

Cold War Anthropology, Anthropologists as Spies, Globalism, and Interconnections

Introduction

Anthropology has historically existed at the intersection of culture, politics, and power. During the twentieth century, particularly during the Cold War, the discipline became entangled with intelligence gathering, geopolitical strategy, and global ideological competition.

Anthropologists possess specialized skills—linguistic knowledge, cultural immersion, and ethnographic observation—that make them valuable to intelligence agencies seeking insight into foreign societies.

At the same time, the rise of global interconnectedness, often described as **Globalism**, reshaped the scope of anthropological research. Globalism refers broadly to the growing integration of societies through economic exchange, migration, communication networks, and political influence. Anthropologists increasingly studied how these global connections reshaped local cultures and power structures.

The intersections of anthropology, espionage, and slavery demonstrate how knowledge about cultures has frequently been used as a strategic tool in war, governance, and global power dynamics.

Anthropology and Espionage

Throughout modern history, anthropologists and archaeologists have sometimes served as intelligence agents. Their ability to travel internationally, conduct fieldwork, and interact with local populations made them uniquely positioned to gather information.

A major early controversy occurred in 1919 when anthropologist **Franz Boas** publicly accused several American archaeologists of using anthropological research as a cover for espionage activities during World War I. In a letter titled *Scientists as Spies*, Boas condemned researchers who used their scholarly roles to gather intelligence, arguing that such actions damaged the credibility of science and endangered legitimate research.

Boas wrote that individuals who use scientific research as a disguise for political spying “prostitute science in an unpardonable way.”

The controversy centered on archaeologists who were working with U.S. intelligence agencies such as the Office of Naval Intelligence while conducting research in Central America. Their archaeological projects allowed them to travel widely and observe political and military developments in the region.

One example was **Sylvanus Morley**, an archaeologist who gathered intelligence in Mexico and Central America while ostensibly conducting archaeological research. His fieldwork allowed him to travel thousands of miles along coastlines and investigate potential German military activity during World War I.

These revelations triggered a major ethical debate within anthropology about whether scholars should cooperate with intelligence agencies.

Anthropology and War Efforts

Anthropologists were widely involved in military and intelligence efforts during the twentieth century. During World War II, many anthropologists worked with intelligence organizations such as the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the CIA.

Prominent anthropologists contributed cultural analysis to help governments understand enemy societies and political systems. Cultural research became a tool of strategic warfare, helping policymakers anticipate behavior, political movements, and social dynamics within other nations.

By the end of World War II, anthropological organizations such as the American Anthropological Association were increasingly consulted by government agencies seeking expertise on foreign societies.

This relationship between anthropology and government institutions continued into the Cold War, when research on developing nations often overlapped with intelligence and military interests.

Cold War Anthropology

During the Cold War, anthropology became deeply connected to geopolitical struggles between competing global ideologies. Research projects often focused on societies considered strategically important to U.S. foreign policy, including regions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Government-funded research programs studied social structures, economic development, and political movements in these regions. In some cases, anthropological research was used to predict or influence political unrest and revolutionary movements.

One controversial example was **Project Camelot**, a U.S. government research initiative designed to study the causes of social revolutions in developing nations. Critics argued that such projects transformed anthropology into a tool of counterinsurgency and political manipulation.

These developments raised significant ethical concerns within the discipline. Many anthropologists argued that collaboration with intelligence agencies endangered the communities they studied and undermined the trust necessary for ethnographic research.

Globalism and Anthropological Interconnections

The expansion of global communication, migration, and economic networks transformed anthropology in the late twentieth century. Anthropologists increasingly began studying globalization and the ways in which societies became interconnected.

Global interconnectedness reshaped traditional anthropological approaches that had focused on isolated or remote societies. Instead, anthropologists began examining how global forces—including trade, media, technology, and migration—reshaped local cultures.

Many scholars advocated for a form of **activist anthropology**, which seeks to address global problems such as environmental destruction, economic inequality, and cultural marginalization. These scholars argue that anthropology should not merely observe social conditions but also contribute to solutions.

At the same time, debates emerged within the discipline about whether activism compromises scientific objectivity.

Foreign Ethnographers and the Study of America

Anthropology is not limited to Western scholars studying non-Western societies. Foreign-born ethnographers have also conducted significant research on American culture.

Researchers from Europe, Canada, and Israel have studied American society through a transnational lens, analyzing how U.S. cultural influence spreads globally through media, technology, and economic systems.

These scholars often provide an “outsider perspective,” examining American political movements, social norms, and cultural dynamics in ways that differ from domestic researchers.

However, foreign ethnographers studying politically sensitive topics in the United States sometimes encounter suspicion regarding their research motivations.

Slavery, Intelligence, and Strategic Knowledge

Long before anthropology became entangled with intelligence agencies, enslaved individuals played important roles in espionage during major historical conflicts.

Enslaved Spies in American Wars

During the American Revolution and the Civil War, enslaved people often acted as intelligence agents, passing crucial information to opposing forces.

Several well-known figures illustrate this phenomenon:

- **Harriet Tubman** served as a Union spy and scout during the Civil War. In 1863 she helped lead the Combahee River Raid, which liberated more than 800 enslaved people and destroyed Confederate infrastructure.
- **James Armistead Lafayette** served as a double agent during the American Revolution, infiltrating British headquarters while providing intelligence to American forces.
- **Mary Jane Bowser** operated inside the Confederate White House as a Union spy, secretly gathering military intelligence.

Confederate officers often discussed military strategies in front of enslaved people, believing them to be incapable of understanding or recording such information. In reality, these individuals frequently gathered and transmitted intelligence that became known as “**Black Dispatches.**”

Anthropology, Race, and Scientific Racism

In the nineteenth century, anthropological theories were sometimes used to justify slavery and colonial domination. Certain scholars promoted forms of “scientific racism,” arguing that human races were biologically unequal.

These theories were used by some intellectuals and political leaders to defend slavery and colonial expansion.

However, anthropologists such as **Franz Boas** strongly challenged these ideas. His work, including the influential book **The Mind of Primitive Man**, argued that cultural differences were shaped by historical and environmental factors rather than biological hierarchy.

Boas and his students helped dismantle scientific racism and introduced the concept of cultural relativism, which became a foundational principle of modern anthropology.

Modern Anthropology and Surveillance Technologies

Today, anthropology continues to intersect with surveillance technologies and global human rights research.

Researchers now use satellite imagery and data analysis to identify sites of modern slavery and forced labor. By studying patterns in land use, agriculture, and industrial activity, scientists can detect locations where exploitative labor systems may exist.

These techniques demonstrate how anthropological knowledge and technological surveillance can be used to combat human trafficking and forced labor worldwide.

Conclusion

The relationship between anthropology, espionage, and global power is complex and historically significant. Anthropologists have sometimes served as intelligence agents, particularly during major geopolitical conflicts such as the World Wars and the Cold War. These collaborations sparked ethical debates that continue to shape the discipline today.

At the same time, anthropology has evolved alongside global interconnectedness. As societies become increasingly linked through economic, technological, and cultural networks, anthropologists play an important role in understanding how global forces affect local communities.

The history of anthropology reveals that knowledge about human cultures can be used for many purposes—scientific, political, humanitarian, or strategic. Understanding these historical intersections is essential for evaluating the ethical responsibilities of researchers working in an increasingly interconnected world.

Sources

Very much recommend these links for discovery:

Globalism

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Globalism>

Anthropologists as Spies

<http://www.anthropologiesproject.org/2013/07/anthropologists-as-spies.html>

SAGE Journal Article

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00491241251414876>

Russian Anthropologists

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vladimir-Germanovich-Bogoraz>

<https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/nebraska/9780803216037/lev-shternberg/>

Anthropology and Stalinism

<https://histanthro.org/notes/bernhard-j-stern-an-american-apologist-for-stalinism/>

JSTOR Source

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dfnts6>

French Historical Journal

<https://journals.openedition.org/rhsh/6853?lang=en>

Russian Revolution Anthropology

<https://sk.sagepub.com/ency/edvol/activism/chpt/russian-revolution#>

Civil War Intelligence and Slavery

<https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2011/02/11/confederate-dirty-laundry-spies-and-slaves/>
