

CHAPTER 2

Some Historical Notes

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INTRODUCTION

Even if the sociology of the military became firmly established and, especially, demonstrated its applicability to concrete cases starting with the vast research of *The American Soldier* (see “The American School” below), sociological investigation of the military and of the phenomenon of war preceded it by nearly a century, and was contemporaneous with the first studies commonly considered sociological. Seeking out these roots is not merely an operation of historical interest: Those starting out on the study of this special sociology need to know the paths that have already been trod, of which some came to an end and others produced studies and researches of what we consider contemporary sociology of the military (from *The American Soldier* onward). Our discipline did not develop in some sort of cosmic vacuum, emerging from nothing, but embraced previous contributions to thought and research and very often carried them further. To give just a pair of examples, Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz (see below) offered their own solutions to the convergence/divergence dichotomy between the armed forces and civil society already evidenced by Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19th century, while Charles Wright Mills’s model of the “*power elite*” is clearly indebted to the studies of Gaetano Mosca at the end of the 19th century. Some knowledge of the thought of those I call the “forerunners” here is important, therefore, especially for the novice, in order to build a more complete and broad mental framework of the discipline than would result from study of contemporary sociology of the military only.

A second section is devoted to what I have called “the American School” because its development took place chiefly in the United States and because military sociologists from other countries initially moved within it and according to its schemes. This school begins with the research published in the mid-20th century in *The American Soldier* and remains a fertile one, although here we stop with the most noted authors of the 1980s. The necessary brevity of the section means that only the contributions of a few authors, generally the founders of a scientific current, can be mentioned here. But because the

worldwide development of the sociology of the military in the second half of the 20th century, with specific regional connotations, issues from the mold of this school—at times also by reaction to some of its schemes—the third, and final, section of this chapter is dedicated to giving an accounting of this development. It is a section that newcomers will find particularly useful for orienting themselves in the panorama of the institutions, now prevalently international, engaged in the subject today.

THE FORERUNNERS

The sociology of the military starts with sociology *tout court*, if not as a specification of a scientific sector, at least in the treatment of the subjects that would later be characteristic of it. Considered by many the founder of sociology (and for certain the one who coined the term), Auguste Comte, in his *Cours de Philosophie Positive*,¹ deals with a number of topics that we would today undoubtedly include in the sociology of the military. As is well known, Comte's analysis of the crisis of the society of his time led him to construct a social history² of humanity, a history built according to an evolutionary, linear conception itself based on the principle, from the Enlightenment, of the progress of the human species. In this construction, the military, along with religion, plays a fundamental role, especially before the emergence of the industrial, bureaucratic, and civil aspects of society in a pluralistic sense.

The military aspect of associative life is as old as *Homo sapiens*, Comte observes: Humans' first tools are weapons and the first authority established in the group is that of the military chief; cooperation between humans is imposed as a necessity and a social value, especially for the needs of war. War acts on primitive microsocieties (the family, the clan, the tribe) by diverting them in two directions: On the one hand, individual human aggregates tend to increase numerically to better meet military necessities; on the other, there is an extension of human associations through the subjection of defeated groups to victorious ones. The human species thus converts the impulse that in many animals remains limited to the destructive act of fighting into a means of civilization. Indeed, says Comte, even the typically human institution of slavery is civilizing. Since the slave is a defeated person whose life has been spared, his survival is civil progress, on the one hand, because it avoids useless destruction of the species and a perfecting of the military institution on the other, since it is largely the work of slaves that makes it possible to wage war and have warriors. Morality itself, for Comte, is at the outset mainly a military ethic in that it subordinates the guiding lines of human action to war aims.³ In the evolutionary blueprint that Comte sees written in humankind's social history, the first institutional situation is the polytheistic primitive society, where the eminent man is the eminent warrior, the dominant society is the one that dominates militarily, and power is the prerogative of the warrior caste.

The polytheistic age is followed by the monotheistic one, which is characterized by a markedly defensive military attitude, partly due to a loss of organization which results in a poor capability of conducting offensive operations. For Comte the growth of monotheism leads to a number of social changes fraught with consequences for the military, such as the

¹ Comte's fundamental work, in six volumes, published between 1830 and 1842. The edition I refer to is the one published by UTET, Turin, 1967, edited by Franco Ferrarotti.

² Understood as *history without the names of individuals and even without those of peoples*, op. cit., p. 123.

³ Op. cit., Lecture LIII, p. 551.

separation of spiritual leadership from temporal leadership, the breaking up of centralized authority into numerous local authorities, and the transformation of slavery into servitude. As a result, warfare gradually loses importance, the military leader is stripped of all religious power, armies shrink until they become elitist, and the military spirit declines until it becomes something internal to the military (*esprit de corps*).

With the coming of the modern age, the military undergoes new and radical changes. First, military leaders also begin to lose part of their temporal power, eroded by the bureaucratic organization that is being created in the new structure of the national state. Second, the internal structure of the military is modified: The standing army replaces feudal militias, military leaders come under civilian authority (the problem of political control of the armed forces arises), the international negotiating function begins to be handled by civilian authority as well, and military activities themselves are gradually subordinated to the commercial interests of the nascent national state.⁴ The bourgeois society characteristic of Comte's period, increasingly bureaucratizing and controlling military activities, leads him to point to a substantial antimilitarism from which he concludes that war is destined to become increasingly rare and ultimately disappear completely. In particular, Comte sees conscription, instituted during the French Revolution, as the decisive element that would reduce the military system to a subaltern task; for Comte the social significance of conscription is a diluting of military customs and mentality, a muting of the specialistic nature of the military profession, a marked subordination of the military to the complex machinery of modern society.

The social history that Comte constructs helps him, finally, to create sociology as *the last major branch of natural philosophy*,⁵ a science that provides the élites who lead the people with a rational basis for operational intervention on the various national societies throughout the world. In these élites he includes military leaders, who, precisely due to their greater awareness of war, must help to rid society of a phenomenon that has become antihistorical and anachronistic in order to institute the conception of that positive society that he believes is coming into being.

Written more or less in the same years as Auguste Comte's *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, the chapters that Alexis de Tocqueville devote to the military and to war⁶ depart from the same Enlightenment outlook that inspired Comte's work and would later inspire that of Spencer. In de Tocqueville, however, one notes a theoretical caution and an attention to concrete facts that makes his historical predictions less distant from actual future reality. Also, for Tocqueville the sociopolitical emergence of nations appears to move in the opposite direction from war and toward a taming of the military spirit. For the author of *Democracy in America*, this result, which for Comte (and later for Spencer as well) was the result of the process of industrialization of national societies, would instead come from the internal democratization of society. But it would be a partial result and slow in coming, so that *equality of living standards, and the institutions that derive from them, do not exempt a democratic people from the obligation of maintaining armies*.⁷ It is therefore important, he concludes, to study the social makeup of armies and the behavior and tendencies of those who compose them. de Tocqueville thus appears to create the subject matter, the topic of

⁴Op. cit., Lecture LV, pp. 77–81.

⁵Op. cit., Lecture LVII, p. 430.

⁶In *De la démocratie en Amérique*, published between 1836 and 1839. The edition I refer to is the one by Gallimard, Paris, 1951.

⁷Op. cit., p. 270.

study, the central object, of what will later be the sociology of the military. And it is not merely superficial: de Tocqueville immediately identifies and explores a number of very concrete themes, such as relations between the armed forces and society, the social origins of officers, the military profession as an instrument of social ascent, and careerism.

In his analysis of the armed forces/society relationship, de Tocqueville takes on what will be the great themes of debate and research in the sociology of the military in the second half of the 20th century: the divergence/convergence of military society and civil society,⁸ the problem of political control over the armed forces, and the excessive strengthening of the executive during a protracted state of war.⁹ The modernity of Tocqueville's approach to the concrete problems he tackles can be illustrated by reporting one of his passages on political control of the military. After affirming the concept that armed forces are the expression of the country to which they belong, he asserts that the remedy against a possible divergence between their ends and those of society must be found through democratic education of all citizens, when they "will have acquired a virile love for order and voluntarily bent to the rules . . . , the general spirit of the nation, penetrating in the particular spirit of the army, will temper the desires and the opinions that the military condition brings into being, will compress them through the powerful pressure of public opinion."¹⁰ It is interesting to note that this concept is taken up in 1960 by Morris Janowitz (see the bibliography), who theorizes that political control over the armed forces will be achieved by educating officers in democratic values and their acceptance and a "rubbing off" of such values from national public opinion.

Although little celebrated by military sociologists today, Alexis de Tocqueville appears to be one of the most interesting precursors of our special sociology, not only for the concrete themes that he dealt with, but also for his scientific approach to their treatment. Indeed, instead of using a prevalently historical method for social investigation, characteristic of Comte, de Tocqueville performed a critical analysis of the social aggregate in a single historical period, in which he was interested, a veritable cutaway of a society and a synchronous comparison of it with other societies. In addition to being innovative, this methodological approach appears to be the only one that can justify sociology as a science distinct from social history. It is also worth observing that this methodology leads de Tocqueville to make use of what later came to be called "*sociological indicators*", an innovation in the realm of research tools as well.

Herbert Spencer, too, adopts a prevalently synchronous, transversal method of investigation, but on the one hand his construction appears much more theoretical than de Tocqueville's and on the other his conclusions are quite close to those of Comte. Spencer lays the groundwork of his sociological science using chiefly the comparative method, producing a synchronous examination of societies at different levels of development. As a unifying principle he uses the biological evolution of the species (Darwin) applied to social aggregates: They constitute for him a superorganic world, set in logical and linear succession to the inorganic and organic ones, with no leap in quality.

The general thesis expressed by Spencer in his fundamental work¹¹ is that a law governs the evolution both of living organisms and the groups they form, resulting in a natural and

⁸See Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz below.

⁹That which Harold Lasswell would later call the garrison state (see References).

¹⁰Op. cit., pp. 275–276.

¹¹*Principles of Sociology*, published in three volumes from 1877 to 1896. The edition I refer to here is *Principi di sociologia*, published by UTET, Turin, 1967, edited by Franco Ferrarotti.

necessary process of development. The evolution of human aggregates is conceived as the set of processes and products that involve the coordinated actions of a large number of individuals. The highest form of superorganic evolution is society; the study of society is sociology. Fundamentally important both for the organic world and the superorganic world is the concept of structure, which designates an entity formed by various mutually dependent parts. The model of structure created by Spencer is homeostatic, that is, change in one of the parts entails change in all the others in order to maintain the system's equilibrium. Individuals and aggregates initially develop at least two fundamental structures, one for acting internally, for the purposes of maintenance, and the other for acting externally, in terms of defence and offence. The structure that acts externally is formed and perfected through war, which is thus the matrix of organized society. It is war that necessitates an authority, a leader, the creation of stable government structures, and a process of aggregation of human groups.

As can be seen, although the route is different, the interpretation of society is similar to that of Comte. Spencer, too, identifies a primitive society, typically military, and a more evolved one in which the activities of maintenance and exchange prevail: industrial society. However, he defines them not so much through a historical process but as general typologies into which the different national societies existing at his time fit more or less separately. The evolutionary law employed by Spencer leads to a development of the social industrial type (a superior society because it aims at individual well-being). Unlike Comte, however, Spencer does not hypothesize a linear evolutionary development, but an alternating one, with periods and episodes that can be strongly involutinal.

Spencer, like Comte, materializes the antimilitary spirit of bourgeois industrialism, guided by the Enlightenment idea of human progress. However, the outlook is more critical in Spencer, who sees the possibility of involutinal processes and warns that peaceful coexistence between societies is not automatically the fruit of the development of industrial society, but derives from the disappearance of militarism. But incomprehension of the real role of the industrial state, which he shares with Comte, prevents him from identifying the terrible war-making potential of industrial society and leads him to focus on militarism as the principal causal factor of war.

Spencer's analysis of the military remains significant, however. Various aspects of it still appear to be present in many current societies which, according to his classifying criteria, incarnate the mixed type of military-industrial society, so that some Spencerian typologies still constitute a tool for reading and understanding the characteristics of military societies.

Gaetano Mosca brings the 19th century to a close for what constitutes our special sociology and is the first scholar to treat a single, specific theme of this discipline, one that more than half a century later will find concrete, significant development in the work of Charles Wright Mills.¹² First and foremost, Mosca goes beyond the positivist optimism regarding the disappearance of war with the advent of the positive (Comte), industrial (Spencer), or democratic (de Tocqueville) society, clearly pointing to the fact that it is not the military institution that causes war. The military function is destined to continue in every type of society because war is only one of the many manifestations of human nature. The military and its historical evolution are thus worthy of serious study in order to understand what its optimum organization should be in the current historical period. In this

¹²Mosca treats the military especially in Chapter 9 of Volume I of *The Ruling Class* (see References), titled "Standing Armies."