



Report

First Workshop Oxford-Berlin Research Network “The Comeback of the Latin American Armed Forces”

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Introduction

In February 2020, the Oxford-Berlin Research Network “The Comeback of the Latin American Armed Forces” held its first workshop at the Institute for Latin American Studies (LAI) in Berlin. The Network is a cooperation between the LAI and the Latin American Centre, University of Oxford. Supported by a seed grant of the Oxford-Berlin Research Partnership, the workshop brought together an interdisciplinary group of early-career and established scholars working in the fields of political science, human geography, international relations, sociology, and history.

The workshop started with a welcome note given by the project PI **Marianne Braig (Freie Universität Berlin)** and the Head of the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies **Timothy Power (University of Oxford)**. Power highlighted the opportunity of the research network to create a new analytical vocabulary that goes beyond civil-military relations (CMR) – a field of study that, in his view, has become a misnomer given the multiplication of actors involved in security. In a similar direction, Braig pointed to the need of developing a new typology of “militarized” actors on different scales (from the municipal to the regional and national level) and along different historical stages.

After a short introduction of the research network, PI **Carlos A. Pérez Ricart (University of Oxford)** and Co-PI **Markus Hochmüller (University of Oxford)** presented the main questions that were to be discussed during the one-day event. The first panel that followed then provided an overview on the three core areas of the workshop, by focusing on historical tendencies, institutional developments, and the new practices of a militarized war on drugs. In three subsequent panels, historical developments and current tendencies of various sub-regions and countries of Latin America (including Brazil, Central America, Colombia, Mexico, and the Southern Cone) were discussed. The event was concluded with a summary of the main lines of debate, and a participatory discussion on future paths of collaborative research.

Questions of the workshop

Historical context:

- From a historical perspective, how accurate is it to talk about a “comeback” of the Armed Forces? Can you identify continuities and ruptures with other processes from the past?
- Why and under what conditions have civilian policymakers relied on the military in the fight against violence and crime?



Institutions:

- What does the “comeback” mean for the military and the police in terms of their structure, composition, and doctrine?
- How do the military define their role in domestic security?

Practices and democracy:

- Why do Latin American citizens trust the Armed Forces, and what do they expect of them?
- How does the (re)militarization of domestic security look like in operational terms, and what are its (potential or already observable) consequences for democratic governance, rule of law, public security and human rights in Latin America?
- What is common about this “comeback” for all Latin American countries? What is specific for the country or countries in which you specialise?

Panel summaries

Democracy, Civil-Military Relations, and Security Governance in Latin America: Continuity and Changes

A broad conceptualisation of Armed Forces was suggested by **Eduardo Posada-Carbó (University of Oxford)** who, from a historical perspective, urged to look into questions such as how and to what extent soldiers and their institutions had a democratizing effect on society (or not). In his view, such an approach would provide not only insights into institutional histories but, more broadly, on the origins of democracy in Latin America. A key question to be addressed is when did society begin to be militarized, and what did this mean for democracy (or, more accurately from a historical vantage point, democratisation). He pointed out that the debate on the Armed Forces is at times reproducing stereotypes, and he warned of a general lack of critical and analytical engagement with the military in the history of democracy.

From a comparative perspective, **Rafael Martínez (Universitat de Barcelona)** demonstrated that the region’s Armed Forces are used for virtually everything. He presented different historical roles of the military. He argued that there are three options for military reform, namely abolition, redefinition/resizing, and conversion. A surplus military, as he called it, could be transformed into an effective and legitimate new tool (reconversion). He identified a *pragmatic approach* to military’s expansive role in internal security that he contrasted with a more *critical approach*. He argues that the military can play an important role if they do not deprive social groups of their tasks (see, for instance, the debates on the chances and dangers of using the Armed Forces for policing tasks). He observes a lack of civilian knowledge on the military (and vice versa, of soldiers on the civilian realm) in Latin America. Apart from legal frameworks and the definition of missions and tasks, what needs to be considered are the values of wider society and the state institutions. A further shift that needs to be carefully studied is the turn from defence to security in Latin America.

In her talk, **Luciana Pol (Centre of Legal and Social Studies, Buenos Aires)** argued that the challenge of doing research on the military’s role in current Latin American democracies lies in trying to decipher what changes while these fast-paced developments are still ongoing. In her view, the fight against drugs was the key driver of change when it comes to the military’s current role in politics and internal security in Latin America. She showed that a paradigm of “new threats” was promoted and shared from the US to the entire continent. With narco-terrorism as the buzzword that secures funding and new missions comes the intensification of social conflicts, migration crises, and other violent and exclusionary

phenomena mixed up in the threat scenario in the region. Pol identifies a double trend: the direct use of Armed Forces in policing, and the militarization of police institutions. She suggested to shed light on a sometimes rather obscuring and fuzzy concept, namely militarization by focusing on five indicators: The absence or weakening of laws dividing police and military roles; joint decision-making by military, police, and civilian bodies; exchange of intelligence between military and police; the acquisition of heavy weaponry and equipment for police operations; and the training of police imparted by military equipment. She further urges to take a critical look into multilateral aid that goes to Latin American Armed Forces.

Evidence from the Southern Cone: Historical Patterns, Human Rights, and New Missions

In his talk, **Stefan Rinke (Freie Universität Berlin)** explored the role of Prussian military advisors in Chile (and how the legacies of Prussian militarism and the myth of Chileans as the Prussians of Latin America reproduced during the Pinochet dictatorship). Coined as the guardians of the nation following a modern imaginary of the military, the Chilean Armed Forces appropriated the transferred military knowledge. The ideal of the Prussian *Charakter* included more than military skills: performance of duty, obedience, comradeship, new institutions like the military club, and values (e.g. order, progress, and honour). Further, depoliticization was introduced as an ideal (rather than a practice) and had impact on broader society. In the 1960s, there was a dissatisfaction inside the Armed Forces when they were confronted with budget cuts. A new phase of intervention started after the coup of 1973 and the new objective of re-building Chilean society along the lines of modernism and corporativism. The military did, however, fail to transform society in this way and instead deepened the cleavages and fractioned the Chilean society. The ambivalent of the military as a symbol of an imagined “past glory” has to be contrasted with the actions of the current Armed Forces. Current developments in Chile would suggest that the military could be classified as an “untamed beast”.

Francesca Lessa (University of Oxford) showed that Uruguay is a regional outlier as the military plays a rather marginal role in internal security. However, she argues that there are important similarities with other countries. First, Uruguay faces similar challenges. While the military was removed from internal security field after the end of the dictatorship, they maintained a close relationship with the *Colorado* party, and they redefined their role as global peacekeepers. Second, the Armed Forces long preserved their institutional autonomy, only after the first *Frente Amplio* government this was adapted and civilian oversight was strengthened. At the same time, however, actual or perceived new threats also informed the military. And while the role of the Uruguayan military remains rather limited (in regional comparison), all that has led to a blurring of the line between public security and national security. Third, *mano dura* policies are demanded in face of rising crime levels. In October 2019, however, a referendum that would have expanded the prerogative of the military failed.

Mexico, Central America, and Colombia: Militarized Order-Making and Transnational Reforms

Carlos A. Pérez Ricart (University of Oxford) traced the deep institutional and historical entanglements between the Mexican police forces and the military. The country’s Armed Forces historically hold a key position in the field of internal security, a trend that became more visible and was prominently discussed particularly in the context of the 21st century war on drugs. He suggested a more genealogical perspective on current trends to assess changes and continuities more thoroughly and to uncover and address the constraints of the country’s security and democratisation agenda (and equally in research on these two issues).

Markus Hochmüller (University of Oxford) explored the transnational embeddedness of the Armed Forces in Guatemala and Colombia. He pointed to similarities of threat construction and mission realignment, and showed that the two countries are key sites to study the effects of “classic” North-South security assistance (mainly by the US) and more recent South-South security cooperation. These transnational processes, he argued, could be best approached from an analytical perspective informed by International Political Sociology. Such an approach would transcend formal CMR by exploring transnationalized professional fields of defence and security (including the role of civilian experts) and informal networks that shape militarized internal security.

Brazil: Historical Tendencies, Penal Populism, and New Alliances

In her talk, **Maud Chirio (Université de Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée)** discussed Brazil’s militarization during the Bolsonaro government. She put this trend into a broader societal context by discussing the extreme politicization towards the right and the authoritarian demands both in the population and by the military establishment. She showed how active key right wing groups since the end of the 1980s have pushed for a turn to the right and how they influenced Bolsonaro’s security policies and the authoritarian discourse, the dictatorship nostalgia, and militarization.

In his presentation, **Christoph Harig (Helmut-Schmidt-Universität Hamburg)** explained the political return of the military in Brazil by what he calls a negative convergence between soldiers, politicians, and society. He argued that politicians contributed to a trivialisation of internal role of the military, the society was disenchanted with politics and has therefore sought refuge in a strong military, and the military had re-discovered its problematic self-understanding as saviours of the nation. Along the lines of Chirio’s argument, he sees militarism as deeply rooted in Brazil and potentially reproducing beyond the Bolsonaro government.

Frank Müller (Technische Universität Dresden) concluded this section by exploring the role of non-state armed actors in the re-militarization of society from the vantage point of illicit ways of urbanization in Rio de Janeiro. His presentation showed that militias are strongly involved in social housing, resettlements, and private security provision. He suggested to look more thoroughly into emerging social alliances and shifting alliances of power and including non-state armed actors into the analysis of city (and potentially state) building in Brazil and beyond.

Debate

In the concluding debate, questions of regional generalizability were discussed: Until what point does it make sense to talk of the “Latin American” Armed Forces? Does the large number of “outlier cases” – many presentations pointed to the “exceptional character” of countries like Uruguay or Chile – point to a limitation of a “regional” approach in studying the role of the military in internal security? Participants further pointed to the risk of being teleological and reading history backwards, and agreed that the diversity of experiences, sub-regional varieties, and historical discontinuities need to be taken seriously in order to recognize the plurality and complexity of the issue the research network aims to study. Other issues that were raised – and which need to be addressed by the research network – were broader questions on who is included when we talk about the military (participants urged, for instance, to look into military bureaucracies); how the internal enemy discourse affects human rights; and how the military “comeback” is related to broader tendencies of economic development, social conflict, and in/exclusion. It was suggested to widen the analytical focus and to look beyond CMR by incorporating analytical insights provided, for instance, by recent scholarship on Security Sector Reform.