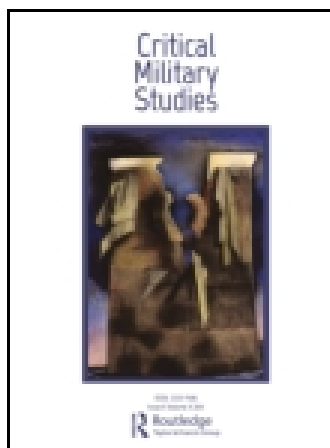


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Critical Military Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcms20>

### What is Critical Military Studies?

Victoria M. Basham<sup>a</sup>, Aaron Belkin<sup>b</sup> & Jess Gifkins<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Exeter

<sup>b</sup> San Francisco State University

Published online: 17 Feb 2015.



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To cite this article: Victoria M. Basham, Aaron Belkin & Jess Gifkins (2015) What is Critical Military Studies?, *Critical Military Studies*, 1:1, 1-2, DOI: [10.1080/23337486.2015.1006879](https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2015.1006879)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2015.1006879>

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## EDITORIAL

### What is Critical Military Studies?

In the summer of 2011, this journal's founding editors came together at an interdisciplinary conference on "Military methodologies", at Newcastle University. The conversation that ensued was an attempt to articulate a niggling sense of what it was that distinguished the rich body of work that we were engaging with and engaged in from most of the rest of military and security studies. It would of course be wrong to suggest that the body of work we came to speak of as "critical military studies" can be defined purely in contradistinction to the wider field of military and security studies. Whilst in some part born of frustrations about this wider field's propensity to interpret critique solely as a means through which to offer recommendations for the improvement of military policy, critical military studies is its own productive and proactive field of inquiry that moves beyond a simple oppositional stance.

Neither is critical military studies a static or precise field of inquiry. Yet it does possess some common characteristics. As Cynthia Enloe's contribution to this inaugural issue puts it, to be critical about military power is to be "sceptically curious" about its character, representation, application, and effects. In approaching military power as a question, rather than taking it for granted, critical military studies more readily engages in a sceptical curiosity about how it works – often through a variety of social and domestic political agendas that may bear no relation to the role of protecting the nation from foreign threats. The kinds of engagements provoked by critical military studies problematize the idea that a neat boundary can be delineated between what is 'military' and what is 'civilian' or otherwise. Indeed, a recurring theme within this inaugural issue is exploring the transitions from civilian life to military service (particularly the articles by Enloe and Hanasik) which do not occur in a linear or straightforward way. Another is the ways in which military apparatuses classify and bureaucratize bodies and minds shaped by combat, and the defiance of those classifications by other bodies and the very bodies they seek to order (see particularly MacLeish, Wool and Serlin). These articles highlight well how the distinctions between what is "inside" the military and what is "outside" the military are thus constantly shifting. Indeed, critical military studies as a sceptically curious endeavour also acknowledges that our very conceptions of military power, militarism, and militarization are themselves open to critique and reimagining. It is in prioritizing the "in-between" – the neither exclusively military nor singularly civilian – that critical military studies can expose such tensions and problematize military power in its multiple manifestations.

Another key feature of critical military studies is its interdisciplinarity. Though the wider field of military and security studies is populated by scholars representing multiple disciplines, critical military studies necessitates *interdisciplinary* approaches. This is reflected not so much by the diverse range of nominal disciplinary "homes" of critical military scholars, but in the literatures, modes of inquiry, and diverse forms of representation and media that those scholars utilize. This interdisciplinarity enables new avenues for curious scepticism by drawing together diverse approaches to address both emerging and longstanding issues. There are no limits to the range of disciplines that can offer original

insights to the study of the military and military institutions from critical perspectives, but it is the synthesis of these that perhaps best characterizes the creative capacity of critical military studies.


To this end, the methodological plurality of critical military studies and its engagement with the politics of positionality stands out markedly from more traditional social scientific approaches to the military and security and their often atheoretical, apolitical, and largely quantitative stances. What perhaps unites critical military studies in methodological terms, though, is a shared desire to question how military institutions, practices, processes, and geographies are an outcome of social practices and political contestation. In critical military studies, nothing is taken for granted as natural or inevitable, but the ongoing processes of construction, constitution, and contestation are explored. The approaches we take therefore prioritize paying much greater attention to how military power operates, how it has come to work in the ways it does, and what its limits might be. For some, this warrants complex and messy interpersonal qualitative encounters with those who articulate and are themselves articulations of military power, including researchers themselves. To be critical is not to be dismissive, therefore, as Rech et al. demonstrate herein. Rather, it is to stay open to the possibility that our curiosity and scepticism can be used to shed much-needed light on our blind spots and to bring about social and political change.

For others, critical military studies might entail looking very closely at the ways that military practices and processes are represented and come to represent social and political life. Visual images are at the forefront of the ways in which military violence is remembered, memorialized, consumed, and inscribed with meaning. Although the public are well aware that images can be fictionalized, as Kaplan discusses herein, photographs and satellite imagery are still often treated by media outlets as if they hold some kind of truth. Critical military studies engages directly with such politics of representation and often does so using diverse media. Indeed, such engagements form a significant part of the journal's "Encounters" section where, in this inaugural issue, Hanasik, melding images and prose, explores military towns, grief, and American warrior masculinity, breaking down the boundaries between public and private, military and civilian; and Hobbs, combining dialogue, immersion, and music, explores ideas around memorialization and the inexhaustible site.

*Critical Military Studies* is the outcome of a particular conversation but also of many conversations held prior and since. Such conversations have involved a number of people who have supported our hunch that the significance of those very dialogues warranted a journal to act as a conduit for their continuation. From associate editors and editorial board members to those we've had conversations with in conference venue hallways, over email and via social media, we would like to thank you all sincerely for your support. We offer *Critical Military Studies* as our invitation to join the conversation and we look forward to your submissions.

## ORCID

Victoria M. Basham  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8829-5119>

Victoria M. Basham   
University of Exeter

Aaron Belkin  
San Francisco State University

Jess Gifkins  
University of Exeter