RESEARCH PAPER

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Abstract

This article scrutinizes the relationship between ‘war amongst the people’ and the ‘cultural turn’ in Western military thinking. It is argued that the cultural turn in military thinking is related to an uncertainty about how to wage war in a context where the enemy defies categorisation, and where understanding and influencing ‘the people’ is regarded as essential to military success. While efforts have been made to integrate culture in military planning in order to tackle this uncertainty, there are a number of deficiencies, which prevent culture from becoming the intended enabler to successful operations. The purpose of this article is to shed light on these deficiencies and to introduce a new approach to culture, which can inform military planning and operations. This approach takes its departure point in how culture is co-produced in social interactions, and directs attention towards how cultural dynamics in areas of operation are shaped and transformed by military interventions.
Introduction

‘Culture’ is increasingly regarded as imperative for successful military operations, especially in the context of ‘war amongst the people’ which defines an emerging paradigm of contemporary warfare fought by Western forces (cf. Smith 2007). In contrast to conventional warfare fought along defined battle lines against a uniformed enemy, contemporary warfare – often defined as ‘hybrid’ or ‘irregular’ – is characterised by the absence of a clearly identifiable enemy, and thus by the centrality of ‘the people’ into which the enemy blends and disperses into (Anderson 2011).

In the context of ‘war amongst the people’, the American General David Patraeus has been at the forefront of framing the significance of culture – a term often employed as a synonym for ‘human terrain’ - in contemporary warfare. “Noting the importance of human terrain, I believe, is a fundamental aspect of crafting a counterinsurgency campaign”, he has argued (in Manea 2013). In recent years, numerous military analysts and practitioners have echoed his arguments, suggesting for instance: “conducting military operations in a low-intensity conflict without ethnographic and cultural intelligence is like building a house without using your thumbs” (Kipp et al 2006:8), and that “operational culture [...] is a combat skill that is critical to mission success” (Colonel Henri Bore in Spencer 2009:97). It is also against this backdrop that culture is increasingly framed as an enabler to military success.

In this article, we scrutinize the relations between ‘war amongst the people’ and the cultural turn in Western military thinking, taking our point of the departure in the absence of an identifiable enemy. We ask, what happens when one of the first principles of warfare – to know your enemy – is radically challenged? And how does the increasing significance of ‘the people’ in contemporary warfare change the way in which military operations are planned and carried out? The cultural turn in military thinking, we argue, can be traced to an inherent uncertainty about how to wage war in a context where the enemy defies identification and categorization, and where understanding and influencing ‘the people’ is regarded as essential to military success. In order to tackle this uncertainty, comprehensive efforts have been made to integrate ‘culture’ in military planning and operations. Despite this, we suggest that there remain a number of fundamental deficiencies, which ultimately prevent ‘culture’ from becoming the intended enabler. The overall purpose of this article is therefore to shed light on these deficiencies and to introduce a new conceptualisation of culture, which can inform military planning and operations.

Approaching culture

While ‘culture’ is seen as critical to military success, definitions and perceptions of what culture implies are inconsistent and, at times, inaccurate. Such inconsistencies and inaccuracies, we argue, stem from a general tendency to map culture onto terrains and to overemphasize

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(1) This paper has benefitted greatly from comments and critique by Thomas Mandrup (PhD) and Kenneth Strøm (Major), both at the Royal Danish Defence College, and from proofreading by Nicola Witcombe. The paper is informed by observation of military planning exercises (US Marine Corps: School for Advanced Warfighting, UK: Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, Danish Defence College: Centre for Advanced Land Operations), participation in cultural pre-deployment training (Royal Military Academy Sandhurst), and qualitative interviews conducted with British and Danish officers deployed at the Afghan Officers Academy in Kabul.
homogeneity and coherence – a cultural approach that is not applicable to those human dynamics military operations tend to target.

‘Human terrain’ is a central term that shapes the way in which militaries approach culture. Considering that military planning and operations are closely linked to topography, ‘human terrain’ is useful in the sense that it appears as a concrete element that can easily be integrated into the planning process, as it makes culture “graphically representable, quantifiable, and geographically measurable” (Salmoni & Holmes-Eber 2011:33). The problem is, however, that not all cultural aspects can be mapped onto terrains, and that culture is not necessarily shared within certain demarcated boundaries. While military thinkers and planners may well be aware of the limitations of this exercise, in that only static, visual elements fit into the human terrain approach, there remains a dominant tendency to think of culture in terms of territory and to believe that certain groups share a specific culture.

The correlation between culture and territory is not limited to military thinking. It has also been central to academic discourse, and in particular to anthropological attempts to ethnographically map the culture of particular people and tribes. Since the 1980’s, however, the concept of culture has become an object of critical inquiry, even to the extent that anthropologists have proposed to ‘move beyond’ or ‘write against’ culture (Gupta & Ferguson 1992, Abu-Lughod 1991) in order to denounce what is widely perceived as a polluted concept. In this regard, the approach to human beings as “bearers of a culture, located within a boundaries world, which defines them and differentiates them from others” has been referred to as “cultural essentialism” (Grillo 2003:158).

In contemporary military publications, the essentialist approaches to culture are challenged by multiple definitions that – much in line with anthropological critique – point out that culture is dynamic and cannot be reduced to static check-list information. In the most recent US counterinsurgency manual (FM-3-24, 2014), for instance, culture is carefully defined as a “web of meaning shared by members of a particular society or group within a society”. Similar definitions are often accompanied by the cultural iceberg model, which stresses that culture is not simply what can be seen (and thus mapped), but the most substantial aspects are, in fact, invisible beneath the tip of the iceberg. While such approaches may more accurately correspond to human dynamics, they are often too abstract to translate into military planning and operations (cf. Bergman 2013). As a result, there may be a tendency to stick to more concrete approaches, which provide lists of “disorganized information” and “little conceptual guidance” (Salmoni & Holmes-Eber 2011:32).

In order to make culture applicable to military planning and operations, it is critical to move beyond ‘human terrain’ approaches, as well as abstract academic conceptualisations. As suggested by Paula Holmes-Eber, former Professor at the US Marine Corps University, such a move should be directed towards developing an approach to ‘operational culture’ defined as “those aspects of culture that influence the outcome of a military operation; conversely, the military actions that influence the culture of an area of operation” (Ibid:44).

Such an approach to operational culture, we suggest, should take its point of departure in how culture is co-produced in social interactions, and thus shift the focus from what culture is towards
what culture does, from cultural mappings to explorations of cultural practices. Intrinsic to this proposed shift is a departure from simply understanding ‘the local population’ towards including a renewed emphasis on how cultural dynamics in areas of operation are shaped and transformed by military interventions.

Below, following a contextual background on ‘war amongst the people’ and the related cultural turn in military thinking, we expand on this proposed shift.

‘War amongst the people’ and the cultural turn

‘War amongst the people’ is a term formulated by General Rupert Smith to capture a paradigm shift replacing that of conventional interstate war (Smith 2007). In contrast to conventional warfare conducted between “blocks of people”, this paradigm shift indicates that “the people are part of the terrain of your battlefield” (Ibid 2006:720), and that military force should no longer be employed to determine wars, but to “create a condition in which a strategic result is achieved” (Ibid:719).

The end of the Cold War brought about two important elements in this regard: Firstly, the emergence of conflicts in former Soviet satellite states in Europe and, secondly, the need for the military establishment to search for a new raison d’être. The conflicts erupting in the former Yugoslavia, and the involvement there mainly of the US and European militaries, highlighted the emergence of the new paradigm of ‘war amongst the people’. Yet, both the military and international community were unprepared for the variety of tasks related to such a new modality of warfare. The military found itself engaged in tasks like taking charge of civilian administration, riot control, and humanitarian relief. Such tasks would normally fall under the responsibility of a variety of civilian institutions, but, due to the lack of civilian capacities, the military was forced to take on these tasks, which proved very difficult for units, trained and equipped for interstate, conventional war on secluded battlefields. Furthermore, the military became engaged in conflicts where the distinction between combatant and non-combatant was getting increasingly blurred. Soldiers were now patrolling areas and tasked with establishing secure environments in cities where civilians, non-state security actors and regular troops were all present – as part of the same battlefield.

It was not until the engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan – and the hard lessons learned there – that the realities of the new paradigm became clear, and the cultural turn in military thinking gained momentum amongst top generals and in certain doctrines, most notably in the US Army/Marine Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24 (FM 3-24) published in 2006.2 This manual was a result of the American experiences in Iraq after President Bush in May 2003 declared that “major combat operations are over”. After the successful defeat of the Iraqi conventional forces in a war that in general was fought under the old paradigm of conventional war, the US military largely expected the Iraqi population to embrace the ‘freedom’ delivered. Instead, the US forces found themselves engulfed in countering an insurgency that was gradually gaining momentum.

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2 The US has not only been at the forefront of formulating doctrines addressing the significance of culture in military operations, but the military cultural turn is also an issue addressed mainly by American scholars and practitioners.
Realizing this new reality, it seemed that the US believed they were facing an old style classical insurgency with a unified political opponent. It was therefore assumed that the ultimate goal of the insurgency was a victory over a single unified political opponent in a conventional battle scenario in order to gain the political power of the country (Knoke 2013:3). Instead, the insurgency was made up of a myriad of groups from major militant organisations, ranging from those such as Al-Qaida in Iraq, the Badr Brigade and Mahdi Army, to Sunni tribal factions (Ibid). These groups all had different political end goals, but could unite in fighting the foreign coalition. Furthermore, the groups all had a substantial local popular base to disperse into and recruit from. The US and its coalition partners thus found themselves engaged in a conflict that they were not trained for and consequently unprepared for – a conflict characterised by blurred distinctions between enemy forces and the civilian population.

Major General Robert H. Scales also brought the cultural turn to the forefront of military debate with his article “Culture-Centric Warfare” (2004), which was a response to the technologically focused warfare the US was conducting in Iraq. In the article, Scales argued that the focus on technology resulted in the military forgetting that war is “a thinking man’s game” (Ibid). Understanding all of the factors that constitute the operational environment should be the primary objective, in order for a commander to select the optimal course of action in fighting the war. According to Scales, the understanding of the operational environment also included an ability to understand cultural dynamics in areas of operation, including ‘the enemy’ (Ibid). Scales argued that soldiers found themselves unable to distinguish enemies from friends, once the kinetic phase of warfare in Iraq was terminated, due to their reliance on intelligence gathering tools and technological methods developed for Cold War purposes. In this respect, Scales referred to a conversation with the commander of the 3rd Infantry Division who gave the following response to how well situational awareness worked during his push towards Baghdad:

*I knew where every enemy tank was dug in on the outskirts of Tallil. Only problem was, my soldiers had to fight fanatics charging on foot or in pickups and firing AK-47s and (rocket propelled grenades). I had perfect situational awareness. What I lacked was cultural awareness. Great technical intelligence . . . wrong enemy* (In Scales 2004:32).

Scales further argued that the ability to understand the people, their culture and their motivation was essential in order to manage perceptions and build alliances through trust. This would mean a focus on “outthinking”, instead of “outequipping” the enemy (Scales 2004).

Building on Scales’ argument that the conflict in Iraq required an “exceptional ability to understand people, their culture, and motivation”, anthropologists Montgomery McFate and Andrea Jackson called for the establishment of an organisational unit that could provide the requisite cultural knowledge to the US military (McFate & Jackson 2005). Such a unit, they proposed, should consist of social scientists who could “produce, collect, and centralize cultural knowledge” for the utility of military operations (Ibid:18). In 2006, in the wake of the US experience in Iraq, this call led to the establishment of the much-debated Human Terrain System, which was later applied to counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan.
One of the actions undertaken by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to fight the insurgency in Afghanistan was to attack the Taliban leaders. The assumption, which to some extent still appears to exist, was that the term ‘Taliban’ covers a wide range of people with one unified view and motivation. Taliban is, however, as described by Bird and Marshall, an umbrella term:

Taliban is an umbrella term for disparate groupings and motivations. Some ‘Talibs’ were disaffected local tribesmen alienated by rapacious and corrupt officials, dishonoured by coalition military activity, seeking to avenge a relative’s death, or with myriad other personal gripes”. Others were traditional “Taliban” with an Afghan-centric focus. Still others were using the Taliban as a badge for convenience for entrepreneurial gain. However, a proportion were highly radicalized Islamists with agendas of global jihad either foreign fighters or products of the mosques and madrasas in Pakistan (Bird & Marshall 2011:179).

The wide variety of people included under the Taliban umbrella made it possible to manipulate ISAF by passing information that would advance personal agendas like private feuds (Ibid). With its seemingly limited understanding of all the different elements making up the Taliban, ISAF inadvertently became involved in tribal rivalry and local power struggles. Having a heavy focus on fighting the Taliban and being unable to distinguish between the different actors, ISAF thus often found itself fighting someone else’s battle for power. This, combined with an increase in Taliban operations, led to a dramatic increase in collateral casualties, alienating the population and producing a steady recruitment base for Taliban.

The critical events that unfolded in Afghanistan resulted in the publication of the paper “Fixing Intel: A blueprint for making intelligence relevant in Afghanistan” (Flynn et al. 2010). This paper, written by US intelligence officers serving in Afghanistan, made clear that, despite initiatives like the Human Terrain System and the designation of specialized cultural advisors, the US military was still struggling to understand the operational environment. And, despite fighting a war ‘amongst the people’ on paper, the military continued to focus on understanding the enemy – “at the expense of the political, economic, and cultural environment that supports it” (Ibid:7).

When collecting and analyzing information, the military thus seemed to be locked into the old paradigm’s way of thinking, resulting in operations in Afghanistan being, in reality, fought as an enemy-centric operation. This was the case even though the narratives surrounding the operation told a different story, one which demanded a people-centric approach with focus on gaining the support of the population.3

The Fixing Intel paper seems to have had an impact on the intelligence community and the approach to incorporating the population into the understanding of the operational environment. Since then, the population has been given more and more attention. And in an interview in 2013, Flynn boldly stated:

If there is a lesson learned from this whole decade of war it is that our failure to understand the operational environment actually led to a mismatch in resources and capabilities on the

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(3) As discussed by Holmes-Eber, who focuses on the US Marine Corps, militaries translate and redefine strategic policies and doctrines to fit their own ways of “doing business” (2014).
battlefield and how we applied them. Once we got over the hurdle of culture and asked – “Why do we have to do this?” – people who actually understood the problem realized this mismatch (Flynn 2013:182)

We would argue that the military is not yet “over the hurdle of culture”. There are still deficiencies in the approach to understanding the operational environment that prevent culture from becoming the enabler it is intended to be. The military still finds itself involved in fighting an enemy which is difficult to identify, with the risk of getting involved in unintentionally fighting the enemy of parties involved in local power struggles. Directing our attention towards current events unfolding in Afghanistan, it is therefore questionable whether the conceptual framing of ‘war amongst the people’, and more generally the doctrinal capture of ‘culture’ reflected in organisational capacities like the Human Terrain System, have sufficiently enabled militaries to distinguish the ‘enemy’ from the ‘population’. At the very least, it is clear that armed forces still find themselves involved in events which engage the ‘wrong’ enemy and thus alienate parts of the population.

The integration of culture in military planning models

Typically, insurgents react to government countermeasures by going quiet (reducing activity and hiding in inaccessible terrain or within sympathetic or intimidated population groups) when pressure becomes too severe. They then emerge later to fight on. This is one reason why an enemy-centric approach to counterinsurgency is often counterproductive: it tends to alienate and harm the innocent population […] but does little harm to the enemy, who simply melt away when pressure becomes too great (Kilcullen 2009:31-32).

As David Kilcullen, former special counterinsurgency advisor to the US Secretary General of State, points out in the above quotation, contemporary efforts to target the insurgent enemy are not always successful. This is particularly the case because the enemy-centric approach employed – despite the renewed emphasis on population-centric warfare – is often counterproductive. In this regard, it is significant to consider whether existing military planning models are able to capture the tactics and strategies employed by the insurgent enemies they are designed to counter. To do so, they must be able to grasp the transnational and clandestine nature that shapes the ways in which such insurgent enemies operate (cf. McFate 2009:117). Moreover, as experiences from Iraq and Afghanistan also demonstrate, the models must be able to capture how such enemies are linked to the populations they navigate amongst. This, we propose, demands a nuanced cultural understanding that moves beyond the mapping of various actors onto fixed terrains, and which encompasses the fluidity of social networks.

Currently, most military institutions use the PMESII model as a planning tool to understand the operational environment at the initial stages of military planning processes. In military parlour, the operational environment is defined as a “composite of conditions, circumstance, and influences that affect the employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander” (JP 3-0,

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(4) The PMESII model is not the only tool for supporting analysis of the operational environment. However, the model is a key reference in the knowledge development phase of military planning, and is widely employed. Guidelines for the use of the model can be found in NATO COPD (2010) and in NATO AJP-2 (2014).
2011). However, as pointed out by Major Brian M. Ducote from the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, PMESII was not originally designed as a planning tool to understand complex environments (Ducote 2010:6). Rather, PMESII was intended as a targeting tool to identify ‘adversary’ actors – whether defined as ‘insurgents’ or ‘enemies’ – in the operational environment (Ibid). The NATO AJP-2 planning directive lends support to this argument. PMESII, the directive notes, “describes the foundation and features of an adversary and can help determine their strengths and weaknesses, as well as help estimate the effects various actions will have on actors across these areas” (NATO 2014:5-5). However, there is a tendency amongst military analysts to understand and employ PMESII as a tool to generate general knowledge about the operational environment, rather than the specific objectives it was originally designed for.

By their very nature, planning models must involve some simplification and generalization of complex realities in order to be applied in practice. One of the strengths of the PMESII model is that it provides a framework for collecting and organizing data on the operational environment into different variables (political, military, economic, social, infrastructure, and information). As such, it provides a ‘menu’ type overview – a descriptive palette of different variables, including cultural ones as we discuss below, which influence the environment. These different variables should ideally ensure that military planners approach the operational environment in a structured and holistic manner.

A major challenge of the model is, however, that military planners may struggle to generate sufficient data to feed into the various variables (cf. Salmoni & Holmes-Eber 2011:32-33). Even if they succeed in doing so, during the limited time that is normally available to the planning process, the model provides no guidance on how to analyze the data. As such, the military planner is often left with a large amount of empirical data, but no structured approach to dissect it. Consequently, it may not be straightforward to provide a nuanced understanding of the operational environment that informs and qualifies a commander’s decisions.

Another challenge relates to the PMESII model itself, to the types of variables it is structured around, and to the sort of data it tends to generate. In terms of the variables, there is an inclination to think in terms of bounded territory and homogeneity. In NATO’s planning directive (COPD) – which provides the guidelines for PMESII – the political variable is, for instance, defined as “any grouping of primarily civil actors, organizations and institutions, both formal and informal, that exercises authority or rule within a specific geographic boundary or organization” (NATO 2010:3-11). This definition encourages military planners to approach the conflict in terms of a territory with clearly demarcated borders. As a result, political dynamics that influence the operational environment outside this territory may be neglected, thus leaving out essential knowledge on, for example, how global processes inform local conflict dynamics. Moreover, it is stated that the political includes “the political system, parties, and main actors”, and that it “must be
representative of the cultural, historical and demographic and sometimes religious factors that form the identity of a society” (Ibid). The notion of ‘the identity of society’ is not defined, but may easily give military planners the impression that the environment they operate within is shaped by a shared, homogenous identity. This, we believe, is deeply problematic, as it fails to capture how complex and pragmatic identities shape conflict dynamics.

More generally, the PMESII variables tend to generate a static view of political, economic and social structures, implicitly assuming that they are universal, or may correspond to Western structures and ways of organization. In this regard, a significant danger is that the model itself comes to shape the approach to the operational environment, rather than the other way around (Ducote 2010:11). This is especially so because the sort of data that is entered into each variable is primarily based on Western sources of information, and military planners’ individual judgment of what it is representative of, for instance, cultural factors.

While ‘culture’ is increasingly framed as an enabler to military success, these challenges may limit its potential in this regard. This is most significantly so because culture is employed as a checklist of empirical facts that draws a picture of the ‘human terrain’ which does not correspond to lived realities in areas of operation. Moreover, a fundamental limitation is the absence of a clear consensus on what culture implies, or on how – and to what extent – it should inform the planning and execution of military operations. As a result of these limitations, culture can easily become a source of friction. This friction appears to stem from, most notably, the inherent uncertainty about how to wage war ‘amongst the people’, and about how to capture the military Other: the enemy (see also Gusterson 2010:280).

**Culture and the military Other**

As discussed above, the enemy occupies a privileged status in military planning and thinking. This, we suggest, can ultimately be traced to the fact that to know your enemy is continuously regarded as one of the first principles of warfare. In the context of counterinsurgency and stability operations, this is no exception. In fact, we argue, militaries are (not unlike politicians) in need of an enemy to wage war. This is not simply so due to matters of legitimacy and public support. Perhaps more importantly, it is related to perceptions of military strength and success, and to military identity. After all, military strength and success is most commonly measured by the ability to handle – and kill – the enemy, and military identity is closely bound to the display of lethal capabilities and kinetic dominance vis-à-vis the enemy. Without the existence of an enemy, militaries would be faced with a fundamental uncertainty of the foundation and purpose of their existence. Moreover, they would have to fundamentally re-think and re-arrange their military plans and operations. Despite the move towards new modes and modalities of warfare, as demonstrated by the formulation of new counterinsurgency doctrines and strategies, militaries do still cling to the Clausewitzian thinking of war as a polarized battle. And, despite Kilcullen’s warning, they still cling to the absolute centrality of the enemy.

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(6) This is also an issue discussed by Holmes-Eber in the context of the US Marine Corps. How can the “ideal tough Spartan Marine suddenly start to solve problems by drinking tea with the sheikh instead of shooting him”, she asks (2014:111).
This centrality of the enemy in military planning ultimately clashes with the cultural turn, most significantly because military plans are not principally designed to culturally capture the enemy. Rather, they are designed to capture the enemy through more conventional means, particularly because the enemy is often approached in terms of military machinery - as a “complex of equipment, men and drills” (cf. Ben-Ari 1998:78). As a result, culture often figures as an appendix-like extension; as something military planners will first have to consider after they have addressed the military strengths and capabilities of the enemy, and after they have triggered the most fundamental military machinery: kinetic solutions. In this process, culture – in its quite reductionist form – is applied mainly as a tool to understand, and thus influence, ‘the population’.

“The conflict will be won by persuading the population, not by destroying the enemy”, stated General Stanley McChrystal, former commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan (Spencer 2009:97). His statement reflects a dominant military tendency to operate with a clear distinction between ‘the population’ on the one hand, and ‘the enemy’ on the other – a tendency, which is also reflected in military planning processes. The problem is – and this also explains why culture can be a source of friction – that the enemy cannot be isolated or approached as inherently different from the population. In the context of ‘war amongst the people’, friends and enemies are not only difficult to distinguish from one another; they are also closely entangled. As Ben Anderson has pointed out in an illuminating article on counterinsurgency, the enemy “appears from the population and disappears back into the population” (2011:222). In contrast to conventional warfare where the uniformed enemy is faced along clearly defined battle lines, the enemy of contemporary warfare is characterised by its spectral presence, by a constant fluctuation between absence and presence, between invisibility and visibility:

The enemy comes to be visibly present in events of violence that disrupt or destroy life (car bombings, Improvised Explosive Devices [IEDs], suicide bombings). Outside these events, the enemy blends and blurs with the complex environment it disperses into. Modern insurgents therefore oscillate between periods of absence as a function of the insurgent’s dispersion (normally described as ‘invisibility’) and moments of disruptive, punctual presence (in acts of violence) (Anderson 2011:221).

This spectral yet disruptive presence is perhaps another reason why culture is not systematically employed as a means to deal with the enemy in military planning: it easily becomes too diffuse, mobile and flexible to fit into military models. That said, military analysts continuously emphasise that “cultural understanding of the adversary is imperative if counterinsurgency is to succeed” (Jager 2009:167). But to understand the so-called adversary, we also need to understand ‘the people’, and vice versa. And we need a cultural approach that can bridge this divide, otherwise culture will continue to be a source of friction.

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(7) Here it should also be noted that the concept of ‘the population’, and of ‘the people’, is deeply problematic in the sense that it connotes an idea of a unified coherent group.
From binary divides to cultural co-production

In order to turn cultural friction into a cultural enabler, it is vital to move towards a dissolution of the binary divides that characterise military thinking and planning. Moreover, and closely related to such a move, it is necessary to critically reflect on whether culture can be conceptualised in a manner that more closely reflects the human dynamics in areas of operation – both when it comes to the perceived enemy and the population. As we discuss in further detail below, such conceptualisation must also include an emphasis on how military interventions shape cultural dynamics in areas of operation.

Binary oppositions are central to military thinking and planning. The most obvious example of this is the opposition drawn between ‘self’ and the ‘military Other’, who is most commonly categorized as ‘the enemy’. Yet, when analyzing the human terrain in areas of operation, similar oppositions are constantly being drawn, for instance between ‘friendly forces’ and ‘hostile forces’, and between civil and military domains. When faced with an enemy who blends and blurs with the population, such oppositions limit the understanding of the enemy as well of the local inhabitants, and thereby limit the potential for capturing the enemy and of winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of the population. While military planners tend to approach the threat as organized along a continuum ranging from regular armies and militias to gangs and criminal groups, they often fail to understand that the defined threat is flexible in modes of organisation, and in modes of action. What this means in practice is that regulars cannot easily be distinguished from irregulars, and that militaries cannot clearly be separated from criminal groups, for instance. Not only is the contemporary threat increasingly deterritorialized (cf. Virilio & Lotringer 2008:11), it also draws on flexible identities and on shifting organizational constellations (Christensen 2013). When the perceived threat merges into one constellation, then out again, and then into a different one, it becomes extremely difficult – if not impossible – to fix in accordance with military planning models. This is precisely because the modes of organisation and action of these disparate groups are messy and unpredictable – like lived realities are.

This, we are aware, potentially triggers the question: so what? - particularly when it comes to the application of culture in military planning and operations. A useful way of addressing this question, we propose, is to take the point of departure in co-production. Culture, it should be noted, is not a static set of entities, such as inherited traditions and fixed identities that are rooted in particular places. Rather, it is an elementary production that shapes and is shaped by social relations and interactions. These relations and interactions do not easily fit into fixed entities and categories – such as those defined in PMESII, for instance - exactly because they are shifting in nature, and in a constant process of transformation. During times of violent conflict and war, processes of transformation are particularly evident. When decisive events or radical changes in the social and political environment take place, social networks tend to leak and flow into new constellations (cf. Deleuze & Guattari 1987:213). Military intervention is an obvious example of such a decisive event that triggers the production of new modes of organisation and action. Military thinkers and planners cannot easily grasp these emergent modes, as they seek to organise human dynamics in areas of operation into predictable models for purposes of control. This is especially not the case because they sometime fail to recognize that they too – by triggering the military machinery – inform these modes of action and organisation.
In order for culture to become an enabler to military success, how military action moulds cultural dynamics must be taken into account. At the most basic level, this involves recognition of the fact that military intervention in itself is a source of fundamental cultural transformation. In order to understand such cultural transformations, the cultural gaze must be directed internally towards military cultural dynamics and externally towards cultural dynamics in areas of operation. But, most importantly, it is critical to examine how these internal and external cultural dynamics shape each other during military interventions – exactly because they are mutually constituted. This is also the reason why it is vital to avoid seeing culture as a list of empirical facts which can be organised into separate categories or binary oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Culture, we argue, should not simply be approached as empirical conditions, but must also be employed as an analytical optic. More precisely, this involves not simply directing our attention towards what culture is, but towards what culture does (cf. Hastrup 2007:13). While it may sometimes be more convenient to approach culture as a set of specific conditions which direct social action and organisation, this approach fails to account for the ways in which culture is negotiated, contested and appropriated. Moreover, giving precedence to what culture is, risks neglecting the fact that culture is often tactically employed as a tool to navigate uncertain circumstances. Intrinsic to an optic that, on the other hand, focuses on what culture does, is a view of culture as flexible and emergent, exactly because it is co-produced in social interactions.

When attention is directed towards how culture is co-produced in social interactions, new openings emerge. While these openings may not be devoid of friction, they provide a useful point of departure for approaching culture in terms of solutions. Because culture is transformative, it is possible to influence, and thus to employ as an enabler when planning and executing military operations.

Towards a cultural paradigm shift in military worlds?
‘War amongst the people’ and the cultural turn represents a paradigm shift that Western militaries are already in the process of adapting to. As we have set out above, this paradigm shift has turned culture into a new vocabulary of warfare, even to the extent that culture is now seen as imperative for successful military operations. However, the essential question in this regard is whether the cultural approach militaries employ actually enables successful operations. Or, put differently: Has the paradigm shift in contemporary warfare been accompanied by an appropriate understanding of cultural dynamics – by an understanding that can actually move beyond addressing culture as a source of friction?

In the most recent US counterinsurgency doctrine (FM-3-24, 2014), it is pointed out that an understanding of the fact that “culture is created by people and can and does change” is key to successful operations. While this is a productive departure point, emphasis is still placed on understanding ‘the local population’ as a unified whole, including their languages and customs (Ibid). Moreover, as stated above, a key division between the population on the one hand, and the enemy of the other continues to be drawn.

While we acknowledge that such formulations may be based on an attempt to make culture applicable to existing planning models and feasible for military thinking, we question whether
the basics are missing. Are militaries able to turn culture into an enabler without recognising that culture is negotiated and co-produced in social interactions involving military actors themselves? Or is there a need for a more far-reaching cultural paradigm shift – one which not only corresponds more closely to the lived realities in areas of operations, but which more efficiently inform contemporary warfare ‘amongst the people’?
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