

Entretien avec Joseph Soeters

Joseph Soeters is a professor of management and organizational studies at the Netherlands Defence academy and professor of organizational sociology at Tilburg University. He was the Dean of the academy between 1999 and 2003. Between 2006 and 2014 he was one of the Vice-Presidents of the Research Committee on Armed Forces and Conflict Resolution of the International Sociological Association (ISA). He published extensively in research journals on a variety of topics such as multinational military cooperation, military culture, effectiveness in operations, diversity management and research methods. He conducted fieldwork during operations in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Liberia, Eritrea and DR Congo. He published and coedited over ten volumes and so far has supervised over 25 doctoral theses in military studies. His work has been published in eight languages.

- 1. Dear Professor, could you draw up a map of the social sciences focused on military matters knowing that the rise of a special sociology dedicated to the military dates from the publishing of the *American Soldier* in 1949? Among all the social sciences of the military, has the sociology of the military a peculiar position and why?**

The start of military social sciences may indeed be seen in the extensive research program among the U.S. troops who were deployed during the second World War in the 'American Soldier'-project. This project was headed by Samuel Stouffer, but also included the participation of famous names such as Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton. What is less well known is that the U.S. government during the war also gave Ruth Benedict (the famous anthropologist) the task of conducting a number of studies on countries that were soon to be liberated. Among them is a small, hardly known study about the Netherlands, but her study about Japanese society, called «The Sword and the Chrysanthemum» became an instant bestseller once it was published immediately after the war. Before that it had already served its purpose for the American government and military during the war. Since then military social sciences have been institutionalized, not as a major but as a stable minor player in the field of social sciences, I would say.

There may be three general lines of research and theorizing in military social sciences: 1/ civil/political – military relations, which has a connection with political sciences, 2/ the conduct and wellbeing of the workforce in military organizations, connected to organizational psychology and sociology, 3/ the study of people in host nations, which field recently experienced an up-swing through the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan; this branch is connected to cultural and political anthropology. Apart from that, the study of conflicts and conflict resolution has expanded, leading to major advancements supported by scientific developments in statistics, economics, game theory, experiments

and computer simulations. You can see that military sociology has a pivotal role in all of the military social sciences, as it easily connects to the other social sciences.

- 2. During your career what are the changes you have observed in the studies dedicated to the military matters? Are we confronted to the rise of new research problematics or topics or is it just a redefinition of ancient ones? Further, do you think that all the geopolitical change since the end of the cold war like the fall of the Soviet empire, the rise of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), the Arab revolutions for instance, has renewed research on and approaches of the military field?**

One can clearly see that the rise of such tensions lead to new interests and new roles for the military. We have seen a quite sudden rise of military efforts since the 1990s with the upheaval in the Balkans. Since then, operations never stopped: Iraq, Afghanistan, now operations in Africa (some of which headed by France), and Lebanon, among others. This is not likely to stop given the current challenges at Europe's Eastern and Southern borders. Now for the first time since years, budgets will not be cut but will increase again, which can be seen in France but for instance also in my own country. Along with that, options for military scientists will grow again, even though renewed emphases on operations and increased self-confidence among the military are likely to restrict social science contributions to questions that are functional to the commanders' views and goals.

However, there are interesting new developments in military social studies that stem from the academic community-at-large not from the military themselves. A number of young female social researchers such as Fotini Christia, Chiara Ruffa and Funmi Olonisakin have shown the « guts » to go into the field where the danger is (respectively Bosnia and Afghanistan, Lebanon and Liberia) and they have demonstrated excellent skills to conduct high-quality research, often of a blended nature combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. One cannot praise such research efforts enough because they are really helpful to understand the broader dynamics of violent conflicts and how the military can contribute to prevent, contain and solve those conflicts.

- 3. Following up to that question: are sociology and social sciences of the military still the stronghold of European and North American scholars?**

In general, I would say yes. Military social sciences are still much stronger in the USA and Western Europe (and Australia). Israel of course has always played a major role as well; since the foundation of the state of Israel the armed forces have been enormously important, leading to numerous studies on the military. There is increasingly more output from Turkey, which is interesting because of its specific civil/political- military relations. Also a number of Eastern European countries (e.g., Slovenia, Poland) are quickly catching up. Interestingly enough, in Southern European countries such as Spain and Greece the contributions have been much less well developed, which may partly be the consequence of language issues and partly because of the fact that those countries were democratized relatively late. In order for military social sciences to flourish, I would say,

one needs a certain importance of the military institution in society as well as a democratic, open atmosphere (including democratic institutions, etc.). Countries in Southern America are increasingly on this path, leading to more possibilities for military sciences to grow and become more important. In as far as in other nations both conditions are less well-developed, military social sciences are less likely to flourish and contribute.

4. In France, sociology of the military has the reputation of being the poor relation of the social sciences. What is the situation in your country and other ones you know? Are there any differences in statute between North America and European countries and among the European countries?

Of course, compared to the importance that the social and behavioral sciences in general have, military social sciences are relatively minor in terms of capacities, funding and outreach to the larger society. But there are differences between countries. The USA thinks highly of their military and the role they are supposed to play, and the fundings are commensurate to these values and opinions. Military social sciences are pretty big in the USA and have given input to many research projects also outside the military itself. In Canada one can observe similar tendencies, but on a more modest scale. In Western Europe this positioning has always been much less positive, with the exception of the UK where one generally believes in the «military solution», probably as a result of the victorious role the British armed forces had in the Second World War. On the continent this role has been clearly less victorious and triumphant: the past was simply much less prestigious and in a number of cases not unequivocally at the «good side» of the spectrum. Accordingly, one has seen less money spent on the military over the last decades, more criticism and suspicion from society-at-large and a relatively smaller role for military social sciences. The general social sciences on the continent are simply not that interested in the military institution, also because there is not so much money at stake.

There may be changes, though. Afghanistan and Iraq but today more importantly, Putin's 'revenge' and the rise of the challenges coming from the refugees and IS in nearby Middle East and Northern Africa put the armed and security forces more in the limelight again, leading to larger budgets, media attention, as well as a growing self-confidence among military people themselves. One can observe a certain influence coming from overseas (USA, Canada and UK) leading to what sociologists call "isomorphism": military organizations, including their capacities, operational styles and all that, become more alike.

5. Is sociology of the military (as well social sciences) condemned to only be taught in military academies or restricted to a few scholars?

In the countries where the military have been all important in society, military social sciences have had an existence also outside the concrete realm of military academies and military research institutes. In other nations, such as my own, military social sciences hardly exist outside the military, because there is no money to be gained, the military is

considered to be a world of its own – and a closed one -, and it is often seen as a “necessary evil” that needs to be followed critically. Still, the atmosphere at the academies and in society-at-large is not necessarily bad. The military itself is very much interested in workforce issues (such as recruitment, training and education, cohesion in the ranks, military culture, ethical training, leadership, cooperation between soldiers from different countries, cooperation between civilians and military personnel, etc.). But also the human dimension of operational effectiveness is increasingly seen as an important topic for social research. Particularly these research questions create jobs and funding for military social scientists. Thanks to the sociologists and social scientists working in such places and the fundings they have available, military social sciences are still very much alive in countries such as Germany, France, Belgium, Sweden and the Netherlands. Their role is small but not insignificant. Admittedly, at the academies there is always a certain, inherent tension between what social research and theorizing produce and what the top brass likes. This tension needs to be acknowledged as well.

6. **In one of your books (*Green about Green. A Civilian in Military Life*, iUniverse, 2012), you provide short stories related to your experience as an outsider in a military organization (*i.e.* Netherlands Defence Academy). I know that is a classic question in social sciences but how do you manage to keep the distance with your work field and maintain the balance between scholar works and expertise. Are they the two sides of the same job or opposite ones?**

Oh, it is nice that you bring up this small book. I have tried to write these short stories with “a sociological eye” as Everett Huges used to call this. Actually, the short stories are all about distance because they rely on the fact that I was so full of wonder when doing fieldwork in military operations such as in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Liberia, Lebanon and Congo. As an outsider, not being used to the military-in-action, the various experiences – what I heard, saw, observed, talked about - never ceased to amaze me. This amazement led me to asking questions and writing down these military travel stories. The power of this type of writing as compared to academic writing is that one is free to come up with observations that would need much more substantiation in academic writing but that is worth noticing anyway. There are people who claim that many novelists are better capable of writing sociologically than professional sociologists themselves. I don’t know if this is true but for sure the borders between academic literature and novels are thinner than people would think. Just as an example : Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel “La Ciudad y los perros” (the city and the dogs) is very illuminative if one wants to understand the sociodynamics in military academies. The genre of what may be called “fiction/faction” is worth exploring a bit more. If possible, I intend to do this in the near future again.

7. **One of the main aims of this issue of *Dynamiques internationales* is to discuss and debate how social sciences of the military through theoretical and empirical papers can help to understand societal and political problematics (both on a national and a transnational or international level). This raises questions on the ties between scholars and politicians and how politicians perceive social sciences works. Do you think that there are some changes in these relationships and there**

is a growing demand of “social expertise”? In other words how can social sciences (including results) of the military be helpful to decision makers? And also to the citizens?

Yes, this is an important issue. It may be useful to get back to the classical Weberian and Mannheimian distinction between functional and substantial rationality or knowledge. I don't think there is any doubt about how the military social sciences – in different degrees among countries though – can have a role with respect to functional questions (which means lead to the goals that one wants to achieve?). These are, as mentioned earlier, often related to workforce issues such as recruitment, training and education, cohesion, stress, leadership and the like. Also the human dimension of conflicts overseas has been discovered (again) as a fruitful field of social research and teaching. To answer such questions military social scientists have been in demand since *The American Soldier* project in the Second World War. These studies are often commissioned by the military themselves who indeed also hire social scientists to teach at the academies.

Questions of a more substantial nature (are the goals one is trying to attain any good?) are less well studied and frankly not always wanted. The military are not that interested if one tries to doubt taken-for-granted wisdoms such as those from von Clausewitz, if one tries to scrutinize the value of operational tactics as a goal in itself (“What do we do? We fight wars”) or if one questions the militarization of societal tensions or certain social practices that may occur in the military but are rejected in society-at-large. Social scientists hired by the military in general don't have a lot of practical and emotional space to deal with such questions. This is what social scientists outside of the military are more likely to do, but they may have problems to get access to the military field.

The best way for sociologists to work fruitfully with the military is starting with functional questions and provide useful answers, and then at the same time raise issues of a more substantial nature. Charles Moskos in my view was a true hero in this respect: his connection with and access to the top brass military was good because he often provided the commanders with useful advice but he also addressed more substantial and political issues in newspaper articles and political discussions. The young female scholars that I mentioned earlier (Christia, Ruffa and Olonisakin) are other, more recent examples because as outsiders with excellent research capabilities they reach for bigger questions and answers.