The U.S. Military and Human Geography: Reflections on Our Conjuncture

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To cite this article: Joel D. Wainwright (2016) The U.S. Military and Human Geography: Reflections on Our Conjuncture, Annals of the American Association of Geographers, 106:3, 513-520, DOI: 10.1080/24694452.2016.1145508

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2016.1145508

Published online: 17 Mar 2016.

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The U.S. Military and Human Geography:
Reflections on Our Conjuncture

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In recent years, the U.S. military-intelligence community has shown a growing interest in human geography. This article examines the available literature to consider this trend. I contend that the growing military-intelligence use of human geography, both as a concept and as a practice, deserves critical scrutiny. Although military involvement in geographical research is a long-standing and well-recognized fact, the growing emphasis on human geography per se marks a notable shift: not only a change in terminology—from anthropology of human terrain to human geography and geospatial intelligence—but also a shift in underlying military strategy and concepts. Because this shift has potentially profound implications for the discipline, substantive debate over the military's employment of human geography is urgently needed. Key Words: geospatial intelligence, human geography, human terrain, U.S. military.

In recent years, the U.S. military-intelligence community has shown a growing interest in human geography. This article examines the available literature to consider this trend. I contend that the growing military-intelligence use of human geography, both as a concept and as a practice, deserves critical scrutiny. Although military involvement in geographical research is a long-standing and well-recognized fact, the growing emphasis on human geography per se marks a notable shift: not only a change in terminology—from anthropology of human terrain to human geography and geospatial intelligence—but also a shift in underlying military strategy and concepts. Because this shift has potentially profound implications for the discipline, substantive debate over the military's employment of human geography is urgently needed. Key Words: geospatial intelligence, human geography, human terrain, U.S. military.

In recent years, the literature on human geography and the U.S. military has grown enormously. To cite only a few strong examples, human geographers have analyzed the violent legacies of U.S. wars (Tyner 2009, 2010), the geographies of U.S. overseas military bases (Davis 2011) and the global U.S. military-logistics nexus (Cowan 2014), the spatiality of drone warfare (Gregory 2011; Shaw and Akhter 2014), militarism and subjectivity (Cowan and Gilbert 2007), the geographical imaginations framing U.S. counterinsurgency strategy (Belcher 2014), and much more. This literature is buttressed by reflections on the historical influence of the military on our discipline (Barnes and Farish 2006; Farish 2010; Bowd and Clayton 2013; Barnes 2015) and a critical awareness of ongoing collaboration between human geographers and the U.S. military, particularly in the case of the Bowman Expeditions (Wainwright 2012; Gilberto López y Rivas 2014a, 2014b; Bryan and Wood 2015).

To generalize, this literature seeks to discern the prospects for a more just, nonviolent geography. Consider Inwood and Tyner’s (2011) collection on “nonkilling geographies” as well as American Association of Geographers (AAG) President Eric Sheppard’s (2013) appeal for a “geography of peace” and the responses it engendered (Inwood and Tyner 2013; Wainwright 2013a).

All of this only refers to recent works by human geographers who are critical of militarism, however. There is another side to the geography–military relation, namely, research by those who treat human geography as a science with useful military and intelligence applications. There are arguably two large, distinct literatures here. One reflects research on military geography by academic geographers (Russell 1954; Woodward 2005; Galgano and Palka 2011). The other
literature, written by and for nonacademic members of the military and intelligence community, assesses the merits of human geography for their purposes. To distinguish between these two literatures, I refer to the latter as “gray.” In this article, I comment on selected recent works in the gray literature. This literature has seen a florescence of references to human geography and the specification of this concept by the U.S. military-intelligence community. I contend that the growing military-intelligence use of human geography, both as a concept and as a practice, deserves our critical scrutiny. Military interest in geographical research is ancient. Yet, I argue, recent engagements by the U.S. military-intelligence community with human geography indicate a notable shift, one with potentially profound implications for the discipline.

Human Terrain and Human Geography

Consider the Human Geography Summits organized by the Institute for Defense and Government Advancement (IDGA) in 2012 and 2013. These summits brought together academic geographers, military and intelligence agents, myriad consultants, and salespeople from the various Pentagon suppliers to discuss the prospects for harnessing human geography as a military tool—or, to cite the slogan of the 2012 meeting, to “[m]aximiz[e] force efficiency through intelligence in the human domain” (IDGA 2012). At the 2012 Summit, one could participate in workshops entitled, “Thinking Like the Natives: Cultural Immersion for US Special Operations,” and “Understanding the Local Culture and History of Target Populations.” At the 2013 meeting there were sessions to help participants with “Understanding Human Geography in the Field” and “Ensuring Boots on the Ground Are Combat Effective” (IDGA 2013). These titles reveal something of the prevailing conception of human geography among the U.S. military-intelligence community, but to obtain a fuller appreciation it will be useful to cite a few relevant texts. Consider one recent article that treats human geography as a “science” to address “the world’s troubled spots”:

Human Geography is rapidly becoming one of the main ingredients in the intelligence gathering processes associated with conflicts throughout the world. An understanding of where people are and why may be a century-old social science, but only in recent years has its application been utilized to accurately predict the next development in a troubled zone. (O’Brien 2013; compare Silverman 2013)

Such claims raise several questions: How did human geography come to be used to characterize “intelligence gathering processes associated with conflicts throughout the world”? What exactly makes human geography so useful to the military?

A proper accounting of these questions would require a detailed analysis of their place in the history of U.S. military and geopolitical strategy, among other topics beyond the scope of this article. This article focuses on the relation between human geography and the analysis of “human terrain.” Although the term human terrain rarely appeared in U.S. military and intelligence documents before 2005, by 2007 it figured prominently. Since 2010–2011, the expression and concept of analysis of human terrain has been increasingly equated with human geography. This shift merits scrutiny.

Let us briefly revisit the argument for mapping human terrain circa 2005 to 2007 (McFate and Jackson 2005; Kipp et al. 2006; Petraeus 2006). These sources suggest that the immediate inspiration for human terrain analysis came when U.S. military leaders, most notably David Petraeus, concluded that the failure of the United States to win hegemony in Iraq and Afghanistan was on the military’s lack of social and cultural understanding. The insights of this work were incorporated into the Army’s newly revised Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3–24 (Department of the Army 2006), written at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, under Petraeus’s tutelage. Kipp et al. (2006) explained:

[The U.S. military has not always made the necessary effort to understand the foreign cultures and societies in which it intended to conduct military operations. . . . Many of the principal challenges we face in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom . . . stem from just such initial institutional disregard for the necessity to understand the people among whom our forces operate as well as the cultural characteristics and propensities of the enemies we now fight. To help address these shortcomings in cultural knowledge and capabilities, the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), a U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) organization that supports the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, is overseeing the creation of the Human Terrain System (HTS). This system is being specifically designed to address cultural awareness shortcomings at the operational and tactical levels by giving brigade commanders an organic capability to help understand and deal with “human terrain”—the social,
Although the human terrain concept has been thoroughly criticized—by anthropologists (González 2009; Price 2011) and geographers (e.g., Belcher 2014)—it was embraced in the military and civil society (remarkably, Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3–24 became a best-selling book). Moreover, these arguments resulted in concrete policies and institutions. After the U.S. Army created the well-funded Human Terrain Systems (HTS) program in 2006, the concept became ubiquitous throughout the military-intelligence community. This rapid diffusion of human terrain analysis was stimulated by the intense desire to explain the failure of U.S. forces to win hegemony in Afghanistan and Iraq after conquering those territories. By 2005, a rather formulaic explanation of this problem was on offer: The United States failed to “win hearts and minds” after sweeping across these territories because the military lacked sufficient cultural understanding of the people. In this period, human terrain was touted as a tool to win the war—with culture. A U.S. Naval Postgraduate College thesis from 2008 captures the sense of promise and necessity:

Countless historical examples exist where in-depth understanding of human terrain was the crucial difference between success and failure. . . . Human terrain can indicate which courses of action will most likely produce positive or counter-productive effects. . . . Pre-identifying the asymmetric socio-cultural aspects specific to an operational area may determine if a planned military action will be welcomed with cheers or bullets. (Eldridge and Neboshynsky 2008, 30)

The authors’ reference to “cheers or bullets” calls to mind Dick Cheney’s (2003) infamous claim that U.S. forces would be “greeted as liberators” by cheering Iraqis. Against Cheney’s optimistic prediction, the violent opposition encountered by U.S. forces in postinvasion Iraq created the conditions for a swing toward a distinctly un-neoconservative approach.

The new narrative found expression in Petraeus’s (2006) widely read reflection essay on Iraq, “Learning Counterinsurgency.” In the ninth of his fourteen “observations” on counterinsurgency, Petraeus wrote:

Observation Number 9, cultural awareness is a force multiplier, reflects our recognition that knowledge of the cultural “terrain” can be as important as, and sometimes even more important than, knowledge of the geographic terrain. This observation acknowledges that the people are, in many respects, the decisive terrain, and that we must study that terrain in the same way that we have always studied the geographic terrain.

“Observation Number 9” marks the entry of cultural and human terrain into Petraeus’s analysis of U.S. strategy—one that helped him take charge of U.S. military operations in Iraq and subsequently the Central Intelligence Agency. It also inspired the creation of the HTS program (as well as the Bowman Expeditions; see Wainwright 2012).

Although human terrain analysis remains in vogue, much has changed since 2008. The Army’s HTS program is now defunct (Price and González 2015), yet the Bowman Expeditions have expanded across Central America (Wainwright 2013b). Recent texts in the gray literature are much less likely to equate human terrain with culture or cultural mapping, and still less to specify anthropology as a solution to its problems. Although it is perhaps too soon to explain this change, two factors stand out. First, the well-organized resistance by anthropologists in the Network of Concerned Anthropologists (NCA) and within the American Anthropological Association (AAA) against participation in U.S. Army and HTS programs—the NCA garnered more than 1,000 signatories condemning the program—brought critical attention to the HTS program, complicating the Army’s relationship with anthropology and creating difficulties for recruiting top-quality anthropologists. Second, there has been a backlash within the military against the HTS program (documented in Stanton 2013). Internal critics contend that the human terrain program was essentially a fad and that too much was expected of the incorporation of cultural awareness in military operations. In this view, the military should study the enemy but not with cultural anthropologists on the front lines: They cause more problems than they are worth.

**Human Terrain Analysis = Human Geography**

Into the breach stepped human geography. Rather, human terrain analysis has been redefined as human geography. The U.S. Army has taken the lead in developing the concept. Thanks to the public release of Grant’s (2011) “selective overview of US Army Human Geography Research Programs,” we can glean a sense of the human geography programs under development since 2010 and 2011, at least within the U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center.
Grant specifically limited his discussion to “projects executed by ERDC,” thus excluding “relevant research, e.g., Mapping the Human Terrain, Human Socio-Cultural Behavior Modeling, [and] Network Analysis” (6). His presentation describes ten distinct Army human geography research programs (see Table 1). One illustration, outlining the GEMINI program, is reproduced here (Figure 1). Note that the purpose of the GEMINI program, involving human geographers from Arizona State University, is to “capture local cultural understanding to provide a base ... model for support to civil military operations”: This is an illustration of mapping cultural terrain redux, now characterized as human geography. The funding for these ten ERDC programs comes to more than US$32 million. Although relatively modest in military terms, this level of funding is not insignificant in relation to academic geography departments. (I note in passing that this also far exceeds the budget of the Bowman Expeditions.6) Notably, most of the Army’s human geography programs were created after 2010. As far as I am aware, no critical studies of any of these programs have been published to date.

This emphasis on human geography has reached other branches of the military. A 2011 guide for “interpreting the cultural landscape” produced at the U.S. Marines’ Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning is entitled, “Reading the Human Geography” (Jasparro and Jasparro 2011). Noting that Marines are expected to be able to “operate immediately” in diverse battle zones, the guide explains:

[...] in addition to operational readiness, regional preparation and some language capability, Marines should be equipped with tools to be able to learn quickly about an area ... once they arrive. The discipline of human geography provides a variety of techniques (mainly visual) that can facilitate the gathering, interpretation, and display of human information—particularly in difficult and/or culturally unfamiliar operating environments. (Jasparro and Jasparro 2011, 1, italics modified)

Human geography is used here in a manner consistent with the earlier conception of mapping cultural terrain, albeit in a more expansive sense to incorporate the gathering and analysis of geospatial data. In this view, human geography includes human terrain analysis, but mapping human terrain is only one of the potentially useful geographical techniques of interest to the Marines.

Behind the military stands the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA), responsible for collecting and analyzing geospatial intelligence (or GEOINT). The NGA is at the center of the military-intelligence turn to human geography (see Crampton 2011). As NGA Director Letitia Long explained in her remarks to the 2012 GEOINT Symposium:

We have also begun making major changes using human geography sources, including social media that delivers context ... information to tip other sources and a comprehensive understanding of the environment. ... [T]he areas of ethnic conflict, NGA analysts are spatially enabling casualty, protest and ethnicity data at the neighborhood level. This new information provides decision-makers with possible explanations for why something is happening. ... Some may know that the DNI designated NGA as the Intelligence Community Lead for Human Geography. ... [W]e have worked with many partners—some outside of our traditional areas—to increase the volume and quality of Human Geography data. We will continue to work together to refine and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Program Name</th>
<th>US$ (millions)</th>
<th>Start year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Geo-Cultural Analysis Tool (GCAT)</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Building Characterization Tools</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Actionable Cultural Understanding to Support Tactical Tools</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>GeoInt Exploitation in Man-Made Environments: Nations to Insurgents (GEMENI)</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rapid Model Prototyping for Infrastructure and Essential Services (IES)</td>
<td>1.46</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Infrastructure &amp; Essential Services Ontology</td>
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<td>2010</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Cultural Reasoning and Ethnographic Analysis for the Tactical Environment (CREATE)</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Grapevine [data mining]</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Human–Water Environmental Complexities in COIN Environments (CMO-HEI)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Socio-Cultural Modeling</td>
<td>7.00</td>
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<td><strong>31.58</strong></td>
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establish data standards for the Human Geography trade-craft, as well as identify new sources and applications. (Long 2012)⁷

What is the value of human geography to the NGA? It produces “insight we could not have ‘seen’ before[,] [i]nsight that makes a difference to those who rely on us” (Long 2012). The NGA is a combat support agency. “Those who rely on us” is a euphemism for the armed forces of the U.S. military.

Conclusion: From Anthropology to Human Geography

A shift is occurring in the relationship between the U.S. military and human geography. To conclude, I offer three interpretative remarks on this shift. First, the military’s turn to human geography reflects not only a change in terminology—from anthropology of human terrain to human geography and geospatial intelligence—but also marks a modification in underlying concepts. What the varied agents of the U.S. Army, NGA, and so on, invoke with human geography is not the same as that promised by McFate and Petraeus in 2006. To be sure, the mapping of cultural difference has not entirely abated, but it has been absorbed as one tactic within a broader conception of commanding sociospatial relations, one that subsumes—or at least seeks to subsume—more varied forms of human difference, sensed in more diverse ways. The ethnographer still has a place in some battle zones, but his or her subject position is far less significant to the military than the geospatial intelligence analyst, working at a quiet desk in Virginia, equipped with training in human geography and geographic information systems, sifting through spatial data from satellites, soldier-sensors, drones, cell phones, and so on.

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Figure 1. Illustration of one U.S. Army Human Geography Research Program (Grant 2011). (Color figure available online.)
Second, I emphasized the gray literature because that is where the shift occurred. Consider, however, the first academic paper by a human geographer to discuss the military’s human geography turn: Medina’s (2014) paper “From Anthropology to Human Geography: Human Terrain and the Evolution of Operational Sociocultural Understanding,” published in August 2014 in the journal Intelligence and National Security. Medina’s central claim is that

The nature of sociocultural understanding by the US is evolving. What was once an ethnographic focus on micro level human systems in post 9/11 conflicts is now more directed toward studies of macro level systems. This was driven by a disciplinary shift of efforts, primarily from Anthropology to Geography, which resulted in a change from face-to-face data collection to remote collection through authoritative and non-authoritative, as well as sensor based sources. (3)

Thus, Medina rightly noted, “In many circles of government and industry, the term human terrain has been replaced with human geography” (2014, 10, italics added). In Medina’s view, one benefit of this shift in terminology is that it “avoids negative connotations from controversies tethered to the term [cultural or human terrain]” (10).

Medina’s thesis is broadly correct. Yet, pace Medina, I do not recommend that academic human geographers accommodate ourselves to this shift. On the contrary, I believe that this shift must be analyzed and confronted. The singular importance of Medina’s paper is that it represents the first scholarly attempt to thematically define human geography as a tool for the military-intelligence community, precisely in the fashion anticipated by the gray literature since circa 2010–2011. With due respect to Medina, none of the arguments made in his paper are novel: They all emerge out of the gray literature. What distinguishes his paper is its affirmative celebration, in academic form, of the military’s shift from anthropology to human geography.

Last, notwithstanding the importance of the debate over the Bowman Expeditions, arguably too much attention has been given to them—particularly the individuals involved—and not enough to the broader conditions of possibility that created them. A substantive debate over the military’s employment of human geography is urgently needed. I contend that the military’s turn to human geography (and the conception of geography reflected in Medina’s 2014 paper) is far more threatening to the present disciplinary formation than the work of the Bowman geographers. What makes it so threatening? The systematic use of human geography by the U.S. military—both as rhetoric and as practice—cannot but have effects on our discipline. We should anticipate that this shift will reduce the space afforded to critical work, in favor of those forms of human geography that promise military applications. This is clearly a potential risk in those geography departments that have created graduate certificates in geospatial intelligence analysis, a development that threatens to shift priorities and intellectual orientation along with budget lines. More generally, if human geography as a discipline comes to be seen as implicated in U.S. military and intelligence operations, it is likely to influence how nonacademics the world over perceive us and our work. This could result in the presumption that human geographers from U.S. universities are military-intelligence agents, which could have grave consequences. For these reasons, it is past time for a substantive study of these matters by the AAG. This will require mobilizing the resources of the AAG in a manner consistent with the steps taken by the AAA in response to the creation of the HTS program. To some this proposal might seem too modest, but generating and institutionalizing a robust analysis of U.S. military involvement in human geography would comprise a useful step.

Acknowledgments

I thank Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro, Jim Glassman, Will Jones, Richard Wright, and anonymous reviewers for their criticism. I thank Eric Sheppard for facilitating discussions at the AAG meetings and in the pages of the Annals.

Notes

1. See Woodward (2005), Bernazzoli and Flint (2009), and Recha et al. (2015). It is beyond the scope of this article to present a full literature review. My emphasis in this article is restricted to human geography and the U.S. military and state. This is not to deny the importance of geography for other states or militaries but only to limit my purview to a manageable, and important, subset of the literature.

2. The IDGA (2013) brochure notes, “With an annual operating budget of $18 billion, DoD Military Intelligence programs have been instrumental in the war on terror. Human Geography has been at the forefront of these intelligence programs, often embodied in the Human Terrain Systems program. ...”
US Military to operate in theatres where conventional warfare is not effective, Human Geography must be readily understood and utilized.”

3. The meaning of the U.S. military’s use of the concept of human terrain is disputed. For fourfolds outlines of the concept, see McFate and Jackson (2005), Kipp et al. (2006), and Medina (2014); for critical genealogies, see González (2009) and Price (2011); on HTS’s antecedents in Korea, see Lee, Barnes, and Wainwright (2015); in Vietnam, see Tyner (2009).

4. According to the U.S. Army’s HTS Web site, twenty-eight HTS teams were deployed to Iraq by 2008 before going into decline. “As U.S. and Coalition Forces in Iraq began to drawdown in 2010–2011, Human Terrain Teams began to reduce in number and by June 2011 all Human Terrain Teams had departed Iraq” (http://humanterrainsystem.army.mil/). Yet the HTS program persists. Its Web site, relaunched on 11 December 2012, quotes the mission statement: “US Army Human Terrain System functions as the primary and enduring social science-based human domain research, analysis, and training capability, focused on enabling leaders to remain adaptive when shaping current and future complex strategic and operational environments which support Unified Action Partners world-wide.”

5. For instance, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has a “cultural mapping (CMAP)” program, led by a geographer: http://www.erdc.usace.army.mil/Media/FactSheets/FactSheetArticleView/tabid/9254/Article/476690/cultural-mapping.aspx

6. Recall that the initial funding for the Bowman Expeditions came from the U.S. Army FMSO (Herlihy et al. 2006; see also Wainwright 2012). In 2013, Jerry Dobson received an award for US$3 million from the U.S. military’s Minerva program to study indigenous communities throughout Central America (Dobson 2013; see Wainwright 2013b).

7. Long was replaced as NGA director by Robert Cardillo, who, like Long, came to the NGA from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). On 9 October 2015, Cardillo spoke in the Department of Geography at Penn State University about their “partnership” with the NGA. According to the NGA’s press release (Fouché 2015), “Penn State is NGA’s largest collegiate academic partner,” with “one NGA University Research Initiative Grant with Penn State, two Cooperative Research and Development Agreements, … and 152 [Penn State] alumni currently serving in the [NGA] workforce.”


9. I also agree with his contention that opposition among geographers to the Bowman Expeditions was “smaller than experienced in Anthropological circles toward the HTS” (Medina 2014, 13), although I disagree with his explanation for this divergence.

References


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