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Military Morals and Societal Values—Military Virtue versus Bureaucratic Reality

The German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf proposed that we should designate the civil society better as ‘citizen society’ (Bürgergesellschaft),²¹ as civil society puts emphasis on the peaceful character of domestic social relations, but nevertheless, excludes the military. As the military man, no matter whether he is a professional or conscript soldier, should also carry a citizen identity, the understanding of citizen society supports the idea of a social integration of the military.

This is but one attempt in the perennial endeavor to establish not only a factual but also a mental and moral connection between the armed forces and society at large. With the acceleration of the modern civil society into an individualistic and pluralistic organism, this effort has always particularly been impeded by the different sets of values both these social systems represent. In this environment, institutions and organizations of distinct intellectual coherence, such as the military establishment, are being increasingly questioned and become somehow alienated from society. In many respects, the big institutions of western type societies, the nation-state, the church, political parties, but foremost the military have not yet come to terms with this development. To name but two results of this social dynamic, the affluent society erodes the concept of conscription, but also the attractiveness of the soldier’s occupation in general.

However, with the corresponding alteration of the global geopolitical design of security, western military organizations have changed from mere instruments of national defense into mechanisms of international crisis prevention and conflict resolution. A development that, for profound reason, caused many commentators to suggest a *civilianization* of the military. The significantly altered tasks and missions assigned to the armed forces in an internationalized security arena demanded close civil-military cooperation and an extended horizon for efficient military leadership. This progress produced the augmented inclusion of ‘civil’ subjects into the curricula of professional military education. Most recent military interventions undertaken for humanitarian reasons did even generate the idea of the emergence of a new *military humanism*.²²

Nevertheless, this process of civilianization could not terminate the true nature of soldiering and the still distinct character of the military organization in comparison with the civil environment. Consequently, questions like the following have to be asked: Can military and society ever become congruent? Can the civilianization of the military ever be absolute? Should we even wish the soldiers to become totally absorbed by society, by societal values? But also, and very much in contrast: Can perhaps a society consumed by value arbitrariness and relativism be enriched by a Military Ethical Code reaching out beyond the borders of professional ethics?

The Military World

When speaking about the military in the political culture of the West, it has to be underscored in the first place that the military organization is primarily bearing political character. As an instrument of politics, armed forces confer – under the presupposition of the primacy of policy and the willingness of political leadership to make use of this means – any policy with the capacity to self-determination, preservation and restoration of peace, and international cooperation and solidarity.

²¹ Ralf Dahrendorf, „Die Bürgergesellschaft,“ in: *Der moderne soziale Konflikt*, (München: dtv, 1992), 67-73.

²² Noam Chomsky, “The New Military Humanism,” *Lessons from Kosovo*, (London: Pluto Press, 1999).

The antique philosopher Plato has already acknowledged this dependency of the ‘guardians’ on the political sphere. Most interestingly, he related that to the necessity of appropriate education (a term already used by Plato). The guardian has to demonstrate a philosophical inclination to acquire knowledge without intending to become a philosopher himself. For education alone enables the guardian to discriminate between friend and foe, and also protects him from being politically misused.²³

In modern times, this particular relationship between politics and military has been posited by the Prussian theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz, in his so controversially debated dictum that “War is the Continuation of Policy by Other Means”.²⁴ That the art of politics precedes the art of war hints, among other things, at the fact that the political factors are cardinal to the mere military ones. Therefore one has to bear in mind that armed forces find their position and societal integration in a comprehensive political context only.

Consequently, as with any other occupation, the professional culture of the military rests with the purpose of the military organization and the tasks it is supposed to fulfill for the political system. The suitability of military forces primarily lies in the aptitude of putting through the interests of the nation under the exceptional circumstances of armed conflict. This allows a conclusion on the nature of the military, which has to be seen in the ability to legitimately threaten with or apply the use of force. From this capability then, namely to endure successfully the conditions of armed conflict, derive the requirements of military education and training that lead to the peculiarities of the military world—physical and psychic strain, discipline, hierarchical structures, strict relations between command and obedience, and all those other features that help to prevent the cohesion of any part of the military establishment from breaking up under the most challenging and strenuous conditions of any situation of armed conflict.

In other words, out of the function of the military follows its organization. It is, thus, for a broad ensemble of reasons why the institution of the military organization is so distinct from the character of other organizations we find in the same political systems. While nowadays the increasing internationalization of security as well as the multiple interdependencies between its military and non-military components fosters a *functional* bond between armed forces and civil organizations, the *institutional* separation of the military from the civil parts of society remains a fact. Whereas the military has integrated itself into a political structure that is characterized by the supremacy of policy and has adapted itself to the bureaucratic arrangements of modern political administration, it remains with the exclusive task to prepare and, if need be, apply violence and force. Although the military has in large measure assumed the character of civil organizations, and in spite of the fact that the distance between civil and military elites has diminished, the lasting mission to fight and endure armed conflict remains the key to the understanding of the distinctive nature of the military.

It is exactly this aptitude and readiness to apply force and to put one’s own and the life of others at risk that necessitates personalities who are actually and in the true sense of the word willing to take on this specific kind of responsibility for themselves and for others.

According to Aristotle, particular vocations require people of suitable temperament and disposition. Very much in this vein, it was Clausewitz again who, with officers in mind, wrote “every special calling in life, if it is to be followed with success, requires peculiar qualifications of understanding and soul.”²⁵ The individual is free to choose, of course, whether or not to seek membership in his country’s officer corps. But he (or she) is not free to decide what it means to be a professional soldier, much less an outstanding one.

²³ Plato, *Politeia*, 376 b-c.

²⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), Book One, 76.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 138.

This distinctive character of the military and the ensuing essential *Chasm of Values*²⁶ between the armed forces and society has been described in various ways. The gap has been depicted as the difference between the conventional set of values the military stands for, as opposed to the post-conventional set of values represented by modern society. While the *Civilian Logic* is utilitarian and self-centered, the *Military Ethos* is altruistic and directed toward a collective immaterial good, at the end of which the exclusive chance of physical sacrifice still awaits the individual soldier. At bottom, the tensions and even, at times, irreconcilable differences between a soldier's and a civilian's mind derive from a dilemma that is essentially of ethical nature.

The divergence has even been driven up to the stage of the theorem of incompatibility, a theory that can be traced back to the enthusiastic early days of both the technological and democratic revolution of the nineteenth century, claiming the structural inability of highly civilized societies to wage wars. As reasons for this incapacity, factors such as the technological vulnerability of modern communication societies, or mental and psychological deficits on the part of both citizens and soldiers are being blamed.²⁷ Although the incompatibility theorem has generally proven false in the course of history, it helps us to grasp the normative and systematic differences between the armed forces and their social environment.

What the theory of incompatibility demonstrates though is the need for military organizations to generate legitimacy and acceptance. In the manifold interdependencies and processes of exchange between civil society and military, it is striking to note the extent to which military institutions have been remarkably open to social change in certain respects, while deeply hostile to others. In general, armed forces normally insist on obtaining the latest high technology, but do, at the same time, also practice the most ancient and seemingly anachronistic rituals.

On the one hand, it has been profoundly shown by social scientific research that, for instance, the United States military has clearly done better than any other American institution in terms of racial integration and redressing racial wrongs. The fact that they were not equally successful in arranging gender issues cannot distort the fact that the military sometimes even leads the way in social change of the most desirable sort. Truman's integration order may have presented an external imposition upon the military of a universalistic moral principle, while civilian society at the time displayed little commitment to racial integration.²⁸

On the other hand, creating a personal soldierly identity based upon the virtues of chivalry and martial honor is still seen by many as constitutive for good soldiering. In this respect it is also interesting to note that a large part of the modern laws of war has developed simply as a codification and universalization of the customs and conventions of vocational and professional soldiery, something, in essence, so distinct from normal social life. This argues for a stress on professionalism as the ultimate value of soldiery—a sort of modern substitute for chivalry. But much of civilian society tends to discharge martial honor or a virtue code of honor as antiquarian, just as many professional soldiers disparage civilian society as decadent or morally corrupt.

It appears as if a timeless thread of values accompanies the military profession from the time of Plato's Republic, where he introduces four cardinal virtues—justice, prudence, courage, temperance, “cardinal” (cardo—to hinge upon) to any good soldier, up to our time. For instance, during Operation Desert Storm, Joint Chief of Staff General Colin Powell, in deciding not to pursue retreating Iraqi troops, explained his decision on the grounds that their destruction would be “un-

²⁶ Compare Robert Maginnis, “A Chasm of Values”, in: *73 Military Review* 2, 1993.

²⁷ For more information on the Theory of Incompatibility: Wolfgang R. Vogt (ed.), *Militär als Gegenkultur. Streitkräfte im Wandel der Gesellschaft*, Opladen: 1986; but also Edwin R. Micewski, *Streitkräfte und gesellschaftlicher Wertewandel*, Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift, Volume 3 / 1995, Vienna 1995.

²⁸ Mark J. Osiel, *Obeying Orders, Atrocity, Military Discipline, and the Law of War*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 31.

American and unchivalrous". In this case, as in many others, the internal morality of soldiering proved more restrictive and humanitarian than international law.²⁹

Taking into account the importance of pronounced discipline, order, hierarchy, division of functions, and, to some extent, the supremacy of society over the individual as timeless qualities of soldierly duty, it becomes quite clear that integrating soldiers fully into the values and institutions of civilian society would likely weaken the distinctive nature and task of the organization.

In the US, a distinguished commission concluded that "discipline—a state of mind which leads to willingness to obey an order no matter how unpleasant or dangerous...—is not a characteristic of a civilian community".³⁰ Thus, for instance, it seems as if the virtue of discipline can best be cultivated in some degree of isolation from the secular temptations and material gratifications of contemporary society. Not only the U.S. Supreme Court has long recognized that the military is, by necessity, a specialized society separate from civilian society. Or as a senior officer noted, "no space after the values necessary to defend a democratic society are often at odds with the values of the society itself."³¹ This is not to imply that the nature of military values and meaning of soldiers honor are immutable. The precise normative commitments of this separate community have shifted significantly over time and will continue to do so. Naturally, modern Western society no longer allows one to cultivate the virtues of the Homeric hero or Samurai warrior, but historic ideals of martial honor can be reinterpreted in ways that make them practically sustainable within a partially insulated subcommunity of that larger society.

In essence, apart from convergence with civilian labor markets for certain kinds of technical expertise or management strategies, not only the US armed forces have effectively resisted the most significant normative forms of civilianization. Exposure to command and obedience, strict discipline, physical and psychic strain, none of this could be taken away from the military, and presumably never will.

Civil Society

But what is the constitution of this civil or citizen society nowadays? The findings and diagnoses might be slightly different; nevertheless, there is much agreement on major aspects.

Sociologists like Max Weber, Emil Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Talcott Parsons have described to us from various viewpoints the process of Individualization, the transformation of the traditional societies, which were characterized by status and caste hierarchies, to the modern type of individualized societies with the individual extracted from given forms of sociability and exposed to increased individual liberties.³² Now, by referring to factors such as economic wealth and social-political mobility, with further erosion of cultural-social milieus and the enlargement of one's operational room to move, the Second Wave of Individualization is being introduced. The social result of which, in a word by Michael Waltzer, is *unsettlement*. A term we should truly not only take physically.

It does not come as a surprise that egotism and moral relativism are societal features nowadays, with a tendency to find moral responsibility in institutions and society rather than in the individual. Freedom has assumed the understanding of actually being a license to do what one wants—something Alexis deTocquille had already denoted as 'degenerated freedom'—; and tolerance has

²⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁰ From a report to the Secretary of the Army (Powell Report), quoted in David Schlueter, *Military Criminal Justice. Practice and Procedure*, 1996, in: Osiel, 26.

³¹ Osil, *ibid.*, 27.

³² Axel Honneth, „Individualisierung und Gemeinschaft,“ in: Christel Zahlmann (ed.), *Kommunitarismus in der Diskussion. Eine streitbare Einführung* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1994), 18.

turned into something that comes fairly close to moral apathy, being an excuse for a lack of judgmental power or will to judge rather than a strength of character.

An empirical analysis of modern society brings about an ambivalent result. The increase in individual freedom and self-determination is opposed by insecurity and orientation deficiencies. The heretofore unknown degree of personal and political liberty is contrasted by the phenomenon of de-solidarization. The ambivalence between tendencies of globalization and fragmentation that we encounter on the level of international relations finds its reflection in the sphere of individual, human relations. What we come across as exaggerated nationalism or fundamentalism on the global scale we find as egocentrism and indifference among people and citizens. The question of how to knit the social band in spite of all individual goals and preferences is thus of paramount importance on all stages of social relations.

Alasdair MacIntyre points at this very problem of today's society by revealing an even more crucial aspect. Beyond the phenomenon of individualization with the ensuing differentiation of interests and values, is not primarily the pluralism of values that constitutes the dilemma; it is rather something that he designates by reference to analytical philosophy as 'emotivism'. Emotivism stands for the idea that the judgments made by people in modern societies are normally only expressions of feelings, predilections, or preferences. The judgments do not bear any morally binding evidence. Whatever one believes in or stands for is equally valid. Not interested in the philosophical significance of this moral doctrine, but in its social efficacy, he points out that people think, speak, and act as if this emotivism was true, no matter what their own individual standpoint is. His diagnosis is that this emotivistic approach has taken hold in the consciousness of our societies with the result of profound arbitrariness and a lack of solidarity and loyalty on the part of individuals.

The modern liberal nation-state, including its major institutions, faces the challenge of finding comprehensive decisions of vital political interest, e.g. in the sphere of foreign affairs or security policy. The ever greater asymmetry of rights and duties of individual citizens results in a lack of loyalty and identification, a process exacerbated by the demographic alterations taking place in the human composition of modern affluent societies. Nevertheless, even the socio-culturally most liberated individual can only survive if it is socially and politically, meaning fore mostly also, institutionally embedded.

Connected with this and particularly relevant to the military sphere, we have to acknowledge the phenomenon that in this world of profane rationality, neither religion nor philosophy or fine arts can provide social norms and sufficient guidance to moral thinking and acting. Modern societies lost the environment of traditional morality. While the micro-level of societies dissolves into randomness, unresponsiveness, and insensitivity, the traditional institutions to be found on the macro-level of societies such as state authorities, churches and other large-scale realms of education or economy lose their historical value-generating and solidarity-creating influence.

Social and moral-psychological role of social characters are no longer merging. The managerial character of today's society is no longer the moral center of attitudes and convictions, and his decisions are being taken without deeper rational justification. The modern Self has no kernel, and since it can assume any role or take on any standpoint, it is lacking a necessary social identity.³³

As we are obviously living in an era of a tragedy of values and morals, the normative moral universe of the officer appears to be alien to and in modern society. But whatever the case may be, the current norms, if there are any, of civil society do by no means constitute a superior moral system that soldiers could possibly desire to share.

³³ Alasdair MacIntyre, „After Virtue.“ *A Study in Moral Theory* (New York: Campus, 1987), 52 - 54.

Military and Society—What is the Solution?

As far as modern society is away from being militarized, as far is the military away from being civilized to the extent of being totally absorbed by the value system of society. Given the socio-political diagnosis of modern society, the perennial aporia between the soldier's and the civilian's world seems to emerge in a more pronounced form than ever before.

Challenges are resting on both parts. One of the biggest challenges to society appears to be the overcoming of a rigorous fragmentation that threatens, at least in the long run, the coherence of open societies. This can only be accomplished by reestablishing the logical hierarchy and rationality of our moral and social attitudes and commitments. One of the biggest challenges to the military appears to be the finding of the proper measure to which they go along with modern society, incorporating civil attitudes, values, and principles, while not surrendering the core values of soldiering. Making clear to society why not giving way totally to civilianization by, at the same time, not endangering the existence of democratic societies seems to be the central task of military-civil dialogue.

Most astoundingly, the altered signature of the post-Cold War security environment can assist the military in this respect. The emergence of the concept of comprehensive security has also drastically altered the tasks and missions carried out by the armed forces. A considerable amount of initially nontraditional tasks, be they of humanitarian, ecological, human rights or social nature, came into the grasp of military organizations. This is due to the fact that those tasks can only be dealt with by, or by assistance of, institutions and organizations that have the required organizational structure, the personal and material resources, appropriate means of communications and the ability to both act and react rapidly. Military forces will, thus, play a significant role in the 'new' security policy as they are inevitable in coping with the manifold categories of strategic and operative security measures within the framework of crisis and conflict prevention and general peace support.

While the armed forces become an inexorable stabilizing element of conjoint, supranational politics, they, by and large, lose their classical function as being a mere maintaining factor of national power politics.

In this respect, commentators speak about the constabularization³⁴ of armed forces. This new development offers risks, but also great chances. Above all, soldier and armed forces stand a good chance to found a new identity which turns away from the mere functionality of the threat and, if need be, the application of force, to the image of an instrument which contributes efficiently to a stable and vital subsistence of not only the own countrymen but the whole of mankind.³⁵

However, the core of soldiering, which even under the altered conditions of security has to be seen in the application of physical force, can never be terminated. The realms of civil society and military organization can never be totally aligned. The paradox appears to be that each sphere, despite their radically different *Weltanschauung*, seems to depend upon the other for its existence. The solution, then, can only be to ensure some measure of formalized insulation of each, so that

³⁴ This concept has already been introduced – with great foresight – by Morris Janowitz in 1971. For more on this compare Chapter VIII, Epilogue: "Toward the Constabulary Concept," in: Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier. A Social and Political Portrait*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1971), 417 and following. The concept, however, makes sense to a certain degree only. It goes too far when attempts are being made to ignore the difference between peacetime and wartime and civilian and military organizations, in the sense of drawing a picture of the soldier as being just a martially looking policeman. The motives which might drive such approaches notwithstanding, military forces need to be adept at carrying out traditional combat missions although those missions might no longer remain in the foreground of armed forces task profiles.

³⁵ Compare Gustav Däniker, „Wende Golfkrieg,“ *Vom Wesen und Gebrauch zukünftiger Streitkräfte* (Frankfurt a. M.: Report Verlag, 1992), here in particular his Seven Theses, 165-188.

neither will corrupt the other. If this is simply be viewed as a form of *institutional differentiation*, as Niklas Luhmann called it, it would be functional for society at large no less than for soldiers themselves. The final answer and resolution to the challenge is as old as it is timelessly relevant. And the remedy lies in what is one basic feature of modern society at which it is great at—education and communication. A *bridge of understanding* needs to be thrown between the shores of the civilian and the military continent, something that can only be managed by information. To overcome the lack of insight into the true nature of the military world as well as the recurrent ideological and irrational resentments toward the military is the chief task in this respect.

It appears to be conceivable that the intellectual dialogue with the civil society and the conveyance of a military ethos can help to resolve the dilemma of indifference and solidarity on the part of society. Nevertheless, if and how this can be accomplished is something that remains to be deliberated upon at some other point.

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