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Towards an Embodied Sociology of War

Abstract

While sociology has historically not been a good interlocutor of war, this paper argues that the body has always known war, and that it is to the corporeal that we can turn in an attempt to develop a language to better speak of its myriad violences and its socially generative force. It argues that war is a crucible of social change that is prosecuted, lived and reproduced via the occupation and transformation of myriad bodies in numerous ways from exhilaration to mutilation. War and militarism need to be traced and analysed in terms of their fundamental, diverse and often brutal modes of embodied experience and apprehension. This paper thus invites sociology to extend its imaginative horizon to rethink the crucial and enduring social institution of war as a broad array of fundamentally embodied experiences, practices and regimes.

Keywords: war, violence, injury, body, experience, sensation.

Introduction

War has been a crucial factor in the shaping of modernity and modern social life and it shows few signs of declining in importance or intensity in the twenty first century. Despite its importance, war has historically not been a core concern for sociology. This paper attempts to rethink the significance of war and its socially generative force by paying particular attention to its fundamentally embodied nature, an analytic orientation that has received limited emphasis within sociological discourse to date.

The paper initially engages with the work of Elaine Scarry (1985) who explores the fundamental centrality of bodily injuring to war, a fact that is commonly disavowed in many prominent military and strategic traditions of thought and media and political discourses of war. For Scarry, war is “the most radically embodying event in which human beings ever collectively participate” (p.71) and war’s force is a fundamentally bodily making and unmaking of the world. The paper subsequently explores how, despite its undeniable and continuing significance in shaping the modern world, war has been under-analysed by a sociology whose gaze has historically been directed inwards upon an assumed pacific state. War thus remains under-examined within sociological discourse in general, and the embodied dimensions of war remain under-theorised in particular.

The remainder of the paper explores a range of contemporary scholarship, in diverse analytic traditions from feminist international relations to medical anthropology,

which has attempted to place the fundamentally embodied dimensions of war more explicitly at the forefront of its analysis. Such work has explored war as a realm of diverse embodied experiences, embodied practices and regimes of sensation and, as such, it offers sensitizing concepts and the beginnings of an analytic toolkit for the task of further fleshing out a comparative and embodied sociology of war. The paper concludes by arguing that embodiment cannot be understood as an insignificant or epiphenomenal dimension of war, and that the sociological analysis of war would thus benefit from a sustained engagement with the corporeal. War is an enduring crucible of social change that needs to be traced and analysed in terms of its fundamental, diverse and often brutal forms of embodied experience and apprehension.

War as Bodily Injuring

For Elaine Scarry (1985), bodily injuring is manifestly at the heart of war. While the founding figure of strategic thought Carl von Clausewitz famously argued that war is a contest to define political reality, ‘the continuation of policy by other means’ (1976: 87), Scarry crucially notes that this contest over differing political constructions of the world is not conducted by any available ‘other means’. It is not decided for example by sporting prowess or by musical ability. Rather, it is always conducted by a very specific ‘other means’ – bodily injuring. Politics is written in war through the very specific idiom of violently injuring human bodies. For Scarry, this is because it is bodily injuring alone, as opposed to any of those other potential surrogate idioms of resolving conflicts, which uniquely carries the power of its own enforcement. The out-injured parties in war are no longer able to make the same sense of the world and as such are less able to resist the imposition of a new political reality.

Drawing particularly upon the work of Merleau-Ponty, this centrality of the body to making sense of the world, and its disruption through violence, is explicitly theorised by Mensch (2009). He argues that our ability to make sense of our surrounding environment, and of ourselves in the world, presupposes a set of bodily actions – turning the head, moving, reaching, picking up, tasting and so on – through which the perception of objects in the external world and the perception of one’s own body are necessarily intertwined. Our primary sense of the world is thus one of bodily enactment, we are in the world through our doings and our projects, ultimately through what Mensch calls the co-constitution of a bodily ‘I can’ and the correlative world in which this ‘I can’ appears.

Mensch argues that what defines all *violent* phenomena is that they attack this fundamentally embodied ability to make sense of the world and one’s own place in it. Violence is specifically destructive of the ability of the body to engage in sense-making and meaning-making, it ‘undoes our deployment of the bodily ‘I can’ in making sense of the surrounding world’ (Mensch 2009: 72-3). In a discussion of the colonial transformation of traditional aboriginal lands into divided, enclosed spaces for farming, Mensch argues that this process not only deprives the original inhabitants of their means of supporting themselves, but it also fundamentally disrupts their contexts of sense-making about the world and their place in it. Through such structural violence, aboriginal men began to lose their sense of embodiment, and hence their ability to understand themselves, as hunters or pastoralists. In a further discussion of a more direct physical assault on bodily integrity, the severing of a

young woman's limbs during the conflict in Sierra Leone, Mensch relatedly argues of this violation of the body that 'What is mutilated is not just her body, but also her body-dependent projects. The mutilation extends to her pragmatic understanding of the world and her being in it' (2009: 77). For Mensch then, there is an intimate relationship between violence, embodiment, injury and the ability to make sense of the world.¹

This noted, let us return to Scarry's argument that bodily injuring is the distinctive idiom for the political contestation of war. Importantly, she argues that this is not only down to the opponent becoming out-injured to the point where they can no longer put up any more resistance - indeed, such a scenario is historically very rare in war. Rather, Scarry argues that the additional significance of this idiom is that the very production of brutally wounded bodies provides a radical material base that can be enlisted into ending the reality contest and the 'crisis of substantiation' (p.150) which war entails. For Scarry, it is in those liminal and protean situations such as war, fundamentally concerned with 'the making and unmaking of the world', that bodily injury accrues a 'frightening power of substantiation' (p.126) and has historically been the reality-confirming force. The fact that war is fundamentally embodied is thus not only central to its prosecution but also to its eventual ending. Injuring is the basis of the contest *and* the initial source of substantiation of the winning reality:

'War is the suspension of the reality of constructs ... and simultaneously, the mining of the ultimate source of substantiation ... the making available of the precious ore of confirmation, the interior content of human bodies, lungs, arteries, blood, brains, the motherlode that will eventually be reconnected to the winning issue, to which it will lend its radical substance, its compelling, heartsickening reality, until more benign forms of substantiation come into being' (p.137)

Despite it being the manifest heartsickening reality of war, many of the ways in which war is thought and talked about frequently fail to hold steady to this central fact of bodily injuring. For Norris, the dead and injured regularly fail to become figures of phenomenology in the mediascape of contemporary war, signaling 'the human body's derealisation by technological media under military control at the end of the twentieth century' (2000: 231). Butler (2009) relatedly argues that the differential structuring of affective responses through such 'frames of war' has meant that it is only certain bodies that matter during wartime, that count and are counted, whereas others are not recognized as fully human, becoming unintelligible and 'ungrievable'. Scarry argues that 'the fact of injuring tends to be absent from strategic and political descriptions of war' (p.12), which are often marked instead by a profound disavowal or transference of its bodily mutilation, in the process becoming 'emptied of human content ... a rarefied choreography of disembodied events' (p.70). As she notes, a level of abstraction may seem appropriate for an instrumental mode of strategic thinking. Nonetheless, fundamental ethical concerns are ruled out of court by such abstraction (Cohn 1987, Zehfuss 2011). And for Scarry, the crucial ethical imperative behind attempting to recognize the fundamentally embodied nature of war is that 'the more accurately the nature of war is described, the more likely the chances that it will one day be displaced by a structural surrogate' (p.143).

The Neglected Sociology of War

If bodily injuring has disappeared from many of the ways that we think and talk about war, war in general has largely been notable by its absence from sociological discourse, despite its undeniable and continuing significance in shaping the history of the modern world. As Brighton (2011: 101) notes, ‘little in modern social and political life goes untouched by war’ and history is replete with examples of its socially generative, complex and at times contradictory powers: from its crucial relationship to the bestowal and proving of masculinities to its empowerment of countless women mobilized into working for the war effort in 20th century Europe; from its striations and brutal entrenchments of masses of class-based lives and deaths to its significance for the history and emergence of universal welfarism; from its often ruthless racial classifications of the ‘enemy’ without and within to its crucial role as a site for the inclusion and recognition of otherwise marginalized and migrant others into the narratives and performances of national service and citizenship (Ware 2012).

War then has never simply been about the deployal of a distant instrument of political violence at the periphery. Rather, it has also been a crucible of historical social change that has continuously mutated social relations at the core of those societies that have continuously made it (Barkawi 2011). And yet war has not been a topic that has regularly captivated the sociological imagination, such that the sociology of war does not exist as a significant discursive sub-field with its own recognizable set of questions, debates and theories. Bousquet (2012: 180) argues that ‘sociology in the main inherited one of the most prevalent assumptions of social theorists in the nineteenth century, namely that of the archaic character, and thus increasing irrelevance, of war’ and that as such it assumed that ‘the emerging global order of bourgeois societies, bound by trade and commerce and guided by rational economic self-interest ... was inherently pacifistic’.² Even when twentieth century history proved that belief to be drastically mistaken, war has nonetheless often been thought of as the exception to normal social and political life (Shaw 1988), or as a discrete event bounded in space and time (Cuomo 1996) whose centre of gravity and primary presence has been considered to be ‘elsewhere’ rather than ‘here’ (Shapiro 2010).

As such, and as Malesevic (2010) notes, particularly in the post-1945 period when sociology largely constituted itself as a discipline, the emphasis of sociological theorising also ‘moved on’ to embrace the optimism of the times (Joas 2003). Its focus shifted decisively towards topics such as welfare, social stratification, culture, education and health but away from any sustained analysis of organised violence, which was now regarded as a sign of failure or the absence of the social rather than its product (McDonald 2013: 8). It moved away also from consideration of the significance of the embodied legacies of war and of enduring preparations for war-making upon the structuring and reproduction of social life.

It has principally been within Weberian comparative historical sociology that the most distinctively sociological tradition of theorising war has been developed. The work of Tilly (1975, 1992), Giddens (1987), Mann (1986, 1993) and Collins (1975, 1986) in particular argued that the emergence of modern bureaucratic, territorialized and centralised nation-states - marked by the monopolization of the means of violence, the extension of processes of surveillance and taxation, and the emergence of new forms of belonging and rights - was in large part the result of protracted wars and highly

expensive military campaigns, a process of co-evolution whereby ‘war made the state and the state made war’ (Tilly 1975: 42). Such work attempted to analyze the complex imbrications of organised violence, state formation and capitalism that were central to the emergence of modernity, whilst crucially asserting a relative autonomy of military power from simple capitalist logics. The total mobilizations of society, polity and economy for the prosecution of the 20th century world wars were testament to war’s all-consuming ability to exceed the logics of brute economic determinism (Shaw 2005).

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of this tradition of historical sociological scholarship, or its utility for illuminating the transformations of war in late modernity, associated in many cases with the disintegration of the state’s monopoly of violence and structural integrity (Kaldor 2012), it is crucial to note here that the embodied dimensions of war - the centrality of bodily violence, killing and injury - are given little analytic attention in such accounts. As McDonald (2013) notes, Giddens’ Weberian account of the modernization of war stresses the increasing discipline, bureaucratization, and professionalization of the modern military, a process by which the soldier is turned into ‘a specialist purveyor of the means of violence’ (1987: p.230). For McDonald, this language is significant, implying that injuring and killing are potentially analytically equivalent to anything that requires a degree of refined training, such as becoming a purveyor of fine foods (2013: 14-15). He argues that, particularly as war spills out of its modern structures and across the global flows of late modernity, analysis primarily in terms of bureaucratic models of rational action fundamentally elides the increased significance of the embodied and experiential dimensions of contemporary paradigms of violence.³

The historical sociology of war nonetheless makes clear the generative force of war, that as MacLeish (2013: 10-11) succinctly puts it, ‘war makes the social, the rules, the nations, and the people, rather than simply corrupting, undermining or destroying those things’. War certainly involves the direct slaughter of thousands of bodies (Tirman 2011), affective assaults upon the morale of entire populations (Anderson 2010), the ‘slow violence’ of environmental and infrastructural degradations (Nixon 2011), and the structural violence of massive investment in war-fighting capacity over domestic capacity building in alternative areas such as healthcare or jobs creation (Garrett-Peltier 2011). But war has also been the midwife of countless transformations in domains from education to medicine, from scientific innovation to urban planning, from logistics to computation (Barkawi 2011, Bousquet 2012). It is at times deeply destructive, isolating and individuating, but it also produces new forms of social solidarity and binding. Reflecting upon the radical transformation of the lifeworld at the end of the First World War, Benjamin (1969: 84) thus notes that:

‘Wasn’t it noticeable at the end of the war that men who had returned from the battlefield had grown silent ... a generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.’

This potent rendering of the body through the force field of war that Benjamin describes has however been a topic of minimal elaboration within sociological thinking. While a renewed concern with the embodiment of human life and social

action has been an extremely productive feature of the social sciences over the past three decades (Shilling 2007), with bodily issues becoming more mainstream to sociological theorising and bodily studies proliferating in numerous empirical directions, the topics of war and militarism have largely been notable by their absence from such developments.⁴ The body that has become a greater focus of Western social scientific attention has to a large extent been a pacific body, one that had already optimistically moved beyond the force field of war. While it has been regarded as producing and consuming in countless ways, it has rarely been thought of as fundamentally shaped or moved by war, preparation for war, or the legacies of war.⁵ The intertwining of war and the body has thus remained an object of limited and sporadic analytic attention for the social sciences, leading to a relative paucity of theoretical resources on how to formulate and think about such linkages.⁶

Feminist International Relations

Within other domains across the academic division of labour, such as security studies, military history and international relations, the topic of war has principally been approached in terms of abstract causes, strategies and aims. Barkawi argues that war is decentred and fragmented as an object of inquiry across such domains and further that ‘neither security studies nor IR inquire into, much less theorise, war as a set of social relations and processes ... in a world made in no small measure by ongoing histories of organised violence, we lack a social science of war’ (2011: 704). Such analysis has certainly tended to elide detailed consideration of embodiment and of the bodily violations and injuries at the dark heart of war. Jabri writes of international relations that bodies ‘are not deemed to constitute the subject-matter of a mature discipline that concerns itself with the abstractions of the international system’ (2006: 825). However, drawing particularly on scholarship from feminist international relations, Christine Sylvester has mapped out in a series of recent publications (Sylvester 2011, 2012, 2013) an approach to the study of war that is more distinctly sociological than the traditional international relations approach to the topic. She asks: ‘What if International Relations (IR) were to turn its usual view of war around and start not with states, fundamentalist organisations, strategies ... and not with the aim of establishing the causes of war, as has so often been the case? What if we think of war as experience, as something ordinary people observe and suffer physically and emotionally depending on their locations?’ (2012: 483). For Sylvester, ordinary people are crucial agents of, and experiential participants in, global geopolitics although they are overwhelmingly absent from mainstream accounts of international relations, politics and conflict.

The key focus of Sylvester’s work then is to try and move beyond the abstractionism of IR to understand ‘war as a realm of experience rather than a set of cause and correlates and abstract actors’ (2013: 13). She argues that, as with heterosexuality, marriage or the family, war can be considered as an enduring social institution with multiple sites of authority and agency, an institution in which everyday people are involved in a myriad of ways – ‘as combatants, yes, but also as mourners, protestors, enthusiasts, computer specialists, medical personnel, weapons designers, artists, novelists, journalists, refugees, portents, clergy, child soldiers, and school children’ (2013: 4). Indeed, given the global nature of contemporary economic, migratory and media flows, Sylvester argues that few in today’s interconnected world remain

isolated from war's touch, that 'everyone has war experiences' (2013: 5) even if all these actors will 'experience the collective violence differently depending on their location, level and mode of involvement, gender, moral code, memories, and access to technologies' (2011: 125). War is far from exceptional in her understanding then and she argues that analysis needs to engage with this 'vast expanse of war's ordinary' (2013: 3), with the 'in-betweenness' of war rather than the predominant concern of IR with the reasons why war is declared or peace accords are signed.

Sylvester takes it as axiomatic that 'war is experienced through the body, a unit that has the agency to target and injure others in war and is also a target of war's capabilities' (2013: 5) and she argues that the body experiences war in terms of two key vectors - 'the physical and emotional connections with war that people live' (2013: 5). This provides the key organizing heuristic for her analytic overview of war as bodily experience. As well as the physical and emotional intimacies of war that occur when people are mutilated, raped, beaten and killed, she notes how people may be physically distant from the epicenters of violence but still intimately engaged with war in active, material and emotional ways, for example in rehabilitating the war-injured or in protesting, as well as how people may be distanced from war both physically and emotionally in their mundane lifeworld, only indirectly touched when they see war on television or learn about war as part of national curriculums (2012: 496). It is important to note that those physically located at the epicenters of war's violences also often force themselves, or are forced, to retain emotional control and distance (Ben-Ari 1998, Hinton 1998). MacLeish (2013: 132) relatedly describes the broad military labour of *not feeling* as 'the self-conscious mastery of affect, emotion, and physical pain by soldiers and spouses, and the institutionally imposed haze of medication, emotional and bodily discipline, and compelled endurance'.

Sylvester also takes as axiomatic several key insights from feminist studies of war and militarization⁷. Firstly, that a consideration of women's lives has often troubled commonplace understandings of war, such that for example it may be more accurate experientially to speak of a 'continuum of violence', and of gender relations underpinned by violence, rather than any clear demarcation between times of war and peace (Cockburn 2009). But secondly, that women's experiences of war occur in a variety of complex ways – certainly as the actual victims of injury, killing and sexualized violence (Olujnic 1998, Leatherman 2011), and through the discursive invocation of their bodies as being a primary target that militarized masculinity seeks to protect (Zarkov 2007); but also as workers centrally involved in war efforts via the armaments industry or medical rehabilitation as well as being the often underacknowledged providers of the emotional and sexual labour that underpins military life (Enloe 2000); or indeed as female fighters in the paramilitaries and armed opposition groups of 'new wars' (Coulter 2009, Mackenzie 2012), and increasingly in Western state militaries (Mathers 2013). Women's bodily experiences then, though rarely credited with historical importance in the study of war, are certainly not ontologically outside the 'war matrix' (Jabri 2010). Moreover, it is the detailed examination of the myriad war experiences of both men and women that is central to Sylvester's project to 'pull the bodies and experiences of war out of entombments created by theories operating at higher levels of analysis and into the open as crucial elements of war' (p503).⁸

A particularly prominent motif of many of the ethnographic and literary accounts of war experience that Sylvester draws upon is the complex and shifting trajectories and fluidity of experiences in wartime. She notes how, particularly at the everyday level of the personal politics of survival and coping, wars are often experienced through a complex and unruly range of interrupted identifications and tactical adjustments of allegiance, embodied ‘masquerades’ and sophisticated concealments of ambiguous identity, and the fluid negotiation of whatever circumscribed agentic possibilities emerge fleetingly and unexpectedly from within the chaos of war.⁹ For Sylvester then, at the heart of war there is often a radical mismatch that we are only beginning to understand between, on the one hand, people’s actual embodied experiences of conflict and, on the other, institutional myths of identity, masculinity and glory in war as well as the sophisticated arguments Western theorists have often constructed about war’s prosecution. She argues that a crucial task is to investigate in much more detail the myriad and often contradictory ways in which people in multiple positions experience and narrate the interruptions and changes to their lives before, during and after experiencing war. It is through analytic attention to such embodied lives that we may better come “to know war as a comprehensive whole that has a teeming life alongside and sometimes in defiance of what statesmen, militaries, strategists and IR specialists say about it” (Sylvester 2012: 503).

Embodied Practices of War

Alongside such work within feminist International Relations, a related analytic agenda has been developed in recent sociologically-informed scholarship by McSorley (2012, 2013) as well as in ethnographic work on warfighting by Hockey (2009, 2013) and Higate (2013) and medical anthropology concerned in particular with the veterans of recent US wars (MacLeish 2013, Wool 2013). It is the elements of this scholarship that can contribute towards developing an embodied sociology of war that will be considered in the following section.

Shaw (2005: 40-1) has argued 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’. For McSorley (2012), one key way to attempt to address this omission is via a more explicit analytic focus upon the *embodied* practices through which war and militarism take place. Although, as Sylvester notes, the structures of feeling and lived experiences that constitute war as a social institution are multiple and diverse, the development of soldiers’ bodies and warfighting ability within militaries, and the wider resonances of these martial body projects across the social field, is clearly one highly significant dimension of the making and doing of war. As MacLeish (2013: 11) notes, ‘The body’s unruly matter is war’s most necessary and necessarily expendable raw material ... the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could not carry on without the physical presence of tens of thousands of such bodies’. Relatedly, Basham (2013: 140) argues that considering how ‘soldiers perform and experience war and war preparedness may go some way towards helping us to think through how the geopolitics of war materialises’.

The embodied practices of war thus include the systems of basic training and further discipline through which the soldier’s skills, capacities, reflexes and habits are inculcated, developed and indeed resisted (Newlands 2013). Such an analytic focus

upon the production of martial bodies has a certain, if modest, analytic history¹⁰. McNeil (1997) for example has examined how the practices of drill and marching together in time foster ‘muscular bonding’ and have been central to the creation of military ‘esprit de corps’ across history. Foucault (1977) has famously explored the military as a foundational laboratory of disciplinary power where the docile bodies of recruits are subject to, and ultimately subject themselves to, various practices of corporeal transformation through which specific martial dispositions and competencies become inculcated. As Higate (2013: 140) notes, the ultimate aim of this embodied military training ‘is to reconfigure body-selves towards the functional imperatives of military objectives’.

Drawing on ethnographic data, Hockey (2013) has explored the ensemble of corporeal competencies and sensory practices that infantry troops develop and deploy as they go about their work. He details the skillful coordinated choreography of patrol, its acute sense of communal time and secure collective movement; the endless weapons drills that establish a pre-reflective relationship with the rifle, so ingrained that it is ultimately thought and felt an extension of the body; and the haptic adaptations to nature that foster a capacity to ‘soldier on’ as adversity, cold and fatigue seize bodies. In particular, he points to how the senses become militarized, attuned particularly to the discernment of enmity and threat. The development of suspicious sensory practices occurs across the sensorium and includes heightened olfactory awareness of lingering smells that might signal enemy presence, auditory alertness to unusual changes in the mundane soundscape such as uncanny silence, and a cynical way of seeing that is constantly monitoring and parsing terrain in terms of potential protection and peril.

Hockey thus argues that infantry display a specific kind of corporeal engagement with the world and come to inhabit a very particular ‘somatic mode of attention’ (Csordas 1993) that is encapsulated, and sometimes specifically summonsed, by the occupational exclamation ‘switch on’. For Hockey, ‘this single utterance invokes the embodied world particular to infantry’ (2013: 102). This vigilant sensory apprehension of the world becomes such an ingrained part of the soldierly habitus that militarized reflexes to potential threat are capable of being unthinkingly elicited in pressurized situations, as well as being incredibly durable over time. Higate (2013) notes how the work of privatized security contractors relies upon the persistence of this mode of situational awareness and the embodied skill-set developed in prior military training. The increasingly important global institution of private military contracting thus fundamentally depends upon the tenacity of this sensory practice, as well as upon cravings for the intensity and exhilaration of professional warfighting that are often the emotional sediment underpinning the desire to continue a particular form of corporeal career beyond military life.

Relatedly, Wool (2013), in an ethnographic analysis of the transformations of the lives of US soldiers following their intense experiences of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, notes the inability to ‘switch off’ upon return from combat and associated severe difficulties in reorientation to the rhythms of regular life. Developing an analysis that stresses in particular the importance of movement in wartime as a fundamental part of making sense of the world, she argues that the experience of being and moving in a warzone can affect deep ontological transformations that irrevocably alter the experience of being and moving anywhere:

‘These [experiences] endure, becoming part of the sensibility of all spaces soldiers see and move through ... this sensibility is not strictly experienced just as a transformation of their own bodies, senses, and movements; it is also a transformation of space itself ... into lines of sight, routes of escape, pockets of potential danger’ (p.17). As such, post-combat the mundane material world can become a newly tentative place as ‘a new experiential knowledge of the vulnerability of solid objects, like bodies, cars, and buildings, has transformed the experience of seeing, feeling, and moving in the world’ (p.19). As an alternative to the currently dominant medical frameworks for understanding post-combat struggles in terms of psychic discontinuity and post-traumatic stress disorder, Wool draws attention to the texture and continuity of embodied experience, stressing that it is sensing bodies in motion that encounter the demands of post-combat reorientation and reworlding. She argues that such an ‘analytics of movement offers a sense of the vertiginous new worlds soldiers inhabit, which suggests ontology, rather than pathology, as the ground for understanding the matter of US soldiers’ being after combat’ (p.1).

These bodily practices of discipline, sensing and moving that produce persistent soldierly being also crucially co-exist alongside military systems of bodily maintenance and care, as well as within a wider constellation of social relations and networks of care-giving and intimacy in which the soldier is embedded. In MacLeish’s ethnography of everyday life in the military community of Foot Hood, Texas, he thus argues that ‘soldiers’ bodies are not end points for power but rather places in which it abides and transforms, “relays” in which it moves on to other bodies and still others’ (2013: 13). MacLeish understands the soldier’s body not as the bounded focus for an analysis of war but as a crucial ‘stepping-off point for understanding the affective currents and exchanges in which soldiers are enmeshed: *the lived affects of war*’ (p.13). The soldier’s bodily reality is ultimately of being invested with the power to destroy other bodies, and of concomitant exposure to forces that can extinguish their own life at a moment’s notice. MacLeish argues that there is no really meaningful narrative into which the constant confrontation with these unceremonious facts of death and destruction can be easily contained, save the brute stoicism of soldiering on. As such, the resonances of these embodied realities of constant exposure to harm and stoical perseverance begin to bleed into, to reshape and define, the wider bonds of intimacy and care within which the soldier is enmeshed.

Drawing in particular upon Butler’s (2009) analysis of the always precarious, susceptible and fundamentally interdependent nature of human embodiment¹¹, MacLeish argues that vulnerability ‘spreads outwards from the soldier to the persons and institutions linked to him ... as a sort of productive contamination that is less a strain on or disruption of attachment than it is the stuff of attachment itself’ (2013: 16-17). Moreover, the stresses and vulnerabilities that families and communities absorb during the physical separations that tours of duty entail do not end when such tours finish, and they are not easily reversible. For MacLeish then, the soldier’s embodied experiences resonate powerfully through, and reshape, wider structures of feeling in which love ‘both domesticates and relays outwards the shock and awe of war’ (p.178). In his account, war moves ‘by lateral and incidental routes – not just through an IED or an insurgent’s bullet, but in a nightmare, a cold sweat, a doctor’s suspicion, a lover’s incomprehension, or a bureaucrat’s obstinacy – to take shape in affects: in

leaps, increments, sedimented layers, and sudden upheavals nestled among other concerns, stresses and relations' (p.13).

The wider resonances of soldiers' embodied worlds are also the focus of attention in my analysis of the importance of footage recorded from helmet-mounted camcorders in recent public mediations of the Afghanistan conflict (McSorley 2012). In stark contrast to the abstraction and radical disembodiment of the mediascape of hi-tech 'virtual war' (Ignatieff 2001), soldiers' helmetcam footage provides the viewer with a lo-fi boots-on-the-ground immersion into the rhythmic kinaesthetics of patrol, the domestic routines and intimate touch of mundane life on base, and the visceral dramas and bodily risks of 'contact'. As such it offers the viewer an invitation to 'switch on' to a specific somatic mode of attention and a seductive cultural enrolment into particular militarized forms of sensory conduct. I argue that the helmet-cammed western soldier has thus become a key assemblage in the emergence of a particular contemporary regime of 'somatic war', and further that this has become a dominant 'regime of sensation' through which the Afghanistan war is currently being experienced by wider Western audiences. Soldiers' bodily rhythms and sensory practices have become a key idiom through which wider public apprehensions of the war are being entrained, and understandings of the aims and rectitude of military conduct are being shaped and negotiated.

This is not to say that a particular politics can be straightforwardly read from this regime of 'somatic war' - its resonances are complex, numerous and at times contradictory. Certainly when bodies are not seen or felt to be put on the line, warfare may be exposed to accusations of inauthenticity and moral hypocrisy (Ignatieff 2001, Shaw 2005), and this may be particularly important in a case such as Afghanistan where the war is protracted and the war aims are confused and contested. 'Somatic war' may thus primarily be an idiom through which such a conflict becomes re-enchanting - 'given a moral or expressive meaning beyond the merely instrumental' (Behnke, 2006: 938, Coker 2004).¹² The emphasis here upon the thrill, daring and vulnerability of soldiering may predominantly act as a legitimation for the continuation of the war. However, the increased salience of bodily risks and injuries in this regime of sensation may also be felt in certain constituencies as an underlying symptom of the wider degeneracy and futility of the continuing war. Far from a legitimation then, it may be laying down the emotional sediments of eventual withdrawal from a protracted campaign. However it is felt, I argue that it is predominantly in the various resonances and intensities of this regime of 'somatic war' that the meaning of the conflict in Afghanistan has recently been made most perceptible and palpable.¹³

Relatedly, I have argued that the analysis of militarism needs to be attentive to its embodied, sensory and affective dimensions (McSorley 2013). Classic discussions of militarism often exhibit a cognitivist bias in terms of their emphasis upon specific militaristic attitudes, beliefs or ideologies.¹⁴ However, as Lutz (2009) notes, despite the largely uncritical acceptance in the US of what she terms the 'military normal', people rarely articulate militarist beliefs in any great detail or as a clearly thought through set of rational principles concerning the necessity of war readiness and the legitimacy of the state having vast military force. Rather it is often through mundane embodied practices and idioms that a broad and subtle form of militarism assumes an implicitness and becomes something not explicitly thought but simply felt to be

habitually right, often from an early age¹⁵. In an analysis of how the recent military-supported 'Too Fat to Fight' campaign lobbied for changes in US schoolchildren's diets, Burrige and McSorley (2013) argue that there is a pervasive militarization of the body that operates across multiple constituencies and domains in everyday life, from fashion and diet to leisure and fitness, and that often resonates with wider pacific, neo-liberal discourses of self-actualisation, thrill and body image. It is through such everyday practices that broad recruitment into a particular 'embodied community' (Basham 2013) involved in supporting the global activities of war and war preparedness may take place. In contrast to a simple post-military society thesis (Shaw 1991) that emphasizes the contemporary reduction in directly conscripted bodies then, many Western states have been marked by a profound remilitarization in the last decade, a widespread mobilisation that has often been fundamentally embodied and affective (see e.g. Massumi 2005, Ó Tuathail 2003).

The body of work outlined above thus develops an analysis of war and militarism as prosecuted, lived and reproduced through a panoply of embodied practices, movements, resonances and regimes of sensation. Taken together with Sylvester's emphasis upon war as a wide-ranging realm of experience, it also begins to constitute a conceptual tool kit, offering sensitizing concepts for the task of further fleshing out a more 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 methods of injury and 'woundscapes' (Terry 2009), modes of somatic engagement and flow, affective resonances, body pedagogics and the inculcation of militarist structures of feeling. For example, recent forms of predatory conflict that Kaldor (2012) has categorised as 'new wars'¹⁶ have often been characterised by, and constituted through, specific embodied experiences such as the massive displacement of peoples, confinement to camps, child soldiering and visceral assaults on bodily integrity. Mbembe (2003) notes that recent conflicts in Africa, where many postcolonial states' monopolies of violence have been fundamentally eroded, have been characterised by 'technologies of destruction that have become more tactile, more anatomical and sensorial' (p.34), including publically visible and admonitory assaults such as the severing of limbs and the production of abject bodies through campaigns of sexualized violence (Diken and Lautsen 2005; see also e.g. Baaz and Stern 2009, Leatherman 2011).

Indeed, anthropological literature on collective violence in Burundi and Rwanda (e.g. Malkki 1995, Taylor 1999) has relatedly emphasized how acts of atrocity have often been perpetrated and narrated in very particular ways, involving the brutalization of specific body parts, that are not merely instrumental but expressive and productive of a dehumanizing discourse that connects putative physical with moral difference. Appadurai (2006) thus argues that, particularly in an uncertain and globalized world, much collective violence against minorities should not be understood simply as a response to pre-existing differences in identity, but rather as a specifically embodied and intimate idiom through which opposing, antagonistic identities are produced and ambivalent and uncertain identities are rendered invalid and dangerous to hold. Furthermore, he argues that the excessive violation of the body of the victim that often characterizes such violence can be understood as an explicit classificatory attempt to establish or 'unmask' the underlying 'reality' of ethnic status: 'Large-scale bodily violence becomes a forensic means for establishing sharp lines between normally mixed identities. Bodily violence in the name of ethnicity becomes the

vivisectionist tool to establish the reality behind the mask. And of course, such violence inevitably confirms its conjecture, for the dead, disabled, or deconstructed body of the suspect always confirms the suspicion of its treachery' (p.89). For Appadurai then, close analysis of embodiment is absolutely critical to illuminate an understanding of particular regimes of contemporary war and collective violence.

As a further and very distinct example of contemporary conflict, practices such as the increased use by the US of unmanned drones in locations including the Yemen, Somalia and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan represent a significant transformation of war characterized by the asymmetric instantiation of myriad mobile zones of violent exception attached to individual bodies (Gregory 2011, Chamayou 2013). While much debate around such practices has focused upon interrogating the techno-cultural apparatus and the particular legal armature through which specific bodies can come to be identified as 'legitimate' targets for killing in particular spaces, it is also crucial to note that the reality on the ground in the areas where such operations take place is an experience of embodied terror that is far from delimited. Rather the production of drone-fearing bodies is manifest and widespread in such areas (International Human Rights And Conflict Resolution Clinic 2012, Amnesty International 2013). In addition, the embodied experience of drone operators themselves is not simply marked by the detachment of physical distance, but is rather punctuated by disruptive new mediated intimacies (Gregory 2011) and by the schizoid experience of daily de/compression between modes of war and peace (Asaro 2013, Brant 2013, Williams 2011).

Clearly then different wars are fundamentally characterised by distinct modes of bodily injury, somatic engagement and rhythm, regimes of sensation, embodied militarisms and so on. Moreover, embodied experiences are distinctive for, and productive of, many different social groups within particular conflicts.¹⁷ A key direction for future elaboration in the analysis of war and its various instantiations, transformations and reproductions will thus be paying further analytic attention to this centrality of embodiment and to the diverse embodied experiences of multiple constituencies in wartime.

Conclusion

War has been a hugely significant factor in the shaping of modernity and modern social life and it shows few signs of declining in importance or intensity in the twenty first century. It is violently destructive, productive and protean, 'a field of contingent unmaking and remaking in which familiar or taken-for-granted objects of knowledge and structures of meaning are overwhelmed and transformed' (Brighton 2011: 102). As such, Holmqvist (2012) asks how are we to study its excessive force? The necessarily incomplete answer that this paper has advanced has been to suggest a plural and corporeal turn in war studies. For, 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 countless men and women. Indeed, for Scarry, war is "the most radically embodying event in which human beings ever collectively participate" (p.71). Understood as such, war's force is a fundamentally bodily making and unmaking of the world. It is via the occupation and

transformation of myriad bodies in numerous ways from exhilaration to mutilation that war itself is made.

The embodied dimensions of war have been subject to a series of significant erasures within sociological, academic and wider discourse. Indeed, in an attempt to continue the legitimization of war as a viable instrument of policy despite its inevitable degeneracy, various bodies at war have historically been subject to a series of disavowals within prominent military and strategic traditions of thought and allied media and political discourses. This paper argues that embodiment cannot be understood as an insignificant or epiphenomenal dimension of war. War is an enduring crucible of social change, whose lived affects are felt and modulated widely, and it needs to be traced and analysed in terms of its fundamental, diverse and often brutal forms of embodied experience and apprehension.

Sylvester argues that it is through the embodied trajectories of multiple lives and deaths that the constantly shape-shifting but enduringly injurious ‘transhistorical and transcultural social institution of war’ (2013: p.5) lives and breeds. An important theme for future elaboration is understanding not just how war is multiply written upon the body, but how war is continually reiterated through a range of embodied continuities and resonances, such as the corporeal career and cravings of the private military contractor (Higate 2013), as well as tracing how transformations and differences between wars may further be understood in terms of their distinctive modes of embodied experience and apprehension. Furthermore, a focus on embodiment and lived experience brings to the fore that war is fundamentally not apart from the rest of social life. The work discussed here has highlighted embodied and sensory practices and regimes that bleed across, resonate through, and fundamentally blur the spatial, temporal and ontological distinctions between war and peace.

If war was ever really distant from liberal Western societies, the events that September 2001 inaugurated have made such a position appear increasingly untenable. As McDonald (2013: 1) notes, the violence that once appeared to be contained by key dimensions of modern society is now significantly more fluid, fundamentally integrated into the global and technological connectivities and flows of late modernity. For Hardt and Negri (2004: 14) the current situation can be defined as one where ‘the limits of war are rendered indeterminate – both spatially and temporally’, leading to the emergence of ‘the everywhere war’ (Gregory 2011) and ‘the forever war’ (Filkins 2009). Although war has historically not been a core concern for a sociological imagination whose gaze has been directed upon an assumed already pacific state, sociology can no longer avoid a reckoning with this most pressing of concerns if it is to retain a claim to provide relevant critical analysis of the key forces shaping the twenty-first century.

While sociology has not been a good interlocutor of war, I have argued in this paper that the body has always known war, and that it is to the corporeal that we should turn in an attempt to develop a language to speak of its myriad violences and its socially generative force. None of this is straightforward. The difficulties of talking, and theorizing, about violence are well documented (Das 2007, Scarry 1985). For example, work on the intergenerational transmission of war-related trauma (Cho 2008, Kidron 2009), and on veteran experience has consistently pointed not only to

the significant and persistent nature of the corporeal aftermaths and emotional inheritances of war, but also of a fundamental struggle to be able to adequately comprehend, and articulate, these effects and affects of war. Bodies carry war in ways that are at once intensely felt and intractable, and yet seemingly unstable and unknowable. Developing a language supple enough to track this ontology of warfare is not simply an analytic challenge, but is also often an existential struggle. Despite its historical aversion to considering issues of war, sociology is nonetheless potentially well placed to contribute to such an undertaking given its significant recent record of thinking through the significance of embodiment in a way that attempts to combine a concern with questions of cultural and institutional reproduction, lived experience, and political power. This article invites sociology to extend its imaginative horizon to rethink the crucial and enduring social institution of war as a broad array of fundamentally embodied practices, regimes and experiences.

Notes

¹ Butler relatedly argues that embodiment is both the very condition of possibility of our interdependent human flourishing and simultaneously of our vulnerability to violence and to war: ‘the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well’ (2004: 26).

² Malesevic (2010a) argues that an alternative ‘bellicose tradition in classical sociology’ fell out of favour as the twentieth century progressed.

³ McDonald (2013) notes the significance of somatic apprehension for various contemporary transformations in violence and war. For example, he argues that Jihadi testimony often refers to the revelation of hidden meanings through embodied encounters with the ‘extraordinary’, and points to the somatic apprehension of intensely repetitive and decontextualized violence as a principal medium for apprehending this ‘reality’ of the world in terms of holy war. He points to the integration of the Abu Ghraib victims into the violent pornographic imaginary of their torturers, and the wider mediated and affective flows of this process, as a further example of the complex ways in which various zones of private experience and war increasingly bleed into each other. For McDonald, the embodied apprehension of distant violence and the types of publics and imaginaries constructed around it are thus increasingly important encounters in a world where the old borders established to contain war no longer hold.

⁴ For example, within canonical texts on the body such as 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.

⁵ The significant role for body studies of Elias’ (1978) work on the civilizing process in Europe was one significant influence in establishing this baseline image of a contemporary pacific, civilized body.

⁶ Indeed, it is not from the social sciences but from autobiography and fiction that the embodied experiences of war have emerged most clearly as a salient and important theme of public discussion. The elegiac reconstruction of the horrors of past wars in war literature and written testimonies haunted the twentieth century and continues to do so into the twenty-first. While the reasons underpinning such war writing are complex and plural – catharsis, ‘truth-telling’, a duty that those who can write do so for those who cannot, an attempt to impose some verbal order on that which may otherwise seem incomprehensible (McLoughlin 2009) – such writing has generally been much more attuned to exploring the precarious phenomenological status of all bodily life in wartime rather than attempting to understand war in terms of its causes, strategies or within the telos of future policy. A significant motif of much war writing is that it regularly foregrounds its own inadequacy, the impossibility of adequate sense-making in the disorientating fog of war, the futility of representation faced with the war’s overwhelming reality. As such, the search for some meaningful grounding has often led such war writing to focus upon ‘the physical ordeal and the indignities war imposes on the body’ (Rau 2010: 3).

⁷ See for example Cockburn 2007; Cohn (ed) 2013; Enloe 2000; Kronsell and Svedberg (eds) 2012; Parpart and Zalewski (eds) (2008); Sjoberg 2013; Sjoberg and Via (eds) 2010.

⁸ It is important to note that, although there is a principled rejection of much of the theoretical abstraction with which war has historically been understood in Sylvester’s work, she in no way adheres to a naïve empiricism that views certain experiences as the ultimate location of the true meaning of war, or asserts the unproblematic existence of simple translations between war experience and war knowledge. Rather the category and lens of experience is understood as an analytic and methodological reorientation, one that invites the narrow focus of war research to be widened to attend to war’s multiple centres of agency, everyday lives and social relations, as part of a ‘process of opening doors for the ordinary to enter into standards of knowledge and comprehension’ (2013: 99).

⁹ These include for example the regular switching of sides of combatants in many conflicts, the false claiming of injured or victim status to access humanitarian resources (Utas 2005), negotiating the ‘choiceless decision’ to become a female fighter rather than embracing passive victimhood (Coulter 2009), and tenacious emotional and physical refusals to accept the imposed terms of ‘bare life’ (Courtemanche 2003, Shilling 2008). See also McSorley (2015) on the precarious negotiations necessitated by a condition of permanent disruption, uncertainty and anxiety in the everyday interaction order in wartime Chechnya.

¹⁰ See for example Woodward (1998), Lande (2007). As Hockey (2013) notes, the fact that there are relatively few studies that attempt to grapple with directly embodied material in researching soldiers’ lives is largely due to the positivist nature of most military sociology.

¹¹ For Butler, ‘the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition’ (2009: 33).

¹² Many war films narrate tales of re-enchantment, where the purpose of war becomes redefined in increasingly existential or self-referential terms, such as a fight to save one’s own soldiers by rescuing the left behind, supporting the besieged, or salvaging honour for the fallen (Wetta and Novelli 2003).

¹³ Of course, it is also crucial to remember that this regime of ‘somatic war’ is not a rendering of conflict as a wide-ranging medium of embodied experience. It is decisively linked to the embodied experiences and vulnerabilities of Western soldiers, rather than to those of other combatants, civilians, victims or others touched by the war.

¹⁴ For example, Mills (1956: 222) writes of a ‘military metaphysics’ among the power elite - ‘the cast of mind that defines international reality as basically military’. Mann (1987: 35) defines militarism as ‘a set of attitudes and social practices which regards war and the preparation for war as a normal and desirable social activity’.

¹⁵ As Scarry (1985: 109) notes, once ingrained ‘the body’s loyalty to these political realms is likely to be ... more permanently there, less easily shed, than those disembodied forms of patriotism that exist in verbal habits or in thoughts about one’s national identity. The political identity of the body is usually learned unconsciously, effortlessly and very early”.

¹⁶ For Kaldor (2012), new wars are degenerate and predatory social formations where a range of forces – decaying state Armies, paramilitaries, mercenaries, criminal gangs – sustain themselves politically and economically particularly through the spread of violence against ‘enemy’ civilian groups and accumulation by dispossession. Her analysis has been extremely influential, if contentious both in terms of its normative underpinnings and its analysis of how such wars are experienced and understood by its participants (see e.g. Drake 2007, Malesevic 2010, Chan 2011). Gregory (2010: 169) cautions that the entire representational and analytic opposition between uncivilized ‘new wars’ and hi-tech Western wars may sustain a rhetorical privileging of the latter as more rational, modern, surgical and ultimately more legitimate, thus foreshortening critical examination of the bodily mutilation and lethality that is necessarily at the heart of all wars including hi-tech Western wars.

¹⁷ Notably of course, war will consist of very different embodied experiences for those positioned on different ‘sides’ of the conflict or those caught in the middle, such that their understandings may even be of radically different wars - of insurgency and counterinsurgency for example.

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