Anthropology and the covert
Methodological notes on researching military and intelligence programmes

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2. On debt, see Graeber (2013); on plunder, see Mathei & 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 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/; see also http://www.fas.org/ip/oddie/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! (Stich & Rampton 2002) provide an excellent introduction for those interested in detecting spin.

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. In addition, many anthropological projects have become less fixated on geographically defined ‘fields’ and processes (such as plunder), and commodities (such as sugar) that have transformed the world over the centuries. 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.2 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 programmes and organizations. 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.
The formulas, which covered such topics as ‘medicine, love, hunting, fishing, war, self-protection, destruction of enemies, witchcraft, [and]...events’ (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 azande 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…[and] had to dig beneath the surface for most of the facts recorded’ (ibid: 206).

Franz Boas took great interest in secret societies among the Kwakuitl 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 Kwakuitl 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
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.


Challenges for DoD Investment

- What Have We Learned?

- Need to ‘Map the Human Terrain’ across the Kill Chain
  - Enables the entire Kill Chain for the GWOT
  - Target Detection may be Difficult and Require Non-Traditional Means
  - Enemy Exists inside potentially High Collateral Damage Areas
  - And... in Denied Access Areas
  - Sometimes We ID the Enemy but....
  - ... do not have an adequate/appropriate Strike Solution in time
  - Mobile / Re-locatable Targets Remain a Problem!
  - The Target Characteristics may Remain Unknown even at...
  - Time Over Target ... & “How Did We Do?”
  - If Decision Timeline Varies and can be Long....let’s Enable the Rest of the Kill Chain to be Dynamically Responsive

Later, I began tracing the history of the ‘human terrain’ concept by looking through military field manuals, many of which are now posted online at the Federation of American Scientists’ website; a rich resource. I also began combing through Pentagon budget reports, which are filed every year by the DoD’s comptroller to the Congress. Most useful were documents associated with ‘RD&T&E’ (Research, Development, Test and Evaluation). I eventually found pages from these budget documents listing such things as MAP-HT, a computerized ethnographic mapping tool used by human terrain teams, and modeling and simulation programs that were to make use of human terrain data. Other potentially useful government documents include parts of the Congressional Record (for example, funding bills). In summary, official unclassified documents can provide small pieces that help to reveal the main features of much bigger puzzles.

A more colourful (and cryptic) group of openly available DoD documents consisted of PowerPoint presentations that I and other colleagues discovered online. Venn diagrams, multiple acronyms, colour-coded maps, and byzantine charts with microscopic text were typical of these materials, all worthy of serious linguistic analysis. Since HTS began, at least two unclassified reports have been made available to the public.
Yet another group of documents emerged, which I eventually came to see as public relations material. 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.8

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 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 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.

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 2008.9 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://publicintel- ligence.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.10 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, automated 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.11 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 it difficult 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 nonchalant: 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 I’ve released the identities of some of those who I interviewed, I made every effort to find out the context 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: ‘ivy 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.

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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 re-orienting 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; ‘harnesses’ 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…I if 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? 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: 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.