

Anthropologists in Arms: The Ethics of Military Anthropology, **by George Lucas**

LANHAM, MD: ALTAMIRA PRESS, 2009, 234 PAGES

Juliana Geran Pilon

It is not a little ironic that just as policymakers are beginning to appreciate the importance of cultural intelligence for the formulation and conduct of an effective national security policy, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) would rather its members stay at arm's length from the military. While not forbidding it outright, the AAA "strongly disapproves" of such collaboration, for reasons explored in a fine new book about the ethical aspects of engaging in "military anthropology." George Lucas, a chaired professor of philosophy at the U.S. Naval Academy's Center for Ethical Leadership who wears his erudition lightly and complements it with the relevant factual data, dares to step into this politically radioactive territory to explain some of the reasons why so many academics are up in arms about the idea. Far from involving just one profession, as Lucas observes in his preface, at issue is "a more general moral dilemma concerning the civic and social responsibilities of scholars and citizens, which is finally what makes the debate over 'military anthropology' interesting for a wider audience."

What lies at the core of the debate is defining who we are, as a society: What is the proper relationship between civilians and noncivilians in the post-Cold War environment? In an era of "asymmetric" conflicts, fourth- and even fifth-generation warfare taking place in cyberspace and literally off the radar, the question takes on a whole new dimension and urgency. We may (and do) have the deadliest weapons on the traditional battlefield, but the theater has morphed. The new enemy is typically stealthy and "irregular," defying the rules of war and oblivious to civilians whose innocence, rationalized away by twisted ideologies or simply deemed irrelevant, is no shield. More than ever, knowledge of "the human terrain" is essential to both winning the peace and keeping it. For, as Sun Tzu wrote two millennia ago, "to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of

skill." The ultimate object of a free and liberal society is to defend the body politic with minimal use of force.

At issue is not only whether scholars and citizens have the right to refrain from supporting military engagements that they find unjustifiable; most people readily agree. Once a nation is at war, however, it is legitimate to wonder whether civilians may not have a responsibility to minimize the cost of that war—and Lucas does. Do they not, in fact, have a duty "to use their particular expertise (as doctors, psychologists, and nongovernmental organization [NGO] personnel often do) to try to ameliorate the worst consequences of war and violence, notwithstanding their individual misgivings about their own nation's participation in those conflicts?" The idea deserves at least a fair-minded consideration in light of relevant factual information, and Lucas proves up to the task.

What elevated its level of urgency and rhetorical temperature was the inauguration of a new project the army started exploring around 2006, known as the Human Terrain Systems (HTS), which the Marine Corps later adopted as well. The use of HTS teams is only the more publicly visible, and hence most controversial, facet of a broader and, Lucas notes, "evolving collaboration between scholars and soldiers, between social scientists and military," including intelligence. It is this emerging collaboration that has come to be known as "military anthropology." Accordingly, while anthropologists have been its most vocal critics, the collaboration extends not only in principle but in fact far beyond that community.

Lucas begins his study with a historical overview of what the AAA considers its own profession's "litany of shame." The association first became involved in ethical self-examination nearly a century ago, when the legendary Frank Boas, a convinced pacifist, accused members of his profession of having "prostituted science by using it as a cover for their activities as spies." He is routinely invoked as defending a principle that condemns activities such as clandestine research. But this is not quite right.

Titled "Scientists as Spies," his letter, published in the *Nation*, actually offered no evidence "or . . . accounts of exactly what these alleged turncoat anthropologists were supposedly doing," and did not unjustly libel anyone. Boas's active opposition to that war was unpopular among his colleagues—as he well knew, which might explain the virulence of his attack in a self-righteous attempt at self-defense. The effect of the intemperate letter, however, seems to have been the opposite of what he might have expected: The AAA ended up censuring Boas, by a margin of two to one.

What Boas had said, in fact, was simply that the scientist ought never to use his or her role as scientist in order to carry out other activities, whatever they may be. Though seemingly minor, the difference is actually monumental, and Lucas rightly notes that each concern needs to be defended on its own. Some “clandestine” activities (depending on the definition) may be justified even as the latter may not. In short, Boas’s (unfounded) charge and the context of the AAA’s response have been misremembered.

More problems were soon to come, involving no less seminal figures than Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, veritable “Founding Mothers” of the discipline, whose research had been used in World War II. As Lucas explains, Mead had faced a dual dilemma: Besides the fundamental matter of the war’s morality as such, she grappled with the question of what anthropology can offer on behalf of morally worthy ends, whatever those may be. She did not ask whether through her own involvement “the core values of the discipline itself might thereby be compromised,” in part because no such core values had been identified. It is this lack that the AAA sought, over the course of many years, to articulate in a code of ethics comparable to those of the American Medical Association and many other professions.

It was the highly unpopular Vietnam War, however, that first brought to the fore the ethical implications of academics collaborating with the military, through the infamous—and broadly misrepresented—Project Camelot. Knowledgeable insiders categorically blasted it from the outset as “an ill-conceived, inappropriately sponsored, poorly coordinated, badly administered, bone-headed, ham-handed attempt to develop regional and cultural knowledge to guide government policy in response to socialist revolution and counterinsurgency in Latin America”—in other words, your garden variety “nitwit, hairbrained waste of taxpayers’ dollars,” if you will forgive the redundancy.

But 1966 was an especially unpropitious year for engaging in this sort of (otherwise not untypical) stupidity. One can easily understand, reports Lucas, “how at the time this project could come, in the collective consciousness of anthropologists, to be linked symbolically . . . with Boas’s ‘Scientists as Spies’ letter,” leading the AAA to issue a statement of protest against “activities of individuals . . . who have pretended to be engaged in anthropological research while pursuing other ends.” The AAA goes on to claim that “there is good reason to believe” that academic privileges had been used “as cloaks for the collection of intelligence information and for

intelligence operations.” But—as later evaluation made absolutely clear—the actual project entailed *absolutely no spying*.

A much closer call was a proposed project designed to be undertaken about five years later in Thailand. Submitted by a research institute at the University of Pittsburgh, it would have included two anthropologists. The project would have practically crossed the line between research and military operations to include even assassinations! It certainly offers plenty of justification for creating a sense of urgency and unease within the profession. That said, however, the project was abandoned in the very early stages. Accordingly, concludes Lucas, “no one, and certainly no anthropologist, actually did anything of consequence, nor did any victims or their relatives come forward to demonstrate harm or complain otherwise”—though some of the credit goes to the Thai villagers themselves, who “recognized at once the grave danger these bumbling and incompetent field researchers posed for their safety and angrily sent them away.”

Fast-forward to 9/11. Enter charisma-challenged President George W. Bush and the “War on Terror,” including military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. Policymakers of all stripes, who had long forgotten (if they had ever learned) the lessons of Vietnam, were glacially slow in accepting the New World Order, whose real meaning all but contradicted the wishful thinking of its coiner, Bush the Father. It finally dawned on the foreign policy and defense community that cultural intelligence mattered, and that the best lethal weapons taxpayer money could buy were not just insufficient but often irrelevant and even counterproductive. A whole new generation of warfare had to be accommodated, along with new ethical questions. Civilians were being killed on all sides, and civilians were indispensable for defeating the enemies. The time had come at last to enlist the “military anthropologists.”

Many Americans first became aware of the presence of social scientists alongside military forces on November 4, 2008. The mainstream media headlines announced with great alarm that a young woman engaged in interviewing the local population of a small village in southern Afghanistan had been brutally set on fire by a man who first doused her with gasoline. Paula Loyd’s short life tragically ended only two months later. A master’s degree candidate in conflict resolution and diplomacy, she had been hired by a private military contractor to gather cultural intelligence. Another civilian killed in Afghanistan doing similar work was Michael Bhatia, a doctoral candidate in international relations at Oxford, followed by still others.

Interestingly, however, whenever a social scientist became a victim or made the news in any way, none was actually an anthropologist: They were historians, political scientists, sociologists, or humanitarian workers. Lucas is quite right to point out that whatever the AAA may dictate to its members, it has—and should have—no jurisdiction over those of other disciplines. He recommends that since all social science research is at issue, a group such as the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), perhaps along with other relevant professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the American Sociological Association, etc. This is no mere legal nicety; it recognizes as well the diversity of methodological approaches and the diversity of our society.

An equally important point of clarification involves the very definition of “military anthropology” (MA). Lucas distinguishes three related yet quite distinct components:

- MA1—Anthropology of the Military—which studies military culture;
- MA2—Anthropology for the Military—the Human Terrain Systems (HTS); and
- MA3—Anthropology for the Military—educational programs (language, culture, regional studies) at military academies.

There is little doubt that the HTS, or MA2, is the most problematic. Yet the ambiguity is conspicuously prevalent, as MA applies to any of the three or, worse, condemning one for reasons that actually apply to another, for reasons that may not necessarily be innocent. Lucas explains: “I discovered that this tendency toward indiscriminate conflation of these vastly disparate and morally distinctive activities could be traced to a widespread underlying ideological antipathy toward the military itself, manifest in the opposition of academics and scholars toward engagement at any level with the military.”

While understanding its roots, however, Lucas argues that morally pristine appearance of this antipathy is illusory. It obviously “robs the most vulnerable victims—in at least two different, morally distinct as well as culturally distinct, theaters of war—of assistance based on expertise” that anthropologists, and more generally social scientists, not only should not withhold but should feel morally obligated to provide. Lucas heartily agrees with professors David Price and Roberto Gonzales, two of the most vocal opponents of MA2, that the AAA code’s prohibition of any involvement with projects that might be aimed at coercive interrogation or torture is legitimate.

Yet no instances of such involvement have been uncovered; in fact, “there are no concrete cases of abusive practice upon which to forge some consensus about appropriate professional behavior.”

To be sure, this absence is not a reason to be lax about the ethics of social scientists’ collaborating with the military, but an additional impetus to keep that record clean. One potential area of future vulnerability, legally as well as ethically, is occasioned by the abrupt transition in January 2009 of HTS employees from the status of private contractors to Department of Defense employees. The effect of this change may be that civilians working in war areas could be more readily considered combatants or legitimate military targets under international law. Their new status could also affect negatively the ability of social scientists to advise or restrain the same military to which they now belong.

In principle, however, the engagement of social scientists alongside the military is not objectionable in itself. So concludes even the recently released AAA-CEAUSSIC (Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the U.S. Security and Intelligence Communities) report. Appreciating the complexity of ethical dilemmas in any military conflict, the report explicitly exempts MA1 and MA3 from censure. Having found no single model of such engagement, the commission recognizes that “issuing a blanket condemnation or affirmation of anthropologists working in national security makes little sense. . . . [Indeed,] there is nothing inherently unethical in the decision to apply one’s skills in a security context.”¹ While not specifically endorsing MA2 and the HTS, the most recent (as of this writing, forthcoming) December 2009 report is expected to outright condemn it as an unacceptable application of professional expertise. In effect, anthropologists who disagree may be expected to pay the price—a luxury most untenured faculty are unlikely to be able to afford.

To be sure, there are good reasons for keeping civilians and the military at arm’s length (no pun intended). Some of the most effective work in building civil society—creating lasting relationships with local communities and engaging in grassroots humanitarian assistance—is performed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and deeply dedicated individuals like the incomparable Greg Mortenson. Their commitment to helping fellow human beings is not primarily for personal gain, whether financial or professional. Lucas accordingly suggests giving such individuals “the legal and moral status, and the underlying forms of institutional support and appreciation that most closely adhere to their own understanding and purpose.” He endorses

the idea of Professor Margaret Walker of Arizona State University to create a group that might be called Anthropologists without Borders. Such an NGO could attract those anthropologists who, whatever they may think about the wisdom of any particular military engagement, would like to help victims of war and minimize violence and suffering.

Those social scientists who do decide to join the military, however, must address a set of ethical questions that are hardly ever mentioned in the literature—which, I am sorry to say, includes this otherwise splendid work. According to one participant in his experience, the social scientists are in the program solely for the purpose of getting published at the conclusion of their deployment and return home. This is not necessarily unethical on the face of it, but what if the information gathered would directly affect the safety of the units to which they are assigned? If the information is deemed to be the property of the researcher, this would imply that HTT (human terrain teams) personnel would be entitled to stand idly by while U.S. and Coalition forces and local nationals took casualties. Such an attitude is not unexpected: Academics are used to working alone and often do not understand teamwork. In addition, they are used to espousing their personal opinions, and may even consider that exposing soldiers and marines to antiwar sentiments is for a good cause. Yet some in the military feel that, in some cases, such opinions could undermine morale. These are all legitimate subjects for debate.

One can only hope for the day when everyone rises to the occasion, and it is no longer politically incorrect to recognize that winning the peace requires all the tools at the disposal of a (still) free society. The better we understand our enemies' cultures and mind-sets, the more likely we can help all the victims—not only ourselves, but also others who face far greater obstacles to freedom and often take far greater risks than we do in its worthy quest and preservation.

Note

1. AAA Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the U.S. Security and Intelligence Communities Final Report, November 4, 2007, 23.

Juliana Geran Pilon is research professor of politics and culture at the Institute of World Politics in Washington, DC. Her most recent books are *Why America Is Such a Hard Sell: Beyond Pride and Prejudice* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) and an anthology entitled *Cultural Intelligence for Winning the Peace* (Institute of World Politics Press, 2009).