

PANEL ON "COUNTERINSURGENCY AND HUMANISM"

APRIL 22, 2010

4:30-6 pm

In 1991, the historian Martin Van Creveld claimed that wars in the future would be waged by guerrillas and terrorists organized around personal or charismatic loyalties. Largely the result of nuclear weapons, he argued, western states had lost interest in fighting one another and had already proved hidebound by their sophisticated weapons and strategy to the point of irrelevancy vis a vis asymmetric threats. Fighting against a motley crew of criminals, terrorists and guerillas in the future would destroy the trappings of modern war – only applicable to war among states – and give way to “warre”. Warre is not fought for a purpose but as a manifestation of existence and those most willing to fight are those who win.

In response to warre, Van Creveld argued, modern states faced a Hobson’s choice. If they did not adapt, they would be overrun. Adapting to this kind of conflict, though, would cause modern states and their societies to be transformed – becoming more like their new enemies. Warre promised to undermine either the power of civilized states or their civility.

In the ensuing twenty years, Van Creveld’s prophecies of the kind of threat modern states would face have grown progressively more relevant. This threat has transformed not only how war is approached and conducted but these logics, strategies and tactics have also affected the logics of social self-arrangement. In the series on Militarizing Society we have been concerned with examining critically the social implications and impacts of these developments. In the present Studio Session, on April 22, we turn our focus to counterinsurgency.

In the articulation and practice of counterinsurgency, the US military and its allies have taken serious interest in cultural and political knowledge of the populations among which they operate. Anthropology has been pressed into use once again by the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan at both the highest level – General Petraeus hired anthropologist Col Kilcullen as a senior advisor, for instance – and at lower levels – such as the Human Terrain program. The military has come to regard culture as a key resource of “engagement.” Interest in politics has been evident too as top commanders as well as military blogs tout the importance of building political support. Military leaders have come to realize the value for their success of giving people in remote towns or individual social groups reasons to resist insurgent threats and the capacity to do so at the local level; of building on local governance arrangements rather than imposing western plans and attempting to work with development and humanitarian aid providers.

What should we make of these efforts to understand and serve populations via cultural understanding and efforts to provide security and other public services with the view to winning wars? How do these endeavors interact with the use of violence? And how do

these modes of military practice impact the social sciences they invoke and the societies over which they seek to establish governance?

- Is counterinsurgency, a conceptual response to an emergent form of warfare or simply a 'patch', revived from the Vietnam War and 1960s unconventional war doctrines, to cover over gaps in understanding?
- Is counterinsurgency a means of civilizing asymmetric conflict – making it less brutal and destructive than Van Creveld imagined through efforts at cultural understanding?
 - If so, is there any evidence that it is working – counter to what Van Creveld imagined? Or is counterinsurgency a strategy that simply uses cultural and spatial awareness to make violence more efficient, infusing societies that it touches (both those where it takes place and those where fighters return) with greater violence and violent potential – much like what Van Creveld expected.
- Does counterinsurgency bastardize the social sciences it appropriates for its efforts, militarizing them as much as (if not more than) the social science might hope to “humanize” the military through engagement?
- What is counterinsurgency’s relationship to humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping, such as occurred in Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, etc.?
- Does a concern with security overwhelm or complement other goals such as the delivery of humanitarian relief or development aid?