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Dangerous Liaisons: Anthropologists and the National Security State

edited by Laura A. McNamara and Robert A. Rubinstein

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The ostensible purpose of this book is to provide the reader with opinions from a “small group of ethnographers from four different countries, each with a variety of experiences studying war, violence, the military, and the state” in an effort to examine the relationship between anthropologists and the national security state. It becomes clear, however, from the first page of the introduction that bias, coupled with a startling lack of a rigorous methodological approach, prevents this edited work from being much more than a politically motivated collection of opinion essays.

The book is replete with postmodern and postcolonial references. Constant allusions from multiple authors to neocolonial wars, American empire, hegemonic militarism, among others betray the roots of the deep-seated biases inherent in the subfield of cultural anthropology. The fact that this work is, for the most part, little more than a collection of politically motivated opinions emanating from the School for Advanced Research Annual Seminar further dilutes any academic rigor. These biases are magnified by the fact that a number of authors end up relying on the opinions of polemically inclined anthropologists and anthropological blogs, such as those of Roberto Gonzalez and Hugh Gusterson, along with the web blog *Zero Anthropology*. What borders on the almost humorous is the fact that authors are so unaware that their chapters are presented as impartial attempts to explain the intersection of social science and military endeavors. At least Gusterson admits in one of his articles deriding the Human Terrain Systems (HTS) that cultural anthropology is academia’s most left-leaning discipline and that many come to this field with a prejudice related to war and warfare.

There is, indeed, something interesting about this book, but it is not what the authors intended. For example, when the reader examines Chapter 8, “Anthropology, Research, and State Violence” by Israeli anthropologist Eyal Ben-Ari, the book takes on an entirely different focus. Instead of providing an insightful, probing work exploring the intersections of anthropology and the military, the book provides a glimpse into the tribal narrative cultural anthropologists have weaved for themselves. Richard Geertz first referred to these cultural webs in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, but many of the authors in this volume are unaware of the cultural web that ensnares them. Ari illuminates this perception by pointing out the liberal political bias presentation in this work and within anthropology as a whole. He argues that a mythical conception of the allegedly horrible use of American anthropologists in the

Vietnam War led many in the field to distrust any collaboration with the military. In fact, several authors note that anthropological groups have attempted to remove anthropologist collaborators from the field. German anthropologist Maren Tomforde highlights the fact the American Anthropological Association does not stand alone in its attempts at ending academic careers.

Besides a liberal bias, Ari argues American anthropologists suffer from a peculiar form of arrogance and engage in what might be characterized as “colonization of the mind.” Ari came to realize he had better luck publishing in American anthropological journals if he used the coda of postmodernism along with a healthy dose of America bashing. It is interesting to note there are numerous references to the George W. Bush administration and none are positive. Ari worries that American anthropological dominance at conferences and in professional journals will continue to influence the work of anthropologists outside the United States.

It is with this understanding of these innate biases that R. Brian Ferguson’s chapter on the HTS concludes “the capacity of HTS is helping to build cannot be seen as being in the interests of the indigenous peoples of the world—the people to whom anthropology is most responsible—unless their interests coincide with the incorporation into a neoliberal US empire.” So, too, is Laura McNamara’s chapter on interrogation techniques used by the Bush Administration, which she dubs torture. She believes such acts permit “a unique perspective on the dynamics through which America is made, unmade, and remade.” Her chapter is placed in the proper context after reading Ari’s chapter with its postmodern, anti-Bush context.

One would be hard pressed to recommend this work on its academic merits. This book, however, is a great read for anyone interested in understanding academic ivory towers. It is also an integral window into the current state of cultural anthropology.