

# The Ethics of Spying

Responses to F. Moos, R. Fardon and H. Gusterson (AT21[3])

The Cold War and its aftermath resulted in a recrudescence of Western ethnocentrism and suprematism that has not yet run its course. Particularly since 9/11, politicians in the West have, for a variety of motives, expressed fear that religious fundamentalism and extreme nationalist upheavals will undermine their societies. This generates further stereotypes which fuel the anti-Americanism, anti-Europeanism and xenophobic Islamic fundamentalism we experience today in various guises.

Franz Boas was, of course, right when he wrote that the activity of spying prostitutes science. In wartime Europe, too, anthropologists were involved. The Nazis used anthropologists to work towards the goals of the Final Solution. The Allies also made use of applied anthropology during World War II: Evans-Pritchard assisted the colonial government of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and between 1940 and 1945 Edmund Leach served in the Burmese Army and engaged in raising a force of Kachin irregulars. Europe also has examples of scholars employed as secret agents who, through extortion and deception, managed to create networks through which the research and ideological activities of their colleagues and of students were reported.

Anthropologists have served as expert consultants all over the world, often in activities with security implications. Immediately after WWII East European scholars worked on the Area Handbooks printed by the US government that were designed to be 'useful to military and other personnel'. Cold War studies units were created (including at Harvard and MIT), funded by the security agencies, and much of this kind of anthropological research was carried out in the name of science. Graduating doctoral students found jobs outside higher education, assisting the Agency for International Development and the Peace Corps.

For social scientists to serve states is thus nothing new. All over the world, there are some who are funded and hired by governments and state (now often transnational) agencies. In many places, academics are required, as civil servants, to conform to the ideals and needs of the states financing their activities. Many are promoted and rewarded not by their academic seniors but by ministers and heads of state. Does this mean that they must blindly follow the conservative ideology or political aspirations of the government of the day? Certainly not.

The EU's Code of Practice for SocioEconomic Research states that scholars must refrain from activities that damage the welfare of the people studied. It emphasizes that research must be transparent; research techniques, methods and analyses of results must be made available to the international scientific community. The Charter of the European Association of Social Anthropologists states that the Association's purpose is to promote best practice among anthropologists and that membership may be terminated if considered harmful to the Association. Information gathered through spying – defined broadly as information gathering without the knowledge of the observed, as implied in the examples above – would clearly be in conflict with such principles. Anybody thinking of working in clandestine operations under the cover of science should think twice.

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The Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program in the US is currently conducting a two-year pilot project which involves secretly sponsoring up to 150 trainees each year, with the aim of facilitating the recruitment of analysts with linguistic or scientific skills essential to the intelligence community. Devised by an anthropologist, the programme includes training in anthropology, and has rightfully become a topic for serious debate in

the pages of *Anthropology Today*. The use of anthropology in counter-insurgency and, more generally, the ethics of anthropology, were extensively discussed in the 1960s and 1970s, culminating in the formulation of ethical codes by professional anthropology associations worldwide. It is important that we remain aware of these discussions and these codes.

Historical examples of covert research, and the fieldwork they are based on, are instructive. One case in Dutch colonial history is that of the famous scholar Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje. Following detailed fieldwork resulting in a magnificent monograph on the people of Aceh, this student of Arab culture and anthropologist *avant la lettre* was invited to advise the governor-general of the Netherlands Indies about the war in northern Sumatra. In his view the only way to win this late 19th-century conflict was to withdraw from negotiations with the local headmen and wage active guerilla war against the religious leaders, who had formed hostile bands supported by some sectors of the population. Aceh could only be pacified once these bands were completely eradicated and had lost the support of the people. Snouck further advised that the confidence of the population should be regained by fostering the development of agriculture, trade and handicrafts. His advice was eventually followed by van Heutz, the commander of Aceh, and some years later the area had been ‘pacified’ – the term for subjugation in those days.

Wertheim (1972) has pointed out Snouck’s ambiguous position. He had very friendly relations with his informants, condemned the arrogant behaviour of the Dutch authorities and was keen to promote the welfare of the people. He also thought that repression was in the interest of the Acehnese, who were described as unreliable and treacherous. In the course of action he recommended, subjugation and development were intertwined, as was congruent with the colonial values of his time. During fieldwork the aims of his research were not revealed to the informants.

Nowadays such norms and values are no longer appropriate, as it is generally acknowledged that peoples have the right to self-determination. According to Wertheim, the expression of solidarity with the wretched of the earth is also an important element in our ethics. Furthermore, we now believe that informants have the right to know the aims and results of our research.

Since values change over time it is of course difficult to formulate absolute criteria for good and bad behaviour. From this and many other early counter-insurgency accounts, such as the anti-Mau Mau advice given by Carothers and Leakey in the 1950s,<sup>1</sup> and the US Defense Department’s infamous aborted Camelot project on rebellions and revolutions in a number of Latin American countries of the 1960s,<sup>2</sup> we learn that the results of anthropological research may be used or abused to a variety of ends.

The problem is that there are no overall ethical rules which encompass the values considered acceptable to all relevant parties the world over. Anthropological research and teaching have relevance for actors in a wide range of networks – the scientific community, informants, individual scientists, students, governments, university officials, managers and employers – all with their own particular values and often diverging interests. In many countries professional anthropology associations have developed ethical codes to incorporate lessons learnt from the Vietnam War. Sociologists have been supporting armies for a long time, and we owe the famous reference group theory about the varying attitudes of different groups of soldiers during war to this type of research.

Our ethical codes emphasize values such as the protection of the privacy and interests of informants, the right of informants to know their role in the investigation and to be acquainted with its aims, the obligation to abide by the scientific community’s standards governing adequacy of research, honesty, general availability of the results and so on. These codes are often based on situational ethics and, when the values they are based on come into

conflict, scholars are often left to make the best of a bad situation. For example, the code of the Dutch Anthropological and Sociological Association states:

This code starts from the premise that in social research a range of values and interests is at stake, none of which have absolute priority, and which furthermore may conflict with one another. There is both a desire for more openness and a need for greater privacy, two principles that may easily come into conflict. Depending on the situation, the investigator must make a *choice*, after weighing all factors involved. Generally, this means making the best of a bad situation (NSAV 1975: 2).

No discussion of past counter-insurgency research and present-day anthropological ethical codes can culminate in a blanket condemnation of the training of spies in anthropology departments. Much will depend on diverging political views and local circumstances. If only for this reason, Moos' call for anthropologists around the world to get involved in spying is problematic. Furthermore, any funding programme should be accepted only on the condition that it observes the codes developed by the anthropological scientific community for adequate research and teaching and for any situations where anthropology is applied. In addition, it needs to be demonstrated to the scientific community that the security situation is so pressing as to justify training spies by this method, and that normal recruitment of spies following regular academic study is impossible. Any covert planting of spies would need to be subject to the scientific community's acceptance, on the basis of convincing arguments.

I have both practical and procedural objections to the PRISP proposal. Anthropologists could become excellent spies after completing their studies, as do students of foreign languages and scholars in any other discipline. However, if spies are clandestinely planted for anthropological training and research, with the aim of covert collection of information about people and places, they will most certainly violate our professional ethical codes and bring the anthropological scientific community into disrepute. This will result in serious mistrust of anthropological fieldwork, may personally endanger anthropologists working in the field and will generally hamper development of the profession.

The correct procedure would be first to prove that the political situation is so urgent that covert operation is justified, then that the education of spies cannot be done in a better and less compromising way, then to seek support from the ethics committees of the relevant national and international professional anthropology associations, and subsequently for these activities to be monitored by a mutually trusted third party. This procedure is necessary to guarantee the proper evaluation and organization by the scholarly community of the values and activities involved.

By using anthropological training and field research as a cover for spying activity or for training spies, security authorities discredit both our discipline and their own profession. An exposed spy is a dead spy, and like Project Camelot, an exposed spy-funding programme is doomed from the start. The values of openness and honesty ultimately trump those of deception.

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1. See Buijtenhuis, 1972  
2. See Horowitz 1967, Galtung 1967.  
3. This contribution contains a personal and provisional view. As Secretary-General of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, I propose that the relevant bodies in this organization discuss this ethical question, so that the Union can formulate a formal statement, as it previously did on the concept of race (see IUEAS website at [www.leidenuniv.nl/fsw/iuaes](http://www.leidenuniv.nl/fsw/iuaes)).

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*Anthropology Today's* republication of Boas' 1919 letter to *The Nation* reminds us of the

history of anthropology's long and ambivalent relationship with espionage. Yet the accompanying editorial note does not do full justice to the complex motivations animating Boas' decision to 'go public' in the US media in his opposition to anthropological espionage. Boas' letter reflects his experience as a German intellectual immigrant to America. He was familiar with the excesses of a police-controlled Prussian state, which eventually fed into the Nazis' rise to power. His letter serves as a piquant reminder of the ever-present dangers of empire, surveillance and the rise of coercive police states, inimical to the academic freedom essential to any democratic political configuration.

Boas' experiential universe was fragmented into diverse moral worlds – German/Prussian, urban North American, Native American – resulting in his revising some of his moral certainties and abandoning others. Did he lose his moral compass? I think that he did not. Stepping outside the boundaries of a single moral world leads to the activity of *zerreißen* – tearing or fragmenting – and a post-modern world where one soon realizes that 'things' could *always* be otherwise. *Zerrissenheit* is perhaps best understood not as an aspect of a fragmented 'and fatally flawed world' but, as Carrithers has suggested, as 'a natural condition of human life' rather than simply a pathological concomitant of global capitalism (2005: 435). Moral landscapes are never black and white, as studies of political violence, international war, global profiteering and social suffering indicate (Robbens 1995, Dean 2002, Nordstrom 2004, Farmer 2005). It would be naïve to ground our discipline in a Manichaeic view that denies the grey zones of social life.

On this point, I respond to Richard Fardon and Hugh Gusterson's comments in the same AT issue. Fardon takes Felix Moos to task for trying to persuade readers of AT 'to join an inclusive "we" prepared to rally to a United States he declares "at war"' No matter what one's political stance on the second (US-led) war in the Persian Gulf, it seems undeniable to me – a citizen of both the UK and the US – that 'we' are indeed at war in Iraq. More than 1700 US soldiers and nearly 100 UK soldiers have died, roughly equal to the same number of casualties for other European, Asian and Latin American combatants involved in this war. Iraqi civilian and military losses are reckoned in the hundreds of thousands: countless innocent and peripherally involved victims have been killed or injured in the 'shock and awe' and ongoing 'insurgency' phases of the war, not to mention in the banal and evil shadows of this horrific military conflict that shows no signs of end in sight.

Fardon is certainly right to say that US-sponsored intelligence programmes such as PRISP have 'implications for those of us not working in the US'. However, the PRISP programme does not, as he says, involve 'the covert placing of CIA trainees in anthropology undergraduate programmes'. PRISP provides tuition assistance to US students willing to pursue advanced education in order to serve as intelligence analysts. The PRISP programme funds individuals who will be employed for a set period by any of the 15 US intelligence community agencies (such as the US Departments of State, Treasury, Energy, etc.), not just the CIA. When I contacted Senator Pat Roberts' office in Washington DC, they were adamant in pointing out that PRISP is not intended 'to place spies in foreign countries'. The Senator's Communications Director, Sarah Little, contends that the aim of PRISP 'is to educate analysts', not to educate intelligence community operatives. Moreover, PRISP students are not required to keep their participation secret.

The PRISP scheme itself may be the brainchild of Felix Moos, but he is not calling for anthropologists to work covertly for the CIA; rather he is encouraging an open, engaged dialogue in the form advocated three decades ago by Laura Nader (1972), who urged the profession to 'study up'. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Moos is promoting the education of culturally and linguistically educated individuals willing and able to deal effectively with the realities of fourth-generation warfare. How we in the discipline respond to political violence and asymmetric conflict will determine the future directions of anthropology (Haviland et al. 2006).

Given the long relationship that both the British and American academies have maintained with the intelligence communities and armed forces, it seems judicious that we continue open dialogue and critical self-reflection. How then does Moos' call for more dialogue violate the norms of the academy or anthropology, as suggested by Gusterson, who concludes by arguing against 'developing covert institutional ties to the intelligence community that would conflict with our ethical norms for informed consent'? Gusterson's claims seem ironic coming from a faculty member at one of the primary recipients of US armed forces' largesse. Moreover his position, though widely accepted (see AAA, ASA, SfAA and NAPA codes of ethics), seems untenable for those with some sense of *Zerrissenheit*. Some anthropologists do leave the middle-class Atlanticist 'bunker' or 'ivory tower' of anxious yet frivolous comfort, and practise partisan anthropology – especially in those deadly worlds of political violence, where moral universes collide with such ferocity that the shadows of power, complicity and deceit are more readily perceptible. The mandate of the partisan anthropologist is to unmask and demystify the apparent and the hidden structures of inequality and political violence, as well as to imagine the possible moral worlds of equality and reconciliation. I look forward to AT's continued comprehensive coverage of this crucially important topic.

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A response to Bartholomew Dean

The Editor has allowed me to respond immediately to Bartholomew Dean's misrepresentations of a letter I wrote as outgoing Chair of the Association of Social Anthropologists in response to Felix Moos. Since John Gledhill has now fully taken over as Chair, I confine myself to clarification of my original communication.

Dean suggests I have failed to notice that numerous military personnel and many times more civilians have died since the invasion of Iraq. But Moos had claimed the US to be engaged in a global war that involved the 'asymmetry of terrorism and insurgency'. Dean's imputation is demonstrated to be disingenuous by his own reference, two paragraphs later, to anthropologists' responses to 'political violence and asymmetric conflict'. The discussion could never reasonably have been construed as narrowly concerned with war in Iraq, unless Moos and Dean wished to apply the notion of asymmetric violence to the invasion itself.

Dean counters concern I expressed about the covert placement of intelligence agents on anthropology courses (drawn from the '15 US intelligence community agencies' and not just the CIA, as he clarifies) with the reassurance that 'PRISP students are not required to keep their participation secret'. So may we assume people invariably disclose whatever they are not required to keep secret?

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