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Against Eurocentric narratives on militarism

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ABSTRACT

Aspects of the recent scholarship on militarism, especially those who focus on ‘militarization’ as a post-9/11 development, have met with criticism by scholars who have underscored that the violence incurred by everyday people in the hands of the(ir) state – be it in Belfast, Cairo, İstanbul, Paris, or Rio de Janeiro – is not new insofar as military practices of have always impinged upon everyday life. Even as I agree with the critics, I submit that substituting the notion of ‘militarization’ with ‘pacification’ or ‘martial politics’ may not suffice. For, the problem is not (only) with the concept of militarization but with Eurocentric historical narratives on militarism that have informed this conceptualization. Accordingly, I locate the problem with militarism and militarization at an epistemic level: our approaches to militarization have been informed by Eurocentric historical narratives that consider militarism as a problem that belongs to a past world, which incidentally includes our contemporaries outside the ‘West’.

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In introducing *Militarism and International Relations*, co-editors Anna Stavrianakis and Jan Selby and Stavrianakis (2013) noted that the study of militarism has, since the mid-1980s, been overshadowed by Security Studies and that a new focus was long overdue. Scholarly interest in militarism has recommenced around that time, largely in response to governmental and other actors unleashing unabashedly militarist practices under the pretext of the ‘Global War on Terror’ (GWOt). Such renewed focus on the ways in which war has impinged upon everyday life (including militarism) is most welcome. That said, aspects of the recent writings that portray ‘militarization’ as a post-9/11 development have been met with criticism by scholars who have cautioned us that the violence incurred by everyday people in the hands of the(ir) state – be it in Belfast, Cairo, İstanbul, Paris, or Rio de Janeiro – is not at all new (Howell 2018; Neocleous 2013, 2019). Let us briefly consider their objections.

Responding to the characterization of state practices adopted as part of the GWOt as the ‘rise’ of militarization, Mark Neocleous (2019) has maintained that no such ‘pristine’ moment of ‘civil’ existed before 11 September 2001. It is ‘the mythology of the liberal state’, the author wrote, to assume that it is only due to the GWOt that military practices have come to encroach upon police practices. The presumption that ‘the police power and the war power are two distinct forces and processes that can and should be kept apart’ is a product of aforementioned ‘liberal myth’, argued the author, reminding us that

“community policing” has in fact always been part of the police war against the people’ (Neocleous 2019). It is not militarization, but ‘pacification’ that is the problem, Neocleous (2013, 7) concluded, encompassing colonial practices of ‘counter-insurgency’ as well as contemporary forms of ‘social engineering to (re)build a social order’. Hence, the author’s call for focusing our scholarly efforts on the study of ‘state violence’ including but not limited to war.

In a 2018 essay Alison Howell, too, objected to the presumption of a ‘civil’ moment in the said literature:

Embedded in ‘militarisation’ is a theorisation of ‘before and after’ – of movement from a non-militarised (or less-militarised) state to a militarised one. This erroneously assumes there ever was a peaceful domain of ‘normal’ or ‘civilian’ politics un sullied by military intrusion: a false and dangerous assumption that lulls us into faith in the naturally peaceful nature of ‘normal’ politics. (Howell 2018, 118)

The literature’s presumption of a ‘civil’ moment before GWOt has resulted in inattention to the persistence of ‘martial politics’ during the age of colonialism and beyond, Howell concluded.

Be that as it may, substituting the notion of ‘militarization’ with ‘pacification’ (Neocleous) or ‘martial politics’ (Howell) would not suffice. For, the problem, I submit, is not only with the concept of militarization (which presumes a prior condition of ‘peace’ or ‘civil’) but with Eurocentric historical narratives on militarism that have informed this conceptualization. Put differently, even as I agree with the Neocleous and Howell’s critique of the literature on militarization insofar as the contributors do not come across as cognizant of the ways in which military practices have *always* impinged upon everyday life, I locate the problem at an epistemic level: our approaches to militarization has been informed by Eurocentric historical narratives that consider militarism as a problem that belongs to a past world, which incidentally includes our contemporaries outside the ‘West’. As such our study of militarism has remained to be an instance of ‘the episteme of a scientific knowledge that asserted a hierarchy among the species in the guise of enhancing European “understanding” of the other’ (Grovogui 1996, 38). Let me clarify.

Writing in 1959, Alfred Vagst defined militarism as an *ideology* that ‘covers every system of thinking and valuing in every complex of feelings which rank military institutions and ways above the ways of civilian life, carrying military mentality and modes of acting and decision into the civilian sphere’ (quoted in Eastwood 2018, 45). Although Vagst’s definition of ideology was not at all narrow, many of those who adopted his definition did so by reducing militarism to its most visible indicators, namely the glorification of military rule and/or behaviour (Eastwood 2018). From then on, this narrow definition came to inform scholarship. Vagst’s (broad) definition of ‘militarism as ideology’ has been utilized almost exclusively to study the past – be it Europe’s past, as with Germany before and during World War-II and Portugal, Spain, and Greece before they transitioned to democracy in the 1970s, or our contemporaries outside the ‘West’ who are viewed as belonging to a past world by way of ‘temporalizing of differences between people’ (Hindess 2007). The world outside the ‘West’ was portrayed as an anachronism, in terms of a failure to leave behind military ways of doing things. The post-World War II arms race between the superpowers and their respective blocs, and

their economic reliance on arms sales to other parts of the world, in turn, has come to be portrayed as a Cold War exigency—i.e. not an instance of militarism. The point being, the persistence of militarism in North America and Western Europe has remained under-studied.

An important exception to trends above has been feminist scholarship. Consider (Enloe's 1983) book *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives* which begins by looking at the so-called 'camp followers' of the 17th century, with the author highlighting that 'the military relies on a particular idea of women and men into the kind of organization it needs, and military elites have been as self-conscious as any factory manager about designing and redesigning sexual divisions of labour' (Enloe 1983, 6–7). Turning to a more contemporary example, Enloe writes the following:

When 500 Australian women defied police directives and marched through Canberra on ANZAC Day in 1982, 'in memory of all women of all countries in all wars who were raped' they were intent on revealing and rejecting one of the underlying assumptions of militarism: that societies must be composed of the dominant and the subordinate and that conquest 'civilises'. (Enloe 1983, 7–8)

Accordingly, Enloe does not subscribe to a narrow understanding of militarism as ideology (understood only in terms of glorification of military rule and/or behaviour) but a broader definition that allows for rich(er) analyses of the ways in which military values and relations encroach upon social values and relations (also see, Altunay 2004). What is more, Enloe's analysis is not limited to North America and Western Europe but was cognizant of social relations between different parts of the world. As such, Enloe's analysis does not 'occlude the global' (Go 2014) in a way that aspects of comparative sociology scholarship have, i.e. studying North America and Western Europe without considering co-constitutive relations with the rest of the world. My point being, informed by a *sociological* definition of militarism, Enloe has approached the study of militarization without assuming a 'pristine' moment of demilitarization in North America and Western Europe or absolving 'liberal' actors of the roles they have played in the persistence of militarism at 'home' and 'abroad' (also see Basham 2018). By way of drawing from a non-Eurocentric narrative on militarism, Enloe's study of militarization has avoided the problems identified by the critics.

This is not to undervalue the significance of the point that Neocleous and Howell make: that what we presume to be currently being militarized was already militarized, and that to presume that a 'pristine' moment existed before GWOt is erroneous. But then, it is important to ask: where did that assumption come from? According to Neocleous, the problem is the 'myth of the liberal state'. Be that as it may, that very myth is a product of Eurocentric narratives on militarism that have overlooked its persistence at 'home' and its constitutive dynamics with militarisms 'abroad'. Put differently: The ways in which post-World War II history of North America and Western Europe has been studied in terms of the eradication of militarism, and the rest of the world has been portrayed in terms of the persistence of militarism has allowed for aforementioned assumptions of a 'pristine' moment to emerge.

Consider, for example, Bayly's (1993) account of the development of networks of espionage and information collection in India. Contrary to everyday assumptions that imagine one-directional transfer of ideas and practices from Britain to India, practices of

surveillance predated the British ‘arrival’. Once they arrived, the British utilized these practices by paying for the services of their local experts and practitioners, according to Bayly. It is only later, as the British learned to master the techniques they learned from the Indian practitioners that they set up their own networks in India and elsewhere. As such, India did not (only) serve as a ‘laboratory’ for British intelligence services. Nor did the ‘colony’ (merely) ‘export’ its techniques to the ‘colonizer’. Rather, what transpired was a product of a ‘co-constitutive’ relationship between British and Indian actors insofar as the British learned from the Indian practitioners and then added to it by making adjustments in view of the evolving needs of its growing empire. What we learn from this example is that a non-Eurocentric narrative on intelligence and surveillance allows us to appreciate the ways in which the British learned from and further developed their techniques in India in the nineteenth century, honed them in Northern Ireland in the twentieth century, and then commodified these technologies and experiences in the GWoT marketplace in the twenty-first century (see, for example, Ellison and O’Reilly 2008; for further discussion, see Bilgin 2016).

The issue here is not (only) one of ‘getting history right’. Rather, it is one of reification (Bilgin and Çapan 2021). Aforementioned Eurocentric narratives have shaped both theory and policy. Once the narrow understanding of militarism as the glorification of military rule and/or behaviour solidified into *the* definition of militarism, those civilians (‘here’ as well as ‘there’) who carry ‘military mentality and modes of acting and decision into the civilian sphere’ were rendered invisible to our theoretical frameworks. On the policy side of things, democratic control of the armed forces (DeCAF) became the recommended policy insofar as militarism was understood to be rooted in the military but not in the civilian sphere (both ‘here’ and ‘there’). To conclude, what is mythical is not only our understanding of the ‘liberal state’ but also our narratives on post-World War II history in North America and Western Europe as demilitarization – that is, with precious little awareness of the persistence of militarism at ‘home’ and its co-constitutive relations with militarism ‘abroad’.

Disclosure statement

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