

## CULTURE, CRITIQUE AND CREDIBILITY

*Speaking truth to power during the long war*

In the 'long war', it seems, anthropologists are a hot property. I am surely not the only anthropologist whose position on involvement vacillates uneasily between the poles of a debate that is unlikely to go away anytime soon. My career has me smack inside what George Marcus refers to as the 'intell/security apparatus,'<sup>1</sup> where I watch policy-makers' quest for the computational equivalent of a crystal ball. The work I have cut out for myself is to develop a cogent critique of attempts to apply complexity mathematics to culture for the purposes of decision-making (see McNamara 2006).

Whether or not anyone will listen is another question: history says I will have minimal impact working from inside these institutions,<sup>2</sup> while Jeremy Keenan (2006: 9) warns that we should 'remain located outside the corrupting sphere of intelligence agencies and government bodies' so that we can credibly act as witnesses, recorders and interpreters of truth. And yet, as we follow Keenan's exhortations to witness truth against the official 'conspiracy theories' about terrorism and war, I wonder if we shouldn't be more stringent in applying the same standards of intellectual credibility to ourselves.

On two recent occasions, I have heard PhD-level anthropologists make claims about 9/11 hijackers currently hiding under the protection of the US government. Wacky fringe? Consider Houtman's recent *AT* editorial, which summarizes two 'alternative' explanations for 9/11 (Houtman 2006). One of the theories alleges 'massive complicity in this attack by US government operatives', while another claims that the Twin Towers were taken down by thermite explosive charges. Houtman writes: 'It is deplorable that academics critical of incomplete, often inaccurate versions of these disasters are professionally ridiculed.'<sup>3</sup> Reading this article, a physicist colleague of mine was aghast. 'Whatever happened to Occam's Razor?' he asked.

Similarly troubling is the belief that there is some special connection between Raphael Patai's book *The Arab mind* and torture at Abu Ghraib. Journalist Seymour Hersh raised this spectre, though he never quite committed himself to the claim. Yes, he says that Patai's book was 'frequently cited' by neoconservative hawks, referencing an 'academic source' who described Patai's book as the 'bible of the neocons on Arab behavior' (Hersh 2004). But nowhere does he give us anything even approaching the 'smoking book'.

Most anthropologists, it seems, would beg to differ with me. At the 2006 business meeting of the American Anthropological Association,<sup>4</sup> a full quorum passed a resolution decrying

the war in Iraq and specifically condemning the use of 'anthropological knowledge as an element of physical and psychological torture'. *Inside Higher Education* quoted Gerald Sider applauding his colleagues for taking a stand against 'mealy-mouthed policies that don't hold responsible those scum with PhDs who stand beside torturers' (Jaschik 2006). Later, David Price (2006) identified 'rogue anthropologists and CIA contract torturers' as two groups of intended recipients for the resolution's message. The latest salvo came when Robert Gonzalez published an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, in which he cited Hersh's essay to warn against a 'new and dangerous phase in applied anthropology' (Gonzalez 2007).

Yet the extent to which ethnography played a specific role in detainee abuse is worth questioning. Even assuming that ideas drawn from Patai fed torture strategies, generals and anthropologists alike might be giving his ethnography too much credit. As Gregory Starrett recently commented, '[c]ould one seriously suggest that the ritual impurity of dogs is the key to understanding why naked Muslim prisoners are frightened by their snarling?' (Starrett 2005; see also Smith 2004). The work of Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo has much more to say about what happened at Abu Ghraib than does a dated ethnography (Zimbardo 1971).

Neither ethnography nor ethnographers are required for torture. Moreover, no special connection to ethnography is necessary for us to say, simply, that torture is unacceptable as a practice of liberal democracies.<sup>5</sup> And that statement is about as far as we can credibly go: despite an allegedly 'growing body of evidence' that anthropological writings are being used in 'torture' (Jaschik 2006), no one has yet offered any direct evidence of individual anthropologists engaged, supporting, or advocating torture in the context of Iraq, Afghanistan, or Guantánamo. It's not impossible, of course, but even David Price agrees that there is no evidence linking any specific anthropologist to the design or implementation of torture techniques today.<sup>6</sup>

Sweeping, poorly supported claims and allegations, even those made in the heat of a rhetorical moment, only undermine the reputation of anthropology among the very institutions we criticize. All the hooplah about culture as a linchpin in 'the long war' means that the eyes of the world may very well be upon us. Speaking truth to power is one thing; getting power to listen is another. As we poke holes in the official discourse, let's not turn our credibility into Swiss cheese.

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1. Marcus, personal communication, 8 February 2007.
2. Price for thcoming: see chapter 11 for Price's discussion of the lessons of history for present-day anthropology.
3. Physicists and engineers quickly dismiss Jones' explanation of the Towers' collapse as displaying, as one colleague put it, 'an astounding, even wilful ignorance of basic physics'.
4. Many were surprised at how packed the business meeting was; see Vesperi 2007.
5. Even from a coldly utilitarian perspective, there is good evidence that 'coercive interrogations' are counterproductive, as concluded by Fein et al. (2007); see also Myser 2004.
6. Price, personal communication, December 14, 2006.

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