

# French social sciences go khaki under increasing military influence

Saturday 19 October 2019, by [BONCOURT Thibaud](#), [DEBOS Marielle](#), [DELORI Mathias](#), [WASINSKI Christophe](#) (Date first published: 15 June 2019).

**As the weight of military funding increases in French social sciences, scholars risk losing their independence.**

In his farewell speech on 17 January 1961, President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned his compatriots about the development of a “[military-industrial complex](#)” (MIC) in the United States, i.e. a growing integration of the military establishment and the weapon industries. Eisenhower feared that this alliance would encourage the production of some biased expertise whose main function would be to justify new wars and weapons programmes.

This trend was already obvious in the studies produced by the Rand corporation and some other think tanks of the MIC. Therefore, Eisenhower’s main concern was that the militarization of knowledge would encroach on a traditionally more independent field: academia. The American president believed that if such a “military-industrial academic complex” (MIAC) were to be formed, there would no longer be any counter-power and “public policies would become prisoners of a techno-scientific elite”.

Such a trend threatens French academe. In 2014, the Ministry of the Armed Forces (formerly called Defence ministry) funded the creation of [an Institute for War and Peace](#) at the University of Paris 1. In 2016, the same ministry launched a national programme called “[Pacte Enseignement supérieur](#)”, which enabled higher education institutions to obtain a “Centre of Excellence for Defence and Strategy” label, together with a 300,000 euro grant. In 2018, the Military Intelligence Directorate (*direction du renseignement militaire*) and the CNRS signed a convention that encourages scholars who are experts on regions considered “strategic” to discuss the results of their research.

The partnership has been strongly [criticized for ethical and security reasons](#). In 2019, the CNRS and the Ministry of the Armed Forces co-sponsored and co-created a “Groupement d’Intérêt Scientifique” that brings together academics and consultants who work on “defense and strategic” issues. These initiatives take place in the wider context of the French military increasingly [using education and youth to promote its values](#).

## Neoconservative thinktanks...

Admittedly, there have been other attempts to militarize French academia. During the Cold War, the Ministry of Defense set up research institutions inspired by the US think tank model: the Institut Français d’Etudes Stratégiques (IFDES) by General André Beaufre, in 1962-1963, and, subsequently, the Fondation pour les Etudes de Défense nationale (FEDN) by General Lucien Poirier [1] in 1972. At the end of the Cold War, the latter changed its status and became the Fondation pour les Etudes de Défense (FED). Most of the funding was provided by Defence industries: Aerospace, Cogepag, Dassault, Elf-Aquitaine, GIAT Industries, Matra-Défense, SNECMA, SNPE, Sofresa and Thomson. Later, FED became part of the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS), which is regularly

branded as a French “neoconservative think tank”.

This brief overview shows that there has been a long-standing collaboration between academic research, the military and the defence industry in France. However, these initiatives did not revolutionize the field of the French academic studies on war because most specialists observed with skepticism these dynamics. The [situation seems different today](#). In a context of declining traditional funding, several researchers – including a few critical and reflexive ones – have resigned themselves to accepting funding from the military.

### **Three cases - US, France and Germany**

To understand what is at stake with the militarization of the human and social sciences of war, we can refer to research published on the case of the United States during the Cold War. Following the path of, among others, the Camelot project, the Pentagon and the CIA massively financed studies in the psychology, sociology, anthropology and political science of countries considered close to the communist enemy. This production contributed to legitimizing US interventionism in Southeast Asia and support for authoritarian regimes in Latin America [2]. Moreover, these funds came together with the framing of research questions and the marginalization of approaches considered at odds with the dominant orthodoxy. For fear of displeasing its security donors, the academic establishment was reluctant to support these alternative or critical approaches [3]. In extreme cases, academics even fully embraced the political objectives of the US government [4].

In France, advocates of the use of Defence money to fund their research intend to protect themselves against these potential biases by calling for a diversification of funding sources. However, it is not clear what other sources of funding would be possible. Opening up research funding to foreign states or non-state armed groups would raise ethical and legal issues. As for anti-military NGOs, they do not have the same financial power – to say the least – as the military-industrial complex. It is therefore difficult to see how they could counterbalance the above-mentioned biases. More fundamentally, scientific research is not about achieving a balance between a variety of stakeholders. Rather, it draws its legitimacy from the collective organization of the evaluation of researchers’ work exclusively by their peers, and from reflexivity vis-à-vis their objects and their donors.

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In Germany, there is a relative consensus in the scientific community that the financing of the military-industrial complex is “[ethically irresponsible](#)”. Many German universities have even adopted “civil clauses” prohibiting this type of interactions. This does not mean that the military-industrial complex is not trying to influence German scientific research. However, these attempts generate an outcry. A controversy emerged in 2013, for example, when the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* revealed that the US Ministry of Defence was funding several German research projects, including projects carried out by people working in universities that had adopted “civil clauses”. The politicization of this problem has slowed the enthusiasm of supporters of Anglo-Saxon style “war studies”. Four years earlier, Otto Suhr Institute students and academics from all over Germany had mobilized against the “Forschungsbereich 700”, a research network collaborating with the German Ministry of Defence in the context of [the “intervention” in Afghanistan](#) [5]. The mobilization was such, again, that the government had to [explain itself to the Bundestag](#).

### **In conclusion**

Advocates of a greater openness of the academic field to funds provided by the military-industrial

complex object to practical arguments such as: “we need money, let’s take it from wherever it is”; or even: “we are in charge of distancing ourselves from the interests of our financiers; we know how to conduct our research”.

It cannot be denied that universities and social science research remain insufficiently funded. However, making research dependent on the security apparatus is not an acceptable solution to this problem, as it runs the risk of profoundly changing the nature of researchers’ work. Instead, it is necessary to continue to defend “traditional” public funding, which alone makes it possible to produce relatively independent research that can inform public debate.

*This article is a revised version of a piece originally published in French: “[Pour des recherches sur la guerre indépendante](#)”.*

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**P.S.**

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<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/french-social-sciences-go-khaki-under-increasing-influence-military/>

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## Footnotes

[1] Lucien Poirier, *Le Chantier stratégique : Entretiens avec Gérard Chaliand*, Paris, Hachette, 1997.

[2] Christopher Simpson, *Science of Coercion. Communication Research & Psychological Warfare 1945-1960*, New York et Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994 ; Christophe Simpson (ed.), *Universities and Empire. Money and Politics in the Social Sciences during the Cold War*, New York, The New Press, 1998 ; Ron Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy. Culture and Politics in the Military-Intellectual Complex*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003.

[3] Deborah Welch Larson, « Deterrence Theory and the Cold War », *Radical History Review*, automne 1995, n°63, p. 93.

[4] Oren, I. 2003. *Our Enemies and US: America’s Rivalries and the Making of Political Science*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

[5] The Federation of Democratic Scientists has denounced the militaristic nature of this research project. See: Ralf Hutter: *Im Afghanistan-Einsatz für Wissenschaft und Militär*. In: *Forum*

