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RECONSIDERING “WHY DR. JOHNNY WON’T GO TO WAR”

By Hugh Gusterson and David H. Price

Editor’s Note: This piece was received in response to Marc Tyrell’s published article in SWJ Magazine volume 7. At risk of confusing the issue, we consider it our first letter to the editor. Marc Tyrell knew he was launching a shot across the bow of the anthropology community, and this response elaborates on issues its authors feel were misrepresented or incomplete while certainly taking a few shots in return. A thread in the Small Wars Council discussed the original article, and that is certainly a good place to continue the discussion and any further clarifications or fallout. Most of us practitioners would be well served by understanding more anthropology, though we seem to have enough fire fights on our hands.

Marc W.D. Tyrell’s article, “Why Dr. Johnny Won’t Go to War,” is, unfortunately, cluttered with factual, interpretive and composition errors, especially in its characterization of our writing on the issue of anthropology and the national security state.

Before enumerating some of the factual errors in Tyrell’s article we would like to comment on the central argument of his piece: that anthropologists have, since Franz Boas, been monologically obsessed with the issue of espionage in regard to those who consult for the national security state. In fact, anthropologists’ feelings about and objections to national security consulting are more complex than that and have shifted over time. Boas’ objections to espionage under the cover of anthropology in World War I were grounded in an émigré German intellectual’s anxieties about the purity of science. (He published his famous letter in the Nation at about the same time that Max Weber delivered his address “Science as Vocation,” and both pieces evince similar attitudes and anxieties). During World War II many anthropologists were enthusiastic about applied anthropology on behalf of the allied war effort. A subsequent generation of anthropologists who objected to war work within the discipline during the Vietnam War was more concerned about the inherent

immorality of that particular war and the obligations anthropologists had toward informant communities whose interests were not held dear by the Pentagon and the CIA. They were also concerned that military secrecy violated a normative ethic of openness within the discipline. At a time when most universities decided to ban classified research on campus, the discipline of anthropology thus formally articulated a norm against secret research – only to weaken this norm in the 1990s in response to pressure from anthropologists doing contract research for corporations. In our own article on the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program (PRISP), we are concerned (among other things) by the way in which it allows intelligence agencies to exploit financially and emotionally vulnerable students, locking them into working for the national security state through a pronounced form of debt bondage. Tyrell’s article largely ignores this complex tapestry of argumentation about national security work in anthropology, collapsing it all into a blinkered obsession with espionage.

In the course of making his argument, Tyrell seriously mischaracterizes an article we wrote for Anthropology News on PRISP. According to Tyrell it is our position that “anyone who does not speak out against PRISP

is “committing the professional ‘crime’ of ‘undermining the reputation of Anthropology’” [sic.] (Tyrrell 2007:8–9). Why are there quotation marks around the word “crime” in this passage? Who is being quoted? Not us. Although the quotation marks give the impression that we used this word in our article, we did not. Nor did we accuse anthropologists of committing a “professional ‘crime.’”

Tyrrell goes on to say, “while the Gustafson (sic) and Price article is clearly a ‘civilized’ warning to the community of Anthropologists (sic) it draws a not too subtle line in the sand. By using a rhetoric of ‘you are with us or against us,’ they are clearly attempting to establish the parameters of any debate in the discipline where the ‘discussion’ takes place only in terms of how extreme the penalty for supporting ‘them’ should be.”

Readers who have not read our article in Anthropology News may be surprised to learn that, far from being an exercise in totalitarian thought control and intimidation of ideological deviants, it was actually a call for debate among anthropologists about the implications of PRISP for our discipline. Our article included the following statement: “Given the arguable conflict between PRISP and the core values of openness in the academy, PRISP should be debated on campus in the same way that ROTC has been in the past. As with ROTC, some universities may decide that the program is compatible with their overarching values, and some may not, but the program should at least be debated.”¹ We will leave it to readers to decide for themselves whether, as Tyrrell claims, this constitutes a rhetoric of “you are with us or against us.” Our concern with

¹ Hugh Gusterson and David Price, “Spies in Our Midst” *Anthropology News* 46(6), 2005, pp.39-40, quote on p.40.

Tyrrell’s shoddy scholarship is not to issue an ad hominem counter-attack, but to clarify how his numerous inaccuracies and intentional mischaracterizations compile to build a flawed argumentative piece that disregards scholarly standards to press an ideological agenda. While such policy-driven ideological analysis appear to be widespread in the non-peer reviewed world of military and intelligence analysis generating and consuming social science analysis, such practices would be unacceptable in academic settings.

In Tyrrell’s article Ruth Benedict becomes “Ruthe Benedict” and he manages to spell Rhoda Métraux’s name three different ways within three consecutive lines of text (Tyrrell 2007:5). Given this remarkable feat perhaps we should be grateful that he only spelled one of our names two different ways. He confuses a published article with a “letter to the editor” (pp 2007:3,n2). His uses of secondary sources, Wikipedia, and pseudonym-based-blogs help create his own wikiality, and at times he offers “data” without providing any citations; in one such example he describes the “5 members of the executive council that issued the censure” against Boas. In truth the censure vote was conducted by thirty members of the AAA’s “Governing Council” who participated in Boas’ censure vote². It would be tedious to enumerate the many other examples of such poor scholarship.

Some of Tyrrell’s misunderstanding of anthropological ethics and the history of anthropology may be due to his background in sociology and the two disciplines’ significantly different developments of professional ethics

² Stocking, George W. 1968. “The Scientific Reaction Against Cultural Anthropology, 1917-1920.” In *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*, ed. George W. Stocking, 270-307. Chicago: University of Chicago Press., pp. 275-276.

standards. But his over-emphasis of the meaning of Boas's 1919 censure substitutes for an informed discussion of the Nuremberg Code's impact on the AAA's and all post-World War II professional social science ethics codes. He gives no indication of being aware of this history, but such a consideration would necessarily include an acknowledgement that principles of informed consent and disclosure to research subjects of what is to be done with research (rather than the simplistically misleading focus on "spying" that so obsesses Tyrrell that he finds evidence of it everywhere) are the fundamental issues pertaining to anthropological research in military and intelligence settings.

Finally, we would like to clarify that we agree with the American Anthropological Association's code of ethics statements declaring that anthropologists need to be open and honest about who they are, who they are working for, and what they are doing. This by

no means precludes the possibility of anthropologists studying military or intelligence organizations, or the possibility of anthropologists working for military or intelligence organizations, but it does limit the sort of work that these anthropologists may ethically undertake under the provisions of the AAA's ethics code.

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03/24/07 - A U.S. Marine passes two Iraqi women making bread during a patrol in Zaidon, Iraq, March 22, 2007. The Marine is assigned to 3rd Platoon, Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Samuel D. Corum) (Released)