

BOOK REVIEW

Roberto J. Gonzalez. 2009. *American Counterinsurgency: Human Science and the Human Terrain*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press. ISBN 097940574-2. Paperback: 16.95 CAD. Pages 134.

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American Counterinsurgency: Human Science and the Human Terrain, by Roberto Gonzalez, presents a scathing critique of the uses of the social sciences and social scientists (with some emphasis on his own discipline of Anthropology) by the US military in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In particular, Gonzalez examines the concept of the 'human terrain' and the practices derived from it that have come to play a significant role in the US led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. The human terrain is 'the human population and society in the operational environment (area of operations) as defined and characterized by sociocultural, anthropologic, and ethnographic data' (Jacob Kipp, cited in Gonzalez 2009, 25). As Gonzalez notes, this concept implies the extension of conflict from a geographic plane to a sociocultural one where victory depends on the military's ability to control the population. The practices associated with the human terrain include, most significantly, the introduction of 'human terrain teams.' These are five person teams combining military intelligence officers with civilian academics (both an area studies specialist and a cultural analyst with a background in either sociology or cultural anthropology) who are embedded in combat brigades to provide brigade commanders with relevant socio-cultural knowledge and to do socio-cultural research on the people under occupation. Other applications include a socio-cultural mapping of the areas under US occupation (an application known as Map-Human Terrain or MAP HT) and the modeling of behaviour of communities under occupation in order to predict the sites of resistance and opposition. This new interest in the 'human terrain' reflects, Gonzalez suggests, a shift in power within the Pentagon after the departure of Donald Rumsfeld to a 'small band of warrior-intellectuals' (Gonzalez, citing the *Washington Post*) centered around David Petraeus (currently Commander, US Central Command) all of whom hold PhDs in social science disciplines.

Gonzalez argues that the 'human terrain' has been mobilized for two reasons. The first reason was to build domestic support for an unpopular

war by emphasizing a new approach to counter-insurgency that is more knowledge-based, humanitarian and designed to 'win the hearts and minds' of Iraqis and Afghans. Consequently, Gonzalez notes that following the introduction of human terrain teams to Iraq and Afghanistan, there was a significant amount of uncritical media coverage that celebrated the shift in US strategy as leading to both more winnable but also to 'gentler' counter-insurgency campaigns. The second reason was to gather badly needed intelligence in order to win the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Gonzalez's analysis of the human terrain and its operationalization in the US military – the Human Terrain System (HTS) covers a wide range of issues; the parallels between its contemporary usage and American methods in the Vietnam war; its current and potential effects on both the American occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan and on the social science disciplines themselves (and especially his own, Anthropology); to the role of private military contractors in its operationalization. Gonzalez challenges the claim of HTS proponents that their participation is humanitarian, focused on cross-cultural training for US soldiers and on figuring out local social needs.

Gonzalez does not, it seems, need to look too hard to find other human terrain advocates describe HTS as producing a more efficiently lethal 'information-based military;' enable it to 'weaponize' culture; manipulate 'cultural leverage points;' or to rent the 'tribes' of Iraq. Gonzalez's own analysis is based on a survey of the existing military literature on the 'human terrain,' project proposal requests, budget justification documents, reports from military contractors, job descriptions for the human terrain team positions, and interviews with current and former HTS employees. From this, he convincingly argues that HTS is about compiling social and cultural knowledge to improve targeting, and to develop the military's capabilities to manipulate behaviour.

Gonzalez's critique of the HTS is in large part based on a concern that social scientific and anthropological research will be used to determine who to militarily target. This, he notes, is a gross violation of the ethical responsibilities of social scientific research. The researcher cannot guarantee that the subjects will not be harmed by the research produced. Nor can the researcher ensure the voluntary participation of the research subjects when the research occurs in the presence of soldiers and where the researcher is also likely armed.

Gonzalez raises other objections to HTS as well. He argues that it is bad social science in that it uses an objectified and dehumanized conception of people and culture – a human terrain – as well as an

antiquated and discredited colonial anthropology. It is also an acceptance by social scientists of a role as technicians for empire. This, he notes, is a return to the historical role of anthropology as a service to colonial administrators. In addition, citing C. Wright Mills, he warns of a social science that is instrumentalized for those in power and which eschews any notion of social responsibility. This leads Gonzalez to call for a decolonized social science to be more publicly engaged and to challenge American foreign policy and to demilitarize American society.

It is undoubtedly important for academics to be publicly engaged as he suggests, but this is not, of course, a new idea, and American left intellectuals have sought to influence public opinion. This has not ended American imperial ambitions or prevented academics from actively participating in it. There is an opportunity that he misses here to think more concretely about how the university can be organized as a concrete site of resistance to imperialism. Furthermore, while he compares HTS to the CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) and Phoenix programs of the Vietnam War, and discusses the origins of the 'Human Terrain' (which interestingly has its roots in the American government's response to the Black Panthers), as well as its antecedents in British colonialism; the history of the relationship between the social sciences, and the American military during the Cold War or of the post-Vietnam doctrinal conflict within the US military over counterinsurgency are, for the most part, absent. Including this would show not only the ways in which HTS represents a significant shift in the relationship of the military and the social sciences, as Gonzalez does effectively, but would also identify the important elements of continuity. Nonetheless, this is an important and timely book and a useful tool in the hands of academics trying to make sense of and challenge the militarization of social science knowledge.