Review - The Routledge Handbook of War and Society

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The Routledge Handbook of War and Society: Iraq and Afghanistan
By Steven Carlton-Ford and Morten G. Ender (eds.)
London and New York: Routledge, 2011

The *Handbook of War and Society* is part of the Routledge series of Handbooks on various scholarly topics related to international affairs. It is edited by two sociologists who are both active researchers and authors on armed forces and society and most notably Ender is a Professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point, providing a view from inside this Institution. It proposes to take a fresh empirical look at the two most recent major conflicts of the 21st century: namely the Iraq and Afghanistan wars that followed the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001.

This book is an edited collection on the general topic of War and Society, written by fifty academics and defence practitioners contributing a total of twenty five chapters, showing the reader a wide array of expertise related to military affairs in general. Furthermore, the book is divided into four sections, essentially touching on the impact of war on combatants and on non-combatants, the social construction of war and the impact of war on the so-called "home front". Most chapters in this collection I believe, are well written and use an accessible narrative and even the few using statistical analysis have kept the number crunching issues to a minimum, allowing all readers to access the material.

As is the case with most edited collections, this book looks into a number of discrete issues within a general theme, offering several parallel narratives. However, the discrete issues discussed are well within the selected themes topic and are logically consistent. For instance, the section on the impact of war on combatants has chapters about: recruitment and retention, the difficulties of armed forces to adapt to irregular warfare, social science applications to counterinsurgency and the social dynamics leading to the Abu Ghraib scandal etc. The selection of these issues is, in general, touching the most difficult challenges that the armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan brought to the American military institution, when looked at from a military sociology perspective.

The expression "War and Society" relates to scholarly research that is germane to both strategic and security studies and military sociology. These researchers, therefore, are proposing to study how armed conflicts impact societies on the one hand and on the other hand how warfare is influenced by societal conditions. By taking an analytical view on the interactions between armed conflicts and societies this book avoids the all too common pitfalls of falling into prescriptive and ideological debates about war. The approaches taken by most of the authors tend to be influenced more by military sociology than by strategic and security studies, as the focus is not about how power is articulated through the use of force, but rather how social dynamics are influencing and influenced by the use of force. Such a perspective provides I would argue a much deeper understanding of the empirical nature of the use of force.

The main critique that I have for this book is the very limited focus on only the American experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this regard, one can note that forty four of the fifty contributors are based in the United States. Many of the chapters are fundamentally about the challenges linked to operations in an expeditionary context, namely the American military operating in a foreign land. Even the chapters related to the establishment of an effective Iraqi or Afghan police force, are about how this brought challenges to the American military. Furthermore, the chapters about the social construction of war and the impact of war on civilians are essentially about the American public debates

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and the impact on American families, respectively. With the exception of a chapter on the Pakistani take on the Afghan conflict, the perspectives of the local armed forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan are for the most part absent from this book. As well, many other countries who were involved in both conflicts and their experiences are barely visible, in spite of the substantive scholarly research on war and society produced in these other countries e.g. the UK. One notable exception is the chapter looking into the Canadian soldiers' narrative about the war in Afghanistan. For these reasons, the title of the book is somewhat misleading, as I feel it should be the "American Handbook of War and Society".

The more important question, however, is whether this book should be added to anyone's collection, especially if one is interested in International Relations. There is no doubt that it should be. Beyond the quality of the scholarship found in the book, and in spite of the narrow focus on the American experience, a better understanding of the interactions between War and Society should inform anyone interested in International Relations. Armed conflicts remain an ostensible feature of the relations between countries and there is no reason to think that this will change in the 21st century. Furthermore, the study of International Relations takes for granted, too often, the military as a docile instrument of the political decision-makers. Military sociology has shown that the military institution has powerful dynamics of its own and is influenced by a number of social forces; both through the pre-enrolment socialization of the personnel and by various indirect social and cultural pressures. These various social dimensions have a significant impact on what a military can and cannot do, or at least how effective it can be in achieving the mandates it receives from the political realm. For instance and as noted in the second chapter of this book, the painful adaptation of any conventional military to irregular warfare is much more than a matter of political and bureaucratic decision-making. It is instead very much about confronting deeply-seated mindsets underwriting the military institution, such as what differentiates a combatant from a non-combatant, the limited overlap between political and military success and the relative importance of the non-military functions of the military. As this book illustrates, the implementation of decisions about and during war are much complex and challenging than taking the political decision to declare war in the defence of freedom and democracy.

To sum up, any serious student of International Relations should be well aware of the issues that are conditioning the capacities of the military in irregular warfare and this book provides an effective way to understand them better through their examination in relation to the lesser known challenges of the Iraq and Afghan conflicts.

About the author:

Dr. Eric Ouellet is an Associate Professor of Defence Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada and at the Canadian Forces College. He is specializing in institutional analysis of the military, irregular warfare and counterinsurgency and strategic military command and decision-making. He has published recently in *Terrorism and Political Violence* on the Institutionalization of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (2014), and on various defence and security related topics in *Contemporary Military Challenges, Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* (2013), *Small Wars and Insurgencies, Canadian Army Journal* (2012), *Journal of Strategic Studies,* and *Defence Studies* (2011).