

Chapter 5

Acquisition and Its Theoretical Foundations: A Phenomenon at the Crossroads of Phenomena

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ABSTRACT

Armament issues are hardly dealt with by the French academics, there is thus no specific theoretical framework available. Existing theories to study technical objects have been designed for civilian artefacts and the specific features of the military market challenge their full applicability to a military research object. As for existing approaches to armament, they are either insufficient or have become obsolete. This questions the need of specific theories to fit with military specificities. Given how complex defence acquisition is there is a case to be made for introducing more disciplines and practising mix-theories in order to gain richer insights.

INTRODUCTION

The political scientist William Genieys once wrote

If there is a field of research in France where sociology and political science are traditionally less developed, then it is the one on military matters This structural weakness is enshrined in a two-fold equation: it is difficult to make the ‘Grande muette’ [‘great mute’] speak – interview surveys are seen as very difficult – and you do not build an academic career with such a research topic. As regards armament policies, military confidentiality oblige, it gets even more difficult to access empirical sources. Events unfold as if defence in general, and armament policies in particular, although they are at the socio-historical roots of state power in Western Europe, are to a greater or lesser extent outside the scope of French research in social sciences. (Genieys, 2004, p.29)

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These lines were written more than a decade ago, yet the statement still stands. Military issues have generally not held much appeal for the bulk of academic researchers. Fortunately, there is evidence that a minority of the younger generation of researchers have become increasingly interested in taking up of the task of identifying the investigating the present research gaps.

Armament appears as ‘the poor cousin’ of French defence studies (Genieys, 2004). Actors usually refer to American pieces of work, and French analysts often use American data, more easily available online than French sources. Domestic topics, when addressed, are largely done so by military engineers, whose work remains mostly unavailable to academic researchers, by historians (e.g. Bret, Duval, Pestre & Vaïsse), economists (e.g. Bellais, Danet, Gnesotto, Hébert, Lelièvre, Mérindol, Serfati & Versailles), and by political scientists (e.g. Genieys, Hoeffler, Irondelle & Joana) who mostly adopt a public policy approach. Therefore, most analyses take a macro perspective on the equipment policy and the defence acquisition (DA) process. A noticeable exception is William Genieys’s (2004) book, which attempts to shed some light on what appears as a black box to external observers, namely the acquisition process.

While economics is the main discipline applied to DA studies, the next most commonly applied disciplinary field when it comes to armament in the strict sense of the term is history. Some examples include Michel Callon and John Law’s (1988) study of the TSR-2, a British aircraft programme, Gérard Dubey and Caroline Moricot’s (2008) investigation on the *Rafale* fighter, and Caroline Moricot and Alain Gras’s (2008) research on the *Atlantic II* maritime patrol aircraft. All of these authors are sociologists specializing in technology.

Because the present knowledge base is informed by scarce, fragmented, mostly macro-level existing studies it cannot provide a global understanding of defence procurement and acquisition. These biases in what is studied and how the matter is approached mean that some aspects are not adequately addressed. These include the determinants of technical choices, what performance means for designers and for equipment users, how the equipment is appropriated and actually used, and so on. These aspects are dealt with in the sociology of technology and in sociology of organisations literature. But researchers belonging to these fields generally take civilian artefacts as research objects – with the exception of the aforementioned case studies by authors such as Law and Callon, Dubey, Moricot, and Gras.

As a consequence of this paucity of relevant studies, researchers focusing on military equipment are compelled to borrow tools from other well established disciplines and to occasionally use theories designed for civilian research topics. Their adequacy to military research objects can be questioned on the grounds that such theories were thought to analyse a supply process designed to meet the needs of a mass consumer market at a time which placed emphasis on the conspicuous consumption of goods and leisure services. By contrast the military market has been, and mainly remains, demand-based, small-scaled, with tailor-made solutions. Although the tools offered by other disciplines can prove useful to researchers willing to understand phenomena common to the civilian and military environments, their explanatory power is limited when it comes to phenomena specifically bounded exclusively within military processes and contexts.

If DA is serious about developing a more sophisticated body of knowledge, then it logically follows that it should take advantage of the knowledge offered by other disciplines. In order to support this claim, the chapter will be divided into three parts, each one covering one single dimension of acquisition: first, the people involved in the process (the actors), second, what is negotiated and ordered (the requirements), and third, how the equipment is realised (the design phase). Each time, the theories and disciplines that can be mobilised will be introduced.

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