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GENTLEMAN-BUREAUCRAT MASCULINITIES AND UK NATIONAL SECURITY POLICYMAKING

Hannah Wright

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Introduction

As the introduction to this handbook notes, studies of masculinities in the context of conflict and insecurity have tended to focus on men who commit or are on the receiving end of direct physical violence, for example as military personnel or members of non-state armed groups. While still addressing how masculinities contribute to militarism and violence, this chapter[1] explores the masculinities of civilian men in a national security bureaucracy who, while they do not directly wield weapons themselves, are nonetheless an integral part of the systems that produce, legitimise, and perpetuate state violence and militarisation. I aim to show that while bureaucratic masculinities may sound mundane or even boring it is precisely the perceived banality of these organisations and their practices that makes the study of them so important. Indeed, they play a critical role in constructing many systems of state violence – from war-making to policing to border enforcement and beyond – as mundane, unremarkable, and therefore unworthy of serious challenge. Furthermore, as both the analysis of and proposed remedies for 'militarised masculinities' tend to focus disproportionately on poor and racially marked men in the Global South (Duriesmith, 2017; Wright, 2020; Brown & de Jonge Oudraat, this volume), this chapter hopes to help redress this problem by exploring how the masculinities of global elites, shaped by whiteness and economic privilege, help to reproduce the war system.

I begin by outlining insights from the literature on masculinities in security policymaking before going on to illustrate my arguments with an example from my own ethnographically influenced research with civil servants from UK government departments involved in national security policymaking. I characterise the central organisational 'script' to which security officials are expected to conform as one oriented around 'gentleman-bureaucrat masculinity', shaped by these organisations' historical domination by class-privileged white men. I argue that because the performance of gentleman-bureaucrat masculinity is understood as signifying the objectivity and political neutrality that civil servants are required to uphold, it has the effect of framing the ideas they express as similarly objective. Using examples from discussions about UK counterterrorism policy, I argue that these ideas are undergirded by an ideological commitment to liberal militarism, constructed as a non-excessive form of militarism whose violence is rule-abiding and unremarkable. Finally, through highlighting the continuities between the masculine performance of security officials and

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the way they construct the liberal militarist masculinity of the British state, I argue that the two are mutually reinforcing. I conclude that seemingly banal bureaucratic masculinities in fact do important work in upholding the impression that the militaristic worldview at the heart of UK national security policymaking is a natural reflection of 'just the way things are'.

Masculinities in security policymaking

There exists a large body of literature on how gender shapes political and policymaking organisations, a smaller subset of which addresses foreign, defence, and national security policymaking (e.g. Dean, 2001; Koch & Fulton, 2011; Neumann, 2012; Bashevkin, 2014; McCarthy, 2014; Schramm & Stark, 2020). A great deal of this research focuses on women in legislatures, ministerial positions, or diplomacy, often examining the barriers to advancement they experience in the masculinised field of security (McCarthy, 2014; Niklasson & Towns, 2017; Niklasson & Robertson, 2018). A few studies also address men and masculinities, such as Neumann's (2012) ethnography of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which analyses a class-inflected hierarchy of masculinities among diplomats. Little of this literature, however, examines how gender in policymaking organisations shapes the content of policy discussions, as opposed to the experiences and opportunities available to policymakers or diplomats of different genders. Most studies that do pose this question investigate how the presence of female policymakers influences decision-making, for example on defence spending, aid allocation, or initiating militarised international disputes (Koch & Fulton, 2011; Bashevkin, 2014; Schramm & Stark, 2020). However, in contrast to the critical masculinities lens adopted in this volume, these studies tend to treat gender as a variable, represented by the seemingly fixed and homogenised category of 'women', rather than asking how masculinities and femininities shape security policymaking. While some quantitative studies acknowledge the mediating influence of gender norms on policymakers' behaviour (Koch & Fulton, 2011; Schramm & Stark, 2020), they capture little of what feminist scholarship has to say about how gender and intersecting power relations not only regulate the performances of individuals but fundamentally constitute the discourses from which policy decisions emerge. Counting women (or men) reveals little about the workings of power if not accompanied by, for example, analysis of the multiple constructions of masculinity and femininity they encounter in their organisations or of national security discourses in each context and the gendered meanings they invoke.

A considerable amount of feminist research has focused on public performances of masculinity by political leaders as they relate to national security. These demonstrate, for example, how the masculine posturings of George Bush Senior and Junior toward Iraq were used to build support for military interventions (Niva, 1998; Ducat, 2004; Messerschmidt, 2010) or how Barack Obama's public construction of a demilitarised masculinity helped to obscure the reality that his administration was escalating the so-called War on Terror rather than ending it (Cannen, 2014). This literature on public rhetoric helps to explain how militaristic and colonial national security policies are sold to or concealed from sceptical publics; however, far fewer studies address the inner workings of national security policymaking from a masculinities perspective. Doing so is important, I suggest, because if feminist researchers are correct in asserting that constructions of masculinity and femininity play a causal or constitutive role in producing militaristic approaches to security (Cohn & Ruddick, 2004; Cockburn, 2010; Duncanson, 2013), then examining the machinations of those organisations responsible for coming up with national security policies and strategies would seem to be particularly important to understanding how militarism is reproduced. Thinking from an anti-militarist feminist perspective (Cohn & Ruddick, 2004; Duncanson, 2017), understanding the processes through which militarism is sustained is crucial to imagining how those processes can be interrupted and transformed in emancipatory ways.

The few studies that do investigate how masculinities shape national security decision-making in policymaking organisations demonstrate the rich insights that can be gleaned from such settings. For example, Carol Cohn's (1987, 1989, 1993) ethnography of US defence intellectuals in the 1980s explores how masculinist systems of meaning make certain policy positions appear thinkable while others are taken off the table altogether. Cohn observed that in a defence research centre which had a 'revolving door' to the policy establishment, some behaviours, ideas, or topics were coded as feminine, including any discussion of the destruction wrought by nuclear war on human bodies (see also Acheson, this volume). Because that which is coded feminine was devalued in this masculinist organisational culture, it was exceptionally difficult for defence intellectuals to be seen to be taking a feminised position, and so they regulated their behaviour to avoid being perceived as weak or feminine. Certain conversations or arguments, she suggests, including those which showed concern for the "bloody reality" of war and its impact on human lives, were "*pre-empted* by gender discourse, and by the feelings evoked by living up to or transgressing gender codes" (Cohn, 1993: 230, 232, emphasis original). Similarly, Robert D. Dean's (2001) study of the US foreign policy establishment in the 1960s and 1970s tracks how this exclusive community of elite white men constructed a "warrior-intellectual" masculinity (p. 13) that shaped the deliberations of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations over whether to escalate or withdraw from military intervention in Vietnam. Despite officials' acknowledging the lack of military justification for continued escalation and the likelihood and costs of defeat, Dean argues that "deeply ingrained ideologies of elite masculinity" made the prospect of military withdrawal "unthinkable" (2001: 234).

Cohn's and Dean's studies demonstrate how masculinist organisational cultures in national security settings help to produce militarism as a natural and inevitable feature of the world and make it difficult for policymakers to challenge militaristic thinking. When asking how patriarchal gender relations undergird militarism and the war system, then, we should examine not only military masculinities or the hyper-masculine performances of those directly committing acts of armed violence but the less overtly macho masculinities of civil men whose work is nonetheless central to reproducing of systems of state violence. Indeed, as I will suggest in the next section, it is precisely the perceived banality of some of these masculinities that makes them so powerful in naturalising and legitimising militarism. Moreover, I suggest there is a need to account for the interrelations between patriarchy, capitalism, coloniality, and state violence, therefore opening more scope for understanding how these masculinities are shaped by race, class, and other axes of power. In what follows, I outline some findings from my research on masculinities among UK national security policymakers and how these can inform our understanding of how militarism is sustained and reproduced.

Constructing the gentleman-bureaucrat

In 2017–18 I undertook an ethnographically influenced study of organisational cultures within the UK national security community, focusing on policymakers in the fields of counterterrorism and Women, Peace, and Security (see Wright, 2020, 2021, 2023).[2] Based on participant observation and interviews with civil servants, the study sought to understand how organisational cultures in government departments are gendered, racialised, and classed and whether and how constructions of (racially and class-coded) masculinities and femininities in these settings reproduced militaristic and colonial ways of thinking and speaking about security policies. In particular, I was interested in the gendered systems of meaning that were invoked in policy discussions, such as how different security actors or policy positions were masculinised or feminised; the embodied performances of masculinity and femininity to which officials were expected to conform; and the ways in which different kinds of knowledge were gendered, racialised and classed and with what implications for policy processes.

Although organisational culture is continually produced and reproduced such that it changes over time, the character of an organisation's culture is nonetheless profoundly shaped by its history. The UK national security community has, perhaps even more so than other parts of the Civil Service, historically been the preserve of middle- and upper-class white men. In the Foreign Office, for example, women were only present as housekeepers and typists until diplomatic roles were opened up to them in 1946, with the proportion of women senior diplomats still capped at 10% and women expected to resign upon getting married up until 1972, which prevented many from rising to senior ranks (Crowe et al., 2018). While no formal bar existed based on race or ethnicity, a memorandum was circulated in 1951 stating that "a person of manifestly un-English appearance or speech" should not be allowed to represent the UK overseas, and the assumption that Black and Asian people were insufficiently loyal to the country was evidenced in internal documents throughout the 1960s (Southern, 2018; Lomas, 2021). The imperial ruling class, including civil servants and colonial administrators, was predominantly white, male, and drawn from Britain's fee-paying public schools[3] and elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. Although today's national security community is considerably more diverse, organisational cultures in the Civil Service bear the hallmarks of this history and the gentlemanly masculinity these institutions explicitly sought to cultivate (Mason, 1993; Puwar, 2004).

When I asked national security officials what qualities or behaviours they thought were needed in order to be taken seriously in policy discussions, their answers demonstrated consistent themes. Officials described an expectation to perform in a way that included being confident, decisive, and assertive but not verbose; emotionally reserved, measured, and level-headed; comfortable with confrontation and debate; and to speak concisely but not too quickly. Many officials identified these workplace norms as being linked to masculinity, whiteness, and middle- to upper-class status, and the cultures of the elite educational institutions that feed the Civil Service, which aim to produce the "right sort of chap" (Watson, 1994: 213). They conveyed that officials tended to be taken more seriously if they adhered to these norms regardless of their own gender, racial, or class background, though this was more difficult for officials who had not already been socialised into this habitus[4] through their schooling or familial upbringing. These embodied performances were summarised by several officials through the concept of 'gravitas', an attribute highly valued in the national security community and culturally associated with masculinity. As one official explained:

> [G]ravitas is really important. Gravitas is read in all the sort of traditional ways that you would expect it to be: old but not too old, male but not hyper-masculine. It's exactly what you'd expect it to be. The ability to make a directional and decisive argument and say it carefully in front of people, slowly and understandably: all of that's really important.

Due to its longstanding association with power, this manner of speaking appears as "the hegemonic language, the voice of reason" and therefore "a central element of the corporeality of authority" (Puwar, 2004: 111). In particular, this gentlemanly performance was closely associated with the central obligation of the bureaucrat to be an objective, politically neutral, rational processor of information, unmoved by emotion, personal interests, or investments. For example, one official explained how credibility and the perception of neutrality are attributed to those who "present arguments in the right way":

> You always go for understatement, rather than overstatement. . . . If you say, "This is completely awful and terrible and unacceptable", you will be to some extent treated less seriously. You'll be treated like a lobbyist, or somebody who's got advocacy points to make. Whereas

> if you present facts as cold as you can, and as unemotively, and use tentative conclusions, you are perceived to be allowing the facts to speak for themselves, and that is perceived to be more intellectual and credible.

By separating the lobbyist who is emotive from the bureaucrat who is "cold", "unemotive", and therefore "intellectual and credible", this official invokes a (gendered and racialised) dichotomy between the emotional and the intellectual. The distinction relies on a notion of scientific objectivity which requires that knowledge production be detached from the interests, emotions, and political investments of the knower in order to be considered objective (Code, 1993). The appearance of objectivity is reinforced not only through particular ways of speaking and bodily comportment but also through the expected writing style of civil servants, characterised by short, declarative sentences with no unnecessary adjectives or adverbs. This masculine-coded style, in which the absence of the first person in the text renders the writer invisible, is one in which "text is presented as if it is a natural reflection of experienced reality, a transparent window on the world, reflecting pure truth" (Hooper, 2001: 131). However, just as feminists have argued that knowledge construed as objective often reflects the interests and biases of socially privileged subjects (Haraway, 1988; Code, 1993; Collins, 2014) – particularly white, class-privileged men – the construction of the bureaucrat as a neutral information processor who is "allowing the facts to speak for themselves" conceals the inherently political character of security policy discussions and the epistemological standpoints they privilege.

The persistence of gentleman-bureaucrat masculinity as the organisational 'script' to which securocrats feel they must adhere in order to be taken seriously has several implications. Perhaps most obviously, it creates extra cognitive labour for those who do not 'fit' this norm due to their prior socialisation – predominantly women, people of colour, and working-class officials. These historically excluded groups spoke about, for example, the additional effort taken to code-switch by changing their accents, tone of voice, or bodily gestures in the workplace (McCluney et al., 2019). Women, for example, were sometimes told that they lacked the gravitas to advance to senior roles, whereupon the qualities they needed to cultivate were described to them as what one official called "an old, Etonian, white, male definition of gravitas". However, I argue that it also has an impact on which kinds of ideas are taken seriously. As I outline in the next section, a hegemonic approach to security, which transcends party political divides and might be characterised as a kind of 'liberal militarism' (Edgerton, 1991; Stavrianakis, 2016; Rossdale, 2019), has been so successfully constructed as objective and common-sensical that it is difficult to name and describe, let alone challenge in policy discussions.

Legitimising liberal militarism

Feminist research has demonstrated how the discursive links between militarism and constructions of masculinity often work to legitimise militaristic responses to conflict (Tickner, 1992; Cohn, 1993, 2019; Hutchings, 2008; Acheson, this volume). In the UK national security community, I found gender discourses to be implicated in the construction of British security policies and practices as embodying a kind of liberal militarism. The term 'liberal militarism' was coined to describe a form of militarism characterised by high-tech weapons, a strong industrial base, and the end of mass conscription (Edgerton, 1991) but also describes how this form of militarism is ideologically constructed. While the liberal state has often been built on colonial conquest, its militaristic practices are often discursively produced as law-abiding, restrained in their use of force, and led by democratic and humanitarian values (Khalili, 2013; Stavrianakis, 2016; Rossdale, 2019). As Stavrianakis (2016)

points out, international laws and norms regulating the use of force have been disproportionately shaped by rich and powerful states in ways that authorise the kind of high-tech violence they are equipped to wield, enabling the violence of powerful liberal states to appear legitimate in comparison to criminalised, low-tech forms constructed as 'illiberal'. I suggest that constructions of masculinity, including that of the gentleman-bureaucrat, play a role in maintaining this discursive dichotomy between liberal and illiberal violence and so in legitimising the violence of the British state.

In discussions among UK officials about counterterrorism and in my interviews with counterterrorism policymakers, I observed patterns in how they framed the UK's approach to counterterrorism, which combined military and criminal justice approaches with upstream efforts to pre-empt violence through counter-extremism measures. In analysing these conversations, I examined how they invoked gendered systems of meaning drawing on recognisable constructions of masculinity and femininity that are sedimented in national security discourses (Cohn, 1993, 2013). The military and policing elements of counterterrorism were characterised by officials as "tough stuff", "chasing bad guys", and "the hard end stuff that everyone thinks works and you have to do", invoking a rugged, heroic masculinity that frames militarism as the natural consequence of a realistic worldview. However, the addition of so-called 'soft' activities such as strategic communications to counter 'extremist' narratives and overseas aid to address the grievances that non-state armed groups draw on was framed by officials as demonstrating a "careful" and "thought-through" approach that values "understand[ing] why [terrorists] have gotten to that place". This latter framing invokes a softer, rational, but empathetic masculinity that officials framed as being more "evolved" compared to the more gung-ho militarism of the early years of the War on Terror. In combining these two approaches, British counterterrorism was discursively linked to a hybrid masculinity – often invoked elsewhere in national security discourses – that is tough and comfortable with the use of violence but also measured and compassionate (Niva, 1998; Khalili, 2011; Streicher, 2012; Duncanson, 2015).

This construction of the national security state has a longer history in narratives about the British Empire, in which the military has often framed its commitment to winning 'hearts and minds' alongside the use of force as a distinctly British approach (Dixon, 2009). More broadly, state narratives about the UK's role as a world power often position the UK as being moderate, restrained, and reasonable, eschewing overly aggressive displays of militarism, and playing the brains to the United States' brawn (Duncanson & Eschle, 2008; Christensen & Ferree, 2008; Duncanson, 2013). This conception of state identity was historically linked to an "imperial class" of white, elite-educated men portrayed as administering and upholding the empire "with the minimum use of force, and with consideration for the governed that would inspire a minimum of resentment" (Mason, 1993: 12) – a notion of British decency and restraint that belies the often-brutal reality of British imperial rule. This moderate masculine image was explicitly linked to whiteness and upper-class *noblesse oblige* and constructed in relation to the subordinate, racially marked masculinities and femininities of the colonised (Hall, 1989, 1992; Sinha, 1995). Similarly, the "evolved", non-excessive masculinity of British counterterrorism today is framed in opposition to the racialised "bad guys" it pursues, kills, or incarcerates, whose use of violence is constructed as excessive and illiberal.

It will not have escaped notice that there are striking continuities between the discursive construction of the masculinity of the British security state and its counterterrorism practices and the embodied performances of gentleman-bureaucrat masculinity that security policymakers are expected to enact. Just as this masculine construction of British militarism combines toughness and realism with a calm, thought-through approach, the gentleman-bureaucrat combines an assertive, authoritative demeanour with an emotional restraint that conveys objectivity and rationality. Given the ubiquity of both gentleman-bureaucrat masculinities and liberal militarist ideas in the national security community, the two are inevitably discursively linked. If liberal militarism derives

legitimacy from being constructed as non-excessive and unremarkable, the repeated expression of liberal militarist ideas through performances of gentleman-bureaucrat masculinities would seem to effectively reinforce that impression. This point proved difficult to discuss in interviews because liberal militarism is so common-sensical among security officials that it is almost invisible. When I asked interviewees whether their organisational cultures prescribed a particular way of thinking about the world, most either acknowledged that there was one but found it difficult to describe or reiterated that the Civil Service is politically neutral. I suggest that the continuous espousal of a liberal militarist worldview by people performing this gentleman-bureaucrat masculinity reinforces the impression that this worldview *is* politically neutral and that those expressing this hegemonic view are merely "letting the facts speak for themselves", in the manner of a good bureaucrat.

If liberal militarism is politically neutral, then describing, denaturalising, and contesting it becomes especially challenging in bureaucratic organisations where neutrality and impartiality are formally mandated. Some officials described their attempts to challenge prevailing views and the importance of maintaining the appropriate demeanour when doing so. One explained, for example, how she was mindful of "not being emotional" or "too impassioned" and "sticking to the facts", especially when speaking about 'soft' issues such as human rights where she might risk being perceived as taking on an advocacy role. However, even while performing in the requisite level-headed manner, officials worried that critiquing the prevailing ways of thinking about security would undermine their credibility in the eyes of their colleagues. In discussions about counterterrorism, perspectives that challenged militaristic policies and practices were variously described by officials as "academic", "out-there", "pie-in-the-sky", "utopian", "ideologically pure", and even "extreme": terms that construct anti-militarist critiques as naïve but also *political*, while militarism is, purportedly, not.

Of course, civil servants have limited capacity to radically change the direction of government policy, which is set by elected politicians. Nonetheless, the fact that their ideas are constructed as apolitical when they adhere to the hegemonic militaristic worldview expected of them embeds the idea that militarism is natural and inevitable, thereby sustaining the everyday reproduction of the war system. While gendered, racialised, and classed organisational cultures may not be the root cause of militarism, for which we would also need to look to structures of domination such as capitalism and white supremacy, they can play a role in normalising these structures and the state violence that upholds them. Indeed, given how deeply national security institutions are invested in militaristic structures, ideas, and practices, it may be that they tend to produce or accommodate the kinds of organisational cultures needed in order to maintain those investments. This could partially explain why, although the entry of growing numbers of women into national security policymaking spaces shows small signs of shifting their masculinist cultures, it has done little, if anything, to challenge their militaristic outlooks (Khalili, 2011; Wright, 2021). While women in security institutions are often expected to adopt masculine-coded behaviours in order to be seen as serious securocrats, these institutions are also increasingly embracing militaristic femininities as markers of credibility in their own right (Khalili, 2011; Grewal, 2017; Razavi, 2021). That is to say, while organisational cultures in national security shift over time in response to demographic changes and new social norms, such cultural shifts tend to mould themselves around a central commitment to militarism and not the other way around.

Conclusions

Through this brief outline of how masculinities work to sustain militaristic ways of thinking and speaking about security among UK policymakers, I have sought to demonstrate the importance of

examining masculinities among civilian officials involved in the management of conflict and insecurity. Bureaucratic masculinities may seem somewhat mundane compared to those found in militaries or non-state armed groups, perhaps especially to academic researchers who often (though not always) share similar social and educational backgrounds to their national policy elites. However, I have argued that in some respects, it is precisely this apparent banality that makes them so powerful in making militaristic ideas appear similarly unremarkable. Based on an analysis of the UK national security policymaking community, I have suggested that it is important to examine the interplay between embodied performances of masculinity and femininity and the gendered systems of meaning invoked in security discourses. Using counterterrorism policy discussions as an example, I have shown how the repeated discursive association of liberal militarist ideas with gentleman-bureaucrat masculinities reproduces an impression of the former as politically neutral and objective.

Studies of security bureaucracies are inevitably limited by the secretive cultures of these organisations, yet there is scope for further research in this area. Research on the gendered cultures of embassies, diplomatic missions, or international organisations, for example analysing competing masculinities within the UN Security Council, could reveal a great deal about how militarism and coloniality are produced and maintained in these spaces. As governments and international organisations begin to promulgate feminist analyses showing that constructions of masculinity can fuel conflict and violence (e.g. Myrttinen, 2019; Dier & Baldwin, 2022; Buchanan, 2022), we must continually insist that such analyses apply not only or even primarily to marginalised men in the Global South or to states perceived as hostile by Western powers but also to elites in the global metropole. In the absence of such an insistence (and perhaps even in spite of it), feminist analysis risks being co-opted – not for the first time – in service of liberal militarism, reinforcing colonial narratives about who are the legitimate wielders of violence.

Notes

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2 This encompassed teams within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Home Office, Ministry of Defence, Cabinet Office, and Department for International Development.

3 "Public schools' in the UK are elite private boarding schools, not publicly owned and run 'state schools'. They were previously all boys' schools, but some are now co-educational.

4 'Habitus' here refers to learned ways of speaking, carrying oneself physically, thinking, and feeling (Bourdieu, 1990: 52–65).

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