

America the ambivalent **Quietly selling anthropology to the CIA**

Guest editorial by David H. Price

The Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program (PRISP) is only one of a number of programmes in the US that are quietly shifting the recruitment of intelligence employees to the front end of the educational process by secretly sponsoring students studying languages, cultures and special skills of interest to intelligence agencies. Though this received timely press attention and criticism in anthropology publications in the UK, in particular through *AT* (20[4], 21[3-5]), in America coverage has been subdued and comparatively late (Gusterson et al. 2005, Price 2005a). However, the newly created Intelligence Community Scholars Program (ICSP) has escaped public notice even though it relies on the same basic levels of classroom secrecy as PRISP – though ICSP imposes much stiffer penalties for drop-outs, who must pay back scholarships with fines totalling three times the prevailing interest rate (see Price 2005b).

This shift in funding from programmes requiring no future commitment to government work (programmes like Fulbright, Title VI etc.) towards programmes requiring years of government employment affords American intelligence agencies new powers to force participants to conform.

The required summer internships at places like CIA headquarters coax young scholars to narrow their focus prematurely, and induce them to engage in agency groupthink that binds rather than broadens their field of academic enquiry, so that participants can better conform to the necessary limits of governmental analysis.

The declared aim of programmes like PRISP and ICSP is to meet the growing needs of the intelligence community. However, these programmes also fulfil the hidden function of curbing the creative range of future analysts even before they are exposed to the critical environments of independent higher education. If students can be captured and indentured before they are let loose to (relatively) free academic enquiry then the CIA is no longer facing a deficit of area scholars willing to limit their analysis and donate their skills in support of Bush's wars of empire.

However, this is just the beginning. Since October, the American Anthropological Association's jobs database has listed an advertisement for post-doctoral anthropology positions at the Central Intelligence Agency. Under the motto 'The work of a nation: The center of intelligence', the CIA seeks anthropologists to study the 'social, organizational, and contextual factors affecting the functioning of political, terrorist and criminal groups, as well as societies' responses to medical crises such as pandemics and mass migration... [Anthropologists] will produce papers and briefings delivered directly to senior policy-makers and military commands.' It also says that '[m]aintaining and broadening your professional ties through continuing education and attendance at professional meetings is encouraged.' Covert researchers will thus be encouraged to attend your professional academic conferences. They must 'show a high tolerance for ambiguity' - a euphemism for not worrying too much about the high academic and ethical standards that our profession strives for.

In accepting this advertisement, is the AAA overlooking the CIA's history of torture, terror and covert global support for anti-democratic movements? Encroachments by intelligence agencies into American anthropology are multiplying and have had some noticeable success. This is the logical outcome of decisions made by the AAA in 1990 to remove prohibitions against covert research in the Association's 'Principles of Professional

Responsibility' (PRP) (see Price 2000). While the AAA downgraded its ethics code for reasons more economic than political (essentially giving in to concerns that some applied anthropologists might not be able to conduct proprietary research if prohibitions on secret research remained), the long-term political outcomes of these decisions now take on increasing significance as intelligence agencies bring their recruiting efforts into the open.

The silence surrounding these brazen recruiting efforts is startling, but this response is in keeping with the US's growing culture of fear and compliance with the desires of state. Even the AAA Newsletter provided an extensive helpful FAQ explaining the PRISP scheme, based on information provided by unnamed CIA personnel (Gusterson et al. 2005). The PRISP and ICSP schemes, and the many other current recruiting efforts, demonstrate that US military and intelligence agencies want to buy a piece of anthropology. But few anthropologists are examining just which pieces of American anthropology are being sold, and which pieces are being discarded like so much other military surplus.

At a minimal level, armies need to communicate with captured soldiers, to translate captured communications and manage occupations, while more sophisticated militaries try to understand the cultural nuances of enemies or use cultural and linguistic knowledge to engage in propaganda against enemies. Thus there are already programmes under way, like the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA)-funded project awarded to Daniel Serfaty which uses 'theoretical predictions from cultural anthropology on how cultural context affects organizational evolution' in order to 'predict likely terrorist actions and terrorist targets in the U.S.' (DARPA 2003; cf. Price 2003). In an odd essay in *Military Review* (March-April 2005) entitled 'Anthropology and counterinsurgency', trained anthropologist Montgomery McFate attempts to demonstrate this, but laments that codes of ethics stand in the way of the military application of anthropology.

But there are also many aspects of anthropological knowledge that military and intelligence agencies don't want to know about, and thus anthropologists present identifiable risks. Chief among these are empathy for other cultures, critical historical perspectives, ethical commitments to protect those we study, analysis of power relations, and a culture concept which rejects principles of ethnocentrism.

Anthropologists' loyalties tend to be suspect from the point of view of military and intelligence agencies. As DARPA-funded researcher Ace Sarich states, '[t]he problem with reliable translators is that they have to be knowledgeable in English and the target languages and not have their own political agenda. Sometimes the military forces are frustrated because the translator does not want to offend people, but the military forces want to get their point across' (Harrison 2005). This is one reason for harvesting anthropologists as young as possible, and embedding recruitment into the discipline from high up.

American military forces seem absurdly intent upon automating language translations by means of a portable translation machine known as 'the Phraselator' (see www.phraselator.com). The Phraselator looks like a chunky sci-fi communicator prop from the Tom Baker generation of Dr Who. It's slightly larger and clumsier than a PDA, and while it may have its own shortcomings, at least it comes without the problems associated with using anthropologists. Phraselators store about 12,000 phrases in four languages, but the range of expressions goes beyond the usual tourist phrases used for greetings, shopping and hovercraft parking. Stock Phraselator phrases include: 'Get out of the vehicle'; 'Everyone stop talking'; 'Put your hands on the wall'; 'Space your feet'; 'We must now search you' (Harrison 2005). The Phraselator does not question the wisdom or colonial roots of such orders, complies without question, and so is surely much better suited to these tasks than an anthropologist would be.

Do anthropologists really want to collaborate in conquest and occupation? Should members stand by while membership organizations permit themselves to become the recruiting grounds for a last-minute boost to flagging wars? Here in the US, even as the AAA rank and file voted overwhelmingly to un-censor Franz Boas for his opposition to such intelligence work a century ago, they nevertheless silently permit the CIA to harvest their association's membership. The CIA today is claiming hitherto unprecedented access to American anthropology with few anthropologists protesting or even, apparently, noticing. The AAA's weakened ethics code offers little rebuttal to resist such encroachments. So was the vote to un-censor Boas a mere sentimental gesture?

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