
Reviewed by Joseph Soeters

In this monograph, Claude Weber has done an excellent job of describing and analyzing the ways in which the French Army educates and trains its officers at port-of-entry level. For the first time, a social scientist was allowed to follow a cohort (une promotion) of young adults while in the process of becoming officers at the Military Academy, Saint-Cyr (Coëtquidan, Brittany). As a consequence, this study is based on a three-year period of research. Weber was interested in questions such as: who are these youngsters? What family and occupational backgrounds do they come from? Who is successful, and who drops out? How does the process of shaping a military identity—including a sense of unique traditions and habits as well as more rational skills and knowledge—develop? How are traditions and habits, often going back to Napoleonic times, transferred from one generation to the next? How much profit can one derive from having parents in the military?

Only rarely have these questions been answered in military studies, at least not to the detailed depth displayed in this book. And only seldom have the answers to these questions been so substantiated and convincingly presented, especially if taboos are being dealt with (for instance, with respect to the impact of having a father of high rank in the Army). The evidence produced is beyond doubt in describing what is going on in the port-of-entry education and training of French army officers.

That is perhaps because Weber uses a mix of operational methods, which also contributes to the richness of his study. Observations are combined with well-chosen quotes from interviews, and tables with descriptive statistics add to the general picture. A separate section with photographs completes the book and shows the strength of what is nowadays called ‘visual sociology’. The set-up of the book is chronological, with many, sometimes very short, chapters that depict the course of events during the curriculum of six semesters. This set-up makes the book highly readable.

Claude Weber is conscious of his role of the outsider who aims to study the sometimes quite intimate interactions between the cadre and the cadets (élèves) as well as among the latter themselves. He needed to win the cadets’ confidence, making sure that his descriptions would harm no one in his or her privacy. He needed to be neutral despite the intrinsic vulnerability of such a demand, and he was careful to maintain his intellectual honesty. The particular situation of being “a fly on the wall” leads him to reflect, at the beginning of the book, on the role of researcher, the ethics of doing research under such conditions, and on his awareness of possible self-censorship because he teaches at the
Academy as well. None of the possible difficult points of such type of research escapes the author’s attention.

Weber’s book is a good read for all those in France who have or had affiliations with Saint-Cyr. They will like a lot of what is being presented – and sometimes also show grimaces on their faces – when reading about some of the happenings. Yet, his findings deserve a translation of the book, or at least the separate publication in English of a number of his most salient results because of the importance of this study for military social studies in general. In addition, the international community of military researchers would do a good job if they endeavoured a comparative follow-up of this study, in order to look for variations among the various national academies and the socialization processes peculiar to each of them. Particularly, the “social construction of the enemy” and ideas about conflict resolution as they are transferred and diffused in the various national service academies should be scrutinized carefully. Those constructions and ideas are determinative of what the officers later in their careers will think and do on operational missions in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

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