

Militarizing the Social Sciences

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Since World War II's Manhattan Project, the above-top secret program that built the atomic bomb subsequently dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the U.S. national security state has transformed scientific research into a branch of weapons development.

The quest for atomic arms and chemical/biological warfare agents led physicists, engineers, biologists, chemists and physicians ever-deeper into the dark heart of a secretive and far-flung U.S. weapons complex. Indeed, many of these dubious programs were hidden in plain sight at prestigious American universities and corporate laboratories.

This trend accelerated during the Cold War when many psychologists and social scientists became witting and unwitting partners in the CIA and Army's illegal and ethically-challenged MKULTRA program.

Under the cover of "national security," CIA and Army researchers sought to create magic bullets they hoped would provide Cold Warriors a leg up over their Soviet rivals in the development of "mind control" technologies.

While that quixotic mission ended in failure, other discoveries in behavioral psychology and psychiatry—such as illicit experiments in sensory deprivation and conditioning—led to the development of today's "enhanced interrogation" techniques (torture) at Guantánamo Bay, Afghanistan, Iraq and the CIA's transnational network of secret prisons.

Recent articles in *Antifascist Calling* have explored the militarization of [biological](#), [cognitive](#), and [information sciences](#) as constituent elements of the Bush administration's "war on terror." We now turn to Pentagon schemes to militarize the social sciences, both as a *tactical* necessity under battlefield conditions and as a *strategic* instrument to further military/media psychological operations (PSYOPS), particularly within societies under threat of imperialist attack.

While the utilization of social scientists as reliable, off-the-shelf intelligence assets is not a new phenomenon, various "dirty tricks" offices of the CIA freely employed the services of media and social science operatives either during the run-up to U.S.-sponsored coups (Congo [1961], Brazil [1964], Indonesia [1965], Greece [1967], Chile [1973]) or as embedded counterinsurgency specialists (Vietnam [1950-1973]), what is new are current plans by the Department of Defense to formalize these ad hoc relationships within specific programs under a Pentagon command structure.

Unlike the complicitous relationships amongst physical scientists as state-sponsored weaponeers, chained to research funding by the DoD or by giant multinational corporate

grifters, these plans have been met by widespread—and growing opposition—amongst social scientists themselves. This is certainly a healthy—and welcome—development.

But as anthropologist David H. Price points out, similar funding trends now threaten to undermine and subvert the sensitive work—and academic freedom—of social scientists. Price [avers](#),

As non-directed independent funding for American social scientists decreases, there are steady increases in new directed funding programs such as the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program, the National Security Education Program, Intelligence Community Scholars Program; these programs leave our universities increasingly ready to produce knowledge and scholars aligned with the ideological assumptions of the Defense Department. (“Inside the Minerva Consortium: Social Science in Harness,” CounterPunch, June 24, 2008)

The latest move towards militarizing academia came April 14, when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced the formation of the Minerva Research Institute.

The Minerva Research Institute: Counterinsurgency with a Human Face

The Washington Post [revealed](#) that the Pentagon is funding a \$50 million initiative that would fund social science research deemed vital to “national security.”

The Minerva Research Initiative is a scheme to help the military “unravel questions” about how terrorists are recruited, translate and analyze captured Iraqi documents, the allure for Afghans of a resurgent Taliban, the collation of open-source documents that pertain to Chinese military policy, or what makes Iraqi insurgents tick.

But the program as described by the *Post*, would have immediate ramifications for societies already designated enemies of the American corporatist empire such as Venezuela, other socialist outposts of alternative development such as Cuba, not to mention geopolitical rivals Russia, China and Iran.

The danger of course, is to transform anthropologists under the watchful eye of Pentagon commissars into counterinsurgency “mission specialists.” Many knowledgeable observers fear that social science as conceived by the Minerva Research Institute, will become yet another front in the “war on terror.”

Such fears are hardly misplaced. During the 1960s for example, Project Camelot, an Army-sponsored program “to study political change and unrest in Latin America, was canceled abruptly after the program was revealed in the Chilean press,” the *Post* reports.

However, as Gerard Colby and Charlotte Dennett describe in their definitive history, *Thy Will Be Done: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1995) Project Camelot was conceived first and foremost as a counterinsurgency program in oil-rich Latin American nations:

The social sciences were the brains, what a computerized guidance system is to a deadly missile. In July 1964, the U.S. Army gave the Special Operations Research Office (SORO) at American University in Washington, D.C., the largest single grant ever awarded a social science project. The project’s targets for “field research” in Latin America were Peru, Ecuador, Paraguay, Venezuela,

and Colombia. ...

Project Camelot was to be a broad sweep for local data collection, including everything from the language, social structure, and history of peoples to labor strikes, peasants' seizure of haciendas, and violence. Anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, sociologists, and economists would be joined by political scientists, mathematicians, and the military to produce a deliberate political objective of social control. (p. 479)

As Price points out, "because of the narrowness of scope and assumptions about the causes of problems facing America, Gates' Minerva plan ... will inevitably fund scholars willing to think in the narrow ways already acceptable to the Defense Department."

While the DoD has largely abandoned the demonizing and shallow rhetoric of the Bush regime, ("they hate us because of our freedoms") will subtler, yet potentially more *lethal* approaches that propose to "get inside people's heads," solve the real world problems created by the systemic economic/ideological biases of our corporate masters? I think not.

In other words, will a cultural knowledge skill-set, particularly during a period characterized by economic melt-down and preemptive wars of imperial conquest and resource extraction, do anything to actually ameliorate the "root causes" of terrorism?

Will rampant poverty, exploitation, repression in the form of the "political genocide" of left alternatives, state-sponsored religious fundamentalism, often in concert with Western intelligence agencies, not to mention the environmental crises brought on by widespread habitat destruction for profit, be mitigated by such schemes? Or will universities, already dependent on DoD and corporate research dollars become ideologically-biased outposts tied ever-closer to the military-industrial-surveillance complex?

As the Network of Concerned Anthropologists ([NCA](#)) [point out](#),

The US university system is already highly militarized, that is, many universities take in a large proportion of their research funding from military sources. This is problematic...

The fields so supported are distorted by focus on issues of utility to warmaking. Whole fields of study hypertrophy and others shrink or are never developed as researchers are drawn from one field into the other, Pentagon-desired ones. Nuclear and other weapons research related areas grow, at the expense of environmental research, for example. Moreover, theory, methodology, and research goals in such fields as physics, computer science, and engineering after decades of military funding now operate on assumptions that knowledge about force is paramount. ...

The University becomes an instrument rather than a critic of war-making, and spaces for critical discussion of militarism within the university shrink. ("Some Concerns about the Minerva Consortia Project," Network of Concerned Anthropologists, May 28, 2008)

Unfortunately, this process is well-underway.

Militarizing the "Cultural Front"

The Human Terrain System ([HTS](#)) is a project administered by the U.S. Army Training and

Doctrine Command (TRADOC) in Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. The unit is commanded by Col. Steve Fondacero, who says the project's purpose is to "non-kinetically neutralize enemies" through knowledge of "what's going on culturally."

HTS units are currently comprised of five-person teams of social scientists and intelligence specialists deployed to forward-operating combat brigades in Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to a 2007 article in *In These Times* ([ITT](#)), "The 'human terrain' is defined as the social, ethnographic, cultural, economic and political characteristics of the people who live in the region occupied by the brigade, a force of 3,000 to 5,000 troops under the command of a colonel."

Fondacero told ITT investigative journalist Lindsay Beyerstein last year "he isn't at liberty to talk about [the program] in detail, lest the enemy learn about successful programs and target them accordingly."

Two HTS specialists have been killed this year. Nicole Suveges was killed in June in Sadr City, Iraq while Michael Bhatia was killed in May in Afghanistan. Suveges was a social scientist and Army reservist previously deployed in Bosnia-Herzegovina where she was assigned to the Combined Joint Psychological Operations Task Force. Bhatia was a political scientist who was a research fellow at Brown University's [The Watson Institute for International Studies](#).

While their deaths are tragic, what broader ethical issues are raised by embedding anthropologists or other social scientists in military units where the mission involves extracting cultural knowledge from local sources as a tactical modality for their subjugation?

As George Mason University anthropology professor Hugh Gusterson [writes](#),

We engage in what one anthropologist has called "deep hanging out" with people, passing the time with them, often day after day for months, painstakingly earning their trust and getting them to tell us about their worlds. What distinguishes anthropology from espionage ... is that we seek the consent of our subjects, and we follow an injunction to do no harm to those we study. According to the anthropological code of ethics, our obligations to those we study trump all others—to colleagues, funders, and nation. (It's for this reason that Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology, famously condemned four colleagues for using anthropological research as cover for spying during World War I.) ("The U.S. military's quest to weaponize culture," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 20 June 2008)

The HTS program is administered by corporate giants intimately connected to the military-industrial-surveillance complex. The scandal-plagued, British defense firm BAE Systems is the prime contractor currently administering HTS, while CACI International and the Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) are subcontractors handling recruitment. *Newsweek* reported that BAE Systems "was handed" the contract "without a bidding process."

According to *Washington Technology's* [Top 100 List](#) of "Federal Prime Contractors: 2008," No. 12 BAE Systems Inc., derived \$2,019,931,520 of its earnings from defense and civilian federal government contracts; No. 5 Science Applications International Corp., earned \$4,919,829,998 from similar sources; and No. 17 CACI International Inc., received

\$1,337,472,153 for work related to the Defense Department. While the \$40 million price tag for the entire program is a mere pittance compared to other DoD projects, it raises serious issues as to the independence of social scientists recruited to the program.

As Roberto Gonzalez and David Price wrote in a 2007 piece for [CounterPunch](#), SAIC “has begun describing anthropology as a counter-insurgency related field in its job advertisements.” As a job description it doesn’t get any more explicit!

Problems have plagued the program since its inception. [Newsweek](#) reported,

Of 19 Human Terrain members operating in five teams in Iraq, fewer than a handful can be described loosely as Middle East experts, and only three speak Arabic. The rest are social scientists or former GIs who...are transposing research skills from their unrelated fields at home. ...

Recruitment appears to have been mishandled from the start, with administrators offering positions to even marginally qualified applicants. The pool of academics across the country who speak Arabic and focus on Iraq, or even more broadly on the Middle East, is not large to begin with. ... Several team members say they were accepted after brief phone interviews and that their language skills were never tested. As a result, instead of top regional experts, the anthropologists sent to Iraq include a Latin America specialist and an authority on Native Americans. One is writing his Ph.D. dissertation on America’s goth, punk and rave subcultures. (Dan Ephron and Silvia Spring, “A Gun in One Hand, A Pen in the Other,” [Newsweek](#), April 21, 2008)

But more problematic than the poor administration of the program by the Army and outsourced contractors, is the nature of HTS and the proposed Minerva Research Initiative itself.

As the NCA document, Assistant Under Secretary of Defense John Wilcox, has described Human Terrain Mapping, a constitute element of the program, as one that “enables the entire kill chain across the Global War on Terror.” Indeed, in a 2006 article in [Military Review](#), Pentagon analysts describe HTS as “a CORDS for the 21st Century.” Such analogies are troubling to say the least.

The Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) was the operational element of the CIA’s Phoenix Program during the Vietnam war. Launched in 1967, Phoenix was a high-tech computer operation aimed at “neutralizing”-through assassination, kidnapping and systematic torture-the civilian infrastructure that supported the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front.

From its inception, the program was rife with corruption. Those who failed to pay bribes to South Vietnamese military personnel assigned to CORDS, found themselves at the tender mercies of CIA-Phoenix operatives. More than 25,000 people were murdered. CORDS, among other things, in a eerie echo of today’s “war on terror” ran interrogation centers that were little more than dungeons where “suspects” were cruelly tortured and then “disappeared.” (For more on CORDS see: Douglas Valentine, [The Phoenix Program](#), New York: The William Morrow Company, 1990)

More disturbing still, are recent developments. In keeping with the “global war on terror” paradigm that opposition = subversion = terrorism, the Network of Concerned

Anthropologists reported that at a November 30 panel discussion which featured three of their members during the American Anthropological Association annual meeting, “witnesses saw two U.S. Army personnel affiliated with the human terrain program writing down the names and institutional affiliations of anthropologists who had signed copies of the NCA pledge circulating during the panel.”

In a subsequent letter to HTS commander Colonel Fondacero, Hugh Gusterson [wrote](#):

I’m writing to you in the hope you might shed light on an incident that concerns me. A former US intelligence officer who now works with the Network of Concerned Anthropologists saw Laurie Adler of TRADOC and Jessica Lawrence of the US army writing down the names and institutional affiliations of anthropologists who had signed the pledge of non-participation in counter-insurgency work as the pledge was passed around a session at the meetings. This raises a number of questions:

Whose orders were Adler and Lawrence following when they engaged in this behavior? How many names of signatories to the pledge has the US military collected How and where are those named being stored? Who will have access to these names? What is the US military’s purpose in collecting the names of people who have signed the pledge?

Surveillance of ethical social scientists who have taken a stand against militarizing their discipline is a clear harbinger of what awaits those who heed the Pentagon’s siren song. With annual salaries exceeding \$300,000 according to *Newsweek*, will anthropologists and social scientists become the academic equivalent of the armed gangs of mercenaries already employed by dozens of private military contractors?

Social scientists, as David Price forcefully argues “cannot ignore the political context in which their knowledge will be used.” Minerva and the Human Terrain System, like earlier counterinsurgency programs funded by the Defense Department and the CIA seek to increase of the *efficiency* of the Bush Doctrine across “the entire kill chain,” not *question* it.

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