Anthropology and the Wages of Secrecy

David H Price
Saint Martin's U

As a member of the AAA's Ad Hoc Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the US Security and Intelligence Communities, I bring years of historical research into American anthropology's interactions with governmental agencies like the FBI, CIA and Department of Defense. My research using interviews, archival sources and the Freedom of Information Act leave me worried about increased secretive interactions between anthropologists and military and intelligence organizations. I join the commission with serious concerns about the unintended consequences that will befall anthropology because of the association's decades of movements away from past ethical guidelines prohibiting secret research.

In 1990, in a move primarily designed to accommodate the needs of applied anthropologists working with proprietary data, the AAA removed language from its ethics code prohibiting secret research. These changes set the stage for the CIA and other national security agencies to at first slowly, and now in the post-9/11 world, rapidly draw upon anthropologists to produce and analyze intelligence data. As anthropologists today are being increasingly pressured to set aside what were once established ethical commitments to openness and accountability in the name of national security, there needs to be careful consideration of what these relationships mean for all of anthropology.

"Costs" and "Benefits" of Secrecy

Secrecy is not merely a methodological tool to be found in anthropologists' toolkits—secrecy can ethically transform ethnographic practices, as secrecy always carries the danger of transmuting ethnographers into spies. Assumptions about the needs and benefits of secrecy are rarely publicly examined and those who might presumably secretly evaluate these needs or benefits have vested interests in maintaining standards of intense secrecy.

For anthropology, the "costs" of secrecy outweigh the "benefits" to be gained by disciplinary secret engagements. The greatest "benefits" to be derived from these relationships will be employment and feelings of contribution to our national policies and intelligence capacities—but there is a firm historical basis for remaining skeptical of claims that our knowledge will have much of an impact. While anthropologists' entry into secretive interactions with those in powerful positions may increase our voice, I see little reason to assume that those in power are interested in using what we know about foreign cultures for ends other than conquest. The "costs" of these relationships will be paid in a debt of trust, to be paid to all those we have, will and would have studied. Once spent, such costs are not easily recouped.

The value of secrecy in governmental work has long been exaggerated and seldom questioned much less measured. Since the 1951 "Yale Report" study pitted a few scholars using materials from the shelves of Yale University's library against the CIA's best staff using classified and unclassified materials, we have known that 90% of the information used in intelligence analysis is found in unclassified sources, and that scholars working in an open environment without secrecy produce analysis that is as accurate and rigorous as that produced using secret sources. Some former CIA employees argue that the primary gain derived from classification is that the CIA can hide its errors and illegal actions from public scrutiny.

Necessary Transparency and Accountability

As anthropologists we *should* brief governmental agencies, but we need to do so with complete transparency in ways that serve those we study. Governmental agencies need to hear what scholars outside their cripplingly narrow worldview know. We need to keep public the recommendations we make to governmental agencies, if by no other means than posting any briefings on the Internet for the world to see. We all need to speak truth to power, but we need to do so publicly.

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Some anthropologists confuse the ethical requirements of using secrecy to protect *individuals and groups studied* with the practice of using secrecy to protect *employers*. This confusion seems to be widespread among anthropologists working in industrial and national security settings, and while this confusion eases some anthropological workplace activities, it muddles the ethical principles supporting the appropriate use of secrecy in anthropological research. The AAA should help clarify these distinctions. There is an emerging confusion of the historical development of using secrecy to protect those we study, with the unrelated new pressures by industry and government to use secrecy to protect powerful individuals and organizations.

Using secrecy to protect the identity and interests of sponsors abuses what have long been anthropological standards of secrecy and pseudonyms to protect those whom we study. Power relations have always been the fundamental reason for using secrecy to protect research subjects. Using secrecy to protect the interests of researchers and employers distorts ethical justification for employing secrecy. It does not matter if our employers are governmental agencies, NGOs or corporations: our primary ethical responsibility should be to the populations we study and when we engage in secret interactions with employers or anybody beyond the populations we study—we betray the commitments of trust needed to engage in fieldwork.

One of the most frequently claimed benefits of security by those working in national security settings is that secrecy allows for "a free flowing of ideas" that nurtures critical analysis, but decreased accountability encourages highly speculative analysis by the non-regional-experts increasingly engaging in these discussions. These conditions of secrecy are birthing a new generation of anthropologists specializing not in specific cultural groups, but in knowing how to interact with national security agencies. These anthropologists can comfortably talk to these groups, saying things in ways that can be understood in agencies' prevailing cultures of groupthink, adding some anthropological perspective—but lacking the critical perspective of anthropologists actually working with the cultures under consideration.

Anthropologists are increasingly participating in non-classified conferences and panels alongside military personnel governed by military "non-attribution requirements." While non-attribution agreements claim to offer more freedom for discussions, they create conditions with non-accountability and foster atmospheres of secrecy. Scholarship needs open accountability and if military and intelligence personnel are not willing to operate in the open, participants in those domains risk our integrity. Anthropologists should question why agencies with such

ON ANTHROPOLOGY AND US SECURITY/INTELLIGENCE

extraordinary and lethal power are afraid to freely engage in discourse under the normal rubrics of scholarly conferences.

Irreparable Damages of Secrecy

Intelligence agencies like the CIA are self-aware of the limits brought on by the internal reproduction of their own limited institutional culture, so see programs like the controversial Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program as a means of supplying themselves with needed new blood to rejuvenate under cover provided by public classrooms. But these secrecy-based reforms are the products of damaged institutional minds trying to repair themselves.

Such attempts at self-repair are doomed failures because these agencies fail to acknowledge that it is their over-reliance on secrecy and conformity to preconceived analysis designed not to seek truth so much as to serve imperial needs that leave them damaged. If the intelligence community wants to broaden its pool of knowledgeable analysts, it should do so by consulting analysts who work in the open without constraints, including scholars critical of America's apparent imperial goals. If these agencies won't work in the open and include scholars holding such views, anthropologists should have nothing to do with them.

America needs a CIA that is less central, more intelligent and less devoted to exerting the agency of American hegemony; it won't get there with increased secrecy. Anthropologists should inform national policy, but dangerous lines are crossed when we do so under conditions of secrecy. Anthropologists' voices are needed to complicate the predominant simplistic views that have allowed a string of policy blunders in the Middle East. If anthropologists have crucial information to share we must do so publicly, or we must be prepared for the worlds where we conduct fieldwork to reject us for our discussions to work in secret.

David H Price *(dprice@stmartin.edu) is associate professor of anthropology, Saint Martin's University, Lacey, Washington, and a member of the AAA's Ad Hoc Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the US Security and Intelligence Communities.*

IN FOCUS

ON THE OAXACAN REBELLION

Since May 2006, a complex conflict in Oaxaca has been the subject of media reports, analysis and commentary. To help provide anthropological perspectives of the conflict, University of Iowa Professor of Anthropology Michael Chibnik guest-edited the series below, in which six scholars with extensive experience in Oaxaca—two of them teaching in institutions in the state—comment on the political and cultural context in which the rebellion emerged, and the role of indigenous organizations, women and the teachers' union.

Anthropological Perspectives on the Oaxacan Rebellion

MICHAEL CHIBNIK
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Over the past century, many anthropologists have carried out research in the picturesque, ethnically diverse state of Oaxaca in southern Mexico. Two topics have increasingly become the focus of recent anthropological projects: the massive movements of people from Oaxaca to and from the US, and the effects of the recent decline of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—an organization that dominated Mexican politics for almost seven decades—on local systems of government.

Since last May, a complex conflict in Oaxaca has been the subject of countless—often superficial—newspaper articles, online publications and blogs. This In Focus series is an attempt to provide an overview of recent events from the perspectives of six scholars with extensive experience in the region. These brief essays can provide only a glimpse of a complicated situation where individuals and organizations have diverse motivations.

COMMENTARY

A Social Movement Emerges

In each of the past 26 years, a teachers' union in Oaxaca has mobilized to demand wage increases and improvements in schools. In what has become a ritual, the teachers often close schools and demonstrate in the *zócalo* (central square) of the city of Oaxaca. Eventually, a settlement is reached through bilateral negotiations with the state government; the strike rarely garners much support or sympathy from the public.

During the 2006 demonstrations, however, the union seemed more militant than usual and the PRI-led state government was less willing to make concessions. On June 14, the state police took the unprecedented step of attempting to dislodge the teachers from the *zócalo* by force. Although the teachers were at first driven out, they counter-attacked and routed the poorly-trained and outnumbered police. The public outrage against the state's bellicose response to the teachers' peaceful protest permitted the union to accomplish what it had unsuccessfully attempted many times before—to gain the support from the hundreds of social action organizations that have proliferated in Oaxaca in the past 20 years. Representatives of about 350 of these groups created a new umbrella organization, the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO).

From its inception, the principal demand of the APPO has been the removal of Ulises Ruiz, the governor of the state. Ruiz, who came to power in 2004 in an election widely believed to be fraudulent, was unpopular prior to the teachers' demonstrations. He has supervised a costly remodeling of public spaces (including the *zócalo*) that many regard as both aesthetically unpleasing and a terrible waste of money in one of the poorest states in Mexico.

The APPO and the teachers constructed barricades that blocked off large parts of the city center; anti-government graffiti covered many buildings. Although the schools were open for part of July, they did not reopen in the fall after closing for summer vacation. At least 17 people died between June 14 and October 28 in conflicts between supporters of the APPO and the police. Tourism, a mainstay of the local economy, dropped drastically. Craft producers lost their principal source of income as wholesalers and tourists stopped coming to their communities to purchase wood carvings, weavings and pottery. Migration to the US became an even more popular option for Oaxacans discouraged by political unrest, closed schools and the collapse of the tourist economy.

A Day of the Dead Altar for a teacher who disappeared, November 4, 2006.
Photo courtesy of Benjamin Alonso

The national and state elections in July further complicated the situation. Felipe Calderón from the right-center National Action Party (PAN) was declared the narrow victor in the presidential election over Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the candidate of the left-center Democratic Revolutionary

See ***Perspectives*** *on page 8*