

# Anthropology and the covert

## Methodological notes on researching military and intelligence programmes

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**Fig. 1.** The Pentagon, headquarters of the US Department of Defense.



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This is a modified version of a paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Montreal, Canada on 19 November 2011. The presentation was part of a panel entitled 'Anthropologies of the Covert' organized by Carole McGranahan. Two anonymous reviewers provided useful comments and suggestions for improving the manuscript.

1. See Ho (2009) and Gusterson (1998).

2. On debt, see Graeber (2011); on plunder, see Mattei & Nader (2008); on sugar, see Mintz (1982).

3. In US military and intelligence agencies, the term 'covert' has a specific definition that distinguishes it from 'clandestine', 'secret', 'classified', etc. The US Department of Defense *Dictionary of military and associated terms* defines a covert operation as 'an operation that is so planned and executed as to conceal the identity of or permit plausible denial by the sponsor' (US Department of Defense 2011: 81). Here I use a broader (non-military) definition of covert, one that is synonymous with hidden or secret.

4. See McFate & Jackson (2005), Kipp *et al.* (2006).

5. See <http://smallwarsjournal.com/>

6. See [www.fas.org/](http://www.fas.org/); see also <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/>

7. Because so many openly accessible documents on HTS and other military and intelligence programmes are of the public relations and propaganda variety, it is crucial for the researcher to carefully evaluate the truthfulness of the information contained within them. The books *Trust us, we're experts* (Rampton & Stauber 2002) and *Toxic sludge is good for you!* (Stauber & Rampton 2002) provide an excellent introduction for those interested in detecting spin.

*Roberto González has contributed analysis on a number of issues surrounding the deployment of input from anthropology into security-related programmes, including the US Army counterinsurgency manual (AT 23,3), the Human Terrain System (AT 24,1), and the concept of 'tribe' as handled by security personnel (AT 25,2). Here, he provides a welcome reflection on the broader issue of methodology, helpful to anthropologists studying covert/security organizations.* Ed.

Any discussion of methods in sociocultural anthropology is likely to provoke some discomfort – or even distress. As noted by John Comaroff (2005: 4) 'a degree of high-handedness, even assertive contempt, [exists] among anthropologists, for speaking about our method...[fieldwork's] mystique lies in *not* disclosing too much of its secret, even when the secret is that there is not much of a secret to it at all'.

The lingering 'high-handedness' regarding our methodology is unfortunate, given the dramatic changes that have occurred in the discipline over the past half-century. Fieldwork has become complicated by the recognition of global processes and interconnections, by reformulations and critiques of the culture concept, and by considerations of power. A startling development has been the emergence of research sites that have crossed into areas that would have been unimaginable in the mid-20th century – such as Wall Street and nuclear weapons laboratories for example.<sup>1</sup> In addition, many anthropological projects have become less fixated on geographically defined 'fields' and have instead focused upon concepts (such as debt), processes (such as plunder), and commodities (such as sugar) that have transformed the world over the centuries.<sup>2</sup> A great deal of ethnographic work has become more diverse, eclectic, and analytically incisive, yet there is a persistent anthropological tendency to prioritize – and sometimes fetishize – participant-observation.

Several years ago, I began researching an experimental Pentagon programme, known as the 'Human Terrain System' or HTS; an initiative designed to embed social scientists within US combat units in Iraq and Afghanistan (González 2008, 2009). I was immediately faced with a range of methodological challenges. Graduate seminars had prepared me well for participant-observation among Zapotec farmers in rural Oaxaca, Mexico, but not for researching covert or obscure organizations and programmes.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I shall review some of the ways in which I met these challenges as my research expanded

beyond conventional anthropological settings; or, to put this in slightly different terms, I will discuss an elusive topic – anthropological methods – by exploring how one might go about researching secretive organizations and programmes.

Writing 15 years ago, Hugh Gusterson (1997: 115) posed a provocative and prescient question: 'How does an anthropologist study such institutions as weapons laboratories and corporations? In most cases participant-observation will be highly problematic, if not impossible ...participant-observation is a research technique that does not travel well up the social structure'. This dilemma affects many anthropologists undertaking research on classified government projects and other initiatives not open to public scrutiny.

When participant-observation is not a feasible option, what techniques can anthropologists use to shed light upon secretive programmes involving military and intelligence agencies and the corporations that they contract? What methods are available to those seeking to understand the inner workings of programmes organized by, for example, the US Department of Defense, the Secret Intelligence Service, the National Security Agency, the CIA, or defence corporations such as Lockheed Martin or BAE Systems? Before exploring these questions however, it is worth considering the experiences of some early modern anthropologists.

### Anthropologies of the covert – over a century ago

Earlier generations of anthropologists sometimes attempted to describe and decipher the workings of secretive institutions. Much of this research focused upon secret societies and knowledge among so-called 'primitive' peoples.

In his study of *The sacred formulas of the Cherokee* (1887) for example, James Mooney reported that he obtained dozens of secret texts written by tribal shamans from either the shamans themselves or their relatives.



**Fig. 2.** Franz Boas (upper right) relied heavily upon a Tlingit man, George Hunt (top row, second from left) to help him gather data about the secret societies of the Northwest Coast Indian tribes.

**Fig. 3.** A page from the book of secret formulas given to James Mooney by the Cherokee shaman 'Swimmer'.

**Fig. 4.** Evans-Pritchard with Zande youth, circa 1928.

8. It can be found at <http://www.archive.org/>

9. See Price (1997:12). FOIA is a US law requiring full and/or partial disclosure of many government documents. Though Price was not the first social scientist to use FOIA as a research tool (he credits sociologist-historian Sigmund Diamond and others with early applications), Price has used it much more productively than any other anthropologist.

10. See [http://wikileaks.org/wiki/US\\_military:\\_Human\\_Terrain\\_Team\\_Handbook\\_Sep\\_2008](http://wikileaks.org/wiki/US_military:_Human_Terrain_Team_Handbook_Sep_2008)

11. See Forte (2010a; 2010b; 2011).

12. At least two unclassified HTS reports have been made publicly available.

13. In a scathing critique of 'military scholars who won't go on the record', David Price (2011) recently described how the HTS director of social science, Christopher King, insisted that his remarks at an academic conference be withheld from public view. King's unwillingness to follow normal standards of academic transparency and accountability illustrates the veil of secrecy cloaking HTS.

14. It is worth acknowledging the valuable dialogues that have emerged between anthropologists and investigative journalists, particularly with respect to HTS. In some cases, sharing of documents and multiple analyses and exchanges written up on blogs (anthropological and non-anthropological) with participation from investigative journalists resulted in a kind of collective – and openly public – research effort.

15. For an excellent summary of Tett's presentation at the 2011 AAA meetings in Montreal, see [erinbtaylor.com/aaa-2011-gillian-tett-how-anthropologists-can-contribute-to-economic-policy-debates/](http://erinbtaylor.com/aaa-2011-gillian-tett-how-anthropologists-can-contribute-to-economic-policy-debates/)

The formulas, which covered such topics as 'medicine, love, hunting, fishing, war, self-protection, destruction of enemies, witchcraft, [and]...crops' (Mooney 1887: 7), were not easily accessible. Mooney noted that 'shamans take good care that their sacred writings shall not fall into the hands of the laity or of their rivals in occult practices' (ibid: 8). He used persistence, persuasion, and appeals to professional pride to gain access. For example, Mooney tried to convince a shaman whom he called 'Swimmer' to share secrets, even though the latter refused to cooperate because the 'songs were a part of his secret knowledge and commanded a high price from the [Cherokee] hunters' (ibid: 10). When Mooney told Swimmer that other Native American medicine men were already providing such information to US government officials, he agreed to cooperate despite the objections of other Cherokee shamans, who told Mooney that Swimmer was not as knowledgeable as he had claimed. According to Mooney, Swimmer was so incensed by these rumours that he secretly handed the anthropologist a 240-page book of formulas, saying, 'Look at that and now see if I don't know something!' (ibid: 10).

Evans-Pritchard was interested in secret societies among the Azande of Sudan. Unlike the practice of witchcraft, oracles, and magic which were performed by individual practitioners in a more or less open fashion, Azande magical associations were formed as underground groups in the early 20th century. Secret societies, or 'closed associations' in Evans-Pritchard's words, were 'functions of European rule and a sign of break-down of tradition' (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 205). These subterranean organizations, popular among young commoners of both sexes, were despised by Zande nobles, condemned by religious missionaries, and finally outlawed in 1919 by the British colonial administration. Evans-Pritchard admitted that he had some difficulty in learning about the associations, but that it was not impossible. He spoke with laypeople about the associations, their morality, and their history. He also spoke with members (who remained anonymous) and even joined an association himself 'and attended a few assemblies...I had to dig beneath the surface for most of the facts recorded' (ibid: 206).

Franz Boas took great interest in secret societies among the Kwakiutl and other Northwest Coast Indians. The secret society was a privilege bestowed upon a few members of certain clans whose ancestors 'were given the right to perform certain dances...[or] secret songs...[or] to eat human flesh' (Boas 1907: 337). Like many aspects of Kwakiutl life, secret societies were ranked, and men seeking to join these societies often had to undergo severe initiation rites such as isolation and fasting. How did Boas obtain such detailed information? In the opening pages of his ethnography, he reported that George Hunt – a Tlingit man who served as Boas's consultant, native informant, and colleague for many years – conducted most of the research.

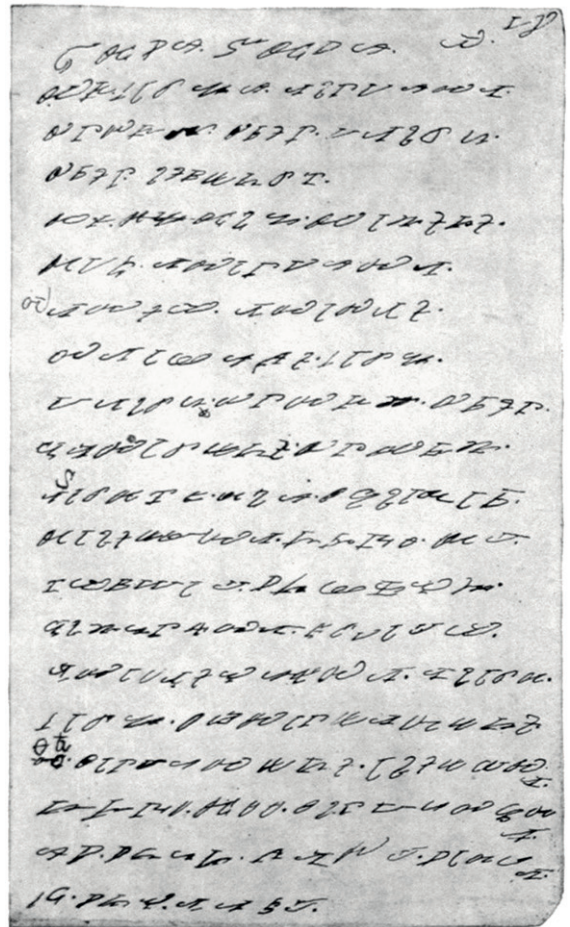
It is worth considering the similarities in these early examples of ethnographies of the covert. These works had several things in common: they were seen as controversial for portraying non-Western 'Others' as rational, logical human beings, and for placing the white man within the frame of reference; each of the anthropologists relied heavily upon participant-observation as a research method, even though access to the secret societies was not always a simple matter; and finally, the anthropologists were in privileged positions of power vis-a-vis their native informants.

### 21st century anthropologies of the covert

There are important differences between the study of secret societies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the study of secretive government organizations and covert



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**Fig. 5.** Pentagon budget documents revealed the existence of MAP-HT, a computer program designed to enter 'human terrain' data collected by US Army human terrain teams in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Fig. 6.** PowerPoint images are a common, if cryptic, means of communication within US military agencies today. This slide illustrates the US Army's vision of its Distributed Common Ground System, designed as a means of pooling intelligence information (including HTS data) and making it more accessible to brigade commanders.

**Fig. 7.** Mapping the Human Terrain 'enables the entire kill chain', as asserted in this unclassified presentation by John Wilcox, Assistant Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Precision Engagement) at the Precision Strike Winter Roundtable, 1 February 2007. This suggests a very different understanding from later publicity put out on this scheme.

programmes today. In terms of social organization, there is a much greater tendency for contemporary anthropologies of the covert to focus upon bureaucratic entities – government agencies, corporations, non-profits, think tanks – in the context of nation-states, not small-scale societies.

Furthermore, there are significant differences in power between the anthropologist and members of the secret organizations in each case. Mooney was effectively an agent of the US government, collecting data on a colonized population. Evans-Pritchard was commissioned by the British colonial administration of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. This is not to say that these anthropologists were handmaidens of imperialism; in fact, each of these men also criticized the disintegrating effects of colonial policies even as they relied upon funding from colonial agencies. But asymmetries of power made it possible for the anthropologists to learn about covert institutions directly through participant-observation. An anthropologist studying the CIA, Blackwater USA (now XiaCorp) or the Human Terrain System is in a very different situation; he or she faces the problem of studying up, not down, and is subject to an array of impediments. After all, 'participant-observation was designed to facilitate the understanding of small, face-to-face societies...where a stranger could easily be absorbed into the flow of daily life and no one was likely to tell the anthropologist that he or she was on private property and should leave' (Gusterson 1997: 115-116).

Many of these dilemmas were foreseen more than forty years ago, when Laura Nader asked the question: How can you study organizations that won't let you in the door? Nader recognized that participant-observation was typically not applicable when studying government agencies or elite institutions (Nader 1969). The problem is clearly one of power, of politics, and requires an innovative set of techniques for 'studying up, down, and sideways' (ibid: 307).

In the concluding paragraphs of her article 'Up the anthropologist', Nader suggested three possibilities that might substitute for participant-observation: firstly, the analysis of documents (including public relations material and internal memos); secondly, interviews, especially face-to-face interviews; and lastly, 'self-analysis' – 'an awareness on the part of the [anthropologist] of how he or she as a social scientist is perceived, run around, enculturated, and described in the veiled and not-so-veiled encounters with...members of organizations' (ibid:308).

### Openly accessible documents

Of Nader's three suggestions – documentary analysis, interviews, and self-analysis – I found that the analysis of documents was the most important in the early stages of research, for the simple reason that I had a very difficult time getting anyone within the Department of Defense (DoD) to talk with me about details of the HTS programme and participant-observation was not a viable option.

While searching library databases, I stumbled upon a parallel anthropological universe; a universe in which a small number of PhD anthropologists were planning and promoting social science for military consumption in the pages of military journals. For example, the journal *Military Review* – edited and published by the US Army Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas – provided a breakthrough, for it revealed the involvement of an anthropologist in the design of the programme. *Military Review* also revealed that some of the architects of HTS envisioned it as a Vietnam War-era counterinsurgency programme.<sup>4</sup> Another journal, the online *Small Wars Journal*, contains multiple blogs and hundreds of discussion groups that provide a great deal of information about counterinsurgency as an interdisciplinary discourse.<sup>5</sup>

Allison, J. 2010. 'The Leavenworth diary' (posted 5 December). <http://zeroanthropology.net/all-posts/the-leavenworth-diary-double-agent-anthropologist-inside-the-human-terrain-system/>

Comaroff, J. 2005. 'Notes on anthropological method, mainly in the key of E'. Presented at the National Science Foundation's Workshop on Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research, May 18-19. <http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/nsfqual/Comaroff%20Paper.pdf>

Boas, F. 1907. *The social organization and the secret societies of the Kwakiutl*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution. See <http://www.archive.org/stream/socialorganizat0hunting#page/n6/mode/2up> [accessed 4 November 2011].

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1976[1937]. *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Forte, M. 2010a 'The WikiLeaks revolution' (posted 10 December). <http://zeroanthropology.net/2010/12/10/the-wikileaks-revolution/>

— 2010b 'Anthropology, secrecy, and WikiLeaks' (posted 24 December). <http://zeroanthropology.net/2010/12/24/anthropology-secrecy-and-wikileaks/>

— 2011. 'Journalist, hacker, spy, racketeer' (posted 23 January). <http://zeroanthropology.net/2011/01/23/journalist-hacker-spy-racketeer/>



González, R. J. 2008. *Human Terrain: Past, present, and future applications*. *Anthropology Today* 24(1): 21-26.

— 2009. *American counterinsurgency: Human science and the Human Terrain*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Graeber, D. 2011. *Debt: The first 5000 years*. London: Melville House.

Gusterson, H. 1998. *Nuclear rites: A weapons laboratory at the end of the Cold War*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ho, K. 2009. *Liquidated: An ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kipp, J. et al. 2006. The Human Terrain System: A CORDS for the 21st century. *Military Review* (Sept.-Oct.): 8-15.

Malcolm, A. 2010. A little secret about Obama's transparency. *Los Angeles Times*, 21 March. <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/21/nation/la-na-ticket21-2010mar21>

Mattei, U. & L. Nader 2008. *Plunder: When the rule of law is illegal*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

McFate, M. & A. Jackson 2005. An organizational solution for DOD's cultural awareness needs. *Military Review* (July-August): 18-21.

Mills, C.W. 1959. *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mintz, S. 1982. *Sweetness and power*. New York: Vintage Books.

Mooney, J. 1887. *The sacred formulas of the Cherokees*. Washington, DC: Bureau of American Ethnology. See <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/24788/24788-h/24788-h.htm>

Nader, L. 1969. Up the anthropologist: Perspectives gained from studying up. In: Hymes, D. (ed.) *Reinventing anthropology*, pp 284-311. New York: Vintage.

Price, D. 1997. Anthropological research and the Freedom of Information Act'. *Cultural Anthropology Methods* 9(1): 12-15.

— 2001. Case Western breakdown: Why I'm through sitting down at academic conferences with military scholars who won't go on the record'. *CounterPunch*, 14 November. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/11/14/case-western-breakdown/>

Rampton, S. & J. Stauber 2002. *Trust us, we're experts! How industry manipulates science and gambles with your future*. New York: Tarcher/Penguin.

Yet another group of documents emerged, which I eventually came to see as public relations material.<sup>7</sup> For example, the HTS website provided a glimpse into how the programme presented itself to the world: as a life-saving humanitarian enterprise that improves the lives of Iraqis and Afghans. Dozens of newspaper articles sympathetic to HTS – and the involvement of a Washington Beltway PR expert – made it obvious that the programme was undergoing 'product placement'. Within a matter of months HTS was featured favourably in *Time* magazine, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and other venues. Another example of PR material came from a short-lived blog created by a one-time professor of anthropology at Christopher Newport University, who is now the Lead Social Scientist for BAE Systems Global Missions Solutions. His accounts (and photos) of military deployment provided an unself-reflective account of life in a human terrain team – until his website suddenly disappeared one day in 2007, shortly after I wrote an article that included a critical description of the blog.

This leads me to mention a very helpful resource for anthropologists trying to access websites that have mysteriously disappeared or gone 'under construction': the Internet Archive 'Wayback Machine', which maintains a partial record of previously posted web pages by taking periodic 'snapshots' and storing them away.<sup>8</sup>

### Classified and leaked documents

Classified and leaked documents can provide a wealth of information. One of the most creative methods for doing an anthropology of the covert was developed by David Price, who has obtained hundreds of files from the CIA, the FBI, the National Security Agency, and the US Departments of State and Defense by using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA); a 'largely untapped resource for anthropologists and other social scientists'.<sup>9</sup> Price has outlined specific areas in which FOIA can be particularly effective:

The FOIA can be used by anthropologists conducting research in areas of the world where American military and intelligence agencies have clashed with ... indigenous groups. The FOIA can also help anthropologists gain access to previously unreleased diplomatic documents relating to regions where they've done foreign fieldwork ... In short, any researcher investigating groups or individuals who have had contact with US government agencies can benefit from using the FOIA to access records held by all branches of federal government. (Price 1997)

However, there are limitations. Price notes that requests to the CIA and FBI often 'take years to comply with even the simplest FOIA requests' (ibid: 14). Furthermore, 'documents are being destroyed faster than they can be released under the FOIA' (ibid). And in spite of President Barack Obama's lofty rhetoric about a 'new era of open government', the Obama administration denied significantly more FOIA requests in its first year in office than the Bush administration did in its last year (Malcolm 2010; Theimer 2010).

At least one document pertaining to HTS was a leaked document, the *Human terrain team handbook*, posted to WikiLeaks in September 2008.<sup>10</sup> Though WikiLeaks has come under tremendous political pressure and has temporarily suspended the publication of new documents, it (or something like it – i.e. the website <http://publicintelligence.net/>) will almost certainly continue to be a useful tool for studying covert organizations, particularly government organizations.

Maximilian Forte has written a series of articles about WikiLeaks, secrecy, and anthropology on the website *Zero Anthropology*.<sup>11</sup> Forte has not been uncritical of WikiLeaks – in fact, he has criticized the 'mainstreaming of WikiLeaks' and its transformation from an entirely user-generated forum to a more closed, autocratic one –

but he has also recognized the historical importance of WikiLeaks in general and the Cablegate scandal in particular. Forte observes that the diplomatic cables allegedly leaked by Bradley Manning represent not so much a threat to national security as a threat to 'the security of the elites'. Such developments reveal deep contradictions between the ideal of government transparency on the one hand, and a repressive, secretive national security state on the other.

Finally, unpublicized reports filed by HTT members provided another vital source of information.<sup>12</sup> One person, who revealed himself to me as a former HTS employee, passed on a secret report of his activities in Baghdad, with the understanding that I would not publish or quote from it. This highlights one of the dilemmas facing an anthropology of the covert. One may build a rapport with insiders, and collect large amounts of data, only to find that to publish or disseminate that data would violate the trust of the informant. Anthropologies of the covert may clearly raise a host of difficult ethical and legal quandaries, and it is important that researchers be fully cognizant of the ethical implications of their work.

### Interviews and 'self-analysis'

After I began publishing short pieces about HTS, a number of employees and former employees of the programme contacted me anonymously (usually using pseudonyms), all wanting to talk about their experiences in the programme. This process required patience. To begin with, when one receives an unsolicited email or phone call from an anonymous person claiming to be employed by a secretive organization, skepticism should be the initial response. I found that the best approach was nonchalance: over time, they all eventually identified themselves to me by name (sometimes after several weeks), and I was able to confirm that they were indeed who they claimed to be. Although most of these people understandably did not want their names publicized, they nonetheless provided valuable information and occasionally, criticisms of the programme.

Those who I interviewed typically remained supportive of the HTS concept – that is, they believed that 'cultural knowledge' could lead to a kinder, gentler military occupation – but they were upset about the poor management of the programme, on-the-job harassment, or the predominant role of former 'special forces' personnel. Over time I was able to conduct numerous face-to-face interviews with former HTS employees, and these proved much more substantial than phone interviews.

Rapport-building was sometimes difficult. A number of former HTS members were traumatized by their experiences and did not want to talk about details. In some ways the situation was similar to the challenges faced in studying 'hidden populations' (Singer 1999) as described by medical anthropologist Merrill Singer.

Because I had limited direct contact or encounters with people who were actively involved in HTS, it was not always possible to gauge their perceptions, attitudes, and reactions towards me. HTS staff were generally evasive and did not respond to the enquiries I made about the programme in 2007 and 2008. When HTS officials did acknowledge those of us who were critically analyzing HTS, they did so via the media, and they were typically dismissive: 'ivory tower' intellectuals was a common epithet. Not surprisingly, at conferences and in other public fora, HTS staff either ignored, or refused to take questions from the audience. It is telling that at the most recent meetings of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in Montreal (in November 2011), HTS staff were present but did not make presentations, nor did they participate in open round table discussions in which session chairs encouraged audience members to contribute to a broader dialogue.<sup>13</sup>



Stauber, J. & S. Rampton  
2002. *Toxic sludge is good for you! Lies, damn lies and the Public Relations industry*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.

Singer, M. 1999. Studying Hidden Populations. In: Schensul, J. et al. (eds). *Mapping social networks, spatial data, and hidden populations*, pp 125-91. Lanham, MD: Rowman Altamira.

Tett, G. 2011. 'Anthropology, policy, and the global financial crisis'. Presented at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Montreal. 18 November.

Theimer, S. 2010. Obama's broken promise: Federal agencies not more transparent under Obama administration. *Huffington Post*, 17 March 2010. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/16/obamas-broken-promise-fed\\_n\\_500526.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/16/obamas-broken-promise-fed_n_500526.html)

US Department of Defense 2010. *Dictionary of military and associated terms*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp1\\_02.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf)

The most insightful 'self-analysis' regarding HTS has come from an anthropologist who was briefly employed there before resigning. John Allison has written a self-reflective account of the HTS training process, which often took the form of indoctrination. He writes:

...the military had a conscious agenda for reframing the civilians' [i.e. social scientists'] consciousness...Part of the cognitive restructuring was overt, as in the classes that made it clear that the HTT member will be 'embedded' in the military structure, just as are news reporters; 'harnessed' would be an apter description. Repeatedly, the Stockholm Syndrome was brought up to make clear the 'shaping' function of the classes...I began to see that I was enclosed by those I opposed; and my options were limited...If I accepted their assumptions about 'reality', I would have had to agree with their conclusions about patriotic responsibilities; the call to action, The Mission, The Chain of Command, the [cheap] value of [Afghan] lives ... compared to [American lives] ... (Allison 2010).

And later:

It became clear that the majority [of the HTT participants, who had military credentials] saw their job as to expedite the acculturation of the rest of us – those who had the skills and credentials that were needed to support the 'soft' warfare image that HTS advertises – an image of winning the hearts and minds of the peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq – to win the anthropologists over to their military culture's world view and values; or to marginalize and force the non-compliant to resign. (ibid)

Such self-analysis on the part of a former participant (and now outspoken critic) of the DoD programme goes a long way in helping us to understand the coercive nature of the programme, which appears to subject its civilian participants (including its social scientists) to forms of coercive persuasion and thought reform.

### Making the covert more overt

What, if anything, makes an anthropology of the covert different from investigative journalism?<sup>14</sup> I raise this question because in my experience, research on secretive programmes is occasionally described as 'journalistic', 'gratuitous', or 'polemical' by (mostly non-anthropological) academic peer reviewers. It is as if some academics are unable to accept anthropological work that confronts contemporary issues in a direct way that is intelligible to a broad public audience.

There are several clear points of difference between anthropologies of the covert and investigative journalism. To begin with, because most of this work involves documentary analysis, it can benefit from an anthropological search for meaning. For example, what are the deeper meanings – not only the texts, but the subtexts – of military documents in which highly abstracted forms symbolize people? What does it mean that social scientists – trained to be self-reflexive – are so easily able to transform a war zone into a grid of colour-coded tribal maps,

flow charts, Venn diagrams, and bar graphs, ready to be neatly inserted into PowerPoint presentations? How can such phenomena help us understand the process of distancing and even dehumanizing 'Others', in way that is perhaps comparable to the remote-control techniques of drone warfare?

Secondly, unlike much investigative journalism, anthropologies of the covert often require the use of theoretical concepts or hypotheses to make sense of certain phenomena. An example of this might be the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which can help explain how terms like 'human terrain' might lead to the treatment of people as dirt (or at best, as territory to be conquered) by those who have uncritically adopted the phrase.

Another point of difference between anthropology and investigative journalism is that the latter does not typically analyze covert organizations from a political economic perspective. Anthropological insights on 'penny capitalism' can be fruitfully applied to a better understanding of Pentagon capitalism. In other words, anthropologists are well prepared to analyze the rise of counterinsurgency programmes with the shifting practices of the corporations that benefit from them. While most journalistic coverage of HTS has taken for granted statements issued by Pentagon officials, anthropologists have from the outset tended to be critical of this data, probably because of an awareness of the links connecting the Department of Defense, military contract corporations, and commercial news organizations, and because of an awareness of controlling processes.

A final note: if we do not make a greater effort to disseminate the results of our work to the general public, we will lose the chance to strengthen our discipline's public profile. Gillian Tett has a point when she states that our discipline has more of a chance now of getting heard than at any other time in recent history<sup>15</sup>: it is indeed time for anthropologists to 'get savvy and get out of the bushes... The diversity of anthropology done today is incredible; the tragedy is that no one is aware of it' (Tett 2011).

As mentioned above, this may have the effect of upsetting those who would prefer that social scientists concern themselves exclusively with trivial questions couched in the language of high theory. But it is worth remembering the words of C. Wright Mills (1959), who observed: 'In many academic circles today anyone who tries to write in a widely intelligible way is liable to be condemned as a "mere literary man", or, worse still, "a mere journalist"... It may be that it is the result of an academic closing of the ranks on the part of the mediocre, who understandably wish to exclude those who win the attention of intelligent people, academic and otherwise.' Anthropology has the potential to make covert organizations more overt, and we should not let the opportunity slip away. ●

**Fig. 8 (below right).** The entrance to an HTS training facility, located in a shopping mall in downtown Leavenworth, Kansas.  
**Fig. 9 (below left).** Protesters in Frankfurt calling for the release of Bradley Manning, the man allegedly responsible for leaking thousands of US diplomatic cables to WikiLeaks.

