



Caroline Moricot, socio-anthropologist and lecturer in sociology at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, held a conference, on March the 8th 2022, entitled "la guerre à distance. From drone crews' perspective". Based on various interviews with fighter and drone crews collected over a period of fifteen years, she returned with us to the place of the latter in technological wars. Before refocusing on the operating conditions of drone crews, however, our speaker sought to return to the intrinsic values of combat pilots.

These values are defined by the sociologist as the product of long-term seasoning, aimed at conditioning pilots to produce the unthinkable - the act of killing - without necessarily being ostracized from the human community. Of the three values associated with the fighter pilot, the speaker first focused on courage, the most iconic of the soldier's virtues, through which the pilot overcomes the fear of seeing his body exposed to "mortal danger". To achieve this, the pilot is trained to automate his reactions when faced with danger; he is submitted to rules and a particular discipline which leads him to develop a sense of moral obligation towards his Squadron on duty. Secondly, it drives him to be accountable and to protect his squadron from danger. Finally, in combat conditions, the trained pilot has a vocation to distinguish himself within the group. In the researcher's view, this condition is the necessary precondition for fighter pilots to carry out the most dreadful of actions without dehumanising the perpetrator.

The particularity of the fighter pilot lies in his being the exclusive master of his machine which is his main drive. However, with the emergence of drones at the turn of the century, they are no longer pilots but rather drone operators. An ideological shift towards a genuine drone culture is taking place, at the junction of two professional cultures: that of hunting and that of intelligence. From now on, the drone operator, immobile at his desk, no longer guarantees the success of an operation, but is the vigilant manager of an almost autonomous system. Moreover, in the event of an incident, he cannot substitute the machine and perform a prowess as in an aeroplane. The sociologist describes it as "the adjustment value of this great system", the "orchestra conductor of techniques" according to the formula of the philosopher of techniques Gilbert Simondon, in which humans and machines work in symbiosis.

However, considering the distance between the drone on the field and its operator at the desk, when the latter describe their daily action to Mrs Moricot, it is boredom that comes up most often during their conversations. Taking up the work of historian Bruno Cabane on the boredom experienced by soldiers in the First World War, the sociologist notes that in the absence of battle, targets dictate the rhythm of the mission. It is then a surveillance task very similar to that of an intelligence officer. However, when an event of greater intensity occurs, the operator must immediately coordinate the various elements of the system. To do this, he mobilises the knowledge acquired in the field as a fighter pilot, which allows him to actively engage his body to his surveillance work.

In conclusion, the sociologist describes the place of the drone operator as an indispensable cog in this large socio-technical network. This implies profound transformations in the social representations of their activity for these former jet pilots. The operator's body is no longer in 'mortal danger' because risk differs with the distance. Finally, their activities also raise concerns about the authority and responsibility of humans in a system composed almost exclusively of machines.

