ARMINIG SOCIAL SCIENCE

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INTRODUCTION
In 2007, the United States Army and Marine Corps published a remarkable document. Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency was the product of a concerted effort by agents within the US military to have counterinsurgency, and the social scientific insights on which it rests, taken seriously again after a quarter century in the strategic wilderness. The mainstreaming of counterinsurgency has huge implications for the American way of warfare, and for the social sciences, because addressing the fact of insurgency means admitting a whole spectrum of issues that militaries often prefer to exclude from their operational remit. Successful counterinsurgency relies not on the targeting and elimination of enemies, but rather on the controlling and shaping of environments. Insurgencies are fought not just on physical terrain, but also on political, economic and cultural grounds. If they are to be understood and countered they must be addressed accordingly.

There are good reasons why counterinsurgency is often called “armed social science” (Packer 2006: 2). Increasingly though, it is not just military intellectuals and specialists that are being asked to serve in this regard; ordinary academics are also being called upon to lend their expertise. This essay considers two new initiatives in light of the historical relationship between the communities

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concerned (academic social science and the US national security establishment), and sketches the outlines of an ethical controversy that will continue to affect the social sciences in the years ahead.

**MINERVA AND THE HUMAN TERRAIN**

The *Minerva Research Initiative* (MRI), taking its name from an ancient Roman goddess of wisdom and warfare, is a university-based research programme announced in 2008 and sponsored by the Department of Defense (DoD). Its aim is to promote research in specific areas of social science that relate to national security, conflict and cooperation, and more broadly to improve the relationship between the DoD and the social science community (Asher 2008). The MRI is distinct from, but often discussed in tandem with, the Human Terrain System (HTS). This is an Army-run initiative whose mission is to “provide commanders in the field with relevant socio-cultural understanding necessary to meet their operational requirements” (US Army 2008a).

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The immediate ethical issue with these two programmes is a familiar one: the potential corruption of research ethics by patronage. While academia has long had to negotiate the tricky terrain of commercial and state interest and sponsorship, complicity in military violence is something that social scientists generally try to avoid. The 20th century history of the “politics-patronage-social science nexus” is a fascinating one, and one that – in the United States at least – seems to hinge on the academic transformations and culture wars of the 1960s (Solovey 2001: 179). While the social sciences had made valuable contributions to the war effort in WWII and was a key research area of the cold war (especially new disciplines such as game theory and ‘kremlinology’), the 1960s saw an abrupt estrangement from the national security state establishment. This was caused to a great degree by two developments: the Vietnam war and a US Army project code-named Camelot.

*Project Camelot sought* to develop a general social systems model that would facilitate the prediction and influence of political change in foreign countries (SORO 1964). The project never made it past the planning stages but triggered uproar over the perceived co-option of supposedly ‘neutral’ social science by the military. The estrangement was compounded by the fact that, following
its demoralising defeat in Vietnam, the military withdrew from the messy problematics of counterinsurgency theory, preferring to focus instead on the accumulation of firepower and the refinement of conventional strategy. This withdrawal was echoed at many levels of defence planning, with the so-called ‘small wars’ and ‘low-intensity conflicts’ of the late 20th century largely being delegated to the elite, expeditionary forces of the Marine Corps. The effect was that two communities with much to say to each other have had little open dialogue since the 1960s. But now, with the unveiling of initiatives like Minerva and the Human Terrain System, academic social scientists are once again being asked to re-enter the military fray.

**MISANTHROPOLOGY?**

The predicament of academic anthropologists with regards to the HTS speaks to the broader controversy surrounding these developments. Once called the ‘handmaiden of colonialism,’ anthropology had a dark history in the imperial adventures of European powers well before the events described above (it has also had a remarkable record in helping strategists to understand their enemies in the theatres of WWI and WWII). Yet in 2005, cultural anthropologist and Pentagon employee Montgomery McFate was able to say of her discipline: “it is a marginal contributor to US national-security policy at best and a punch line at worst” (2005: 5). A year earlier, the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) had finally sponsored a conference on ‘adversary cultural knowledge and national security’, the first important DoD conference on the social sciences since 1962. Since then, as senior social science advisor for the HTS, McFate has been overseeing the formation of Human Terrain Teams (HTT) – bringing together civilian anthropologists, linguists, political scientists and economists into teams that have already been embedded with combat brigades in Afghanistan (Shachtman 2008). As the HTTs mature into valuable operational assets, the recognition of cultural knowledge as a vital aspect of strategy is spreading in the higher echelons of the state-security hierarchy, exemplified by the enthusiastic adoption of Field Manual 3-24. That General David H. Petraeus, the man who oversaw publication of the manual (and whose PhD dissertation dealt with counterinsurgency theory and the lessons of Vietnam) was recently appointed to the head of Central Command indicates that the ‘human terrain’, ‘stability operations’ and ‘culture-centric warfare’ are likely to continue to supersede ‘force protection’, ‘shock-and-awe’ and ‘network-centric warfare’ as favoured slogans in the US strategists’ lexicon. If this trajectory continues, the necessity of culturally aware and astute
battlefield commanders will demand an ever-greater level of anthropological and political know-how. Until this sort of training can be successfully achieved by the military ‘in-house’, pressure on academic social scientists to bring their wisdom to bear on warfare will only increase.

Like Camelot, the HTTs were immediately controversial. In an October 2007 statement, the executive board of the American Anthropological Association expressed “grave concerns” about the programme generally, going on to frame these concerns with reference to “the context of a war that is widely recognized as a denial of human rights and based on faulty intelligence and undemocratic principles” (AAA Executive Board 2007). This framing is significant. For the AAA to oppose the HTS on professional principle is one thing, but to explicitly link that opposition to certain beliefs about a certain conflict is quite another.

By conflating professional research ethics with political opposition to American activities in Afghanistan and Iraq, the AAA here confuses *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellum*. An anthropologist’s personal opposition to a war is an issue of *jus ad bellum*, but *jus in bello* – right conduct in war – is a different matter. Counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen argues that enhanced cultural knowledge of the sort that anthropologists can provide works to decrease the human suffering that comes with war; therefore there is a moral imperative to help. That imperative might come up against other ones (pacifism for example, or a belief that the *conduct* of the war is unethical) but it cannot be simply dismissed because of political opposition or even because it violates a professional code of ethics (Kilcullen 2007: 20). Codes of ethics such as those of the AAA are only ever contingent, and there is nothing to stop them being overhauled in light of new realities. In fact, the AAA’s has been before, in order to permit a certain level of classified research by anthropologists seeking private and government contracts. Successive motions (in 1969, 1971, and 1982) barring anthropologists from engaging in clandestine research and from fraternizing with the CIA or military intelligence agencies have been passed by the AAA’s members and council. But in 1998 members adopted a new code of ethics, one that demoted itself to the role of providing just “a framework, not an ironclad formula, for making decisions” (Moos 2006). The idea was that this framework could then be weighed against other, competing demands if necessary.
MILITARY PATRONAGE AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Writing in *Anthropology Today*, Professor Roberto J. Gonzalez criticises the Human Terrain System as “mercenary anthropology,” but Montgomery McFate responds with the key question: “Is the use of anthropological knowledge by the national security community less ethical than the censorship and control of such knowledge by academic anthropologists who claim to believe in truth and freedom?” (Gonzalez 2007: 15; McFate 2007: 21). Gonzalez is so appalled by the notion of embedded anthropologists that he is moved to ask: “Is it anthropology at all?” (Gonzalez 2007: 17). It seems that it is – insofar as the methodologies and the techniques are the same – but we should not be surprised that many academic anthropologists do not see a way to accommodate counterinsurgency scholarship and the Human Terrain System within the boundaries of ‘their discipline.’

We recognise that anthropologists, like journalists, rely on their reputation for their legitimacy. Both professions depend on hard-won *bona fides* to secure the trust and cooperation of subjects and sources; if they do harm or deceive, they will see the human resources on which they rely evaporate. The furore over embedded journalists is instructive. No matter how scrupulously those reporters tried to maintain impartiality, their position inevitably left them open to accusations of bias. This bias, real or perceived, served to taint the credibility of all war journalists, thus making the hard work of disseminating accurate information from a combat zone even harder. There is an analogous effect with anthropologists who work with the military: “Because the HTS identifies anthropology and anthropologists with U.S. military operations, this identification—given the existing range of globally dispersed understandings of US militarism—may create serious difficulties for … non-HTS anthropologists and the people they study” (AAA Executive Statement 2007). Yet the humanitarian argument for engagement remains. The commander of the first brigade to receive a HTT estimated that, as a result of the team’s activity, ‘kinetic’ (read: lethal) operations were reduced by 60-70% (US Army 2008b). This figure is suspiciously high, and much more testing of this ‘proof-of-concept’ system is required before its actual impact and efficacy can be known, but the HTS certainly has potential as a means of reducing violence in combat theatres.
Arguably, American opponents of the Iraq or Afghanistan wars should focus their criticism not on the military but on the civilian leadership and foreign policy that were their permissive cause. Given the fact of those wars, any right-minded citizen should surely like to see them waged on as humanitarian a basis as possible. We can frame the issue thus: Is the goal of the HTS the militarization of socio-cultural knowledge, or merely the employment of such knowledge in military contexts to humanitarian ends? Depending on one’s view, the system represents either an abhorrent abuse of social science in the service of oppression and mass political violence, or a welcome attempt by an insular military to apprehend and influence the broader situation surrounding its ‘kinetic’ operations.

While the social scientists embedded with the HTTs in Afghanistan today are literally and figuratively on the frontline in these controversies, the political resolve and normative commitments of academics safe at home are also being tested by the Pentagon. For the broad scope and generous funding of the Minerva initiative potentially poses an even greater challenge to academic integrity than the relatively narrow activities of the HTS. Yet here too, the potential of patronage cannot be dismissed outright. Hans Morgenthau long ago lamented the tendency of academics to pursue “the trivial, the formal, the methodological, the purely theoretical, the remotely historical – in short, the politically irrelevant” (Morgenthau 1966: 73). Along these lines, the Minerva Research Initiative can be viewed as a necessary attempt, in the public interest, to build a bridge between the ivory tower of academe and the commanding heights of the national security and state establishment. But it can also be seen as a project analogous to Camelot, an attempt to transform academic research into a harmful instrument of state and military power. Pragmatically, we can approach Minerva as a well-intentioned programme that might produce useful public goods, but that nonetheless is likely to impact negatively on academic impartiality, and has the potential to implicate social scientists in political oppression.

In his farewell address to the nation in 1961, President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned against over-close collusion between government and scientific researchers, worrying that in certain circumstances, “a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity” (Eisenhower 1961). However we might understand these Minerva and the HTS, it is clear that these initiatives should be addressed with a degree of scepticism and caution, and the
ramifications for academia considered carefully. Mark Solovey has described the effect of military patronage on the social sciences in the post-WWII period:

*Although in retrospect it seems clear that military support left a deep imprint on the institutional conditions, intellectual orientation and political significance of academic social research, the threats of political subordination and loss of intellectual independence seemed at the time to be manageable; it seemed, to many key players at least, that social research carried out with military funding could contribute to important Cold War goals without losing its objectivity...* (Solovey 2001: 173).

If the social sciences are to maintain their objectivity, then any new configuration of the ‘politics-patronage-social science nexus,’ in the US or elsewhere, should be subjected to the most robust scrutiny and debate.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Whether we speak of the armed social science of counterinsurgency, the tactical ethnography of the Human Terrain System or the social and behavioural dimensions of ‘national security’ that are the target of the Minerva initiative, it is clear that the relationship between the Pentagon and the academic community is undergoing something of a transformation. While it might be tempting for researchers to resist outright any attempt by the military to encroach on their turf, the nature of contemporary conflict means that social scientific knowledge will continue to be deployed in times of war. Given that fact, it is worthwhile to consider ways in which academic expertise can be channeled through – and used against – national security establishments so as to alleviate the human suffering that is the constant and ultimate condition of war. This essay has broached this topic in the context of the academy and war apparatus of the United States, but researchers in Europe and elsewhere undoubtedly have similar cause to reflect on their relationship with state sponsors and with political violence.

**REFERENCES**


Asher, Thomas. 2008. “Making Sense of Minerva Controversy and the NSCC.” New York:
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