

Collaboration Occurred in the Past, and there is no professional bar to it today

Anthropologists as Spies

By David Price

The Nation, November 20, 2000

In December 20, 1919, under the heading “Scientists as Spies,” *The Nation* published a letter by Franz Boas, the father of academic anthropology in America. Boas charged that four American anthropologists, whom he did not name, had abused their professional research positions by conducting espionage in Central America during the First World War. Boas strongly condemned their actions, writing that they had “prostituted science by using it as a cover for their activities as spies.” Anthropologists spying for their country severely betrayed their science and damaged the credibility of all anthropological research, Boas wrote; a scientist who uses his research as a cover for political spying forfeits the right to be classified as a scientist.

The most significant reaction to this letter occurred ten days later at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), when the association’s governing council voted to censure Boas, effectively removing him from the council and pressuring him to resign from the national research council. Three out of four of the accused spies (their names, we now know, were Samuel Lothrop, Sylvanus Morley and Herbert Spinden) voted for censure; the fourth (John Mason) did not. Later Mason wrote Boas an apologetic letter explaining that he’d spied out of a sense of patriotic duty.

A variety of extraneous factors contributed to Boas’s censure (chief among these being institutional rivalries, personal differences and possibly anti-Semitism). The AAA’s governing council was concerned less about the accuracy of his charges than about the possibility that publicizing them might endanger the ability of others to undertake fieldwork. It accused him of “abuse” of his professional position for political ends.

In 1919 American anthropology avoided facing the ethical questions Boas raised about anthropologists’ using their work as a cover for spying. And it has refused to face them ever since. The AAA’s current code of ethics contains no specific prohibitions concerning espionage or secretive research. Some of the same anthropologists who spied during World War I did so in the next war. During the early cold war Ruth Benedict and lesser-known colleagues worked for the RAND corporation and the Office of Naval Research. In the Vietnam War, anthropologists worked on projects with strategic military applications.

Until recently there was little investigation of either the veracity of Boas’s accusation in 1919 or the ethical strength of his complaint. But FBI documents released to me under the Freedom of Information Act shed new light on both of these issues.

The FBI produced 280 pages of documents pertaining to one of the individuals Boas accused—the Harvard archeologist Samuel Lothrop. Lothrop’s FBI file establishes that during World War I he indeed spied for Naval Intelligence, performing “highly commendable” work in the Caribbean until “his identity as an Agent of Naval Intelligence became known.” What is more, World War II saw him back in harness, serving in the Special Intelligence Service (SIS), which J. Edgar Hoover created within the FBI to undertake and coordinate all intelligence activity in Central and South America. During the war the SIS stationed approximately 350 agents throughout South America, where they collected intelligence, subverted Axis networks and at times assisted in the interruption of the flow of raw materials from Axis sources. Lothrop was stationed in Lima, Peru, where he monitored imports, exports and political developments. To maintain his cover he pretended to undertake archeological investigations.

From his arrival in Lima in mid-December 1940, Lothrop was dogged by constant worries that his communications with Washington were being intercepted by British, Peruvian, Japanese or German intelligence operatives. By August 1941 he became concerned that his lack of significant archeological progress might lead to the discovery of his true work in Peru. Lothrop reported his fears of being detected to FBI headquarters: “As regards the archaeological cover for my work in Peru, it was based on the understanding that I was to be in the country six months or less. It is wearing thin and some day somebody is going to start asking why an archaeologist spends most of his time in towns asking questions. This won’t happen as soon as it might because the Rockefeller grant for research in Peru makes me a contact man between the field workers and the government.”

Lothrop was referring to the Rockefeller Foundation, which financed twenty archeologists who were excavating in Peru, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela and Central America. He also used his ties to a variety of academic and research institutions—including Harvard, the Peabody Museum, the Institute of Andean Research and the Carnegie Institute—as cover in Peru. Archeologist Gordon Willey, who worked on an Institute of Andean Research Project in Peru and had some contact with Lothrop at this time, recalled that “it was sort of widely known on the loose grapevine that Sam was carrying on some kind of espionage work, much of which seemed to be keeping his eye on German patrons of the Hotel Bolivar Bar.”

In fact, Lothrop was considered a valuable agent who collected important information on Peruvian politics and leading public figures of a nature usually difficult to secure. An FBI evaluation reported that headquarters “occasionally receive[s] information of sufficient importance from Mr. Lothrop to transmit to the President.” Lothrop’s principal source was an assistant to the Peruvian minister of government and police. In the spring of 1944 this informant resigned his governmental position and began “working exclusively under the direction of Dr. Lothrop.” In May 1944 the US Embassy reported that Lothrop’s principal informant was fully aware of Lothrop’s connection to the SIS and FBI. Lothrop’s cover was compromised by four Peruvian investigators in the employ of his top informant. His informant had been heard bragging to the Peruvian police that he made more by working for the US Embassy than the police made working for the Peruvian government.

The FBI decided to test the reliability of Lothrop’s key informant by assigning him to collect information on nonexistent events and individuals. The informant was given background information about a nonexistent upcoming anti-Jewish rally that he was to attend, including a list of specific individuals who would be present. Though the rally did not occur, the informant provided a full report on it. He also filed detailed reports on a nonexistent commemorative celebration of the bombing of Pearl Harbor held in a distant town, and on a fictitious German spy who supposedly had jumped ship in Peru.

Lothrop was instructed not to tell the informant that his duplicity had been detected; instead, he was to say he was out of funds to pay for informants. Lothrop refused to believe his informant was lying and sent a letter of resignation to J. Edgar Hoover. His resignation was accepted and he returned to the United States to resume his academic duties at Harvard’s Peabody Museum and the Carnegie Institute.

What is now known about Lothrop’s long career of espionage suggests that the censure of Boas by the AAA in 1919 sent a clear message to him and others that espionage under cover of science in the service of the state is acceptable. In each of the wars and military actions that followed the First World War anthropologists confronted, or more often repressed, the very issues raised by Boas in his 1919 letter to *The Nation*.

While almost every prominent living US anthropologist (including Ruth Benedict,

Gregory Bateson, Clyde Kluckhohn and Margaret Mead) contributed to the World War II war effort, they seldom did so under the false pretext of fieldwork, as Lothrop did. Without endorsing the wide variety of activities to which anthropological skills were applied in the service of the military, a fundamental ethical distinction can be made between those who (as Boas put it) “prostituted science by using it as a cover for their activities as spies” and those who did not. World War II did, however, stimulate frank, though muted, discussions of the propriety of anthropologists’ using their knowledge of those they studied in times of war, creating conditions in which, as anthropologist Laura Thompson put it, they became “technicians for hire to the highest bidder.” Although the racist tenets of Nazism were an affront to the anthropological view of the inherent equality of humankind, Boas (who died in 1942) would probably have condemned anthropologists who used science as a cover for espionage during World War II. Approximately half of America’s anthropologists contributed to the war effort, with dozens of prominent members of the profession working for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Army and Navy intelligence and the Office of War Information.

In the following decades there were numerous private and public interactions between anthropologists and the intelligence community. Some anthropologists applied their skills at the CIA after its inception in 1947 and may still be doing so today. For some of them this was a logical transition from their wartime espionage work with the OSS and other organizations; others regarded the CIA as an agency concerned with gathering information to assist policy-makers rather than a secret branch of government that subverted foreign governments and waged clandestine war on the Soviet Union and its allies. Still other anthropologists unwittingly received research funding from CIA fronts like the Human Ecology Fund.

The American Anthropological Association also secretly collaborated with the CIA. In the early 1950s the AAA’s executive board negotiated a secret agreement with the CIA under which agency personnel and computers were used to produce a cross-listed directory of AAA members, showing their geographical and linguistic areas of expertise along with summaries of research interests. Under this agreement the CIA kept copies of the database for its own purposes with no questions asked. And none were, if for no other reason than that the executive board had agreed to keep the arrangement a secret. What use the CIA made of this database is not known, but the relationship with the AAA was part of an established agency policy of making use of America’s academic brain trust. Anthropologists’ knowledge of the languages and cultures of the people inhabiting the regions of the Third World where the agency was waging its declared and undeclared wars would have been invaluable to the CIA. The extent to which this occurred is the focus of ongoing archival and FOIA research. When the CIA overthrew Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, an anthropologist reported, under a pseudonym, to the State Department’s intelligence and research division on the political affiliations of the prisoners taken by the military in the coup.

During the Korean War linguists and ethnographers assisted America’s involvement with little vocal conflict of conscience. Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung’s revelations in 1965 of Project Camelot, in which anthropologists were reported to be working on unclassified counterinsurgency programs in Latin America, ignited controversy in the AAA. During America’s wars in Southeast Asia the AAA was thrown into a state of upheaval after documents purloined from the private office of UCLA anthropologist Michael Moerman revealed that several anthropologists had secretly used their ethnographic knowledge to assist the war effort.

As a result of inquiries made into these revelations, the 1971 annual meeting of the AAA became the scene of a tumultuous showdown after a fact-finding committee chaired by Margaret Mead maneuvered to create a report finding no wrongdoing on the part of the accused anthropologists. An acrimonious debate resulted in the rejection of the Mead

report by the voting members of the association. As historian Eric Wakin noted in his book *Anthropology Goes to War*, this “represented an organized body of younger anthropologists rejecting the values of its elders.” But the unresolved ethical issue of anthropologists spying during the First and Second World Wars provided a backdrop to the 1971 showdown. Almost two decades later, during the Gulf War, proposals by conservatives in the AAA that its members assist allied efforts against Iraq provoked only minor opposition.

Today most anthropologists are still loath to acknowledge, much less study, known connections between anthropology and the intelligence community. As with any controversial topic, it is not thought to be a good “career builder.” But more significant, there is a general perception that to rake over anthropology’s past links, witting and unwitting, with the intelligence community could reduce opportunities for US anthropologists to conduct fieldwork in foreign nations.

In the course of research in this area I have been told by other anthropologists in no uncertain terms that to raise such questions could endanger the lives of fieldworkers around the globe. This is not a point to be taken lightly, as many anthropologists work in remote settings controlled by hostile governmental or guerrilla forces. Suspicions that one is a US intelligence agent, whether valid or not, could have fatal consequences. As Boas prophetically wrote in his original complaint against Lothrop and his cohorts, “In consequence of their acts every nation will look with distrust upon the visiting foreign investigator who wants to do honest work, suspecting sinister designs. Such action has raised a new barrier against the development of international friendly cooperation.” But until US anthropology examines its past and sets rules forbidding both secret research and collaboration with intelligence agencies, these dangers will continue.

Over the past several decades the explicit condemnations of secretive research have been removed from the AAA’s code of ethics—the principles of professional responsibility (PPR). In 1971 the PPR specifically declared that “no secret research, no secret reports or debriefings of any kind should be agreed to or given” by members of the AAA. By 1990 the attenuation of anthropological ethics had reached a point where anthropologists were merely “under no professional obligation to provide reports or debriefing of any kind to government officials or employees, unless they have individually and explicitly agreed to do so in the terms of employment.” These changes were largely accomplished in the 1984 revision of the PPR that Gerald Berreman characterized as reflecting the new “Reaganethics” of the association: In the prevailing climate of deregulation the responsibility for ethical review was shifted from the association to individual judgments. As anthropologist Laura Nader noted, these Reagan-era changes were primarily “moves to protect academic careers...downplaying anthropologists’ paramount responsibility to those they study.” The current PPR may be interpreted to mean that anthropologists don’t have to be spies unless they want to or have agreed to do so in a contract. A 1995 Commission to Review the AAA Statements on Ethics declared that the committee on ethics had neither the authority nor the resources to investigate or arbitrate complaints of ethical violations and would “no longer adjudicate claims of unethical behavior and focus its efforts and resources on an ethics education program.”

Members of the current ethics committee believe that even though the AAA explicitly removed language forbidding secretive research or spying, there are clauses in the current code that imply (rather than state) that such conduct should not be allowed—though without sanctions, this stricture is essentially meaningless. Archeologist Joe Watkins, chairman of the ethics committee, believes that if an anthropologist were caught spying today, “the AAA would not do anything to investigate the activity or to reprimand the individual, even if the individual had not been candid [about the true purpose of the research]. I’m not sure that there is anything the association would do as an association, but perhaps public awareness would work to keep such practitioners in line, like the

Pueblo clowns' work to control the societal miscreants." Watkins is referring to Pueblo cultures' use of clowns to ridicule miscreants. Although it is debatable whether anthropologist intelligence operatives would fear sanctions imposed by the AAA, it is incongruous to argue that they would fear public ridicule more. Enforcing a ban on covert research would be difficult, but to give up on even the possibility of investigating such wrongdoing sends the wrong message to the world and to the intelligence agencies bent on recruiting anthropologists.

Many factors have contributed to the AAA's retreat from statements condemning espionage and covert research. Key among these are the century-old difficulties inherent in keeping an intrinsically diverse group of scholars aligned under the framework of a single association. A combination of atavistic and market forces has driven apart members of a field once mythically united around the holistic integration of the findings of archeology and physical, cultural and linguistic anthropology. As some "applied anthropologists" move from classroom employment to working in governmental and industrial settings, statements condemning spying have made increasing numbers of practitioners uncomfortable—and this discomfort suggests much about the nature of some applied anthropological work. The activities encompassed under the heading of applied anthropology are extremely diverse, ranging from heartfelt and underpaid activist-based research for NGOs around the world to production of secret ethnographies and time-allocation studies of industrial and blue-collar workplaces for the private consumption of management.

As increasing numbers of anthropologists find employment in corporations, anthropological research becomes not a quest for scientific truth, as in the days of Boas, but a quest for secret or proprietary data for governmental or corporate sponsors. The AAA's current stance of inaction sends the dangerous message to the underdeveloped world that the world's largest anthropological organization will take no action against anthropologists whose fieldwork is a front for espionage. As the training of anthropology graduate students becomes increasingly dependent on programs like the 1991 National Security Education Program—with its required governmental-service payback stipulations—the issue takes on increased (though seldom discussed) importance.

It is unknown whether any members of the AAA are currently engaged in espionage, but unless the scientific community takes steps to denounce such activities using the clearest possible language and providing sanctions against those who do so, we can anticipate that such actions will continue with impunity during some future crisis or war.

Many in the American Anthropological Association are frustrated with its decision neither to explicitly prohibit nor to penalize secretive government research. It is time for US anthropologists to examine the political consequences of their history and take a hard, thoughtful look at Boas's complaint and the implications implicit in the association's refusal to condemn secret research and to re-enact sanctions against anthropologists engaging in espionage.

David Price (dprice@stmartin.edu) is assistant professor of anthropology at St. Martin's College in Lacey, Washington. He is completing a book on the impact of McCarthyism on American anthropology