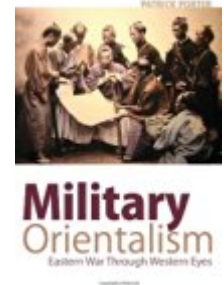


Patrick Porter. *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. x + 263 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-15414-7.



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It has to be said at the outset that this is not an easy book for someone whose background lies in the field of historical studies to review adequately. Patrick Porter of the British Defence Academy at King's College, University of London, is a man with a message. It is primarily directed at the political and military establishments of the United Kingdom and United States, though presumably those of any other country whose military forces might be engaged in conflicts with foes in faraway places could absorb it with profit. In order to convey his message, Porter has written a book which draws in turn on history, historiography, current affairs analysis, literary criticism, sociology, and anthropology. The time scale stretches from classical antiquity to the present day, the geographical coverage is global--and all of this in under two hundred pages of text. The result is at times slightly dizzying, especially as Porter also engages in sudden shifts of focus from the widest of angles to extreme close up.

Porter's message, put simply, is that the employment of American and British forces in Iraq

and Afghanistan has encouraged a view that culture dictates ways of making war and that, in order to fight wars in such alien environments successfully, commanders and troops on the ground need thorough training in the cultural ways of the societies from which their opponents derive. Porter, however, argues that this "culturalist" approach is based on deeply flawed understandings of how cultures work, especially in times of conflict, and tends to create monolithic categories of "western" and "eastern" warfare.

To substantiate his argument, Porter's opening two chapters seek to set a broad historic context of "western" military engagement with "eastern" foes at a range of levels: practical, theoretical, and even popular cultural. Despite the obvious nod to the works of Edward Said in the title, these are not discussed in detail, and the "military orientalism" Porter seeks to identify is a rather more complex creation than what one might describe as a "vulgar Saidian" discourse of western superiority and eastern subjection would suggest. Inevitably Porter has to be very selective in his ar-

guments. On his own admission, he focuses almost exclusively on writings in English, while conceding that looking at, say, French-language material would have added nuance to the analysis. One might suggest that Russian/Soviet views would have been even more interesting, given Russia's ambiguous position as both a self-consciously "western" imperial power pushing eastwards into the steppes and, in the eyes of its European enemies, an "Asiatic" power unleashing barbarian hordes against the West. He skips very lightly over lengthy periods of time. The Roman Empire gets much less coverage than classical Greece (though curiously Alexander of Macedon is hardly mentioned despite his obvious relevance for debates on cultural approaches to warfare in eastern lands), while the Middle Ages and Renaissance get very short shrift, with only one fleeting reference to the Crusades. Ottoman Turkey is rarely mentioned, despite its status as the predominant "Oriental" power with which Europeans had dealings for some five hundred years.

For all that, Porter makes some important points. Under the stress of confrontation and combat, "western" and "eastern" militaries have clearly borrowed liberally from each other and in many cases have come to institutionalize such borrowings in the long term—even if the Swiss might debate Porter's claim that it was Ottoman Janissaries who persuaded European armies to have military bands and march in step. Success in colonial warfare was often crucially dependent on the collaboration of elements of "native" society with the European colonizer. Casting the foe as irredeemably barbarous could provide a convenient justification for the use of what would otherwise be unacceptably brutal methods (though this matter does pose questions about the "legitimate" boundaries of mutual borrowing that Porter might have engaged with in more detail). On a more theoretical level, Porter's point that western Orientalizers were as likely to idealize the eternal Orient of their imaginations as denigrate it is a well-taken one, as is his contention

that, at least from the late nineteenth century onwards, propagandists for "Oriental" causes like Japanese imperialism or Arab nationalism were very ready to promote organic and essentialist visions of their own cultures as ways of asserting their own innate superiority over a vulgar materialist West. Such assertions might in turn be employed by western cultural commentators at odds with the development of their own societies as a mirror for the alleged shortcomings of the latter. He has little difficulty showing that contemporary commentators who contrast a "western" way of war based on the writings of Carl von Clausewitz and an "eastern" one based on Sun Tzu (usually as a way of denigrating the former) are caricaturing both what Clausewitz actually said and the ways in which the supposedly "Clausewitzian" militaries of the "West" have in practice gone about fighting their wars. Intriguingly, he does not subject the Sun Tzu side of the equation to quite the same level of deconstruction, while observing that the actual practice of Asian militaries has also been strikingly at odds with Sun Tzu's supposed lessons. While perhaps less original than he implies, his demonstration that groups like Al-Qaeda are products of a globalized, Internet-linked environment and are quite willing to engage in organizational, tactical, and even ideological borrowing from sources as diverse as published U.S. army manuals, Latin American urban guerilla theorists, and even American white supremacist writers is convincing. His mutual adaptation model perhaps begins to falter around this point, however; despite his best efforts to "normalize" suicide bombing as a technique of war, one suspects that this practice is extremely unlikely to be incorporated as a tactical option in manuals used at U.S. or British staff colleges in the foreseeable future.

One might however wonder just how "Orientalist" a lot of this discussion is. Porter's historical "Orientals" include Zulus, Aztecs, Sioux, and even (briefly and by implication) the thoroughly European-model Mexican army that besieged the

Alamo. As far as the contemporary world is concerned, Rwandan Hutus and the peoples of former Yugoslavia (especially the Serbs) join this group. The analysis thus poses a considerable danger of making the whole concept so generalized as to become meaningless. A thorough overview of the ways in which (say) European societies have viewed non-European foes encountered on the battlefield and how these views have shifted over time in the last three thousand years might well be a fascinating (if unwieldy) project. A genuinely comparative dimension would presumably include a look at how other literate societies saw their foes--and might well find more convergences than divergences. Early Arab chroniclers analyzed their forefathers' Byzantine and Persian foes in terms of luxury and servitude, depicted the still-pagan Turks they encountered in Central Asia as violent barbarians, alternately cunning and stupid, and reacted with horrified incomprehension to the scorched-earth tactics employed by the Berber confederation whose revolt temporarily reversed the advance of the early Caliphates' armies in North Africa--all recognizable "Orientalist" stereotypes.

Indeed, many similar points might be made with respect to hostilities between European societies. As Porter himself notes, an ongoing academic debate persists about the existence of a specifically "German" culture of war marked, amongst other things, by extreme violence against civilians, whether Herero or Belgian. It would not be difficult to map most of the cultural issues identified by Porter onto the ways in which German society and the armies it has produced have been analyzed by others, from the Roman writer Gaius Cornelius Tacitus's use of what many modern writers would see as a largely imaginary picture of German society to criticize its contemporary Roman counterpart through a belief that Germans are "innately" warlike, to the idealization of Wehrmacht prowess by certain Cold War military theorists. If everybody is somebody else's "Oriental," are we perhaps looking at much deeper

forces linked to issues of maintaining social cohesion, particularly in periods of crisis, and legitimizing conflict and conquest, whether the societies in question are "western" or "Oriental"? Much of Porter's evidence would seem to tend in that direction, though it is not one in which he chooses to go very far.

The next four chapters narrow the field down dramatically, while going off in slightly unexpected directions. The first of these examines the reactions of a group of British army officers to Japan's triumph in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. These were almost uncritically pro-Japanese, despite the implications which the victory of "yellow" Japan over "white" Russia is generally seen as having had for European imperial powers. (It would be interesting to know if there were any dissidents within the British military.) Despite visible racial prejudices, the officers in question were also generally astute observers of Japanese society; far from attributing Japan's success to the successful adaptation of a timeless Japanese samurai culture to modern warfare, they were quick to note that the Japanese military they observed was the product of recent social developments, especially in education. As Porter notes, however, it is clear that the main purpose of their idealization of a Japan in which the education system was designed to produce fervently patriotic conscripts and where military decision-making was largely insulated from the influence of elected politicians was to provide a model that Britain should follow. In their view, an urbanized society ruled by liberal politicians in which patriotism appeared to be in terminal decline was an inferior social and political structure doomed to decline. Arguably, as the First World War was to show, the culture they failed to understand was their own.

The following chapter looks at the various ways in which the British military theorist Basil Liddell Hart sought to make use of the thirteenth-century Mongol armies as justifications and precedents for his own theories of how war

should be waged. Porter has no difficulty showing just how slippery Liddell Hart could be in his use of history, rewriting his descriptions of how the Mongol forces operated to suit his shifting views of how the mobile warfare he championed should be organized (in particular to cover up his own misconceptions as these had been revealed by Second World War realities). Porter also notes Liddell Hart's evasiveness about the sheer violence of Mongol warfare as it impacted the societies the Mongols attacked (and, by extension, the consequences of his own preferred ways of making war for civilian populations) and his writing of aspects such as siege warfare out of history altogether. While the picture of Liddell Hart which emerges is far from flattering, it is, however, fair to say that he can hardly be the only theorist, military or otherwise, to have been guilty of selectivity when invoking historical precedents for their preferred options.

Returning to the present day, Porter then examines "culturalist" approaches to the Afghan Taliban and how, in his view, these have failed to account adequately for realities on the ground by overstressing the supposedly irrational or tribalist nature of the movement. This argument involves going over some of the ground already traversed in earlier chapters, with much stress placed on the malleability of supposedly immutable tribal or religious cultures when confronted with serious external challenges (the adoption of suicide bombing, previously despised as cowardly), the tactical flexibility that even the most fundamentalist movements may display to rally support in time of war (shifting attitudes to opium cultivation or female education)—and the gap between the self-image such movements may choose to project to outsiders and the reality of their practice (glorification of "martyrdom" as against much more complex guerilla tactics). Again many of Porter's points are well taken, though some of his analysis is inevitably based on sources that are not above suspicion—Porter's own strictures on the alleged gullibility of western media in the face

of manipulation by Taliban sources might equally apply to, say, the testimonies of Taliban defectors. Inevitably, this section of the book (written, it would seem from the endnote references, in the first half of 2008) already looks a little dated in the light of developments in the past eighteen months; while the role of Pakistan as a "safe haven" for the Afghan Taliban is noted, it is reasonable to assume that Pakistan and its internal conflicts would bulk a good deal larger if Porter was writing this section now, and one imagines also that issues surrounding the 2009 Afghan presidential election would have proved a fertile source for "culturalist" commentary of the kind he deplures.

The final chapter is an analysis of the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hizballa (Porter's preferred spelling) in south Lebanon. By comparison with the other chapters, this one feels somewhat rushed and superficial. The Israeli High Command clearly underestimated the technical and military skills of its foes (as well as their ability to present a coherent media presentation of their side of the fight) and Israeli soldiers on the ground discovered that years of occupation duty in Palestinian territories had proved poor training for serious combat against a well-armed enemy prepared to stand his ground. No doubt a sense of cultural superiority undermined the Israeli effort as well, though Porter's own implication that Iranian training and support meant that Hizballa forces were in some sense no longer "Arab" sits oddly with the main thrust of his book.

Ultimately a book of this type is presumably intended to exercise some influence over political and military decision-making. Given Porter's own stress on the willingness of groups like Al-Qaeda or the Taliban to absorb external influences, one suspects he would not be surprised if copies turn up in remote parts of the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. I therefore turned to the conclusions with anticipation. Was Porter going to say that the cultural turn in military affairs he de-

fects was bunk and announce a new paradigm--"Armies do fighting, not culture," for instance? Some points he made along the way seemed to point in that direction. While conceding in the introduction that the cultural turn had paid some dividends, a sense of damnation with faint praise hung in the air--especially when coupled with a recognition that cultural sensitivity training for soldiers is an expensive business in terms of time and money (with the additional complication--not mentioned by Porter--that years of training could be rendered useless overnight by a change in deployment). Cases where experts got things badly wrong appear throughout the book. In the end, though, Porter contents himself with a call not to abandon the cultural turn but to do it better. The problem, perhaps, is that "doing it better" is likely to mean stirring in even more variables and looking out for the kinds of selective use and modification of cultural characteristics that are only likely to emerge clearly with hindsight. At least some of Porter's own arguments could be read, no doubt against his own intentions, as proving that basic military pragmatism will ultimately push cultures in predictable directions.

This is perhaps a rather downbeat note on which to end the review of a very rich and stimulating work that raises far more issues than can be addressed even in this excessively lengthy review. From a narrowly British perspective, Porter's repeated snipes at contemporary British military thinking and performance raise interesting questions about how years of engagement in Northern Ireland (a conflict not mentioned by Porter) may have impacted the British Army's ability to operate in combat situations. On a wider front, it is a pity that he did not engage more fully with what he describes as "democratic defeatism"--the belief that democratic states are by their very pluralist nature less able to fight "difficult" wars successfully--or take some rather different case studies (since the Balkans are part of Porter's "Orient," some comparative work on the

Balkan wars of the 1910s and 90s might have repaid the effort). In the end, however, one cannot help feeling that any decision-maker, political or military, who reads this book will end up persuaded that culture is very important in military matters but little the wiser on how best to take that fact into account in practical policymaking.

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