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Beyond the hegemonic in the study of militaries, masculinities, and war

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Across a rich terrain of empirical and theoretical trajectories, the concept of military masculinity (now understood in its plural as military masculinities) has been a significant conceptual tool in both feminist international relations (IR) and in critical men and masculinities studies scholarship. The concept has helped us to unpack the relationships between gender, war, and militarism (Enloe 1993; 2000), including how military standards function in the production of wider normative, hegemonic (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Agathangelou and Ling 2009) manliness. As such, military masculinities has been a rewarding tool for many scholars who take a critical approach to the study of war and the military, enabling us to approach ‘military power as a question rather than taking it for granted’ (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 1) and deconstruct areas of ‘common sense’ (Enloe 2004, 1–3) through which gendered military power is reproduced.

This special issue advances what we identify as an emerging curiosity within accounts of military masculinities. This curiosity concerns the silences within and disruptions to our well-established and perhaps too comfortable understandings of and empirical focal points for military masculinities, gender, and war. The special issue is situated within emerging critiques of military masculinities. Scholars such as Stachowitsch (2015), Richter-Montpetit (2007), Howell (2007), and Belkin (2012) all expand where we locate gendered militarist logics of war and its various contestations. In common with these scholars, the contributors to this special issue trouble the ease with which we might be tempted to synonymize militaries, war, and a neat, ‘hegemonic’ masculinity. Taking the disruptions, the asides, and the silences seriously, we claim, challenges the common wisdoms of military masculinities, gender, and war in productive and necessary ways.

Doing so, we argue, necessitates a re-orientation of where, to whom, and for what we look to understand the operation of gendered military power. It involves paying attention to the margins and the marginal, variously characterized, of masculinities and war. It prompts us to consider how concepts originating from marginal knowledges can be applied to the study of military masculinities, and our responsibilities to the political projects in which they are grounded. It challenges us to ask how gendered military power is (re)produced within our own conceptualizations. It also necessitates looking beyond soldiers to other people, other bodies, and other subjectivities of war –
to non-combatants, to veterans, and to the researcher – to understand military masculinities and war. This special issue gathers scholars from various backgrounds who each begin with one or more of these provocations. Individually and collectively they challenge us to reorient and reconceptualize military masculinities, and war, beyond the hegemonic.

In their piece ‘Re-thinking Hegemonic Masculinities in Conflict-Affected Contexts’, Henri Myrttinen, Lana Khattab, and Jana Naujoks offer rich empirical insights that push the account of masculinities in conflict-affected and peacebuilding contexts beyond the narrow focus on ‘men and their violences’ and simplified accounts of hegemonic and hyper masculinities. They consider the absence of non-combatants, displaced persons, and non-heterosexual masculinities, and call for re-examination and re-articulation of the idea of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, and a widening of the scope of study. Amanda Chisholm, in her ‘Clients, Contractors, and the Everyday Masculinities in Global Private Security’, also offers both an empirical and a methodological intervention, with an explicit focus on the gendered and racialized relations between the scholar who researches security and her research community. Employing an autoethnographic examination of her research of private security contractors in Kabul, Afghanistan, and placing herself as the main analytical focus, Chisholm shows us how the knowledge we produce about militarism, violence, and gender cannot be separated from our own embodiments and gender biases that will always frame our research questions and mediate how we navigate and write about the field. Both Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks and Chisholm re-orientate our focal points for the embodiment and production of military masculinities.

In their contribution ‘Combat as a Moving Target: Masculinities, the Heroic Soldier Myth and Normative Martial Violence’, Katharine M. Millar and Joanna Tidy interrogate the gendered politics of conceptualizing ‘combat’ within masculinities theorizing. They trace how combat has been mobilized as a common-sense empirical category within critical feminist and gender analyses, importing its normative investments. Millar and Tidy argue that this has obscured the political work that masculinities do to constitute ‘combat’, as an imagination of normative violence, with this imagination sustaining ‘military authority and the broader social acceptance of war’. Sarah Bulmer and Maya Eichler’s ‘Unmaking Militarized Masculinity: Veterans and the Project of Military-to-Civilian Transition’ argues for a focus on the unmaking rather than the making of militarized masculinity. They explore the experiences of veterans transitioning to civilian life, arguing that ‘attempts to unmake militarized masculinity in the figure of the veteran challenge’ key aspects of feminist analyses of war and militarization. ‘Embodied veteran identities refuse a totalizing conception of what militarized masculinity might be’ as well as demonstrating ‘the limits of efforts to exceptionalize the military’.

Both Millar and Tidy’s and Bulmer and Eichler’s work speaks to a need to pluralize military and militarized experiences and to be analytically careful with the concepts we use as critical scholars. Marsha Henry shares this impulse in her ‘Problematizing Military Masculinity, Intersectionality and Male Vulnerability in Feminist Critical Military Studies’. Her article traces the use of intersectionality in work on the multiplicity, hierarchies within, and vulnerabilities of military masculinities. She raises the importance of connecting these analyses to the “originary” black
feminist project’ from which intersectionality has been drawn, and ponders cautionary answers to the question of our responsibilities in using concepts such as intersectionality, black and double consciousness, standpoint, and situated knowledges. Consequently, Henry reminds us of the politics of how we understand and apply the very concepts we use to understand militarism, gender, and war.

In her Encounters contribution, Marysia Zalewski asks ‘What’s the Problem with the Concept of Military Masculinities?’ Sharing a scepticism concerning current iterations of the concept within feminist scholarship with the contributors above, Zalewski takes as her point of departure the ‘idea that the concept of military masculinities has become overly familiar and “comfortable”, at least within feminist scholarship, and that this “cosiness” is problematic’. Catherine Baker, reflecting upon Holly Furneaux’s recent book *Military Men of Feeling* (2016) in her Encounters contribution, demonstrates how archetypes of hegemonic masculinities – embodied in the stiff upper lip, emotionally constrained, physically fit combat soldier, were also challenged in alternative histories of British military operations. She draws our attention to the important work on militarism, gender, and war being produced outside feminist IR spaces. Finally, in her Encounters piece, Anna Agathangelou offers a de-colonial feminist critique of military masculinities. Taking the concept outside a western academy and drawing upon ‘living’ archival histories of her mother’s stories of war and violence in Cyprus, Agathangelou gives an important alternative voice to our understanding of military masculinities – and challenges our own western-centric ideas concerning the universality of militarism, gender, and war.

The contributors to this special issue, in different ways, reconsider, push beyond, or complicate the well-worn associations that link hegemonic masculinity, militaries, and war. Each research article and Encounters piece speaks to unease with existing theoretical configurations of the masculinities–militaries–war nexus. They all illuminate the way in which ‘military masculinities’ has in some important regards become a form of comfortable story, the ending to which we seem to already know. Yet, as they reveal the silences, disruptions, and erasures that structure the comfortable story of military masculinities, our contributors also make this conceptual and empirical terrain newly strange (see Eriksson and Stern 2016, 117). Another way to think about it is that each of our contributors applies a feminist curiosity (Enloe 2004, 2015) back onto the concept of military masculinities, converting the comfortable givens of the well-worn masculinities story into questions. In doing so they open up new avenues and possible directions for future scholarship. As such, this special issue comes – to butcher Shakespeare – not to bury military masculinities (although we have all probably felt like doing so at one point or another!). Neither does it unquestioningly come to praise the concept by mobilizing it as a common-sense critical scholarly panacea. Rather, we aim to offer some possible ways in which to keep the concept curious, sceptical, and uncomfortable.

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