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Rethinking War and the Body

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Conclusion: Rethinking War and the Body

Kevin McSorley

This collection has placed the body at the heart of critical thinking about war, giving embodiment and bodily issues an explicit analytic recognition and a centrality that they have often been denied in the annals and ontology of conventional war scholarship. It has sought to develop and elucidate an understanding of war, and its reproduction, in terms of the myriad affective, sensory and embodied practices, regimes and experiences through which war lives and breeds. While the collection confers much analytic attention on the institution and embodied practices of soldiering, it has also sought to be wide-ranging and inclusive in its concerns rather than problematizing any specific set of practices or bodies as the exclusive locus of war. Furthermore, rather than endorsing any particular empirical focus, singular method or specific theoretical perspective as the key to fleshing out such an understanding of war, the analytic agenda of this current collection has been to assert a deliberately plural corporeal turn in war studies. In bringing together a wide range of material on a variety of war-related themes, informed by a number of intellectual traditions and disciplinary backgrounds - including sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, political science, and disability studies - this collection has aimed to open up and multiply future lines of enquiry. Its intention has also been to offer a variety of conceptual resources that may assist those who wish to follow these particular points of departure, or indeed who wish to trace any of the other myriad entanglements between war and the body. What follows in this concluding chapter then is not an attempt to comprehensively overview the numerous themes, ideas and suggestions that proliferate in this book, or integrate them into any sort of programmatic research schedule, but simply a highlighting of some of the potential research questions and directions that are brought to the surface via this plural corporeal turn in thinking through war.

Militarization

One of the key themes in this collection has been an attempt to think about the reproduction of war, and war readiness, in terms of a militarization of sensation, affect and the body that operates across multiple constituencies, and endures across time and space. Such a theme resonates with previous work, particularly within feminist and anthropological traditions, which has also explored militarization across multiple domains of life and at various analytic levels. For example, Enloe (2004: 219-20) defines militarization as ‘the multi-tracked process by which the roots of militarism are driven deep down into the soil of a society’, her analysis moving from the heights of international politics and economics right down to the most mundane and microscopic details of cultural and everyday personal life.¹ This collection develops this plural analytic orientation of previous research on militarization, but explicitly draws attention to the embodied and affective processes through which various militarist values and martial competencies are inculcated. Moreover, a focus on embodiment enables particular ways of thinking through the interconnections across the different domains and between the levels of analysis highlighted above, exploring how abstract ‘social norms and social actions inhere within the deepest fibres of our bodily being’ (Shilling 2007: 13).

In this collection, the various embodied processes of militarization analyzed have ranged from those concerned predominantly with inculcating discipline and particular martial competencies in specific military recruits to those processes through which militarism is embodied in wider populations. Emma Reilly’s historical analysis of the British Army’s basic training regimes initially analyzed the archetypal transformations by which the conscripted body is prepared for war. The analytic remit of the following chapter, Tamara Ehs’ examination of the historical emergence of the Austrofascist state, moved beyond this classic sequestered domain of military discipline to explore the more widespread ‘steeling’ of the body for war across multiple domains of everyday life under a totalitarian social and political system.

The final two chapters in the opening section explored embodied processes of militarization that occur in contemporary post-conscription Western societies, as well as in particular domains that are very far removed from the direct disciplinary

preparation of particular bodies for war. Jane Tynan's analysis of 'military chic' fashion, and Burrige and McSorley's exploration of children's diets, furthermore explored processes and domains beyond those that are often understood to be central to any inculcation of militarism in the contemporary West, such as the mobilization of consciousness via media spectatorship. In examining other, less obvious spaces of militarization, from the catwalk to the school canteen, both of these analyses point to the subtle and seductive articulation of contemporary neoliberal desires for self-actualization and bodily transformation with particular embodied military virtues, aesthetics and models of social organization. Taken together, both chapters suggest that the enculturation of embodied military values occurs across the capillaries of multiple social relations and cultural practices, and point to the development of subtle new forms of embodied, voluntaristic militarization that articulate with wider neoliberal governmental imperatives. Processes of 'individualization', which on the surface may seem antithetical to the collective ethos of state militarism, may thus in practice be calibrated to work towards such mutual constitution.²

The chapters in this section as a whole thus trace a shift in embodied militarization from sequestered spaces of discipline to more widespread practices and societies of individualized self-control. Indeed, the recent transformation of 'British Military Fitness' from a specific occupational regime into an increasingly popular workout activity in the UK, with classes taught by ex-soldiers and instruction widely distributed via mainstream publication platforms, is perhaps exemplary of this expansion and integration of embodied military practices and values into wider post-disciplinary spaces and individualized reflexive body projects. There is much potential for future research exploring such historical transformations, and cross-cultural differences, across the plural embodied processes of militarization through which various militarisms are established and normalized.

While it is important, methodologically and politically, to highlight and explore the multilayered and ubiquitous nature of militarization, it is also essential to recognize the failures and unanticipated consequences of its processes, logics and pre-emptions when they occur. Indeed, the chequered recent history of the 'global counterinsurgency' campaign suggests that there are numerous analytic, and political, dangers in conflating military desire or doctrine with actual instantiation and practice.

The body is a key site to explore this question of the effectivity of discursive formations in the constitution of actual regulatory practice. Empirical explorations of the embodied experience of militarization may be particularly well placed to be sensitive to disjunctures or overflows between governmental intentions and actual effects, and may usefully complement those analyses and theories that draw upon motifs of totalitarian military colonization, of an unproblematic transformation from governmentality to complete 'militarality' (Marzec 2009).³ For example Reilly's work in this collection highlights that the army recruit was never simply a subjected being, a docile surface inscribed by militarization, and that the body is ultimately an unstable object for power. Indeed, as Shilling (1997) has argued more widely of the sociology of the body, there are reasons to be skeptical of any attempts to ground notions of embodied agency in static and over-deterministic notions such as the habitus, which may undertheorize the role of creativity and resistance and make it difficult to think through social change.

War as Embodied Practice

Alongside preparation for war, a further crucial topic that this collection has foregrounded is the essential role that embodied regimes of sensing and apprehending the world, as well as specific corporeal competencies, play in the actual prosecution of war and the occurrence of particular acts of violence. As noted in the Introduction to this collection, Shaw (2005: 40-1) argues that 'the defect of most social theory of war and militarism is [...] that it has not considered war as practice, i.e. what people actually *do* in war'. This collection has explicitly attempted to understand war as embodied social practice, exploring a range of the sensory, affective and embodied practices that constitute particular wars.

To this end, John Hockey's ethnography of infantry soldiers explored the comprehensive militarization of sensation that such troops experience, and highlighted the sensory practices that comprise a crucial part of their work in warzones. Hockey details how soldiers continually and collectively inhabit a suspicious somatic mode of attention in their mundane engagement with the world.⁴ Elsewhere, I have argued that the on-going war in Afghanistan is currently being made palpable for a wider Western audience through the extension of a related

sensory regime of ‘somatic war’ - that foregrounds the apprehension of specific experiences of sensory immersion, vital living and bodily vulnerability (McSorley 2012). In his chapter in this collection, John Protevi specifically examines the actual act of killing in wartime. Noting that there is a deep-seated empathic inhibition towards killing among humans that must be overcome in order to carry it out, he argues that military killing has historically been achieved through the constitution of specific embodied states, such as the berserker rage, that explicitly bypass individual conscious intention and inhibition. He further argues that contemporary military killing follows a related principle, being organised around specific assemblages and regimes of ‘political physiology’ that bypass the conscious subject and directly link the military to the somatic realm of entrained reflexes and involuntary ‘affect programs’. Kevin McDonald’s chapter in this section also attempts to explore the significance of different regimes of embodied and sensory apprehension of the world that he argues lie at the heart of various important contemporary acts of war, from Jihadi violence to the sexualized torture of military detainees. McDonald suggests that an overall understanding of the central transformations in contemporary warfare, and accompanying processes such as radicalization, requires paying analytic attention to important shifts in the modes of embodiment, somatic engagements with the world, and deterritorialized flows of affective experience that are associated with such transformations.

These case studies often occupy distinctive theoretical spaces and deploy various scholarly resources, including different understandings of the body, from a wide variety of intellectual traditions and disciplinary backgrounds, such as phenomenology, neuroscience, and political science. However, there is a family resemblance in their concerns and conclusions, and a clear sense across all these analyses that embodiment cannot be understood as an insignificant or epiphenomenal dimension of war, but rather that it is fundamental to the enactment and meaning of war. Indeed, these studies all suggest that, if we fail to take account of the institution-making properties of various forms of embodied agency in our analysis and theorizing, we may fail to understand war. Taken together, they also begin to constitute a conceptual tool kit, offering sensitizing concepts for the task of further fleshing out an embodied sociology of war. Such an analytic undertaking may seek to further develop the understanding of different conflicts via the comparative analysis of their

distinctive regimes of sensation, flows of affective experience, modes of somatic engagement, and body pedagogics. Of course, the 'same' war may consist of very different modes of embodiment for those positioned in various relationships to, or on various 'sides' of, the conflict, such that their embodied experiences may be of engaging with radically different, even incommensurable, wars - of insurgency and counterinsurgency for example. Relatedly in this collection, Drake suggests that, as revealed in the differential affective rituals surrounding the dead bodies of their respective soldiers, the ostensibly allied forces of the US and the UK actually embody and enact very distinct versions of the 'war of terror'. Ultimately, war may be characterized by, and understood in terms of, multiple, mutable and fluid modes of embodiment being made available and assumed by those in different social locations and at different times.⁵

As well as analyzing the differences between wars in terms of their distinctive modes of embodiment, a related direction for future elaboration is thinking through the reproduction and transformation of war as an institution in terms of embodied continuity and change. To this end, Paul Higate's chapter in this collection specifically highlights how it is the continuity, the tenacity, of militarized somatic memory that lies at the heart of significant recent developments in the privatization of warfare and security provision. The efficacy of these developments is dependent upon the resilience of particular regimes of sensation and corporeal repertoires among the ex-soldiers turned private military contractors. Indeed, as Higate further notes, at the individual level, many military to 'post-military' trajectories are defined by a clear sense of embodied continuity in terms of career and lived experience. It is partially an appetite for the continued embodied intensity, exhilaration and camaraderie of professional warfighting that forms the emotional sediment underpinning the global institution of private military contracting.

Corporeal aftermaths of war

Understanding how the dynamics of war are shaped by a range of embodied continuities and resonances, such as the career and cravings of the private military contractor, is a final theme that is explored throughout this collection, and an important and broad area for further elaboration. The concluding section of this

volume in particular focuses on exploring some of the enduring embodied legacies of war, both for the structure and meaning of individual 'post-war' lives, and for further developments in the wider political realm, that may ultimately contribute to the persistence of war or the waning of the possibility of further conflict.

To this end, Elsbeth Bösl's chapter explores how the bodies of war-disabled veterans in Germany after WWII were seen as visceral symbols of the ruins of war and National Socialism, and hence regarded as harbouring the potential for future political conflict. She argues that the national programme of vocationally-oriented prosthetic renormalisation that was designed for such war-disabled bodies can partly be read in terms of addressing this symbolic threat to the emerging democratic, pacific state. Fitting men with prostheses was deemed a way of pacifying veterans as well as presenting a manifest figure of renewal - the reconstruction of social and political order visibly staged on the technically rebuilt body. However, as Bösl notes, while designers and experts envisaged that war veterans would be pacified and remasculinised via the programme of prosthetic renormalisation, relatively little is known about the actual subjectivity of the disabled war veterans that underwent such rehabilitation. Julie Hartley's chapter explores this particular issue in the political context of post-civil war Lebanon and the state-endorsed 'collective amnesia' towards the ruins of that particular internal war. Hartley demonstrates how a particular group of disabled veterans, the long-term residents of a militia-funded rehabilitation centre, purposefully contested this wider discursive imperative to move beyond the sectarian past and reject the war as meaningless. By contrast, these veterans collectively reaffirmed their bodily sacrifices as meaningful and worthwhile, and upheld a sense of their difference from the 'naturally' disabled. Hartley thus draws attention to the ways in which the veteran body is lived and experienced, within a particular political and institutional context, not just as disabled, but as specifically and meaningfully war-disabled. Contestation and complexity are also central features of Catherine Trundle's account of the claims for recognition and compensation of nuclear test veterans. As Trundle notes, unlike the quintessential veteran body of an amputee wounded in active service, the sacrifice to the nation is not visibly inscribed on the bodies of nuclear test veterans and their subsequent illnesses and suffering cannot be definitively linked to their military activity. Trundle's account thus highlights how the corporeal aftermaths of war may be marked by a certain political mutability, even an

ontological indeterminacy, as they are variously acknowledged or denied within particular quotidian spaces, social interactions and public discourses. Victor Seidler's chapter relatedly points to the highly complicated ways in which the embodied memories and legacies of war may be apparently disavowed and yet inexorably passed on, as they haunt the everyday spaces of family life in particular. For Seidler, the resonances of war, unarticulated fears and anxieties, become complex embodied inheritances that are silently absorbed and carried across the generations, laying down an emotional substrata that has an often-unacknowledged depth of affective force.

Given the emphasis upon the intricacy and complexity of the embodied continuities and resonances of war explored in these chapters, there are few general lessons that can be drawn across these various studies. All of the analyses in this collection do however reiterate that bodies are occupied and traversed by war in ways that are felt to be powerful, debilitating and enduring. Furthermore, they also draw attention to the ways in which post-war bodies are often key sites for the articulation of various collective imaginaries and political projects. However, the relationships between particular post-war bodies, subsequent lived experiences and identities, and further expressions of state or sectarian power, are rarely straightforward or consistent. Indeed there is a sense in these analyses not only of the contentious and contingent nature of the embodied resonances of war, that may be variously amplified or denied within particular social spaces, but also of a fundamental, wider struggle to be able to adequately comprehend, and articulate, the effects and affects of war. Bodies carry war in ways that are at once intensely felt and intractable, and yet seemingly unstable and unknowable. These studies thus suggest that developing a language supple enough to track this ontology of warfare is not simply an analytic challenge, but also an existential struggle.

The Body

At this juncture, a final point that I would like to briefly comment upon is the notion of the body that is deployed and developed across this collection. As Shilling (2007: 10) notes, the body remains one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences and the development of the field of body studies has been hugely diverse, such that 'it is increasingly difficult to define the body or even say what is being examined within

the field'. Blackman (2008: 132) similarly argues that certainty has disappeared, she suggests productively, from the field of body studies, 'alongside the recognition that asking exactly what bodies are or what a body is no longer seems tenable'.⁶

What the body is, or any particular method for knowing the bodily realm, was similarly not foreclosed or defined in advance across this collection. With the terms deliberately kept open, talk of the body in this collection has thus ranged across numerous bodies and various embodied doings, practices, processes, assemblages, interactions, inculcations, experiences, regimes and so on. However, there is clearly one consistent motif that runs throughout this collection, which is simply that the body is thought in terms of a capacity to affect, and be affected, by and through war.

The point I wish to make here is merely that this is not a perspective or understanding of the body that has been significantly elaborated within recent body scholarship. Although body studies have proliferated in numerous directions over the past three decades (Shilling 2007), the topics of war and militarism have been notable by their almost complete absence from such developments.⁷ The intertwining of war and the body has thus been an object of limited and sporadic attention within the academy, leading to a relative paucity of theoretical resources on how to formulate and think about such linkages. This has been the result of a number of erasures that are beyond the scope of this conclusion to lay out in detail. As one example, just as the body was until recent decades not a core concern for sociology, war has similarly never been a key concern for a sociological imagination whose gaze has historically been directed internally upon an assumed already pacific state. Relatedly, the body that has recently become a focus of Western social scientific attention has to a large extent been a pacific body, regarded as producing and consuming in countless ways, but rarely thought of as fundamentally shaped or moved by war, preparation for war, anxiety over war and security, or the legacies of war. The foundational role for body studies of Elias' (1978) historical work on the civilizing process in Europe is perhaps one significant influence in establishing this model of the contemporary pacific, civilian body.

However, just as a renewed focus upon embodiment, a plural corporeal turn in analysis, may enable us to productively rethink our understandings of war, so a

renewed engagement with the study of war - its histories of violent classification and ruthless destruction; its contemporary transformations into humanitarianism and wider securitization; its pervasive affective flows, emotional resonances and complex inheritances; the subtle remilitarizations of everyday civilian life - may be an important resource for thinking the body anew, thinking over the processes of its becoming.

Conclusion

War has been a ubiquitous and hugely important feature of modernity and modern social life, and it shows few signs of declining in significance, intensity or longevity in the twenty first century. It directly and indirectly affects countless lives, transforming and occupying myriad bodies in numerous ways, from mutilation to apprehension to exhilaration. It lives and breeds through a panoply of sensory, affective and embodied practices and experiences, a number of which this collection has endeavored to explore. War is at times spectacularly disorienting and disordering, but is also an utterly mundane feature of many everyday life-worlds, from the daily mortifications and existential anxieties of those living inside particular war zones, to the routine workings of the 'military normal' (Lutz 2009) that structure the daily lives of those living outside the ostensible battlespace. As Sylvester (2011: 127) notes, in a globally interconnected world, 'It is not that we are all at war but we are all affected by a system milieu in which war continues to feature as a politics of extreme disagreement'.

That war is not apart from the rest of social life has been a theme that the focus on embodiment and lived experience in this collection has particularly brought to the fore. The work gathered here has highlighted embodied and affective practices, processes and regimes that bleed across, resonate through, and fundamentally blur the spatial, temporal and ontological distinctions between war and peace⁸: the embodied, voluntaristic militarizations of contemporary fashion and diet; the mediated flows of affect through which private experiences and war are increasingly intertwined; the enduring somatic memories and sensory regimes of warfighting; the corporeal aftermaths and negotiations with the complex emotional inheritances of war. At an

embodied and affective level, this collection fundamentally contests any thesis of the demilitarization of contemporary society.

War is an irreducibly complex and chaotic phenomenon, and there will inevitably be blind spots in any analytic perspective or viewpoint, including those that may seek to explore or reassert a sense of the otherwise disavowed corporeality of war. As Woodward and Jenkins note in this collection, contemporary military memoirs constitute a particular and increasingly popular ‘body genre’ that is typically infused with a sense of both the impossibility of adequate sense-making in wartime and, relatedly, the privileged ‘visceral authority’ of the embodied presence of the soldier to thus try and make sense of war. They caution that an overwhelming emphasis upon the individual and the corporeal in such accounts, particularly in the relative absence of wider public critical engagements with the purpose or rectitude of contemporary military campaigns, may be politically debilitating. An exclusive self-regarding focus on the fleshed-out soldier’s story may become another idiom through which warfare is ‘re-enchanted’ (Behnke, 2006, Coker 2004, McSorley 2012).

Although it is always important to be attentive to such a possibility, the scholarship in this collection has shown that a careful and systematic consideration of embodiment is able to combine a concern with questions of cultural reproduction, lived experience, and political power. As Scarry (1985) notes, war is never simply politics by any other means. It is politics incarnate, politics written on and experienced through the thinking, feeling bodies of men and women. Indeed, for Scarry, war is “the most radically embodying event in which human beings ever collectively participate” (p.71).

This collection thus contests those discourses or ontologies of warfare that disavow or deny the significance of embodiment for understanding war.⁹ Ultimately, as Frank argues, ‘Only bodies suffer. Only by studied concentration on the body can we bear adequate witness to this suffering. Only an ethics or a social science which witnesses suffering is worthy of our energies and attention’ (1991: 96). The invitation and the imaginative horizon that this collection extends is to rethink war as an array of fundamentally embodied and affective practices and experiences.

Notes

¹ Similarly, Lutz (2002: 272) argues that ‘Militaryization [involves] a shift in general societal beliefs and values in ways necessary to legitimate the use of force, the organization of large standing armies and their leaders, and the higher taxes or tribute used to pay for them [...] but also [...] the less visible deformation of human potentials into the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality’. See also Enloe 2000, Lutz 2009, Gonzalez 2010, Sjoberg and Via 2010.

² Other scholars have argued that contemporary militarisms may be regenerated through the articulation of practices that would potentially be considered antithetical to more classical variants. For example, Stahl (2010) highlights the emphasis upon individual, existential risk rather than collective solidarity in the contemporary legitimations of ‘militainment’. Sasson-Levy (2008) similarly notes how individualized discourses of thrill and self-control legitimate military service in Israel. Managhan (2012) explores how the practice of care has recently become intimately bound up with legitimizing sovereign violence.

³ Indeed, Philo (2012: 15) argues that Foucault’s work, from his earlier analysis of discipline right through to his later concern with governmentality and biopolitics, ‘only makes sense if we take seriously the lively bodies and populations over which (dominating) power is to be exerted, and whose pre-discursive liveliness is often too much for the powers-that-be’

⁴ What scholarly work there has been upon the militarization of the senses has almost exclusively concentrated upon the visual, exploring particular militarized and weaponized ways of seeing, rather than the significance of other, wider sensory or embodied practices in war. For example, a prominent theme of contemporary war scholarship has been the argument that there has been a recent collapse between the mode of destruction and the mode of perception in, for example, virtual/’virtuous’ war, with a concomitant focus of analytic attention upon media management and the alignment of audience vision with a military point of view. (see Introduction, this volume)

⁵ In a discussion of theorizing war as experience, Sylvester (2011: 125) relatedly asks, ‘So what is war? It is much the same old story of large-scale collective violence; but it works with myriad more actors, all of whom experience the collective violence differently depending on their location, level and mode of involvement, gender, moral code, memories, and access to technologies’. She argues that a key issue at present is getting these experiences of collective violence recorded and analyzed as part of war studies.

⁶ Blackman contends that to ask such questions already presumes that the body is a thing has a particular form and substance, rather than thinking in processual terms.

⁷ For example, within the canonical texts on the body (e.g. Turner (1984) *The Body and Society*; O'Neill (1985) *Five Bodies*; Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner (eds) (1991) *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*; Shilling (1993) *The Body and Social Theory*), the topic of war is given minimal attention. Recent anthologies such as Fraser and Greco (eds) (2005) *The Body: A Reader* and The Aberdeen Body Group's (2004) edited five-volume set *The Body: Critical Concepts* continue this trend, excerpts from Scarry's (1985) *The Body in Pain* being the only work that addresses war in both collections.

⁸ The assertion of a blurring of distinctions between wartime and peacetime, zones of war and peace, martial and civilian identities, has also been a motif in previous scholarship on militarization. Enloe, for example, argues that 'Most militarizing processes occur during what is misleadingly labeled "peacetime"' (2004: 220). Work by scholars such as Nordstrom (1997) argues that war itself, and indeed peace, are experienced, and hence best thought of, in terms of multiple processes, continuums, intensities that are progressively woven into, and out of, the texture of everyday life, rather than as discrete bounded events (see also Cuomo 1996). The conceptual utility of the very category of 'militarization' itself has even been questioned - in that it ultimately rests, at some historical or ontological level, upon asserting the existence of an autonomous 'civilian' sphere that is becoming (more) 'militarized', rather than understanding the ongoing organisation of civil society as always already oriented around the production of violence and the securing of material and discursive borders (Balan 2010, Bernazzoli and Flint 2009).

⁹ This collection has also endeavored to move beyond an exclusive focus on the *representation* of bodies in war that has been the focus of much scholarship from within traditions of film and media studies.

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