

Review - The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

Written by Paul Dixon

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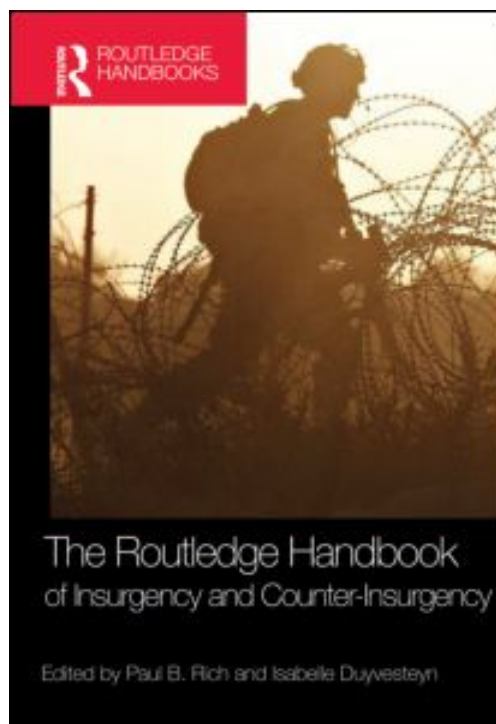
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The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency
Edited By: Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn
Routledge, 2012

The Counterinsurgency Industry



Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 'counterinsurgency' (COIN) has enjoyed a revival. The perceived failure of counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan has led to a 'backlash' principally by advocates of the use of conventional warfare against insurgents, some of whom see COIN as not a 'manly' approach to warfare, as well as by Anti-imperialists who see COIN as a means of extending Western imperial power.

Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn's handbook of insurgency and counterinsurgency gives us an opportunity to survey the state of the art in 'orthodox' counterinsurgency thinking. This 'orthodox' approach appears to dominate the 'counterinsurgency industry' and could be argued to represent an 'interpretive' or 'epistemic' community. Peter Haas defines an epistemic community as a 'network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area'. This

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community tends to share common assumptions and intellectual beliefs and is influential because policy-makers may rely on their expertise.

Orthodox COIN reflects a positivist approach to knowledge in which the methods of the natural sciences (or a particular conception those methods) are applied to the study of social reality. Positivism is often considered to include the following: an emphasis on observation in the development of knowledge; the generation of hypotheses and laws that can be tested; the accumulation of facts that provide the basis for laws; the belief that science can and must be conducted in a value free way that is objective; a clear distinction between scientific and normative statements, accompanied by the belief that it is scientific statements that are the proper job of the scientist because normative statements cannot be confirmed by the senses.

Although 'orthodox' counterinsurgency tends to reflect this positivist approach there is much within it that undermines these principles. The idea of objectivity is undermined by observations that the generation of knowledge is affected by the 'insurgency industry' and the social background of those who theorise about counterinsurgency. For example, Steven Metz points to the rise of 'an insurgency industry in the West, centred not only in militaries, government agencies and intelligence services, but also in segments of academia, journalism, research institutes and, to some extent, security-related corporations' (p. 32). This industry first appeared in the UK and France but after decolonisation was dominated by the US. 'This industry shaped not only the way that states and their militaries undertook counterinsurgency, but also the way insurgency was understood in the academic world and among the wider public' (p. 32). The problem, Metz argues, is the basic conceptualisation of insurgency, arising from the Western colonial tradition, that 'it demanded a re-engineering of the political, economic, security and even social systems that was possible only through colonialism, at least in nations not part of Western culture' (p. 33). Therefore, this orthodox model, he argues, may not reflect reality in conflict-prone regions and he urges a redefinition of insurgency and a different conceptualisation of its context (p. 37).

David Kilcullen: Practitioner and Theorist

Lieutenant Colonel David Kilcullen is a prominent theorist and practitioner of counterinsurgency who has been influential on General David Petraeus, a key champion of counterinsurgency within the US military. He distinguishes three periods of COIN theory: 'Classic' COIN theory of the sixties; 'Neo-classical' theory of the 2003-06 period; 'Post-classical' theory of 2007-12.

Kilcullen draws attention to the lack of diversity in the backgrounds of those developing 'classic' counterinsurgency theory. A RAND symposium on COIN in 1962 was 'a seminal moment in the intellectual history of classical COIN' (p. 133). The symposium's 12 formal participants were all men, eleven of the twelve were 'white' and included five Americans, four British, an Australian, a Frenchman and a Filipino. Eleven were army officers and at least eight had fought in World War 2. In spite of the emphasis classic counterinsurgency thinking places on the importance of non-military measures, 'there were no specialists in logistics, transportation, policing or civilian government, no naval, marine or aviation officers, no diplomats and no former or current insurgents or host-nation civilian populations' (p. 136). Rich and Duyvesteyn conclude that 'the non-Western world has largely been absent' from the debates over counterinsurgency (p. 364). David Ucko argues that 'Inadequate attention has been given to area studies, regional experts and anthropological data; instead much of the research is self-referential and inward looking' (p. 74).

The belief in objectivity leads COIN theorists to seek an objective, neutral definition of counterinsurgency. Although, in the handbook, orthodox COIN theorists offer competing definitions which are underpinned by different assumptions and values. 'Insurgents' can be seen as 'bad' people who must be defeated and, therefore, counterinsurgency is defined to include only conflicts fought by 'bad' people. On the other hand, 'insurgents' might also be seen as both 'bad' and 'good' people such as resistance fighters against the Nazis in World War II, patriot insurgents in the US revolution or the ANC's fight against Apartheid South Africa. This raises the tricky question that may be side-stepped by 'orthodox' COIN theorists, as to whether or not it is moral to fight a particular counterinsurgency.

Classical sixties COIN also attempted to derive general lessons or laws that could be applied to all 'insurgencies'. As

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Kilcullen points out, the sample size on which classical COIN is based is too small and while he finds 'a high degree of homogeneity among the case studies' it was hard to say that the application of COIN had led to government victory (p. 136). This 'one size fits all' approach to counterinsurgency is attractive because it appears to offer political and military elites simple, palatable answers to complex wars and the prospect of victory if its prescriptions are 'properly' implemented (this is the theoretical 'escape hatch' should the reality not meet the theory's predictions).

'Neo-classical' COIN – sometimes known as peace enforcement (see Zaalberg's interesting contribution on 'Counterinsurgency and peace operations') – has been deployed in the post-Cold War world to achieve the stated goals of development, democracy and human rights so that it is presented as part of a 'just war'. It is assumed that the insurgents and counterinsurgents compete for the 'hearts and minds' of the public, on whom defeat or victory rests, by offering material advantages and demonstrating 'will' to win. The 'hearts and minds' rhetoric and a sanitised history of previous insurgencies disguises from domestic public opinion the often bloody and coercive realities of counterinsurgency campaigns.

Afghanistan: Post-Classical or the Rejection of Coin?

The failure of Classic and Neo-Classical COIN to provide a road map to victory in Iraq and Afghanistan has led Kilcullen to develop Post-classical COIN. Since Kilcullen was a leading figure with Petraeus in the development of Neo-classical COIN – codified in the Army/Marine Corps Field Manual, FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency, published in December 2006 – this represents a development on his previous position. Yet Post-classical COIN also shares the positivist approach of 'orthodox' COIN theorising.

Post-classical COIN is based 'more on empiricism (a data-driven or evidence-based understanding of what is happening on the ground) rather than on appeal to the authority of historical cases, or exegesis from the classical canon of COIN theorists' (p. 140). In effect this seems to be based on the experience of Iraq where the 'surge' combined coercive and persuasive elements that was less COIN and more 'civil war termination or heavy peace enforcement' (p. 141). 'Irreconcilables' are killed or captured so that the 'reconcilables' may negotiate: 'Ultimately the decisive aspect of the reconciliation strategy was the Awakening, a tribal revolt against Al Qaeda International (AQI) which spread rapidly across the Sunni part of the country in 2007 and combined reconciliation and peacemaking with direct military action against irreconcilables and public safety in threatened communities' (p. 142).

In Afghanistan, Kilcullen argues, the implementation of a COIN strategy 'only became widespread in 2008' (p. 142). Insufficient troops have been provided (by President Obama?) so commanders have attempted to dramatically accelerate COIN. This combines a 'highly kinetic counter-network targeting of irreconcilables, and a peace-building programme to win over any member of the insurgency who proved willing to reconcile' (p. 143). This is a 'field innovation' that goes beyond the Neo-classical COIN of the 2006 Counterinsurgency manual. The surge that was applied in Iraq is being applied in Afghanistan based on an empiricist, bottom-up, tactically driven campaigning style (p. 143). There is a tension in Kilcullen's theoretical approach between generalisation and specificity: having endorsed a bottom up approach he then draws top-down lessons to create a 'Post-classical' paradigm that moves beyond COIN on an interpretation of two (highly contestable) case studies.

The US strategy in Afghanistan, however, appears to be a rejection of the population-centric, Neo-classical COIN approach that General Stanley McChrystal attempted to implement. General Petraeus has favoured a more violent, 'enemy-centric', 'counter-terrorism' strategy involving a major increase in bombing missions, drone strikes, night raids and Special Forces so-called 'Kill or Capture' missions. This 'Post-classical' approach does not seem designed to win the 'hearts and minds' of the local population (according to one report 80% of those captured are innocent civilians) and the killing of Taliban leaders – as Kilcullen has acknowledged – may inhibit rather than encourage negotiations (*Sunday Times* 14 November 2010).

The Morality of Repression?

'Orthodox' counterinsurgency theorising, because it embraces a positivist approach to knowledge, places little or no explicit emphasis on morality. Critics of 'orthodox' counterinsurgency thinking argue that, whether they admit to this

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or not, their moral assumptions are concealed within their descriptive accounts and it is impossible to analyse human activity without making value-judgements. For example, Rich and Duyvesteyn conclude their handbook by stating that

'based on the material in this volume... we can no longer escape the politically inconvenient truth that coercive and repressive counterinsurgency has in a large number of cases achieved the desired effect of pacification and stabilization' (p. 369; p. 13).

They also argue, 'the counterinsurgency repertoire of what to do and when is highly ideological and prescriptive, the success of coercion is preferably brushed aside and the lack of counterinsurgency learning remains a problem' (p. 364). Further, 'despite the present emphasis on the more tempered approach to counterinsurgency, the case studies point to a prevalence of the harsher forms of dealing with political violence' (p. 15).

Rich and Duyvesteyn appear to be arguing that in a 'large number' of cases harsh measures of coercion and repression in counterinsurgency are prevalent and successful, achieving the desired effect of pacification and stabilization. The success of coercion and repression, they argue, is brushed aside because it is politically inconvenient. The implication of their argument for policy-makers *appears* to be, because it is not spelled out, that coercion is more successful than 'minimum force' and winning 'hearts and minds' in counterinsurgency operations.

Rich and Duyvesteyn may argue that they, as scientists, are just stating the 'facts' which less hard-headed scientists, or ideologues, are reluctant to do. Although their statements provide intellectual backing for the coercive and repressive approach of Post-classical COIN in Afghanistan they may claim that it is not their concern or responsibility how their 'findings' are used in the real world. Yet there appears to be an implication in these statements that coercion is successful and should be implemented but isn't because it is not politically convenient. What is remarkable about Rich and Duyvesteyn's assertions is that such an important conclusion and potentially dangerous policy recommendation does not warrant extensive justification and qualification. This issue deserves a chapter of its own because the effectiveness of repression and coercion appears to be a widespread assumption in the 'counterinsurgency industry' which does seem to influence policy.

Rich and Duyvesteyn's argument is also problematic because it reinforces the idea that it is feasible to eliminate values from social research. However, there are numerous points where values shape research outcomes. The scientific claim to neutrality and objectivity simply serves to disguise the influence that norms and ideology have on the scientist. For example, Rich and Duyvesteyn's claims about repression are only briefly stated and appeal to hidden, commonsense assumptions. They don't explain whose 'desires' are being fulfilled by achieving 'pacification and stabilization' (the British against US revolutionaries? The Nazis against the resistance? The Apartheid regime against the ANC?) and, therefore, whether those desires should be fulfilled. The level and the specific harsh measures of coercion and repression – carpet bombing, chemical warfare, reprisals, massacre, torture, rape, starvation, deportation – they believe are successful, and in what combination, are not discussed (neither is the role of 'non-repressive' activities). The particular cases that are designated 'successes' for repression are not listed and justified. What 'success' and 'victory' means in war are highly contested terms that reveal the norms and ideology of the scientist. 'Pacification' and other coercive and repressive measures seem to have been unsuccessful in Vietnam, although this case is barely mentioned in the Handbook. Repression may simply galvanise resistance rather than achieve 'pacification and stabilization' and causation may be difficult to assess.

The End of Counterinsurgency Theory?

The weakness of counterinsurgency theory (as exposed by Kilcullen) suggests that it is a poor guide for predicting whether, for example, repression and coercion will currently have the 'desired effect' in Afghanistan. Publicly acknowledging the effectiveness of repression in COIN operations is likely to be politically inconvenient to both NATO governments and their militaries in justifying COIN operations which are claimed to be about preventing genocide and achieving democracy and human rights. Presumably, 'success' should be judged against those goals rather than 'pacification and stabilization'?

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Intriguingly, David Ucko raises the question of whether the term 'counterinsurgency' should be dropped in favour of a more complex understanding of war. Although he does argue that the term provides a rallying point for those opposed to the use of (even more repressive) conventional tactics against insurgents. After the perceived failure in Afghanistan, 'the future of counterinsurgency now looks bleak, and what happens in the United States will no doubt seal its fate across much of Europe, where the embrace of counterinsurgency has from the outset been far more tentative' (p. 77). 'Among critics, counterinsurgency is too ambitious, even presumptuous and arrogant, encouraging the idea that if equipped with the right doctrine, military forces can achieve social and political change in a foreign society that they do not understand. More discreet operations, carried out by local forces, and assisted by special forces, are seen as a less provocative, costly and fateful means of exerting influence as and when needed' (p. 77).

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Professor Dixon is Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is editor of *The British Approach to Counterinsurgency: From Malaya and Northern Ireland to Iraq and Afghanistan* (Palgrave 2012) and author of the report *Warrior Nation: War, Militarisation and British Democracy* (Forceswatch 2018).