The armed forces and society in South America: how similar? how different?

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Abstract
As a field of scholarly inquiry, the study of civil-military relations can be defined as the analysis of the relations between the armed forces, the state, and society. For the last 25 years, students of the forces have focused almost exclusively on one side of this triangular relationship. Particularly among the political scientists in this group, the dominant concerns have been coups, military democratic transitions, and the varying degrees of military autonomy and transitions. Given the uncertain and often fragile state of democracy in Latin America, it is not surprising that U.S. and Latin American scholars have concentrated their attention on the civilian leaders and on the progress (or lack thereof) in reconstructing democratic norms. Nevertheless, it should have been obvious to all of us that focusing exclusively on the interaction of the military with the rest of the state was in effect to ignore the other side of this triangular relationship. Detailed studies of the social origins of the officer corps are lacking for most of the region. To my knowledge, no one has done a comprehensive sociological study of a Latin American military since Roy Hansen’s 1967 dissertation on the Chilean army. Neglecting the military-society side of civil-military relations means that our assumptions about the social context of military behavior are probably outmoded, perhaps dangerously so.

In the paper which follows, I propose to reconsider the classic questions of military sociology and pose new questions about military efforts to restructure its relation to society. I then argue that on both sides of the mutual inter-penetration of the armed forces and society, there is evidence of significant change. Unfortunately given the paucity of research in this area, that evidence is fragmentary, largely anecdotal, and quite incomplete. Next, I attempt to address the “So what?” question, arguing that changes in the relationships between the armed forces and society may have important consequences for the political side of the civil-military equation. Finally, I outline a program of research on the armed forces and society in Latin America, in hopes of inspiring others to join in a collaborative effort to revive the study of military sociology in the region.

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