

Anthropological Intelligence supports Military Occupation: Engineering “Trust of the Indigenous Population”

How Some Anthropologists Have Learned to Stop Worrying and Start Loving the Army

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Anthropologist Audrey Roberts works for Human Terrain System (HTS), a Pentagon program. Referring to the information produced by HTS scholars, [she says](#), “If it’s going to inform how targeting is done – whether that targeting is bad guys, development or governance – how our information is used is how it’s going to be used. All I’m concerned about is pushing our information to as many soldiers as possible. The reality is there are people out there who are looking for bad guys to kill. I’d rather they did not operate in a vacuum.”

In a [recent article](#) on this site I have described HTS as comprising American scholars, primarily in the field of anthropology, along with sociologists and social psychologists, embedding themselves with the US military in the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Their brief is to enable the military to make better decisions by helping it to understand the social mores and customs of the cultures it is occupying.

As a program that is likely to have a long tenure, it deserves further examining. The US military would like the US public to believe it is a benevolent program, but it does not require a crystal ball to recognize the insidious reality. HTS teams actively engage in targeting the “enemy” in Iraq and Afghanistan. Team members often wear military uniforms and body armor, and even carry weapons. Like Ms. Roberts, they are not overly concerned about the fact that the “intelligence” they produce is instrumental in capturing and killing people. The social scientists who choose to employ themselves within HTS clearly are not having a moral struggle with the fact that they are allowing their knowledge to be used as a weapon of war.

The military’s [benign description](#) specifies that HTS will “improve the military’s ability to understand the highly complex local social-cultural environment in the areas where they are deployed.” Proponents of the program go as far as to claim that its goal is to help the military save lives.

Those who know better, like US Army Lt. Col. Gian Gentile, will [tell you](#), “Don’t fool yourself, these Human Terrain Teams, whether they want to acknowledge it or not, in a generalized and subtle way, do at some point contribute to the collective knowledge of a commander, which allows him to target and kill the enemy in the Civil War in Iraq.”

The two highest ethical principles of anthropology are protection of the interests of studied

populations, and their safety. All anthropological studies consequently are premised on the consent of the subject society. Clearly, the HTS anthropologists have thrown these ethical guidelines out the window. They are to anthropology what state stenographers like Judith Miller and John Burns are to journalism.

I consulted David Price, author of “Anthropological Intelligence: The Deployment and Neglect of American Anthropology in the Second World War” and a contributor to the Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual, a forthcoming work of the Network of Concerned Anthropologists, of which he is a member.

According to Price, “HTS presents real ethical problems for anthropologists, because the demands of the military in situations of occupation put anthropologists in positions undermining their fundamental ethical loyalties to those they study. Moreover, it presents political problems that link anthropology to a disciplinary past where anthropologists were complicit in assisting in colonial conquests. Those selling HTS to the military have misrepresented what culture is and have downplayed the difficulties of using culture to bring about change, much less conquest. There is a certain dishonesty in pretending that anthropologists possess some sort of magic beans of culture, and that if only occupiers had better cultural knowledge, or made the right pay-offs, then occupied people would fall in line and stop resisting foreign invaders. Culture is being presented as if it were a variable in a linear equation, and if only HTS teams could collect the right data variables and present troops with the right information conquest could be entered in the equation. Life and culture doesn’t work that way; occupied people know they are occupied, and while cultural knowledge can ease an occupation, historically it has almost never led to conquest – but even if it could, anthropology would irreparably damage itself if it became nothing more than a tool of occupations and conquest.”

The Handbook for the HTS offers the Human Terrain “toolkit” for the US military to understand subjects living in militarily occupied areas. It states:

“HTTs will use the Map-HT Toolkit of developmental hardware and software to capture, consolidate, tag, and ingest human terrain data. HTTs use this human terrain information gathered to assist commanders in understanding the operational relevance of the information as it applies to the unit’s planning processes. The expectation is that the resulting courses of actions developed by the staff and selected by the commander will consistently be more culturally harmonized with the local population, which in Counter-Insurgency Operations should lead to greater success. *It is the trust of the indigenous population that is at the heart of the struggle between coalition forces and the insurgents.*” (Emphasis added.)

The mission of the Human Terrain social scientists gains legitimacy and credibility when expressed in terms of engineering the “trust of the indigenous population.”

It is obvious that for the neo-colonialist, the HTS is a form of “soft power.” In addition to dropping 2,000-pound bombs in civilian areas, occupation forces now see fit to use HTS to get into the minds of the people of the occupied country.

Price avers, “The problem with anthropology being used in counterinsurgency isn’t just that anthropologists are helping the military to wear different cultural skins; the problem is that it finds anthropologists using bio power and basic infrastructure as bargaining chips to force

occupied cultures to surrender.”

Although he says it is too soon to gauge [a] possible increase in HTS operations since Obama took office, Price is convinced that the president is falling for the claim that a smart counterinsurgency can lead not just to easier occupations, but to victory.

For the military to find regionally competent anthropologists to work for them is unlikely. Price is convinced that, “most (American) anthropologists understand the obvious ethical problems in working for HTS. The real risk lies in the likelihood that anthropologists will be seduced by arguments to support soft-power projects tied to occupation and counterinsurgency – especially when these projects are increasingly being presented as “helping” the occupied.

“Those favoring soft-power forms of counterinsurgency are going to need anthropologists and other social scientists,” Price said, “Narratives of aid and assistance, of building hospitals and schools will replace the strategic narratives of soft-power counterinsurgency manipulation of occupied people by occupiers. When you add to this the grim job prospects many anthropologists face in this economy, you can see how easy it is for the US administration to sell these soft-power programs.”

As the new administration adopts less-violent manipulations of the environments and peoples in Iraq and Afghanistan, Price is concerned that anthropologists will fail to see the distinction between military coercion of occupied peoples and publicized acts of “humanitarianism.”

As in most matters related to the occupation, the corporate media are squarely responsible for selling the HTS program to the American public. Price [has written](#), “... the media has become a key supportive enabler of HTS. In the last two years I have probably spent twenty to thirty hours speaking with journalists from NPR, Elle, USA Today, Newsweek, Time, AP, New York Times, Wired, Harpers, Washington Post, etc. patiently explaining what the critical issues for anthropologists are when a program like Human Terrain Systems embeds anthropologists with troops engaged in counterinsurgency operations in occupied battle settings in Iraq and Afghanistan. Sometimes portions of these critiques show up along the way in the final stories, but in most cases, the arguments and critiques against the efficacy, ethical, neocolonial politics as well as the practical impossibility of HTS working as advertised are ignored, or worse yet, they are presented as absurd caricatures.”

Corporate media coverage of the program conveniently does not indicate that HTS ignores basic anthropological principles of ethics, such as voluntary informed consent, issues of secrecy, and doing no harm, among others. Most anthropologists concur with Price that HTS is also part of a domestic propaganda project, “that tells the Americans that wars for the hearts and minds of the people of Iraq and Afghanistan can be won. History argues against any such outcome, but HTS becomes part of a lie to the American people that helps keep us fighting these already lost causes. It is so poorly designed that HTS has no hope of actually working as advertised, yet both the Bush and Obama administrations have sold us a false hope that such counterinsurgency programs can lead to an eventual victory.”

As Price [wrote recently](#), the media stance does not bode well for the future, or for President Obama. “The real bad news for American foreign policy is that given President Obama’s commitment to “soft power” and his open endorsements of counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan, we can expect more of this uncritical coverage on HTS as a crucial tool needed

for America's occupations in foreign lands. I am left to wonder how anthropologist Ann Dunham, Barack Obama's mother, would have reacted to her son's reliance on such clearly unethical anthropological means to achieve political ends so aligned with neocolonialist goals of occupation and subjugation?"

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