

Past wars, present dangers, future anthropologies

Guest editorial by David Price

David Price is Associate Professor of Anthropology at St. Martin's College. His forthcoming book is *Cold War witch hunts: The FBI's surveillance and repression of activist anthropologists*.

Editor's note: Forthcoming issues of AT will carry a series of articles by David Price examining in more documentary detail the various thematic aspects of the relationship between anthropology and military and intelligence agencies.

Like many other anthropologists who contributed their professional skills to the waging of the Second World War, in 1943 Gregory Bateson enlisted in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the organizational predecessor to the CIA.¹ At the OSS Bateson wrote intelligence reports, undertook clandestine 'black propaganda' radio campaigns, and even took part in manoeuvres with an OSS forward intelligence unit in the Burmese Arakan Mountains. Bateson applied his principles of *schismogenesis* to foster disorder among enemy minority populations, and some of this work prefigured the sort of psy-war, culture-cracking approach to conquest that was later employed by CIA operatives like Edward Landsdale in Vietnam and the Philippines. One intelligence report released by the CIA finds Bateson recommending that the Americans learn from Russian successes in conquering ethnic minorities, other reports show him analysing ways that the British could strengthen their colonial control of India in the post-war period. These were very useful, albeit troubling, applications of anthropological skills in the service of war.

In the post-war years Bateson came to view this work with regret and disdain – not because of any failures, but because of the successes in which native peoples were ill treated, manipulated and disempowered. Some anthropologists had no regrets regarding their war activities, while others shared Bateson's sentiments in the post-war period, and the later wars of the 20th century found anthropologists supporting and opposing wars with a diversity of opinion and approach befitting the diversity of our field. Nevertheless, there remains a general hesitancy to take

stock of the extent and meaning of past anthropological interactions with warfare.

The current crisis brings to the surface many of the buried issues faced by Bateson and hundreds of other anthropologists in past wars. Chief among these is the threat this 'war on global terrorism' poses to the prospects of peace and sovereignty for indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities and separatist groups around the world. But the situation also raises numerous ethical issues that must be confronted by anthropologists and their colleagues – especially those concerning the integrity of the discipline of anthropology, as pressures to harness anthropological knowledge of other societies for military purposes and other objectives re-emerge.

Present dangers

It is imperative that anthropologists critically evaluate and speak out about the dangers the war on terrorism will present to native and minority populations around the world if the governments managing them and their lands are given a new international legitimacy to repress them as 'terrorists'. The United Nations' support for new anti-terrorist policies is helping to establish new forms of cooperation among member nations, yet these arrangements proceed with explicit agreement that terrorism shall remain strategically undefined. International human rights groups and even the German Foreign Ministry have raised concerns that these policies will usher in renewed state terrorism against minority populations. But for the most part these objections have been suppressed in the interest of the Western world's new unity of purpose.

There are signs that US Secretary of State Powell-the-coalition-builder is purchasing the cooperation and approval of world leaders by adopting policies whereby the United States will not protest or intervene when these states suppress or attack their own ethnic minority populations.

As the United States signals President Putin that it can learn to see Russia's bloody war in Chechnya as part of the global war on terrorism, this signal is welcomed by other world leaders hoping for a free hand to deal with domestic indigenous troubles.

Anthropologists know that most of the world's nation states are in internal conflict with one or more domestic groups contesting power relations; and these conflicts are frequently marked by violence and counter-violence. The idiom of power dictates that the violence of the state is legitimized as peace-keeping, while that of the dispossessed becomes terrorism. It is this hypocrisy that prevents the formation of a coherent behavioural definition of terrorism – and without such a definition the war on terrorism must be viewed with informed scepticism.

Anthropologists also know that colonial powers and nation states have long designated a wide range of cultural practices as terrorist threats. Historically, activities categorized as 'terrorism' have not been limited to acts of violence. The historical range of non-violent practices defined as terrorism includes certain forms of speech, teaching native languages and a wide range of religious or cultural ceremonies. North American examples of this include outlawed cultural and religious practices associated with resistance or non-assimilation such as the Ghost Dance, potlatch, peyote rituals and lodge ceremonies. As terrorism remains undefined we are left to wonder if world leaders will be freely allowed to oppress their own minority populations for engaging in similar nonviolent acts of rebellion.

There is a present danger of the wholesale categorization of people who resist domination as 'terrorists' – thereby sidestepping all the issues that an in-depth cultural and historical analysis would raise. Whether it is the Basques in Spain, the Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, Zapatistas in Mexico, Chechens in Russia, post-colonial wars of Africa smouldering along ethnic lines, or the struggles of other excluded groups, there are contentious battles for power that will rapidly become even more lopsided if the currently ill-defined anti-terrorism campaign continues.

In the last few months the American Congress has given the CIA and NSA new authority to conduct global surveillance operations with minimal levels of supervision. Of particular concern to the international anthropological community is the passage of the 'Patriot Act' and revisions to the Foreign Surveillance Intelligence Act that potentially impact all of us as well as those we study in the field. Relying on technologies already at work with the NSA's ECHELON program, all global telephonic and electronic communications are now increasingly subject to monitoring and scrutiny. These conditions mandate that anthropologists take extra precautions to protect their field data, and that communications from the field be made with high-quality encryption software such as PGP. As a discipline we can no longer afford the illusion that our field communications and research are not subject to inspection – and, if pertinent, use – by international military and intelligence agencies. The NSA and CIA have been taken off their leash and the world is now their unrestricted territory.

Many anthropologists bristled at the war rhetoric of Prime Minister Blair and President Bush as they cavalierly characterized the current military campaign as a fight between the civilized West and uncivilized Afghanistan. These representations are designed to limit public understanding, and to pre-empt the obvious comparisons between the violent acts against civilian populations committed by the terrorists and those perpetrated by the military. The complexities of Pashtun-, Hazara-, Aimaks-, Turkmen-, Baloch-, Uzbek-, and Tajik-contested Afghanistan are thus easily swept from view as the intri-

cacies of Afghanistan are reduced to the inevitable chaos of uncivilized people. There is no need to examine the CIA's role in creating and maintaining instability in Afghanistan. Here in the US, narratives that accompany televised images of Fourth World poverty thus reinforce an implicit tenet which defines market consumerism as the peak of a hierarchical chain of evolutionary development.

Anthropologists have much to offer to the public and policy makers during this crisis. If the war continues, and grows, we should be concerned about the increasing probability of anthropologists serving less-public bodies within the world of military and intelligence community.

Past wars, past anthropologies

Gregory Bateson's work and experience with the OSS was not an historical anomaly – and given a war on terrorism's inevitable focus on minority populations it is clear that the methods and skills used by Bateson and other wartime anthropologists will once again be in demand. Past wars have found anthropologists using their professional skills as analysts, spies, linguists, peace activists, interrogators, geographers, detention camp managers, cryptographers, military guides, propagandists, advocates for the humane treatment of prisoners, culture brokers and in dozens of other military capacities. If this turns out to be the new forty-year war promised by Bush, we will no doubt see many of these roles reprised by new generations of anthropologists.

Regardless of the immediate course of events – be it peace or war – we need to evaluate the impact and meaning of anthropological contributions to past wars, and to consider carefully the ethical and long-term impacts of these actions, if for no other reason than that some future war will find our profession drawn into conflicts in ways similar to our ill-considered past. Our history raises issues that must be discussed openly by anthropologists, but our past need not be our future. The various positions regarding the application of anthropology to warfare held by different factions of our profession need to be made known to the peoples we study so that they can take whatever actions are needed to protect their own best interests.

The ethical issues embroiled in the commingling of anthropology and warfare are both simple and complex. Simple, in that anthropologists' primary ethical duty must be to protect and serve those studied; and complex because when the drums of nationalism call, anthropologists at times find themselves conflicted (or compromised) between their duties to country, and to the culture which hosted them and their research. In past wars some anthropologists have not seen conflicts in these positions and have served their country without hesitation, while others resolved these conflicts by rationalizing war service as being in the best interests of the culture they found themselves fighting; some anthropologists have seen their duty as being to assist oppressed minorities and native peoples in times of war; still others have viewed the use of anthropology for warfare as ethically problematic. Some anthropologists held this last position during both World Wars. Boas' views concerning the propriety of mixing anthropology and espionage in the First World War are well known, and during World War Two Laura Thompson worried that wartime anthropologists were simply becoming 'technicians for hire to the highest bidder'.² Prior to joining the OSS Gregory Bateson wondered to what use anthropology would be put in the war, asking, 'now that we have techniques, are we in cold blood, going to treat people as things?'³

The ethical guidelines of various national and international anthropological associations offer little consistent guidance on these matters. Some associations, such as the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and

I am grateful to seven anonymous AT referees for their comments.

1. Price, David 1998. Gregory Bateson and the OSS. *Human Organization* 57(4):379-384. As will be discussed in a forthcoming article in AT, hundreds of anthropologists – including Ruth Benedict, Carleton Coon, Felix Keesing, Clyde Kluckhohn, Margaret Mead, George P. Murdock and S.F. Nadel – contributed to the Second World War effort.
2. Thompson, Laura 1944. Some perspectives on applied anthropology. *Applied Anthropology* 3:12-16.
3. Aberle, David 1967. *Fellows Newsletter of the American Anthropological Association*: 7.
4. Sluka, Jeffrey 2000. *Death squad: The anthropology of state terror*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 11.

Commonwealth (ASA), do explicitly prohibit the use of anthropological research as a cover for espionage, while others (such as the American Anthropological Association) have intentionally removed such prohibitions from their ethical codes. But even the ASA's guidelines are less explicit concerning the propriety of anthropologists using information gathered in fieldwork to assist military or intelligence agencies at some later date. This issue has importance in 'peace' time too, given the increased reliance on programmes such as the National Security Education Program in the United States (with its mandated payback clause) to fund graduate study. It is an issue of ongoing concern to all of anthropology.

It is unlikely that anthropologists in any one nation, much less throughout the world, will be of one mind regarding the ethics of anthropological applications in warfare. This is to be expected. What is important is that actions taken by anthropologists in the present situation be directed towards protecting the interests and safety of those groups likely to be victimized by this war on terrorism.

Anthropological advocacy

Anthropologists as citizens and members of professional associations must monitor and speak out against the direct and indirect threats that the current war poses to various peoples around the world. In the past, calls for advocacy or action in opposition to wars and military actions on the part of various professional anthropological associations have provoked responses from some members that such organizations are not political bodies and it is therefore improper for them to get involved in political matters. But as David Aberle observed over three decades ago, in times of war there is no such thing as an apolitical course of action for anthropological professional associations, only inaction, which is in fact political action supporting prevailing military policies.³

Anthropological associations and research institutions have *always* been involved in political causes – it is just

that these causes have seldom been considered as such unless they go against the grain of overriding political economic structures. Advocating around issues of gender, ethnic or racial equality or for basic human rights is common practice for professional anthropological organizations, and advocating for the groups who stand to be victimized by the new war on 'terrorism' should be no different – though the consequences for such a stance will make some hesitate to engage in such advocacy.

We need to choose carefully the ways that we will use anthropology in this current war, for it seems likely that it will be used one way or another. We can help to reveal the complexity behind an oversimplified picture and to de-exoticize those who are being marginalized as uncivilized or reactionary. Thirty-five years ago anthropologists John Donahue, Marshall Sahlins and Eric Wolf helped invent the teach-in, creating a still-vibrant model of public education that bypasses the filters and constraints of traditional media outlets – and today this basic model has been adapted for an internet-ready world. Anthropologists can enrich public discussions of terrorism by 'studying-up', and examining state terrorism, though as Jeffrey Sluka observes, thus far 'among the well over 10,000 anthropologists worldwide, only a few dozen have chosen to study state terror.'⁴

As anthropologists we have a duty to serve the populations we study by shifting political and media driven frames of analysis and advocating for the safety and independence of peoples around the world. This is not a conflict that anthropology can afford to sit out and watch from the sidelines, and we can learn from the regrets of Bateson and others who came to lament the application of anthropology to the cause of warfare against minority populations. ●

David Price
St. Martin's College
dprice@stmartin.edu