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One of the protagonists of Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The White Guard*, an old school Stabskapitän, declared that he was able to read *War and Peace* to the end because it was written "not by some kind of a blockhead but by an artillery officer." Although Bernard Boëne, the author of *Social Sciences and the Army: Objects, Approaches, Perspectives* and a leading French military sociologist, made no career in the army, he has for many years been the director of teaching and research at Saint-Cyr, the nation's supreme military academy. The author's competence in the subject, thus, makes reading this book a rewarding experience and provides it with the credibility, so often lacking in the attempts of mere "social scientists" to write about war and its impact on society. Currently professor Emeritus at University of Rennes and the chancellor of Geneva Graduate School of Governance, Bernard Boëne is also the chief editor of the professional review *Res Militaris*, a holder of the prestigious Morris Janowitz Career Achievement Award named after one of the founders of military sociology, and the author of a hundred of articles on various aspects of military action. His study provides an ambitious theoretical synthesis of what has been achieved in the field of military sociology in the past century. It is not a mere historical outline, but rather an unusual reflection on the disciplinary boundaries of what the author designates as "the military object" (*objet militaire*) aiming at a definition of its particular traits and an explanation of its rather marginal status within the social sciences. According to Boëne, this state of affairs has been slowly changing in the last few decades, as military studies is becoming a specific field of research, mainly in the Anglo-American scientific community. The very term "social sciences" (*sciences sociales*), far more common in the English-speaking than in the francophone world, clearly indicates the author's predilection for Anglo-American material, all the more because he claims that military studies *stricto sensu* have become such an area of research in Great Britain and the United States, partly because of an abundant scientific "demography," and partly because of the less rigid borders between disciplines and institutions which encourage transversal analysis.<sup>1</sup>

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DOI: 10.17323/1728-192X-2015-4-195-198

1. Notwithstanding this fact the author remains within the French sociological tradition from Durkheim to Aron, though he believes that a few great names is not enough to maintain that there is a particular school of military studies in France. The German context from Clausewitz to Carl Schmitt and Ludendorff, extremely important from the historical point of view, is presented only to a limited extent. See Boëne (2014: 33–34).

Nevertheless, Boëne still displays a very typical French sensibility to the questions of method and his study could be considered a treatise on the methodology of war studies as much as an outline of the approaches to military sociology. And since the book contains graphical presentations and tables it could equally have obtained the status of being “recommended for military academies.” As Jean Baechler, another eminent specialist in the field, observes in his preface to Boëne’s book, there is no way to treat such complex subject other than by “doing philosophy” (p. 11), or, more precisely, by combining sociology, history and philosophy in order to comprehend the reason for violent conflicts between various human “polities.” However, the perspective on these matters which the book provides is full of nuances and is not limited to this triad: the famous question about the “reasons for wars” among different “polities” is far from being his primary concern. The author is rather trying to explain the bad luck, or, more exactly, the malediction that military questions have to deal with in the social sciences. He discusses the profound conviction nurtured by the Enlightenment of the belief that wars “are condemned to disappear.” Social sciences, as we know them, have a “natural born hostility” towards military questions and even Marxist philosophy of history focuses essentially on social conflicts instead of confrontations between the states.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, Boëne argues that we should delimit within the social sciences what he calls “the military field of martial action” (*champ militaire de l’action martiale*), and the first part of the book deals with this question. The four essential concepts being proposed are violence, organization, legitimacy and sovereignty. Boëne’s definition of the military domain is as follows: “It covers the phenomena connected to the application, real or potential, of organized legitimate violence that deals with sovereignty (whether it is juristically recognized or not)” (p. 39). These factors are not seen as having the same influence and so the author proposes a sort of historical typology by measuring their impact on the strategic, operative (the intermediate) and tactical echelons connected to the stages of the development of society which constantly develops from an “archetypical martial action” to the “mass war of preindustrial era” which dates back to the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and continues through to “mass industrial war” (of the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century). The period of the Cold War with its “mutual dissuasion” of both camps by the means of nuclear annihilation, Boëne designates as the era of “paradoxical war” when the possibility of a WW-type conflict is almost totally excluded and yet the preparation for a global war accompanied by numerous peripheral conflicts becomes permanent. According to Boëne, this transformation of the military field confirms the thesis of Clausewitz that war is like a “chameleon” (even through in the book he insists that the classic Clausewitzian triad remains relevant to contemporary military studies). Probably, the most evident shift

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2. Boëne attests a paradoxical absence of Marxist military theory in the true sense, although many important authors from Engels to Trotsky and Mao showed their interest to the question of war and the Red Army theorists certainly made their contribution to the matter. Boëne refers to Etienne Balibar, who gives three important reason for this phenomena: first, the strict Marxist emphasis on the war between the classes makes conflicts between states a rather secondary factor in the “economy of violence and cruelty”; secondly, an “anthropological optimism” that derives from the Enlightenment and its numerous projects of “eternal peace”; thirdly, a particular “metaphysics of history” seeking to convert violence into justice. See p. 104–105.

in the era of “paradoxical war” is that the border between “external conflicts” and “inner war” became more and more transparent, and for this reason the topics of war and the famous Weberian problem of the “control of violence” within the state should be an object of a complex comprehensive analysis.

Notwithstanding the evolution of military studies, the social sciences still have much trouble in understanding the specificity of the military object, though for very different reasons. The second part of the book is devoted to an analysis of this systematic failure. Boëne discerns two kinds of reductionist approaches to the military object: the first group neglects it “by default” and underestimates it, while the second, on the contrary, uses war as a universal metaphor of social conflict and equally misses the point. Among the “negationist” approaches Boëne picks out those which tend to disqualify war from the evolutionist point of view as an apparent anachronism in the era of Modernity, and those which condemn it methodologically, i.e. by considering military conflicts as something “irrational.” On the other side, theorists inspired by the Machiavelli-Hobbes tradition treat war as an essential model of political relations. Into this category fall not only the 19<sup>th</sup> century doctrines of social Darwinism or the Schmittian theory of the political, but also the neo-Nietzschean interpretations of social conflicts which have become widespread in France since the 1970s under the influence of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari. (This part of the book, in our opinion, has an evident omission: Boëne only briefly mentions this trend without referring to the Levi-Strauss/Clastres discussion of “primitive war” in the structural anthropology which has had a profound influence on the contemporary French philosophy.<sup>3</sup>) However, for Boëne both of these approaches hardly seem to be relevant to the treatment of the military object because, as he claims, they are not able to explain its specificity and proper place within the social sciences.

Finally, in the third part of the book Boëne scrutinizes various tendencies in the development of the military field, and here again no consensus can be attested between the “anthropological optimism” professing the end of war, and the eschatological rhetoric about the world’s forthcoming collapse. On the one hand, military conflicts in the past thirty years have been less intense and bloody, and have led to significant cuts in defense budgets, along with the ongoing professionalization and demassification of armies causing an unprecedented corrosion in soldiers’ identity and the loss of military prestige which has reached a peak within the national states. On the other hand, one could argue that collateral damage remains important in ongoing conflicts and the funds which had earlier been spent on defense are now invested in internal security. Moreover, the gradual disappearance of military problems from the public discussions is claimed to be asymmetrical to the flourishing of military studies which have recently become an independent research subject. The general solution proposed by Boëne consists of the substitution of the notion of war by a more encompassing and flexible one “military action” (*action militaire*) which could embrace both fields of external conflicts and the internal “control of violence” (p. 222). As Boëne warns, one should never confuse tendency with

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3. On the attempts of anthropology to treat the phenomenon of a modern war see Audoin-Rouzeau (2008).

destiny and so there is no apparent evidence whether our brave new world will be a safer place to live in.

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Рецензия: Boëne B. (2014) *Les sciences sociales et l'armée: objets, approches, perspectives*, Paris: Presses Universitaires Paris Sorbonne

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