
Reviewed by Maya Eichler

The recruitment of labour is of central concern to States and militaries. In the United States, male conscription ensured a relatively reliable supply of military labour until the transition to an all-volunteer force (AVF) in 1973. Since then, the military has had to compete more heavily with civilian employers to attract recruits. While one might have expected a de-militarization of society with the end of the draft, attracting enough recruits to an AVF has required new strategies of militarization. In this context, high schools have become a central site of struggle between military recruiters and counter-recruitment activists. Opponents of military recruitment in schools have organized across the US for more than 40 years. Together these counter-recruitment activists form a loose national network with a common goal: to offer students an alternative view of military life and keep the influence of the military in public schools at bay. *Counter-Recruitment and the Campaign to Demilitarize Public Schools* is the first book to provide a systematic treatment and assessment of the US counter-recruitment movement – its tactics, successes, and limitations.

Scott Harding and Seth Kershner draw on interviews with over 70 counter-recruitment activists across the US to tell the story of this social movement. The counter-recruitment movement is rooted in local communities and has won important local successes, such as limiting military recruiter access to schools and student data. But despite a national counter-recruitment network, the movement struggles to effectively extend its reach to the national scale. Counter-recruitment activists often have a history of political activism, are left-leaning politically, and skeptical of the military’s role in society. In its most successful guise, the movement also includes parents, educators, and, importantly, veterans. Bringing veterans into counter-recruitment provides an important source of credibility to the movement as veterans can draw on their own experiences of military and post-military life to dissuade young men and women from signing up.

The strength of the book lies in offering a detailed account of the range of approaches and activities employed by counter-recruitment activists in the US, and in doing so Harding and Kershner also illuminate the variety of tactics employed by military recruiters. Counter-recruitment organizers draw on consumer advocacy, youth mentoring, legislative change, and protest. The consumer advocacy approach, favoured by many activists, emphasizes educating ‘consumers’ or in this case high school students about their rights and options. This includes, for example, the right to opt out of having their personal information shared with military recruiters and about non-military options of funding a college education. Counter-recruitment activists see themselves as advocating on behalf of high school students and equipping them with the information they need to make an
informed decision about whether or not to join the military. Consumer advocacy requires gaining access to public schools through tabling, career fairs, and similar activities and aims to correct inaccurate or incomplete information provided to students. Some activists see counter-recruitment as part of their broader activism aimed at preventing future wars. For some activists, this has meant picketing military recruiting stations as an alternative to engaging in anti-war demonstrations. But even these activists use anti-war rhetoric only strategically, instead deploying a more inclusive rhetoric of protecting children and offering alternative options.

The authors argue that successful counter-recruitment requires careful framing of the case against military recruitment in high schools. Message framing that emphasizes the protection of privacy rights of children is more effective than a straight-out antimilitary or anti-war stance. In addition to downplaying their antimilitarist stance, it is important for counter-recruitment activists to build coalitions. Involving social and economic justice and immigrant rights activists as well as youth, educators, parents, and veterans offers the most promising outcome. Engaging youth through interactive, arts-based methods and including youth as counter-recruitment organizers themselves are key movement strategies. Counter-recruitment organizers have to overcome significant challenges, measuring outcomes is difficult, and success can be fleeting. Military recruitment is ultimately an unequal playing field as the access and resources military recruiters have to reach high school students far exceed those of counter-recruitment organizers. Counter-recruitment organizers may gather feedback from students after a visit, may be able to change policy, or even close down a Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) programme, but as the authors make clear in their frank assessment, it is hard to track long-term impact.

A central premise of the book is the idea of a poverty or economic draft. With the end of the draft in 1973 in the US, the proportion of previously underrepresented groups such as women increased, but it also led to the over-proportionate recruitment of working-class and lower-middle class Americans as well as people of colour, especially in the lowest ranks. Economic downturns tend to make military recruitment easier, while making fund-raising for counter-recruitment activists more challenging. In this context, military recruitment has become a social justice issue, where socio-economic factors intersect with racial, spatial, and gendered politics. Military recruiters are found to target places where the economy is in decline due to plant closures, thus taking advantage of people with limited economic options. In response, counter-recruitment activists often focus their attention on low-income areas and highlight alternative avenues for employment or college financial aid. Counter-recruitment based on consumer advocacy works directly with those affected by power, in particular with poor and racialized communities. As the authors argue, “counter-recruitment may represent the sector of the peace movement most attuned to issues of class and social justice” (p. 33). In this way, counter-recruitment organizing is at the forefront of progressive social movements increasingly working across the intersections of class, gender, and race, while also highlighting the intersections between social inequalities and militarism. The book shows not only how military recruiters take
advantage of socio-economic inequalities, but also how broader social and political changes create fertile grounds for advancing the military’s reach into schools. For example, the cutting of school guidance counsellors or increasing job pressures faced by teachers make it harder to oppose military encroachment into schools.

The book makes an important contribution by providing the first systematic account of this social movement. It is primarily written for those in the fields of critical military studies, education, and sociology, and for counter-recruitment organizers themselves. Its analysis of strategies is thorough and complemented by practical suggestions. One of the central dilemmas it addresses is whether the counter-recruitment movement goes far enough in challenging militarization. Is it limited by its framing of the message in ways that are explicitly not antimilitarist, and instead emphasize protecting children’s rights and health? The authors suggest that “all those involved in counter-recruitment reflect on the self-imposed limitations of this work, and evaluate the reluctance among some to engage in a stronger anti-militarist critique” (p.39, emphasis in the original). The key to this movement’s success – its inclusive framing of military recruitment as a rights, health, and social justice issue rather than an issue of militarization – may also rob it of its critical edge.

The book’s scope is clearly defined in providing a systematic overview and evaluation of the counter-recruitment movement in the US. But its relevance goes beyond the movement to broader questions of education, citizenship, and the role of the military in US society. While focused on the US, the book also has larger cross-national significance considering the on-going global trend away from conscription-based to all-volunteer forces. Counter-recruitment is most developed in the US context, but the significance of counter-recruitment will likely increase globally over the next decades, in particular in Europe. Harding and Kershner’s book lays the groundwork for future comparative scholarship on counter-recruitment.

If the book has any weaknesses, it may be that at times it provides too ridged a dichotomy of military versus civilian spheres. The juxtaposition of education and militarism, and the emphasis on needing to protect traditional educational values from encroaching militarization, may overlook the historic militarization of many education programmes, and the fact that for many new recruits the military offers meaningful education. Educators still draw on militarized techniques of discipline and order, while military recruiters heavily rely on civilian techniques of recruitment from the fields of marketing and advertising. Militarization and education are more entangled, both historically and in the present, than is revealed by the struggle between recruitment and counter-recruitment. Moreover, the book stops short of tackling the question of whether recruitment should always be opposed or whether more ethical recruitment would be acceptable to counter-recruiters. Is it simply the aggressive and at times unethical recruitment practices that are being opposed, or recruitment per se? Is there something valuable in, for example, aiming to recruit more women to the military, or is it necessarily
problematic considering continuing high rates of sexual harassment and assault in militaries? These are questions that defy easy answers.

What this book offers, in addition to a detailed account of the counter-recruitment movement in US, is a critical view on recruitment that provides a useful counterbalance to the much larger existing mainstream literature on recruitment (and retention). But both mainstream and critical scholarship on recruitment would benefit from thinking that goes beyond the opposing questions of ‘how can we ensure high-quality recruitment?’ and ‘how can we successfully oppose recruitment?’ Recruitment is a tool in the supply of both civilian and military labour, and the connections and entanglements of recruitment across military and civilian spheres are worth exploring in future scholarship. That being said, *Counter-Recruitment and the Campaign to Demilitarize Public Schools* fills an important gap in our understanding of high schools as sites of on-going struggle between military recruiters and counter-recruiters. It should be of interest to scholars and activists, but also parents, students, and educators.

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