Political Geography 60 (2017) 203–212

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Militarisation, universities and the university armed service units

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 18 April 2016
Received in revised form
21 July 2017
Accepted 29 July 2017
Available online 18 August 2017

Keywords:
Military
Militarisation
Officer cadet
University
OTC
UAS
URNU

ABSTRACT

This paper asks what militarisation looks like when encountered in university settings, using the example of the UK university armed service units. It identifies a specific definition of militarisation, which is then used as a framework to explore the USUs. The USUs have been subject to critique as emblematic of militarisation, and thus problematic. The paper looks at practices where militarisation can be identified as evident on university campuses, such as in disciplinary engagements with military institutions and activities, as well as flows of funding and knowledge. We show how the military-university nexus problematizes the idea of separate and distinctive military and civilian spheres which pervades much of the discourse around military involvement at universities, and highlight the generative and creative capabilities of militarisation as co-constituted within the military-university nexus. The paper then examines in detail how the process of militarisation works in practice through the USUs. This confirms the importance of individual agency to a conceptualisation of militarisation. In conclusion, we argue for the continued utility of process-focussed understandings of militarisation which emphasise how such processes are generative of social relations. We emphasise the necessity of capturing the nuance and complexity through which processes work not least around the engagements of people as active agents with such processes. We also note the potential significance of scale to future conceptualisations of militarisation.

1. Introduction

This paper is about militarisation and military involvement in UK universities, and the ways in which we can develop our thinking about the former through examination of the latter. We examine the case of the university armed service units (hereafter USUs) as a 'perspicuous example' (Garfinkel, 1967) of UK military involvement in universities, because such examples disrupt accepted orders and thus make their practical organisation visible.[1] USUs are military units managed and funded by the UK armed forces and populated by students studying for higher education degrees at UK universities. Students receive training in military doctrine and practices through weekly drill nights and weekend and vacation exercises. Student members are not obliged to join the armed forces following graduation, although some do.

At first sight, USUs could be readily identified as an illustration of militarisation at work on university campuses; as we go on to show, this charge has frequently been levelled against them. We are interested in this paper in what 'militarisation' might mean in this particular context. If we subject USUs to close scrutiny, how does the militarisation that they are said to demonstrate actually work? Do assumptions about what militarisation is and does remain confirmed or become untenable when we look at the granular detail of militarisation in action? What are the affordances of such an examination in terms of how we can conceptualise militarisation? We start by discussing debates on militarisation, identifying work by Kuus (2008, 2009) as providing the definition of militarisation which we wish to take forward. We then examine how the processes of militarisation work in practice through the university-military nexus in which USUs sit, discussing disciplinary engagements with military institutions and activities, as well as flows of funding and knowledge. We then break Kuus's definition down to discuss how USUs have been constructed in critical commentaries as emblematic of militarisation, and look to empirical evidence for this. In conclusion, we argue for the utility of process-focussed understandings of militarisation which emphasise how such processes are generative of social relations. We emphasise the

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[1] This paper is solely about the USUs in the UK. For information on the United States' Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) – which has certain marked differences, not least around assumptions about recruitment – see Neiberg, 2000; Ax, 2007; Giroux, 2012; Griggs, 2005.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.07.012

necessity of capturing the nuance and complexity through which processes work not least around the engagements of people as active agents whose practices constitute and perpetuate them. We also note the potential significance of scale to future conceptualisations of militarisation.

2. Conceptualising militarisation

In much social science scholarship, the category of 'military' is understood in moral terms because of the association between military forces and the execution of lethal violence, and is often loaded with pejorative associations. As Jauregui (2015: 457) states, militarisation can be understood as a process through which 'a mostly unilinear vector of militaristic violence [infiltrates] what would otherwise be a more peaceful or critical populace.' This conceptualisation is particularly visible in critiques of USUs and of military involvement in higher education practices. The necessity – or otherwise – of having and using concepts of militarism and militarisation within the social sciences, and the ways in which those concepts could be defined and used, has of course generated considerable discussion (see Bernazzoli & Flint, 2009; Cowen & Smith, 2009; Woodward, 2014). Arguments have been made for a renewed focus on militarisation in recent years, because of the continued prevalence of political violence and its effects, and the continued salience of military organisations, institutions, objectives, cultures and personnel in shaping the social world (Gusterson, 2007; Stavrianakis & Selby, 2013).

Militarisation is usually understood as a process or set of connected processes facilitating the engagement of military institutions, activities and modes of organisation into multiple spheres of social life. The concept is generally accepted as a useful one in identifying the specificity of material and discursive practices and relationships through which the social world is shaped by the requirements of the state to have the capacity to exercise lethal force, and in turn how that state capacity is itself socially constituted. For example, Lutz, drawing on Geyer, defines militarisation as:

> … "the contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence" (Geyer, 1989: 79). This process involves an intensification of the labor and resources allocated to military purposes, including the shaping of other institutions in synchrony with military goals. (Lutz, 2002, p.723)

As Lutz and others note, militarisation may be understood best as both a discursive and a material process (see also Basham, 2013; Basham, Belkin, & Gifkins, 2015; Stavrianakis & Selby, 2013). Some analysts take this further, viewing militarisation as a biopolitical practice productive of subjectivities as part of wider systems of structural violence (Belkin, 2016; Loyd, 2009). In terms of the reach of militarisation as a social process, it has been identified as having its own political economy (Gouliamos & Kassimeris, 2012) and as productive of a specific cultural politics (Giroux, 2004; Kuus, 2009) and cultural practices (Stein, 2008).

Whilst recognising the validity of these engagements, in this paper we draw specifically on Kuus's (2008) definition of militarisation, because she argues for militarisation to be seen as an integral part of social life in Western liberal democracies, and as something which takes place outside the institutions and practices which explicitly promote military solutions to political problems – something she refers to as 'civic militarisation'. Specifically, Kuus (2008) defines militarisation as 'a multifaceted social process by which military approaches to social problems gain elite and popular acceptance' (p.625; see also Kuus, 2009, p. 546). Her definition emphasises militarisation's processual and thus dynamic nature, its multiplicity and multiple points of engagement, and its purchase across social formations from high politics to daily life beyond the institutions or organisations themselves responsible for the organisation and execution of lethal violence. Kuus' definition has underpinned much of our previous work (Rech, Bos, Jenkings, Williams, & Woodward, 2015; Rech, Jenkings, Williams, & Woodward, 2016; Woodward, 2014), and has wider purchase within political geography (see for example Bernazzoli & Flint, 2010; Christian, Dowler, & Cuomo, 2016; Paasche & Bachmann, 2012). Furthermore, although not explicit in the wording of the definition above, Kuus (2008, 2009) and others (Basham, 2016; Shaw, 2010) emphasise the importance of a focus on the prosaic, banal or everyday aspects of militarisation in contrast to approaches which prioritize its place in grand or state-level geopolitical narratives. As such this framework enables us to critique and analyse organisations, such as USUs, which straddle the civil-military binary, and to focus on the detailed, granular, evidence around militarisation in accordance with arguments within critical military studies and critical geopolitics literature more widely. Thus, whilst we note that there is other literature which could be cited to emphasise the same point about the necessity of considering militarisation's contingent and embodied aspects (see Basham, 2016 for an overview), we focus exclusively on operationalising Kuus's definition in this article because it enables us to answer the following questions: what does militarisation mean in the context of universities, and how does it actually work? In the next section, we discuss the university-military nexus and then introduce the USUs. We then use the two central ideas within Kuus's definition – the social problems for which military approaches might be seen as being mobilised, and the mechanisms by which these approaches gain popular or elite acceptance – to explore what the idea of USUs as emblematic of militarisation might actually mean in practice and what this might mean for our conceptualisation of militarisation.

3. The military-university nexus

As Jauregui (2015: 457) states

> [M]ilitarization tends to be conceived as a contagion invading and increasing society's existing penchants toward racism, sexism, and oppressive imperial warmongering, and this process of invasive contamination is assumed to be driven by a relatively static, destructive and hyperempowered military though a domestic and global citizenry that otherwise would be more constructive and healthy.

Such pejorative conceptualisations of militarisation have implications for the way we understand the contexts in which USUs sit – the universities themselves. Universities and military institutions are usually held to be quite separate and distinct as organisations, with markedly different missions. Those missions are readily constructed as morally quite different (although they are both, of course, public goods or services). Viewed in this way, it becomes possible to subscribe to the idea that the militarisation of universities leads to the contamination of these academic educational spaces by invasive ideas, priorities and practices which originate in state requirements for the organisation of lethal legitimized violence. Whilst we do not wholly subscribe to this interpretation of the militarisation of universities we do recognise that there are connections between military and higher education institutions and often tensions between their respective missions. However, we want to think about the translation of agendas and priorities between these two missions in terms of generative capacities and creativity, as something to be empirically evidenced rather than *a*