

Crosscultural Social Ontology: The Case of Navies

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Abstract

One important challenge in the ontology of institutions is re-identifying types of institutions across times and cultures. An exclusive focus on the most controversial cases can obscure some general issues about commonalities of institutions across cultures. To exhibit some of these general questions and to make some progress on them, this paper will focus on what will hopefully be a less hot-button institutional question: what is it for an organization to be a navy? While the variety of naval phenomena makes characterising navies a harder task than it might first appear, a functional account of navies with some additional conditions drawn from other approaches appears to provide the most fruitful line of investigation.

1. Introduction and the General Problem

The same kinds of social organisations can be found across (some) times and (some) cultures. Many places and times have markets, religions, kinship relations, state authorities, financial institutions, festivals, punishments, and so on. One interesting and important philosophical question is whether there is anything very general to say about how we can re-identify a *kind* of social entity or relationship across cultures or across times within the "same" culture.

We *do* seem to do this re-identification all the time. Japan in 2020 CE had marketplaces, police, furniture, factories, etc., and so did England in 1850 CE, and arguably so did Rome in 50 CE.¹ Puzzles often appear when we try to state in any explicit way what is required for these sorts of social kinds which can apparently have instances in different cultures and times. Naturally enough, philosophers have often focused on some of the most difficult and contentious cases: what it takes to have a state, or what it takes for a system to be a religion, or when two societies have a gender in common, or what it takes to belong to a racial category, or what it takes for there to be a marriage. (Among many examples, see Pettit 2023, Stone 1991, Stone 2001, Bach 2012, Godman 2018, Briggs and George 2023, the many positions discussed by James and Burgos 2020, Nolan 2024.) Questions about re-identifying social kinds are in some ways especially important, and often bear on questions that are politically contested in our own cultures today. But some of the challenges to saying how re-identification of social kinds should be done seem to be more general than the specific challenges that come up in theorising about e.g. gender or religion.

Is there anything general to say about how to re-identify social kinds, especially institutional kinds, across cultures and times? One approach to this question is focus first on a specific social kind and try to answer the question of how to tell when a social arrangement belongs to that kind, and, if that project is wholly or partially successful, see if there are more general lessons to be learned about finding the same social kind across cultures and across times. So I have chosen to explore the case of navies: what criteria, if any, can we use to determine whether an institution at a give time and place is a *navy* or not? This is a question that is more difficult to answer than it might at first seem, and hopefully some of the details of the variety of navies and navy-like organisations across time and space will be of interest to

¹ I am confident Rome had marketplaces, furniture and factories. Whether e.g. the *vigiles* count as police might be a slightly more vexed question.

readers, especially any more interested in navies themselves than in general philosophical questions of social ontology.

Another reason to look at navies is that they are a different kind of social case from the ones that receive the bulk of philosophical attention. A lot of interesting social kinds are politically contested: marriage, family, religion, gender, race, etc. This can make progress in debates about these institutions particularly difficult. It may help to focus on a kind of institution where the classificatory task is not as politically fraught, and there is relatively little heat around the question of which organisations are navies. Of course political questions about navies are often important, and navies can be politically influential institutions in their own right. But the question of whether some organisation at a time *is a navy* or not is rarely of burning concern.² A wide diet of cases is a good idea when trying to frame high-level generalisations about social phenomena and societies, and cases where the ideological temperature is low can help us think about principles we may want to go on to apply in more contentious fields.

I'll be talking about "cases" of navies (and other institutions): an institution, or other collection of social entities, at a time. The English Navy of Henry VIII's era is a very different thing from the Royal Navy of the United Kingdom of 1935, even if in some sense there is identity over time between them. While I am interested here in which cases of institutions are navies, I will have relatively little to say about what makes two cases of a navy cases of *the same navy*. Some cases are easy: the Royal Australian Navy of 2010 and the Royal Australian Navy of 2020 are cases of the same navy, for example, and neither is the same navy as the Royal Canadian Navy of 2015. But other questions of identity of navies

² One potential recent counterexample in the news of the past few months is the question of whether the navy of the Syrian Arab Republic is still in existence. But even in this case, the focus seems to be more on who controls which ships and equipment etc., than whether any of the various groups which control ships or missiles or port installations are part of a *navy*, and if so whether it is the same one that was controlled by the Baathist regime.

over time are more challenging, when tracing navies through large re-organisations or regime-changes or civil wars.

One peculiarity of usage in the English language, at least, is that while armies can often be part of other armies, navies are rarely parts of other navies. The US Pacific Fleet is one of the most powerful naval institutions in the world at present, and one of the most powerful in all of history. But it is not a navy: it is a *part* of the US Navy (which I take it is a navy). So sometimes when we look at some naval object or organisation, the question to ask is not whether it is a navy, but whether it is part of a navy.

When re-identifying social kinds, including institutional kinds, there is a problem of abundance: there are ever so many ways of grouping e.g. institutions together, and we want to find the ones that are familiar, or theoretically important, or both. I will start with the initial assumption that there is a social kind we pick out with our talk of navies, and that it is not unduly gerrymandered. We might be optimistic, at least initially, that is the a kind we would usefully cite in historical or sociological explanations. Entire books have been written on various navies, and relationships between navies, such as the naval arms-races in the lead-up to World War One. Below I will return to the pessimistic idea that there is nothing in common between the institutions we are inclined to classify as navies, but I think it is worth looking to see if we can develop an understanding of a kind common to navies before looking back to see if we were pursuing a mirage.

A theory of navies must be able to handle the wide variety of institutions that are navies in different cultures and times. One puzzle is to know where to start: where do we get our data about which cases are cases of navies and which are non-navies, before seeing whether various accounts of navies are not subject to counter-examples? The best place to start, it seems to me, is to take expert opinion at face

value about the cases. If historians, international relations experts, military planners etc. call an institution at a time a navy, then (initially and defeasibly) we should take it be a navy as well. Eventually, armed with a theory, we may need to go back and revise that classification, but we would do well to initially take the classifications by experts seriously, and only attempt to curate the data after we have a theory that accommodates at least a large majority of it. (Of course, experts can be divided. For example, in the case of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force, discussed below, some officials are careful to not call it a navy, though experts outside Japan are almost unanimous that it is. Cases like this can still be useful data points, though they must be handled with care.)

Before moving to discuss navies, I want to distinguish my project from two related projects. I will speak about re-identification of a kind, across times and across cultures. But this is to be distinguished from the project of re-identification of *a member of* that kind. We might ask, about two rooms and occasions, whether there is a duke present in those rooms. But it is a different, and further, question, whether the *same duke* is present. There were dukes in 1400 CE and dukes in 1800 CE, but no single duke can be found at both times. I am interested whether the same kind, *navy*, has instances in various cases, but not directly interested in when the same navy can be found across time or across military actions. (Though the latter question might be relevant to the former in some cases, which I will mention below. Sometimes we are more confident that an institution is a navy at a time because *that very institution* was a paradigm navy earlier or later in its career.)

The second project I want to distinguish from the project at hand is an examination of the *concept* of a navy. Whatever concepts are, the concept of a navy is presumably possessed by many competent users of the expression "navy". (As well as e.g. various speakers of other languages.) Competence in the

concept presumably gives us some guidance about when to apply it, and so may yield some useful information about which things would be navies. But I suspect we use much more than our *concept* of navies when determining where the navies are. Contingent facts about the world are presumably relevant. So to, I think, are our beliefs and theories about navies, both general beliefs and specific beliefs. (Even someone who has little general to say about navies across all time and cultures might know a good deal about e.g. the navies that fought at the Battle of Trafalgar.) I am trying to use all the kinds of relevant information available to come up with an account of the social kind *navy*, not just the information supplied from the concept itself, however we should understand the interaction between concepts and beliefs. I have no objection to the project of exploring the concept of a navy, and I expect there is interesting work to be done in understanding how our social concepts function more generally. It is just that it is not my project here.

2. The Puzzle of Navies

Giving a general, precise and non-circular specification of which institutions are navies proves challenging. Of course we can operate our understanding of navies without a precise definition: we lack precise definitions for most of our words. A lot of the difficulty stems from the wide variety of forms navies can take, and how far from paradigm cases they can stray. To simultaneously give a sense of the challenge and the kinds of cases that make this task difficult, I will focus on a specific attempt to characterise navies, and explain several different ways it goes astray. I will not try to go through a series of replacement attempts, but hopefully readers will be able to see for themselves why simple repairs to the sample definition will face similar problems.

The general characterization of what a navy is will be drawn from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The primary definition there is that a navy is

"The part of a country's armed forces that fights at sea, and the ships that it uses".

The problems I want to focus on in this definition are primarily actual cases of navies that it rules out, and actual cases of non-navies that it would rule in. That is, I am interested primarily in actual examples and counterexamples. I should note that a dictionary "definition" may often be aimed at getting an idea across rather than exactly capturing the relevant phenomenon, so for all I say here the Oxford English Dictionary definition may be fine for their purposes even if it suffers from counterexamples when examined.

Whatever else we might want from a useful characterization, usually a successful one should at least be *extensionally* adequate: they should not exclude anything that should be covered by the definition or capture anything that is not in the target grouping. In our case, a specification of what the navies are should not rule out any genuine navies, nor count as navies any organisation that in fact fails to be a navy. The main direction of criticism I will focus on is that this definition implies, or in some cases suggests, too many *necessary* conditions to be a navy that have counterexamples. That is, there are cases of navies, or at least *prima facie* cases of navies, that this definition rules out.

Depending on the purpose for which a definition or characterization is offered, it might be required to correctly classify merely possible cases as well. (For an example of an issue that comes up for merely possible and fictional cases, it is a staple of a certain kind of space opera that there are "navies" made up of spaceships, and a set of ships that operate on a planetary ocean or sea would only be part of a

"wet navy": but I will not focus on questions like whether navies can operate entirely in the vacuum of space here.) But most further questions about cases distant from reality (or at least present day reality) can be usefully postponed until we have an understanding adequate to the actual cases humanity has encountered so far. While the discussion below employs the usual vocabulary of necessary and sufficient conditions, I ask my readers to keep in mind I am focused on classifying actual cases, rather than coming up with conditions that apply e.g. to every metaphysically or conceptually possible case of a navy.

We should also interpret the definition with a grain of salt. Many countries at the moment are at peace, and do not have any of their military fighting at sea. They may well still have a navy. A part of the armed forces that "fights at sea" presumably only needs to be *disposed* to fight at sea, or *intended* for fighting at sea. Presumably equipment besides ships should also be included in a typical navy: its boats, of course, but even rifles, uniforms, barracks, helicopters, and all sorts of other equipment can be part of the navy, as well as ships.³

Here is a list of necessary conditions that we might naturally try to employ to help capture what it is to be a navy, entailed by the OED definition exhibited above. After listing them I will show why each appears to have counterexamples. These are only a sample of the conditions we might think help characterise navies, though many other plausible necessary conditions also face counterexamples when

³ Some might already object that ships or even personnel cannot be *part* of an institution like a navy. Turner 1997 claims that any institution is "a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment". (p 6). Presumably complexes of positions, roles, norms and values do not have anything as concrete as a frigate among their parts. I think this shows how far Turner's conception of institutions is from our ordinary understanding: though perhaps the gap could be closed if theorists following Turner explain how we can paraphrase claims like e.g. "that frigate is part of the Royal Navy" into a relationship the frigate can stand in to the relevant complex of positions, norms etc. that is the Royal Navy.

we examine the full range of naval phenomena. (I have cut discussion of several others for space reasons.)

- 1) Navies are operated by single states or countries.
- 2) Navies have water-going vessels fitted out for armed conflict.
- 3) Navies can fight at sea.
- 4) Navies *include* the parts of a country's armed forces that fight at sea.

2.1 Are Navies Operated by Single States or Countries?

Even if we understand "country" broadly to include empires, governments which have temporarily lost control of their usual territory, and some other disputed cases, there are many cases of navies throughout history that were not operated by countries. Some supra-national organizations seem to have had navies from time to time. Perhaps the greatest naval battle of the 1570s was the Battle of Lepanto. On one side was the navy of the Ottoman empire, which I am happy to allow is a "country" in an extended sense, but the fleet that opposed it was the fleet of the Holy League. The Holy League employed ships of Venice, Spain, and more than half a dozen other Catholic powers, under the unified command of John of Austria, a Spanish (/Austrian) prince appointed to the position by Pope Pius V. On the face of it, the Holy League commanded a great navy, without being a country. If you had to, you could argue that really the Holy League's navy belonged to the Papal States, or perhaps there was no single Holy League navy but only ships drawn from many other navies. But neither of these options look appealing in explaining away the navy of the Holy League. Against the first, the Papal States had very little control over the Holy League fleets, compared e.g. to Spain. Against the second, the Holy

League operated its naval vessels in a relatively integrated way, and had a structure of command at Lepanto: it was no mere co-ordinating institution for allies acting independently.

Another potential example of a supra-national entity with a navy was the United Nations Command during the Korean war. The United Nations Command had, and has, a sub-entity called the "United Nations Command Naval Component", and warships have fought as part of this organization. A third example is provided by the powerful naval forces of the Hanseatic League in the fifteenth century. The Hanseatic League was a league of cities, many of which were under the sovereignty of kings or emperors. However, the League operated its own foreign policies, and assembled fleets to fight competitors such as Denmark. The 1362 Battle of Helsingør is often described as a battle between the Danish navy and the navy of the Hanseatic league, for example. The Hanseatic League was not a country, and its navy was not part of any particular country's armed forces.

Sub-national entities also have operated navies, or apparent navies. For example, the British colony of South Australia operated the "South Australian Naval Service" from the 1880s until its absorption into the new nation of Australia in 1901. The gunboat *Protector* served in this naval service and was dispatched to serve in the fight against the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. (*Protector* was uncontroversially a warship once it was transferred to serve in the Australian navy, which suggests it was already a naval ship before that.) On the face of it, the South Australian Naval Service appears to have been a colonial navy. Many components of the Holy Roman Empire operated navies without being sovereign countries: the city state of Lübeck (a key member of the Hanseatic League) fought many naval engagements against Sweden, Denmark and other opponents in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, sometimes as part of Hanseatic League operations, but sometimes on its own account, and it would seem perverse to

deny that it had a navy. The British East India Company and Dutch East India company operated some of the most powerful naval forces in the world in their day, and also arguably counted as having navies.

Finally, there are non-state actors which apparently operated navies. Some were claimants to the status of states or countries. The Confederate States of America operated a navy, including powerful warships like the ironclad *CSS Virginia*, but we may hesitate to describe it as a country, or a state, rather than a rebel organization. The "royalist navy" headed by Prince Rupert of the Rhine that raided through the Caribbean from 1648-1653, opposed by the navy of Cromwell's England, seems to have been a navy, but arguably was not a navy of any country's, since plausibly the English navy at the time was the one loyal to Cromwell and Parliament.

Other non-state actors did not even purport to be a state or country. The great Pirate Queen Zheng Yi Sao commanded over 400 junks at the height of her powers in the early nineteenth century, fighting not just Imperial Chinese fleets but Portuguese fleets as well: her organization is sometimes described as a navy. The Sea Beggars of the Netherlands (*Watergeuzen*, or *Geux de mer*) were rebels against the Habsburg monarch, and fought the Habsburg navy on a number of occasions, such as the 1573 Battle of the Zuiderzee. While some of them operated under the nominal authority of the sometime Stadholder of Holland, Zeeland and Utrecht, William the Silent of Orange, many of these rebels did not seem to see themselves as representatives of any government, at least at first. While the Sea Beggars eventually became the nucleus of the navy of an independent Netherlands, it may be difficult to match their emergence as a navy with their emergence as a navy *of a state* by any means other than fiat.

2.2 Do Navies have water-going vessels fitted out for armed conflict?

The OED definition above talks of the part of an armed force the "fights at sea". However, I think that navies do not have to have any water-going vessels at all, even if we restrict ourselves to actual cases. Or at least they do not have to control vessels like this at all times of their existence. The following three examples suggest that, in particular, navies need not control warships near the *beginning* nor the *end* of their existences.

The first case concerns a navy that has lost its ships (or in this case, its ship). At the beginning of 1896, the Kingdom of Zanzibar had a navy that was essentially one ship and its crew: *His Highness's Ship Glasgow*, or the *HHS Glasgow*, a steam yacht with naval guns and professional naval officers and men. After one of the most one-sided wars in colonial history, the 38-minute long Anglo-Zanzibar war of 27 August 1896, the *Glasgow* sat at the bottom of the harbour of Zanzibar city. However, most of the officers and men of the *Glasgow* made it to life-rafts, and were picked up by the British Navy. They were held as prisoners of war until they were released back into the custody of a new, pro-British, regime in Zanzibar.

The rescued crew were treated as military personnel by the British, rather than captured civilians. The Zanzibari state did not treat them as if their term of service ended upon the sinking of the *HHS Glasgow* either. So both the Royal Navy and the Zanzibari state treated those officers and men personnel as members of the Zanzibari navy after capture and perhaps until they were released from their terms of service. (I do not know what their subsequent careers were after they were released from British captivity.) On the face of it, you cannot be an officer or enlisted man of the Zanzibar navy unless there is a Zanzibar navy, and there seemed to be such officers and men after the sinking of the *Glasgow*.

That small example is very simple, with one ship, one clear event when it passed out of service, etc. But a more complex example of a navy that no longer has ships or boats is provided by the end of the Kriegsmarine in 1945 and 1946. The German navy during World War II had been one of the most formidable navies the world had seen up until that time, though of course as the war drew on it suffered enormous losses at the hands of the Allies. It plausibly stayed in existence after Germany's surrender on May 7 1945. For one thing, the Kriegsmarine's U-boats were not immediately informed of the surrender, and U-858 surrendered only on May 10 at sea, with its formal surrender on May 14 in harbor in Delaware. But even after the Kriegsmarine lost any independent operation of warships, it continued to have an official existence.

Many of the officers and men of the Kriegsmarine were interned by the Allies, and the Western allies even, under close supervision, used some of these personnel to do mine-clearing and other naval operations. For months after Germany's surrender, these officers and men were considered to belong to the Kriegsmarine by the Allies, and by themselves. Indeed, the Kriegsmarine was officially wound up in 1946 at the insistence of the USSR, which feared the Western Allies might try to resuscitate it as an anti-communist independent armed force. See Peifer 2002 for many details. Plausibly, after the Allies gained full control of the organisation, the Kriegsmarine remained a navy despite no longer controlling any naval vessels.

Other navies in their early stages may well have lacked ships and even personnel. As just one example, when newly independent Lithuania established its navy on July 4 1992, it *first* created its navy and *then* commissioned several ships into it, starting with a ship (The Vetra A41), which had been owned by a city harbour patrol. It also appears to have created the Lithuanian Navy before commissioning any officers into it or enlisting any sailors. This makes administrative sense—it is hard to add officers or

sailors to an organization that does not yet exist. For some hours at least, the Lithuanian Navy seems to have been a navy without ships or personnel. (According to some this 1992 navy was a *refounding* of a pre-Soviet Lithuanian navy, but even if it was, it briefly had no ships after the refounding.)

Of course, when dealing with these origin cases, it is an option in principle to deny that there is a navy here until there are enough warships and sailors to operate them. This does seem to disagree rather gratuitously with how participants in these institutions conceive of them: official accounts of the Lithuanian navy are unlikely to be *incorrect* about when it started or what order the administrative acts and the ship transfer occurred in. It is plausible in general that the early stages of an institution may lack some of the characteristics paradigm forms of mature institutions possess, and it is not a revolutionary piece of social theorising to maintain that official institutions can be produced in processes that start from legal and administrative actions before physical movements of equipment and personnel. So it should not be surprising that some navies could share this character. While I am open to a theory of navies leading to justified revisions in judgements about some cases, I doubt we will need to do this for the Lithuanian navy at its official beginning.

Even if navies do not have to have water-going vessels equipped for fighting, I want to leave it open at this stage of the discussion whether there might have to be at least some indirect connection to fighting ships. Even if we allow the Lithuanian navy came into existence without ships or boats or naval personnel, we may be more suspicious of an alleged navy that *never* had either of those things, let alone one where nobody intended an eventual connection to ships or boats.

2.3 *Can All Navies Fight at Sea?*

The above cases of e.g. the Kriegsmarine in early 1946 or the Lithuanian navy at the time of its foundation in 1992 may already cast doubt on the idea that all navies can fight at sea. But another class of cases that undermine the thought that being able to fight at sea is a characteristic of all navies is the class of *landlocked navies*. Not every country has a coast facing a sea or ocean, but there are other significant bodies of water that can require defence. The Paraguayan navy operates on Paraguay's rivers, while Bolivia's navy is primarily deployed on rivers and Lake Titicaca. Laos's navy operates primarily on the Mekong river, and would have to pass through its neighbours' territory if it wished to reach the sea. Of course, one could claim that none of these so-called navies are real navies, but a custom-built warship like a patrol boat, staffed by dedicated military personnel and armed with typical military equipment certainly *seems* like it could be a naval vessel even if it floats on fresh, rather than salt, water.

2.4 Do Navies include the parts of a country's armed forces that fight at sea?

The OED definition above does not handle landlocked navies well, nor cases of navies which lack fighting ships or boats altogether. But you might at least hope that *if* part of a country's armed forces fights at sea (or is disposed to fight at sea, or...), *then* that part of the armed forces is part of the country's navy. Alas, counterexamples abound to even this conditional claim.

Land-based aircraft, from time to time, have done a lot of fighting over the sea. The Army Air Force of the United States in World War II took part in many of the most important naval battles in the Pacific between the USA and Japan, and played an important role in the drawn-out Battle of the Atlantic. The Army Air Force destroyed more shipping and naval aviation than many entire navies during World War

II⁴, but has never been considered part of the US navy: it was a component of the US Army. (For that matter, the US Army and many other armies operate some boats and even ocean-going ships: while part of a country's armed forces, often army shipping is not considered part of the navy.)

Another case from the USA is the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard is one of the eight branches of the US Armed Services, and the US has treated it as a distinct branch from the US Navy since 1915, with exceptions at the end of World War One and for a period around World War Two when it was (arguably) temporarily incorporated into the US Navy. The US Coast Guard has more ships and men than most of the world's navies, and its largest "cutters" easily outsize the light frigate class of ships operated by the Chinese navy. The National Security Cutter, in service in the US Coast Guard, has a range of installed heavy weaponry and has significant anti-shipping and anti-aircraft ability. The US Coast Guard has participated in a wide range of America's wars, for example serving extensively in the Vietnam war. The US, at least, does not classify it as part of the navy: it does not overlap with the United States Navy, which is the institution the US does consider its navy.

A second kind of problem with the claim that a navy includes the parts of a country's armed forces that fight at sea is that some countries operate *multiple* navies, or at least appear to. Iran has both the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy and the Navy of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These have separate service hierarchies, and operate separate armed vessels. The former is a more traditional "national" navy, and the latter is the result of the Iranian revolution setting up a Revolutionary Guard to defend the ideology of the revolution, and as a counterweight to other institutions in Iran that were not direct products of the revolution. In Iran, there is no navy-like organisation that includes *all* the parts of

⁴ The Cuban navy was an allied navy that served in the undeclared conflict in the Atlantic before 1941, and Cuba was a combatant among the Allies from December 1941 to the end of World War II. Among its other exploits, the Cuban navy is credited with sinking the German U-boat *U-176*. The Cuban navy during World War II is uncontroversially a case of a navy, but its combat operations at sea were much less extensive than those of the USA Army Air Corps.

Iran's armed forces that fight at sea. Historically, many countries have decentralised their armed forces to some extent, and Iran is not the only case where multiple naval forces are within the one state structure, though it is one where it is particularly clear that e.g. Western observers and theorists treat both institutions as navies.

3. Theoretical Approaches to Accounting for the Kind

Listing the kinds of conditions I have been considering does not look like a promising approach to capturing what it is to be a navy. (I do not say it is impossible, but just that the wide variety of cases across times and cultures, including those exhibited above, will make it difficult.) So, if we are to characterise navies in general, what are we to do? A natural thought is to explore strategies for coming up with conditions, rather than unsystematically coming up with conditions one by one and testing them against cases. One advantage of having a more reflective approach to specifying the kind is that if we use general considerations to identify what kinds of conditions should characterise our target, then the conditions we come up with will be more than a lucky guess. The method of conjecture-and-counterexample, even if it produces a conjecture that has not yet been undermined, can leave us wondering whether the next set of counterexamples is just around the corner. If we have a more general reason to think a proposed list of conditions is the right kind of list to capture the phenomena, may leave us rationally more confident in the list. It may also give us a better *understanding* of navies in general, though saying anything general about understanding is at least as difficult as generalising about navies!

I will list eight approaches to coming up with an account of the kind, to give my sense of the theoretical landscape. In a more full treatment of the problem of navies, each of the general approaches I list below

would deserve discussion. Since the problem of navies is a microcosm of the problem of reidentifying social kinds, or at least kinds of social institutions, in general, a fully satisfactory discussion might need a book length discussion. (Or, realistically, a series of debates by different authors over decades.) I will not have space to explore all of these approaches here. Instead, after listing the approaches, I will briefly explain the combination of approaches that seems to me the most promising at the moment. This will not be as satisfying as a full critical discussion of the available options. I will also not end with a crisp analysis of the conditions to be a navy. I feel the appeal of a non-circular, crisp, specific, testable analysis as much as anyone. Unfortunately all of the ones I have been able to come up with so far face counterexamples, so this is a status report on a problem I have not yet solved, even to my own satisfaction.

3.1. Particularism

Perhaps there is nothing systematic to be said across times and cultures?

3.2. Projectivism

Perhaps we take the paradigm cases from our culture and treat other organisations as navies if they are similar enough?

3.3. Stipulation by Theorists

Perhaps the best we can do is have theorists stipulate which organisations count for the purposes at hand?

3.4. Cluster Concept/Kind

While any successful analysis is likely to be able to be cast in a cluster form, specifying the cluster and the weights is the central challenge. It may be unlikely to work easily, given how many non-navies are more like paradigm navies than some other navies are.

3.5. Self-Identification

Should we just see what organisations call themselves navies, or parts of navies, and use that as our main guide to which are the navies? This risks credulity, the problem of translation, and epistemic difficulties about the past.

3.6. Causal/Historical Accounts

This might be part of the story. But not all navies need be interestingly historically connected, and sorting navies from non-navies in the causal downstream of navies still remains a challenge.

3.7. Functionalism

We can identify the core functions of navies (or some paradigm navies), and then see what institutions in different times or places play *that* role. One challenge functionalism has is that any given navy, or part of a navy, has *many* different functions.

Another problem is that there are unusual navies: ones with less of the standard functions than usual, or more of non-standard functions than usual. And there are non-navies with many of the functions of paradigm navies.

3.8. A Mixture of the Above

If none of these approaches work on their own, at least as a first pass, the solution might be to combine aspects of several of the above options.

I am optimistic that there is something in general to be said about when an organisation is a navy, and I am inclined to think this is a matter of discovery by investigating navies and navy-like institutions across times and across cultures, rather than direct or indirect stipulation. Optimism is not a guarantee of success, of course. So I would like to resist options 1-3. Option 4, which is treating being a navy as a kind that requires some, but not all of a cluster of features (and perhaps lacking some, but not all, of a different cluster of features) might well be the right way to go: but since almost any account can be fit into a cluster analysis framework, deciding on a cluster account by itself may not get us very far.

Suggestions 5, 6 and 7 all have elements to contribute to an overall analysis, I think. Self-identification, together with identification as a navy by other parts of the society an institution exists within, is unlikely to be enough on its own. One problem is that there are some navies that do not call themselves that. A salient example is the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force. This institution regularly turns up on lists of top-10 most powerful navies in the world, and operates a full suite of submarines, destroyers, including destroyers armed with cruise missiles, and other military craft. However, officially, it is not called a navy by the Japanese government or by the institution itself. The post-war Japanese constitution specifically forbids Japan from operating military forces at sea. Article 9 states in part "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained". (Japan 1957)

What outsiders might see as a legal fiction has developed, according to which the Maritime Self-Defence Force is not a navy, though of course it is conceded that it is navy-like in many of its operations. See Takei 2023 for a recent example of the circumlocutions needed. Takei served as Admiral of the MSDF, and is careful to say it is not a navy, while proceeding to discuss it rather as if it is. My view is that the Japanese MSDF is a navy, though I understand the political and legal pressures for Japanese officials to not agree.

A quite different problem would be telling when organisations in far off times and far off places classified themselves with anything like our word or concept of "navy". Some theorists maintain that Old Kingdom Egypt operated a navy. But the ancient Egyptian concepts deployed about the relevant institutions may not have been much like ours, in all sorts of ways, and of course this was centuries before the emergence of Latin or English or other languages where the word "navy" might find a home. Experts do not proceed as if we need to find the concept of a navy in ancient Egypt or ancient China before we can come to conclusions about whether there were navies at different points.

On the other hand, some cases of whether some forces are part of a navy seem to turn on administrative classifications. Until 2023, the Ukrainian marines (/naval infantry) were classed as being part of the Ukrainian navy. Then a reorganisation by the Ukrainian government led to them being treated as a branch of the Ukrainian armed forces outside the navy. (Understandably, Ukraine has needed to employ its naval infantry much more heavily than its sea-going forces, which have been largely bottled up in port by the Russian threat.) I think it is true that they were in the Ukrainian navy until 2023 and now are not. But apart from the meetings senior marines attend, little changed for the personnel or equipment of the marines because of this reshuffle. This seems like a case where administrative fiat was enough to change what functional parts the Ukrainian navy had.

When we want to know when an institution is a navy at a given time, it may sometimes help to look at the past and maybe even the future. Not every detained group of sailors constitute a navy, but what was special about the crew of HHS Glasgow in Zanzibar or the Kriegsmarine officers and men in Allied-controlled Germany was in part their collective pasts. The paperwork and buildings and organisation of the Kriegsmarine in 1946 was downstream of the German naval activity of e.g. 1943, when it is uncontroversial that Germany operated a navy. Being downstream of that activity, in just the right way, seems crucial to understanding why that unusual organisation was a navy even at times when it did not effectively control any ships. At the other end, one reason why it seems plausible that the Lithuanian navy began with its official proclamation and not when it later acquired a ship and personnel is that it went on to be an organisation that functioned more like a standard (albeit small) navy.

I doubt the story of when an institution is a navy, or a fighting force is part of a navy, can be settled entirely in causal-historical terms. All sorts of institutions now are downstream of earlier navies, and it remains an open empirical possibility that the earliest navies had no interesting causal connections with each other. (It seems not just possible but likely that the earliest navies in the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf were a largely independent development from the earliest navies in East Asia.) If historical navies do not all have a common naval origin, then at least explaining why institutions in each lineage are both navies cannot be done just in terms of having the right origin. Causal-historical links seem best suited to unite marginal parts of navies, and marginal life-stages of navies, into wholes with more standard parts and stages.

A functional account, where roughly to be a navy is to do what navies do, seems the most promising of the list above. Developing a functional account that gets the cases right faces two obvious challenges:

some navies are atypical and do odd things, and some non-navies do very similar things to what typical navies are supposed to do. While the challenges of determining "the" functions proper to navies are very hard, and I have no guarantee this can be done in a satisfactory way, I am even more pessimistic that once we have a list of those functions, all and only the institutions that perform those functions will be the navies.

However, assuming we could characterise the core functions of navies in a useable way, we might be able to come up with a notion of "functional navy" that captures most of the cases of navies. Perhaps then we could use other criteria to add in some dysfunctional cases of navies (e.g. the occasional navy paralysed by a mutiny, or some navies at the start or end of their careers) and rule out some cases of entities that behave like navies but on the face of it are not navies or parts of navies (e.g. the US Coast Guard, which is not a navy, or the Ukrainian marines as of 23 May 2023, which are no longer part of a navy despite acting very much like the Ukrainian marines of April 2023). This is my current best hope of a successful account, though the test would be to fill in the details and see if the resulting theory still faced counterexamples.

4. Tentative Conclusion

We have a tough problem to solve. It may not even be solvable in the terms I have presented it, though there are reasons for optimism that something usefully general can be said about when we have a case of a navy on our hands. While I have not presented a specific answer to the question "what is a navy?" here, I hope that my discussion of the initial difficulties and plausible paths to a solution will be a good basecamp to make an attempt on this question.

As mentioned in the introduction, the case of navies is intended as illustrative. Any institution found across a wide range of times and cultures is likely to come with a considerable variety of instances, and trying to sort out what is needed for a case to count as falling under that kind is likely to face similar challenges. Many institutions will not conform to our standard models near the start or the end of their lives, or after an institution established for one purpose is employed to serve other purposes, perhaps at the cost of efficiency of the functions we may have thought were central. Without some ability to adequately classify instances of social institutions and other social kinds, we will have a great deal of difficulty investigating them, and we risk having understandings of these kinds that only apply to a limited range of the more familiar cases. Just as experimental setups can test phenomena in unusual situations in ways that are revelatory, learning about how institutions operate outside their familiar range can give us a better understanding of even familiar cases.

If necessary, we could retreat from the dream of learning anything general about navies or other social institutions (religion, banking, government, limited liability companies, or whatever). That would still give inquirers into the social world plenty to do, of course, but it would have some unfortunate consequences. One of the main downsides I see, if we prematurely abandon the search for general truths about social phenomena across times and across cultures, is that we risk failing to understand some of the most interesting general phenomena we encounter at what seems to be the natural level of generality. It may seriously impair our ability to take hard-won knowledge from one set of cases to another, and several of the so-called social sciences might devolve into a series of case studies.

The main reason for optimism that we can do better in characterising social kinds in general is that our grip on them seems pretty good in practice. While I struggled to find many candidate general characterisations of navies, and those I did discover seemed to fall quickly to counterexamples,

specialists and non-specialists alike seem to do pretty well at identifying navies across times and societies. At the very least there appears to be a lot of unforced convergence about many cases. We have gone a long way with a combination of "know it when I see it" methodology and stabs at characterisations that do not capture the full extension of the kind very well. This makes me optimistic that we can be even more explicit and even more accurate in spelling out a general understanding of what it is to be a navy. And if we arm ourselves with the tools to do this, we will hopefully be able to improve our philosophical understanding of this sort of general social kind across the board.⁵

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