

# Utile forms: power and knowledge in small war

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**Abstract.** This article introduces the concept of ‘utile forms’ and analyses the effects of these forms in imperial rule and contemporary counterinsurgency. Utile forms are media that enable bureaucracies to disseminate specialised knowledges to officials operating in the field. Examples include smart cards, field manuals, and handheld biometric devices. We argue that utile forms have significant social and political effects irrespective of the ‘truth value’ of the knowledge they contain. We analyse these effects in terms of world-ordering and world-making properties: utile forms both embody a particular worldview or ideology (world-ordering) and they facilitate official attempts to remake the world in accordance with this vision (world-making). We draw on examples of utile forms from British India and more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The article concludes by reflecting on the relations between truth, knowledge, and power in times of war and imperialism.

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Perhaps, we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests. . .

In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

An unexpected outcome of 1989 and the ‘End of History’ twenty years on was the crisis of Western power in old imperial hinterlands. As with earlier small wars gone wrong, political and military officials turned to scholars and the academy in order

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 26–7, 194.

to enlist various knowledges for purposes of intervention, counterinsurgency, and governance. Modern warfare always involves use of specialised and systematic knowledges, with particular emphasis on technology and engineering. While these are important in small war too, such conflicts place an additional premium on understanding of indigenous languages, cultures, and societies. In the period of European empire, Orientalists, anthropologists, and other scholars played key roles in enabling colonial rule and overcoming resistance to it, while during the Cold War insurgency and subversion led to a sustained and multifaceted relationship between the Department of Defense (DOD) and the US academy, particularly but not only in respect of area studies.<sup>2</sup> In the last decade, social science and anthropology have been drawn on to inform counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the War on Terror more generally. Small war is back, and with it the relevance of ‘soft’, social knowledges for the conduct of military operations.

In this article, we consider the relationship between social science and policy in terms of the *forms* into which specialised knowledges are put, in order to make them available to, and useful for, civil and military bureaucracies. Form puts knowledge to work for power. We approach this topic from a different angle on the relationship between knowledge and power – here, the state – than is usual for security studies. Broadly speaking, the relationship between state policy and science is normally addressed in terms of policy relevance, of the utility of particular ideas, knowledges and scholarly methods for policymaking. An important, related strand of scholarship concerns ‘speaking truth to power’, in which scholars from a range of positions and expertise critique policies of state on grounds of ethics, politics, rationality, legality, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> These approaches reflect the classic Enlightenment presumption that knowledge and power are in principle separable. Systematic knowledge, developed in relative freedom from power, can inform or critique state policy. An opposing strand of work in security studies and related fields conceives power and knowledge as co-constitutive, as power/knowledge in the Foucaultian idiom.<sup>4</sup> Power shapes the development of knowledge, academic and otherwise, while knowledge shapes the operations of power.

We seek to contribute to this literature, and to open a new front in the study of security and power/knowledge. We are interested in what happens when military and other bureaucracies concerned with small war, colonial rule, and counterinsurgency seek to operationalise specialised knowledges about culture and society. In order for such knowledges to be put to use by the military, they must be ‘translated’ into

<sup>2</sup> Masao Miyoshi and Harry D. Harootunian, *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Bruce Cumings, ‘Boundary Displacement: The State, the Foundations, and International and Area Studies During and after the Cold War’, *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations at the End of the Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Noam Chomsky, *The Cold War & the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York: New Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> This is a major theme in the work of Hans Morgenthau, among others. Robert J. Meyers, ‘Hans J. Morgenthau: On Speaking Truth to Power’, *Society*, 29:2 (1992).

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980). For related work in security studies, see Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and Us: America’s Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Josef Teboho Ansorge, ‘Spirits of War: A Field Manual’, *International Political Sociology*, 4:4 (2010); Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, ‘The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies’, *Review of International Studies*, 32:2 (2006); Hayward R. Alker and Thomas J. Biersteker, ‘The Dialectics of World Order: Notes for a Future Archaeologist of International Savoir Faire’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 28:2 (1984).

certain forms, which we term *utile forms*. These are media with a standardised layout that make knowledge available for particular purposes. They include field manuals, smartcards, and PowerPoint presentations, as well as software and hardware used to input and present biometric data. We focus on the forms themselves and argue that utile forms potentially have important effects: on those using them, on the wars they are trying to fight, and on the people they seek to govern.

That is, it is not only the ‘content’ of the knowledge that matters, the theories, ideas, and data, but also the form, or container, into which that knowledge is put. This is a version of the notion that the medium of information is not ‘neutral’.<sup>5</sup> For example, as is appreciated in military circles, PowerPoint not only simplifies ideas, but also has its own ‘cognitive style’ which shapes how problems are understood and acted upon, while excluding alternative approaches.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, we seek to identify and initially elaborate the field of power/form/knowledge in security studies, with respect to small war. Drawing on colonial and military experience, we show that utile forms exercise effects, both in shaping the worldviews of their users and in enabling these users to act upon, to put into practice, the knowledges the forms contain. Not least, utile forms are essential to bureaucratic efforts to standardise and routinise official interaction with indigenous populations.

In the first section below we discuss controversies over military anthropology in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to introduce knowledge forms in general and utile forms in particular. The second section provides an account of utile forms in British India and develops the concepts we use to make sense of their effects. In the third and fourth sections we return to the contemporary context by looking at the use of smart cards and biometric handheld devices in Iraq and Afghanistan. Utile forms are potentially effective for certain purposes irrespective of their academic qualities, of the ‘truth value’ of the knowledge they contain. This is of central significance for the politics of academic knowledge in times of war and imperialism, a topic we explore briefly in the conclusion.

### Manuals, monographs, and timetables

One route into the nature and significance of knowledge forms is their role in the controversies over the DOD’s renewed interest in anthropology and counterinsurgency amid the crises in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2004 onwards. Reform-minded officers grouped around General David Petraeus wanted to shift US strategy, and to mobilise expert knowledge about society, economy, and culture to assist in its legitimation, development, and realisation. They faced the challenge of how to make these knowledges useful for an army in time of war. As two advocates of reform argued, ‘DOD should create and house an organization of social scientists ... [to] disseminate knowledge to the field in a usable form.’<sup>7</sup> The reformist officers also had to convince

<sup>5</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Walter J Ong, *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the Word* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Edward R. Tufte, *The Cognitive Style of Powerpoint: Pitching out Corrupts Within* (Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 2006); T. X. Hammes, ‘Dumb-Dumb Bullets’, *Armed Forces Journal* (July 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Montgomery McFate and Andrea Jackson, ‘An Organizational Solution for DoD’s Cultural Knowledge Needs’, *Military Review*, 85:4 (July–August 2005), p. 20.

their more sceptical colleagues as well as politicians and the public that counterinsurgency was the solution to the US's difficulties in Iraq. They met these challenges in part through putting knowledges into utile forms, such as smart cards, and by publishing *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency* both as a field manual and as a university press monograph. Some reflection on the role of form in the debates between the officers and their critics in the Network of Concerned Anthropologists (NCA) serves to introduce knowledge forms and to elaborate the core properties of utile forms. While rarely made explicit objects of analysis, questions of form saturated these debates.

The American Anthropology Association's (AAA) report on the Human Terrain System (HTS) specifically noted the limitations of packaging research as 'briefings, research reports, patrol reports, weekly and monthly summaries'. That briefings consisted of 'usually no more than four to five PowerPoint slides' in a style comparable to work for corporate clients, led one Human Terrain Team (HTT) social scientist to surmise: 'This is not ethnography. It is translating abstractions into actionable recommendations.'<sup>8</sup> Others criticised *FM 3-24* for lacking footnotes and not following proper citation procedures, while smart cards were taken to task for their simplicity and stereotypical representation of ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup> Unlike scholarly monographs, field manuals and other military utile forms do not normally have an apparatus of citation enabling the tracing of sources. They are institutionally assessed according to criteria other than university procedure, notionally that of military utility.

Critiques of knowledge forms on grounds of academic process segued into more substantive concerns. The military use of academic materials lacked scholarly rigour. The AAA report cited problems in adhering to 'established disciplinary and federal standards for the treatment of human subjects'. Anthropologists in HTTs failed to follow the 'disciplinary Code of Ethics', were unable to maintain 'reliable control over data' they collected, and their work was not subject to 'external review'. All of this meant that HTS could not be considered 'a legitimate professional exercise in anthropology'.<sup>10</sup> Profoundly worried about the renewed interest of the national security state in their discipline, and the harm that would come to indigenous informants and others, the NCA went further. HTS was accused of 'faking scholarship' and lacking 'academic integrity'.<sup>11</sup> The failure to comply with academic standards and practices made military anthropology 'simplistic' and 'incoherent', its products the work of 'second rate mercenary academics'.<sup>12</sup> HTS's 'epistemic framework' was damned as 'static, reductionist, and unrealistic'.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> AAA Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the US Security and Intelligence Communities (CEAUSSIC), 'Final Report on the Army's Human Terrain System Proof of Concept Program' (2009), p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> David H. Price, 'Anthropology as Lamppost? A Comment on the Counterinsurgency Field Manual', *Anthropology Today*, 23:6 (2007). Derek Gregory, "'The Rush to the Intimate'" Counterinsurgency and the Cultural Turn', *Radical Philosophy*, 150 (2008), p. 4; Hugh Gusterson, 'The Cultural turn in the War on Terror', in John Kelly et al. (eds), *Anthropology and Global Counterinsurgency* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> (CEAUSSIC), 'Final Report', p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> David H Price, 'Faking Scholarship', in Network of Concerned Anthropologists (ed.), *The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual: Or Notes on Demilitarizing American Society* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009), p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Marshall Sahlins, 'Preface', *ibid.*, pp. ii–iii. It is important to note that few holders of academic posts have actually served on HTTs.

<sup>13</sup> Greg Feldman, 'Radical or Reactionary? The Old Wine in the Counterinsurgency Field Manual's New Flask', in Network of Concerned Anthropologists (ed.), *The Counter Counterinsurgency Manual*, p. 90.

It was inevitable that efforts to apply anthropological knowledge in wartime contexts involved departure from scholarly standards. One frustrated drafter of *FM 3-24* reminded his critics that a field manual was not a ‘doctoral dissertation’ and was intended for practical use by the military.<sup>14</sup> But *FM 3-24* also appeared in the guise of a university press book. For us, behind the critiques of research method and amid the politics of a debate between anthropologists and military officers was a confusion of forms. Given the criticisms made about smart cards, field manuals, and PowerPoint presentations, one could say that the debate was about form, but not consciously so. While the officers felt that they had distilled knowledge into its most useful components, the anthropologists were alienated by the degraded state of their knowledge as it appeared in the military’s utile forms and by the warlike purposes for which it was to be used. For the military, utile forms fostered the illusion that they had captured the necessary objective knowledge in a condensed, accessible form. For the anthropologists, the forms into which the military put anthropological knowledge seemed to corrupt that knowledge. What can be glimpsed here is that *form is productive*. It creates effects which are not wholly reducible to the knowledge the forms contain, and which can be analysed in their own terms.

Knowledge can only be realised in practice through a form of some kind. In military contexts, it is the forms into which knowledge and data are put that ‘weaponises’ knowledge that makes it potentially harmful.<sup>15</sup> The debate between the anthropologists and the military has been heavily normative in character, even *ad hominem*. We propose instead an ‘empirical turn’, or at least provide the conceptual basis for such a turn. We do so by looking at the forms that transform knowledge into tools of imperial governance and warfare. We situate contemporary utile forms within a genealogy of forms and knowledges developed in the course of European colonialism. We offer some concepts – world-ordering and world-making – by which the effects of utile forms can be anatomised. We look at some of the ways in which form mediates knowledge and power, and realises knowledge for power. One principal effect of many knowledge forms is to obscure and mystify the relations between power and knowledge. Accordingly, we show how a focus on utile forms can address a core conundrum in power/knowledge debates. Reflection on the curious appearance of *FM 3-24* as both manual and monograph illuminates many of these points and helps situate our contribution.

For the anthropologists David Price and Marshal Sahlins the military’s use of scholarly materials lacked ‘critical reflexivity’.<sup>16</sup> Consider however some of the properties shared between scholarly monographs and military field manuals as knowledge forms. Field manuals and monographs are both published by legitimating authorities following processes of review and revision. Both help establish and secure hierarchies inside institutions. They are sites and bearers of authoritative claims to truth and play significant roles in career progression. Both are implicated in policing boundaries. For the military, a manual can define the appropriate, officially-sanctioned way to go about a given kind of operation. For the academy, the research monograph

<sup>14</sup> John Nagl, ‘Desperate People with Limited Skills’, Small Wars Blog, {<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/11/desperate-people-with-limited/>}.

<sup>15</sup> David Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology: Social Science in Service of the Militarized State* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Sahlins, ‘Preface’, p. iv. See also Price, ‘Faking Scholarship’, p. 74.

helps to distinguish between scholarship and lesser forms of inquiry or reportage. The role of the monograph in tenure processes, in defining the fellowship of established scholars, is only one dimension of its boundary drawing properties in this respect.

Interestingly, both field manuals and monographs can consume reflexivity. Doctrine-defining manuals invoke, develop, and embody traditions of warfare and their imagined worlds of operations and enemies. For example, the 1976 edition of *FM 100-5 Operations* was the principal vehicle by which the US Army overcame and forgot the tragic complexities of Vietnam and reoriented itself towards the ‘operational level’ of warfare against Warsaw Pact forces in Europe. This manual imagined a world where there were clear distinctions between the political, the military, and the civil, and in which soldiers could concentrate on the purest form of their art denied them in Indochina – so-called peer on peer warfare.<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, *FM 100-5* did not say any of this directly but achieved these effects by focusing on how to defeat Warsaw Pact forces through superior firepower and technology, fostering critical debate and revision in future editions on subjects such as force ratios and attrition vs. manoeuvre. The manual, the debate, and the revisions took for granted, as did the US Army it came to define, that high intensity conventional warfare was the way of the future. This is quite an astonishing achievement, given that nuclear weapons made an overt war between the superpowers in Europe very difficult to envisage, while at the same time helping to shunt armed conflict to peripheral states, where the US Army actually has fought its wars since 1945. The operational orientation of the manual form – instructing soldiers how to fight – helps reify what are in fact highly tendentious and profoundly political assumptions.

The knowledge contained in *FM 100-5* mattered, but form served to shape and multiply its effects. For example, as a widely distributed field manual, many copies of *FM 100-5* circulated. Content and form are always entwined in practice, but they must be analytically distinguished in order to comprehend the effects utile forms can have. In both the turn to the operational level of warfare in 1976 and the latter move to counterinsurgency in 2006, the manual form was deployed as the instrument of institutional transformation in the US Army.

A research monograph on military doctrine ideally would have made *FM 100-5*’s assumptions explicit and available for debate. But in doing so, in claiming space for critical inquiry, the monograph contributes to the illusion of the separation between truth and power, as if inquiry proceeds in a space where power relations have been suspended. Of course they have not been, and monographs and their authors are embedded in institutions and their ‘real world’ struggles and constraints, not least those of universities and presses, but also in wider social context both locally and internationally. Among other things, the monograph obscures the geopolitics that make it possible. The Western academy is unimaginable absent Western wealth and power in the world, past and present. Imperialism enabled anthropology and other fields of inquiry, carrying scholars to distant places on routes punched through and maintained by Western power. From the Second World War onwards, the US state has been deeply implicated in the development of the social sciences, especially those

<sup>17</sup> Paul Herbert, ‘Towards the Best Available Thought: The Writing of Field Manual 100-5, “Operations” by the United States Army, 1973–1976’, PhD Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1985.



related to foreign areas and national security, while ideas like ‘modernisation’ produced by these sciences shaped intervention in the Third World.<sup>18</sup> The Western development enterprise in the post-1945 world is another site where scholarship and neo-imperial power are intertwined.<sup>19</sup> Whatever their intentions, and whatever the roles they or their ideas play, scholars are always embedded within definite social and political contexts, and the historic formations of power that have produced them. Much blood has dried on academic texts from the wounds carved by the great circuits of empire.<sup>20</sup> Yet, monographs, assisted by the codes of research methodology upon which their contents are based, seemingly arise from and reflect only the world of knowledge, not power. A university press volume with footnotes conveys the impression of *truth*.

We do not mean to suggest that there are no differences between military manuals and scholarly monographs. The idea that the latter are free from power is however not one of them. Moreover, features of both these knowledge forms seem to work effects, to contribute to certain beliefs on the part of those who utilise them. One effect of the monograph form is to help substantiate the classic Enlightenment distinction between truth and power. Other than acknowledgement of sources of funding, the constitutive relationship between the Cold War national security state and area studies, for example, would not be immediately evident in any given area studies monograph. Yet, core categories and ideas were fundamentally shaped by power, even in respect of seemingly ‘objective’ rational choice approaches.<sup>21</sup>

It is precisely at the intersection between imperial power and scholarship that anthropology initially flourished.<sup>22</sup> Ethnographic research was published in a variety of forms and played important roles in colonial rule. Critical inquiry into this power/knowledge nexus was foundational for contemporary historical and cultural anthropology, as in the work of Bernard Cohn and his student Nicholas Dirks among others.<sup>23</sup> They focused on what Cohn called the ‘investigative modalities’ through which colonial government gathered knowledge of indigenous society, and on some of the forms into which this knowledge was put, from narrative histories to census

<sup>18</sup> Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Mark Solovey, ‘Project Camelot and the 1960s Epistemological Revolution: Rethinking the Politics-Patronage-Social Science Nexus’, *Social Studies of Science*, 31:2 (2001); Joel Isaac, ‘The Human Sciences in Cold War America’, *The Historical Journal*, 50:3 (2007); Michael E Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and ‘Nation Building’ in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000). See also, fn 2 of this article.

<sup>19</sup> James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: ‘Development’, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Mark R. Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Compare Michel Foucault et al., *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975–76* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> S. M. Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Talal Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). See also E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986–1995* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

schedules. This work constitutes a more or less obvious starting point not only for critiques of HTS but for inquiry into the role and nature of knowledge forms in small war. It is therefore curious that anthropological critics did not, with some exception, pick up more directly on questions of form in the HTS debates.<sup>24</sup> Their primary focus instead was on the military's failure to properly use ethnographic and other research methods. These methods had offered anthropologists apparent insulation from geopolitics, and they clung to them. Scholarly forms like the monograph helped to maintain and further naturalise this belief.

This tendency to see knowledge as potentially or relatively free from or even opposed to power is evident in Jürgen Habermas's appeal to the 'forceless force of the better argument'.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, in the Foucaultian tradition, power appears to be 'everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere'.<sup>26</sup> A popular line of critique towards such an inclusive notion of power is that it lacks any specific analytic purchase. Once power comes from everywhere it becomes more difficult to make sense of it and more challenging to explain how and why resistance to power can be imagined or organised, or even be possible at all. Marshall Sahlins has this in mind when he muses 'Power, power everywhere, And how the signs do shrink. Power, power everywhere, And nothing else to think.'<sup>27</sup>

We locate the study of utile forms between the Foucaultian vision of power as widely distributed and more traditional conceptions of power as centrally held, vertical, or 'top-down'. Utile forms are one of the ways in which power can appear to be both centralised and dispersed at the same time. Utile forms connect 'everywhere' with central sites of institutional power. In the age of mechanical reproduction, they are vehicles by which centrally held knowledges and practices can be disseminated across staffs, populations, and milieus. Put simply, there are many copies. With utile forms large modern organisations can rehearse, standardise, manage, streamline, and distribute their micro-practices of communication, exchange, and domination. But utile forms are more than simply vital links between institutional power and everyday practices – they are also significant political phenomena of their own, characterised by distinct properties and effects. One of their distinguishing features is that they are always deployed for instrumental purposes.

The invention, standardisation, and universalisation of utile forms played important roles in histories of modernity, capitalism, and imperialism. Their genealogy includes the development of the printing press, double-entry bookkeeping, improvement of mapmaking, compilation of indexes and encyclopedias, as well as repeated innovations in card catalogues – all of which worked to place knowledge in distinct forms for various purposes. Utile forms and the knowledge they contain embody a vision of the world, while simultaneously facilitating agents' action in such a way as to bring this vision into being through practice. We refer to these two properties of utile forms as *world-ordering* and *world-making* respectively. Consider *FM 100-5* mentioned above. Like all field manuals, this one embodied a vision of war, in this case consisting of high-intensity conventional fighting. As pointed out, this was an ideologically tendentious construct of war, one the manual form helped naturalise

<sup>24</sup> Compare Gusterson, 'The Cultural turn in the War on Terror'.

<sup>25</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *Waiting for Foucault, Still* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002), p. 20. We thank our reviewers for drawing our attention to these passages.



and reify. These are world-ordering properties of the manual. It envisions and orders the world in a particular way; it has a worldview. At the same time, the manual, in myriad manner, helped to put this vision to work in practice. These are the world-making properties of the manual. From their basic courses onwards, a generation of US officers learned to think and act in its terms. US forces were trained and equipped in accordance with the manual's lessons and principles. War plans and operations in both the Persian Gulf War of 1990–1 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 reflected *FM 100-5*.

Utile forms are distinctive in that their world-ordering properties are tightly aligned with their world-making effects. For example, the reduction of some domain of social life to quantitative indicators, printed in tabular form, predisposes one to understand the world in reified and rationalised terms, as available for instrumental action. Through processes of socialisation, such forms help develop human characters ready to understand and act in particular ways. That is, utile forms have socialising effects, shaping the subjectivity of agents. The tabular organisation of data enables officials to operate upon the world and its denizens as if they were ciphers for rationalised processes. In so doing, they deepen the circuits of rationalisation in the Weberian sense, realising them in practice. An example is the forms and data by which bank officials determine an applicant's eligibility for a loan. First, the applicant is reduced to a series of data points, made available to a loan officer in a utile form (for example, the bank's software for this purpose), which then enables the officer to act in the 'appropriate way', directing behaviour into predetermined and standardised channels.

Another apparently mundane example of a utile form is the railway timetable. As many have pointed out, the railway was crucial to colonising and imagining India, Australia, and Africa as well as North America.<sup>28</sup> Cecil Rhodes's Cape to Cairo railway plans were both an engineering fantasy and a regulative ideal of imperialism. Little considered is the railway timetable itself. While timetables are obviously vital in the coordinating function they play, they appear merely as innocuous standards and conventions. But the railway timetable does much more than fulfil its delimited practical purpose as a container of information. In a timetable the world is rendered and revealed as one connected place. Moreover, timetables assist in bringing such a world into being by encouraging people to think of distance in terms of time and through coordinating and rationalising the practices associated with interconnecting places. Timetables help substantiate an image of the world as a circulating machine, while simultaneously doing their part to make the world run on time. Through processes of socialisation, utile forms such as loan applications, timetables, and field manuals help develop human characters ready to understand and act on the world in 'appropriate ways'.

Looking particularly at languages and cultural knowledge, we move on now to consider more closely how form matters in historical and contemporary small war.

### **Knowledge and form in British India**

Our concern in this section is the operation of civil and military bureaucracies involved in imperial rule. We identify the role of utile forms in how these bureaucracies

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

encounter, appropriate, and disseminate knowledges in order to educate their personnel and to structure and regulate their interactions with indigenous populations. European colonisers faced problems comparable to those that have confronted Coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Contemporary officers and analysts have drawn directly on colonial experience to understand populations like the Pashtuns, while the history of utile forms in small war begins in the colonial encounter.<sup>29</sup> Scholarship on colonial forms of knowledge therefore offers an important perspective on the present, and we contribute here in a new, critical way to the turn to British experience of empire and counterinsurgency.<sup>30</sup>

When the Spanish came to the Americas or the British arrived in India, these places and their peoples had to be put into an overall scheme of reference, a narrative ordering of the world that addressed questions of identity, history, and purpose.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, policies, day-to-day rules of conduct as well as procedures for training and briefing officials had to be established. As Cohn remarks, the British had not only conquered a territory but an ‘epistemological space’, one which had to be mapped in its linguistic, cultural, and historical dimensions among others.<sup>32</sup> These demands for knowledge led, on the one hand, to Orientalist and colonial discourses, which provided the imperial project with a worldview, creating the familiar Eurocentric world of white men burdened with the responsibility to rule the natives.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, an array of quotidian bureaucratic documents – grammar texts, caste handbooks, training syllabi, standardised forms – were produced to deal with the myriad daily tasks that confronted colonial and military officials in the execution of policy. These utile forms were explicitly concerned with facilitating the application of knowledge in practice, that is, with world-making. But, as we show below, even banal utile forms, concerned with the most mundane matters, can instantiate worldviews that legitimate and naturalise Western presence and policy in the non-European world. One such banal form was the grammar text.

Communication with the locals is a perennial problem for imperial conquerors, one that in modern times generates expensive bureaucratic and technical responses.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Rob Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War* (London: Hurst, 2011); Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, ‘No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier’, *International Security*, 32:4 (2008); Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004). For an earnest argument that modern occupying forces should emulate Napoleon’s use of ‘census, cadastre, and ID cards’ in Egypt see Douglas Batson, Al Di Leonardo, and Christopher K. Tucker, ‘“Napoleonic Know-How” in an Age of Persistent Engagement’, *Small Wars Journal*, 7:2 (2011).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517–1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David Frawley, *The Myth of the Aryan Invasion of India* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1994).

<sup>32</sup> Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> The scale and importance attached to translation are evidenced in attempts at technological solutions, such as Ectaco GI-5 electronic translator; the size of translations contracts, such as one in 2006 for \$4.6 bn to provide translators in Iraq for a five year period, fought over by L-3, McNeil, and DynCorp International; and in the existence of standing institutions, such as the DoD’s Defense Language Institute.

It was necessary for the basic processes of colonial rule, from understanding land tenure arrangements and collecting taxes to managing local staff and commanding native troops. It was also essential for conducting wars against and among non-European peoples, then as now fought in close collaboration with indigenous leaders, soldiers, and populations. The Europeans arrived with various racial and historical theories about languages and peoples, and had to find translators and scholars who could render indigenous languages in European terms. These languages then had to be codified and grammars and dictionaries developed that made sense to Westerners.

In this process, languages and dialects were not only stabilised but also invented. The military patois of Urdu, as spoken by the late Moghul Court, combined with the dialect of the Delhi bazaar, became the basis for the primary British language of administration in India, Hindustani.<sup>35</sup> It was the official *lingua franca* of the British Indian Army, which soldiers and officers alike were required to learn, and a primary medium for communication in the Raj. Notably, even when translation into European terms remade indigenous languages, as in the case of Hindustani, they were still useful for official purposes. In other words, it was not a problem that Hindustani was a hybrid, invented language, a British interpretation of a range of local sources that was codified in a series of texts. The British gained the power and capacity to instantiate their versions of indigenous languages, requiring the locals to adapt. As ever, form and content work together but the veracity of the content – whether or not Hindustani corresponded to a pre-existing Indian language – was beside the point. The potential for miscommunication remained, of course, offering subordinate populations strategic possibilities for dissimulation and maneuver.<sup>36</sup>

In order for knowledge of languages to be used in the education of civil and military officials, it had to be put into teachable forms, into grammar texts, dictionaries, readers, teaching aids, and language exams. What made knowledge of language available for the making of empire was the form into which it was put.<sup>37</sup> Mundane yet vital utile forms were essential for empire, just as today their heirs are used to prepare soldiers and officials for deployment abroad. That said, and in regard to the co-mingling of world-ordering and world-making, knowledge of language in institutions like the British Indian Army and the Indian Civil Service was not taught simply as language, as if it were a technical subject only. The language of a subject people was learned against the backdrop of imperial ideology, as well as in the context of views about the history, ethnology, and sociology of colonial society. One example is *From Sepoy to Subedar*, a text used for three quarters of a century in teaching British officers Hindustani.<sup>38</sup> The autobiography of an Indian soldier in East India Company service produced in collaboration with a British officer, its language instruction came alongside lessons about the Martial Races, the religious sensibilities of Indians, their putative sources of loyalty, the proper behaviour of British officers, and a host of other tales that inculcated new officers in Indian Army lore. These

<sup>35</sup> Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, pp. 16–57.

<sup>36</sup> Compare James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>37</sup> This is not to suggest that language instruction was limited to printed forms, only that they were an essential element. New British officers in the Indian army were assigned a *munshi* to tutor them in Hindustani.

<sup>38</sup> Sita Ram Pandey, *From Sepoy to Subedar, Being the Life and Adventures of Subedar Sita Ram, a Native Officer of the Bengal Native Army, Written and Related by Himself*, ed. James Lunt, trans. Lt. Col. Norgate (Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1970 [orig.pub. 1873]).

lessons in colonial discourse would be reinforced by other materials and lectures the officers received along with their language courses.

The example of language in British India serves to make two preliminary points. The first is that utile forms of the kind we are singling out here were not only pervasive features of colonial rule but essential media for the preparation of personnel and the operation of civil and military bureaucracies in colonial context. A second is that even at that level of bureaucratic minutiae, practical knowledges were transmitted alongside imperial ideologies. The racial theories that informed British rule in India can be found in the caste handbooks and census schedules that civil and military officials made use of in the conduct of their duties. Within these utile forms world-ordering and world-making cannot be separated out from one another. The language reader was also an opportunity to impart, and normalise, moral lessons.

With these thoughts in mind, we initially develop two areas for research into utile forms. First are the *subjective* effects that the array of teachable and other utile forms have on officials. The second is their role in bureaucracies. By subjective effects, we mean the ways in which officials come to think about and act upon the world. Utile forms play a role in socialising officials and in forming their characters. A core premise of the colonial knowledges officials were taught is that Westerners *knew* native languages and cultures, however exotic, and that they could be grasped by nearly anyone with the will to learn. Language and ethnographical instruction contributed to a larger and deeper sense of mastery over the non-European world. They helped create a confidence that, however warranted, was needed, for reasons perhaps not immediately apparent. Western officials and soldiers in the non-European world were placed in a realm of more or less radical difference, a social and cultural context they had little practical precedent of, which they had to navigate and act upon as effectively as possible in conducting their duties. As Ashis Nandy comments, the experience of being a colonial ruler is overwhelming.<sup>39</sup>

Utile forms contribute to, and are premised upon, the belief that indigenous languages and cultures are knowable, that they can be objectified, put into teachable forms, and transmitted to officials. Holding a dictionary in your hands is practical evidence that the language it concerns is known, *and* that you have more or less effective access to that knowledge. The dictionary, as in the monographs and manuals discussed above, disappears the fact that the language might be made up, a product of colonial power. Of course, it can be pointed out, that it is knowledge itself, say of the dialect and customs of a particular tribe, which is most reassuring, not just the form in which it comes. But what the utile form contributes is the idea that if one did not know a particular word or rite, *it could be looked up* in the appropriate knowledge aid: the caste handbook, a predecessor's handover document, an official circular, etc. If the knowledge did not exist in a utile form, then an entry could always be made for it. A further premise buried in the utile form is that the knowledge had been successfully objectified. That is, underpinning utile forms is the assumption, again however warranted, that knowledge content could be translated and transferred to different forms and contexts without any significant loss of fidelity or distortion of meaning. An official facing difficulty in the field need only access the relevant materials. That actual practice turns out to be confusing and unsettling,

<sup>39</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 32.

forcing revision of 'book knowledge', only prompts 'lessons learned' initiatives and other kinds of information and intelligence sharing procedures, which involve their own array of communications media and knowledge forms. At each stage, utile forms can contribute to an underlying sense of the possibility of mastery, of the legibility of indigenous society.

The second area of research we want to identify is the role of utile forms in bureaucratic standardisation and routinisation. Ideally speaking, the institutions and curricula used to prepare officials in languages and other topics inculcate them with a shared, standardised baseline of knowledge, which then shapes their conduct in the field. Collectively, moreover, training institutions make officials replaceable and function as a means of centralised control and dissemination of information. Later, in the field, utile forms enable the regulation of interaction with indigenous populations, and can structure, stabilise, and standardise interchange. We develop this point further by considering three more such forms, the recruiting handbook and, in the following sections, the smart card and biometric devices. In doing so, we remain attentive not only to subjective effects but also to the ways in which world-ordering and world-making go hand in hand in utile forms.

In the British Indian Army, each group that was recruited was identified as a distinct 'Martial Race' based on an ethnic identity constructed out of caste, region, and religion. Within each such grouping were a variety of subgroups and classes, from particular areas and associated with and favoured by particular regiments. Given the variable, hybrid, and changing character of ethnic relations in South Asia, recruiting officers faced a very real problem: that of identifying whether any given individual or group was a genuine specimen. For example, Jat peasants in the Punjab were recruited as a Hindu class, but should they convert to Sikhism they could be recruited as Jat Sikhs. Meanwhile, although Sikhism itself was a syncretic religion closely associated with many Hindu practices, only men from Jat communities which had converted to Sikhism around the time of Gobind Singh, the tenth and last Sikh Guru of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, were considered true Sikhs and could be recruited as such. Naturally all of this was rather confusing to the young British subaltern and the recruiting handbooks were developed in response.<sup>40</sup>

Regularly updated and published in various editions, each one covered particular recruitable groups. The handbooks, as the author of one on 'Marathas' and 'Dekhani Musalmans' noted in his preface, were 'intended primarily for the instruction of young officers'. In order to be effective for this purpose, 'as much information as possible concerning the history, customs, etc.' of these groups had to be 'put into an easily accessible form'. The handbook does not 'profess to give a complete account' of its subject, but does provide a 'working knowledge' for young officers to recruit and command such troops, including history, ethnography, lists and tables of clans and their totems, of dynasties and sub-castes, and of religious events in the area, capped off with a different knowledge form – a map – provided in an envelope attached to the back cover.<sup>41</sup> Importantly, the text provides instructions and maxims for action designed to overcome the ambiguity and indeterminacy encountered in practice in

<sup>40</sup> See Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, pp. 107–11; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, pp. 177–80; Richard Gabriel Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>41</sup> Unpaginated foreword in R. M. Betham, *Handbooks for the Indian Army: Marathas and Dekhani Musalmans* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1908).

favor of the categories and constructs in the handbook. As the handbook on Sikhs warns, ‘the line between the strictest Singh and a Hindu is but vague’.<sup>42</sup> The handbooks offered various suggestions from descriptions of phenotype to pre-scripted questions and answers to help officers determine the ‘correct type’ of an individual and weed out ‘imposters’. ‘If he says he is neither or tries to explain what he is, it may be assumed he is not a pure Maratha and should be rejected.’<sup>43</sup> One officer remembered the rules of thumb well enough to reproduce a version many years later in his memoir: ‘If asked what kind of [Punjabi Muslim] they are they will answer “Chhib Rajput”, and they call their own headmen and other worthies “Raja”.’<sup>44</sup> Such protocols for identifying ‘genuine specimens’ anticipate the biometric desires of our own day.

In assessing the significance of the recruiting handbooks and the knowledges they contain, it is important to remember that the Martial Races did not in fact exist in and of themselves, as if such racial theories were adequate accounts of real social groups in Indian society. Drawn from British and Indian imagination and culture, the codified, official versions of the Martial Races found in the Indian Army were *made real* through imperial power and bureaucratic organisation.<sup>45</sup> Recruits and soldiers had continuously to be sorted into categories and bounded off from one another by official versions of their ethnic identities, complete with separate uniform, rituals, holidays, diets, and religions. Recruiting handbooks, combining as they did colonial ethnography with tips for its realisation in practice, actually helped *produce* the Martial Races, guiding officers in making their individual daily contributions to objectifying caste and race in ways prefigured by colonial discourse. It is in part through the form of the handbook that the world-ordering construct of a Martial Race, or any other ethnic grouping, played its world-making role, affecting populations in practice.

We are not suggesting that things always work like it says in training materials and other knowledge aids. Attempts to formalise human interaction at the level of specificity found in the recruiting handbooks tend towards ritualised and rehearsed exchanges. After all, how many iterations of the kind of exchange described above were necessary for potential recruits to learn what a successful response was? But as with Hindustani, this did not make the recruiting handbook any less effective. The recruiting officer and the recruits had available to them a script which, if followed, permitted likely recruits entry into the army and the officer the experience of legibility, order, and control. Once the recruit had been inculcated into the traditions of his regiment and martial class, uniformed accordingly and so on, it did not particularly matter that his official identity was a recent invention. In these processes, as in their counterparts in civil government, handbooks, and other forms played their role in categorising and ordering populations through objectifications of caste and race. In doing so, world-ordering and world-making operate in and through utile forms in codependent ways.

<sup>42</sup> R. W. Falcon, *Handbook on Sikhs: For the Use of Regimental Officers* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1896), p. 16; quoted in Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making*, p. 110.

<sup>43</sup> Betham, *Marathas and Dekhani Musalmans*, p. 96.

<sup>44</sup> Centre for South Asian Studies Cambridge, Col. H. B. Hudson, ‘A Backward Glance: A Personal Account of Service in the Indian Army 1932–1947’, p. 63. ‘Raja’ was perhaps not so useful in making fine distinctions among populations as it is an appellation used throughout the subcontinent.

<sup>45</sup> See Tarak Barkawi, ‘Peoples, Homelands, and Wars? Ethnicity, the Military, and Battle among British Imperial Forces in the War against Japan’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46:1 (2004).



In closing this discussion, we want to note that to focus on the ‘truth value’ of the recruiting handbook as a piece of ethnographic research is to miss its significance. To criticise it for simplicity, or the gap between what it says and ‘what the natives really thought’, or for its Orientalism, is to risk overlooking some of the functions knowledge serves for power.<sup>46</sup> A fiction like the Martial Races, encoded in a utile form like a handbook, is one of the ways knowledge helps power create the world power imagines.

### The smart card and power/form/knowledge in contemporary counterinsurgency

For the development and systemisation of colonial knowledges, the British had the advantage of a long and settled stay in India. Cohn’s ‘investigative modalities’ involved ‘the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and encyclopedias’.<sup>47</sup> The scale of the knowledge problems that confronted the British is evident in the generality of Cohn’s modalities: historiographic, observational/travel, survey, enumerative, museological, and surveillance. Having constructed India as alien, the British faced in proportion the problem of knowing it, and of legitimating and disseminating the knowledge they acquired.

It is useful to contrast these earlier moments in modern imperialism with the contemporary situation, with the knowledge problems faced in the colonial present. In the great circuits of imperial power and modern knowledge, British colonial discourse was an early incarnation of area studies broadly conceived, the further development and critique of which has profoundly shaped the modern academy and its social sciences and humanities disciplines.<sup>48</sup> In part due to these histories of scholarship and empire, as well as to the great interest in, and resources devoted to, knowing foreign places and peoples over the centuries, the basic problem of acquiring and legitimating knowledge of ‘others’ is in many ways much less pressing today. A variety of institutions and their personnel store and produce relevant knowledges. There are universities and libraries, think tanks, and foreign office and intelligence archives, files and databases. Credentialed experts of diverse kind in and out of government are available for consultation. Moreover, suitably updated, the world-ordering categories of colonial discourse are still much in evidence, profoundly shaping Western mindsets and knowledges. Ideas regarding a developed, global North and an undeveloped South, trapped in corruption, poverty, tradition, and violence are taken for granted, and are in fact premises of contemporary discourses of development and humanitarian intervention, as well as those of the War on Terror.

Even if, in terms of foundations, neo-imperial knowledge problems are less daunting than those faced by the Europeans in their heyday, the Coalition armies of conquest and occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq had their own difficulties. For one,

<sup>46</sup> Compare Marshall Sahlins, *How ‘Natives’ Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). For a compelling critique of Sahlins see Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>47</sup> Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 25–44.

these were more hastily built and temporary affairs than the great bureaucracies of British India, with their professional staff who devoted lives and careers to faraway, hot places. The US and the UK had to rotate their personnel in and out of country on tours counted in months. More or less from scratch, systems had to be developed to prepare each cohort of officials, every deploying military unit, as well as replacement personnel with the changing knowledges thought needed in their areas of operation. Given the wartime context, it is significant that the primary interface between the occupying forces and indigenous populations were Western soldiers. To the extent cultural knowledges were to be utilised in fighting insurgencies, commanders, staffs, and especially junior officers and soldiers had to be informed and educated. ‘The US military relied on thousands of young men and women who had been abruptly transferred from small-town America to a cultural landscape for which they literally had no terms.’<sup>49</sup> Utile forms were a crucial means for meeting these challenges.

It was not only social backgrounds, political dispositions, or choice of vocation that posed difficulties in the cultural education of US military personnel. The initial invasions and years of occupation were conducted under ideological and operational frames that dismissed as more or less irrelevant cultural knowledge of anything other than a superficial kind. Themes concerning revenge, counter-terrorism, and Islamic backwardness and violence were favoured instead. The US military had constructed itself from the mid-1970s through to the 1990s as an institution committed almost exclusively to high intensity war fighting. Peacekeeping and operations other than war were for the UN and the Europeans. Only in the face of setback and possible defeat in Iraq, confronting a growing, virulent insurgency, did reform-minded US officers reach out for past traditions of counterinsurgency warfare, with their injunctions requiring civility and good governance for the populace and their emphasis on detailed intelligence and more finely targeted uses of force. In this context of crisis and war, these officers faced the political problems of turning around civil and military institutions and their policies and personnel, and of acquiring support from a national security establishment prone to regarding excessive understanding of foreigners as weakness. As Thomas Ricks has shown, Petraeus and his allies faced considerable opposition from Rumsfeld’s DoD.<sup>50</sup> In many respects, then, the officers pushing the counterinsurgency paradigm and the importance of cultural awareness contended with a power/knowledge challenge of considerable scope.

As with the British in India, the particular contexts facing imperial power shape the knowledge forms brought to bear. The reform-minded officers deployed different tactics in Washington, in headquarters, staff colleges and universities, and among the personnel of the field forces. Home front and war front had their varying concerns and demands for power, knowledge, and form. Intended for the field army, the cultural smart card was one form through which knowledge was put to use for neo-imperial power.

Smart cards are laminated foldout sheets that reduce to pocket size, packed with a variety of useful information, lists, charts, images, drawings, etc., intended for use by soldiers and marines who can fold it such that the relevant panel for what they are

<sup>49</sup> Derek Gregory, ‘“The Rush to the Intimate” Counterinsurgency and the Cultural Turn’, *Radical Philosophy*, 150 (2008), p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), ch. 2.

doing is visible. The Iraq Culture Smart Card has twenty panels on religion, ethnic groups, clothes and gestures, social structure, cultural attitudes, customs, history, terrain, weapons, typical ambush tactics, holidays, and Iraqi rank insignia as well as phonetic Arabic phrases for typical commands, survival needs, and basic communication.<sup>51</sup> As with the recruiting handbooks, the smart card contains simple maxims with one panel each headed ‘Do This’ and ‘Don’t Do This’. Examples include: ‘Shake hands gently in greeting and departure, but always with your right hand’; ‘Respond to a woman’s greeting only when she initiates the contact’; ‘Don’t withdraw if a man greets you with a hug and a kiss’. The panel on cultural attitudes is devoted mostly to simplifying the past and present hostilities among Iraqi religious and ethnic groups: ‘Sunnis blame Shia for undermining the mythical unity of Islam and they view them as less loyal to Iraq.’ The one on customs notes that ‘Admitting “I Don’t Know” is shameful for an Iraqi’. A version for Afghanistan helpfully includes the Pashto phrases for local terrain, comments on the recognition accorded academic and professional titles and credentials in Afghan society, and enjoins soldiers to exchange gifts with the locals as a way of initiating or acknowledging relationships. As in Iraq, the women are not to be addressed, while the Americans are warned that Afghans have a different sense of time and that they can expect to spend most of a visit drinking tea and socialising before business can be discussed.

Certainly to call the cultural information provided on these cards ‘stereotypical’ is an understatement. They are not dissimilar to mass market tourist guides in some respects, but they do have their own style characterised by the disappearance of the author, the desire to list, and an absence of adjectives. Colonial discourse is much in evidence, as both Iraq and Afghanistan are heavily marked by the signs of ethnic tradition and religion: ‘The 5,000 year old Pashtun cultural practices often supersede religious ones’; ‘Religious credentials are highly respected’; ‘Religious leaders are considered infallible’; ‘Rural philosophy is based on religious conservatism’. Yet, as pocket-sized guides intended for enlisted personnel who mostly lack college education, these cards contain a great deal of information for visitors to alien lands. In practice they were supplemented by lectures, other literature, computer simulations, and a variety of training regimes and exercises, capped for combat units with a rotation through a training centre designed to replicate an Iraqi or Afghan environment, complete with native speakers and complex scenarios involving both ‘hearts and minds’ and violence.<sup>52</sup>

In this context, the smart cards served as handy prompts for soldiers, enabling them to review information learned, seek guidance for various situations, and as a sign of the importance their commanders placed on respect for indigenous populations, however different their ways. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the smart cards were taken seriously.<sup>53</sup> As with the caste handbooks, the smart cards were also a more general

<sup>51</sup> For an example, see {[http://www.usm.edu/armyrotc/MSIV/402/%20Files/%20for/%20webpage/Lesson/%2004a/%20\(Cultural/%20Awareness\)/L04a\\_Cultural\\_Awareness\\_Muslim.pdf](http://www.usm.edu/armyrotc/MSIV/402/%20Files/%20for/%20webpage/Lesson/%2004a/%20(Cultural/%20Awareness)/L04a_Cultural_Awareness_Muslim.pdf)} accessed 30 March 2010.

<sup>52</sup> For instance, ‘[t]he Deployable Virtual Training Environment is a simulation designed to teach Marines up to five languages, cultural nuances, convoy operations and the steps to call for fire support.’ Sarah Anderson, ‘Simulation Keeps Combat Center Marines in Fight’, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, {<http://www.29palms.marines.mil/News/NewsArticleDisplay/tabid/3005/Article/57418/simulation-keeps-combat-center-marines-in-fight.aspx>} accessed 25 March 2013. See also the US Army National Simulation Center and the US Army Research Laboratory.

<sup>53</sup> For one personal account of the use of the smart card to present an image of a culturally attuned force see {<http://www.boiseweekly.com/TheGrip/archives/2009/11/10/flying-with-marines-a-culture-smart-card>} accessed 25 March 2013. See also Rochelle Davis et al., ‘Cultural Sensitivity in a Military Occupation’, in Kelly et al. (eds), *Anthropology and Global Counterinsurgency*.

and comforting reminder to US personnel that these alien lands were *known*. Through the smart card, they could begin to access the knowledge systems involved, just as they consulted manuals and memory aides for other aspects of their duties. Soldiers did not face off against beguiling Oriental warriors with comrades and weapons alone, but with a knowledge system that deposited its condensed findings in their pockets and on the screens of the computers that accompany them into action.

What is of significance, on this view, is not whether the 241-word description of the Pushtunwali Code on the Afghanistan smart card was an apt summation of the latest ethnographic research on the matter. Rather, smart cards provided soldiers with a rudimentary frame that facilitated their world-making activities and engendered categories – such as shame and honour – that helped them to order and narrativise a potentially overwhelming situation. While offering different knowledge content, the Iraq and Afghanistan smart cards are identical in their form. Like the recruiting handbooks, they attempted to function as paper machines regulating human subjectivity and interaction for the project of ‘empire over there’.

Critics of the smart card have focused on their obvious failings in terms of scholarly approaches to culture, chief of which being their simplicity.<sup>54</sup> For Derek Gregory, smart cards are ineffective expedients, compromised by an implicit concept of culture as a ‘forcefield of hostilities’ offering ‘no space for mutuality or transculturation.’<sup>55</sup> We see these features less as failings than as advantages inherent to this utile form, advantages shared with other training materials in the military cultural awareness genre. In world-ordering terms, those of the larger narratives or meaning of the war, the smart cards presented both Afghanistan and Iraq as containers of hostile ethnic and religious groups, among which the Americans and their Coalition allies are not included. The US, it would be assumed from these cards, as from the role-plays in the training centres, was an external force seeking to understand and help these benighted lands and their conflict-prone peoples. The smart cards helped produce a remarkable ideological effect: even though the US had invaded these countries, violence and hostility were figured as arising from the indigenous populations themselves, from their ethnic and religious antagonisms, and the competition for power that resulted.

Violent natives requiring a firm Western hand and patient tutelage are of course stock tropes of colonial discourse, invitations for conquest and imperial responsibility. The smart card reproduced and reinforced these tropes and deflected questioning that would arise from a reflexive conception of culture, obviating issues like the role of the West in shaping Afghan or Iraqi politics, culture and society, or the US as a source of violence. The form of the smart card assists in producing these effects and in containing reflexivity to relatively innocuous matters, such as contrasting American punctuality with Afghan conceptions of time, or American conceptions of masculine and personal space with the more tactile Iraqis. Dismissing the smart card and related knowledge forms for their simplicity, or for out of date concepts of culture, can overlook the work they actually do. For us, then, Gregory is on firmer ground when he identifies the cultural turn in counterinsurgency, of which smart cards are an early example, as ‘profoundly political’.<sup>56</sup> Part of their politics is to prepare imperial soldiery for their exacting and overwhelming duties, to give them clear guidance

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Gusterson, ‘The Cultural Turn in the War on Terror’.

<sup>55</sup> Gregory, ‘“The Rush to the Intimate” Counterinsurgency and the Cultural Turn’, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

for action, and to steel their consciences from questioning their missions amid the maelstrom of war.

Truth-value has never been the *sine qua non* of imperial power/knowledge. The British ran India for two hundred years with potted ethnic descriptions.<sup>57</sup> That the US is unlikely to be as successful, however measured, will not be due to faulty ethnography or misuse of the concept of culture. What imperial power in part requires from knowledge is an account of identity and purpose, bright-line rules and clarity in classification, maxims that reduce indeterminacy in practice, and assistance in the processes of subjectification productive of effective imperial administrators and soldiers. How effective or not various forms like smart cards are at doing these things is a topic this article seeks to open up for more sustained empirical research.

### Biometric devices as utile forms

Biometrics offer a technical solution to the problem of reducing indeterminacy in the identification of friends and foes. The filing requirements of imperial occupation are substantial, especially so in circumstances of small war where foes hidden within the wider population must be identified and found through the careful handling of information. The challenge is summarised well by a French officer in Algeria in 1845 who noted ‘that the essential thing is to gather into groups this people which is everywhere and nowhere; the essential thing is to make them something we can seize hold of’.<sup>58</sup> This ‘gathering into groups’ can occur physically through placement into camps and controlled zones of movement or exclusion. But it can also take place virtually: as a data-management practice that identifies and categorises individuals with the use of machines. This virtual categorisation of individuals into groups usually precedes physical practices of engroupment and control of movement. Such categorisation has normally been accomplished through constructions of ethnic, racial, and political identity operationalised in utile forms such as the Martial Races handbooks. Technology offers new possibilities to short-circuit such ‘soft’ knowledge with ‘hard’ data accessed through a hand-held biometric device. Securitisation of identity – who among the population poses a risk? – easily manifests in a totalising drive for data. Now, biometric data can substitute for indicators such as ethnic attire, dialect, or phenotype.

A key difference between biometrics and colonial precursors is that the knowledge content is not visible to the naked and public eye. A Martial Races handbook can at least be critiqued for its ethnographic fantasies. In the case of the biometric device, the content/data exists only as relatively inaccessible machine code, illegible to all but specialists, and sequestered on secure networks. The content is unavailable for critique. *FM 2-22.3 Human Intelligence Operations* describes the current state of the technology: ‘Identification devices use biological information such as fingerprints, voiceprints, facial scans, and retinal scans to match an individual to a source database. They can verify the identity of a specific individual from the target population

<sup>57</sup> As Cohn famously concluded, the British ‘reduced vastly complex codes and their associated meanings to a few metonyms’, Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, p. 162.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 98.

during screening.<sup>59</sup> Biometric devices came to play a vital role in the day-to-day lives of soldiers and civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such systems are so useful because they permit the identification of individuals through cross-comparison of vast reams of information. *FM 2-22.3* claims that '[o]nce a person's identifying characteristics are entered into the database, if that person is again detained and scanned, the system has a probability of identifying them that approaches 100 percent.'<sup>60</sup>

Two desires are at work here: one for total information and the other for an automated routine. These conjoin into an aspiration to develop a technical method that solves the social and political problem of determining who the terrorists or insurgents are. The biometric database and the software and hardware through which it is accessed fulfill a host of world-ordering and world-making functions, even if they fall short of fully satisfying these desires. Biometrics, like other utile forms, have subjective, socialising effects. Soldiers in the field can now be assured that there is centrally held and locally accessible data that can tell them the ontological status of the person standing before them: whether they are a foe or a civilian member of the 'host population'. Soldiers can believe that technological progress is on their side and that the problems of imperial occupation can be solved with information management tools. Biometric technology and its utile forms also have an important disciplining function on the patrol practices of troops because their engagement with the population can now be precisely measured: 'How many entries did your unit add to the biometric database?' This enables the bureaucratic standardisation, regulation, and oversight of widely dispersed military interactions with the local population; power appears 'everywhere'. As we have sought to stress throughout this article, crucial functions such as these are fulfilled even if the data is flawed and the handsets prone to errors.

Biometrics and associated software function as a machine that dilutes agency and responsibility on the part of the operator. In effect, the operator becomes an extension of the machine. By opening the laptop and performing a scan an automated decision is arrived at regarding 'who' the individual standing before the operator 'is'. In contrast to the handbooks of British India, no expertise, judgment, intuition, or interpretation is required on the part of the operator of a biometric device. These are replaced by an electronic decision, a centralised technological response that appears 'objectively true'. Such machines and their 'decisions' are very difficult to refute in practice. One necessarily comes to trust the machine. In these kinds of ways, neo-imperial soldiers are bolstered with a technological confidence that can work to resolve doubts about who is and who is not a threat (the key question for any counterinsurgent) and to compensate for relative ignorance about local conditions and personalities.

Because biometric handheld devices eschew judgment and experience, they are seen as adaptable for use by indigenous security forces. Devices with colour-coded buttons for illiterate Afghan soldiers and police are in use. Biometric data now can

<sup>59</sup> *FM 2-22.3* 13-4; On biometrics generally see Louise Amoore, 'Biometric Borders: Governing Mobilities in the War on Terror', *Political Geography*, 25 (2006); Alfred McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009); Keith Breckenridge, 'The Biometric State: The Promise and Peril of Digital Government in the New South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31:2 (2005); Keith Breckenridge, 'Verwoerd's Bureau of Proof: Total Information in the Making of Apartheid', *Hist Workshop J*, 59:1 (2005).

<sup>60</sup> *FM 2-22.3*, pp. 13–15.



be collected by the more numerous host country security forces. From afar, Western powers can regulate the interaction between these security forces and the population. Indigenous security personnel, meanwhile, are given assurance that the technological prowess of the West is at their fingertips, and can make their 'decisions' with the same automated confidence as their Western counterparts.

Beyond biometrics, smart phones, smart pads, and other hand held devices offer new frontiers in utile forms. ISAF's Counterinsurgency Advisory and Assistance Team notes that smart phones are particularly attractive because soldiers already know how to use them and they are easily adapted to a whole range of information tasks. They can be used, for example, for real time translation or to hold virtual smart cards on a variety of topics from weapons identification to local culture. They can also hold photo logs of 'key individuals' among the population, giving soldiers confidence that they can recognise the local VIPs as well as the 'most wanted'. Moreover:

The potential is limitless for the application of smart phones in [Afghanistan] and future Security Force Assistance activities which includes having the ability to assist the training of indigenous ANA and ANP in certain capabilities such as mechanic and medical classes in their native languages. Translation software and apps, quick reference material, and hip pocket video training could speed the building of [Afghan] security forces, as well as support any other training requirement.<sup>61</sup>

New utile forms continue to be developed – forms which here make Western officials believe that they not only can train and regulate the behaviour of indigenous security personnel, but also accelerate these processes. These forms serve to socialise those personnel, inform their worldviews, and facilitate their interaction with the local population in accordance with official policy, remaking the world even if things do not quite work out as officialdom hopes.

### **Truth and power in utile forms**

It is important to distinguish between the knowledge content of utile forms and the 'truth value' of that content. As we have pointed out, it is not enough to critique military or imperial utile forms on grounds of ethnographic veracity, superficiality, or error. Simplicity actually aids in their world-making role. More generally, utile forms and their content work their effects more or less regardless of the content's truth value. Both good and bad research can be put to use in dividing, ruling, and combatting indigenous populations. The invented character of Hindustani and of the Martial Races are cases in point.

What does seem to matter for utile forms are clarity and simplicity; the formalisation and regulation of official agency; the displacement of responsibility onto a knowledge system operationalised by the utile form; and the shaping of subjective states of officials so as to enable the world-ordering and world-making properties of utile forms.

<sup>61</sup> CAAT Point Paper: Wireless to the Edge, p. 2 {[https://ronna-afghan.harmonieweb.org/CAAT/Shared%20Documents/110902\\_NIU\\_CAAT\\_RCS\\_SNEIL110902\\_SP\\_Wireless\\_to\\_the\\_Edge.pdf](https://ronna-afghan.harmonieweb.org/CAAT/Shared%20Documents/110902_NIU_CAAT_RCS_SNEIL110902_SP_Wireless_to_the_Edge.pdf)} accessed 29 March 2012.

What would count as effective critique of the wartime and imperial use of utile forms and the knowledge systems upon which they are based? To tell the military they are not proper anthropologists or social scientists due to flawed methodology or failure to follow human subject procedures misses the mark, because the military conceives itself to be fighting a war, not doing research. Such external critique, as well as principled non-participation in the military's mobilisation of academic knowledge, marginalises the academy and leaves the field to politicised think tanks and 'mercenary social scientists'. Indeed, the turn to biometrics and logarithms internal to machines further disempowers academic critique. At least the grammar texts and ethnographic handbooks of British India were ostensibly about scholarly knowledge and as such inviting of scholarly criticism. The rise of contemporary information technology will increasingly disable such content-centric forms of critique, the predominant form of critique of the cultural turn in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. By contrast, what we have tried to do here offers a different starting place. What is at issue is not what is true or false, wrong or right, but the use of power and knowledge to divide and rule indigenous populations.

Across a range of military and imperial contexts, utile forms helped create the world power imagined. Whether in British India, or the US military's response to Vietnam, or its turn to counterinsurgency and culture in Iraq and Afghanistan, utile forms were at work ordering and remaking the world. However valid in any particular instance, content-based critique fails to grasp this regularity and its implications. That utile forms have such effects is an "'inconvenient" fact' for all concerned.<sup>62</sup> Taking power's apparent interest in academic knowledge seriously on its own terms is to participate in the fiction that 'truth' matters in imperial war. The implication is that if the military did 'good research' everything would be different – that this would somehow be an acceptable outcome for, say, the NCA. That is not the case. On our view, what matters is power, and we have sought to say something about how power puts knowledge to use in times of war and imperialism.

<sup>62</sup> Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 147.