

## The limits of military sociology

Article (Accepted Version)

Owens, Patricia (2017) The limits of military sociology. *International Affairs*, 93 (6). pp. 1453-1470. ISSN 0020-5850

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/72314/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

## On the Limits of Military Sociology

Patricia Owens  
University of Sussex

Many readers of *International Affairs* will be familiar with Tarak Barkawi's frequent skewering of IR theories and debates, from his demolition of liberal peace and so-called "schools" of critical security studies to his elevation of empire and critical war studies. In each intervention, Barkawi engaged directly with core IR debates and ruthlessly exposed their flawed premises, establishing a new agenda for research in the process. In doing so, he has shaped at least two generations of IR scholarship. The influence of *Soldiers of empire* could be of a totally different order. It will come less from the book's main arguments than the quality of the scholarship and style of intellectual engagement. This book, *Soldiers of empire*, delivers on something far more urgent than a new agenda for research.<sup>1</sup> It is a yardstick for those in our field interested in producing scholarship that is critical, but also of real substance and originality. That is, work that is historically rich, theoretically engaged, well-written, multi- and inter-disciplinary, and pays no heed whatsoever to the debilitating distinctions between IR subfields.

However, as one would expect of a book of real substance, there are problems that will limit its intellectual reach. In this review forum, I focus on two. The first relates to the book's main claims about rituals, military socialization and the structure of war. Barkawi argues that it is not the politics of any particular war, but the conditions of military service that matter most to how soldiers behave. 'What was immediate and present', he writes, '- deprivation, fatigue, fear for life and limb, for oneself and others - was often far more important in shaping action than the distant high politics of the war. In this, colonial soldiers were little different from national ones' (83). In addition to concern for basic life needs, Barkawi points to the significance of ritual systems. Military drills, he writes, 'dispose people toward acting in particular kinds of ways, those intended by ritual experts' (185).

In *Soldiers of empire*, these two claims that are quite obvious at first have an extremely surprising intellectual and political origin. It is a great irony that a landmark book of postcolonial war studies relies so heavily on nineteenth-century Eurocentric bourgeois sociology. Specifically, Barkawi's main claims about the conditions of military service and rituals draw on Emile Durkheim's functionalist and apolitical account of how French working classes could be bound to the nation, refracted through his racist account of Australian aboriginal clans. Durkheim's agenda was less to understand than to bring about and rationalise worker's subordination under capitalist modernity, to explain and then curb popular rebellions. For Durkheim, working classes could be made to behave in particular ways given particular structures of incentives. For Barkawi, 'soldiers acted in comparable ways when caught in similar straits during the Burma campaign' (193). Neither of these sentences is exactly wrong. But one of them certainly and the other one potentially risks mis-describing and therefore naturalising how these conditions are produced. Taking control of the exigencies and necessities of life is the oldest and truest form of coercion and discipline. Of course, colonial soldiers, like national soldiers and all human beings, tend to behave in certain ways when directly confronted by extreme

---

<sup>1</sup> Tarak Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

structural powers of life and death. To understand this, we don't need to elevate Durkheim and other prophets of social engineering more interested in naturalising rather than fully interrogating the production of this form of power.<sup>2</sup>

The second point is that in a book about how soldiers are made and why they fight, of how military solidarity, hierarchy, and authority are instantiated, it is surprising that there is no sustained *theoretical* account of gender difference. There is plenty of discussion of one aspect of its significance. There is a great deal on 'military masculinity', how it was instrumentally used to bond together soldiers within and across cultural divides; that the theory of martial races manufactures war-like and 'effeminate' races (21); that 'soldiering is a strategic site for the production of masculinity' (276). In addition, women make brief appearances usually through the eyes of soldiers as "prostitutes"; disloyal wives (237); wives of British officers barred from dancing with or swimming near Indian officers (96, 99); victims of rape; as mothers and wives sending pleading, complaining, ignorant letters to their sons and husbands serving abroad even as they are apparently the real beneficiaries of men's military service (91).

Thus, we have 'military masculinity', on the one hand, and clichés of women, on the other. Clearly, this reproduces rather than interrogates the gender relations that make 'military masculinities' possible. While the central arguments of the book completely depend on it, there is nothing on the mutual imbrication of war and the constitution of binary sexual difference. Barkawi argues that military education in the imperial army 'required less expert cultural knowledge than might be thought' (157). Yet the British army in India could get away with a minimum of ethnographic knowledge *because* gender was already doing much, if not all, of its work. Of this, we hear virtually nothing. The British Indian army was able to adapt so well after defeat, 'to modularly reconstruct difference and rearrange group identity', because pre-existing and flexible gendered relations of power could be harnessed to its ends (50). The sole focus on military masculinity and clumsy treatment of women is a missed opportunity. As many feminist scholars have shown, war is parasitic on gendered relations of power. The gender binary, in turn, is almost unimaginable outside war. We could even say that the very origin of the binary - one that makes little sense given the diversity of bodies - is preparation for war, in how soldiers are made and why they fight.

To think through these relations would not just be an add-on to an otherwise excellent book, which Barkawi may respond 'is not about gender'. Its absence distorts and contorts *Soldiers of empire*, reducing its intellectual and political power in a manner comparable to non-feminist analyses of 'gender' in social constructivism. For example, 'ham-fisted' is used to describe the practice of forcing new recruits to wear women's clothing if they discharge weapons too soon. The British effort to instil anti-Japanese hatred by telling them 'Jap fathers sell their daughters into brothels' is called a 'contrivance' (235). Most troubling of all, 'kept busy' is used as a euphemism for women being raped by soldiers in what is called a 'lurid' 'escapade' (59). That the women were sex workers does not contradict the point; they are among most vulnerable to being raped. These moments betray *Soldiers of empire's* discomfort with gender. Terms like 'ham-fisted', 'contrivance', and 'lurid' imply that we all already know what it takes to make soldiers but we can pass over it quickly because there are other more important things to

---

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Owens, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

discuss. The frequent acknowledgement of ‘military masculinities’ is no substitution for a full and proper accounting of how it is produced.

It is only because *Soldiers of Empire* is so important that such fundamental issues are at stake. Barkawi has produced an outstanding work of original scholarship that is an inspiration. It fully succeeds in its most important intention of ‘strip[ing] away not only some of the chauvinism which governs military writing, but also the Western triumphalism’ (257). And more broadly it sets a new benchmark for book length original scholarship that has a shelf life of more than three years and a multidisciplinary readership beyond one section of BISA or the ISA. Yet, still battle’s structure and war’s power have not yet been fully captured. But Barkawi can hardly be blamed for that.