



□ Words and war. Around the book *Le Soldat XXe-XXIe siècle* (The Soldier of the Twenty-first Century)

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Monsieur David Dominé-Cohn

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In January 2018, General Lecointre is directing the publication of a book simply titled: *Soldier XXth - XXIst Century* ¹⁴⁵. ¹⁴⁵ This book brings together a series of contributions initially published in the journal *Inflexions*. The release of the book, published by Gallimard, followed an op-ed piece by the same general that had appeared a few days earlier in *Le Figaro*¹⁴⁶. In this tribune, the new Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces called on French officers, those who were destined to command at the highest level, to take up the pen and think about what they were doing, what they were called upon to do, and what they were : soldiers in the 21st century. In doing so, the general is leading by example, accompanied by a few officers as well as academics.

When it comes to writing, especially when there is - considering what is at stake - a certain ambition, everything is symbolic and full of meaning. The cover of the book is a photograph of a soldier, assault rifle in hand, standing, from behind, between two tanks, looking at a large fire that occupies the entire background of the image. The blaze, whose fuel can be guessed at its base, rises and dominates the soldier facing it; the edge of the photograph cuts the top of the flames. There is in this image, and this is its function, as a summary of the enterprise and its difficulty. The reader, who also becomes a spectator, does not have access to this fire, the soldier makes a screen. It is a summary of the intellectual ambition of the magazine *Inflexions*. As Emmanuelle Rioux reminds us, the magazine was born from the observation that, with the end of military service, the link between civil society and the army was going to weaken and that it was therefore necessary to invent new forms of mediation.¹⁴⁷ At the heart of a project is that of meaning, as Mrs Rioux reminds us again, and this question opens up the first issue.¹⁴⁸ In this context, the great fire that the soldier looks at, because it is his mission, becomes less and less accessible to those who do not look at it directly, and fewer and fewer people look at it directly.

What will guide our reading is the way in which the different authors, each with his or her own perspective, will articulate this question of the production of meaning and, above all, of the institution that produces it and which, in the context of the army in a democracy, is

always the political. It is therefore not a question of giving an overall account of a very rich work, with varied and complex texts, twenty-four in all, grouped into three themes, "From the Soldier", "In Combat", "The Return", but of offering a singular journey, a reading.

Around the question of meaning, what is placed at the centre of the authors' analyses is, logically, the producing institution. It is clear from reading the various contributions that this institution of meaning is always, or almost always, for the authors, internal to the military community. There are reasons for this.

The "training of the body", which is at the centre of military training, regularly renewed but transmitted, constitutes the military ethos. It is in the learning of the subordination of one person to another, of one's body to what is defined as one's will, that the military ethos is developed. The cult of bravery is first and foremost a relationship to the institution and to one's body, as Pierre-Joseph Givre and Jean-Michel Bachelet remind us.¹⁴⁹ However, as General Bachelet points out, bravery remains deeply linked to a certain conception of society and the interweaving of the military and the military in society as a whole.¹⁵⁰ General Bachelet is also well aware of how, from great moments of construction and reconstruction, the ideal of bravery is developed on the scale of a small corps: Legion, marine troops, fighters...¹⁵¹ These analyses place at the heart of their reflections and at the threshold of the work the affirmation that being a soldier implies a transformation through integration: one rightly speaks of the incorporation of the discipline that allows, in theory at least, a mastery of the body, in combat, in order to subordinate it to the collective mission....¹⁵² To the liturgy of the discipline that transforms bodies responds, in mirror - precisely what the iconography on the cover illustrates - a mystery of combat. Combat occupies the central part of the book.

The incorporation of the discipline, the subordination to the group makes the group the instance of reward - as shown by the ambivalence towards the decorations displayed - told by Xavier Boniface and Hervé Pierre.¹⁵³ However, a question arises on reading the book: the link with the outside, with the society that commissions the army and therefore the soldiers. It is understandable that the reflection on this link is not obvious, as it opens up a sensitive area.¹⁵⁴ However, it must be said that the soldier, in the text as well as on the cover facing the fire, is depicted in great solitude.

As such, when the outside, and particularly the power, is exposed, we always touch the sensitive. The importance of the issue is found in the extent of the affects that this contact evokes, as if incorporation into the military world had made the exterior more impressive. In their reflections on the role of decorations, the decision to award them is always an intrusion from the outside that recaptures a collective but limited and even secret experience.¹⁵⁵ Pain is an essential modality for constructing a relationship with the outside world, in the differential between the sometimes "unspeakable" experience and the words that the civilian world is capable of putting on the experience of war.¹⁵⁶ In the background, it is the understanding of what it costs to incorporate oneself that is seen as a cause of suffering and, beyond that, as the explanation of what is at odds with it. Contributors also point out that when military experience is captured by other modalities of categorizing reality, there is tension. Thus, the law retains and shifts the relationship to the authority created at the time of incorporation. Indeed, there is a tension between the general categories of the legal framework and that created de facto by the experience of hierarchy in warfare.¹⁵⁷ This is why thinking of power and authority - representations incorporated to make war - leads to thinking of cases of disobedience as both a sign of a pathology to the state and a sign of the lack of it. This is why thinking about power and authority - representations incorporated in order to wage war - leads us to think of cases

of disobedience as both a sign of pathology at the level of the institution - since the army cannot but be thought of as being loyal to the State - and as participating, in their own way, in an ethic of "loyalty".¹⁵⁸ The demonstration that is made is that the same principle pushes General Zeller on one side to take an active part in a putsch, and the general to take an active part in a coup. Général de Bollardière to ask to be relieved of his command so as not to endorse General Massu's methods in Algiers because : "...under his [General Massu's] orders, kidnappings, torture, "disappearances" are multiplying."¹⁵⁹ This is perhaps the whole point of a psychological comparison: the ability to put on the same level gestures for some that are completely illegal and for others that are perfectly legal. This approach shows to what extent being a soldier can only be understood on the level of a personal ethic that is lived as opposable to the outside world, whatever it may be. The interest of this contribution, placed between reflections on disobedience and others on authority, is to restore an ethic that can be understood only in terms of a personal ethic lived as opposable to the outside world, whatever it may be. The interest of this contribution, placed between reflections on disobedience and others on authority, is to restore an ethic, but also, by taking up the imagery of the cover, an aesthetic, of being a soldier and, perhaps, rather an officer, as a primarily individual approach. The army then appears, but it is a distorting prism as to its nature, as the meeting of profoundly ethical personalities whose individual and collective moral dimension is the basis of their ability to confront the violence of combat.

Authority, that of the superior, but also that of the mission, and disobedience are as many touches of this question of power. The army is a political instrument by its very nature because, in the modern state, it is the primary instrument for maintaining the monopoly of legitimate violence. In other political configurations, the control of force confers power, except for making the exercise of violence an end in itself, but the question of warring castes is not the one that concerns us primarily.¹⁶⁰ The army is an instrument at the service of a policy, just as war could be seen as the pursuit of political projects. Thinking about the meaning of war and the situation of the soldier today in France therefore necessarily means thinking about the articulation between politics and the army. In the contributions of the volume, the question of politics is all the more interesting as it is both present in fact but apparently absent.

It is undoubtedly the lack of meaning felt by the soldiers that, for the most part, hurts them; at least this is what we perceive in the background of the preThis is at least what we see in the background of the presentation of cases of post-traumatic stress disorder by Yann Andruétan when he talks about the effects, once he returns to his country, of what he calls "the red death".¹⁶¹ Killing is not without consequences; has it ever been? It is this question that the author asks, in a more anthropological way, when he researches societies of the past in relation to voluntary death.¹⁶² Interestingly, it is reminiscent of the formula "live and let die", famous because it is associated with a novel title by Ian Fleming, a film by Guy Hamilton and a song by Paul McCartney.¹⁶³ What is at stake for the author is to think of the articulation between the soldier - who is also an individual who, in conscience, must face alone the very nature of his act - and the institution that mandates him. Indeed, it is in the inability to position oneself clearly between the act of killing and the institution that ordered it that the whole difficulty for the mind and the resulting suffering lies. This situation, which is a form of loneliness, is reinforced by the partly voluntary distancing of our societies from violence, and particularly from the violence received in war, as evidenced by the social and even political demand for a war without deaths, or at least without visible deaths.¹⁶⁴ Yann Andruétan, in doing so, highlights that it is in a game of language, and therefore of categories, that the solution to articulate individual action, to relieve it as much as possible of the weight of the act, and of the

collective that commissioned the act, is to be found.¹⁶⁵ By inventing categories to create an act or by dehumanizing the opponent with nicknames, one builds the conditions for the possibility of a transition from a group of warriors to a modern army. In a historical perspective, the transition to the modern state can be seen as an extension of the military condition beyond a small group of warriors and, at the same time, the confrontation of a larger part of the population with the power of life and death, and therefore as the social necessity to name this power in order to confront it collectively.

Thus, incidentally, in the course of this work directed by General Lecointre, a political question emerges from this set of stories and reflections on the group responsible for exercising violence and death in the name of French society: the relationship of politics to its own violence. Indeed, the well-known formula "live and let die" is at the heart of the slow elaboration of our political model, as Michel Foucault has precisely highlighted in the course taught at the Collège de France *Il faut défendre la société*¹⁶⁶. He opens on the need to put war back at the centre of an analysis that aims at a history of the ideas of the State.¹⁶⁷ In doing so, he shows how the relationship to death is at the heart of modern sovereignty:

"In a sense, to say that the sovereign has the right to life and death means, basically, that he can make people die and let them live; in any case, that life and death are not those natural, immediate, somehow original or radical phenomena that would fall outside the field of political power. When we push a little further, if you like, to the point of paradox, it basically means that, in relation to power, the subject is, as of right, neither alive nor dead. ...] The right of life and death is only exercised in an unbalanced way, and always on the side of death. The sovereign's effect on life is exercised only from the moment when the sovereign can kill. ...] And I believe that one of the most massive transformations of 19th century political law was precisely, I am not saying exactly to substitute, but to complement this old right of sovereignty - to kill or let live - with another right of sovereignty.... The new right of sovereignty is therefore the right to make people die or let them live. The new right of sovereignty is therefore the right to make people die or let them live, and it is this new right that is taking hold: the right to make people live and to let them die. »¹⁶⁸

To conclude, perhaps we need to go back to the cover illustration. Slightly above the soldier, in the background, halfway between him and the blaze, is a mirror. Logically, we should see the photographer there, but, similarly to the mirror painted by Diego de Velasquez in *Las Meninas*, we should see the photographer in the mirror.¹⁶⁹ The mirror does not refer to the viewer as a mechanism of classical pictorial representation.¹⁷⁰ The mirror, that of a VAB rear-view mirror, reflects only the interior of the vehicle and the military world, not the spectator. It seems that to this mirror, which is clearly visible but does not reflect anything of the world of the spectator, precisely this assertion applies: "For the function of this reflection is to attract what is intimately foreign to it inside the painting".¹⁷¹ As in *Las Meninas*, through this device, what is at stake is the autonomy of the scene depicted. For Michel Foucault, in Velasquez's painting, it is the staging of the autonomy of power that no longer needs to be represented directly but which, nevertheless, organizes the entire scene by its absence:

"Perhaps there is, in this painting by Velasquez, like the representation of classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up. In fact, she undertakes to represent herself in all its elements, with her images, the glances she offers herself, the faces she makes visible, the gestures that give birth to her. But there, in this disappearance that she collects and spreads all together, an essential emptiness is

imperiously indicated on all sides: the necessary disappearance of what founded it - of the one to whom it resembles and the one in whose eyes it is only resemblance. This very subject - which is the same - has been elided. And free at last from this relationship that enchainned it, the representation can give itself as the worst representation. »¹⁷² is played out, perhaps, in this book, a moment in the history of the presentation of the army, and particularly of the Army: a search for what founds it at the same time as what organizes it and, like the soldier, what makes it stand by the fire.

145 The soldier. XXe-XXIe siècle, François Lecointre (dir.), Paris, Gallimard, 2018.

146 François Lecointre, " Oser écrire pour renouveler la pensée de l'action militaire ", Le Figaro, 17 January 2018.

147 The Soldier, op. cit, p. 16.

148 Ibid. at p. 15.

149 Ibid. at 33 and 44.

150 Ibid. at p. 47.

151 Ibid, pp. 42-43, a similar analysis can be found in Colonel Givre's text, p. 31.

152 Ibid, p. 62.

153 Ibid, p. 310 and p. 312.

154 The complexity of the relationship between the world of war thinking, and if necessary its criticism, and the world of war, that is to say armies in the literal sense, begins to The complexity of the link between the world of reflection on war, and if need be its criticism, and the world of war, that is to say armies in the true sense, is beginning to attract more and more attention from observers, as attested by an article, otherwise debatable but significant in itself, published in the paper review of the Mediapart site, Alexandre Jubelin, "Qui pense la guerre? La France en retard d'une bataille", Le Crieur, 20 February 2018.

155 Le soldat, op. cit., p. 311.

156 Ibid, pp. 360-361.

157 Ibid. pp. 123 and 133 and 380.

158 Ibid. at 101.

159 Ibid. at p. 113.

160 The question of warring castes seems exotic to us.

161 Ibid. at p. 326.

162 Ibid. at p. 326.

163 The song by Paul McCartney and the Wings was composed by him and Linda McCartney in 1972 for the soundtrack of Guy Hamilton's film released in theatres in 1973 and bearing the same title; the film is based on the title of a novel by Ian Fleming published in 1954, Ian Fleming, Live and let die, London, Jonathan Cape, 1954.

164 The theme of a war without casualties is no longer entirely new today. It has come with the revolution in military affairs and the renewal of a war in the United States, where the horizon of a direct, land-based confrontation with the USSR was becoming blurred

and transformed into the prospect of a distant, air and sea war. The first Iraq war was an attempt to realize this Western political-warrior fantasy.

165 The Soldier, op. cit. p. 341 and p. 343.

166 Michel Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, Cours au Collège de France 1976, Mauro Bertrand and Alessandro Fontana (eds.), Paris, Gallimard-Seuil, 1997, pp. 193-235.

167 "We must therefore try to finish, to bring to a close a little of what has been said this year. I had tried a little bit to pose the problem of the war, seen as a grid for the intelligibility of historical processes. (...) And I tried, last time, to show you how the very notion of war had finally been eliminated from the historical analysis by the principle of national universality", *ibid.*, p. 213.

168 *Ibid.* at p. 214.

169 Diego de Velasquez, *Las Meninas*, Prado Museum, Madrid.

170 One can think, for example, of the mirror in Jean Van Eyck's painting *The Arnolfini couple*.

171 Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966 (2016), p. 30.

172 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

David Dominé-Cohn is a medieval historian by training (Sorbonne University and EHESS). After several years as a temporary teaching and research attaché in the Créteil academy, he is now working in a REP (Réseau d'éducation prioritaire) college. For 4 years he participated in the jury of the external CAPES of History and Geography.

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