

**The War Machine Redux:
Critical Comments on the Epistemology of Counter-Insurgency**

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En fait, la culture n'a jamais été un produit spontané qu'un territoire pourrait s'approprier. Cette définition illusoire ressurgit aujourd'hui parce qu'il n'y a plus de territoire. C'est une des illusions entretenues par la globalisation (Augé, 2007: 146).

The study of warfare abounds with commonplaces. Amongst the most frequently cited is Sun Tzu's imperative to 'Know thy Enemy'. More often than not, this phrase is understood as an incitement to gather proper and reliable information about a given enemy's purpose, strategy, operations, and tactics. If we can properly anticipate these elements of warfare on the side of the enemy, we can respond appropriately and win the battle, the war, and perhaps even the peace.

Yet in a presentation to the XXth Annual Strategy Conference at the U.S. Army War College in April 2009, Richard Maltz stated that 'we are moving increasingly away from predominantly mechanistic, kinetic, and pyrotechnic solutions [to the contemporary problems of conflict and war] to those that require us to take account of the complexities of the environment, its inhabitants, our adversaries, and most importantly, ourselves' (Maltz, 2009: 4). The issue of knowledge, far from being reduced to a commonplace, re-appears within the agenda of Strategic Studies as a problem. Maltz's argument indicates a failure of strategic knowledge and the need to return to one of the central, yet systematically undervalued, issues in warfare: the Epistemology of Strategy and the question of what we (can) know about the Enemy. While Maltz does not acknowledge this explicitly, his paper needs to be understood within the context of the crisis of a form of strategy that focuses predominantly on kinetic warfare as revealed in the military campaigns in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom) and Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom).

The incitement for this paper is provided by the argument that the failure of the US-led military campaigns in Afghanistan and above all in Iraq raise the issue of knowing 'our' enemy to a more radical level than Strategic Studies traditionally acknowledges. What is at stake is not only gathering proper information about a given enemy, the ontological status of which is as such unproblematic. Rather, the USA's (re-) turn in Afghanistan and Iraq to a strategy of Counterinsurgency (COIN) needs to be understood as a response to a failed mode of knowing the enemy and as a – so far inadequate – articulation of a new and different modality through which to identify the enemy on the ontological level.

Put differently, the uncertainty that has always been a constitutive characteristic of warfare – as its outcomes have always been contingent on the play of chance, 'friction', and circumstance – is now operating on a different, more fundamental level. What is uncertain is no longer only the outcome of a contest and conflict between given combatants or enemies; today the epistemic problem is the very nature of the enemy and the very possibility to know 'him'. Modern and post-modern modes of strategic knowledge no longer apply, or produce only limited results. The 'code' through which we understand the enemy is no longer given and controlled by us. The context within which we find the enemy defies such easy coding, the 'smooth space' in which the new enemy operates offers no clues or coordinates from which to establish such a code.

For the longest time, the study of war could ignore this problem and respond to Sun Tzu's command by focusing on the practical and phenomenal level of warfare. Knowing the enemy never rose to the level of a truly epistemic issue. Modern warfare could take the identity of

the enemy for granted: war was a matter of inter-state conduct, where like sovereign entities settled their disputes by force. State met state, soldier battled soldier. War was therefore a political means to impose the will upon the enemy, the identity of which was never at stake. As Rupert Smith (2006) has pointed out, during the 20th century this paradigm of industrial state-to-state warfare has given way to a different, more complex form of conflict. This 'War amongst the People' differs from traditional warfare in that it takes place within, and above all involves, the social, political, and cultural structure of societies. War is no longer confined to the antagonistic relationship between designated combatants; it now involves – in a systematic and intrinsic, rather than accidental fashion – the populations of the involved nations. Moreover, the combatants are no longer defined by their official status as soldiers, representing sovereign states. In this 'post-modern' war, non-state agents and organisations play a significant role on the battlefield. As David Kilcullen has summarised this new paradigm, 'the utility of military forces depends on their ability to adapt to complex political contexts and engage non-state opponents under the critical gaze of a global public opinion' (Kilcullen, 2009: 292).

As Smith points out, winning the war is no longer the sole purpose of the use of force. Successful campaigns are now measured by the ability of the victorious side to create the conditions for a stable post-conflict society. Warfare now can only create the conditions of successful socio-political transformations; a process that does not end with the end of combat operations. War is no longer the imposition of will upon a vanquished enemy; it is now but the first step in the pacification and transformation of societies (Smith, 2006: 289ff).

One can therefore understand the current reformulation of US military doctrine and practice as an adaptation to the realities of this 'post-modern' war. As the Iraq war dramatically demonstrated, the 'end of major combat operations', so proudly declared by President Bush on the USS Abraham Lincoln, did not end the conflict. More US troops and more Iraqis died since that proclamation in May 2003. Since then, the US military has recognised the counterproductive nature of the traditional or modern way of warfare within the context of a complex global and local insurgency (Ricks, 2007) and produced a new Counter-Insurgency (COIN) doctrine that address the political and cultural context of US military actions (US Department of the Army, 2006). This doctrinal shift is accompanied by a large number of publications (and internet blogs), which adds some analytical and epistemic depth to it.

The doctrinal shift is accompanied by the creation of a 'Human Terrain System' (HTS), run by the US Army Training and Doctrine Command. The purpose is to

improve the military's ability to understand the highly complex local socio-cultural environment in the areas where they are deployed; however, in the long-term, HTS hopes to assist the US government in understanding foreign countries and regions prior to an engagement within that region (US Army, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to critically investigate the theoretical and epistemic assumptions underlying HTS and the new COIN doctrine and to critically evaluate and map the limits of this anthropologised strategic knowledge. The paper will argue that while the focus on social, cultural and political structure of the theatres of conflict is a significant shift from the previous focus on purely kinetic and pyrotechnic warfare, the 'ontological' assumptions about the relationship between culture and war obscure the more radical developments in the current global conflagration. Consequently, a crucial element of the current global threat environment has become, or remains, unknowable. More specifically, the paper argues that

the violent practices and strategies of al Qaeda (AQ) cannot be properly understood and explained through the anthropological knowledge of COIN. The ‘Globalised Insurgency’ (Kilcullen, 2009: 12-16) that is driven by AQ exceeds the ontological and localised epistemology of COIN.¹ This is all the more significant, as many of the current local or regional insurgencies (which are in the focus of the HTS) are incited or provoked by AQ. To simplify matters somewhat, the anthropologised epistemology of strategy can only deal with the symptoms of the global insurgency, but cannot formulate an analytical useful etiology of it. The main reason for this is that AQ constitutes a force of pure negativity, that it operates in a ‘smooth space’, and as such eludes anthropology’s desire for structure and striation. Hence, as I shall argue in the following, in order to understand AQ’s role in the current Global Insurgency, we need to turn to the political theory of Deleuze and Guattari, in particular their work on Nomadology and the War Machine.

From Soldiers and Marines to Cultural Operators: Fighting in a ‘Human Terrain’

According to the new COIN doctrine, as expressed in the Human Terrain System programme, *Army Field Manual 3-24*, and teaching publications such as *Operational Culture for the Warfighter*, published ‘for use in Marine Schools and the Fleet Marine Force beginning August 2007’ (Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 2007, inside sleeve), war takes place within densely structured and striated cultural spaces. In order to win the war and to subdue the insurgency successfully, knowledge of this setting is required of the soldier.

According to the US Army HTS programme,

The near-term focus of the HTS program is to improve the military’s ability to understand the highly complex local socio-cultural environment in the areas where they are deployed; however, in the long-term, HTS hopes to assist the US government in understanding foreign countries and regions prior to an engagement within that region.²

For this purpose, Human Terrain Teams are embedded with Army units operating in the field:

The HTT’s [Human Terrain Team’s] mission is to increase the ability of brigades, battalions, companies, platoons, and squads to understand the local populace that they live with and must operate among.³

A more detailed conceptualisation of the ‘cultural’ setting within which wars take place and in which Marines will have to operate is offered in *Operational Culture for the Warfighter. Principles and Applications*, a textbook for use in Marine Corps Schools (Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 2007). The purpose of the textbook is to familiarise Marines with ‘Operational Culture’, i.e., ‘those aspects of culture that influence the outcome of a military operation; conversely, the military actions that influence the culture of an area of operations’ (Salmoni

¹ At the time of writing of this essay, the point was driven home in dramatic fashion by the failed attempt of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a 23-year old Nigerian, to bring down flight NW 253 on its approach to Detroit International Airport. No anthropological knowledge about Nigeria, Yemen, Togo, or London (all spaces mentioned in the hastily produced biographies of the alleged perpetrator) can account for this action.

² <http://humanterrainsystem.army.mil/default.htm>. For a critical review of HTS from within the military see Connable (2009); and from within the anthropological community Price (2008, 2009).

³ <http://humanterrainsystem.army.mil/components.html>.

and Holmes-Eber, 2007:46). This somewhat contradictory definition is further complicated by a conceptual disaggregation of Operational Culture as comprising

Operationally relevant behavior, conduct, and expressed attitudes of groups within indigenous security forces against or with whom Marines operate, civilian populations among whom Marines operate', indigenous communities or groups whom Marines wish to influence; international partners in coalition operations.

Dimensions influencing operationally-relevant behavior, conduct, and attitudes. These Operational Cultural Dimensions involve the physical environment; the economy of a culture, social structures; political structures; and the beliefs and symbols of a culture group. [...]

Historical trends that craft the interaction among those cultural dimensions that influence operationally-relevant behavior, conduct, and expressed attitudes.

Capability to successfully plan and execute across the operational spectrum, including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; pre-hostility; shaping operations; professional [education] and formal schools, and individual professional development (47).

The purpose of integrating Operational Culture into the training of Marines is to turn the latter into 'Culture Operators'. In the words of the authors, 'to be a Marine in an expeditionary or irregular environment, one *must* to be [sic!] a culture operator' (50).

The analytical core of this unabashedly eclectic compilation of 'all things culture' is constituted by five Operational Culture Dimensions. Derived from three anthropological 'models', the authors compile a list of these dimensions the common denominator of which seems to be that they reflect 'specific cultural dimensions of the battlespace' (22). Undeterred by any methodological issues and epistemological contradictions involved in this simplistic compilation, the Dimensions include (22-23):

- The Physical Environment
- The Economic System
- The Social Structure
- The Political Structure
- Beliefs and Symbols

The respective Dimensions are then further disaggregated, producing an overall cognitive checklist that enables the Marine as Culture Operator to apply Operational Culture to the various settings to which s/he is, or will be, deployed.

It would be fairly easy to demonstrate the inherent fallacies, inconsistencies, and contradictions within the Operational Culture model. It is for instance unclear to what extent the interpretative epistemology implied in the study of Beliefs and Symbols is relevant for the analysis of the Physical Environment or the Economic System. Also, the differentiation of Social and Political Structure raises methodological issues about the one-dimensionality and internal coherence of the model. Finally, the statement that 'people create culture, and not the other way around' betrays an excessively agential as opposed to structural conceptualisation of culture that contradicts the overall gist of the textbook, which tries to explain behaviour and conduct in war as reflective of extant cultural structures.

The focus of the present critique, however, is a different one. Here, the basic assumptions about the relationship between war and culture will be scrutinised and critically evaluated. I shall return to this topic after the presentation of *FM 3-24*.

FM 3-24 was released in December 2006. Since then, it has become the central reference in the debate on COIN and new forms of warfare. Authored by a collective of military officers, and supported by the personal authority of General David Petraeus, who himself was one of the authors, the document was put together within a year and constitutes the first field manual on counterinsurgency for the US Army in 20 years (Nagl, 2007).

Within *FM 3-24*, issues related to 'Culture' are subsumed under the overall context of 'Intelligence in Counterinsurgency'. Employing a less comprehensive definition than the Marine Corps textbook discussed above, culture becomes one of six factors the analysis of which is crucial in 'understanding people' as part of the 'civil considerations' given to the Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) (Department of the Army, 2006: 3-1 – 3-4). As part of the following six factors dealing with 'the people', Culture describes 'the effects of the operational environment' on COIN operations (3-4):

- Society
- Social Structure
- Culture
- Language
- Power and Authority
- Interests

Again, it would be easy to demonstrate the inconsistencies, contradictions, and conceptual confusions that characterise what amounts to little more than a shopping list of plausible social factors relevant for the description of 'people'. Thus, a 'Society' is characterised by a common 'Culture' making the latter category appear both as an integral part of 'Society' as well as its own category; Social Structures apparently exist prior to, and independent of, social structures of meaning within societies, with such structures provided by 'Culture' (3-6).

Whether the analogy that 'social structure can be thought of as a skeleton, with culture being the muscle on the bone' really remedies the reification of the former remains doubtful (3-6).

The conceptualisation of Culture itself is broken down into composite elements such as identity, beliefs, values, attitudes and perceptions, belief systems, and cultural forms (3-7 – 3-9). Interestingly, *FM 3-24* defines and conceptualises Social Structures and Power and Authority as independent of Culture. Finally, the authors do not address how the legitimacy of political authority, or the effects of informal power, can be ascertained without taking 'beliefs' or 'values' into account.

But, again, the point here is not to review the particular methodological issues and problems in these three examples of the 'culturisation' of warfare. As stated above, this essay deals with the conceptualisation of the relationship between culture and war.

Culture and War – Terrain, Context, or Code?

There are a number of notable differences between the three texts presented and summarised above. For the HTS programme, culture is mapped onto a 'human terrain' that supplements

the physical and material environment or 'terrain' within which military force is, or will be, deployed. As the authors of the Marine Corps textbook note in a critical tone, the concept of 'human terrain' imports the static and stable notion of physical or geographical terrain into the cultural sphere. 'Maps' of human terrain might easily be projected onto geographical and physical maps, yet these 'cultural maps' cannot account for the dynamic relationship and exchange between different cultures and their intermingling. Moreover, the notion of an objective, 'mappable' terrain does not properly address the subjectivist epistemology of identity, in which the self-perception of the respective individuals and groups defies an easy 'ethnic' categorisation. And finally, a 'human terrain map' that focuses on objective ethnic or cultural data 'cannot account for other criteria for differentiating or uniting people', such as the presence of a common enemy that unites different 'cultural' or 'ethnic' groups for a political purpose (Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 2007: 40-43; quote on 42).

The Marine Corps manual itself employs the widest and most comprehensive notion of 'culture' in its model. Marines are to become 'culture operators' on the tactical, operational, and strategic level, continuously reading and re-reading the changing cultural and human aspects of the battle-space as they affect military operations (Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 2007:48). Physical and other dimensions of the battle-space are in effect subsumed under the priority assigned to culture (51-52). War itself becomes an expression of particular cultural structures, as Salmoni and Holmes-Eber's reference to Clausewitz's conundrum about the French way of warfare during the Napoleonic age demonstrates.

Clausewitz came to the conclusion that the French military success was produced by changes in French society and culture since 1789. [...]

In short, French culture produced French fighting, and in order to understand one's enemies, factors beyond traditional military concern needed to be considered (5).

The third text, *FM 3-24*, on the other hand employs a narrower definition of culture, subsuming it under the IPB of the respective AO, and differentiating it from concepts such as political structure that are included into culture in the Marine Corps textbook. Yet this narrower definition of culture itself still relates to similar categories as employed in the Marine Corps text. And here too we find a notion of culture as an 'operational code' (Department of the Army, 2006: 3-7). This 'code' also applies to combatants and insurgents, as the example provided in *FM 3-24*, interestingly also from the Napoleonic age, demonstrates. Napoleon's failure to subdue and pacify the Spanish population after 1808 is explained by reference to the French failure to

analyze the Spanish people, their history, culture, motivations, and potential to support or hinder the achievement of French political objectives. The Spanish people were accustomed to hardship, suspicious of foreigners and constantly involved in skirmishes with security forces (4-1).

The Essence of Culture

Despite the different conceptualisation of 'culture' in the texts discussed here, on closer inspection a number of crucial commonalities and shared assumptions appear.

Firstly, all three texts effectively 'essentialise' culture. All three definitions focus on the 'shared' or 'common' cultural elements that define a particular social or political community.

Hence, HTS refers to the ‘local socio-cultural environment’ within which military forces are to be deployed. Moreover, the notion of ‘terrain’ emphasises the delineated, static, and fixed nature of culture.

Salmoni and Holmes-Eber define culture as the ‘shared world view and social structures of a group of people that influence a person’s and a group’s actions and choices’ (Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 2007: 29). A ‘culture group’ thus constituted displays ‘shared’ ‘observable’ and thus predictable behaviour that facilitates operational planning (29).

FM 3-24 offers the following definition:

Culture is:

A system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts that members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another.

Learned though [sic!] a process called enculturation.

Shared by members of a society; there is no “culture of one.”

Patterned, meaning that people in a society live and think in ways forming definite, repeating patterns.

Changeable, through social interaction between people and groups.

Arbitrary, meaning that Soldiers and Marines should make no assumptions regarding what a society considers right and wrong, good and bad.

Internalized, in the sense that it is habitual, taken for granted, and perceived as “natural” by people within the society (DoA, 2006: 3-6 – 3-7).

Here too, paying attention to culture is supposed to make social behaviour more predictable, as it ‘conditions the individual’s range of actions and ideas, including what to do and not do, how to do or not do it, and whom to do it with or not to do it with’ (3-7).

Culture consequently provides a specific code for the conduct of defined, and ontologically given, social groupings. It operates as a defining essence or attribute of that community, the existence of which is never as such problematised. Culture operates internally, organising the behaviour of member of a society ‘with one another’.

The introduction of change, transformation, or adaptation that the Marine Corps textbook and *FM 3-24* attempt in their respective conceptualisation of culture is therefore necessarily secondary and accidental; such processes change extant cultures, but do not constitute them. Thus, crucially, conflict and war affect, change, but do not constitute socio-cultural structures. Culture in this sense precedes conflict and determines, or at least significantly influences its conduct.

Secondly, despite this essentialist conceptualisation, the very employment of culture in the context of military operations such as COIN produces a diacritical and relational effect. Paradoxically, it is the very essentialism of the definition that produces this effect. All three texts try to provide an answer to the puzzle that a particular social behaviour, namely a violent insurgency, is conducted in a fashion unfamiliar, and unknown, to American Marines and Soldiers. Culture thus provides, or is supposed to provide an answer to the question: Why do they fight us in such an unexpected fashion? *FM23-4* and its companion texts therefore establish the difference and otherness (as compared to American standards) of the populations within, and the combatants against, which military actions have to be conducted. All three texts therefore contain a strong assumption of American culture as a default, with other cultures becoming relevant because of their difference and distance from American

culture. There is therefore a strong ‘orientalist’ notion baked into the texts. Culture is the other, as it defies our expectations.

Thirdly, these essentialised and ‘orientalised’ cultures affect the conduct of warfare in a significant and observable fashion. War, conflict, or insurgencies are therefore to be understood as expressions of particular, localised and spatially defined and delineated cultural structures. As we fight ‘wars among the people’, operational planning has to take the respective cultural peculiarities of the ‘people’ into account.

Finally, all three texts discussed here share a particular ambiguity. It remains ultimately unclear if culture is a constitutive, or an intermediate variable. In other words, does it explain the particular conduct of warriors, insurgents, or rebels in a particular locale, or does it define the social context of a population among which a conflict is conducted, and which impacts upon the conflict? More concretely with regard to COIN, does culture relate to the conduct of the insurgents, or to the social structures of the society within which the insurgency and counter-insurgency are fought?

Disentangling this ambiguity in the case of AQ and the ‘Global Insurgency, we can observe that fighting AQ cannot rely on any particular anthropology or cultural competence, as the network does not reflect or express a ‘culture’ as understood in COIN epistemology. Given the mobility of AQ and its member, even if we should succeed in pacifying and stabilising one particular cultural setting such as Afghanistan, it remains unclear how this can prevent a shift of AQ into a different country and theatre. Furthermore, the geographical shift of the Global Insurgency would arguably further disrupt already the unstable and fragile social structures in a host country such as Somalia or Yemen. Hence, rather than reflecting an extant culture, the conflict would first and foremost disrupt and destroy one.

War as the De-Construction of ‘Culture’

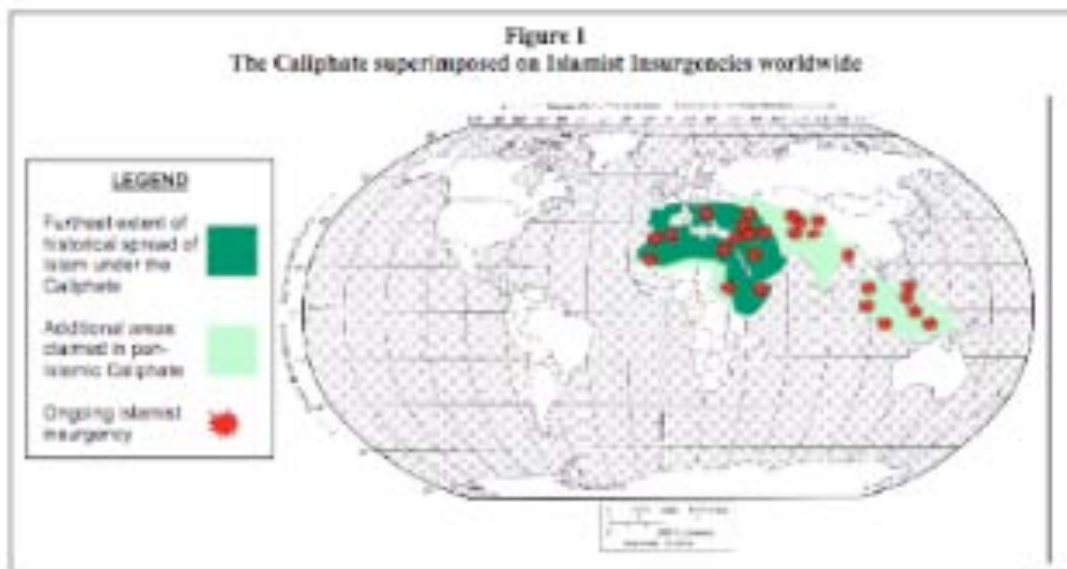
Within the context of the war on terror, this particular rendition of the relationship of war and culture, in which the latter becomes an ontologically prior, causal and constitutive foundation of war, is problematic on two counts. Firstly, al Qaeda

is the product of no single indigenous culture, but is part of an umbrella of linked movements’ from the Philippines, Indonesia, Morocco and Western Europe. It is formed through global interactions and borrowings, and shapes its warfare through the worldwide circulation of ideas, technology, and techniques (Porter, 2009: 62).

The networked, virtual, and de-territorialised nature of AQ therefore should escape the anthropologisation of its war against the West. AQ, as I shall argue below, is conducting a radicalised form of warfare, that that should be understood in terms of a pure negativity. As such, its warfare has no positive or substantial content; it is not the expression of an underlying cultural context or reality.

However, the desire to attribute cultural meaning and with that a particular spatialised and localisable identity to AQ’s terror translates into two counter-arguments. Firstly, there is David Kilcullen’s argument that while AQ constitutes a network, it nonetheless can be ‘localised’ and identified in terms of a shared culture. In an early article he published in *Small Wars Journal* in 2004, AQ inhabits the space of the Caliphate that they are allegedly trying to re-create. In Kilcullen’s words,

there is a clear correlation between the geographical area of the historical Caliphate, the broader pan-Islamic Caliphate posited by Al Qaeda, and Islamist insurgency. This is illustrated graphically at Figure 1.



Note: This map does not include Shi'a insurgencies, terrorist groups that have no known links to al-Qaeda, or Muslim insurgencies that are predominantly separatist or rationalist in character.

As the map indicates, every single Islamist insurgency in the world sits inside the claimed pan-Islamic Caliphate, while the most active theatres correspond to the historical Caliphate. This map seems to show that al Qaeda is indeed executing the strategy outlined by al-Zawahiri, of re-establishing an Islamic Caliphate then using this as a springboard to extend Islamic control over the remainder of the globe. In fact, the reality turns out to be more complex. Nonetheless, the map accurately portrays the existence of a global spread of Islamist movements seeking to overturn the world order through subversion, terrorism and insurgency (Kilcullen, 2004: 8).

The problem with this argument is that historical evidence has long since falsified it. The argument does not account for AQ's signature event, 9/11 (which Kilcullen somewhat surprisingly considers an 'exception'), nor does it include the first attacks on the WTC in 1993, arguably a precursor to 9/11. Even more significantly, the December 2001 'shoe bomber' attempt is missing, as are other AQ plans to destroy airplanes over the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans. AQ's latest (failed) attempt on 25 December 2009 also demonstrates the flawed logic of this argument. Finally, attacks, both successful and failed in London, Paris, and other Western cities indicate the global, rather than localised reach and strategy of the Global Islamic Insurgency. One might also dispute whether the attacks in Madrid in 2004 can really be said to have taken place within the 'Caliphate'.

Furthermore, Kilcullen's definition of AQ's 'cultural links', constituted by 'an Islamic civilisational overlay, providing a common language, social outlook and political theory for groups from diverse national cultures' (Kilcullen, 2004:9) does little to explain the highly adaptive and changing mode of terrorism that AQ has conducted since the 1990s.

One might alternatively argue that the war against AQ takes place within distinctive culturally defined theatres, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Yemen. While AQ itself might not be the product of a specific local culture, they nonetheless ‘infest’ such cultures, and therefore our counterinsurgency strategies need to take account of the anthropologically defined ‘realities on the ground’ to conduct this campaign in a successful fashion.

In this case, it is less the enemy itself that fights in a predictable, culturally determined fashion. Rather, as this is a ‘war among the people’, the socio-cultural context of the latter needs to be included within strategic knowledge.

On the face of it, this argument appears more plausible than the previous one and closer to the current COIN doctrine. Regarding Afghanistan, one might address the cultural context within which the fight against AQ takes place, in order to deny the latter organisation a ‘foothold’ in this country. By taking into account the cultural and social sensitivities, norms, and values of the relevant society, COIN forces avoid alienating people and thereby driving them into supporting the insurgency.

Regarding Afghanistan, the logic appears to be something like this: by conducting an anthropologised and thus culturally aware and sensitive COIN campaign, US and allied forces deny the Taliban control over the people, and thereby prevent AQ from returning to the country from which they planned and executed their campaign of terror against the West. Incorporating the Afghan (or Pashtun) ‘cultural code’ into the military’s strategic knowledge therefore accomplishes the particular goals of a ‘population centric’ warfare in which the preservation of people’s life-worlds takes precedence over the elimination of enemy forces. By winning over the population and by depriving the insurgents of their support structure, a stable political and social order can be established that is immune to terrorist or insurgent campaigns.

Yet such thinking misconstrues the relationship between war and culture by assuming that the latter provides the constitutive or causal foundation for the former. As Barkawi and Brighton have argued, a proper (Clausewitzian) understanding of war as the realm of chance, friction and contingency reverses this order.

War as a ‘test of the real’ has an extraordinary capacity to overturn received wisdom of all kinds. Political orders are built around narratives regarding the competent and legitimate exercise of armed force, from the military indispensability of the Prussian Junkers to the technological supremacy of the United States, narratives vulnerable to the contingencies of war. These certainties and narratives are of existential significance for polities not only in the sense of avoiding conquest but also in the myriad ways in which defeat abroad occasions disruption, transformation and revolution at home. The pervasive tendency to destroy truths, whether regarding the putative prowess of a weapon system, a leader, a party, an army, or a nation is part of what gives war its generative power to unmake and remake social, cultural and political orders. We refer to this dependence of regimes of power upon authoritative but vulnerable narratives concerning the use and significance of armed force as the ‘war/truth nexus’ (Barkawi and Brighton, 2009: 3-4) [quoted with the permission of the authors].

War, in other words, does not express an ontologically prior culture. Rather, political, social, and cultural orders are constituted and re-constituted in war, as societies adapt to the exigencies and outcomes of war. War (rather than Justice) is the ultimate deconstruction of

truth claims, as it constantly tests their relationship to the powers that sustain them. Culture, then, is the contingent, and always tenuous, outcome of war, a way of life born in strife, reflective of the re-ordering of power and knowledge in war. As such the reality of Afghanistan today with its socio-cultural structure owes more to the persistent conflict that has devastated the country since 1979, than to allegedly fixed Muslim, Islamic, or other Orientalist cultural dispositions (cf. Porter, 2009: 143-70).

To the extent that war deconstructs and re-constructs culture, the essentialist definition of the latter needs to give way to a relational, diacritic one. Culture is formed in the (violent) encounter with the other – in the case of the Global Insurgency, in the conflict with the West. The socio-cultural realities we confront in the ‘oriental’ spaces of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and now apparently Yemen, are therefore of our making in a number of ways.

Firstly, violent intervention becomes a contributory factor in the radicalisation of these societies. Whether in Iraq post 1991 and again 2003, in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 1979, the emergence of forces that sustain or support AQ’s global insurgency has to be understood within the context of the respective conflicts. The destruction of extant socio-political structures and the attempted re-creation, or rather, imposition, of such structures arguably created the very conditions in which those groups emerged which COIN strategists now attempt to understand as embedded in a ‘traditional culture’ and that preceded these conflicts. Secondly, the ‘return to culture and identity’ in strategic knowledge is best understood as a reflection of a crisis in (Western) warfare. As Porter has argued, the (Orientalist) interest in the enemy’s culture usually emerges in response to sense of ‘anxiety over the vulnerability of [Western] power’ as well as a site of its effective discursive protection (Porter, 2009: 29). This protection works in a number of ways: it provides narratives about the inherent superiority of Western culture and warfare; it explains the enemy’s successes in terms of its similarity to Western values and heroism, or by reference to the ‘warrior nature’ of the enemy which experienced war as a way of life. And sometimes, it becomes a way to rationalise the demise of Western standards of warfare in favour of adapting the enemy’s tactics: ‘*il faut opérer en partisan partout où il y a des partisans*’ (Schmitt 1995: 20). Only by adapting the Barbarian’s tactics can the Barbarian threat to Western identity be defeated (Porter, 2009: 45).

The culturisation of warfare is therefore as much about the enemy as it is about ‘us’. Our own identity become refracted and reproduced within the discourses on the other’s culture. Historically, such discourses therefore respond to an existential crisis of Western identity in the encounter with the colonial other that refuses to become subaltern.

The anthropologisation of COIN and the current culturisation of warfare are the response to a similar crisis. The current Western obsession with culture, space and identity has to be understood as a response to the failure of modern Liberal warfare that sought to overcome culture, accelerate history, and transform identity.

Post-Modernity and the Failure of Liberal War

Postmodern culture, Nicolas Bourriaud writes, ‘had its roots in the idea of the end of history; more precisely, it posits the end of history considered as a linear trajectory. In its stead, postmodernity locates an ‘interminable “afterwards”’; after the myth of progress, after the revolutionary utopia, after the retreat of colonialism, after the battles for political, social, and sexual emancipation’ narrative (Bourriaud, 2009: n.p. [18]). Postmodernism therefore becomes a philosophy of mourning: of the loss of progress, purpose, and direction. What we

are faced with instead is an 'immobilised space-time', filled with 'fragments of the past' (Bourriaud, 2009: n.p. [19]).

Confronted with these spaces that do not fit a historical trajectory, an obsession with cultural identity and post-colonial 'multi-culturalism' appears as the ontological response. Aesthetic, as well as political, meanings are now defined and articulated in terms of mythified origins, with essentialism as the critical paradigm. In the age of globalisation, in the age of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporary, multi-culturalism allots meaning and assigns identity in response to the question 'Where do you come from?' ([20]).

Bourriaud's description of the postmodern 'neurotic preoccupation with origins' ([20]) presents us with a compelling framework within which to understand the culturisation of COIN. The failure of *Operation Enduring Freedom* and *Operation Iraqi Freedom* to liberate and emancipate the societies of Afghanistan and Iraq and to move them forward on the historical trajectory towards Western understandings of democracy and capitalism has left us with those immobilised spaces, filled with 'fragments of the past'. These theatres of conflict are no longer defined in terms of their potential social, political, and cultural transformation, but in terms of social and cultural characteristics that make them *essentially* different from us. Within COIN, the question 'where do you come from?' is now supposed to elicit a response about the particular heterochronous structures that define international conflict. The insurgents are no longer enemies that stand in the way of History and its homogenisation of social and political space; rather, they are the expression of an essential alterity that defies and resists the linear History of modernity. Rather than transforming the target societies, the discourse of COIN now talks of pacification and stabilisation, of the recognition of traditional structures of power and governance. The mastery over the other is now produced not by integrating him into the 'us', but by understanding and knowing (in a political and strategic fashion) his fundamental alterity.

From postmodern to altermodern war

COIN, and with it the postmodern way of Western war, it seems, is caught up in a logocentric trap in which the violent rejection of History's homochrony by agents and articulations of alterity translates into 'timelessness' and immobility. History, or so this narrative goes, only provides one timeline.

But AQ and the global insurgency in its different manifestations do not immobilise societies. Rather, it 'jolt[s] [them] out of tradition, it embodies a cultural exodus, an escape from the confines of nationalism and identity-tagging' (Bourriaud, 2009: n.p. [12]). Such altermodern war merges modern and postmodern war. It rejects the timeline of modernity and asserts difference over identity; it does not condemn societies to the endless repetition of the same culture. It is altermodern, because it is a radical assertion of otherness, and because it provides this alterity with its own route, its own historical trajectory ([12]). AQ then needs to be understood as the most radical form of such altermodernity: a violent assertion of difference against extant cultures and structure, Islamic or Western, a radical trajectory that constantly transgresses boundaries and borders and the only purpose of which is the negation of extant global and regional power structures. AQ constitutes the 'dark side' of altermodernity, taking its aesthetic logic into a destructive and violent form. Yet the logic

remains the same: contemporary terrorism ‘gives the impression of being uplifted by an immense wave of displacements, voyages, translations, migrations of objects and beings’ ([13]). The pursuit of the ‘Caliphate’ denotes in this context little more than the articulation of a radically different temporality and onto-theology, which creates a temporo-spatial ‘smooth space’ extending between a re-constructed past and an imagined future that is constituted in the pure violence of the terrorist attack (Behnke, 2010 forthcoming). As Faisal Devji explains,

the caliphate’s role thus far is simply conceptual, allowing the jihad to abandon the political geography of the Cold War, made up of national states grouped into various alliances, for a completely de-territorialized and even anti-geographical space, since the caliphate imagined by the jihad possesses neither centre nor periphery (Devji, 2005: 84, cf Roy, 2004: 340).

The terrorist therefore becomes a nomad ‘in space, in time, and among the signs’ (Bourriaud, 2009: n.p. [13]). There is no tellurian ground on which, or for which he fights; there is no timeframe within which his eternal struggle can be concluded, his purpose fulfilled; there is no way to predict where and what the target of his next attack will be.

Terrorism as altermodern violence therefore amounts to more than resistance against domination, if we associate this domination with a particular space and time. It becomes an ‘insurgency’ not just against particular local or national power structures which it ultimately aims to appropriate and take over. Rather, the ‘altermodern is to be found in the [terrorist act] itself; the work of art as a manifestation of pure difference in all the social, cultural and political signs it wields to elaborate that difference’ (Enwezor, 2009: n.p. [35]).

Al Qaeda and the War Machine

And each time there is an operation against the State – insubordination, rioting, guerrilla warfare, or revolution as act – it can be said that a war machine has been revived, that a new nomadic potential has appeared, accompanied by the reconstitution of smooth space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 386)

Above I alluded to AQ’s insurgency as a pure negativity, but such a label already presupposes and reproduces the state as the model form of interiority; it erroneously stipulates that there is nothing outside the State (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 354). It is only from within the state, that the radically de-territorialised violence of AQ appears in an ontologically negative form: ‘stupidity, deformation, madness, illegitimacy, usurpation, sin’ (354). It is therefore analytically more adequate to conceptualise AQ as a ‘pure form of exteriority’, or as a ‘war machine’. As such, the terrorist-nomad operates in a smooth space that stands against the striated space of the State. While the latter might be amenable to an anthropological investigation in terms of its cultural norms and structures, the smooth space of the war machine contains turbulence, vortex, trajectories, and vectors. Whereas COIN seeks to ‘count’ space in order to occupy it, the terrorist-nomad’s space is ‘occupied without being counted’ (362).

Culture might apply to the striated space of state and society, as these are forms of interiority, seeking to reproduce themselves, and make themselves identical to themselves across time. But the terrorist-nomad's war machine exists only in metamorphoses, in innovation, in new tactics and strategies, 'as well as in a religious creation' (360). The latter observation is of course crucial for our understanding of AQ as a war machine. Religion itself arguably constructs a highly striated, hierarchical space with fixed locations and rules of worship. Yet there is also another aspect to religion: not the institutionalised, internalised version that becomes part of the state apparatus, but the one that creates and motivates the smooth space of the nomad.

For monotheistic religion at the deepest level of its tendency to project a universal or spiritual State over the entire ecumenon, is not without ambivalence or fringe areas; it goes beyond even the ideal limits of the State, even the imperial State, entering into a more indistinct zone, an outside of States where it has the possibility of undergoing a singular mutation or adaptation. We are referring to religion as an element in a war machine and the idea of holy war as the motor of that engine. The *prophet*, as opposed to the state personality of the king and the religious personality of the priest, directs the movement by which a religion becomes a war machine or passes over to the side of such a machine (383).

From this perspective, AQ's 'Caliphate' is but the name given to that zone outside of states, to the exteriority of the smooth space, which threatens the state and its structure. Holy wars (or, for that matter, Crusades [383]) are nomadic movements across that space, which make 'the absolute appear in [any] particular place' (382), which, in other words, bring the terror of God to any location sign or symbol of the enemy.

In this process, the terrorist-nomad deterritorialises the globe, with no re-territorialisation taking place afterwards.⁴ The terrorist comes and ceases the moment, without taking or appropriating the land. 'The land ceases to be land, tending to become simply ground or support. The earth ... becomes deterritorialised in specific locations [of attack] (381).

The 'Caliphate' therefore does not refer to any recognisable, geo-graphable space. Rather, it is the desert, the steppe, the space of the terrorist-nomad on the ultimate, global scale. In Osama bin Laden's words, God himself gave Muslims smooth spaces, and thus the conflict for bin Laden becomes one for such spaces:

Ever since God made the Arabian peninsula flat, created desert in it and surrounded it with seas, it has never suffered such a calamity as these Crusader hordes, that have spread through it like locusts (Bin Laden et al., 1998: 58).

The proclamation of the 'Caliphate' thus becomes the imperative to make 'the desert' grow, to rid it of the contamination of a competing war machine – the Crusaders – and to expand it through its own Holy War. 'If war necessarily results, it is because the war machine collides with States and cities, as forces (of striation) opposing its positive object: from then on, the

⁴ However, cf. Elden (2009) for the opposite argument that all terrorist de-territorialisation points to a necessary re-territorialisation. Consequently Elden also sees the Caliphate as a geopolitical entity, rather than a pure exteriority.

war machine has as its enemy the State, the city, the state and urban phenomenon, and adopts as its objective their annihilation' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 417).⁵

Altermodernity, or rather altermodern warfare thus unleashes the war machine in a globalised, technologised, and virtualised fashion. Globalisation provides the war machine as the State's constitutive enemy – states are created to prevent the vortex of war (the Hobbesian war of all against all in the smooth space of a civil war) – and grant it new possibilities. In response, we see again the state responding by appropriating the war machine and turning it around against itself in a War on Terror – war in the name of peace, war against the smooth space of the nomad, war conducted in order to re-striate the spaces of the nomad.

Conclusion

COIN and the anthropologisation of warfare are not only a sign of the crisis of Western warfare, they are also part and parcel of an anthropologisation and hence a re-striation of space. Nomadic space has to be turned back into nomadic space: space seized, administered, and governed by the state.⁶ Yet the struggle against AQ cannot be fought, nor won, in this fashion. The epistemology of COIN is an epistemology of the state, it focuses on the interior striation of spaces, and therefore this epistemology cannot know, cannot understand its nomad enemy.

The war machine, and this is Deleuze and Guattari's valuable insight, is exterior to the state, it is 'outside its sovereignty and prior to its law: it comes from elsewhere' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 352). States do not 'make war', nor do wars make states. The relationship is more complicated than this. Smooth spaces are always between striated spaces, and the latter always aim to re-striate the former. Similarly, the war machine emerges (spatially and temporally) between states, to be re-appropriated, and institutionalised in always new forms into the disciplinary regime of the state, to be put into its service.

The global insurgency we are facing today is such an intermittent episode in which truths about the West and the Rest, about the state and its copies in Asia and the Islamic world are put to the test of 'reality', and deconstructed. The War against Terror is therefore an anticipation of things to come, not an expression of past traditions and cultures.

⁵ For an investigation into Cities, War, and Terrorism cf. Graham (2004).

⁶ My definition of nomos and nomadic here differs from Deleuze and Guattari's who use these concepts in reference, and synonymous to smooth space. My definition stays closer to the one found in Carl Schmitt's work, see above all Schmitt (2003).

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