I Spy with My Science Eye

Social scientists with specialist knowledge of 'dangerous' peoples are increasingly valuable in the fight against terrorism, but is it ethical to spy on your subjects? Chris Bunting reports

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In December 1919, Franz Boas, the grand old man of American anthropology, accused fellow anthropologists of spying for the American government in Central America, saying they had "prostituted" their science. "In consequence of their acts, every nation will look with distrust upon the visiting foreign investigator who wants to do honest work, suspecting sinister designs," he thundered.

Boas did not name the targets of his attack, but one of them was probably the senior Harvard academic Samuel K. Lothrop. Files recently obtained from the Federal Bureau of Investigation by David Price, an anthropologist at St Martin's College in Washington, confirm that Lothrop spied for American naval intelligence in the Caribbean during the first world war. In 1940, Lothrop went to Peru to "conduct an archaeological investigation". He provided intelligence to the US military before returning to a quiet academic life at Harvard in 1944.

Boas had prodded his finger into a running sore at the heart of the problematic ethics not only of anthropology but of the whole of international social and political science. Is it acceptable for a patriotic social scientist to serve the interests of his own country with information gathered about another? Or should the academic's responsibility always be to the interests of the people he studies? For Price, this is of pressing relevance in a world in which the president of the United States declares a global "war on terrorism", a campaign that President Bush says "will be waged by day and by night, in the light and in the shadow, in battles you will see and battles you won't see".

"Clearly, if this war is to be prosecuted successfully it is going to need unprecedented quality of covert intelligence," Price says. "They are talking about going after small groups of people in cultures that were previously almost completely unknown to the agencies involved. So what are they going to do? They are going to be knocking on the doors of the experts that do exist. That means academics. Academics are already working with the Americans in Afghanistan in areas such as directing the bombing so that it does not hit civilians."

For those who decide to work with intelligence agencies, there is no shortage of role models, from T. E. Lawrence in the first world war to the British ethnologist and explorer Tom Harrisson, who parachuted into Borneo to raise a guerrilla army to fight the Japanese in the second world war. One early pioneer of anthropology, Holland's Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, developed an unrivalled understanding of Muslim culture in colonial Indonesia but then betrayed the confidence of his research subjects by engaging in counterinsurgency activities by the Dutch colonial authorities during the bloody Atjeh war at the turn of the 19th century. It was a war ostensibly aimed at reducing piracy, the 19th-century equivalent of a war against terrorism. More than 100,000 people died, almost all Indonesian.

The eminent American anthropologist Gregory Bateman famously worked for the US Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency, applying his ideas of schismogenesis to foster disorder among enemy minority populations. Bateman would later harbour grave doubts about this work — even before joining the OSS he had wondered about the ethics of using scientific understanding

of societies to manipulate them. "Now that we have techniques, are we in cold blood going to treat people as things?" he asked.

Others, apparently, had no such qualms. Many of the techniques of controlling populations used by the CIA in Vietnam were based on concepts developed by social scientists, and much of the post-war boom in "area studies" was fuelled by covert and overt government funding. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for International Studies, for instance, is reported to have been clandestinely funded by the CIA at its inception. In 1976, a US Senate committee reported: "The CIA is now using several hundred American academics located in more than 100 American colleges, universities and related institutes. In addition, there are several American academics abroad who serve operational purposes, primarily the collection of intelligence."

Activist raids on university offices in the 1960s and 1970s established that senior social scientists were participating in covert operations in the Korean war, the Vietnam war and in counterinsurgency across the globe. Eric Ross, an American anthropologist at the Institute of Social Studies in the Netherlands, says there is no reason to think that such links have ended or were restricted to the US. "The only difference in places such as Britain is you don't get any information at all about what is going on. We only find out about these things 30 years after the event if we are lucky. But this kind of involvement is continuing, you can rest assured of that. It is only going to increase in the current climate. There will be a lot of grant money and a lot of positions that will come directly out of the intelligence agencies' pockets. Many will take this money because they believe they are here to do a job for people in power."

Of course, "doing a job for people in power" in the context of a military campaign could have deadly consequences for the people about whom information is traded. But Ali Ansari, a lecturer in the political history of the Middle East at Durham University, cautions against a simplistic assertion that advising governments automatically transforms the social or political scientist into a freelance spy. "If we are to mean anything, we have to try to communicate what we know to people in power. It doesn't mean we are betraying the people we are studying, in fact possibly quite the opposite. The extent and nature of that involvement is a genuine moral issue, but my problem at the moment is that the British government doesn't seem to give a monkey's about what we say, not the opposite."

For Robert Jervis, professor of international politics at Columbia University, who admits to consulting for the CIA, judging how and in what way to communicate with the authorities is a delicate balancing act that can be resolved only by individual conscience. "I think most of us would say that it is unacceptable to go out to do fieldwork on a group of people, say in Somalia, knowing that you are going to covertly report back. But what if you are going to prevent another World Trade Center attack? What if you have, or retrospectively, might have information about a group of dangerous people that could save lives? One thing I would resist is any blanket assertion that we must serve the interests only of the people we are studying. I would say our duty is

not to our government and not to the people we are studying but to the truth as we see it."

A growing band of academics, including Price and David Gibbs, associate professor of political science at Arizona University, are lobbying for professional codes of conduct on the issues that lie outside such vagaries of individual morality. After all, says Jervis, "the betrayal of one academic could lead to the next guy out there having his legs pulled off". Gibbs and Price argue for rules forcing academics to disclose all sponsorship, including that from the intelligence agencies, and to make all of their advice to those agencies publicly available.

Price points out that there are rules against the use of fieldwork as a cover for espionage in the United Kingdom's Association of Social Anthropologist's code of conduct, but he says they are much less explicit about the use of information after fieldwork has been completed. The American Anthropological Association intentionally removed rules forbidding secret research and briefings from its ethical codes in the 1980s, replacing them with rules saying anthropologists had "no professional obligation" to provide such briefings. "The current code effectively says only that you don't have to be a spy if you don't want to," Price says.

Many academics, it seems, do not want any discussion of the issue at all. During his research, Price was told by other anthropologists that to raise such questions could endanger the lives of fieldworkers around the globe. It is an ironic echo of the reaction to Boas's letter in 1919. The American Anthropological Association decided to censure Boas, in effect removing him from the ruling council of an organisation he had helped create. The association said he was unpatriotic and his accusations might endanger others' ability to undertake fieldwork. As for the spies themselves, they were allowed to take part in the vote and were never properly investigated.

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