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Published online: 04 Dec 2025.

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The conceptualisation and limits of 'critical' in critical military studies

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ABSTRACT

What has the 'critical' in Critical Military Studies meant? What criticalities have informed and been developed within CMS approaches to the study of militarism and military institutions, power and processes? What might some of the limits of this be? And as we look ahead to the future of the field, what imperatives might guide the directions we take next? Responding to these animating questions I set out to do two things in this article. Firstly, I map out where the 'critical' in critical military studies came from, how it developed, and attempt to locate the field in broader analytic traditions and social and political projects. Secondly, I take the article in a more exploratory direction in which I map some of my misgivings about the limits of CMS's criticalities and invite directions we might take next. I focus on two areas: the disavowal of denunciation, which I argue has fore-closed important normative work within CMS; and the framing of alternative, which I argue has been limited by a post-structuralist concern with opening space for, rather than delineating the conditions of, alternatives.

Introduction

What has it meant to be 'critical' within critical military studies and what has this enabled the field to do? What critical imperatives should guide the future direction of the field? Responding to these animating questions I set out to do two things in this article. Firstly, I map out where the 'critical' in critical military studies came from, how it developed, and attempt to locate the field in broader analytic traditions and social and political projects. I explore how various perspectives on 'criticality' framed and guided CMS research and provide an indication of what these critical impulses (spanning the conceptual, the normative, and the methodological) have enabled the field to do. Broadly speaking, CMS emerged at the intersections of critical, and particularly feminist, international relations and wider critical social theory as applied within disciplines including critical geography, sociology, and anthropology. The field drew heavily on post-structuralism and the ideas of Michel Foucault to deconstruct 'given' categories relating to militarism,

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military institutions, and military power. Whilst CMS drew much from antimilitarist feminist literature on militarism, the overt antimilitarist or pacifist position of these approaches was often treated with scepticism within CMS. This scepticism accompanied the use of methodological approaches that drew inspiration from fields such as military sociology and anthropology and that involved working in close proximity with military institutions as a way to understand the complexity, contradiction and nuance of how military power works. I discuss the ways in which this approach has illuminated the workings of militarism in important ways and also situate the contributions the field has been able to make within criticisms that have been consistently levelled, specifically the neglect of race and coloniality, forms of methodological whiteness, and the neglect of class.

Secondly, I take the article in a more exploratory direction inspired by Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern's methodology of unease (Baaz and Stern 2016). In this part, I map some of my misgivings about the limits of CMS's criticality as they distil around two central concerns: the disavowal of denunciation and the framing of alternative. These misgivings underpin the suggestions for directions we might take next. I argue, firstly, that the disavowal of denunciation has foreclosed important normative work within CMS and there are emergent areas of potentially unhelpful comfort in a field previously held in productive tension by a conscious dialogue of, and with, animating sensitivities of unease, irresolution, and messiness. I argue, secondly, that the CMS framing of alternative has been limited by a post-structuralist concern with opening space for a *potential* radical politics of resistance and alternative, rather than clearly delineating the *conditions* of and for alternative futures as a central concern of the work.

When I write 'we' and think about 'our' future directions I am imagining contributors to *Critical Military Studies* the journal, the Edinburgh University Press book series, Critical Military Studies conference sections, and so on, but more broadly anyone whose work takes some form of critical inroad into the interrogation of military institutions, power, and processes and who might have some interest or stake in the directions taken within the field.

The task of reflecting on ten years of the journal *Critical Military Studies* takes place in the shadow of genocide in Gaza and alongside vital conversations about our obligations as academics in this context (inter alia Kynsilehto 2024; Qutami et al. 2023; Shoman et al. 2025). It also takes place at a moment when a right-wing politics of white supremacy and misogyny seems to work with a political lexicon that is familiar to the critical researcher, via claims to marginality and exclusion (Drolet and Williams 2021, 23; Jahn 2021; Michelsen 2021, 503). The global backlash against progressive social movements is defunding programmes and institutions perceived as 'leftist' or 'woke' (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020); inroads made towards gender, race, and trans justice are being dismantled. Many countries are pursuing a conspicuous policy of armament. In March 2025, for instance, the head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced the 'ReArm Europe' package which aims to ramp up European defence spending to the tune of 800 billion Euros (Henley 2025). There has been a failure to limit global heating which is now on course to exceed 1.5°C (Watts and Xipai 2025). In writing this article I have, whether in explicit or more tacit ways, been compelled to confront the question of whether CMS as a field is equipped for the present we are in and the sort of future we seem to be heading into, and how we might as

a research community see our part in envisioning and working towards something different. In broader terms I have therefore been reflecting on what it means to, in the words of Donna Haraway, 'cast our lot for some ways of life and not for others' (Haraway 2004, 237; Basham and Bulmer 2017, 63). Of course, and as Kimberley Hutchings (2023) reminds us, there are good reasons to be careful with logics of 'timeliness'. Furthermore, to attempt to describe the circumstances we are in feels like an inevitably exclusionary and erasing exercise. Why, for instance, this atrocity and not this other one? (see Davids et al. 2025). And are we only really troubled by expressions of misogyny or white supremacy when they come for the institutions and the programmes that academics work in and with? With these qualifications in hand, I see the context I sketched above as exemplifying and clarifying the broader stakes that scholarship on militarism and military power confronts.

The main discussion is preceded by some caveats about how I have marked the boundaries of the field. Any attempt to map and describe the contours of a rich and diverse literature can run the risk of flattening out important and generative wrinkles of academic terrain and of mischaracterising and misrepresenting people's work. This is perhaps particularly the case with CMS. CMS is a field that has thrived by embracing messiness, the interstitial, and the contradictions (often embodied, and lived and encountered by researchers themselves) of military power, militarism, and war. The initial invitation to the field published in the journal's inaugural issue couched the emergent agenda for research in terms of conscious plurality and remarked that CMS was neither 'static or precise' (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 1). As a result, CMS scholarship has tended to work with multiple, overlapping *criticalities* that animate, guide, and inhabit research curiosities and processes. CMS is not characterised by a single, clear, and rigid mode of critical inquiry. There is no one CMS way of doing things, although there are core concerns that seem to operate as touchstones throughout much CMS work (these are what I attempt to identify and discuss).

When I characterise CMS research in this article I do so by focusing on research published within the journal *Critical Military Studies* and in the Edinburgh University Press *Advances in Critical Military Studies* book series. I do this despite recognising that any field of study necessarily exceeds a single venue of publication (and, indeed, exceeds publication) and that as researchers we typically work across different fields and their conversations. I do not believe that as people we are ever perfect embodiments of or receptacles for any one discipline or approach and I think a tacit assumption that we can be may have hampered critiques of the field that I would otherwise be inclined to agree with. Perhaps we have some work which 'feels CMS' and is submitted to *CMS* the journal, and other work that 'fits' elsewhere. As such, what a field's flagship journal or book series publishes (via the self-selection of submissions, editorial decisions and through peer review) provides a significant if not exhaustive indication of which particular 'types of work' come to be badged as belonging to that field. It is how a field comes to be formalised and how particular research approaches come to be institutionalised.

Beyond the journal and book series, CMS encompasses standing sections at the European International Studies Association and British International Studies Association, and a loose community of people who are involved in conversations, projects, publications, and other forms of intellectual, creative, and advocacy work. Throughout, where I refer to CMS I mean the wider field, and where I refer to *CMS*

I mean the journal and book series specifically. Although I have focused relatively narrowly on the journal and book series, I have set the work published there within the context of the approaches to critical scholarship from which they emerged, and I have attempted to relate conversations taking place within CMS to those within adjacent disciplinary spaces. One other caveat concerns what I hope to achieve. My aim is not to offer neat solutions and clear, comfortable paths into the field's future, but rather invitations to together confront with more clarity the question of where we want these paths to ultimately lead. In other words, for what ends are we doing this work?

Criticality in CMS

It is important to understand where CMS came from. The field and its contributions and limitations does not exist in a vacuum. Especially when it comes to the limitations of criticality in CMS, we cannot clearly map alternate paths without understanding those we started out on, and how comparable terrain has been navigated elsewhere.

Many of the initial questions and research curiosities of CMS grew out of broader critical and feminist engagements with war, security, and military power which were in turn grounded in and animated by more longstanding traditions of political philosophy, cultural and literary criticism, and emancipatory social movements that have traversed and transcended disciplinary boundaries. Whilst CMS is not straightforwardly reducible to international relations, the ways in which these long-standing and varied traditions of criticality were taken up within international relations informed the character of CMS as a distinct field of study in the first place and the field continues to be in dialogue with them. Discussions of criticality in international relations tend to describe the broad intellectual terrain as encompassing 'Marxism and post-Marxism, the Frankfurt School, hermeneutics, phenomenology, postcolonialism, feminism, queer theory, post-structuralism, pragmatism, scientific realism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis' (Edkins and Vaughan-Williams 2009). There is an extensive literature on critical IR that reflects on, develops, and challenges its parameters (see, inter alia Hobson 2007; Hutchings 2007, 2025b; Jahn 2021; Krishna 1993; Michelsen 2021; Weber 2014). Kimberley Hutchings (2007, 72) argues that 'Although critical theory takes many different forms, it always distinguishes itself from other forms of theorising in terms of its orientation towards change and the possibility of futures that do not reproduce the patterns of hegemonic power of the present'. This is an iteration of Robert Cox's (1981) distinction between critical theory and problem-solving theory which has permeated every strand of critical IR, perhaps not always helpfully (see Visoka 2019, 681), and was central to initial definitions of CMS. This formulation characterises problem-solving theory (typically the traditional or mainstream) as being concerned with the generation of policy solutions that help existing hegemonic structures function more effectively. Critical theory, on the other hand, is understood to be a matter of questioning those structures and envisioning, in varying forms and degrees, more radical change and alternatives.

Unlike military sociology and military studies, CMS did not set out to instrumentalise critique 'as a means through which to generate recommendations for military policy' (Basham and Bulmer 2017, 59); it was not – in other words – concerned with making militaries function 'better' in some way, situating it on the 'critical' side of Cox's imagined

divide. (Of course, even if it is not the intent, analysis generated within a CMS framing could be instrumentalised by particular actors to 'improve' the military). Next, I focus on how, from the milieu of critical scholarship sketched above, feminist and post-structural approaches to war, military violence, and military power were particularly significant in framing the version of criticality that configured CMS both theoretically and methodologically.

CMS emerged in the context of a burgeoning of critical scholarship within international relations, political geography, and neighbouring disciplines which was organised around the imperative to understand and critique the pursuit by the liberal powers of the Global War on Terror and more broadly to understand the operation of military power, military institutions, war, and military violence over a much longer history. This work was largely being undertaken within critical security studies, critical war studies, or critical and feminist international relations, with these areas overlapping to varying degrees and with some significant points of tension (see, for instance, Aradau 2012; Barkawi 2011). The CMS focus specifically on *militaries*, and 'military power, processes, and institutions' (Basham and Bulmer 2017, 59) borrowed more from feminist international relations and particularly antimilitarist feminism than it did from critical security and critical war studies. Rather than being consistently concerned with militarism, militaries, and military power, approaches such as critical war studies overtly set out to centre, theorise, and delineate war, often at an ontological level (for instance, Barkawi and Brighton 2011), and many scholars turned to concepts such as Foucault's biopolitics to understand the governance of populations in the context of the liberal order and the Global War on Terror (for instance, Reid 2013).

Drawing on these and other disciplinary areas, CMS assembled a set of conceptualisations that would be both utilised and questioned within the field, including militarism (inter alia Enloe 2016; Stavrianakis and Selby 2012; Whitworth 2004), militarisation (inter alia Benazzoli and Flint 2009; Enloe 2000), liberal war and violence (inter alia Basham 2013; Jabri 2006), and military/ised masculinities (inter alia Connell 1995; Enloe 2000). Much of the work being done at this time was underpinned by post-structural (and often specifically Foucauldian) perspectives on power, subjectivity, and agency which were then further taken up within CMS. The critical impulse of this work centred on revealing that the taken for granted categories of the political were not inevitable common sense, but the outcome of political projects, of power relations, and – crucially – could therefore be otherwise. It was this critical impulse that underpinned CMS's central concern with 'the interrogation and destabilization of often taken-for-granted categories related to the military, militarism and militarization' (Critical Military Studies 2025). The locus of criticality in CMS therefore came from a post-structural criticality that problematised and destabilised 'given' categories to assert that the world does not have to be this way and that, therefore, to quote Hugh Gusterson, 'is ours to construct' (Gusterson 1993, 300). Importantly, this was an approach to critique that emphasised the value of opening up space for alternative through Foucauldian strategies of problematisation more than the forwarding of alternatives as a central concern of the work (see discussion in Visoka 2019, 683). I return to this point in the second part of the article.

Simultaneously and sometimes but not always in combination, there was an increased momentum, coming particularly from feminist international relations and broader feminist scholarship, around the idea of centring people in the study of military power,

military institutions, and war. This attention was in part animated by Cynthia Enloe's observation that the personal is the international (Enloe 2014) and it involved, variously, situating the political (and knowledge and agency about the political) in the personal, the intimate (Peterson 2014), in embodiment (Parashar 2013), in everyday experience (Sylvester 2013), and in the apparently banal. As Enloe put it 'The Mundane Matters' (Enloe 2011). One of the significant moves within feminist scholarship on war and militarism concerned the centring of the 'constancy of militarism and its effects on social reality' (Cuomo 1996, 32); military violence should be understood not as an event but as a presence that exceeded categories such as war and peace and exceeded narrow concerns with the state. Feminist international relations owed much within its approach to the study of war and militarism to feminist pacifisms and feminist non-violence in a number of forms (for instance, Ruddick 1989; Richie 2000; Cockburn 2012; see discussions by Frazer and Hutchings 2014; Hutchings 2023, 2025a). Importantly, feminist pacifism observes that military violence is 'part of a continuum of gendered violence' (Hutchings 2023, 107) such that the study of it cannot be limited to the state or neatly contained within categories such as 'war' and 'peace'.

Critical work is methodological as well as theoretical. As Claudia Aradau and Jeff Huysmans (2013, 596) put it, critical methods are 'devices which enact worlds and acts which disrupt particular worlds'. CMS scholarship placed its critical impulses and curiosities into dialogue with methodological approaches that were more common within sociological and anthropological scholarship on military institutions than within IR and feminist scholarship on militarism. CMS scholarship set out to take seriously the ways in which people have knowledge and agency about the political (via subjectivities, embodiment, positionality), starting from a position that valid knowledge and agency in relation to military institutions, militarism, and military power is possessed by those entangled with those processes and spaces – including, and perhaps especially (Massey and Tyerman 2023), those within military institutions. Ideas such as that of 'feminist listening' became significant to putting this into practice; 'interviewees contradictions, confusions and anxieties' are taken on board and the researcher is not assumed to know more 'about what the speaker means than the speaker' themselves (Enloe 2011, 142; Bulmer and Eichler 2017).

This research sensitivity was applied in the context of methodological approaches developed within sociological and anthropological scholarship which had involved ethnographic research encounters with military institutions and those within them (John Hockey's 1986 ethnography of the British infantry being an often-cited example) but which had tended to take military power and other categories related to militarism for granted. CMS's attention to method also occurred within the broader context of an expansion of methodological richness within critical international relations and a redrawing of the map determining what could constitute 'the field', 'fieldwork' (Lisle 2014), and ethnographic encounter (Baker et al. 2016).

CMS sought its critical traction on war, military violence, and military power through the feminist attention to the everyday, to individuals, individual experience (Sylvester 2013), positionality and agency, and in the messiness (contradiction, inconsistency) and complex political potential of the ways in which lived lives abut, constitute, and navigate power (state power, military power, gendered power, and so on). This shared much with the explicitly or tacitly pacifist or antimilitarist feminist scholarship out of which, as

described above, it in part emerged, but there were highly significant points of divergence.

The methodological focus on military institutions and those within them was atypical within feminist scholarship. As Victoria Basham and Sarah Bulmer write, there was an 'assumption that feminism and being in close proximity to military personnel was somehow incompatible' (2017, 65). This, and the accompanying emphasis on messiness (Basham and Bulmer 2017, 65), is where CMS seems to take an alternate path from much explicitly or more tacitly antimilitarist feminist scholarship. This departure was grounded, at least for some writers, in a particular reading and critique of those antimilitarist feminist approaches that were closely connected to and informed by anti-war activism. Claire Duncanson (2017, 50–54), for instance, characterises these approaches as tending to see military power, processes, and institutions as static and fixed, with neat causative links between, for instance, gender and war that at least border on the essentialist. It was this characterisation and critique of the antimilitarist feminist literature which had otherwise inspired and animated CMS that underpinned the field's overt scepticism of 'given, functional categories beyond interrogation' (Rech et al. 2015, 48) and the emphasis on engagement and productive grappling with the messiness of social and political co-constitution and contestation.

The scepticism for given categories encompassed the remit of critique itself, manifesting in attempts to move beyond what Zoe Wool characterizes as critique as 'denunciation' (Wool 2014), and Matthew Rech et al. as 'dismissal' (Rech et al. 2015, 56). Rather than denunciation, Wool suggests that work within CMS engage in 'exploring, describing – and not necessarily resolving – the ambiguities and contradictions that animate war, military action, militarization, and their logics and lived experiences' (Wool 2014). For Rech et al, the criticality of CMS could be one to transcend what they termed the 'simplistic' positions of pro or anti military (Rech et al. 2015, 56). Within CMS, 'critical' is therefore not a straightforward shorthand for positions such as antiwar, antimilitarism, pacifism or non-violence. I return to a discussion of this position in the second part of the article.

Bringing these critical tools to bear, research published in *CMS* has engaged with, amongst other things, soldier and veteran identities and subjectivity (Tarusarira and Wabule 2025; van Roekel 2022), including forms of military resistance (Durgun 2019; Perez 2018), military commemoration and memorialisation (Caso 2024; Fishel 2015; Molloy 2019), the politics of military/ised spaces (Hirshberg 2024; Gilks 2021), military recruitment (Baker 2022; Christensen 2016; Stern and Strand 2024; Tasseron 2022), embodiment (Caddick 2018; Dyvik and Greenwood 2016; McSorley 2016), the politics of military technologies (Hall 2024; Jackman 2021), the political economy of military power (Ettinger 2018; Gilbert 2015; Merrill 2025), military violence (Badalič 2023; V. M. Basham 2022; Malešević 2019; Miyamoto 2015; Sandman 2021), militarised masculinities (Chisholm and Tidy 2017; Henry 2017; Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2016), research methods (Ajala 2025), military work and labour (Ghosh 2025; Singh 2025), antimilitarist direct action (Crilley 2016; Rossdale 2017, 2019), and violence within militaries (Wadham et al. 2023). Across these areas CMS has problematised and expanded our understanding of militarisation and militarism (Bilgin 2023; Manchanda 2022). The above overview is indicative; my aim here is to draw attention to some of the directions that the CMS approach has opened up. In addition, although I've separated

them out here, research published in *CMS* often engages in multiple of these areas simultaneously rather than there being discrete lines of scholarship, and sometimes also questions the field itself, its parameters, silences, inclusions and exclusions (for instance, Bilgin 2023; Henry 2017; Manchanda 2022; Furtado 2022, 12-13).

In summary, a number of critical motivations and provocations framed the approach to criticality within CMS, whether as animating ways of thinking about military institutions, power, and violence, or as some form of a status quo from which the field sought to depart to some degree. The core terms of CMS criticality can be summed up as follows. Firstly, post-structurally informed deconstruction was a starting point for the principle that 'nothing is taken for granted as natural or inevitable' (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 2), with this being powered by a sceptical curiosity'. As Enloe put it, 'to be a critical military analyst is to be a sceptically curious military analyst' (Enloe 2015, 7). This followed the critical tradition of opening up space for alternative by revealing the openness and contingency of what seem to be 'given' social and political realities. Secondly, the approach to criticality was imagined as transcending (or perhaps occupying the generative interstitial space between - Gray, 2016) the end point of either distilling recommendations for military policy on the one hand (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 1) or forwarding a statement of moral denunciation or dismissal concerning war or militarism on the other (Rech et al. 2015, 56; Wool 2014). Thirdly, it was in part this urge not to dismiss that made it possible and desirable to pursue a research praxis grounded in proximity to rather than distance from military institutions and those within them (broadly construed – neat 'insides' and 'outsides' to military institutions and power being routinely problematised - Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 1). Across a research agenda, a scholarly community, a journal, a book series, and standing sections at multiple international conferences, CMS became a meeting place for research that was occurring across a number of disciplines but which was connected by engagements with commitments and curiosities that spanned the normative, the conceptual, and questions of form and method.

Having set out this characterisation, it might be helpful to reiterate that it is not intended to be totalising. These are the core contours of CMS's criticalities as I understand them but there is considerable nuance to how each of these things are actually 'done', in what the field means to the people that comprise it, and in the normative lenses through which these critical starting points are interpreted and translated in research projects and agendas. For instance, in relation to the question of denunciation, dismissal, and the place of antimilitarism within CMS (which I will turn to in the second half) it seems to me that various forms of antimilitarism continue to be central to much CMS scholarship (even if this often tends to be tacitly held rather than clearly spoken).

At the same time as CMS's significant contributions to understandings of militarism, military power, and military institutions have been recognised, a number of important criticisms have been levelled at the field and its approach. Firstly, as Nivi Manchanda and Chris Rossdale argue (2021, 474), recent scholarship on militarism has neglected the ways in which 'racism and coloniality are not epiphenomenal to or merely "facets" of militarism, but are in fact integral to its functioning'. Similarly, Harriet Foreman argues that CMS has failed to 'lay bare the essential and constitutive relationships between race, colonialism, violence, and militarism' (2025, 1; see also

Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2018). This, Foreman argues, makes it impossible for CMS to 'successfully oppose militarism'. These viewpoints work alongside the broader critique of the concept of militarisation made by Alison Howell (2018); (and see MacKenzie et al. 2019) and there are implications for CMS to be taken from critiques of Foucauldian security studies (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019). Secondly, Rachel Massey and Thom Tyerman (2023, 68) argue that the CMS approach to 'engagement' and 'in-betweenness' 'risk[s] perpetuating the whiteness and militarisation of critical research' (and see Furtado 2022, 12-13). Finally, Daniel Evans (2025) criticises CMS for neglecting class as an 'overarching heuristic'. In the next part of this article, I attempt to think with these critiques as I reflect on my own unease about the limitations of the criticality I have mapped here. Reaching back to the stakes I sketched at the very beginning of the article I focus on the limitations of CMS's disavowal of denunciation and of the post-structural scope for framing alternative.

Denunciation and alternative: an attempt to pin down unease

This part of the article is a reflection on my unease, and an attempt to pin down and give some of that unease a shape in prose. Inspired by Baaz and Stern's 'methodology of unease', in which a something that unsettles us is used as an 'inroad and compass' (Baaz and Stern 2016, 117), I discuss a sequence of uneasy feelings about what the approach to criticality I have just sketched out has and has not allowed us to do. This section has an intentional shift in style and tone, oriented towards a speculative, open foray into aspects of the field that for me do not 'sit right'. I think that some of the critical starting points of CMS have ended up talking against each other in ultimately limiting ways. I do not have final and complete answers but I do forward two propositions. Firstly, that we need to re-encounter and reassess the disavowal of denunciation and dismissal. Secondly (and in doing so), we should question whether troubling taken for granted categories and opening up space for alternate futures is sufficient. For the sake of clarity my own position on these two points is that CMS needs to seriously reconsider its prevailing stance on denunciation and dismissal (of military power, militarism, military violence, war) and that more ambitious and more difficult approaches that grapple with the framing of alternative are needed so that the field can better engage with and contribute to social and political change (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 2), radically rather than incrementally imagined.

My unease about the limitations of criticality in CMS came partly out of reflecting on what the normative impulse behind our work was or could be and on what felt sayable and not sayable in particular academic spaces. What, I wondered, are we actually trying to *do* here. What sort of world are we recoiling from? What sort of world are we imagining in hope when we do this work? I intend my work to be a something that is allowed to recoil and to hope. Hope for a world without patriarchy, a world without white supremacy, a world where states do not conduct themselves through the preparation for, threat of, or delivery of mass killing and injury. And so, I have asked myself: can CMS help me imagine, advocate for and nurture a world I can hope for? I am not sure that in its current form it can.

Denunciation

I am uneasy that denunciation has come to be conflated with a reluctance to understand and with a lack of nuance. Denunciation is, in this view, associated with totalising and essentialist analyses of the world. But, as Judith Butler points out in relation to condemnation of violence in Israel and Gaza, 'It would be odd to oppose something without understanding it or without describing it well. It would be especially odd to believe that condemnation requires a refusal to understand' (Butler 2023, no page numbers). This is the assumption that I think the CMS disavowal of denunciation operates within. It is an assumption that denunciation rests on a failure of understanding or a wilful refusal to understand (understanding that would supposedly be unlocked via engagement with nuance, complexity, contradiction, perspective, ambiguity). What should be the limits to circumspection about denunciation? The strategy of 'exploring [and] describing . . . ambiguities and contradictions' (Wool 2014) feels unequal to the moment and to its magnitude of military atrocity.

My unease says that to recoil is not very CMS. To normatively confront war and other expressions of military violence has run up against the idea of moving beyond critique as a blunt and polarising denunciation (Wool 2015, 25) or dismissal (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 2) and it can seem to be at odds with the field's impulse to grapple with the complexities and messiness of research encounters (Baker et al. 2016), with those, researchers included, bound within military power, and with an ethic of centring positionality (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 2). The criticality of CMS has so often been concerned with people: listening to them and taking them seriously, their positionalities, their lived experiences and contradictions, their intimacies, emotions, and social connections. CMS work has sought to avoid patronising judgements of people in whose shoes we have not walked (Basham and Bulmer 2017, 65). I am uneasy that those judgements have become conflated with normative judgements about militarism. But it is vital that the two not be neatly folded together.

It is uncomfortable and it is challenging to surface our own feelings, analytics, and normative commitments about war and military power (perhaps complicated, messy, or conflicted – or perhaps not!) in or in relation to these encounters and to do so requires particular ethical care. But this should not mean turning from 'difficult' topics or submerging the normative positions we might carry with us, rather it seems to me that it should be about finding ways to surface those positions, commitments, and investments and meaningfully and honestly communicate about them, including and perhaps especially with others who do not share them.

This includes within the field and it is necessarily uncomfortable work. It matters which ideas or positions may be comfortably voiced in a space and which cannot. Opposition to militarism is only inconsistently surfaced, spoken about, and engaged within CMS. I think there is an assumption by many of us (most often tacit) that opposing militarism *is* one of the things we are all here to do within CMS but at the same time this is a commitment that is carried quietly. It was refreshing to read Foreman (2025, 1) make this assumption robustly; not tucked away, not qualified. However, when denunciation has been disavowed, I am not sure, firstly, that this is an assumption that can safely be made about the field's central aims and, secondly, what 'opposing militarism' actually looks

like for those who are working with CMS approaches. I have increasingly come to feel that to speak the antimilitarist position that I hold is awkward in many CMS spaces.

Surfacing our normative positions might be uncomfortable, and it also might complicate and impede research relationships, perhaps in telling and ultimately useful ways. At its outset, CMS was unusual in embracing research encounters with military institutions and subjectivities. Where much of the antimilitarist feminist research that otherwise inspired CMS's guiding questions and sensitivities might be sceptical of, for instance, hanging out with soldiers as part of a research project, within CMS this was recognised as a productive route to critically engaging with military power. It could be uncomfortable in the early days of CMS to explain at a conference that this is what you had done (Basham and Bulmer 2017, 65). Now, however, this approach has become very established.

CMS now has standing sections at two international conferences and has the scale and momentum as a field to put forward panels and roundtables at others. These sections, panels, and roundtables create comfortable spaces for CMS's iterations of critical theory and method. Too comfortable? I think so. Doors are opened by comfort and ease in research relationships with 'the military' (and I do not just mean the formal institution here, but more broadly) and conversely it is likely that doors would be closed if those research encounters were made more uncomfortable by franker conversations. Doors are opened and doors are closed to access, contacts, funding, impact, and of course also genuine insights into military power and institutions and processes. I wonder when and why might we just walk away from a project and whether there are any military institutions that we would not engage with. At the same time as it has become comfortable to talk about this close proximity research with military institutions, the category of 'the critical veteran researcher' has come to prominence within CMS (Antrobus et al. 2023), bound to claims to veteran researchers' 'unique adequacy' in relation to and 'flesh witnessing' of 'the phenomenon of interest' (Jenkings 2022). Massey and Tyerman (2023, 66) argue that, within CMS, 'military-affiliated subjects' come to be 'portrayed as possessors of unique insights into military–civilian relations'. For me, this is a point we need to think about carefully. In my own work I have described how militarised authority can work in powerful yet ultimately limiting ways within the overtly antimilitarist space of the veterans' anti-war movement (Tidy, 2016) and I think there are unavoidable implications of this that travel to and resonate within CMS.

A disavowal of denunciation has closed down important normative work within CMS. To denounce and oppose something like militarism is not to show we don't understand it. We need to be more explicit in framing whether and on what terms opposition to militarism is central to our work individually and to the field. If it is to be (and I think it should be) then, as Manchanda and Rossdale (2021) argue, we have to take seriously the necessary continuities between antimilitarism, antiracism, and decoloniality. We need to be in a more sustained conversation with pacificist perspectives (see Christoyannopoulos 2021), with antimilitarist activism (Crilley 2016; Rossdale 2017, 2019), antimilitarist feminisms (see Hutchings 2025a), and postcolonial, decolonial, and third world feminisms (Lugones 2010; Sandoval 1991). These conversations should include perspectives on the legitimacy of political violence that emerged in the context of decolonial struggle and that critique non-violent philosophies (Fanon (1961 2007)).

Alternative

Writing about Gaza, Butler poses the following questions:

> What if our morality and our politics did not end with the act of condemnation? What if we insisted on asking what form of life would release the region from violence such as this? What if, in addition to condemning wanton crimes, we wanted to create a future in which violence of this sort came to an end? That is a normative aspiration that goes beyond momentary condemnation.

Recoiling, denouncing and condemning is not an endpoint. If the first part of this section was about how recoiling from militarism might (not) fit into CMS, this second part is about hoping for and working to bring about a future without militarism. One of the aspects of a CMS approach to criticality that I have found deeply motivating is that we try not to take anything as 'given' about the workings of military power, processes or institutions. As Enloe has written, the maintenance of power structures owes a lot to things that seem 'given' or 'common sense' (2004, 3). Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins (2015, 2) express something very similar when they write that, within a critical approach to military studies, nothing can be 'taken for granted as natural or inevitable'. Tied to Enloe's point about power structures, this impulse to question common sense seems fundamental to another CMS critical impulse; that of generating research oriented towards 'social and political change' (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 2). Establishing that something is not natural and inevitable opens up the possibility of imagining alternatives including hopeful ones. Alternative ways of being in the world, alternative ways of organising social and political life (such as, other than through violent and oppressive structures based on race, gender, and class). However, I feel uneasy about the limits of an approach to framing alternative that is based on opening up possibilities and spaces for it but which does not place the realisation of that alternative front and centre. Destabilisation of the 'given' becomes an end in itself, rather than – say – tangibly dismantling militarism and all it entails. I think that if we have the conversations I allude to in the previous part, the limitations of this mode of criticality will become even more apparent.

In reflecting on the limits of how CMSs engage with alternatives, I found Gezim Visoka's (2019) discussion of the relationship between criticality and alternativity in international relations (2019, 680–684) and peace and conflict studies (684–695) a useful parallel conversation. Visoka characterises three versions of critique within peace and conflict studies that also resonate within CMS research. 'Critique without alternative' utilises deconstruction 'to unmask power relations and dynamics of dominance and to create space for a politics of resistance'. There is a concern within this model of critique that more practical suggestions for alternative are likely to be co-opted (685). For those researching military institutions at close proximity this, I think, comes to be a significant fear, especially so if your research (even if tacitly) takes its bearings from an opposition to militarism. Critique without alternative seems to offer some degree of safety from this compromise which is, at the same time, conceptually consistent as 'radical interpretivism among poststructuralist forms of critique conceive of alternativity as unnecessary because of the undecidability of social practices and discourses' (683). 'Critique as alternative', on the other hand, tends to see deconstruction and problematisation as a 'process and pathway for coming to an alternative solution without prescribing how to

implement it in practice' (Visoka 2019, 690). This absence of prescription 'in practice' means that there is not an impulse to translate alternatives into the terms of policy recommendations, but there is a focus on the establishment of 'non-prescriptive conditions' (691). Finally, Visoka charactries 'critique with alternative' as being associated 'with problem-solving knowledge and prescriptive logic' that works within and refines the existing order with practical suggestions for policy.

For Massey and Tyerman (2023), a central problem with the mode of critique developed within CMS has been the way in which critical conceptual language has come to be untethered from its 'radical politics' (77) when, via 'critical friendship' with military institutions, CMS scholars are lured by 'the promise of producing policy-oriented research for influential political institutions' (74). As such, their critique is about the approach to alternative taken within CMS, one they argue means CMS ends up producing 'problem solving' rather than the 'critical' research it seems to promise (cf. Basham and Bulmer 2017, 59). Whilst this criticism does resonate with me, on my reading the majority of CMS (and certainly *CMS* work) actually more resembles the first category outlined above – critique without alternative. For this scholarship (my own, of course, included) there is a limit to the radical political potential of post-structurally informed approaches (at least as they have been developed in international relations, from which CMS derived its approach in large part), specifically a limit to the radical political potential for envisioning and bringing about different futures.

This is why, when I ask myself if CMS in its current form can allow me to imagine, advocate for, and nurture a world without white supremacy, without patriarchy, without militarism, the answer cannot be unequivocal and affirmative. Troubling taken for granted categories and opening up space for alternate futures feels insufficient. Instead, it might be productive to ask what 'non-prescriptive conditions' for alternative (Visoka 2019, 691) might look like for CMS and what conceptual and theoretical tools we might need to delineate alternatives in this way.

Conclusion

This article has been an exercise in mapping and reflecting on the contours of the 'critical' in Critical Military Studies and then using my own unease about directions within the field to suggest future avenues that feel urgent. I began by tracing how various streams of criticality found their confluence in CMS. CMS criticality rests on a post-structurally informed deconstructive approach to military power, military institutions, militarism and war, and an interest in people and the political at the level of the individual that was shared with feminist traditions of antimilitarism and pacifism. However, CMS parted company from these traditions both through its scepticism about given categories and, connectedly, through an explicit reluctance to embed denunciation (of war, of militarism) within critique. Methodologically, CMS has pursued, in various forms, a research praxis grounded in proximity to rather than distance from military institutions and those within them, informed by openness to positionality bound to the impulse not to denounce. We know a huge amount more about the workings of militarism, of military power and military institutions than we did prior to the establishment of the field. This has been important work. However, as I argued in the second part of the article, some of

the critical starting points of CMS have ended up talking against each other in ultimately limiting ways.

I explored limitations as they have emerged across two connected areas: the disavowal of denunciation and the scope for engagement with alternative. Firstly, the disavowal of denunciation is limiting. To denounce something does not prove that your understanding of it is lacking in nuance or complexity. There are things we should denounce. Antimilitarism is valid. We should reflect on why particular methodological approaches and relationships have become comfortable within CMS and what is lost and what is enabled in and through that comfort. Secondly, the post-structuralist approach to alternativity, that of opening up space for radical alternative rather than actively pursuing that within the work, is limiting. Whilst it promises protection from the phantom spectre of 'problem-solving' ('non-critical') research it impedes our ability to imagine and work to realise futures that are not configured by the structures, relations, economies, and institutions CMS is so effective at illuminating.

Acknowledgement

Disclosure statement

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