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Citation for final published version:

Basham, Victoria ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8829-5119>, Belkin, Aaron and Gifkins, Jess 2015. What is critical military studies? *Critical Military Studies* 1 (1) , pp. 1-2. 10.1080/23337486.2015.1006879 file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2015.1006879>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2015.1006879>>

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EDITORIAL

What is Critical Military Studies?

Victoria M Basham, Aaron Belkin & Jess Gifkins

In the summer of 2011 this Journal's founding editors¹ came together at an interdisciplinary conference on 'Military Methodologies' at Newcastle University. The conversation that ensued was an attempt to articulate a niggling sense of what it was that distinguished the rich body of work that we were engaging with and engaged in from most of the rest of military and security studies. It would of course be wrong to suggest that the body of work we came to speak of as 'critical military studies' can be defined purely in contradistinction to the wider field of military and security studies. Whilst in some part borne of frustrations about this wider field's propensity to interpret critique solely as a means through which to offer recommendations for the improvement of military policy, critical military studies is its own productive and proactive field of inquiry that moves beyond a simple oppositional stance.

Neither is critical military studies a static or precise field of inquiry. Yet, it does possess some common characteristics. As Cynthia Enloe's contribution to this inaugural issue puts it, to be critical about military power is to be 'sceptically curious' about its character, representation, application and effects. In approaching military power as a question, rather than taking it for granted, critical military studies more readily engages in a sceptical curiosity about how it works; often through a variety of social and domestic political agendas that may bear no relation to the role of protecting the nation from foreign threats. The kinds of engagements provoked by critical military studies problematize the idea that a neat boundary can be delineated between what is 'military' and what is 'civilian' or otherwise. Indeed a recurring theme within this inaugural issue is exploring the transitions from civilian life to military service (particularly Enloe and Hanasik) which does not occur in a linear or straightforward way. Another is the ways in which military apparatuses classify and bureaucratise bodies and minds shaped by combat and the defiance of those classifications by other bodies and the very bodies they seek to order (particularly MacLeish, Wool and Serlin). These articles highlight well how the distinctions between what is 'inside' the military and what is 'outside' the military are thus constantly shifting. Indeed, critical military studies as a sceptically curious endeavour also acknowledges that our very conceptions of military power, militarism and militarisation are themselves open to critique and reimagining. It is in prioritising the 'in-between' – the neither exclusively military nor singularly civilian – that critical military studies can expose such tensions and problematize military power in its multiple manifestations.

Another key feature of critical military studies is its interdisciplinarity. Though the wider field of military and security studies is populated by scholars representing multiple disciplines, critical military studies necessitates *interdisciplinary* approaches. This is reflected not so much by the diverse range of nominal disciplinary 'homes' of critical military scholars, but in the literatures, modes of inquiry and diverse forms of representation and media that those scholars utilise. This interdisciplinarity enables new avenues for curious scepticism by drawing together diverse approaches to address both emerging and longstanding issues. There are no limits to the range of disciplines that can offer original insights

to the study of the military and military institutions from critical perspectives but it is the synthesis of these that perhaps best characterises the creative capacity of critical military studies.

To this end, the methodological plurality of critical military studies and its engagement with the politics of positionality stands out markedly from more traditional social scientific approaches to the military and security and their often atheoretical, apolitical, and largely quantitative stances. What perhaps unites critical military studies in methodological terms though is a shared desire to question how military institutions, practices, processes and geographies are an outcome of social practices and political contestation. In critical military studies, nothing is taken for granted as natural or inevitable, but the ongoing processes of construction, constitution and contestation are explored. The approaches we take therefore prioritise paying much greater attention to how military power operates, how it has come to work in the ways it does, and to what its limits might be. For some, this warrants complex and messy interpersonal qualitative encounters with those who articulate and are themselves articulations of military power, including researchers themselves. To be critical is not to be dismissive therefore, as Rech *et al* demonstrate herein. Rather, it is to stay open to the possibility that our curiosity and scepticism can be used to shed much needed light on our blind-spots and to bring about social and political change.

For others critical military studies might entail looking very closely at the ways that military practices and process are represented and come to represent social and political life. Visual images are at the forefront of the ways in which military violence is remembered, memorialised, consumed and inscribed with meaning. Although the public are well aware that images can be fictionalised, as Kaplan discusses herein, photographs and satellite imagery are still often treated by media outlets as if they hold some kind of truth. Critical military studies engages directly with such politics of representation and often does so using diverse media. Indeed, such engagements form a significant part of the Journal's *Encounters* section where in this inaugural issue, Hanasik, melding images and prose, explores military towns, grief and American warrior masculinity, breaking down the boundaries between public and private, military and civilian; and Hobbs, combining dialogue, immersion and music explores ideas around memorialisation and the inexhaustible site.

Critical Military Studies is the outcome of a particular conversation but also of many conversations held prior and since. Such conversations have involved a number of people who have supported our hunch that the significance of those very dialogues warranted a journal to act as a conduit for their continuation. From associate editors and editorial board members to those we've had conversations with in conference venue hallways, over email and via social media, we would like to thank you all sincerely for your support. We offer *Critical Military Studies* as our invitation to join the conversation and we look forward to your submissions.

¹ Victoria M Basham (University of Exeter), Aaron Belkin (San Francisco State University) and Alison Howell (Rutgers University)