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Everyday Modalities of Militarization: Beyond Unidirectional, State-Centric, and Simplistic Accounts of State Violence

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Abstract

Critiques of militarization have deftly highlighted its limitations as a concept, not least because it too easily implies something done to otherwise benign and peaceful societies by militaries. The guest editors of this special issue however are inviting scholars to rethink militarization through the notion of everyday modalities. This more sociological approach, I argue, enables us to consider how militarization simultaneously produces and is produced through society. This, I argue, enables us to more fully examine the extent and character of the social and daily labour that makes state violence possible, to decentre the notion that state violence is almost always legitimate and that it is the only form of legitimate violence, and explore the multiple ways that communities contest the reproduction of militarised violence in their lives. Treating militarization in terms of everyday modalities therefore can facilitate more nuanced thinking about the social reproduction of violence.

Everyday Modalities of Militarization: Beyond Unidirectional, State-Centric, and Simplistic Accounts of State Violence

In inviting us to think about militarization through the lens of everyday modalities - the ways that war and preparing for war exists, is experienced, and is practiced in daily life and not just by the state – this special issue develops and continues a rich, longstanding, and transdisciplinary debate on militarization. For me, this approach enables the analysis of militarization as something that produces and is produced by social relations. Militarization in this sense is a “set of actions” that interacts with other sets of actions in society; it is something that “incites”, “induces”, “seduces”, and that can make different possibilities for social action easier or more difficult (Foucault, 1982: 789). For others the analytical value of the concept of ‘militarization’ remains subject to contestation, however. This is not least because its language implies that it is unidirectional: that it is the military doing the ‘izing’ (Cowen in Bernazzoli & Flint, 2009). In this vein, Howell (2018, 117) recently called for us to ‘forget militarization’ altogether, astutely highlighting the pitfalls of a concept that implies that otherwise peaceful societies, once free from military power, have been “encroached” upon. Kienscherf (2016, 1180) has also compellingly demonstrated the theoretical and material limitations of failing to acknowledge that “social control involves more than just the transfer of gear, tactics and organizational forms from the military to the police”, and indeed, other unidirectional understandings of militarization have been troubled by others in this very journal (see for example MacLeish 2015; Wool 2015; Rech *et al* 2015).

This is but one interpretation of the concept of militarization, however (McKenzie *et al* 2019). Others (*inter alia* Orr 2004; Burridge & McSorley 2013) have, for example, drawn on Geyer’s (1989, 79) definition of militarization as those “contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence”. If civil society organises *itself* for the production of violence, rather than the military organising society for that production, then it follows that we ought to pay more attention to how society does so; to the everyday modalities that make military violence possible (Bernazzoli & Flint, 2009). Geyer’s definition recognises that violence is socially and historically embedded and enables us to reject discrete boundaries between military/civilian and war/peace. Instead, militarization can be analysed as “wide-ranging, multi-faceted, and sometimes uneven” (Burridge & McSorley 2013, 65). This entails focusing on specific practices, societies, and social groups, and being attentive to the contestations and inconsistencies within them. It means interrogating how claims about any perceived acceleration, decline or transfer of militarized power - of the kinds critiqued by Howell and Kienscherf - come about, and asking what alternative explanations are possible. Rodriguez’s (2018) analysis of Colombia’s ‘civilian militarism’ provides an excellent example. Rejecting unidirectional accounts of militarization, Rodriguez shows just how *insignificant* military institutions can be to how societies organize themselves for the production of violence (Rodriguez, 2018). Considering the multitude of, and often uneven and inconsistent, ways this occurs - and acknowledging within this that violence comes in varied forms with divergent effects – is what this special issue builds upon and expands. If we commit to being curious about militarization as a set of modalities - as something that exists and is experienced and expressed in the everyday in multiple ways - as our guest editors urge, we do not need to ‘forget militarization’ because a very different, multidirectional, and more complex picture emerges.

When we consider militarization as something that simultaneously produces and is produced - that is as embedded, embodied, emotional, and woven into the fabric of our societies - we enhance our ability to recognise and analyse three primary things. First is the extent and character of the social and daily labour that makes state violence possible. One of the most important diagnoses that scholars have made about militarization is that it “traverses not only at the scales of global politics but also with the intimate scales of the home and the body” (Dowler 2012, 490). By acknowledging that “scale is a social construction”, but that it also creates boundaries for societal power relations (Dowler 2012, 492), we can understand, for example, the vital role that the workaday routines, desires and material gratifications of women guards in Nazi concentration camps played in materialising, facilitating, and rendering banal something as horrific as the Holocaust (Mailänder 2015). We can discern how routinised daily attempts by peacekeepers to build and use martial capital for their own material enhancement or survival (Henry 2015) contribute to the legitimization of peacekeeping as a practice that aims to make war-torn societies more amenable to neo-liberal world order (Agathangelou & Ling 2003). We can locate and challenge the normalisation and facilitation of war not just in cabinet rooms, voting chambers, or command centres, but in the organisation of household labour (Basham & Catignani 2018). We can recognise how the child soldier of the Global South, cast as “as essentially deviant and pathological in relation to the ‘normal’ child” of the Global North, is instrumental in reproducing a particular version of international political order still predicated on an imagined divide between the ‘barbaric’ and the ‘civilised’ respectively (Tabak 2020, 2). We can trace how the circulation of affect around the labour carried out by soldiers in everyday spaces makes it possible for Israeli politicians and journalists to caricature Palestinian protest against settler-occupation as mere “ludic choreography”, all whilst reaffirming the morality of Israeli soldiers ‘enduring violent protestors’; and we can map how this obscures the asymmetry of the pain and politics of the conflict (Jude 2017: 147).

Second, approaching militarization through everyday modalities enables us to decentre the notion that state violence is usually legitimate and is the only form of legitimate violence. Furtado’s (2017) work on the Brazilian Truth Commission, for example, demonstrates how the particular modality of ‘truth-seeking’ that the Commission utilised resulted not only in the important and commendable denouncement of perpetrators of systemic state terror, but also in the depoliticization and victimization of leftist militants. By characterizing leftist militants as “mere dreamers who fought for liberty and democracy in the past” the Commission “silenced their fundamental ideas (and actions) regarding the concept of revolutionary violence and its radical programme of structural change” (Furtado 2017, 316). Such erasures, even when state violence is being delegitimated, reinforce the ‘naturalness’ of the relationship between the state and violence, and the deviance and illegitimacy of non-state violence in contradistinction. Similarly, Eastwood (2018) argues, that because militarism and militarization have too often been understood as ways to measure how states normalise their violence, rather than as critical concepts that can be used to exert and reconfigure it, many scholars have neglected the possibility of a non-pacifist anti-militarism. Eastwood highlights the pitfalls of understanding militarism and militarization as emanating from the ‘military’ to be imposed on the ‘civilian’. Taken this way, the study of militarization becomes little more than calculating the extent to which military practices and values have encroached on civilian ones to normalise and legitimise war and preparing for

it. Eastwood (2018, 53) instead encourages us to pay attention to how war and preparing for it become desired and desirable in everyday life so that social practices become “fully compatible with a credible justification for violence”. Seen this way, militarization is not a property of the state. It cannot simply be imposed on society unidirectionally. Thinking about militarization in terms of desire, displaces the assumption that state violence is an inherent, normal feature of human life rather than one that is consistently reproduced sociologically and ideologically. The notion that all other forms of violence other than state violence are anathema, including anti-militarist violence can also be challenged.

Finally, focusing on modalities helps us see the multiple ways that communities contest the reproduction of militarised violence and its normalization in their lives. Poets (2020, 1), for example, troubles how, since at least the 1980s, a configuration of “policy, research, and common-sense depictions” have associated the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and their residents with non-state gang violence, a vacuum of governance, and an abundance of crisis. Centring instead the community-run Museu da Maré, Poets (2020) shows how the museum interrupts how fear circulates in the city and sticks to inhabitants of the favelas, through its affective curations of the favela as a site of water, home, migration, resistance, labour, celebration, trade, faith, childhood, normal life, and the future, not just fear. Even in its engagements with fear the Museu da Maré centres the fears of those who live within favelas, resisting the abjection and objectification of them as mere sites of death, squalor, and lawlessness primed for military intervention (Poets 2020).

Looking to the intricacies, contingencies, contradictions, and unevenness of how societies organise themselves to produce and legitimise violence reveals how war and constant preparations for war become possible. It enables us to identify whose violence is and is not normalised and legitimated, and under what conditions. We can better question how violence ‘sticks’ to some communities and facilitates militaristic interventions against them, but also how those communities contest, reconfigure and reject the legitimacy of everyday militarised violence.

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