

Review - The Counter-Counter Insurgency Manual

Written by James Hevia

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JAMES HEVIA, AUG 3 2012

The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual. Or, Notes on Demilitarizing American Society

By: Network of Concerned Anthropologists

Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009.

Prickly Paradigm Press, the publisher of this collection of essays, produces small, inexpensive books on very big issues. The purpose of the press, according to its supporters, is to shake us from our complacency and intervene into the pressing issues of the moment. Since this volume is at least three years old, one might expect that the shelf-life of the concerns to be found in it have passed their expiration date. Yet, Counterinsurgency operations continue in Afghanistan and Iraq, and neither country appears any more “stable” today than it did three years ago. Now as then, the United States military continues to see itself as the solution to the problem rather than part of it, and while many, many Americans are tired of both conflicts, very few have taken issue with the notion of counter-insurgency retailed in the *Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

This absence of a critical engagement with counterinsurgency, Katherine Lutz suggests in the opening article, is to be expected under the hegemony of the “military normal,” a configuration made up of heavy censorship of military operations outside the United States, massive investment by the Pentagon in public relations, the mythologizing of

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war in movies and television productions, and the widespread belief in American innocence and exceptionalism.

But, why, we might wonder, was a manual needed at all? It was assembled in 2006, when, after much had gone sour in Iraq, it was discovered that the occupation forces were operating without a doctrine. Fortunately, Gen. David Petraeus, currently the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, had taken command of the U.S. Army's Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas after fifteen months as Commander of the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq. He pulled together a team of military and civilian experts who set about constructing doctrine on counterinsurgency. At the core of this doctrine, as it turned out, was a notion that the backbone of counterinsurgency is the collection and evaluation of information about the physical and human terrain of the theater of operations, and that the secret to acquiring "actionable" information was an understanding of the social and cultural world of the people of "host" nations. The tools necessary for such understanding were, however, not part of the usual skill set of army personnel.

Fortunately again, Petraeus had an MPA and a PhD in International Relations from Princeton University, which seems to have given him some sense of where expertise on society and culture could be found. It lay among academic sociologists and anthropologists, specialists present on virtually every American university campus. All that needed to be done, it would seem, was to appeal to their patriotism and invite their participation. While already on-board social scientists such as sociologist David Kilcullen and anthropologist Montgomery McFate helped to compile the intelligence section of the manual, the army began its campaign to recruit civilian social and cultural specialists for the war effort. The idea was to embed social scientists into what the army dubbed Human Terrain Teams, and send them into the villages and towns of Iraq and Afghanistan. The teams were to give a kinder, gentler face to the occupation in order to win "hearts and minds" and, incidentally, gather information about the insurgents.

This volume's group of concerned anthropologists found the militarization of their discipline disturbing, the social and cultural theory in use somewhat shopworn, and the army's effort to enlist members of their profession as fieldworkers morally and ethically repugnant. Why is this the case?

Anthropology and sociology are among a group of academic disciplines that deal with living human beings. For some time these professions have operated with an ethical code of conduct, accepted by their membership, practiced in their fieldwork, and codified in the policies of their professional organizations. These protocols are designed to protect the well-being of their interlocutors and informants. Although not mentioned in the articles, in addition to their professional ethics, social scientists uniformly work at institutions that have Institutional Review Boards, or IRBs, whose purpose is to review behavioral, as well as biomedical, research involving human subjects. In other words, just as the military has a code of conduct, so too do the social science disciplines. As numerous contributors to the volume make clear, the two are not compatible, and their combination in counter-insurgency has resulted in what Roberto González estimates to be a \$190 million corporate boondoggle.

González, Andrew Bickford, and Hugh Gusterson draw attention to how the militarization of knowledge about human behavior, beliefs, and social interactions can only distort any notion of knowledge as social scientists understand the term. More importantly, because insurgencies by their very nature are intimately linked to the ordinary population of the "host nation," the "people" become as much of a problem and a target as the insurgents. Rather than being a resource for furthering human understanding, militarized social science produces the "people" and their practices as objects to be worked on and manipulated. Disturbingly, as Gusterson adds, none of this is particularly new. The current configuration is reminiscent of the Cold War era, when the physical and social sciences were enrolled into "national security" projects, and thick networks of social relations were made between the military, universities, and private enterprise. In Vietnam, for example, the social sciences were used as applied, instrumental knowledge, the purpose of which was to break the National Liberation Front's underground network. Social scientists were part of teams producing "actionable intelligence" in a program with the cumbersome title "Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support."

It should come as no surprise, therefore, to see a reductive and distorted view of social scientific theory and methodology evident in the intelligence chapter of the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. As David Price points out, these sections are a hodge-podge of plagiarized passages from the writings of numerous well-known anthropologists

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and social-cultural theorists. Moreover, the dubious ethics in the construction of the intelligence chapter is paralleled by the tortured logic of Sarah Sewell's defense of counterinsurgency in her introduction to the University of Chicago Press's publication of the manual. Greg Fledman points out that Sewell, the Director of Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, seems less concerned with rights and more with counterinsurgency's promise to provide stability in "ungoverned space." Here she is one with Pentagon planners who worry about the "non-integrating gap," the two-thirds or more of the world that the US military monitors, intervenes in and occupies through its thousand or more bases and through its combat commands, the most recent of which is AFRICOM. As Catherine Bestman explains, countering terrorism is the ostensible purpose of AFRICOM. The more plausible reason for its existence, Bestman argues, however, has to do with oil and China's growing presence throughout Africa.

The military security apparatus of the United States, as many contributors note, is supported with virtually limitless unchallenged resources. In a country where professional and college sports receive more print and visual media coverage than Iraq and Afghanistan, we get only hints of the many military operations underway to deal with "ungoverned space." However, since the publication of this volume, the US strategy in Afghanistan seems to have shifted away from the on-the-ground doctrine of the counterinsurgency manual to the use of high tech equipment to "decapitate" the leadership of the insurgency.[1] Informed more by intelligence produced through satellite sensing and aerial photography than by research on "terrains," assassination teams are rapidly inserted and removed.[2] Complementing the teams are unmanned drone strikes controlled from bases in the United States.[3] According to statistics gathered by the New America Foundation, drone strikes increased in Pakistan from 53 in 2009 to 118 in 2010.[4] Approximately ninety-percent of the confirmed strikes were in Waziristan region of Pakistan. Official reports indicate that these missile attacks invariably kill militants and their leaders, but seldom others. Sources within Pakistan say otherwise, with some claiming over two thousand civilians killed between 2009-2010.

The extent to which Human Terrain Teams are involved in gathering information in support of these strikes is unclear. What is clear, as Pratap Chatterjee has observed, the "hearts and minds" objectives of HTT "appear to be in direct conflict" with the methods of decapitation.[5] Such a contradiction would also seem to point to the failure of the doctrine of counterinsurgency retailed in the Army and Marine Corps manual. But as the contributors to this volume know, programmatic and technical failure has never provided a rationale for dismantling the national security state. Rather, as Robert McNamara suggested in *The Fog of War*, failure is simply part of a learning experience.

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[1] The decapitation approach was been both confirmed as operating successfully in Afghanistan and identified as ineffectual by Gen. Stanley McChrystal when commander there. See *The Nation*, May 13, 2010 and *The Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2010.

[2] While reports had existed of such teams, full confirmation came from documents released on the WikiLeaks website. See the reports in *Spiegelonline* July 26, 2010 and *The Guardian*, July 25, 2010.

[3] Christopher Drew, "Drones Are Playing a Growing Role in Afghanistan." See <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/20/world/asia/20drones.html>; accessed January 23, 2010.

[4] See <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/drones>; accessed January 23, 2011.

[5] See his "The Secret Killers: Assassination on Afghanistan and Task Force 373," posted by Truth-out.org. See <http://www.truth-out.org/the-secret-killers-assassination-afghanistan-and-task-force-37362460>, accessed January 23, 2011.