.g., Johnson 2004). When we survey the US military infrastructure, with its regional commands, its six hundred domestic and overseas bases and satellite facilities, and its countless ventures, from invading Iraq to special operations in the Philippines, the neo-colonial argument seems to hold a lot of weight (Van Arsdale and Smith 2010). And, as Nathan Hodge (2011) points out, US foreign diplomacy frequently is coupled with a military component, so that it might be difficult to unravel where the Department of Defense (DoD) ends and the Department of State (DoS) begins, thereby bolstering accusations of US imperial intentions. Furthermore, if we take theoretical positions that stress differential power relations, which propose that all social relations are manifestations of power (Foucault 1977), then the US does appear guilty of a new iteration of colonial rule.

Such are the arguments of some anthropologists, who have responded negatively to the use of social scientists as part of COIN operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (González 2009; Lutz 2009). Their arguments point to an irreconcilable conflict of interests, pitting knowledge as utilized for empowerment of society (including that of political power structures) against knowledge as utilized to serve a particular nation-state agenda (including cultural knowledge as part of COIN operations). Then such knowledge serves to produce and reproduce specific kinds of power relations. In the case of COIN, the interests served are primarily those of the US, even when US officials claim otherwise. This line of reasoning is extended by González in his critique of the Human Terrain System (HTS), which relies on embedded anthropologists, or comparable social scientists, to acquire and use cultural and social knowledge gained in conflictive environments for the benefit of the US military (González 2009).

It is difficult to mount a convincing counter-argument. For one, most anthropologists who work in the HTS work for

private contractors, so that the information they collect and analyze is proprietary (McFate 2005; Kipp, et al. 2006). In short, it is not their data, and they cannot guarantee against abuse of the data by the contractor, including its possible transmission into the hands of questionable local authorities. This raises vital ethical considerations about knowledge acquisition and usage. Furthermore, working for the military directly, or indirectly with a private contractor, means that the scientific process is highly susceptible to being compromised. That is, knowledge is collected and developed not for deeper understanding per se, but for a military agenda.

Civilianization of Security, Anthropological Involvement, and Critical Social Theory

But whereas the debate seems to favor the critics, I come back full circle to the issue of civilianization of the American security apparatus. The goal of tapping the social science community for help is driven by a desire to improve the safety of military personnel as well as to improve the livelihoods of those with whom the US military has contact. Put differently, civilian values, including those of social welfare, tolerance, and good governance, have pervaded military philosophy and actions in the 2000s. (This, of course, raises other issues related to neo-colonialism, such as American notions of exceptionalism, which lead some Americans to characterize US actions around the world as ultimately "unique and benevolent.") But, I would argue, this trend also points to other social phenomena that demonstrate how norms "travel" and penetrate civilian-military relations. Military programs within the spirit of COIN are explicitly designed to improve the livelihoods of the local population and often concern themselves with economic development, gender equity, and public health, all concepts that also are shaped by global discourse on what constitutes "what is best." In short, processes of globalization, including human mobility and international communications networks, are influencing simultaneously civilian and military discourse (Avant 2005). Consequently, this makes conclusions about US imperialism difficult to assert with great confidence, except through a politicized perspective, be it for or against US military operations and civilian involvement abroad.

Moreover, there are important reasons to support anthropologists and other social scientists who decide to engage in DoD-centric work. One reason has to do with the changing security environment worldwide. The parochial view that nation-states are distinct entities responsible only for their domestic concerns is outmoded. We are on the crest of dramatic global transformations that frequently cause catastrophic harm to human life. For example, climate change and natural disasters continue to occur with consequences that no single nation-state can manage. We have



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seen this recently in Japan, Haiti, and Burma. Furthermore, because national economies and populations are linked internationally, a major disaster in one nation impacts other nations regionally and more distantly. And often, it is militaries that possess the best capacity to manage such large-scale emergencies most effectively.

Thus, I would argue that contemporary military practices forwarded by the US, especially those emphasizing humanitarian aid, are forward-looking and should continue to be civilianized through the incorporation of non-military actors, including those who concurrently work in academia in social science fields. This is not to dismiss the caveats raised by critics of such practices, but it is to expand the discussion to account for the evidence that militaries worldwide are playing increasingly important humanitarian roles in traditionally civilian arenas (e.g., Hodge 2011; DiPrizio 2002). In related fashion, this would keep civilian-military relations more transparent, by exposing and monitoring the increased level of interactions between civilian (including NGO) and military actors, thereby improving the relationship as well as the practices and doctrines of the military.

Here, then, critical social theory provides important insights. The civilian-military dynamic demands understanding the practices, symbols, and meanings associated with the relationship. This is highly contextual, in both historical and geographical terms. Thus, I would advocate avoiding politicization of the dynamic as we interpret historical and geographical contingencies and experiences, from the oppressive Japanese occupation of China to the ominous rise of Nazi Germany to the socially suffocating military-intelligence-industrial complexes that formed in the USSR and its satellite states in Eastern Europe. A reexamination with greater precision of the contemporary military-civilian relationship can shed light on how security institutions have changed over time with regard to civilian control and how such control is symbolized as it reflects the identity and activities of such institutions. Thus, it is valuable to avoid becoming bogged down in debates that artificially separate civilian and military social spheres. We should favor discussions that address how these spheres, in the spirit of scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977), inform, shape, and mediate one another in ways that are symbolized by and become manifest in contemporary military-civilian relations.

Future Considerations for Military – Societal Relations

Finally, as traditionally opposing voices about the US security apparatus increasingly converge to agree that the future of human security is vulnerable to problems requiring military and civilian cooperation, the demand to understand better military-societal relations concomitantly grows. This suggests that now is the time to engage heavily in military-civilian discussions. One way to do this is to focus the social

science research program (writ large) on specific aspects of civilian-military interactions and further develop research methods for such analysis. For example, in the arena of humanitarian aid, research might entail an inductive approach based on feedback and evaluation from indigenous populations affected by the military's entrance into this type of work. This might include local rapid-assessment studies by independent social scientists from various countries inquiring into attitudes of local populations served by the US military within the context of a humanitarian aid operation. This form of research (which has been attempted in some locations) would serve several purposes, including finding out what local populations want and what they feel most comfortable with intervention-wise, as well as reducing the contest between those favoring military work in this area and those criticizing it as subversive to the ideals of humanitarian aid. Put simply, we need more empirical research in this arena that accounts for the perspectives and felt needs of those in the "receiving" communities, instead of only debate by those of "sending" communities. In this way, the US military may avoid the peculiar conundrum of being simultaneously labeled humanitarian and imperialist.

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