U.S. Military Funded Mapping Project in Oaxaca

Geographers used to gather intelligence?

By Cyril Mychalejko
Mychalejko's ZSpace page

War was God's way of teaching Americans geography," once wrote Ambrose Bierce, an American journalist and social critic. Today, a University of Kansas (KU) professor may be using geography to teach Americans war.

Dr. Jerome Dobson, a geography professor and president of the American Geographical Society (AGS), sent out a one-and-a-half page white paper sometime in late 2004-early 2005 to the Department of Defense and civilian agencies looking for funding to promote a $125 million "academic" project that would send geographers to countries all over the globe to conduct fieldwork.

"The greatest shortfall in foreign intelligence facing the nation is precisely the kind of understanding that geographers gain through field experience, and there's no reason that it has to be classified information," wrote Dobson. "The best and cheapest way the government could get most of this intelligence would be to fund AGS to run a foreign fieldwork grant program covering every nation on earth."

This fieldwork program, named the Bowman Expeditions, was enthusiastically received by Dr. Geoffrey Demarest, a former Lieutenant Colonel and current Latin America specialist at the U.S. Army's Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO). The FMSO is a research center housed at Fort Leavenworth, about 50 miles down the road from KU. According to its website, FMSO "conducts analytical programs focused on emerging and asymmetric threats, regional military and security developments, and
other issues that define evolving operational environments around the world." Demarest, a School of the Americas graduate who served multiple assignments in Latin America during his 23-year military career, has written extensively about counterinsurgency and believes mapping and property rights are necessary tools to advance U.S. security strategies, such as with Plan Colombia. He helped secure a $500,000 grant to partially fund México Indígena, the first Bowman Expedition, which until recently has been quietly mapping indigenous lands in Oaxaca, Mexico.

In January, a communiqué sent out by the Union of Organizations of the Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca (UNOSJO) alleged that the project was carried out without obtaining free, prior, and informed consent of local communities as mandated by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. UNOSJO also questioned whether the project, which in addition to the involvement of the U.S. military office that runs the controversial Human Terrain System, involves the participation of Radiance Technologies—a weapons development and intelligence company that could in the future use the information collected to the detriment of the local population in terms of counter-insurgency, bio-piracy, or the privatization of land.

The communiqué generated a confined hurricane of criticism on Internet sites and listservs (and a flurry of articles in Oaxaca daily newspapers). But when reports of the conflict starting appearing on international media outlets like Pravda and Seoul Times, project directors Dobson and fellow KU professor Peter Herlihy (lead geographer for México Indígena) were prompted to defend the ethics, purpose, and scope of their projects.

"Because the Foreign Military Studies Office has been one of several sponsors of the first Bowman Expedition México Indígena," they wrote on the México Indígena website to address "misconceptions" on the project, "there has been some understandable confusion regarding the project's aims.... FMSO's goal is to help increase an understanding of the world's cultural terrain, so that the U.S. government may avoid the enormously costly mistakes which it has made due in part to a lack of such understanding."

On the gathering controversy in Mexico, they stated, "The México Indígena team is well aware that some people are suspicious of the fact that FMSO is one of its sponsors. We ask only that such potential critics keep an open mind, that they learn a little about what we really do, and that they reconsider their assumption that any
action which involves any part of the U.S. government must necessarily be bad." These words only added fuel to the fire.

**Community on Fire**

In a small rural Zapotec community deep in the distinctly isolated Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca, southern Mexico, a regional gathering of indigenous peoples' autonomy took place from February 21 to 23. The 3rd Feria of the Cornfield-Globalization and the Natural Resources of the Sierra, convened by the UNOSJO coordination, drew together a couple of hundred local attendees to consolidate the ongoing process of autonomy and present a showcase of indigenous corn-based culture and food sovereignty. But the burning topic of the mapping controversy seemed to overshadow other discussions.

"We made it very clear that we don't want anyone mapping around here," said Juan Perez Luna, community leader of the host village, Asuncion Lachixila. "Yes, we want to map our own communities and, yes, we want to learn how to do it, but we don't believe what these (México Indígena) geographers were saying." Don Juan, an elderly grandfather who attended the gathering, was straightforward with his thoughts on the project: "We think these studies are about counter-insurgency."

The U.S. geographers promoting the México Indígena project first approached UNOSJO in 2006, as if recognizing the NGO as the informal conduit to the Zapotec communities. This coincided with the development of the popular social movements in Oaxaca that gave birth to the Oaxacan Peoples Popular Assembly (APPO) and a dynamic new kind of popular uprising marked by horizontal organizational structures and militant non-violent direct action. APPO seized the city of Oaxaca for seven months in what become known as the Oaxaca Commune, often mobilizing as many as a half-million citizens in support of their revolutionary demands. The state, unfamiliar with how to deal with this kind of social unrest (no obvious leaders to arrest, disappear, assassinate) repeatedly failed to quell the uprising and eventually sent over 5,000 members of the Policía Federal Preventiva (PFP), Mexico's heavily armed federal military-police force, to retake the city. The violent counter-offensive led to
several deaths and hundreds of arrests, and was followed by intense repression against the social movement.

Indigenous communities across the Oaxaca state, representing the poorest and most oppressed segment of the population, sided with the inclusive social movement. The Zapotec communities of the Sierras threw their weight behind the APPO, supporting its demands for indigenous autonomy.

"Indigenous peoples' demand for land tenancy and territorial autonomy challenge Mexico's neoliberal policies—and democracy itself," wrote Professors Dobson and Herlihy in a July 2008 article published in the *Geographical Review* ("A Digital Geography of Indigenous Mexico: Prototype for AGS Bowman Expeditions"). This overtly political observation contrasts strikingly with Dobson's February 5 written response to the growing controversy around his project, where he claimed "our team's abiding dedication to the indigenous people of Oaxaca and our neutrality in all things political."

"UNOSJO have been showing how Dobson, or better said, the U.S. military authorities who are behind the mapping project, have an interest in the privatization of communally held lands," explained Aldo González, director of the Union of Organizations of the Sierra Juárez. "Throughout their mapping investigations, they are seeking to understand the communities' resistance to privatization and identify mechanisms to force them to join PROCEDE [a government privatization scheme]. Bowman Expeditions clearly state that they are collecting information so that the U.S. government can make better foreign policy decisions. So obviously they are going to take into consideration the information gathered here in these communities and apply it in general to all the communities in similar circumstances in Oaxaca and all over Mexico."

México Indígena's own website reveals, "Since the tumultuous period of political unrest in the summer and fall of 2006, Oaxaca has been in the news as a region where long-standing grievances among many indigenous communities are meshing with other movements in complex ways. Our work will illuminate neglected but important facets of these movements." This reinforces concerns, like Don Juan's and González's, that the project's real focus is on counter-insurgency and social engineering.

When asked about the stated goal of understanding social movements, Herlihy didn't initially recall that from the project's website. When asked in a
Another intrinsic part of the war of words in this bitter dispute is the Bowman Expeditions' insistence that UNOSJO, and particularly its director, Aldo González, have no right to speak on behalf of the communities. "UNOSJO is a small NGO that works with Zapotec and other indigenous communities in the Sierra Juárez (but) it is not the political or official voice of the Zapotec communities where we did our research," wrote Herlihy in an official statement with other students and professors participating in México Indígena.

González refutes the charge. UNOSJO—with the affiliation of 24 communities—is the largest Zapotec organization in the region. He said: "Mr. Herlihy and Mr. Dobson—and indeed the U.S. military—are used to speaking to individuals. For them it is sufficient to ask one person as the owner of a piece of land for permission. But for the indigenous communities things aren't like that. Today we are struggling for autonomy for our indigenous peoples, and this is a project bigger than any one single community. So what is happening in Tiltepec and Yagila is affecting other Zapotec communities. For this reason, we have the courage, the duty, and the reason to protest against Bowman Expeditions because it is not just the communities of Tiltepec or Yagila, but all the Zapotec communities in that region, and, ultimately, all of the indigenous communities in Mexico, who are being or will be affected by the studies."

"Let the indigenous people of Oaxaca speak for themselves," wrote Dobson in his February 5 response to critics. The problem in this is that the two communities who hosted the mapping project—San Miguel Tiltepec and San Juan Yagila—have not yet come out publicly on the matter.
Herlihy, the México Indígena team leader, wrote in the aforementioned statement "our (sic) community leaders have openly expressed heartfelt appreciation for our hard work. And you recognize the usefulness of the maps we produced together with you, as well as the training received by the community investigators and university students involved."

González offered a different version of events: "We have been talking to the communities involved in the U.S. studies and they maintain that they were not sufficiently informed about the source of finance and they feel angry because of this. For sure the Herlihy team will try and go to them to change their minds and convince them otherwise, and that will generate more debate."

Zoltan Grossman, a faculty member in Geography and Native American Studies at Evergreen State College who also serves as co-chair of the Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers (AAG), has been following the project and the controversy surrounding it. "In this case of mapping collective land holdings, it seems like some indigenous communities are working with Herlihy's project, while others are suspicious of it," said Grossman, speaking as an individual and not on behalf of the AAG's Indigenous Group. "Personally, I don't think the support of some indigenous people for the project should be used as an answer to criticism by others."

He added that this could exacerbate internal divisions among the Native peoples, while it also creates a colonial divide-and-conquer dynamic that pits indigenous communities against each other. Meanwhile, in Oaxaca, everyone is taking a position. Don Juan from Lachixila is more disappointed with his neighbors in Tiltepec and Yagila: "They don't have enough awareness of what's really going on. They were fooled."

Melquiades Cruz, an indigenous communications worker from Santa Cruz Yagavila (the first community to stop work with the México Indígena project), admitted that people there were initially interested in the project as a way of empowering local students. "At first the community was interested in the México Indigena project primarily so that the youth would learn how to do this kind of graphic information work, to be useful for the community and the region. The community entered into communication with them, and there were three assemblies during which they presented their project," said Cruz. "It was during the third assembly that the
community told them that this project doesn't appeal to us because we think that it seems like an awful lot of money and there must be something else behind it. But if you have the money to just leave your people here to train our people to do the work, that's all, then we can do it. So that this knowledge can be communal, and so that it is shared between the community and the academics that come from outside."

Cruz said the México Indígena team broke off relations after that. This led the community to determine it would not make a formal decision in the assembly. "These people from outside always come trying to sell a great idea—in this case to produce a graphic picture of the community—but this time we saw through it, and we said, it's not just a graphic map, maybe they are interested in the community resources," said Cruz. "We saw that there was something else behind it."

Among the Zapotec in Lachixila, the charge of counter-insurgency activities resounds. UNOSJO has also outlined its concerns in terms of both land privatization and bio-piracy. "It's not just about military control, but also about strategic control over the communities, controlling their land and their consumption," said González.

The bio-piracy issue has been taken up by groups working in food sovereignty and environmental advocacy. Silvia Ribeiro, a researcher from the environmental advocacy ETC Group wrote in the Mexican daily *La Jornada*, "These maps are of great utility for military ends and for counterinsurgency, but also for industrial purposes (exploitation of resources like minerals, plants, animals and biodiversity; mapping access roads already constructed or 'necessary,' sources of water, settlements, social maps of possible resistance or acceptance of projects, etc)."

"We're putting the power of maps into the hands of these communities," insists Herlihy. But could it also be that these University of Kansas geographers' mapping project is serving as an imperial alibi for the FMSO's Demarest, "champion" of the Bowman project, to further his agenda of strengthening the collaboration among "policymakers, officers and soldiers to have better on-the-ground information" through GIS mapping systems to conduct war?

Santa Cruz Yagavila's Cruz alleged that the geographers were not forthright with where their funding was coming from, thus suggesting either a lack of comfort with the project's relationship with the military, or a conscientious effort to conceal the
military designs behind the project. "Herlihy made a presentation in the community showing what were the uses of the maps, where they had worked before, but he never told us where the funds for the project were coming from," said Cruz. "He said it was funded by the University of Kansas or by the University of San Luis, but he never mentioned the source of the funds coming from the Armed Forces of the United States, never."

"By not really revealing their intentions, by not revealing the sources of their funding, by not giving all the information, México Indígena are violating the communities. They are concealing the truth, they are lying," said González. "What they say is a façade, a deception. Yes, we recognize that the maps do have a certain usefulness for the communities, but what we see behind the project is not a helping hand. No, in reality, it's espionage, a form of spying on the communities."

Answering critics' attacks on the lack of transparency, Herlihy recalled how he gave numerous presentations about the project to local communities and "was sure to declare that the project was partially funded by the Foreign Military Studies Office." Nevertheless his description of the FMSO as a "small military research office within Fort Leavenworth down the road from the University of Kansas" seemed deficient, especially in light of the fact that the research being carried out by the office largely concerns counter-insurgency and focuses on "emerging and asymmetric threats."

An Indecent Proposal?

F ormer U.S. President Ronald Reagan often spoke of America as "a shining city upon a hill whose beacon light guides freedom-loving people everywhere," even as he was cozying up to Guatemala's genocidal former dictator Efrain Rios Montt, funding and training death squads in El Salvador, and being charged by the World Court for "unlawful use of force" (terrorism) for Washington's overt and covert support of the Contras in Nicaragua.

In a similar light, neither Dobson nor Herlihy seem to accept any type of radical critique of U.S. power, refusing to acknowledge the country's imperial designs for the region dating back to Manifest Destiny. "My whole rationale for Bowman Expeditions is based on my firm belief that geographic ignorance is the principal cause of the blunders that have characterized American foreign policy since the end of World War II," Dobson wrote in his February 5 statement answering his critics. He told me in an interview that, "America abandoned geography after World War 2 and hasn't won a war since." But statements like that seem to contradict assertions that the
project in Oaxaca was conceived exclusively to "help" the local indigenous population.

"It's the prostitution of geography for the national ruling class," said Neil Smith, distinguished professor of Anthropology and Geography at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Smith, whose book *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* exposes Isaiah Bowman, whom KU's Dobson named his project after, as an imperialist and racist. "This project is aptly named the Bowman Expeditions," Smith said. "[It] follows in the tradition that he started."

Dobson and Herlihy's July 2008 article in the *Geographical Review* reveals that General David Petraeus, co-author of the "U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual," met with México Indígena's research team in October 2006, and commented how, "U.S. troops were unprepared for the 'cultural terrains' of Iraq and Afghanistan and how they needed ways 'to get troops smarter faster.'" Dobson shares with readers his reply, explaining "how geography combines the 'cultural' and 'geographical' terrains into the synthetic 'cultural landscape.'"

In the project's executive summary, prepared by defense contractor Radiance Technologies (whose role according to the company is to provide "requirements oversight"), México Indígena "represents the initial step in a much larger concept of reviving a tradition of research by university scholars providing 'open-source intelligence' on different parts of the world...[in light of] the unfortunate realization that the United States is now perceived as a mighty global power crippled by its own ignorance and arrogance about its dealings with its vast global domain."

The document also states, "Indigenous regions in Mexico, like in so many parts of Latin America and around the world, are where rebellions are fomented, where drugs are produced, where resource pirates operate, and where conditions of poverty and despair drive up the highest rates of our migration. Few would disagree that as we move into the 21st century, indigenous populations are among the most important social actors in struggles of the future of Latin American democracies. Today's populist struggle against neoliberalism has been central to the indigenous movement in Mexico as illustrated by the emergence of the Zapatista army in Chiapas, challenging the corruption and neoliberal strategies of past PRI-run governments at the onset of NAFTA."
Amnesty International (AI), on February 9, issued a statement criticizing a Mexican government human rights report recently submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council. Mexico is one of 16 countries up for review this year by the world body's Universal Periodic Review Working Group. According to AI, the report "fails to acknowledge the worsening human rights climate in many parts of the country." AI also offered an alternative report, which concluded that "Mexican federal, state and municipal police officers implicated in serious human rights violations, such as arbitrary detention, torture, rape and unlawful killings, particularly those committed during civil disturbances in San Salvador Atenco and Oaxaca City in 2006, have not been brought to justice." It also noted that, "Human rights defenders, particular those in rural areas, often face persecution and sometimes prolonged detention on the basis of fabricated or politically-motivated criminal charges."

The FMSO, the principal sponsor of the Oaxaca mapping project, runs the Human Terrain System (HTS), an army program used by General Petraeus in Iraq and in Afghanistan, which embeds anthropologists with military units to conduct field
research with the aim of assisting counterinsurgency efforts in the two countries. UNOSJO's first communiqué sent out in January claimed they believe that the Bowman Expeditions are a new manifestation of the counter-insurgency program.

Roberto González, an associate professor of anthropology at San Jose State University and author of *American Counterinsurgency: Human Science and the Human Terrain*, told *CounterPunch* in an interview that the program is "a scheme to whitewash counterinsurgency and to clean up the image of anti-revolutionary warfare, which is always a dirty business. Even though the U.S. military has more than a century of experience in counterinsurgency warfare (going back to the 'Indian Wars' of the 1800s and the cruel campaign against Filipino revolutionaries in the early 1900s), General David Petraeus and other battlefield technicians have portrayed the method as a 'gentler' means of fighting, while recruiting political scientists, anthropologists, and other social scientists to create the tools to do this." This led the American Anthropological Association's Executive Board to produce a statement officially condemning the Human Terrain program as a violation of the field's ethical tenets, such as ensuring both voluntary informed consent and ensuring the welfare of affected populations.

Dobson, in his *Geographical Review* article, claims allegations that México Indígena and the Bowman Expeditions are part of HTS are unfounded. "The AGS Bowman Expeditions offers a means of studying the human terrain, but they are substantially different from the human terrain system or human terrain teams as currently constituted: Our purpose is scholarly, not military," wrote Dobson.

"I feel that this particular controversy would not have the traction that it does if it were not for the direct role of the U.S. military, especially in light of the turmoil in Oaxaca," said Evergreen State College's Grossman. "Oaxaca is not just any old state in Mexico and southern Mexico is not just any old region in the Americas, it's an area that has had significant repression in very recent years against indigenous peoples by federal forces funded by the U.S."

Grossman said that given the political turmoil in the region, coupled with U.S. military pronouncements in recent years equating indigenous and anti-globalization movements with insurgency and terrorism, it's not surprising that some people believe that the maps could be used by the Mexican government for repressive actions in the name of stability. Specifically, FMSO analysts have lumped indigenous movements with insurgents and terrorists and suggests they are troublemakers and a threat to U.S. interests.

Adding to the specter of U.S. and state violence and repression in the region, the U.S Joint Forces Command released a report in November 2008 that stated Mexico risked
becoming a failed state and, if that were to be the case, it would demand U.S. intervention. Meanwhile, the U.S. House passed a spending bill on February 25 which allocates $410 million for the Merida Initiative, a militarization project modeled after Plan Colombia, to "carry out counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and border security measures."

CUNY's Smith said he believes the motivation behind the Defense Department is very clear, especially in light of Dobson's words. "It's clear that the work they are doing could feed into the Human Terrain System," he said. "The question to ask is why wouldn't it go into the HTS?"

Grossman essentially agrees with Smith. He believes that the FMSO is interested in the research, if not "officially" for its Human Terrain System program, then to better understand the social and cultural human landscape of the regions research.

But México Indígena's Helihy passionately defended his project and intentions. "This is not an evil military plot to destroy indigenous lands. It's nothing of the sort," said Herlihy. "I knew it would be conflictive precisely because we had FMSO funding, but I hoped it would be a project that would make a difference in the world."

In addition, he stated, "We told the Tiltepec community Assembly, where UNOSJO Director presented the first public denouncement, that we would take down the maps if they wanted us too, and we would do the same for any other study community." Likewise, Dobson notes that one thing he insisted on with the FMSO was that the academic investigator in charge of any of the projects would have sole responsibility for choosing the topic of his or her expedition, which he believes quells any notion that this is a military-run research program.

The debate over this program, the contradictions surrounding it, and the broader question of whether it is ethical for academia to be working so closely with the U.S. military and intelligence community has been going on for decades. But, in a way, it seems closer to beginning rather than ending. Whether this project is "about science in the service of the state and science in the service of elites," as Smith contends, or about using participatory mapping to empower indigenous communities to protect their land and cultural rights, as Herlihy and the projects' other supporters argue, an answer probably won't be fleshed out any time soon.

Grossman said that dealing with research controversies and the ethical questions raised in cases such as this one could be a way for geography to overcome its colonial and imperial past. Indigenous peoples have been waiting over 500 years for the world to overcome its colonial and imperial past. What's uncertain is whether these indigenous communities in Oaxaca can afford to wait a few more.
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