

Interrogating British armed forces recruiting in contemporary times

Notes for the Inaugural lecture of Professor Paul Higate, Department of Politics,
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Watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_G9DMzuQ9XI&t=995s

I'm delighted to be here today and want to open by thanking the many friends, colleagues, students and teachers that have helped me on this shared journey over the last two decades. I'm dedicating this lecture to my dad who passed away last year. He may not agree with much of what I have to say today, but would have enjoyed the ensuing debate – of that I'm certain!

In 1983 and following a family tradition of military service totalling 60 years, I enlisted into the Royal Air Force at age 17 for a period of a little over 8 years. I wouldn't say – in contrast to the popular view – that I 'chose' to enlist but rather, had been so comprehensively socialised into the military environment that alternative forms of employment were beyond easy contemplation. Thus, I had grown up around the RAF. From sitting with my dad in the cockpit of Lightning interceptor jets in the 1970s in West Germany during the Cold War years, to experiencing my serving brothers returning home on leave and regaling tales of travel, adventure and a carefree life of fun and great mates, I was motivated to join the RAF from my youngest years. It was the dream option. Join up, see the world, have fun and at the same time be part of an institution that went well beyond the humdrum realities of civilian life.

It is against this backdrop that on leaving the RAF in 1991 after a wholly unremarkable career where I climbed rapidly through the hierarchy to reach the dizzy heights of Corporal, I embarked on an academic journey as a sociologist. This change in career came as a complete surprise to myself and others, with the touchstone of interest being 'A' level sociology taken at night school during the final year of air force service. Debating questions of social justice towards the end of the Thatcher years in a decrepit classroom of the Kings

Lynn College of Further Education in rural Norfolk, opened my eyes - to paraphrase the sociologist C Wright Mills - to the importance of seeing personal troubles as public issues. I had also been really lucky to have friends (some of them are here tonight) both within and outside of the air force who reminded me of a world beyond the bubble of the military. They, and my gradual exposure to sociology pushed at an open door in ways that fuelled far more profound questions, as I began to realise that whether I or others recognised it, serving in the armed forces was a hugely political practice. To be freed of responsibility's for many of life's choices as a squaddie was great but it came with a hefty price tag. One took a pretty big gamble through volunteering to become a direct vector of state policy.

With my undergraduate degree in sociology out of the way, direct experience of the military lifeworld helped to open novel doctoral research doors since it allowed me to move between the civilian and military habitus with relative ease. While British military sociology lagged behind its US counterpart because of the paucity of ex- military scholars working in the discipline, the main barrier to former service personnel becoming sociologists in the UK appeared to be political (with a small p). The discipline was thus perceived from the mainstream perspective as colonised by long-haired, sandal wearing Marxists who – unable or unwilling to 'crack-on' - invariably wasted precious hours procrastinating in the pub. But, there were some former service personnel who had managed to carve out a career in British military sociology, thereby steering a careful course between hippie and scholar; notable amongst these is John Hockey – a great friend and colleague. Plucked from the shelf in Waterstones bookshop on Edinburgh's Queen Street in 1994, it was upon reading John's ground-breaking ethnography of infantry soldiers (aptly named *Squaddies*) that I realised how important it was – within the context of my own 'sociological awakening' - to make sense of life journeys that unfold, as he says, 'behind our backs'. Fuelled by intrigue around my own trajectory into the armed forces and after 8 years, subsequent return to civilian life, attention was turned to how others experienced the transition. In particular, after interviewing a good number of rough sleepers with an army background up and down the country for my doctoral research, it seemed clear that the concept of military masculinities provided one way in which to explain this groups' pathway into hardship. In particular, the gendered concept helped to shine a light on the ways in which pride and the ability to survive physically on the streets featured in both the genesis and sustaining of this most

challenging of experiences. Often, and with good reason, my participants couched their experiences on the streets as far tougher than military training, though of course there is little or no credit given to those surviving at the lowest reaches of society.

The British armed forces are both politically and culturally unique. They are subject to democratic control and are accountable to us, the UK citizenry. While chronically under resourced, they manage to act as a 'force for good', ensuring national security, and in doing so provide a model for those who develop high levels of discipline, integrity, honesty and loyalty in the service of an exemplary public good. The dedication of the armed forces across its ranks and branches is indisputable and is most clearly manifest in the willingness serving men and women show through voluntary acceptance of injury and possible death for the greater good of the nation and its security, as the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq show. Though some might see the institution as lagging behind the times (perhaps inevitable given the break-neck speed of social change in wider society), recent developments reveal some of the ways that the institution is seeking to have a greater relevance for the nation to which it is held account.

An apposite example is the British army's animated recruiting advertisements 'this is belonging, 2018' (of which more later). Suffice to say at this point, their message is that whether you're gay, straight, a woman or an 'over' emotional man, physically weak or a practicing Muslim, you will be welcomed into the ranks with open arms. This campaign signals the armed forces' willingness to embrace **diversity** and harness the talents of those often marginalised from the available pool of potential enlistees.

There are numerous ways in which we might analyse these ads but the one I wish to pursue today calls for a closer look at the **national** tropes they mobilise. These ads chime broadly with so-called British values that, according to OFSTED who promote them in the nation's schools, comprise in their full sense of 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect for, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without

faith.’ To these, we might add other British values that intuitively include ‘fair play, decency, politeness, support for the underdog, inclusiveness and stoicism – to soldier on (in the case of the latter) in times of hardship’. Recognisable to many, these values reside in a wider nexus that might also invoke the white cliffs of Dover, Dame Vera Lynn, Churchill and it goes without saying, World War II. Asked about in the street, members of the public are likely to mention some of the above and in addition, other symbols of Englishness that could include cups of tea, black cabs, Big Ben and red telephone boxes (it might be worth mentioning at that all of these are in some sense in decline. A *Metro* newspaper in 2017 screamed ‘*Treasonous British People now prefer coffee to tea*’. The cab company *Uber* is gradually usurping the iconic black cab in London, Big Ben is crumbling and undergoing emergency repairs, and the red phone boxes in Bath city centre are full of fake plastic plants.

Taken together, British values and their allied symbols are reassuring for many, and engaged as familiar tropes that provide for continuity through the decades. They circulate in and out of the media with regularity and in times of national crises or victory, are presented to a responsive audience in ways that cement a shared sense of belonging, and common identity. In so doing, they create sharp cleavages between those who hold ‘British values’ and those who do not, or cannot on account of their national identity. How on earth could a Parisian possibly hold British values? In response to the new years’ firework celebration in London just over two weeks ago, Roger Helmer, a former Conservative MEP who defected to UKIP, tweeted:

“While the UK is locked in critical negotiations with Brussels, Sadiq Khan chooses to display the **other side’s** flag on the London Eye. Would he have shown an Argentinian flag during the Falklands war?”

Much like the consumption of tea over coffee, this tweet couches the attempt by Sadiq Khan to build bridges with a Europe incredulous at the perilous situation into which the UK is about to plunge, as treacherous.

The British military as potent symbol and positive intervening force underscored in the provision of humanitarian relief abroad, and aid to the civil power in their potential support

for a no-deal Brexit for example, can humanise the organisation and its people through framing them as a bulwark against uncertainty at home. As, red lines and backstops loom, it is good to know that we are in safe hands in respect of an institution that is both repository and fortifier of British values. What is done at home and abroad for the greater good is reflected through this perception and imbues the national imaginary with a sense of ontological security and beneficence in the world. It's at this point we may wish to give ourselves a pat on the back - albeit in a quintessentially English, self-deprecating, and slightly nebulous manner. Crucially, this must be done out of sight of others who would interpret this as a distasteful moment of clear un-English hubris.

Intuitively then, British values of the kind discussed here sat easily with the Paul of old whose orientation to the world was in broad congruence with the comforting, hegemonic narrative of Englishness of which they, and he were a part.

I had yet to really challenge the status quo, with questioning up to that point rarely transgressing implicitly agreed norms beyond which one was threatened with informal exclusion from the social group at hand.

Thus, the British were a largely benign lot, and could seek solace in the knowledge that they always tried to do the right thing. Whether it was reaching out to foreigners in distant bars (not pubs) through the language of football, queuing patiently (unlike some of those rude folk from abroad who – quite unbelievably – ‘push in’), or tutting quietly under their breath because an individual in the train's quiet carriage could be heard discussing how joining the unaccountable World Trade Organisation will allow us to ‘take back control’, Britain's place in the world continues to be largely revered. Quite simply, we know who ‘we’ are and from whence ‘we’ came. It's no accident that ‘Great’ prefaces ‘Britain’.

It would have been easy to have gone through life in this way. I could rest assured in the knowledge that we were a fair, tolerant and just society that continues to do so much good in the world. In microcosm, the army ads confirmed this openness to difference through

favouring the underdog within one of the key institutions of public life. Whether it be those marginalised on account of their sexuality, or in this years' army campaign, others designated as snowflakes or millennials, here was an intervention explicitly established to help those that society tended to regard warily or more seriously, actively discriminated against.

All of that was before I became **radicalised** and not just because of my dabbling with sociology; other academic disciplines were involved too, with radical articles avidly consumed in such dangerous journals as *Theory, Culture and Society*. According to the PREVENT guidelines I had all the signs of radicalisation. I developed a sudden disrespectful attitude towards certain others. I started to isolate myself from particular friends. There were times when I had increased levels of anger. I developed views deemed extreme by some. Aspects of the world felt unjust. As noted in the PREVENT policy, these values were distinctly un-British.

The catalyst for this shift in subjectivity lay in what I began to learn from a brilliant generation of race and post-colonial scholars (and some of those are also here tonight) who opened my eyes to a world hitherto masked by my own unacknowledged privileges. Listening to them and engaging with their arguments rather than seeing them as unable to make valuable contributions, required re-assessment not just of the 'facts' as presented to me over the years, but also of how this process touched-off particular kinds of uncomfortable affect shaped by decades of 'behind my back' acceptance of deeply embodied values and beliefs. This led me to move into a far more critical register, leading in turn to a reconsideration of how best to gauge the importance of my own research and teaching efforts. If these activities left me feeling uncomfortable, I was probably on the right track.

In 2014, David Cameron claimed that ‘we are a peaceful people’, a phrase that washed over the majority since, in keeping with British values, it was little more than a statement of the obvious. However, as Ian Cobain has argued, this claim is entirely at odds with the empirical record. Cobain notes that:

‘For more than a hundred years, not a single year has passed when Britain’s armed forces have not been engaged in military operations somewhere in the world. The British are unique in this respect: the same could not be said of the Americans, the Russians, the French or any other nation.’

Britain has shown time and again that its foreign policy is best followed through via violent means. Since 1918 Britain has been involved in wars in: Iraq, Sudan, Ireland, Palestine, Aden, Eritrea, French Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, Malaya, Egypt, China, Oman, the Falklands/Malvinas, Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Libya and Northern Ireland. Britain’s current involvement in Yemen fits with this pattern of violent intervention where the British (military officers and representatives of the arms industry in this instance) are helping their Saudi counterparts key in the codes to help them select and attack their targets. The Saudi air force is flying British made aircraft, and vast numbers of British made bombs have been dropped, resulting in the killing of countless civilians. Yet, while the Ministry of Defence confirmed that British forces were in the operations room to provide training and advice “on best practice targeting techniques to help ensure continued compliance with international humanitarian law”; their complicity in the violence is leading to an historically unprecedented humanitarian crisis that has recently slipped out of the news as we have been swamped with the nations convulsions over Brexit. As the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commission have argued: “There is little evidence of any attempt ... to minimize civilian casualties (in Yemen) ... since March 2015 up to 23 August 2018, 6,660 civilians were killed and 10,563 injured. The real figures are likely to be significantly higher. Over a three-month period in 2015, the value of exports of British-made bombs and missiles to Saudi Arabia had increased by 11,000%, from £9m to £1bn. And, even if we were to pursue the political-economic mantra of job creation justifying such intervention (supported by those on the left in the case of the unions defending the status quo, as well as by the free marketeers), we would find that in light of the vast subsidies upon which this much revered, high tech sector relies and, as revealed by the Campaign Against the Arms Trade, the arms

industry constitutes a net **cost** to the treasury, or at best provides only marginal economic benefits. Jobs in the industry are in some sense then, artificial and driven largely by the attempt to garner prestige on the world stage (note the role of the Royal family in such trade) within the context of the common, masculinised refrain that the UK ‘punches above its weight’. And it’s not just the pariah state of Saudi Arabia and its use of violence against unarmed civilians that the UK actively supports. Israel stands as a further example, a state that flouts international law in its oppression of Palestinians. According to Human Rights Watch and numerous other organisations, Israel routinely uses excessive force with British made weapons and components against those armed only with sticks and rocks. Here, and in parallel to the ways in which British values deflect from asking difficult questions – and discussed in depth by James’ Eastwood’s in his recent book - is the Israeli Defence Force’s claim that it is the most ‘moral army in the world’. The UN notes that Israeli settlements have no legal validity and that they constitute a ‘flagrant violation of international law’. Like Saudi Arabia, Israel is a rogue state that the British Secretary of State for Defence Gavin Williamson (who on a lighter note recently argued that UK forces should pelt Spanish war ships entering British waters around Gibraltar with paintballs to humiliate them), has described Israel in glowing terms as a ‘light unto the nations’ and as a ‘liberal, free and exciting country’. Theresa May goes one further and describes Israel most effusively ‘as a beacon of tolerance’.

‘A whole great city is ablaze. After two nights of intensive bombing with high explosives and incendiaries, several square miles burn for hours at hundreds of degrees of centigrade, an inferno consuming every living creature. At least 40,000 civilians – mostly women or girls, more than 10,000 of them children – die awful deaths ...

Those were the words of Geoffrey Wheatcroft referring to the British annihilation of Dresden some seven decades ago. He goes on:

‘yet, despite this (and the carpet bombing of civilians in other cities) a remarkable 80 percent of Germany’s industrial plant capacity remained intact. Germany exited the war with a greater functioning machine tool stock than it had on entering it. It was quite a feat to kill 400,000 civilians while barely affecting the German war economy.’

The historical context to Wheatcroft's documentation of the mass killings perpetrated by the RAF during World War II, is exemplified in such incidences as

'the annual tournament held at RAF Hendon, where in 1925 visitors could watch as aircraft dropped incendiary bombs on a model of an African village'

Why the bombing of an African village in particular? This target and what it tells us during the mid 1920s represents continuity as argued by Pankaj Mishra with a

global racial order in the century preceding 1914 ... where ... it was entirely natural for "uncivilised" peoples to be exterminated, terrorised, imprisoned, ostracised or radically re-engineered

Recorded a few decades later during the late 1930s, Arthur Harris, the architect of WW II's aerial bombing, argued that to subdue the Arab revolution in Palestine, Palestinian Arabs should be dealt with by dropping 'one 250lb or 500 lb bomb on each village that speaks out of turn.'

To be clear, and as Richard Gott and many others have argued, Empire was enforced militarily using repression, brutality, terror and innovative forms of torture subsequently adopted by other states; the development of the concentration camp during the Boer War and its later refinement by the Nazis on an industrial scale is a case in point. Invariably inflicted with class, the logics driving these developments were often seen through the benign lens of British values, as Malti Malik argues in the case of cricket:

'As cricket was a game of the 'Gentlemen', it represented high English values ie fair play, discipline and gentlemanliness ... Thomas Arnold, the headmaster of Rugby School and the founder of the modern public school system, believed that team sports such as cricket and rugby were not only outdoor games but they taught English boys discipline, the importance of hierarchy, the code of honour and the qualities of leadership ... Thus they helped significantly to build and run the British Empire'

Documented through living memory of the few survivors involved, Caroline Elkins, author of the Pulitzer winning book *Britain's Gulag*, summarises British atrocities in Kenya against the Mau Mau as recently as the 1950's thus:

“During the Mau Mau war, British forces wielded their authority with a savagery that betrayed a perverse colonial logic ... Only by detaining nearly the entire Kikuyu population of 1.5 million people and physically and psychologically atomising its men, women, and children could colonial authority be restored and the civilising mission reinstated ...

her research uncovered

‘a murderous campaign to eliminate Kikuyu people, a campaign that left tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, dead’.

In an attempt to suppress this bloody history, that at one and the same time reveals the colonial administration's clear recognition of its own brutality and the censure it would likely attract, it ordered that nearly a quarter of a million documents relating to Britain's occupation of Kenya be destroyed. Other records relating to this systematic oppression were secretly flown out of Kenya in the 1960s but were recently re-discovered in a 1970s concrete building in Kew, and in these we note the detailing of torture and oppression that might ‘embarrass’ the British establishment. Taken together, the deeply racialised beliefs underpinning these policies are not simply oddities of history, to be justified through invoking the exceptional nature of the times within which they were enacted (ie war), but continue to pervade society today where 40% of those incarcerated in the UK are from BAME populations. This is a greater proportion than that of the much higher profile, deeply racialised prison-industrial complex in the US, where – with some sense of superiority – the British might see their American cousins as lacking a sense of fair play and tolerance.

Let us be under no illusion: Britain is a permanent war state, or what Michael Paris has called a ‘warrior nation’. There may not be tanks rolling down the streets, but the appetite for the use of military violence through proxies or directly, remains undiminished.

At this juncture, and in returning to our focus on the armed forces we might reasonably argue that they are subject to democratic control and simply **do what they are told**. After all it's little more than common sense to claim that the British armed forces are at the behest of the executive power. However, from my own research and personal experience of the transition of individuals from military to civilian life, this illusion of top-down exercise of power is far more nuanced (one of my former RAF colleagues is employed at a senior level by the US arms company, Raytheon. To be clear, he makes full use of his insider knowledge and contacts developed during his days in the military). In quoting Hew Strachan, and in regard to the recent invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Paul Dixon has argued that

‘the Army’s subordination to parliament has become a constitutional figment rather than a practising reality’.

As Lord Chilcot records in the case of Iraq:

‘The military put **strong pressure** on the government for the maximum British involvement in the Iraq invasion. In spite of the failure in Iraq, the military also lobbied for an escalation of its role in Afghanistan’

These attempts to influence the government are not exceptional or aberrant, but rather have long histories within the context of the military-industrial complex. They are configured along the lines of the old-boy network in ways that caution against the existence of a neat compartmentalisation of the military and civilian spheres. That the former is straightforwardly subordinate to the latter simply does not hold. In extending our analysis to consider the inseparability of the military and civilian worlds and its frequently mundane expression, I draw your attention to chocolate covered pizza slices sold in military themed boxes by the veterans charity Help for Heroes. On a more serious note, it is the everyday martial politics of wider society from which such policies as the ‘hostile environment’ emerge. The hostile environment is described by Liberty as comprised of

Internal border controls that amount to state-sanctioned discrimination ... they are fundamentally incompatible with the human rights laws the UK is signed up to.

State sanctioned, structural violence of this kind percolates through to the routine interactions of those working within, and using the services of education, health, banking, housing, employment, and even the ability to drive. The ‘hostile environment’ represents an exemplary instance through which ‘British tolerance’ is rearticulated into an intolerance verging on malevolence. This leads to the question not so much of what British values ‘are’ as ‘things’ or nouns that name, but rather towards the ideological work they perform, to which discussion now turns.

To address the problematic of British values’ ideological resonance, I turn to the literary theorist Raymond Williams and his concept of ‘structures of feeling’. What it is to **be** British as lived identity and experience is central here. Seen as structures of feeling, British values are in a constant state of emergence and belie precise definition, rationalization and classification. Note the competing demands for getting ‘our’ version of British values recognised, alongside the endless debates around what might constitute the definitive British value. Notwithstanding the extent to which British values are contested, their hegemonic forms coalesce around ideas of tolerance and fairness, as already stated. As such, and as Raymond Williams reminds us, structures of feeling

exert a palpable pressure and set effective limits on action and experience, meanings and values

They are constituted of ‘felt thoughts’ where structures of feeling influence consciousness and relationships, and while experienced as private, materialise through distinct forms of social or public practice and importantly, as the so-called ‘Windrush’ scandal illustrates, become embedded within institutional and bureaucratic structures – the Home Office is exemplary in this regard.

Yet, the most important aspect of British values as structures of feeling is that – to return to Williams claims around the ways they set effective limits on action and experience – is the work they do in codifying instances of brutality, abuse and intolerance as **exceptional** and/or capable of creating silence in the place of debate. In regard to exceptionality, this is a matter of bad apples, rather as noted in Victoria Basham’s work on the armed forces, ‘rotten barrels’. The impulse is to see those responsible as aliens, whether they be the ‘rogue soldiers’ of the Queen’s Lancashire Regiment who, in 2003 were alleged to have inflicted 93 injuries on the Iraqi detainee Baha Mousa leading to his death, or dehumanised

‘illegal immigrants’ determined to exploit the good-will of the British people, the cohering theme here is they are **not** like us. Rather, they are other, though at certain moments this narrative is ruptured; recall the global outpouring of sorrow in response to the washed up corpse of the 3 year old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey. No longer is he a faceless refugee whose intentions are self serving, but rather he is cast as innocent toddler and victim. To be sure, this moment of humanisation through death fades quickly and is replaced with the dominant narrative around refugees where, to paraphrase Raymond Williams:

The other’s behaviour is bracketed off from the structures of feeling around valorised British values that we hold dear and somewhat counterintuitively, is also made possible by them.

The productivity of this inside/outside binary also lies in its ability to absolve ‘us’ of any kind of responsibility for ‘their’ behaviour. And – in returning to questions raised around colonisation, we can extend this analysis further to the level of the state and its key institutions. As the critical IR scholar Rob Walker argues: There is always an assumed outside to the production of modern subjectivities presented through their ‘objectivity’. This modern self as Walker puts it, is ‘civilised’, ‘progressive’ and naturally disposed (or in the case of the US) is imbued with, a ‘manifest destiny’ to develop the backward other – in Kipling’s terms ‘the white man’s burden’. Here, structures of feeling related to one’s own felt superiority and the desire, drive or impulse to ‘benefit’ the other elides the violence upon which it depends, or at least presents it as the good violence of military interventions.

So, where does this leave us in terms of the British army’s recruiting ads, ‘this is belonging 2018?’ In light of the preceding, let us return to the ads.

Ads here

Although controversial for many and condemned as ‘soft’ and too ‘touchy feely’ by some, their appeal lies in the structures of feeling they likely invoke. They deal with values that invite **empathy** with the underdog and in a related sense, pave the way for respect to those willing to take a chance within a wider a story of transition from the civilian to the military –

a 'step up' in the parlance of welfare. They invite us to think about solidarity for which many might feel nostalgic in contrast to the eulogised individual epitomised in the current day selfie generation. And finally, the numerous linguistic vernaculars accompanying each, play to our understandings of region and class that are uniquely British.

Yet, these skilfully crafted vignettes and the (albeit fleeting) investment they encourage into their narratives are self contained. They are stripped of politics and the violence that armed forces use to achieve their aims (during an eight year period, a staggering 46 million bullets were fired by the British armed forces in Afghanistan). Ironically enough, the army presents an inclusionary image of itself which is open to all races, genders and religions. Yet, it is through this doubly alluring imaginary that the army's racialised character – clearly evident in how it views and treats 'the other' out there, is erased. There are good Muslims and bad Muslims, with the former's recruitment eliding the realities of the latter's othering and subsequent treatment. Also, recall Deepcut Barracks where 4 soldiers died, the ill treatment of junior soldiers at the army foundation college in Harrogate and the frequency of sexual harassment in the army (the 2018 *Speak Out* report records that 10 female army personnel believe they had been raped in the last year). Clearly, the army is no paragon of egalitarianism and justice, but even more crucially, what the construction of the army as a "safe space" does is exacerbate the difference between "home" and "abroad". "We" in Britain have feminism, diversity and liberalism, "they" over there, where we fight, have sexism, intolerance and abuse. These are places that will benefit from exposure to, and the eventual adoption of British values.

Thanks for listening.