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Rethinking Military Theory, Critiquing COIN

-by Moitreyo Sarkar

Abstract: If any layman in the field of “military theory” seeks to acclimatize oneself with the historiography and forms of theorizing in military affairs, one is sure to be overburdened with multitudes of categories constructed in differing contexts. In this paper the constructivist lens, and critiques of emerging contemporary paradigms of war are utilized to illustrate the multi-contextual and stochastic reality of war vis a vis with theories of scientific reality.

The basic premise behind the investigation in this paper starts from Thomas Kuhn’s distinction between normal and revolutionary science. Kuhn has suggested that in each scientific endeavor, there is a common maturation pattern. Even if there are periods which lack coherence in scientific organization and show inconclusive research output, they are succeeded by the achievement of a paradigm. Something that can be temporarily but universally accepted as a model of problems and solutions to practitioners. A discipline which has achieved a paradigm henceforth reaches a stage of maturity which aids in the beginning of a “normal science”, where disciplinary efforts are targeted towards developing the paradigm and contextualizing applications to solve appropriate problems. However any “normal science” can have its normativity challenged by the accumulation of enough occurrences of anomalies, which might render it unusable. At such a moment a revolution occurs, which forces a change in both the psychological framework and social organization of scientific communities and their methods, due to the emergence of a new paradigm. Kuhn defines paradigms in two senses here; first "the entire constellation of beliefs values, techniques, and so on shared by members of a given community" (Kuhn called this the "sociological" sense). Second, "the concrete puzzle solutions which, employed as models or examples, can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science" (Golinski, 1998)

Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar in their seminal work “Laboratory Life : The Construction of Scientific facts” (1979), utilise the notion of paradigm and portray a constructivist image of how every aspect of scientific research carried out in the laboratory of a scientific research institution, (including making sense of the research output) are tied in an interlinked network of meaning making system. This interlink includes not only the efforts and temporal-physical

conditions of the individual scientists or any other human agent, but also the act of performing a disciplinary investigative ritual in a space demarcated for such purpose, along with any occurrence in the space external to it which might be relevant to the institution. Henceforth the active agents, and information yielding sources are both human and non-human here, and this study would later go on to be one of the most terminal inspirations behind the formation for actor network theory.

A few concepts used by Latour and Woolgar, are borrowed for the purposes of legitimising this paper. Firstly that of an agonistic field. It is argued that if facts are constructed through operations designed to result in the upheaval of modalities which are crucial to qualify a particular statement, and if the consequent reality is the reason for this construction, then such activity is not actually directed towards reality but towards the original operations which were conducted from certain statements. Scientists actions are oriented towards this agonistic field, which are a sum total of the operations which challenge and create paradigms. This agonistic nature is not unlike political qualities required in other endeavours which might be perceived as “non-scientific” atleast from a disciplinary sense. The agonistic nature of the field makes the authors conclude that negotiations as to what counts as proof scientific enough or not is no more or less disorderly than any argument between lawyers or politicians (B. Latour and S. Woolgar 1979 , pg 237). The solidity of the argument is always central to the dispute but the constructed character of this solidity implies that the agonistic is a necessary part in deciding which argument is more persuasive.

The second concept that we will borrow is that of Noise, one that the authors, themselves write to have borrowed from Information Theory. The authors have implemented and interpreted noise here in the sense that information is measured against a background of equally probable events. A sentence which threatens to dissolve all statements precedes a list of equally probable statements. The outcome of this formulation is often the dissolution of the statement in noise. Therefore the objective of scientific research becomes carrying out all possible manoeuvres which might force the researcher to admit that alternative statements are not equally possible. If sufficiently convincing then objections will be stopped being raised altogether and the statement achieves a fact like status. It shifts from the realm of subjectivity to objectivity. Therefore the operation of construction of information transforms any set of equally probable statements into a set of unequally probable statements. However this operation mutually occurs with the agonistic nature of the field (ibid, pg 242).

This transformation of a set of equally probable statements into a set of unequally probable statements amounts to the creation of order. The authors have used the concept of Maxwell's Demon here effectively, providing a useful metaphor for laboratory activity, showing that scientific reality is a pocket of order created out of disorder by seizing any signal which fits what has already been enclosed, and also by enclosing it at a cost. Disorder, here, may not only lie in the noise from information generated by reified practices and instruments, it might also generate from the laboratory itself. The conclusion here can be interpreted as, that conditions of enquiry in as to why a controversy can become resolved, or how can a statement be stabilised, are only valid if there is an a priori assumption, that of an order which might pre-exist its discovery by science, or an order which emerges from something other than disorder (ibid, pg 248).

Justin Kelly (2011), in an article titled "On Paradigms" provides suitable grounds for discussion of military theory, which arises from the enactment of military affairs, through a constructivist lens and the actor-network perspective. The author begins by quoting noted naval historian Sir Julian Corbett, something which can be understood as an opining that war is something so varied, complex, both individual and mass, and intangible that it seems incapable of being reduced to anything comparable to true scientific analysis. He points towards the general paradigm of developing military history; that is to consider the experiences of self and others, draw generalities, define the relationships, and connecting them assembles the whole as a theoretical explanation of some aspect of strategy or war. However construction of such a theory, the author holds, exhibits considerable intellectual boldness, along with a certain eagerness in contention. What results is an arbitrary selection of evidence and arbitrary placement of emphasis. The author points to Kuhn on how he addresses the progress in the physical sciences and their focus on disclosure of objective truth. Warfare might not be science in the sense that it doesn't have one objective truth, but military theory aspires to be scientific in the sense that it aims to have a structured body of knowledge. This structured body arises from a paradigmatic journey from experience, through the establishment of paradigms, and then refining those paradigms to theories. These theories are then given the form of doctrinal publications, textbooks, through which following generations are indoctrinated (J. Kelly, 2011).

Military theories are universally based on the examination of historical record and the selection of exemplar conflicts. The choice of which military event to hold exemplary depends upon whether they exhibit some significant characteristics which believed to enable these to be

collected in a category. After a category has been defined, actions or occurrences deemed historical enough are assembled in a paradigm which both describes the phenomenon, and provides a model for the range of probable circumstances at the face of suitable action. However Kelly refers to Colin Gray (2006) and argues that the character of warfare is defined by six aspects of context : the political, the strategic, the social-cultural, the economic, the technological and the geographical. Given the diversity in which conflicts arise, the chance of any two conflicts sharing the same sufficient commonality to form a true category, is very small. Therefore there remains high probability that theory derived from such false categories is also flawed. The author points towards several epistemologically confusing terms such as; “Industrial Warfare” a term which enables us to link battles from the period of the Crimean War, to the Operation Desert Storm. What is problematic is that this explains why nation states engaged in conflict in this period, and doesn’t account for other generalities that might explain why things happened the way they did and the reason behind the particular path for victory for the relevant belligerent. There is insufficient connection between every battle from this period to enable an inference that can comprise some generally applicable descriptive or prescriptive theory. “Conventional Warfare” is yet another example. Conventional warfare at its core is any warfare that a state prepares for, and regarding any new emergent paradigm of warfare as unconventional or irregular war, compared to them it is supposed to be the dominant paradigm. However if any new paradigm for war becomes sufficiently institutionalized and doctrinated then the former dominant paradigm is displaced. Kelly draws attention here to the buzz regarding new dominant paradigms of warfare after the end of the Cold war and the revolution in military affairs in 90s. This he says is a form of constructing reality based on unreality. Examples are 21st century terms such as Asymmetric Warfare, Fourth Generation Warfare. The implication of this in practice, lies in the process of doctrination of military theory through textbooks and proselytization through the use of those books, which provides those taught with the knowledge not just the extant of the paradigms but also the lexicon with which to understand war. The dominant paradigm lies at the core of the doctrinal edifice. In the absence of a more sophisticated understanding of reality, practitioners will conceive of warfare as a choice between the conceptual enclosures offered by doctrine and will be constrained in their understanding by the lexicon they have been given. This will result in wars being fought in contexts different to the preparation. “No military fights the last war: they are simply trapped in a dominant paradigm which they have taken to an exotic contest to which it is ill-suited” (J. Kelly, 2011).

This is further illustrated by the article “An Actor Centric Theory of War” by Sebastian L.v Gorka and David Kilcullen (2011). This paper debates the effectiveness and misperceptions inherent in the formation of the doctrine of COIN or counter insurgency by the US Defense Forces. It presents arguments from both sides of the debate and highlights the limitations of the current understanding of COIN. On one side of the debate are proponents of a counterinsurgency approach, who argue that the US Army should prioritize irregular warfare and adapt to the challenges posed by insurgency. They believe that future conflicts will be shaped by irregular threats and that the adaptability of US forces is crucial in addressing these challenges. On the other side are experts who criticize the overemphasis on COIN and argue that it undermines core military competencies, such as conventional warfare capabilities. They advocate for a return to basics and maintaining essential national security capabilities. The article suggests that neither side has a monopoly on the truth and proposes taking a more historic perspective to understand how America should apply force in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 environment. It emphasizes the need to broaden the scope of analysis beyond a few famous cases and examine a wider range of conflicts, including those not traditionally classified as insurgencies. By doing so, a more comprehensive understanding of irregular warfare can be developed, which may be more relevant to the current threat environment. The article also argues that a single unified counterinsurgency doctrine is not possible due to the diverse nature of conflicts and their distinct political, economic, and social contexts. It suggests that doctrine should be tailored to the specific starting point and goals of each intervention, considering factors such as the type of unrest, the nature of the government, and the role of religion. Overall, the article calls for a reevaluation of the current understanding of COIN and a more nuanced approach to warfare that incorporates a broader range of conflicts and takes into account the complexities of the modern threat landscape.

COIN, as the U.S. Armed Forces and policy elites currently understand it, is an intellectual fad, a way to think about irregular warfare. Before COIN, there was “asymmetric warfare,” before that, “AirLand Battle.” Next will come another transitory doctrinal lens such as “stability operations” to replace COIN, and another lens after that. War against nonstate actors using unconventional means has existed for millennia and under many names (such as “tribal warfare” and “small wars”). COIN, as the Western world understands and uses the concept, developed out of key meetings at the RAND Corporation in 1958. Yet the activities so described should be understood as a specific subset of the overarching, far older activity of counterinsurgency. The doctrinal principles that resulted—eventually in FM 3–24 which is the

doctrinal document issued to forces on the topic “Insurgencies and Counter Insurgencies” — were shaped not by the lessons of past centuries of war against nonstate actors but by the limited experiences of Western nations during the 20th century. In fact, COIN is but one small example of the various forms of warfare the world has witnessed over time. These forms can be classed with regard to the characteristics of the parties involved—State versus State, State versus nonstate actor, or conflict among nonstate actors. The Army’s rediscovery of COIN theory following the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq led scholars and officials to revisit case studies and doctrinal texts on the subject long overlooked by political and policy analysts. As a result, thanks in part to mass media coverage and the exposure of theater commanders such as Generals Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, millions of people across the United States are familiar with COIN concepts such as “winning hearts and minds” or “clear, hold, build.” The development of COIN theory was influenced by Western nations’ limited experiences in the 20th century, rather than drawing lessons from centuries of war against nonstate actors.

The analysis of COIN is often restricted to a handful of famous 20th-century cases, ignoring many other conflicts that could be considered insurgencies. Most of the well-known examples of counterinsurgency involve colonial or post imperial governments fighting on the territory of their dependent colonies. These cases focus on politically motivated goals rather than religiously motivated ones, which are more relevant in the current global context. The limitations of COIN theory include a narrow focus on a few conflicts, a failure to differentiate based on strategic aims, and a mismatch between the nature of contemporary conflicts and the doctrine derived from colonial policing actions. Historical data suggests that governments have a higher chance of success in defeating nonstate actors when they fight on their own sovereign territory and are prepared to negotiate. The resolution of complex political, economic, and social problems takes time and cannot be artificially accelerated. The popular notion of winning hearts and minds is not necessarily the most important factor in counterinsurgency. It is more crucial to establish a sense of order and predictability in people’s lives, breaking alternative normative systems created by the insurgency.

The disturbing truth that modern Western COIN theory is built on a handful of books based upon practitioner experiences in a handful of 20th-century conflicts is not mitigated by the less famous but broader COIN works. Country studies by lesser known writers are similarly restricted. The core texts cover Vietnam (French Indochina), Algeria, Northern Ireland, the Philippines, and Malaya. The less-well-known writers will go on to discuss Mozambique, Angola, El Salvador, or Afghanistan under the Soviets. Only the most adventurous writers and

theorists braved traveling as far as Kashmir or India to look at what could be learned there. Subsequently, the modern study of counterinsurgency and the doctrine it gave birth to are limited to less than two dozen conflicts in a century that witnessed more than 150 wars and lesser conflicts, domestic and interstate. Classic COIN is simply the current lens we use to try and comprehend an ageless form of conflict that is in fact more prevalent than conventional war. Within the 464 conflicts recorded on the Correlates of War database since 1815, we can identify 385 in which a state was fighting a nonstate actor. Surprisingly, despite the conventional wisdom, in 80 percent of conflicts, the government defeated its irregular foe (victory measured by whether the counterinsurgent government stayed in power and was able to vanquish the threat for at least a decade). Irregular warfare is, therefore, more regular or conventional than our strategic lenses would propose. The author suggests, that we would do well to broaden our scientific catchment of scenarios used to inform our doctrine. This would allow us to move toward a more stochastic approach to 21st-century warfare. Instead of approaching the threats we face solely on the plane of tactical or operational questions and making the choice of which field manual we should use in theater a primary issue—rather than treating this properly as a doctrinal issue—we should start by establishing the context of conflict. Such a stochastic approach to war today would not posit new qualities of war, or new characteristics of our foe, but ask simpler questions : whom are we fighting? Why are they fighting us? For it is highly unlikely that the Taliban fighter whom U.S. Soldiers and Marines face on the ground in Afghanistan or the al Qaeda operative who intends to kill Americans on U.S. soil wakes up and chooses to fight irregular war, or network war, or fourth-generation war. They simply choose war. It is who they are that shapes their approach, not some detached, independent, quality of “modern” war. The author remarks that Carl von Clausewitz was so very right when he warned us that we must remember that the nature of war is immutable. Who fights us, why they wish to kill us, and to what end they wish to destroy us will always be different. General Carlos Ospina is referenced, as someone who more than anyone else was responsible for defeating that very unconventional foe, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, as stating: “War is war.” (Gorka and Kilcullen, 2011)

Colin S. Gray in the paper “RECOGNIZING AND UNDERSTANDING REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE IN WARFARE” argues that war's contexts play a crucial role in understanding the nature of war, warfare, and revolutionary change. The political context holds the utmost significance, as it shapes war, warfare, and revolutionary transformations. The strategic context is derived directly from the political context, while the social-cultural, economic, technological,

and geographical contexts contribute to defining the boundaries of feasibility in war. It is important to emphasize the authority of these contexts, particularly the political context, to the American defense community, as the U.S. Armed Forces tend to focus more on advancing warfare tactics rather than comprehensively understanding war as a whole. The monograph argues that the future of the U.S. Army will be primarily influenced by the political and strategic contexts that shape its missions and tasks. It emphasizes that the Army's future is not determined solely by a rigid Science of War, but rather by factors such as the rise of an anti-American coalition led by China and the predominant nature of irregular warfare. This implies that the Army needs to enhance its understanding of war and its contexts while pursuing military-technical modernization. The monograph also highlights the importance of revolutionary changes in attitudes toward war and the military, suggesting that this aspect may be even more significant than revolutionary changes in warfare itself. It acknowledges that war has a constant nature but that attitudes towards its legitimacy and conduct can vary significantly over time. The social-cultural context of war shapes these attitudes, and the monograph argues that a Revolution in Attitudes towards the Military (RAM) holds more significance than the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) that focuses on technological advancements. The future American way(s) of war will be shaped by the social and cultural context, which defines acceptable military behavior, in addition to military-technical opportunities. The monograph presents the example of the Soviet-German War of 1941-45 to illustrate the potency of social and cultural contexts in war. It suggests that the extraordinary brutality and total war nature of that conflict stemmed less from military methods and more from the rival ideologies and high stakes involved. The Nazi leadership's framing of the war as a struggle for racial survival greatly influenced its character. This finding emphasizes that revolutionary change in warfare extends beyond purely military aspects and is deeply intertwined with social and cultural contexts, which can vary across societies. In terms of practicality, the monograph acknowledges the challenge of expecting a large number of military specialists to possess deep knowledge of diverse local societies, considering the global domain of America's interests. While cultural skills are important, the primary expertise of soldiers should be in fighting. The notion of "culture-centric warfare" is deemed impractical, given the feasibility of rapidly deploying non-academic American soldiers to unfamiliar foreign locations. Thus, the monograph argues that cultural skills should be secondary to combat expertise, not because they lack desirability but due to practical limitations.

However if one goes into a perusal of the latest version of the FM 3-24 MCWP 3-33.5 (2014), which is the primary source for doctrination and proselytization regarding counter insurgencies in the American context, one might see that the U.S. are currently not unaware of the multi-contextual nature of war, nor the fact that the environment in which counterinsurgency might be established might be an environment influenced the total whole of a structure of human and non human factors. The importance of legitimacy in understanding the political variable in an insurgency is repeatedly highlighted. Legitimacy is determined by the norms and values of a particular population, and it can change as society evolves and individuals or groups redefine their understanding of authority and identity. The manual emphasizes that all population groups are controlled through a combination of consent and coercion. Governments may employ various coercive methods to control the population, but if these methods cannot be justified according to the values and norms of the population, they can undermine the government's legitimacy. However, it cautions against viewing coercion and consent as opposing forces. If coercive acts align with the population's norms and values, they may not necessarily erode the government's legitimacy. Therefore, both the actions of the government and the insurgency should be evaluated from the perspective of the population experiencing those acts, avoiding external biases. In the context of insurgency, the struggle for legitimacy with the population is a central issue. The insurgency seeks to undermine the legitimacy of the host-nation government while building its own credibility with the population. Conversely, the host-nation government aims to reduce the credibility of the insurgency and strengthen its own legitimacy. A government perceived as legitimate requires more resources and capabilities to defeat the insurgency but allows for the focused allocation of finite resources towards countering it. However, legitimacy is subjective and perceived by the population based on their norms and values. If the population does not perceive outside forces as legitimate, it can undermine the legitimacy of the host-nation government's efforts to counter the insurgency. It concludes by highlighting that the legitimacy of the host-nation government is achieved when the population accepts its authority and the way it governs aligns with the population's beliefs. It is not sufficient for the government to be merely effective and credible; its governance structure must be justifiable based on the population's norms and values. In some cases, providing effective governance becomes crucial for establishing legitimacy among the population. Insurgency is stated to happen from a position of instability and weakness, and the insurgents offer the population a new form of stability (legitimacy) in their social order, and therefore counterinsurgency is stated to counter explicitly in that multi-contextual basis, by establishing or offering a stronger legitimacy. (FM 3-24, Pg 1-28 to 1 30)

Conclusion

Considerable stress is also given on operational variables that constitute the environment in the conduct of counterinsurgency. The variables are stated as i) Political ii) Military iii) Economic iv) Social v) Information vi) Infrastructure vii) Physical Environment viii) Time (FM 3-24, Pg. 2-8 to 2-44). Such an active awareness and consequent theorisation provides considerable ground for comparing the field manual doctrine of COIN with the explanation of the American policies of Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD), relevant in the context of the immigration crisis at the U.S – Mexico Border, as theorised by the anthropologist Jason De Leon, through Michael Callon and John Law's theory of Hybrid Collectif (De Leon, 2015, pg 56). He successfully portrays PTD as a strategic network of heterogeneous actors at work every day, manufacturing complex forms of violence. By peering behind the federal policy curtain one can see the links that connect Border Patrol policy with venomous animal, extreme temperatures and hostile terrain. The Land of Open Graves makes visible the effects of U.S. border enforcement practices designed to be hidden and draws attention to the violent logic on which the entire immigration security paradigm is based on. It can be henceforth argued, that even if the coining of Strategic doctrines of "COIN" is limited in the paradigm that has been used in constructing it, and ineffective in the contexts to which it can be applied, Actor Network theory, can still be utilised to understand the continuum of human-non human actor interconnections upon which such doctrines of counterinsurgency attempt to create paradigms, and seeks to predict.

The main contention here is with the stochasticity of the nature of war, and how any attempts to create rigid theories and doctrines will fail to appropriately contextualise it. It also aptly echoes the problems elucidated by Latour and Woolgar, in so far as the aspect of discovering order from disorder is concerned. Our contentions with the difference between object and subject or the difference between facts and the field should not be the starting point for scientific activity/theory. The relationship between order and disorder that underpinned the construction of facts in "Laboratory Life" is stated to be very similar to biologists, in the sense that life is an orderly pattern emerging from disorder through the sorting of random mutations. Reality is constructed out of disorder without the use of any pre-existing representation of life. But social scientists seem extremely reluctant to introduce similar concepts to account for the

construction of reality. Similarly the paradigms on which much of military theory is based on typically reflect the creation of false categories that claim for conflict, or claim a commonality among conflicts or specific instances within conflicts that doesn't truly exist. This is done to educate the uninformed and to sustain the institutions and livelihood of those involved in the field. However, this approach leads to a lack of understanding and an inability to accurately describe new and complex realities. These false theories can have destructive consequences when they transition into the public consciousness. As the public becomes more familiar with theories such as Counterinsurgency (COIN), there is a tendency to apply them inappropriately and view conflicts through a flawed lens. This, in turn, influences public policy and shapes strategy based on misguided perceptions rather than a thoughtful analysis of objective circumstances and needs.

In the 21st century, maybe the prevalence of these false theories is a reality that cannot be avoided. However, it highlights the importance of mitigating the consequences by ensuring that those with expertise in the field can speak the truth or, at the very least, refrain from perpetuating falsehoods. By doing so, a more accurate understanding of conflicts can be achieved, leading to more effective strategies and policies.

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