

American Anthropologists Stand Up Against Torture and the Occupation of Iraq

By DAVID H. PRICE, <http://www.counterpunch.org/price11202006.html>



**Threatening Anthropology:
McCarthyism and the FBI's
Surveillance of Anthropologists
By David H. Price**

In San Jose, on Saturday evening, November 18, 2006, the rank and file members of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) attending the Association's business meeting approved resolutions condemning the occupation of Iraq and the use of torture.

These two resolutions were co-written by Roberto González, an associate professor of anthropology at San Jose State University, and Kanhong Lin, a graduate student in anthropology at American University. The first resolution condemns the American occupation of Iraq; calls for an immediate withdrawal of troops, the payment of reparations, and it asks that all individuals committing war crimes against Iraqis be prosecuted. This statement passed with little debate or dissent.

The second resolution condemns not only the use of torture by the Bush administration, but it denounces the use of anthropological knowledge in torture and extreme interrogations. The AAA's statement stands in stark contrast with the American Psychological Association's ambivalent policies which provides psychologists working in military and intelligence settings with some cover should they wish to assist in extreme interrogations or torture. One of the concerns underlying this resolution comes from reports by Seymour Hersh that CIA interrogators consulted anthropological works such as Raphael Patai's book, *The Arab Mind*, to better design culture-specific means of torture and interrogation. This resolution passed unanimously with little debate.

Both of these resolutions must now be presented to the full membership of the American Anthropological Association in a mail ballot in the next few months. Prior to changes made in the AAA's bylaws in the early 1970s, activist members of the Association could pass binding resolutions at annual meetings. During the Vietnam War, these rules allowed members to direct Association policies and make political statements by controlling the floor of these business meetings. Changes made in the AAA's bylaws in the early require that resolutions passed by members at the annual business meeting now be presented to the full membership in a mail ballot.

Since this bylaw shift removed AAA members' ability to ratify resolutions at the annual conferences, attendance at these business meetings has been abysmal. I go every year, and most years there is nowhere near the required 250 member quorum present needed for the meeting to officially convene (this at a conference that generally has between 4,000 -- 5,000 members attending). Last year only 35 members attended the annual business meeting--this in a year when many members were upset by CIA efforts to advertise in AAA publications--simply because the non-binding structure of these meetings disempowered those who bothered to attend. But thanks to the activism of González, Lin and others, this week's meeting room was packed with concerned anthropologists.

But sometimes democratic sentiments are contagious.

After adopting the anti-Iraq War and anti-torture measures, a spontaneous floor debate arose after Gerald Sider, CUNY Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, eloquently spoke of how the AAA's bylaws had been changed during the Vietnam War as an anti-democratic measure to empower the association's administrative structure, while disempowering the rank and file's ability to enact political measures at these annual meetings. Sider knows of which he speaks. While doing archival research over the years at the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives, I have seen enough of the AAA's records and the correspondence of key actors from this period to know that such claims are well founded, statements from the floor by Nina Glick Schiller and other veterans from these past struggles helped push Sider's proposal to a vote that the association consider returning to its old structure.

The debate that transpired was interesting. Some argued that the business meeting's normally low attendance was sufficient evidence that such poorly-attended meetings should not be allowed to direct Association policy, but the argument that carried the day maintained that it was the structural decision to limit the power of meeting attendees that had destroyed meeting attendance. After some discussion, a resolution was adopted instructing the Association to consider re-empowering the annual meeting as a forum where direct democratic action could occur.

Later that evening I spoke with Roberto González, Kanhong Lin and other anthropologists attending the annual Association for Mutant Anthropology Business Meeting (a great party, this year joyously honoring the late great Bea Medicine). Both Lin and González were quite pleased by the direction the meeting had taken and they seemed to have a good perspective of what the passage of these measures had and hadn't accomplished.

Obviously each of these motions will likely have no direct impact on the Bush Administration, Congress, rogue anthropologists, or CIA contract torturers, but the events of Saturday's meeting do represent a noteworthy democratic moment in the history of American anthropology and in higher academia's struggle to retain some control over the knowledge it produces.

Such resolutions rarely solve problems, but they do clarify group values and serve notice to those forces that are pressing to use anthropology for intelligence needs-but the sudden move to restore what was once an

important democratic mechanism of a past era may signify that the members want greater control over where anthropology seems to be heading in the post 9/11 world.

The conference had several organized panels examining ways that anthropology is interacting with the War on Terror. Some sessions examined issues of secrecy, the ethical issues raised by anthropologists working in military and intelligence communities, one session had presentations by anthropologists working for the intelligence community. The Association seems to know it is sitting on the edge (let's hope it is the edge) of something very large and powerful and but there are organizational fears of establishing limits governing what anthropologists do. It remains to be seen how the Association's elected and unelected leadership will respond to the memberships' call for increased democratic control over an Association increasingly slipping under the sway of the Pentagon and the intelligence community as traditional educational funds become scarce, even while covert funding programs like the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program increases.

These can be difficult times for engaged academicians, so it is encouraging to find an academic association's voice speaking so loudly in opposition to what anthropologist Laura Nader calls the "coercive harmony" of dominant power structures. Whatever political developments concerning military uses of anthropology transpire next, it appears that the Association's membership will likely not sit by silently as others determine how anthropology will be weaponized against those they study for the needs of American hegemony.

David Price is author of [*Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists*](#) (Duke, 2004). His next book, *Weaponizing Anthropology: American Anthropologists in the Second World War* will be published by Duke University Press. He can be reached at: dprice@stmartin.edu