Security for whom? Anthropologists and repressive state elites

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Abstract: The most important political and ethical issues in North American anthropology today concern anthropologists' relationships with the "security and intelligence communities." The call for anthropological participation in warfare has never been so intense, yet recruitment of anthropologists is not new for hegemonic anthropologies. Their relationships with state power have a long history of contradictory political and professional engagements. After a brief discussion of the notion of national security and its intimate relations to nation-state projects and elites, I consider the importance of culture and anthropological knowledge for politicians and conclude first that anthropologists need to be aware of how the discipline and its uses are part of much larger power relations and constraints, and second that anthropological knowledge is already always political.

Keywords: anthropologists and the military, anthropology and power, national security and anthropological practice, uses of anthropological knowledge

One of the most pressing political and ethical issues in North American anthropology today concerns the relationships anthropologists have with the "security and intelligence communities."¹ The intensity of these relationships has increased after 9/11, because the cultural turn has now reached even the Pentagon. According to Montgomery McFate, an anthropologist who strongly defends the involvement of anthropologists with the military and who is the author of a chapter of the new U.S. Army counterinsurgency manual (released in December 2006), the war in Afghanistan and Iraq proved that "traditional methods of warfighting" were inadequate

for "low intensity counterinsurgency operations where civilians mingle freely with combatants in complex urban terrain" (McFate 2005: 24). The new imperial wars prompted the interest of the U.S. military in "understanding people their culture and motivation" (Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr., quoted by McFate, 2005: 24). Another important representative of the security community, the Director of the Office of Force Transformation, concluded that "knowledge of one's enemy and his culture and society may be more important than knowledge of his order of battle" (McFate 2005: 24). Once again, it became clear that understanding cul-

ture is important when there is a great disparity of power among adversaries, especially when non-Western parties are involved (McFate 2005). “Friends” need to be identified and hearts and minds need to be won (McFate 2005).

This renewed interest in culture was followed by practical initiatives. The Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program (PRISP) is a governmental program established in 2004 to recruit analysts into the U.S. intelligence community. The PRISP resurrected a phantom that historically has haunted anthropologists located in the hegemonic centers of the discipline: the confusion of field research with espionage (see Gusterson and Price 2005). In 2005, the PRISP had “with little notice placed over 150 student participants in an unknown number of university classrooms” (Gusterson and Price 2005: 39). At the same time that PRISP outsources the intelligence community’s training programs to the universities, its “students’ identities are not publicly announced as they undertake their studies in university classrooms” (Gusterson and Price 2005). Other similar programs have emerged recently, such as the Intelligence Community Scholars Program, in which “scholars have to repay the costs of their education plus penalties . . . if they decide not to work for US intelligence upon graduation” (Gusterson and Price 2005), Gusterson and Price consider this to be a form of debt bondage.

In response to the serious implications of these initiatives the American Anthropological Association (AAA) created an Ad Hoc Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the U.S. Security and Intelligence Communities in 2006. At the 2006 AAA meeting, sessions were organized to debate the problem and two resolutions were approved in a historic business meeting. One condemned the occupation of Iraq. The other condemned the use of torture. The 2006 meeting also revealed the existence of “security anthropologists.” These are anthropologists who work for the military establishment and who, in one of the meeting’s session, proudly defended their jobs as consultants as well as the need for anthropologists to engage

with the military. For them, the presence of anthropologists would make war less destructive and lethal because many fatal mistakes are the result of cultural misunderstandings.

The call for anthropological participation in warfare is more intense than ever, but for hegemonic anthropologies the predicaments that arise when anthropologists are recruited are not new. Their relationships with state power have a long history of contradictory political and professional engagements. It is well known that anthropologists have participated in colonial and war efforts before, although such participations were hardly consensual (with the possible exception of World War II).

Perhaps it is possible to say that most anthropologists currently lean toward the progressive camp. Cultural critique and a respect for differences among people are basic to anthropology; these concepts most likely encourage progressive tendencies. Anthropologists, however, have never been a homogeneous political body historically. Politically conservative anthropologists are more inclined to work for repressive and manipulative elites than are progressive anthropologists. There are also anthropologists who would claim that they are able to walk a line independent of any political position. The current discussion on anthropological practice and national security resonates with other debates about applied anthropology. Are security anthropologists’ dilemmas and certainties similar to those development anthropologists had met with before? These questions recall the long-standing quandaries about the academic practice of anthropology and what some call its extramural (notice the defensive and isolationist connotations of the adjective) activities.

National security and anthropological practice

National security is a complex subject. The definition of security revolves around the meaning of different kinds of violence and whether they are considered legitimate or not. The security of my block is one thing; the security of my

city and country is another. The definition of security involves a sense of belonging, of identifying with a collectivity, of protecting “us” against “them.” In short, it involves identity issues. The larger the collectivity involved, the more complicated the issue gets. When it comes to national security, matters become highly complex. This is the realm of the nation-state. It is comprised of two entities that are interrelated but not homologous to each other. The fabric of the nation is much more diverse than that of the state. For instance, children cannot be state officials and several “minorities” are underrepresented within state apparatuses. Nation-states are complex polities, made up of historically defined economic, political, cultural, and social arrangements. In spite of the diversity of their sociological assemblages, nation-states tend to be homogeneity machines, especially when nationalism—the main product of their identity and ideology—is at stake. Nationalism relates in different ways to national security and to the reproduction of state elites. The consideration of a nation-state’s specific characteristics is mandatory for the study of national security. The fact that “national security” varies according to different historical junctures and according to different ideologies that state elites follow over time only confirms my assertion that it is a complex subject.

Because national security concerns nation-states, it is immediately located in a broader international scenario characterized by the unequal distribution of power among the countries that comprise the world-system. Whereas the definition of national security of an imperial power may imply that the elites of a given nation-state will take into their hands the “security” of other areas of the world, the definition of national security of a less militarily powerful nation-state is much more circumscribed to its own national territory. This does not mean that global geopolitics are not important in such scenarios.

The subject of national security and anthropological practice is embedded in a field defined mainly by the relations between scholarship and

citizenship. It is a field that includes, for instance, university systems, science and technology policies, and the role of intellectuals in nation building and nationalism. Historically, the relations between citizens and nation-states vary according to different political and ideological junctures. The relationships between anthropological practice and national security vary accordingly. At the same time, anthropologists, as a collectivity, have their own political diversity and their own disciplinary histories and trends, which result in preferred ways of representing the profession. This is why involvement with war may be accepted in one historical juncture and repudiated in another.

The possible roles of anthropologists in national security also vary according to nation-states’ power within the world system. It is one thing to be an anthropologist in an imperial country, it is another to work in a country where power imbalances among anthropologists and their research subjects are structured by internal colonialism. “Counterinsurgency consulting,” for instance, the “latest phase in the weaponization of anthropology” (Gonzales 2007: 19), would be unthinkable to anthropologists in Brazil, where the most delicate ethical issues concern the activities of a handful of anthropologists aligned with *developmentalist* initiatives that are contested by native populations. Covert ethnography or an anthropologist working as a spy for the *military* would amount to an earthquake in Brazilian anthropology. Anthropologists in Brazil still bear in mind the memory of a time, the 1964–1985 military dictatorship, when Brazilians had to learn how to live with powerful and repressive national security agencies. The Brazilian anthropological community has also not reached the point, and I hope it never will, of behaving like an “‘industry’ for sale to the highest bidder,” as Laura Nader put it in 2006 in a AAA session on national security and anthropological practice. Moreover, when the issue is political professional ideology, the Brazilian anthropological community, one of the largest in the world, is inclined to be critical of state elites. In its more than fifty years of existence the Brazilian

Association of Anthropology (ABA) won a well-deserved reputation of defending political positions that favor vulnerable or discriminated-against segments within Brazilian society. To summarize, in the complex political and institutional field of national security, anthropologists may place themselves in radically different positions. They may become “security anthropologists” but they may also become a “security problem.” Such was the case in the U.S. in the 1950s during McCarthyism (Price 2004) and in Brazil in the late 1980s and early 1990s when, after the end of the “red danger,” anthropologists who strongly defended Indian rights and the Amazonian rainforest were accused of being a “green danger,” that is, members of international environmental conspiracies that were supposed to be against the country’s territorial integrity.

Anthropologists and repressive state elites: Why culture matters

Anthropologists are used to studying violence and war. But, we are not used to studying the uses of anthropology for war and oppression with a few exceptions (see e.g., Copans 1975; Weber 2002). Perhaps this is so because most of us are pacifists and, in one way or another, are touched by the Enlightenment’s supposition that reason and knowledge should prevail above irrationality and violence. Whichever is the case, the uses that repressive state elites make of anthropology are a subject of fundamental importance. Are anthropologists to be confused with spies? Is ethnographic research nothing but a special modality of information gathering? Is the use of information ever something neutral? Questions easily multiply and need to be taken seriously by anthropologists everywhere, not only because their effects on the American anthropological community, the largest and most influential in the world, may reverberate far beyond the United States’ borders, but also because this challenging situation generates far-reaching ethical and epistemological issues. At the same time, we need to ac-

knowledge how intensively marked by American historical, sociological, political, and cultural characteristics “national security” is in the U.S. Indeed, the relationships among the university system, knowledge production, state power, and war-making have not been sufficiently analyzed in the U.S. despite the fact that they are strategically related to each other. This discussion also calls attention to how state policies affect the lives of American citizens. What we learn is that the intervention of the American state in the country’s political life is significant. This is also true in the university milieu, the major locus of anthropological (re)production. I recently wrote that:

[S]tates and universities have many interconnections and mutual and contradictory interests. States sponsor the production and use of knowledge for different ends, including to perpetrate mass killing of people or major environmental destruction. At the same time, universities are not monolithic entities. Indeed, on the same campus, one may find a professor who does research on how to improve equality in an unjust and unequal world and another who is (patriotically?) trying to develop new weapons to destroy the enemies of his or her nation-state. These contradictions and ambiguities reveal the contradictions and ambiguities of the relationships between the state and the university. Consequently, the ideology of academic freedom needs to be related to a discussion of what the universities really are as institutions of modern life. They can be the bastions of collective freedom and life or the bastions of oppression and death or both simultaneously. What shapes a university’s (and a profession’s) ethos are political, ideological, and utopian struggles that are fought within society at large as well as within the university and scientific world. These struggles define what “ethics” is. Otherwise, how would one understand the ambivalence of academic knowledge production over time or in a single period? How would one understand, for instance, the use of anthropological knowledge for war mak-

ing, colonial administration, or the liberation of native peoples? (Ribeiro 2006a: 530)

The political roles that culture plays in the U.S. are potent enough to get the attention of even uninformed foreigners. It should be of no surprise that the American nation-state is hypersensitive to cultural and ethnic differences. Several major historical and sociological factors underlie this fact. They include the importance of frontier expansion to nation-building, the scars left by slavery in racial relations, and the continued relevance of immigration to the formation of the most complex ethnically segmented modern nation. To these domestic factors, we should add the imperial might the U.S. has developed since the nineteenth century. As we know, 9/11 made the importance of culture for U.S. national security and for its world politics even more acute. At this point, it should be evident why politics and power in the U.S. are highly traversed by ethnicity and culture. Consequently, in the U.S. the institutional setting, including the military, has a propensity toward cultural turns, that is, toward moments of strong sensitivity to cultural and ethnic differences.

In the 1990s in the U.S., there was an increased culturalization of politics. Culture and politics got mixed in different ways. The conservative approach presented a new world in which clashes of civilizations would be the ultimate form of conflict. September 11 tragically recreated the dividing lines between the West and the Rest. Culture and cultural diversity became strategic factors for making peace or war. Currently, even UNESCO officials believe in an “implicit connection between culture and security” (2004: 18) and that “intercultural relations are, indeed, an international security issue” (2004: 19).

Because cultural anthropologists are, by definition, the professionals committed to understanding cultures, cultural difference, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, and interculturality, state managers are increasingly attracted to anthropologists. The United States and the

United Kingdom already have experience using anthropologists and anthropological knowledge in conflicts in which cultural and ethnic differences were at stake. In the United Kingdom the relationships between anthropologists and administrative state elites were formed under the large umbrella of colonialism. In the United States, relationships between anthropologists and repressive state elites were salient during World War I and World War II. Project Camelot, designed in the 1960s to provide information about national security in several “less developed countries,” renewed the interest of the U.S. Defense Department in the social sciences (Horowitz 1967). In 1969, Eric Wolf wrote that the “age of innocence” of anthropology (Wolf [1969] 1974) was over, as the relationship between knowledge and power became more and more explicit with anthropologists’ involvement in counterinsurgency intelligence in countries such as Thailand, thereby raising new ethical and political problems (Wolf and Jorgensen 1975). Currently, as we have seen, there is a new round of recruitment of anthropologists in the U.S. In 2006, a British reincarnation of Project Camelot was planned in the U.K., this research initiative of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Economic and Social Research Council, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council had the title “Combating terrorism by countering radicalization.” This program targeted six regions (Europe, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, North Africa, and the Gulf):

Academics would be asked to “scope the growth in influence and membership of extremist Islamist groups in the past 20 years” . . . “name the key figures (moderate and extreme) and key groups . . . influencing the local population” and “understand the use of theological legitimisation for violence.” Among the main topics mentioned were “radicalisation drivers and counter-strategies in each of the country studies” and “future trends likely to increase/decrease radicalization.” (Houtman 2006: 1)

Thanks to the mobilization of British academics, especially anthropologists, this pro-

gram was cancelled. Objections were raised in the name of “independent quality research” and of “fears that this project could destroy decades of trust built up with . . . informants in particular communities” (Houtman 2006: 1). Meanwhile, a revised funding initiative on “new security challenges” was met in April 2007, with a resolution of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the U.K. and the Commonwealth [see *Anthropology Today* 23 (3): 28] that denounced the governmental project as “prejudicial to the position of all researchers working abroad, including those who have nothing to do with this Programme.” The resolution clearly stated “research of this kind may well conflict with the ASA’s Code of Ethics” [*Anthropology Today* 23 (3): 28]. There are other examples of relations between anthropologists and repressive state elites outside Western Europe and the U.S. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for instance, Japanese anthropologists, concerned with the origins of Japanese culture, followed the colonial expansion of their nation-state to do field research in countries such as Korea and China, where imperial Japanese power was exerted (Yamashita 2006). During Stalinist times, in the Soviet Union, anthropology was thought to be useful to manage the minority populations of the U.S.S.R. (Vakhtin 2006).

Thus, anthropology has had a long-standing relationship with state power in different national contexts and these relationships shape the discipline. In highly authoritarian regimes, such as the Stalinist one in the Soviet Union, the anthropology–state relation becomes more obvious (Vakhtin 2006) as state elites control the critical potential of anthropological work and often strive to convert anthropology into a technique of social control, into a kind of social engineering aimed at managing the relations between ethnic minorities and powerful central governments. In times of war, anthropology may, however, be called to develop similar roles in nonauthoritarian regimes. During war, anthropology is called on to become a source of intelligence. In the U.S., World War II proved that anthropology could be useful in

providing “intelligence” not only on the enemy but also on allies, to learn how to cooperate with them; “intelligence” was provided on the American nation itself so as to make better use of its force (Goldman and Neiburg 2002: 198f.). We still need a consistent history of the role of anthropology during World War II in various countries.² World War II was an important period for anthropology because it crudely revealed modes of interaction between anthropologists and state elites that were less likely to take shape in periods of peace.

In sum, anthropology developed in relation to the national and international interests of states regarding the status of the native populations “found” in the territories states traditionally controlled or in new colonial areas (L’Estoile, Neiburg, and Sigaud 2002). Anthropologists’ varied responses to nation states’ interest in anthropological knowledge are structured by processes of nation-building and state formation, the character of the resulting nation-states, and the role of academic scholarship vis-à-vis the government.

What is anthropological knowledge good for?

The persistent interest that the military has shown in anthropology is surely indicative of its awareness that culture is not neutral, that it is a major issue in human conflicts. The more national security is exposed to ethnic and cultural diversity at home or abroad, the more the so-called intelligence community needs to understand it in order to operate on safer ground. Imperial armies depend on accurate information on local populations, which makes anthropology attractive to the military. Cultural translation and ethnography, two activities often used to define the profession, seem to be the anthropological assets the military values. This brings to the fore the question: What is anthropological knowledge good for?

Anthropology is of little good in making its practitioners rich. Many anthropologists, however, do long for visibility and for the feeling

that their work is important. Anthropology can be good, therefore, for providing professional recognition. Its value is not that limited, however, since anthropology always exists in institutional milieus traversed by wider power relations. Anthropological knowledge raises the interests of people other than anthropologists, as the discussion on its practice and national security vividly shows. Anthropologists never know what is going to be done with their texts once they are published. Given the many possible uses powerful agents and agencies can make of anthropological knowledge, we are forced to go beyond the notion that anthropological knowledge is produced to enlighten people. Although anthropological ideas are not “mechanically reflexive of the encompassing political economy but emerge in a complex interplay among intellectual production, varied institutional settings, and the dominant value orientations of the time” (Wolf 2001: 63), we need to be aware that the discipline and its use is part of much larger power relations and constraints. Sometimes such relations and constraints are quite obvious, as when neoliberal scientific policies are implemented and university administrators become preoccupied mainly with economic calculations.

Explicit reflection on the positions, perspectives, and practices anthropologists have regarding powerful and powerless groups and projects are, however, always of importance. These positions are related to the political, methodological, and theoretical options an anthropologist has, situating his/her work in a critical or conservative vein. Anthropology can provide certain groups, either powerful or powerless, with knowledge that legitimizes claims over ethnic and cultural diversity as well as over access to natural and social resources. All this leads to the conclusion that it is impossible to separate anthropological practices and knowledge from political awareness: Anthropological knowledge is already always political. I see anthropology as a cosmopolitics (Ribeiro 2006b) and, today, the control of cosmopolitics is a crucial objective of hegemonic global powers.

It is no wonder that anthropology again attracts the attention of imperial forces.

Final comments

George Stocking’s (1982) distinction between anthropologies of nation-building and anthropologies of empire-building is helpful when considering the relationships between anthropologists and powerful state elites. Stocking’s classification may be transcended, however, if we remember that behind empire-building there is always a nation-state. Anthropologies of empire-building are also in fact anthropologies of nation-building, but the reverse is not true. There are “national anthropologies,” such as the Australian, Brazilian, Canadian, and Mexican ones, that can be international without falling into the temptation of becoming empire-building anthropologies. The dichotomy may create the impression that there are only two options for world anthropologies. Anthropologists everywhere would be trapped in either serving the nation or the empire, which is just not the case: there are also anthropologies of diversity building.

Nation-building, empire-building, or diversity-building anthropologies: What are these labels telling us about the relationships between anthropology and security? They clearly indicate that the roles of anthropologists vary according to their political positions and involvement in processes related to the security of empires, nations, or differentiated groups. Nation-state elites may vary their conceptions on security according to different junctures and interests. But, in any given time period, the military—thanks to the hierarchical structures it is part of—knows the answer to the question that is the title of this article: Security for whom? Anthropologists need to have much clearer answers to this question if they are to be conscious political actors in conflictive scenarios. In any case, there is no doubt a discipline based in a method that depends on mutual trust—ethnography—is highly vulnerable to suspi-

cions of espionage and bad faith. Nothing less than the future of anthropology is at stake.

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Notes

1. This text was originally written for the session "Debating anthropological practice and national security," organized by Laura Graham and Kathryn Libal, for the 2006 meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Jose, California.
2. See for example Weber (2002) for some of the dilemmas of French ethnology under the Vichy government.

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