comment

ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND WAR
A response to David Kilcullen (AT 23[3])

In his critique of Roberto González' article on the rise of 'mercenary anthropology', David Kilcullen argues that anthropologists are free to work for the occupying forces in Iraq, so long as this does not conflict with their personal ethics, since the invasion of Iraq was authorized by democratic vote and, therefore, legitimate. He suggests that anthropologists who oppose the war in Iraq should work as citizens to reverse government policy rather than making arguments about the professional ethics of anthropologists who are assisting in the occupation of Iraq. And he argues that since the legitimacy of the war itself ('*jus ad bellum*') has been determined through the political process, the only ethical questions remaining for anthropologists who work with the military are questions of the morality of implementation ('*jus in bello*').

Dr Kilcullen's argument is wrong on three counts.

First, the legitimacy of the war (*jus ad bellum*) is far from settled. The invasion of Iraq was carried out without prior UN authorization. Although UN resolutions 1483 and 1546 later provided guidelines for the occupying forces, these were pragmatic responses to a *fait accompli* – an invasion undertaken in violation of international law. More to the point, there is now good reason to doubt the legitimacy of the war in terms of the internal democratic processes of the United States. The US Congress voted to authorize military action in Iraq in response to arguments made by the Bush administration about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. As we all know, there were no such weapons, and it is now widely believed in the US that the Bush administration misrepresented the evidence about them in order to secure Congressional authorization to invade Iraq. (In particular it made claims that have now been discredited about aluminium tubes it said were for uranium enrichment, about Iraqi attempts to buy uranium yellowcake from Niger, and about mobile biological weapons production facilities that turned out not to exist.) A number of members of Congress have said they would not have voted to authorize war had they known then what they know now. With opinion polls showing a majority of the American people turning against the war in late 2006, the Republican Party lost control of both houses of Congress in an election widely seen as referendum on the war. Opinion polls in Iraq also show a majority of Iraqis favouring US withdrawal. And yet the Bush administration is now escalating the war. Ironically, just at the moment when the legitimacy of the war is in collapse, a coterie of anthropologists is intensifying its involvement in the war.

As Dr Kilcullen seems to recognize, the question of *jus ad bellum* is prior to the question of *jus in bello*. Without *jus ad bellum* the question of *jus in bello* is moot. There is no *jus ad bellum* for the US invasion of Iraq.

The second problem with Dr Kilcullen's argument is that, in advanced industrial democracies, the process of democratic debate permeates civil society and is not quarantined in the confined spaces of the electoral process. This is particularly the case with regard to war – the gravest issue that confronts any society. The Vietnam War was ended not just by political pressure exercised through the electoral process but through a vast upswell of debate and agitation that encompassed churches, trade unions, universities, veterans' groups and professional associations. (This included the American Anthropological Association, which passed a resolution against the Vietnam War and engaged in spirited internal debate about the propriety of anthropological participation in the war.) When governments become unresponsive to the popular will, as the Bush administration has in regard to the war in Iraq, it is in the noisy clamour of civil society that democracy resides. As for anthropology's part in this clamour, in a context where the Pentagon seems to hope that anthropology will be to the 'war on terror' what physics was to the Cold War, it is quite proper for professional associations of anthropologists to debate the appropriateness of anthropological involvement in current counter-insurgency campaigns and for individual anthropologists to make arguments on this subject to their colleagues.

The third problem with Dr Kilcullen's argument concerns the glibness with which he applies utilitarian logic to the war in Iraq. He says that the involvement of anthropologists in counter-insurgency campaigns reduces violence and 'the evidence suggests that anthropological knowledge (properly applied by people who understand both the discipline and the security environment) does contribute to the greatest good of the greatest number.' Quite apart from the fact that he does not tell us what 'the evidence' is that anthropological involvement in war reduces violence, this representation of the ethics of war as an arithmetic problem elides all the important questions: how does Dr Kilcullen (or the US military) get to decide what is 'the greatest good of the greatest number'? Does he believe Iraqis would agree with his maths? In calculating the 'greatest good of the greatest number', does one just count dead bodies, or does one also have to weigh the immorality and illegality of one country occupying another? If one simply seeks 'the greatest good of the greatest number', are all means to that end acceptable? (Torture? Attacks on civilians? Detentions without properly obtained evidence?) And are there some things that anthropologists simply should not do, regardless of the anticipated consequences? Psychiatrists, priests and journalists, for example, have professional codes that forbid them to violate covenanted relationships of confidentiality except in extreme situations. Many anthropologists assume that we do, or should, live by an analogous imperative rather than prostituting ourselves as hired intelligence-gatherers for those in power.

On 6 March I went to hear Dr Kilcullen talk, at Washington DC's Wilson Center, to a policy-oriented audience. Several were in military uniform. Though he spoke for over an hour, Dr Kilcullen never once mentioned anthropology. Some of the things he said I agreed with: that the presence of US troops in foreign countries helps al-Qaeda and its ilk to recruit; that the US should invest more resources in diplomacy; and that the US will not improve its performance in Iraq and Afghanistan unless it can win the political support of large parts of the population. Other aspects of his talk I found more troubling. They suggested someone using the methods and insights of anthropology in a game of chess to dominate the Other in the interests of Empire rather than, as his response to González might have suggested, to save lives.

Kilcullen argued that 'it's wrong to look at Iraq as a war that's going to be over in two or three years. It's better to look at it as a campaign in a war that's going to last a couple of generations.' He told the audience that the US came out of the Cold War oriented towards defeating enemies on conventional battlefields by means of superior weaponry. 'Armies as currently constituted are devices for defeating another nation-state, not for controlling a population,' he lamented. In the long war ahead America's enemies, knowing they would be defeated on the conventional battlefield, can be expected to resort to 'irregular' means of armed struggle. Maintaining that 'irregular warfare is population-centric, not enemy-centric', he argued for the importance of approaches to counter-insurgency in which 'information warfare' and what he has elsewhere called 'ethnographic intelligence' are key.[1] He argued that al-Qaeda is adept at disseminating stories – sometimes false stories – that turn local populations against the US, and that the US has to develop information strategies to neutralize that threat. As he has written elsewhere, in a 'new era of information-driven conflict… to combat extremist propaganda, we need a capacity for strategic information warfare – an integrating function that draws together all components of what we say and what we do to send strategic messages that support our overall policy'.[2] Regarding intelligence, Kilcullen pointed out that Western intelligence agencies are good at stealing secrets from enemy governments but have been blindsided by events that came from below, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the era of 'irregular warfare', when the goal is 'controlling a population' rather than 'defeating another nation-state', the West needs to learn to gather information from 'the street'. In other words, we need to mobilize anthropological methods for espionage (this reminds me of how a social scientist consulting for the CIA once suggested befriending children in targeted countries with sweets and asking them what their parents talk about over dinner as a way of gathering intelligence about emergent opinion, in a manner reminiscent of the most insidious Soviet surveillance techniques).

What is advocated here amounts to a social science inspired approach to Empire, using 'information warfare', 'ethnographic intelligence' and culturally informed soldiers as a velvet glove around the brute fist of military might that Empire requires. Do anthropologists really want to be part of this sordid, neo-colonialist project? ●

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1. David J. Kilcullen, New paradigms for 21st-century conflict, *EJournal USA* 12(5): 40-44.
2. Ibid.: 44.