Culturally Sensitive War? The Human Terrain System and the Seduction of Ethics

Since 2005 the US Army has designed and implemented the Human Terrain System (HTS) as part of the counterinsurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹ Its centrepiece is the deployment with combat forces of Human Terrain Teams (HTTs), involving regional studies experts and social scientists. An article introducing and praising the programme in the *Military Review* extolled the significance of "ethnographic and cultural intelligence" for military operations in low-intensity conflicts: not drawing on such information would be wasteful, and "waste on the battlefield means loss of life, both civilian and military, with high potential for failure having grave geopolitical consequences to the loser" (Kipp et al., 2006: 8). Given the criticism of the US's failure to consult regional experts before its invasion of Iraq, an interest in culture appears progressive, and the more so if lives may be saved. Hence, the idea of HTS as a means of reducing the (human) cost of war is seductive. Despite positive coverage in the mainstream media (CEAUSSIC, 2009: 9-11), HTS has, however, been subject to fierce criticism, especially from anthropologists.

The promise of reducing harm to people caught up in warfare through particular capabilities is familiar not least from the discourse on smart weapons (Zehfuss, 2011) and from the recruitment of nuclear scientists to the war effort in the Second World War. Hence both the seductive appeal and the pitfalls of this idea are well established. Nevertheless, the controversy over HTS, especially among anthropologists, is worth exploring. Arguably, the recruitment of social scientists for war-fighting is part of a wider securitisation of public life

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(CEAUSSIC, 2009: 5), making it an obvious concern for those studying security. What interests me, however, is how the debate has been shaped and limited by its reference to ethics. Some of the discussion has revolved narrowly around professional ethics. Arguably, however, even contributions that go beyond this frame reproduce the idea that protecting others is an ethical, indisputable – and therefore somehow extra-political – aim. The controversy illustrates that ultimately ethics is of limited use in critiquing war: ethics suggests our capacity to make things better for others, which simultaneously serves as the very grounds on which war and contributions to it are justified. Thus the seduction of ethics is at the heart of the problem.

The Human Terrain System

HTS is part of a wider trend towards the idea that combat forces require awareness of the “human terrain” as much as of the physical terrain (Lucas, 2009: 4). It works in sync with a shift of strategy that focuses attention on counterinsurgency warfare marked by the introduction of the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, which stresses the need to understand culture (U.S. Army/Marine Corps, 2007).² General James H. Mattis observed that “our soldiers and Marines must learn to navigate the human (cultural) terrain with as much facility as they use maps to navigate the geographical terrain” (Lucas, 2009: 6). The military therefore has “cultural knowledge needs” (McFate & Jackson, 2005) and HTS was created to address these through using the social sciences, which are seen to provide expertise in analysing and “providing valid and objective information” on these issues (HTS, 2008: 3). HTS was

specifically designed to address cultural awareness shortcomings at the operational and tactical levels by giving brigade commanders an organic capability to help understand and deal with ‘human terrain’ – the social, ethnographic, cultural, economic, and political elements of the people among whom a force is operating (Kipp et al., 2006: 9).

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For an analysis of the extent of this shift see Ucko, 2009.

Through HTS social scientists are to fill the forces' "cultural knowledge gap" (HTS, 2008: 2).

Although HTS involves several components,³ its core, and most controversial aspect, are HTTs consisting ideally of "experienced cultural advisors" (Kipp et al., 2006: 12). While the number of team members varies, the five planned roles were leader, cultural analyst, regional studies expert, human terrain research manager and human terrain analyst (Kipp et al., 2006: 12). The cultural analyst was to be an anthropologist or sociologist fluent in the local language while the regional studies analyst would have a similar background, without having a specified disciplinary social science background. Both were to hold an MA or PhD (Kipp et al., 2006: 13). However, recruiting individuals with such expertise has proved difficult, and George R. Lucas observes that few individuals with the totality of this skill set are likely to exist (Lucas, 2009: 151-152).

According to supporters, deploying brigades will be "culturally empowered" through HTS (Kipp et al., 2006: 15). How this is to be achieved is set out in the *Human Terrain Team Handbook*. The mission of HTTs is to conduct "operationally-relevant, open-source social science research, and provide commanders and staffs [...] with an embedded knowledge capability, to establish a coherent, analytic cultural framework for operational planning, decision-making, and assessment" (HTS, 2008: 4). What this seems to mean is that HTTs gather information employing social science methodologies from which they immediately generate relevant facts for the commanders. The handbook explicitly asserts that irrelevant information and ambiguity must be stripped out so as to pass on only objective, mission-relevant facts. More broadly, it identifies five key tasks for HTTs: 1) to "conduct a Cultural Preparation of the Environment", that is, to collect, analyse and brief on socio-cultural aspects of the area of operations; 2) to "integrate" information on the human terrain into the Unit Planning Process; 3) to provide "support to current operations"; 4) to assess the effects of operations on the human terrain; and 5) to provide training on socio-cultural issues (HTS, 2008: 24-25).

³ The CEAUSSIC report (2009: 13-17) identifies seven components.

HTS has been promoted as building on the insight that the “human dimension” is central to counterinsurgency or “irregular warfare situations” (HTS, 2008: 3), that successes in Afghanistan and Iraq “closely correlate with proactive efforts by coalition forces to understand and respect the culture” (Kipp et al., 2006: 11). Christopher King, now Director of the HTS Social Science Directorate and previously an HTS staff social scientist, explains that the programme is to “enable culturally astute decision-making” and that this “allows commanders to consider the possible ramifications of their choices with consideration of local populations’ perceptions, needs and interests” (2009: 16). Social scientists are to recommend options for “the use of non-lethal effects” (HTS, 2008: 13; see also 26). HTS (2008: 56 and 82) claims that insights from HTS research will not be used for lethal targeting. That is, people must be the focus and HTS is represented as benign for the population, as promoting respect and reducing the use of lethal force.

Some problematic issues are obvious. It is, firstly, not clear that the programme can achieve what it is promoted as doing. The claim is that HTS can reduce the death toll. This relies on the expectation that kinetic operations will be reduced through cultural understanding in two ways. On the one hand, HTTs are to promote cultural understanding, and – in a significant *non sequitur* – it is assumed that this will increase support for institutions supported by the US (HTS, 2008: 48), reducing violent conflict. As Hugh Gusterson (Udris, Der Derian and Udris, 2010) notes, in this thinking, resistance is framed as a matter of cultural miscommunication. That is, this assumes that Iraqis and Afghans participate in the insurgency because they lack a sufficient grasp of what coalition forces are trying to achieve rather than because they perceive their plans correctly and object to them. On the other hand, HTS supporters believe that “an educated and ‘culturally agile’ military will kill fewer, rather than more, innocent civilians”.⁴ Yet this is difficult to show. While Col. Martin Schweitzer testified before the House Armed Services Committee that kinetic operations had been reduced by 60-70 per cent and that, without HTS, “we would have lost double the lives”, he acknowledges that this reflects impressions by military commanders

⁴ Felix Moos cited in Marcus, 2009: 40.

rather than an evaluation based on evidence (Weinberger, 2008; CEAUSSIC, 2009: 55; Price, 2010: 249-250). Crucially, establishing how many civilians are *not* killed because of HTS involves a comparison with a counterfactual and is inherently problematic.⁵

Further, the programme presumes that 'social science' can be conducted while carrying arms.⁶ Yet it seems unlikely that ethnographic research as described in the handbook is compatible with wearing fatigues, carrying arms and being transported, protected and supported by combat troops.⁷ As one Marine commander observed, "when you're in uniform you have all the coercive force of the U.S. government" (CEAUSSIC, 2009: 50). Moreover, even if such research could be conducted under these conditions, it is questionable whether academic inquiry can produce the mission-relevant objective facts that are sought, especially as 'culture' is more complicated than is acknowledged. Finally, representing people as 'terrain' is significant. The 'human dimension' is regarded as a knowable, objective backdrop to military operations to be manipulated in pursuit of military objectives.

Anthropologists and their Ethics

HTS has been represented as about anthropologists. In *US News & World Report* civilian anthropologists were called "perhaps the most controversial weapon in [the US military's] counterinsurgency arsenal today".⁸ This perception is interesting in view of the figures. In April 2009 HTS employed 417 people, of whom 49 held a PhD, although up to a third are thought to have left following a change in status and reduction in pay in summer 2009. Of the 417 only six had a PhD and another five an MA in anthropology (CEAUSSIC, 2009: 12). Thus, anthropologists only account for a small number of HTS employees, who hold degrees in a range of social sciences, including international relations, political science and their subdisciplines (CEAUSSIC, 2009: 60-61). Hence the comparative lack of debate about HTS within International Relations is noteworthy.

⁵ On this issue related to precision bombing see Zehfuss, 2011.

⁶ HTT members are normally armed for self-defence (HTS, 2008: 47; González, 2009a: 2), though the practice varies (CEAUSSIC, 2008: 24).

⁷ Griffin (2010: 222) reports walking streets with a "platoon-plus-sized security element".

⁸ 30 November 2007 cited in González, Gusterson & Price, 2009: 2.

It is not surprising that HTS, developed to support unpopular military operations, has met with criticism. In tune with its perception as drawing on anthropological expertise for warfare, anthropologists have actively investigated, questioned and vocally opposed the programme. In 2007 the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) released a statement calling HTS an “unacceptable application of anthropological expertise” (AAA Executive Board, 2007) while the Board of the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) expressed its “grave concern” (Robinson, 2008: 12). In 2009 the AAA Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the US Security and Intelligence Communities (CEAUSSIC, 2009: 3) produced a 72-page report on HTS which suggested that the AAA should “emphasize the incompatibility of HTS with disciplinary ethics and practice for job seekers and that it further recognize the problem of allowing HTS to define the meaning of ‘anthropology’ within DoD”. Moreover, the Network of Concerned Anthropologists (NCA), formed in 2007 in response to what is described as an increasing militarization of US anthropology, has published critiques – in particular the *Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual* (2009) - and promoted a “Pledge of Non-participation in Counterinsurgency”.⁹

The instrumentalisation of cultural knowledge for war-fighting, that is, for an activity that is hardly conducive to the well-being of people in the war zone, has to be of concern to practitioners of a profession inclined to engage, seek to understand and empathise with others. There seems to be “a contradiction between the goal of anthropology, to help local populations, and the goals of the army, which often wants to control them” (Weinberger, 2010). The strong reaction from within anthropology attests to that, but seems to be reinforced by the idea that anthropology has been problematically entangled with counterinsurgency in the past (Gusterson, 2009: 47-50; Lucas, 2009: Chapters 1 and 2). David Price (2009) observes that, “given anthropology’s often odious past role as a handmaiden to colonialism, these issues easily move from the realm of individual politics to disciplinary politics, and properly raise the attentions of disciplinary professional

associations.” Thus, because of anthropologists’ objectionable past involvement with military operations, whether or not anthropologists contribute to HTS is a matter of concern for anthropologists as a group, not just an individual choice. This is underlined by the fear that anthropology might become militarised as funding by the military and other security institutions may affect research agendas (Gusterson, 2009: 53).

Gusterson recounts the history in the *Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual*. The core of the problem arises in the 1960s when the US was at war in Vietnam and concerned about further insurgency campaigns. Project Camelot was “a lavishly funded initiative to mobilize anthropologists and other social scientists to investigate the origins of peasant radicalism and insurgency and devise strategies to preempt, contain, and repress revolutionary movements” (Gusterson, 2009: 48). As Gusterson (2009: 48) points out, its “proponents saw Camelot as an enlightened attempt to reduce the use of military firepower by using social science to forestall the emergence of insurgencies in the first place”. Yet the project was shut down amid controversy when peace researcher Johan Galtung made it public. Even after its cancellation Camelot remained of concern to anthropologists because field research in Latin America was hampered by fears among co-researchers and research subjects that US researchers might pass information to the CIA (Gusterson, 2009: 48). Lucas notes, however, that Camelot “hardly involved any anthropologists”; the problem was not that anthropologists had committed actual wrongs, but that the project undermined anthropological research in Latin America (Lucas, 2009: 60). Around the same time, anthropologists were found to advise the Pentagon in respect of Southeast Asian villages. The ensuing controversy within the profession led to the adoption, in 1971, of the first ethics code by the AAA (Gusterson, 2009: 48-49; AAA, 1971). This code “used strong language to condemn anthropological participation in secret research and affirm anthropologists’ primary obligation [...] to those they study” (Gusterson, 2009: 49). Gusterson (2009: 49; see also Fosher, 2010a: 179) suggests that the discipline reacted strongly in part because “anthropology’s unique research method [...] involves forging deep bonds of trust with human beings in order to learn about their world”. Without the trust of those they study

anthropologists are unable to do their research; hence the stakes are high if this trust is placed in jeopardy.

The HTS controversy seems to recall the one over Camelot in two ways. First, anthropologists are again embroiled in controversy over a project that involves few of them but may have serious ramifications for their discipline. Second, in objecting to HTS anthropologists have again framed the problem in terms of professional ethics, now armed with a meanwhile revised ethics code (AAA, 1998). Hence, to a significant extent the debate is not about the merits and dangers of HTS *per se* but about what it is appropriate for anthropologists to do. As Lucas (2009: 8) says, the “controversy has been framed [...] *primarily as a matter of ‘ethics’ and ‘professional ethics.’*”

The 2007 AAA Executive Board statement on HTS identifies not least the problems participating anthropologists would face in appropriately disclosing their identity and research agenda, doubts over their ability to fulfil their obligation not to harm those they study and problems in obtaining voluntary informed consent as reasons for their disapproval, making reference to regulations within the AAA Code of Ethics. The CEAUSSIC report (2009: 42) similarly identifies the failure to acknowledge core concerns of the ethics code in HTS design as a problem, especially “concerns that relate to: the establishment of voluntary consent, taking care to insure that no harm comes to research participants as a result of HTS research, and full disclosure to research participants what will be done with collected data”. The Code clearly establishes that the “primary ethical obligations” of anthropological researchers are “to the peoples, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work.” These obligations “can supersede the goal of seeking knowledge” and include the obligation to “avoid harm or wrong” (AAA, 2009: Section III, A1).¹⁰ The CEAUSSIC report (2009: 18) further points out that “if HTS is a research organization, then it would be required to comply with federal law for human subjects protection”. That HTS has

¹⁰ The AAA adopted a revised code in 2009. Section III, A1 remained unchanged.

avoided oversight by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) is politely called “unusual” (CEAUSSIC, 2009: 42; see also 47).¹¹

To assess the seriousness of the concern that participation in HTS would constitute or likely entail a breach of professional ethics, especially the crucial no harm principle, it is necessary to know what is done with the information generated. The extent to which data gathered by HTTs may be used for “lethal targeting” or could be used “to the detriment of informants” in other ways is a key issue (CEAUSSIC, 2009: 32). While the *Human Terrain Team Handbook* and other publications claim that information generated through HTS is not used for lethal targeting, it is difficult to see how such a separation could be maintained, especially if social scientists are tasked with providing mission-relevant information. The CEAUSSIC report highlights the admission - in a response by HTS to a query from the commission - that it is possible that those who interact with HTTs may become subject to ‘lethal targeting’, even if by insurgent groups rather than US forces. Of course, “ethically, it would not matter who does the targeting” (CEAUSSIC, 2009: 32).

King (2009: 16) describes an ethical dilemma involving the handling of information from his HTS deployment: he was asked by a military intelligence officer to identify individuals who, in interviews, had indicated their willingness to work for the insurgents if they became unemployed. King recounts asking himself whether his primary responsibility was towards his research subjects or their potential victims should they contribute to the insurgency and how he might to protect both. After discussions among his team, the decision was not to disclose individuals’ identities for three reasons: 1) in order to keep the promise of anonymity, 2) because they “wanted to maintain IRB standards of protection” and 3) because they “did not know the validity of their comments, which were statements of general attitudes about the hypothetical future, not statements of intent to harm” (King, 2009: 16). This was accepted and King (2009: 16) concludes that contributing directly “at the site where research is done” is more valuable than merely teaching in classrooms. Nevertheless, given King’s

¹¹ IRBs are similar to ethics committees in the UK, though their legal status is different. For a history of IRB oversight for social science research involving human subjects see Schrag, 2010.

report, it seems difficult to dispute the CEAUSSIC report's conclusion that "in a circumstance in which tactical military goals are preeminent, and in which members of HTTs regularly negotiate circumstances of uncertainty of the battle space, and in which their data can circulate in ways not entirely under their control, ethical practices are, to say the least, challenging to maintain" (CEAUSSIC, 2009: 48). After all, King's list of reasons implies that he might have taken a different decision had the threat posed by his research subjects been more concrete.

Moreover, in King's case the HTT is aware of the significance of concrete pieces of information and able to prevent their circulation. What his considerations cannot address is the broader contribution of providing knowledge. This wider issue is illustrated in a response by Lieutenant Colonel Gian P. Gentile to blog postings by HTT member Marcus Griffin: "Don't fool yourself. These Human Terrain Teams whether they want to acknowledge it or not, in a generalized and subtle way, do at some point contribute to the collective knowledge of a commander which allows him to target and kill the enemy in the Civil War in Iraq" (González 2009a: 68). This is reinforced by a shift in HTS practice towards more of an intelligence analysis function (Burke, 2010: 35). Thus, the 'no harm' principle seems severely undermined and González (2009a: 3) argues that "HTS represents a perversion of social science because it puts at risk Afghans and Iraqis who share information about their lives with embedded social scientists."

The Limits of Ethics

Given the Code of Ethics, and the evident problems in fulfilling its requirements regarding voluntary informed consent and above all the protection from harm of research subjects, it seems that no self-respecting AAA member should contribute to HTS (see also Gusterson, 2010a). The matter is serious: people might be killed due to information provided to the military by anthropologists on HTS deployment. Indeed, few anthropologists have been prepared to participate, despite the financial incentives (Gusterson, 2010b: 293). Yet the strength of the reaction – and the need for a 72-page report – indicates that things are not

straightforward. HTS has, as Price (2009) points out, generated great “friction” among anthropologists and *some* have joined. It is perhaps important that the AAA Code (2009: Introduction) is not binding; it is a “guideline”.

The upshot of a critique derived from professional ethics is not primarily that HTS is problematic but that it is problematic for anthropologists to participate. It is clearly appropriate for anthropologists to consider their position and arguably it would be inappropriate for their professional organisations to express views on matters other than the concerns of the discipline. Nevertheless, the focus on the Code allows for the conclusion – given especially the claim that it is anthropology’s *unique* research method that makes objecting to HTS so vital - that the solution is to employ other social scientists. One vocal critic seems to suggest just this. According to Price (2009), “anthropology is not political science, and anthropologists have different commitments to those who share their lives and vulnerabilities with them”, which implies that it might be acceptable for political scientists to contribute.¹² The problem is that critique articulated in terms of the professional ethics of a subgroup of social scientists makes it possible for this critique to be ‘quarantined’ (Gusterson, 2011).

The suggestion that anthropologists are marked out by their profounder care for their research subjects might not only be insulting to other social scientists; it also obscures that the requirements of ethics have been as controversial in anthropology as elsewhere in the social sciences (Lucas, 2009: Chapter 1). Indeed, they continue to be so.¹³ Debates over extending the remit of IRBs to the social sciences, which featured controversies not least over whether the requirement not to do harm would undermine the possibility of critical social science research (Schrag, 2010: 16 and *passim*), underline this. Significantly, an alternative codification exists *within* anthropology. When the SfAA Board expressed “grave concern” about HTS, they also affirmed that providing “training, analysis and evaluation” to the military

¹² APSA guidance does not privilege the ‘no harm’ principle (APSA Committee, 2008: Section H). ISA has no code pertaining to human research subjects.

¹³ A new version of the (AAA 2011) is currently under consultation. See also the report of the AAA Ethics Task Force (2011).

could be a good thing “so long as these activities are compatible with this organization’s code of ethics” (Robinson, 2008: 12). The SfAA Code starts with the duties of disclosure, ensuring the voluntariness of participation and protecting appropriate confidentiality. Interestingly, in contrast to the AAA Code which simply asserts the obligation to avoid harm,¹⁴ the SfAA Code speaks of the duty to disclose “within the limits of our knowledge” any “significant risks to those we study that may result from our activities” (Robinson, 2008: 12).

What seems to be behind the SfAA’s less strident condemnation of HTS is not only the wider problematic of anthropologists studying the military or contributing in some professional capacity to activities of the military but the not entirely dissimilar work anthropologists do in business and industry. Some of this involvement raises ethical concerns similar to those generated by HTS. Given the fraught relations between anthropology and the US military, not least in response to past instances where anthropologists consider their expertise was exploited and their profession damaged, conducting research or consulting for the military is considered problematic, while even involvement with the military to study it as an institution may raise concerns.

The debate about the merits and problems of military anthropology – that is, researching *on* the military rather than *for* the military - is beyond the remit of this article,¹⁵ but the problem of this distinction is significant. While HTS has attracted attention, it does not exhaust anthropologists’ involvement with the US military. Anthropologists have contributed to formulating strategy, developing training materials and writing field manuals, including the *Counterinsurgency Manual* (Lucas, 2009: 5). The CEAUSSIC report (2009: 45) distinguishes between participation in HTS – that is, doing what is framed as anthropological field research

¹⁴ The 1998 version said that researchers “must do everything in their power to ensure that they do not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research or perform other professional activities” (AAA, 1998: A2); the 2009 version asserts that researchers must “ensure” that no harm comes to people (AAA, 2009: A2).

¹⁵ Lucas (2009: 7 and Chapter 3) notes that military anthropologists feel unfairly caught up in the HTS controversy. However, the CEAUSSIC report (2009: 52) identifies embedding with troops to study *them* as in accordance with ethical practice. Gusterson (2007: 164) proposes to distinguish not along the lines of *what* is being studied but between those who offer a critique of militarism and those who do not. Keith Brown (2008), on the other hand, challenges anthropologists to acknowledge the diversity of uses of cultural knowledge *by* the military.

while being attached to forces on deployment – and educating military personnel, which is regarded as less ethically problematic because it avoids “role confusion (between ethnographer and supporter of military operations)”. The permissibility of such activities might also be based on contributions other than research not falling foul of the ethics code’s provision concerning the protection of research subjects. However, CEAUSSIC (2009: 26-27) also raises the question of whether what HTT members do is ‘research’ at all, potentially invalidating the critique that ethical regulations pertaining to research cannot be maintained.

Part of this debate seems concerned with what scholars may be considered to be responsible for. Is teaching military personnel how to read cultural signs in order to identify insurgents which may subsequently be killed as morally problematic as doing the identifying yourself? The Code at first sight appears to provide a clear answer as all responsibilities in respect of teaching are to “students and trainees”, not those who might be affected by the impact of the teaching (AAA, 2009: Section IV). More broadly, the Code gives guidance as to whom anthropologists should be concerned about in what way, even though it indicates that researchers have to negotiate particular situations (AAA, 2009: Introduction). Yet there seem to be two ways to read the Code. On the one hand it contains various catch-all assertions suggesting that no professional activity by anthropologists may ever harm anyone;¹⁶ on the other hand it privileges obligations to research subjects. On the latter reading, responsibilities to others arise from studying them; that is, the Code implies the possibility of not acquiring obligations to people *by* not studying them. This delimitation of obligation, while perhaps appropriate for guiding anthropologists’ professional conduct, means that in a debate derived from the Code serious consideration of those who are not (potential) research subjects - most obviously the military forces deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq - is absent. A few asides mention that having to protect social scientists in the warzone

¹⁶ The crucial Section III, A2 (AAA, 2009) apparently covers “other professional activities”; this is, however, in tension with the introductory phrase of the same sentence which restricts it to “conducting and publishing [...] research”.

is an additional burden on troops and further places them at risk (Lucas, 2009: 154), but there is no sustained consideration of ethical issues arising in regard to military personnel.¹⁷

The AAA Code regulating scholarly ethics implies an economy of protection in which research subjects are primary. One source of tension in terms of developing a critique that resonates beyond anthropology is that this contrasts with the military economy of protection which privileges non-combatants and co-combatants. Lucas's book on the ethics of military anthropology, occasioned by HTS but conceived more broadly, is situated at this tension. He claims anthropologists treat their ethics code as beyond critique; he suggests that it is the code of professional ethics that is defective (Lucas 2009: 111). Given the passion and care with which ethics is debated in AAA,¹⁸ this seems unfair. Lucas's point, however, is not that anthropologists are not reflective about their Code, but that they seem unwilling to read it in the context of – and see it as limited by – other codes.

Lucas roundly condemns the critical response to HTS. Although he acknowledges anthropologists' "earnest and fervent desire not to be made into inadvertent accomplices in inflicting harm, misery or abuse on precious 'research subjects'" (Lucas, 2009: 19), he suggests that they are insufficiently steeped in ethical debates and poorly qualified to formulate "cogent responses" to the "complex moral dilemmas" they face (Lucas, 2009: 18). For Lucas, a professional code that would forbid contributing even to a just war is morally problematic. He moreover seeks to show that what he argues is the condemnation of most if not all activities that might be summarised under the heading of military anthropology rests on a prior and unexamined condemnation of the wars that are potentially supported by such activities. Given his conviction that participation in a legitimate war must remain possible, he calls the concerns of the NCA and even the AAA "inflammatory" (Lucas, 2009: 7). From his

¹⁷ This is particularly interesting in view of the recognition by the Task Force (2011) that "anthropologists 'studying up,' studying those in power, do not owe greater ethical obligation to powerful individuals than to those vulnerable to that power". While the US military is 'in power', ordinary soldiers might not be. More fundamentally, this acknowledges that anthropologist *may* at times see their primary responsibility as being towards someone other than their research subjects, something the current Code does not do.

¹⁸ See the work of the Ethics Task Force (2011) and the related blog space at <http://blog.aaanet.org/ethics-task-force/>. For an anthropologist calling for the code to be revised in the HTS debate see Foshier, 2010b: 270.

perspective, making available one's expertise to support a just military operation conducted by one's country is not merely permissible but morally required (Lucas, 2009: 98).

The AAA Code (2009: Section III) indeed states that anthropological researchers should "be alert to proper demands of good citizenship". Hence other obligations are acknowledged. Lucas (2009: 39) himself takes just war reasoning as an unproblematic starting point and thus his critique is not dissimilar from the anthropological commitment to their Code. He simply sets his preferred set of rules (just war thinking) over another (the anthropologists' code). Both critiques thus operate within a problematic conception of a rule-governed ethics,¹⁹ and Lucas offers no real insights on how to negotiate clashes between the codes; he merely assumes that just war thinking – or the supposed defence of the US – should be prioritised.

The Seduction of Ethics

Lucas's critique, though unpersuasive, draws attention to a wider context and thus brings us back to the claims on behalf of HTS: the US finds itself involved in costly counterinsurgency wars and social scientists can help reduce the death toll. The public and indeed the military seeking expert assistance might find it surprising that in this context anthropologists consult their ethics code and declare their unavailability for the job: what could be more significant than saving lives?

Griffin (2010: 229), a vocal supporter of and participant in HTS, reveals that saving lives is a motivation when he asserts that there "are people likely alive and uninjured today that otherwise would not be". While HTS members defend their work as reducing harm to civilians, the CEAUSSIC report (2009: 40) sees this as problematic as this amounts to a 'tactical support' function. Nevertheless, saving lives seems a worthy aim. Some critics acknowledge the sincere and laudable intentions of HTS participants, while suggesting they are insufficiently attentive to wider implications of their work. The problem is not just the actual harm that may come to research subjects but also the contribution to promoting

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For why such ethics is problematic see Zehfuss, 2009.

imperialism - or, as Gusterson (Udris, Der Derian and Udris, 2010) puts it, greasing the wheels of occupation. In Price's (2009) words, "no matter how anthropological contributions ease and make gentle this conquest and occupation, it will not change the larger neocolonial nature of the larger mission", confirming that HTS might be rejected because of a prior objection to the wars it supports.

Thus, while HTS social scientists may be well-intentioned, this is beside the point. In contrast, In Lucas's view it would be impermissible and even beyond comprehension to condemn individuals who do not have malevolent intentions (Lucas, 2009: 112 and Chapter 3). Lucas's is a limited way of looking at the ethical dilemmas as he does not consider that participating in an activity known to cause harm may be problematic, even if individual events that cause actual harm are not intended (see Owens, 2003; Zehfuss, 2011).

Yet while benign intent is insufficient to establish ethicality, intent seems significant in a different sense. González (2010b: 124) rightly notes that "[m]any of those who have chosen to participate in HTS appear to have done so for humanitarian reasons – in order to 'do good', or at least to prevent a horrible situation from getting worse." Both HTS social scientists and military personnel *may* pursue the acquisition of cultural knowledge for benign reasons, and hence the seductiveness of the expectation that cultural expertise can contribute to making war less destructive is important. To simply dismiss such intentions as based on false consciousness, especially an inadequate grasp of US imperialism, sounds worryingly similar to the idea that insurgents oppose US occupation because they do not properly understand its purpose.

This seductive appeal has been acknowledged. In explaining the SfAA Board Resolution on HTS, Sarah Ann Robinson (2008: 11) summarises arguments presented in the debate and recognises them as "seductive", especially ideas of "helping" framed in terms of "speaking truth to power" and "harm reduction". Given the complexity of the issues, the board "decided that individual anthropologists are free to make their own choices, BUT SfAA can give guidance for legitimization" (Robinson, 2008: 11). The resolution reflects ambiguity:

The Board of SfAA expresses grave concern about the potentially harmful use of social science knowledge and skills in the HTS project. SfAA believes that social scientists can be helpful to the military by offering training, analysis and evaluation so long as these activities are compatible with this organization's code of ethics (Robinson, 2008: 12).

Catherine Lutz, too, acknowledges that being asked to help improve a terrible situation is tempting; yet she urges us to consider whom one is being asked to help to do what (Udris, Der Derian and Udris, 2010).

These interventions recognise the powerfully seductive logic of the claim that cultural knowledge may reduce levels of violence. Yet this seduction might be based on illusion. González (2010b: 111) suggests that "the way in which HTS has been packaged – as a kinder, gentler counterinsurgency – is completely unsupported by evidence" and González, Gusterson and Price (2009: 17) call this idea "a myth and a fantasy". Despite this, Gusterson himself admits to his "ambivalence" towards how his discipline is simultaneously valued and used in problematic ways (Udris, Der Derian & Udris, 2010).

While there are HTS enthusiasts who view others' cultures as merely 'terrain' to be mastered by the military (McFate & Jackson, 2005), the more interesting question seems why benignly intentioned social scientists might be drawn in by the promise of improving war, despite the evident danger of playing "into the worst tradition of social science as a 'handmaiden to colonialism'" (González 2009a: 4). This issue is illustrated in a film by David Udris, James Der Derian and Michael Udris from the Watson Institute of International Studies. Part Three of *Human Terrain* portrays experiences and thoughts of HTS social scientist Michael Bhatia. Bhatia had been a Visiting Fellow at the Watson Institute before joining HTS. He was killed by an IED on 7 May 2008 while on deployment in Afghanistan (Community Editor, 2009). In exploring Bhatia's decision to join HTS the film shows email correspondence, field recordings and footage of Bhatia involved in discussions about the

military's increasing interest in culture as well as interviews with colleagues, friends and family.

Although the film acknowledges that Bhatia had run out of funding for his PhD, the evidence presented in the film shows him as someone who wanted to help, not just his country but also people affected by his country's military operations. He appears as someone who had the sorts of benign intentions acknowledged by some critics. Bhatia also saw problems; he took months to decide whether to participate. Emails sent to his academic mentor, friends and colleagues show him struggling with complex ethico-political issues both before and during his deployment. While Bhatia was a political scientist, he was aware of anthropologists' concerns regarding professional ethics. Yet he clearly did not find that their code provided the answer as to what he should do.²⁰ He worried about the question of imperialism. While he was prepared to contribute to the operation in Afghanistan, which he calls a "quasi-just war", he would not have participated in the Iraq war, considering it "morally suspect" (Udris, Der Derian and Udris, 2010). Bhatia also argues that critics know too little about what HTS social scientists actually do; in one email sent while on deployment he stresses that he is not involved in lethal targeting.

In the film, the examination of Bhatia's decision to contribute to HTS follows on from portrayals of military training 'in culture' and of critics' challenges, and we can easily see much that is wrong with the idea of culturally sensitive war (without touching on anthropologists' professional ethics). Yet just as we relax into having our critical attitude of what is so clearly wrong safely confirmed, the film unsettles us by portraying Bhatia as an articulate, bright young American, a respected and well-liked colleague, who somehow believed that he should help out with the counterinsurgency.

The film does everything to make Bhatia's decision intelligible, acknowledging - but not reducing it to - the potential financial motive. What is striking is not that the film paints a

²⁰ Nor do anthropologists think that it is that simple. See the blogspace on the revisions of the ethics code <http://blog.aaanet.org/ethics-task-force/ethics-task-force-first-principle/>.

favourable picture of Bhatia, but that his decision remains unintelligible. What is most striking is that those who loved him are clearly unable to understand it. Although Bhatia explains his aspirations, colleagues, friends and family struggle to provide an explanation for why, in the end, he chose to join HTS. Much as they try, they just cannot grasp it. It makes no sense. It is not what they would have done. It is not what Michael, sensibly, should have done. Despite our access to his thoughts as expressed in correspondence and conversation with others, his decision remains mysterious, his reasons unsatisfactory. Apparently, Bhatia felt an obligation to do something that he could not explain to others.

This inability to express or justify what one considers the responsible thing to do is familiar from critical engagements with the limitations of ethics. Jacques Derrida (1995: 67) famously uses Abraham's predicament upon being told to sacrifice his son Isaac to illustrate and explore the aporia of situations within which we are called to responsibility. Derrida (1995: 61) maintains that Abraham teaches us that "far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics incites irresponsibility." Responsibility becomes possible only by breaking away from the ethical order and making a decision. In doing so, we find ourselves alone, unable to communicate our reasons. That is, in a moment of decision, we experience our singularity: we may neither be replaced nor helped by anyone else, because just "as no one can die in my place, no one can make a decision, what we call 'a decision', in my place" (Derrida, 1995: 60). Ethics provides no answer.

Whatever his reasons, Bhatia seems to have made a decision that he could not explain by reference to ethics. In the film, Bhatia's mother suggests that he felt some obligation to contribute to making things better, even if 'things' were a counterinsurgency campaign. Or perhaps he felt like Kerry Foshier (2010b: 267) who explains, regarding her view that it is good to get involved in working in ethically challenging environments such as the military, "[w]hile much of disciplinary attention has gone to the consequences of action, some of us also feel compelled to look at the consequences of inaction, especially in terms of individual lives." Whatever may be the case, the issue is not to identify the applicable code. As the

AAA Code (2009: Introduction) acknowledges, a code cannot replace the decision; indeed it “requires judgment” (Fosher, 2010a: 178).

Members of the NCA suggest thinking about this differently. They want us to think about HTS in relation to what they see as a militarization of US culture (González, 2010b; Lutz, 2009). Lutz argues that issues more significant than supposedly improving war should be addressed, not least the question of why military violence is pursued in the first place (Udris, Der Derian & Udris, 2010). The question is not how ongoing wars might be conducted better but how having to pose this question could be avoided altogether in future. González (2009a: 105) suggests that “critical ethnographies of the United States” are needed. He notes that “the question of whether war is appropriate at all today” (González 2009a: 124) is missing. Given that much debate appears to turn a wider ethico-political issue into a technical matter of the probity of particular kinds of conduct by professional anthropologists, such interventions are important. As González (2010b: 105) notes, though “anthropological concerns over the uses and misuses of ethnographies are important, they pale in comparison to the potential effects upon people in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia as US military and intelligence agencies relentlessly seek ‘cultural knowledge’ about these regions.”

Yet if the problem is the militarisation of US society, it is not clear why contributing to HTS should be *particularly* problematic. From this perspective HTS is epiphenomenal. Precisely because this is a powerful argument Griffin’s observation that HTS is being treated “as some kind of whipping child for their anxiety about U.S. forces being in Iraq” (Griffin, 2010: 229) seems plausible. HTS may have gained attention as it appears the main site where anthropologists are making a tangible contribution to the imperial project, rather than because HTS is likely to have the most far-reaching impact.

It is clear that HTS social scientists may be accused of complicity in the politico-military context within which they have chosen to work. They may be accused of facilitating US imperialism and its deadly consequences. Critics of HTS sometimes imply that non-

participation avoids complicity. So Brian McKenna (2008: 13) asserts that “‘Human Terrain’ anthropologists are with imperialism. I’m with Gramsci.” And Kevin Caffrey (2010: 341) argues that “our only reasonable contribution if we want to avoid complicity is at the level of strategy”, taking it for granted that avoiding complicity is possible. Much like HTS social scientists who stress that they are not involved in lethal targeting, these critics want to demarcate the extent of their responsibility. Staying the right side of the line is to ensure they are not implicated in the deaths of those killed in counterinsurgency operations. Yet crude distinctions cannot obscure that matters are complicated, given especially the plausible argument that society at large is implicated in the militarisation that enables war.

Price (2010: 259) asks whether “anthropologists voluntarily making the cultural ways of occupied people vulnerable to military occupiers expect they [...] will get a free pass because they did not break the societies they imagine they are fixing”. He worries his colleagues contributing to HTS may expect to be let off, ethically speaking, just like soldiers are if they participate in questionable behaviour. While HTS social scientists do seem to want to distinguish what they do from deadly military operations, one could equally argue – taking into account Bhatia’s reflections – that they instead think that there are no free passes in life. Bhatia and others seem to suggest that when you find yourself possibly being able to help protect those exposed to violence by your country’s military, you do not have the option of drawing a line around your obligations such that they are outside.

Conclusion

In this debate ‘ethics’ refers to professional ethics. This explains the curious distinction by González, Gusterson and Price (2009: 11) between two sorts of questions raised by applying anthropology in warfare: “The political questions regarding the justifications or causes of a war are generally evaluated by individuals; the ethical issues of particular uses of anthropology in warfare are debated at a collective level.” The intended thrust of the statement seems clear; yet the separation between politics and ethics is both problematic and futile. It is difficult to see how ‘political’ questions regarding ‘justifications’ could be

separate from ethics. Indeed, some of the critique framed in terms of professional ethics seems implicitly reliant on a prior judgement about the permissibility of using military force. That is, a wider (or simply different) understanding of ethics influences how the problematic is set up and whether a war is seen as legitimate is crucial. Yet if anthropologists grant that they might make a contribution to military operations in different circumstances, then their refusal seems not really based on the claimed professional ethics.

More importantly, the effect of construing ethics and politics as separate is that ethics may serve as an extra-political standard. This limits the critique in two significant ways. On the one hand much existing critique does not tackle the ethical claims on behalf of HTS. Critics reject HTS as part of an objectionable project – the use of imperial violence. While Lutz and others examine how military violence becomes acceptable, both promoters and critics of HTS seem to subscribe to what one might call a fantasy of protection. The AAA changed the language of its code, by 2009, to demand that researchers ‘ensure’ that no harm comes to research subjects, thereby seemingly invoking a heroic vision of anthropologists as in control of the world around them. Marshall Sahlins (2009: vii) praises the NCA for “defending the better values of their discipline and their nation by giving those who had forgotten it to understand that other peoples were not born to live and die for our sake.” One might want to add that nor do they exist to be saved by us.

In this thinking there is no space for Afghans and Iraqis making their own decisions about participating in HTS. Anthropologists’ concern over research at gunpoint is “grounded in the Nuremberg Code’s insistence that all research be based upon free and informed consent” (Gusterson, 2010a). Yet, ironically, this concern privileges the anthropologists’ decision over that of potential research subjects: in a bid to protect people from being forced into consent their view – because necessarily constrained by the might of US military power – becomes irrelevant to the discussion. Being protected from such an unfree decision by anthropologists is identified as better for people living in a warzone than making their own

choice, however constrained. From this position it seems impossible to dislodge the logic of HTS which builds on the same assumption that *we* must protect *them*.

More broadly, drawing on a notion of ethics as extra-political makes it impossible to critique an ethico-political project reliant on employing this same supposed political neutrality of ethics to improve its appearance. As John D. Caputo (1993: 1) observes, ethics has a “good name”. The production of this good name relies on ethics being separate from politics. The politics of producing visions of the good is not discussed. As a result, the debate over HTS reproduces the bifurcation of thinking on the ethics of war, which pitches just war thinkers against pacifists. The former are at their most disturbing when they are the most well-intentioned, failing to appreciate how construing certain uses of political violence as morally required facilitates war, while the latter aim to stand apart from war in order not to facilitate it.

While I find much to admire in the pacifist position, pacifists sometimes seem to prefer ethical purity over offering a considered view on actually existing warfare. This is not dissimilar from the argument of those anthropological critics who argue that HTS is a distraction and that we need to study how state violence comes to be possible in the first place. While this is a worthwhile research strategy, this is – ironically perhaps – presented as a way not to become tainted by any association with imperialism. That is, this argument seems to suggest that it is possible to stay out of things. This does not seem possible, given that we are always already situated within the world. Moreover, the history of passionate debate over IRBs and professional ethics attests to the problematic usefulness of anthropological methods and knowledge to those pursuing domination over others. This raises unsettling questions about the production of such knowledge that seem impossible to address by merely focusing on one side of the issue, namely its exploitation by the military.²¹

Not surprisingly, the debate goes on. HTS is evolving and anthropologists continue to debate their professional obligations. This article, while trying to acknowledge different

²¹ I am grateful to one of the reviewers for this point.

positions, has surely failed to do justice to the range of views among anthropologists. Nevertheless, there seems merit in showing how professional ethics has organised and limited debate, arguably constraining even the reasoning of the more critical critics. Interestingly, the draft for the new Code of Ethics (AAA, 2011) moves away from any simplistic assertion of the 'no harm' principle towards requiring that researchers "think through" the potential for harm and seek to avoid it. While the new code also asserts the distinctness of ethical and political issues, it embraces more directly the predicament that anthropologists have to tackle ethical issues "that inevitably arise in the production of knowledge."

It is not least as producers of knowledge that we cannot stay out of things. The issue is one of the knowledge one produces being potentially effective in ways one may not approve of, but also one of how to negotiate the aporia of being inevitably involved, possessing incomplete and ineffective knowledge as well as incomplete and ineffective means of effecting change. We need to acknowledge that our actions confront the terrible possibility of causing harm to others; yet they also hold the promise of creating something positive with them. We always stand at this tension. War raises the stakes, making HTS and its critique significant. Giving in to the temptation of condemning HTS on the basis of a generalised ethics seems ineffectual, however. An extra-political ethics rooted in our obligation and – by implication – capacity to protect others is particularly unhelpful to negotiate the tension as such an ethics is precisely what legitimises the supposedly benign use of force in the first place.

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