Time for Critical Military Sociology[*]

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The Commitment

Professor Robert Putnam opened his presidential address at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in 2002 by stating that "*the health of the* […] *Association and of* [the] *discipline is exce*llent" (Putnam, 2003, p.249). However, Putnam did not limit his argument to a health diagnosis. He also asked his colleagues to think about their professional responsibility. He claimed that "*an important and underappreciated part of our professional responsibility is to engage with our fellow citizens in deliberation about their political concerns, broadly defined*" (*ibid*.) I would like to echo his words by arguing that scholars studying the relations between the military and society should do more to contribute to public life, not necessarily by solving problems and answering questions but by framing new questions and highlighting aspects of the relations between the military and society that have been ignored.

This commitment is relevant now more than ever. The period between the French Revolution and the Vietnam War was typified by mass recruitment of citizens for war, making the "nation in arms" a dominant concept in Western political culture. This period can be viewed as a time in which the democratization of war took place, meaning that decisions about going to war, the management of war and the preparation for it were subject to bargaining between the State and organized groups (see Tilly, 1997, pp.193-215). As Martin Shaw noted in his *Dialectics of War* : "*Total war is at its very best a two-way process, in which the State coerces the population but the population endorses its own coercion and thereby improves its position in and influence on the State*" (2010 [1988], p.57). Small wonder, then, that the warfare-welfare State saw its empowerment during this era.

However, since the 1960s, state leaders in industrialized democracies have sought to limit such bargaining or avoid it completely. In short, the de-democratization of war has been set in motion. Military participation, in terms of the proportion of society's members who are mobilized in the military, physically and financially, has been steadily declining since the 1960s. The move towards professional forces and the use of contractors, coupled with the shift from labor-intensive to capital-intensive warfare, is part of the process, distancing society from the experience of war. Indeed, prominent in the American discourse are laments about the growing civil-military gaps. Ironically, for example, an American writer justified her choice to write about a military unit of war dogs by arguing that "dogs were one of the few common points of reference between the military and the larger public" (Fallows, 2015, p.4).

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Nevertheless, manpower policies cannot be decoupled from the study of power. As sociologists maintained, the new capital-intensive warfare, starting from the Falklands-Malvinas War (Shaw, 2010), reversed the relationship between States and the majority of their citizens. As industrialized democracies moved toward the automation of war, they emancipated themselves from dependence on their worker-citizens for success in war, and hence reduced the bargaining power of workers and citizens vis-à-vis their States (Silver, 2004, pp.32-33). Furthermore, the burden has shifted from the powerful middle class to more lower class groups (Levy, 2007).

Unavoidably, the de-democratization of the war has reduced the potential political opposition to preparing for and initiating war autonomously. As Paul Starr (2010, p.65) argued: the "*ability to wage war without conscription and with so little call for personal sacrifice from the public may reduce the high threshold for starting wars that has been partly responsible for democracies' military success*", thus neutralizing the traditional republican-type bargaining over the wars' goals and expectations. Consequently, as Andrew Bacevich (2007) noted:

> When it came to invading Iraq, President Bush paid little attention to what voters of the First District of Massachusetts or the 50th District of California thought. The people had long since forfeited any ownership of the army. Even today, although a clear majority of Americans want the Iraq war shut down, their opposition counts for next to nothing: the will of the commander-in-chief prevails (p.F9).

And if Theda Skocpol (2004) lamented that democracy in the US has been diminished because associations have shifted away from popularly-rooted membership associations toward professionally managed organizations, many with no members or chapters at all, then the declining interest of the public in military affairs may play an important role in energizing this disempowerment of civic life.

Politicians are not blind to such impacts. As former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (2011) confirmed in his memoirs:

> I was convinced then [during the Vietnam War], and remain convinced now, that if the country had had a volunteer system in place during the Vietnam War, the level of violence and protest across the country would have been considerably less (p.102).

Small wonder that fewer overseas military deployments occurred in the US during the 27-year draft period than during the volunteer force era (Eikenberry, 2013). In sum, we are experiencing a decline in civilian control of the military in the sense of the demise of citizen control over the State's organized violence and its potentially destructive impact.

So, against the backdrop of this decline, what is the role of the community of scholars of civil-military relations? I would suggest that this process raises the bar of the community's professional commitment. But first let us look at what has been done so far. Categorization of the kinds of knowledge that have been produced may help us.

Categorization of Knowledge

In his *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971), Jürgen Habermas offered a typology of what he termed *knowledge-constitutive interests*, each expressed in a particular type of scholarly inquiry and each of which can be exemplified in the study of the military. The first is *technical interest* in the prediction and control of the natural environment that seeks to tie knowledge production to controlled observation and testable general explanations yielding the *empirical-analytic* sciences. In a different manner, *practical human interest* in establishing consensus makes use of the cultural hermeneutic approach that relies on interpretive methods. Assuming that social actions create social life, and these actions are meaningful to the actors and to other social participants, the scholarly task is interpreting the meaning of these actions.

In contrast to the former two sets of interests, the third category is *emancipatory interest* that makes use of *critical theory*. Its goal is to achieve emancipatory knowledge by counteracting the oppressive effects of the social construction of knowledge (assuming that science is a product of social activity). Critical thinking identifies the constraining structures of power, such as relationships of dependence that unreflectively appear natural.

Admittedly, most studies of military organizations and of civil-military relations belong to the category of empirical-analytic sciences. Included in this type of research are studies focusing on enlistees' motivations and propensity to serve, the reengineering of the social make-up of the ranks to promote diversity management, models of civilian control designed to determine best practices with regard to disciplining the military, studies dealing with achieving cohesion and promoting leadership, and those on primary groups, morale and race relations. Scholars have even indirectly provided advice about how to frame the use of force to muster support despite mounting casualties (Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2009).

In general, this typifies much of the work done by military academies and the research units of militaries and defense ministries. This type of knowledge is very similar to what sociologist Michael Burawoy (2005), in his typology of the broader division of sociological labor, termed *policy sociology* – "*sociology in the service of a goal defined by a client*" (p. 9) – by providing solutions to problems that are presented to sociologists or by legitimizing solutions that have already been utilized. Ethnographic works, studying the language, action and symbols of military personnel, have played another important role in recent years (see Ben-Ari, 2014).

At the same time, in the wake of the Vietnam War and the associated antiwar movements of the time, many critical studies of the military were produced. Critical thinking in the domain of civil-military relations has traditionally focused mainly on the rise of tacit and explicit forms of militarism and their contribution to the construction of power relations (see, for example : Vagts, 1959 ; Mann, 1987). Even more specifically, scholars studied the role played by the preparation for war and the building of modern

militaries in molding the institutional infrastructure of the modern state (such as the works of Giddens, 1985 ; Dandeker, 1990 ; Tilly, 1992 ; Mann, 1993).

Furthermore, students of civil-military relations exposed hidden motivations, or at least implications, beneath the formal manpower policies. They investigated the links between these policies and (1) the propensity or ability of the armed forces to forcefully intervene in domestic politics (Kier, 1995) ; (2) the aversion to sacrifice (Vasquez, 2005); and (3) the propensity to use force (for example, see Pickering, 2010). In sum, scholars largely agree that the mode of recruitment affects the way the political community controls its armed forces.

Also important are studies about the role of the military in entrenching ethnic relations (Enloe, 1980) and gender relations (for summary, see Sasson-Levy, 2011). In a similar vein, other studies demonstrated the military's role in reproducing the hierarchy in society due to the hurdles in converting military service into social status (Krebs, 2006; Levy, 1998). Other endeavours have explored the various social influences on post-Cold War militaries by going beyond the labelling of these militaries as postmodernist (see, for example, Boëne, 2006 ; King, 2006).

Burawoy (2005) maintained that critical sociology attempts to make sociologists aware of their biases and silences, and promotes new research programs built on alternative foundations. Therefore, "*critical and policy sociologies are at odds – the one clinging to its autonomy and the other to its clients*" (p.18).

The Challenge

Despite this tension, I would like to call on the community of military sociologists and scholars of civil-military relations to increase their critical tone. No doubt, the reliance of many scholars on government funds and their intimate involvement with the military do not make it easy, but it is worth the effort. As Cynthia Enloe recently noted (2015, p.7):

> To be a critical military analyst is to be a sceptically curious military analyst. If it is risky to assume that any given military is as easily created, sustained, mobilized, demobilized, deployed, and redeployed as some commentators would have us believe, then to avoid that risk one will have to be prepared to ask a lot more questions and pursue more complex dynamics, in order to produce more reliable explanations.

At the very least, more critical writing may even serve the policy agenda by highlighting potential unintended consequences produced by existing policies. It was Alejandro Portes (2000) who (following Robert Merton) called on the community of sociologists to focus on the unanticipated consequences of purposive actions. He proposed questioning the linear process representing the straight arrow between the avowed goal of actors (relevant to our case are state agencies), and the achieved end-state. He identified several conditions that interrupt the routine implementation of this linear relationship, among which was the situation when the intervention of outside forces produces

unexpected consequences different and sometimes contrary to those intended. We can think about many manifestations of such unintended consequences pertinent to the study of militaries. One example is the role of mandatory civil service in Germany in unexpectedly hindering manpower reforms that could have led to the abolition of conscription to the Bundeswehr during the 1990s (see Longhurst, 2003). Another example is how the reduction in the load of reserve military service in Israel produced the unintended consequence of impairing egalitarian service and hence also impairing the legitimacy of this service (Levy, 2011). Critical thinking may enhance the prediction of the unexpected.

More importantly, with the declining public interest in military affairs, academia must become more engaged in policy issues. Civilian control, argued Richard Kohn (1997), "*allows a nation to base its values, institutions, and practices on the popular will rather than on the choices of military leaders*" (p.141). The popular will is shaped and reshaped by political discourse as a process of deliberation and argumentation. As Kohn warned, in the absence of public debate, the popular will may stagnate, and the military's autonomy and that of its political supervisors to interpret this will may increase. However, with the decline in military participation, prompting debates that activate the public will is a greater challenge, one that scholars should not ignore.

I want briefly to cite three specific areas ripe for the attention of the community of scholars. They should be considered illustrations rather than a final list.

First, manpower policies. As I mentioned earlier, manpower policies affect the power structure in society, and hence also the political supervision of the military. Therefore, we should not study manpower policies in isolation and detached from power relations. Instead, we should ask how different levels of the vocationalization of the armed forces affect these relations. It is not necessarily just a binary distinction between conscription (which is still relevant to some industrialized democracies) and a volunteer force, but also a matter of degree between different levels of vocationalization.

Second, civilian control of the armed forces. Scholars of civilian control have traditionally focused mainly on the interaction between officers and civilians, and less on the power relations that form the context for the encounter between the two sides. As C. Wright Mills (1956, p.21) explained, power relations are more crucial than the black box in which decision-making occurs. Similarly, James Burk (2002) called our attention to the narrow scope of the study of civilian control. What is studied most, he argued, is the relationship between the government and the military. This approach "*reflects a normative belief that civilian political control over the military is preferable to military control of the State; and so it seems that the central problem in civil-military theory is to explain how civilian control over the military is established and maintained*" (p.7). Again, in light of the changing nature of military participation in tandem with the breakup of traditional warfare into a complicated chain of activities carried out by multinational forces, contractors, local allies, and civilian operators of technologies (such as drones), we should re-address the issue of civilian control. Our challenge is to improve the study of topics such as the impact of privatization, the links between civilian control and collective action,

and those between civilian control and the behaviour of the ranks, and globalization and the "NGOization" of control. All of these efforts are designed to reveal how power relations affect control.

Last but not least, diversity management. The management of diversity is one of the major themes at the core of the current scholarship on intercultural encounters within the armed forces. Much attention has been devoted to how diversity impacts the functioning of the military as a cohesive organization, its needs for representativeness and legitimacy, the need to enhance intercultural competence and its role as a statist mechanism for social mobility (see, for example, Soeters & van der Meulen, 2007, pp.4-5; Winslow *et al.*, 2006). However, less attention is devoted to intergroup tensions and even conflicts that emerge from the ranks (for a pioneering effort to identify such conflicts, see Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 2013). More importantly, by apparently helping blur inequality within the organization, diversity management may actually entrench rather than undermine the power relations that are biased toward the interests, values and culture of dominant groups (on gender diversity, see Pinch, 2004, pp.187-190).

These are among the areas in which our duty is to frame new questions and highlight ignored issues. These are the areas where our role is to initiate debates that can somehow help activate the collective will and address the new deficits inherent in the ability of the community of citizens in industrialized democracies to better monitor the manner by which the state manages organized violence. Attending to the actual or potential concerns of our fellow citizens should be an obligation as fundamental as our pursuit of scientific agenda and the professional service of our clients.

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