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Whither class in critical military studies?

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ABSTRACT

Although it is often mentioned, social class is rarely deployed as an overarching heuristic for studying the military nor militarism within Critical Military Studies, both as a discipline and journal. This represents a significant departure from older 'critical' (i.e. Marxist) approaches to militarism which explicitly linked militarism to class society; but also from 'traditional' military sociologists such as Moskos (1970) who also routinely discussed class. This is a glaring, worrying lacunae within a self-proclaimed 'critical' discipline, yet given the disappearance and subsequent fragmentation of class analysis within the academy, it may seem difficult to imagine what class analysis of the military might look like today. This Encounters piece aims to catalyse a return to class analysis within Critical Military Studies. It provides- as a starting point- a brief overview of a range of classic and newer perspectives on class and militarism taken from history and political economy and from the macro and micro level.

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Despite class being central to the military and to militarism more broadly, it is not central to critical military studies (CMS), neither discipline nor journal. Although class is regularly *mentioned* in CMS, with notable exceptions (Basham 2016; G. Levy and Sasson-Levy 2008) it is rarely deployed as an overarching heuristic for studying the military or militarism. This is a significant departure from older 'critical' (i.e. Marxist) approaches to militarism (see Oberg 1980) which explicitly linked militarism to class society, but also from 'traditional' military sociologists such as Moskos (1970) who also routinely discussed class.

One might legitimately ask what is 'critical' about a 'radical' discipline which treats class as an afterthought? Yet CMS is not exceptional in this regard: class has been marginalized in the academy and in sociology, where it was once dominant (Savage 2016); and as Way (2013a) notes, this neglect was a two-way street: even at its high point, class analysis was reluctant to study the soldier.

Today, class analysis is so fragmented between 'cultural' and 'materialist' approaches (Crompton 2006) it is ostensibly difficult to see how it might provide a viable lens for studying the military. This article begins to piece together some shards – taken from

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outside CMS, in history and political economy – to reflect on what future class analysis of the military might look like.

Militarism, capitalism and class

Militarism has a symbiotic relationship with capitalism: war and empire are central to primitive accumulation (Way 2013a); they are facilitated by the class structure of capitalist society, insofar as it provides the personnel willing to both wield and produce arms. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British military strength was reliant on the UK's domestic economic policies; enclosure and then the agricultural revolution created a huge surplus population of landless labourers, paupers and national minorities – the lumpenproletariat – who could be absorbed as a workforce for the imperial army (Mansfield 2015; Way 2013b).

In the age of empire, soldiers were viewed as vagabonds who existed outside civilized society (Way 2013b). Today, soldiers are placed on a pedestal and lionized as part of state militarism, yet the little empirical evidence which exists on the class background of the modern British military suggests recruits continue to be drawn from the most marginalized segments of the population (Gee 2007). Mass deindustrialization and the transition to a financialized service economy has created an outsized reservoir of people faced with the prospect of insecure employment if not unemployment. This has led to the idea that in the era of all-volunteer militaries there nonetheless exists de facto 'economic conscription' (CRIN 2019) whereby the poorest are essentially compelled to join the military given their lack of alternative careers. Recent reports by activist groups have confirmed long-held suspicions that army recruitment in the UK deliberately targets the most deprived strata, and hence the most deprived areas (Morris 2018). Meanwhile, the militarization of the education system is similarly mediated by class (Basham 2016), with schools in working-class areas targeted by the infantry while more affluent schools are avoided (Forces Watch et al. 2021).

War as work: military and civilian working-class cultures

Crucially for CMS's focus on breaking down the hard boundary between 'military' and 'civilian' and focusing on the 'spaces in between' (Gray 2016), historical research by Way (2013b) and Mansfield (2015) shows that at the micro level, soldiers were never a 'class apart' from the civilian world, as widely believed. They instead emphasize the permeable boundaries between military and civilian work and hence civilian and military working-class *cultures*. For many working-class men, military service was often simply one part of a long working life. Soldiers brought the working-class norms of their community with them into the military, including artisan guild culture and militant social attitudes which manifested themselves in resistance to the military hierarchy, ranging from individual dissent to organized mutiny. In the other direction, upon leaving, veterans often took up roles in their communities, in which the class conflict, discipline and togetherness experienced in the military helped mould civilian labour movements. Leed's (1978) account of trench warfare similarly notes the parallels of 'war-work' with civilian industrial work (primarily the heavy labour of digging and tunnelling) – and the same norms of shifts, breaks, time-discipline, routine, etc. Indeed, Leed (1978, 691) notes it was

precisely the monotony of *war-as-work* and its proximity to proletarian labour, rather than the horrors of war, which disillusioned the privileged romantics in the officer class who joined up expecting heroism and sacrifice but instead found themselves digging trenches.

Given established difficulties with access to the military as an institution documentary films are a fantastic resource for critical military sociologists. The centrality of class to military life is captured brilliantly in Molly Dineen's (1995) documentary on the Welsh Guards, *In the Company of Men* (ITCOM), which follows the regiment on a tour of Northern Ireland. The film reveals the almost parodic levels of class inequality within the British army, with the interactions between the officers and soldiers constituting a jarring clash between what Bourdieu (1977) calls 'habituses' – the different ways of speaking, thinking, and acting that different classes possess.

In Dineen's film, combat represents only a small part of soldiers' 'war-work' (Way 2013a), the rest of which is taken up by routine labour: polishing kit for ceremonial duty, drill, stagging on, domestic labour, and large periods of boredom. What is significant are the obvious parallels with the battle for control over the labour process which defines *all* work (Braverman 1974), albeit here is a job in which the 'foremen' (NCOs) are willing to enforce discipline through physical punishments and humiliations. Managerial control ranges from formal disciplinaries dished out to soldiers through to 'informal' surveillance such as summary weapons inspections, to micromanaging their movements on patrol. The soldiers, for their part, attempt to guard their own autonomy and resent and resist these managerial interventions, which they believe to be ultimately inefficient and often dangerous.

While *ITCOM* clearly portrays a subculture with its own acronyms and norms (Hockey 1986), the habitus of the soldiers is not alien but one which anyone familiar with working class culture would recognize: military working-class culture blends with civilian working-class culture, and the forms of low-level resistance to management are redolent of working class, manual civilian work. The constant 'banter' or playing up is central to working-class 'protest masculinity' beyond the military (Gater 2024) – particularly to 'leisure-in-work' (Collinson 1988). This is working-class culture refracted by the particular norms and language of the institution. Understanding the parallels with civilian working-class cultures – in particular working-class masculinity and its orientation to manual work with its norms of toughness and resistance – is important to understanding the enduring appeal of the military and its normalization in particular places.

Class conflict

Despite soldiers' reputation as docile automatons (Mansfield 2015, 39), in Dineen's film, class conflict abounds. Echoing literature by enlisted men, the soldiers do their war-work shorn of any romantic notions of nation, heroism, or service, focused overwhelmingly on *survival*. The soldier-workers' dislike of the officers – who buy into more romantic notions of service, sacrifice and heroism ('soldier-players') (Leed 1978) and hence risk inviting death – is palpable.

They are right to be wary – just as the poor tend to serve in the military, so they bear the brunt of its horrors. Empirical research into the class background of casualties shows

socio-economic status is the main determinant of death in combat (Y. Levy 2006). Militarism as an ideology is designed to smother domestic class conflict and hence reproduce class society (Liebknecht [1910] 2021, 29). Yet far from being a social leveller, the costs borne by the working classes – both at the front and at home – mean war often *exacerbates* class conflict and catalyses political crises. Just as war has a contradictory effect on class relations and class consciousness, soldiers occupy a complex role in the class structure which can be both reactionary and revolutionary (Chorley-Schulz 2024).

Towards a holistic class analysis of militarism

What might it mean to integrate class analysis into CMS? Future class analysis of the military and militarism must approach the subject at the micro *and* macro level, embracing both cultural and materialist approaches. It should include analysis of the classed, militarized *subject*, but cannot confine itself to the class background of the soldier or class hierarchies *within* national militaries lest we lapse into methodological nationalism; it must consider the myriad ways in which militarism reproduces but also complicates *domestic* class society and social relations; and finally the role of warfare, soldiers and the military–industrial complex in processes of *global* imperialism and accumulation and how this envelops the working class around the world (see Moore 2019).

This is not just an academic issue. Global conditions increasingly resemble the febrile interwar period. Militarism is intensifying as states attempt to smother escalating domestic class conflict (Oberg 1980). Veterans and their chaotic class consciousness – which historically combines socialistic, anti-establishment instincts with destructive authoritarianism (Leed 1978, 696–697) – are increasingly central to modern politics (Glenton 2021). Class analysis is urgently needed to understand the role of militarism in the current conjuncture.

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