

Interview - Paul Higate

Written by E-International Relations

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Paul Higate is Reader in Gender and Security at the University of Bristol. Prior to entering academia, Paul was in the Royal Air Force for over eight years. He went on to gain his Masters and DPhil from the Universities of Glasgow and York. His research focuses on the gendered culture of military and militarised masculinities in relation to private military security contractors (PMSCs), United Nations peacekeepers, and military personnel transitioning to civilian life. Previous research has considered the links between service in the British army and homelessness. He has an interest in developing innovative and inter-disciplinary ways in which to theorise security, drawing on human geography, critical geopolitics, sociology, and cultural studies. He recently finished an ESRC/AHRC Fellowship which focused on the embodiment of security, the identity work of contractors, and questions of regulation and accountability of the industry, using ethnographically sensitive methods for fieldwork carried out in Kabul and interviews with British and American contractors. He has numerous publications, including *The Private Militarised Security Contractor as Geocorporeal Actor*, *Drinking Vodka from the 'Butt-Crack': Men, Masculinities and Fratriarchy in the Private Militarized Security Company*, and *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Broadly put, my field of study might be framed in terms of a very particular kind of critical men's/masculinities studies that sits at the interface of critical security studies and feminist IR. While a number of incredibly talented scholars are contributing to this broad field in interesting and important ways that lay bare newly emerging configurations of gendered relations and violence, nonetheless I do feel that, on balance, the centre of gravity of this scholarship remains wedded to a fairly modest transformational agenda that can all too easily be incorporated into prevailing power structures. As such, I remain somewhat disillusioned with the hackneyed debates on gender equality, gender mainstreaming, critical mass, and – remarkable as it might seem – the continued conflation of gender with women! Yet, these ways of thinking and seeing remain highly influential, not only in the policy world with which scholars have increasingly to foster a cynically instrumentalised dialogue, but, somewhat surprisingly, also within the academy.

Against this backdrop was my attendance at a panel entitled “Queer Theory and the International” at the 2015 ISA convention in New Orleans, where I experienced a real sense of excitement. Though I profess to know almost nothing of Queer Studies in the broadest of senses, it struck me as incredibly vibrant, subversive, radical, and provocative. The wonderfully passionate panelists set out to destabilize, interrupt, and trouble not just the institution of the ISA as an exemplar of masculinised gender-power, but they also sought to carve out a space for intellectually inspired forms of transgression that challenge many of the unquestioned orthodoxies within mainstream social science.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My trajectory into academia is perhaps somewhat unconventional, given that between the ages of 17 and 25 I served in the British Royal Air Force, within the broader context of a thoroughgoing military family upbringing. My understanding of the world has been profoundly influenced by sociology (and the military) and, in particular, by a heightened awareness that, as actors, we are necessarily embedded within social structures that both constrain and liberate in ways that are hidden in plain view, to coin Aaron Belkin's astute phrase.

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It was in 1994 that I picked up a copy of John Hockey's *Squaddies: Portrait of a Subculture*, in the Waterstone's bookshop in Edinburgh, that my thinking really began to develop. Eloquent, insightful, and beautifully written in equal measure, Hockey's compelling ethnography of infantryman training demonstrated that soldiers are subject to a process of what he terms 'behind their back socialization'. Not only was I better placed to reflect on how the military shaped my subjectivity, but, more importantly, began to recognize that pathologizing one's place in the social structure all too often obscures the real loci of power. In turn, the conditions of possibility for both my own intellectual development and that of the subfield of military masculine studies were established, drawing on autobiography as resource and topic as initial point of departure.

Has the perception of military masculinities changed since the publication of your book *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State*? Do you think the traditional stereotypes of military identity are still as pervasive?

I rather rushed into editing the book in the immediate aftermath of my PhD, and while there is little doubt that it contains some really great chapters, overall it is incredibly under-developed. I believe its main, though by no means unique, contribution is that it does draw attention to military masculinity in its plurality – from masculinity to masculinities. Though this is the case, traditional stereotypes of the soldier archetype remain surprisingly tenacious, and numerous scholars continue to assert that soldiers are simply hollowed-out through processes of military socialization. It is not just that military masculinity should be pluralised, but perhaps, more importantly, we might conceive of these forms of gendered identity in their intersectional aspect in regard to race and the national dimension. Here, Cynthia Enloe was far ahead of her time in elucidating the idea of the martial race, developed most recently by Amanda Chisholm in her ethnography of Ghurka private military security contractors. I think we should continue to work with the concept of military or, perhaps more appropriately, militarized masculinity, and in contemporary times at least, think through these terms as they articulate with so-called processes of 'radicalization' and the growth of non-national, irregular groups whose use of violence can often be explained in terms of blowback.

The last UK Ministry of Defence review raised concerns that 'team cohesion' may be undermined if men and women worked in small units for several months at a time. What are your views on this? Has the increased presence of women in the military and peace support operations affected the notion of military masculinities?

The short answer to the last question here is: perhaps. In keeping with the logic of 'operational effectiveness', the 'team cohesion' line is as much about an ideological stance as it is about how military teams function, a point underscored when the ban on gay personnel was lifted in the British armed forces and – big surprise – the earth did not open up! The wider problem, however, concerns how one might set about gauging shifts in military-gender relations. Though the sociologist Tony King is pretty clear on the decreasing relevance of gender as it is supplanted by military professionalism honed through drill and training, my view is that traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity persist in certain military spaces. Military masculinity is incredibly malleable and able to successfully neutralize challenges to its contradictory formation, as noted by both Kim Hutchings and Aaron Belkin, among others.

What have been the most significant changes within the private military security industry in recent years?

In late 2003, the Iraqi 'gold rush' was something to behold, as many (almost exclusively) men flocked to Iraq in an attempt to fill a security vacuum caused, among other things, by the dissolution of the indigenous security services. A number of these contractors had only the most limited sense of what contracting work would entail, whereas others came with backgrounds in national militaries and, for a significant number, from the UK and US special forces. It was dangerous, unpredictable, and sometimes chaotic work, with many contractors killed and significant numbers injured. However, the money to be made was undoubtedly seductive, with a handful of those emanating from the most elite of military backgrounds working in armed close and convoy protection earning between \$800 and \$1,000 a day. Yet others, with fewer skills and civilian backgrounds, could also generate relatively high wages in comparison to their earning power back in the US or the UK in those contexts where they had worked as mall security guards or night club bouncers. From the days of the 'gold rush', Iraq's insurgency burgeoned, the country was in security free-

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fall, and, in 2004, four security contractors from the US company Blackwater were killed, mutilated, and hanged from a bridge over the Euphrates. It was at this point that wider publics became aware of the large number of security contractors working in Iraq, a sensitivity that was further heightened in 2007, when Blackwater team members shot and killed 17 Iraqis, as well as injuring many more.

While contractors continue to have a significant presence in both Iraq and Afghanistan, there have been at least two major shifts in the industry. The first concerns the way it has 'matured', such that contractor costs have been driven down through employing increasing numbers of Third Country Nationals. In conjunction with the shifting composition of the industry's workforce that has also seen attempts to recruit from Africa, Latin America, and, most notably in the case of Afghanistan, from the local population in the guise of Local National men, the industry has attempted to clean up its image. At the time of writing, the (self-regulatory) International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers (ICoC) had been signed by 708 companies as means to professionalise, though it is too early to say whether or not the ICoC will really change the way in which contractors on the ground operate.

In your article 'Cowboys and Professionals', you analysed fieldwork and the memoirs of American and British contractors. How did these accounts differ, and can you explain these differences?

It is important to state at the outset that the empirical material upon which the analysis is based in the article tends to be skewed towards the British view of American contractors. Similarly, the US/UK binary is intended as an heuristic device and should not be taken literally. However, notwithstanding these caveats, the memoirs of British contractors do frequently argue that American contractors perform a particular kind of brash and boastful hyper-masculinity, whereby security is enacted through explicit acts of intimidation. From the British perspective, aggressive driving, weapons pointing from windows, and pumped-up bodies make for a high-profile presence, thereby signaling the so-called American way in regard to the perceived practice of these 'cowboys'.

In contrast and drawing on American contractors who are cast as the exemplary foil for the former, is the cool, calm, and professional Brit. The British believe themselves to be measured, thoughtful, and able to provide security for the client in ways that are more likely to win hearts and minds, since they rest on expertise garnered over decades during the days of Empire and, more recently, on the streets of Northern Ireland. Rivalries between soldiers are, of course, not uncommon, and this narrative derives from conflicts over many decades. The British pride themselves on 'making do' with few resources, while their American cousins have had the luxury of relying on overwhelming firepower in ways that have influenced respective military doctrines. And it is the British who will tell you that they excel at counterinsurgency in opposition to the Americans, for whom Lawrence of Arabia is something of an anathema.

Taking a step back, and somewhat under-developed in the article, is the attempt to delve into the cultural and historical trajectories that help make possible these framings of US/UK masculinities as they play out in national militaries and private security. Building on the idea mooted by John Nagl in *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, it is perhaps the certainties of the British class system and nostalgia for the days of Empire that imbue masculinities in this context with a degree of (albeit reluctant) assuredness and superiority. Seen in this light, class sets discernible limits on what kind of man it is possible to be in the British context, though in the US, this plays out differently, such that Michael Kimmel's compensatory masculinity may well flow from the frustrations established by the spurious promise of the American Dream. The juxtaposition of the US's first black president, Barack Obama, with the old Etonian David Cameron fielding questions in the Rose Garden captures the potency of the American Dream with the sense of superiority emanating from the (re)invigorated British class system.

How are perceptions of security shaped by the presence of peacekeepers?

In the book I co-authored with Marsha Henry, *Insecure Spaces: Peacekeeping, Power and Performance in Haiti, Kosovo and Liberia*, we noted that peacekeepers had a contradictory impact on the ways in which beneficiary populations perceived and imagined security. Our guess is that little has changed. It continues to be important to more fully explore the expectations and contexts of those hosting peacekeepers, rather than conflate the latter's presence with some indefinable sense of felt security.

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In your article ‘Peacekeepers, Masculinities, and Sexual Exploitation’, you suggest that the sexual exploitation of women by peacekeepers has often been attributed to military masculinity – is this a satisfactory explanation? Do you think this perception has changed?

No, I don't believe this to be a satisfactory explanation. In retrospect, I don't think the article brings out the significance of power and privilege sufficiently, within the wider context of particular colonised encounters. Question: what kind of gender relations might we see if 15,000 male academics were sent to the Democratic Republic of Congo? What about 15,000 male businessmen? I don't think perceptions have changed in respect of military masculinity being seen as a key explanatory variable here, and a focus on peacekeepers can occlude other actors, such as UN civilians who perpetrate sexual exploitation and abuse – the latter of whom are typically far less visible and one element of a far more diverse exploitative community.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of Gender and Security studies?

My advice to young scholars of Gender and Security studies would be to follow their intellectual and political convictions to their zenith and not be deterred by a number of damaging trends within the academy. It is not just that increasing levels of competition mean that talent is being wasted en masse, but also that managerialist agendas, coupled with the instrumentalisation of knowledge production, present new and enduring challenges, even if one is successful at securing a post. The wellspring of intellectual tenacity is passion, and young scholars are the future of the academy. While advice is always useful, the older generation of scholars have a responsibility to provide the best legacy possible for the inspiring, younger cohort. I remain deeply disappointed at the acquiescence of the more senior among us who have barely resisted the creeping privatization of the British university system and its corollary – the erosion of higher education as above all else – a public good.

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This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR