

INTELLECTUALS AND “HUMANITY AS A WHOLE”

Richard A. Shweder

It has been a while since Stanley Katz (who now chairs the editorial board of *Common Knowledge*) looked “beyond the academy’s protective walls”—in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001—and called in these pages for pursuit of “intellectual philanthropy.” Katz defined that term to mean clearing away “*specifically intellectual* obstacles to commensuration, communication, and comprehension,” and he invited the intellectual community to reflect on our own history of involvement in public affairs and to make good on our own mistakes.¹

About the pressing need for “commensuration, communication, and comprehension” there can be little doubt. And surely it is desirable to clarify where and how we have blown it in the past—if indeed we have blown it—so that sensible and defensible initiatives beyond the walls of the academy become possible. What I would like to do, accordingly, in this space is examine a single case of intellectuals involving themselves in public affairs and explore some of the difficulties involved in saying and evaluating what happened.

I recently read *Anthropological Intelligence*, a book by David Price published in 2008, which concerns the application of my own academic discipline of anthro-

This essay was written while the author was a Rosanna and Charles Jaffin Founders’ Circle Member of the School of Social Science, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey.

1. Stanley N. Katz, “Excellence Is by No Means Enough: Intellectual Philanthropy and the Just University,” *Common Knowledge* 8.3 (Fall 2002): 427–38, esp. 438.

Common Knowledge 16:1

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-2009-056

© 2010 by Duke University Press

pology to public purposes during World War II. Despite several disclaimers by the author (“I raise this point not to impugn those who applied anthropology during the war”; “my purpose is not to criticize the choices made by anthropologists at that time”), *Anthropological Intelligence* is artfully designed to suggest that a noble profession was polluted and desanctified by entanglement with American and British war projects of the 1940s.² And despite the author’s ultimate (and arguably true) conclusion that “only a small percentage of anthropology’s contribution to the war clearly violated coming postwar ethical norms,” that final conciliatory judgment comes as a surprise to the reader, given the main drift of the text. Indeed Price worries that during World War II anthropologists, “encouraged to follow depraved paths,” left their discipline “positioned but one step removed from complicity with genocide” (268). A major theme of the volume is that even the greatest of “just wars” had a corrosive effect (and left an indelible stain) on the moral fabric of an academic field, thereby paving the way for anthropologists to become tools in the service of powerful interest groups outside the academy, rather than in the service of humanity as a whole. It is a provocative thesis that deserves to be scrutinized in current debates about the proper role of intellectuals in the societies and polities of which they are members and citizens—and it should be discussed for the sake of clearing away “*specifically intellectual* obstacles to commensuration, communication, and comprehension.”

The moral history that Price tells about wartime anthropologists working outside the academy’s protective walls is unapologetically and explicitly “presentist” in its method. The reader is invited early on to evaluate the actions of anthropologists in World War II as though they were occurring today and to judge them on the basis of contemporary standards of professional ethics (xiii). The moral history that gets constructed/invented is in substantial measure informed by the deontological perspective of Franz Boas, the founder of American anthropology, who wrote: “the first duties [of an anthropologist] are to humanity as a whole, and that, in a conflict of duties, our obligations to humanity are of higher value than those toward the nation; in other words, that patriotism must be subordinated to humanism” (273). By my lights, those are problematic features of the account and somewhat limit its contribution to “intellectual philanthropy.” For next to nothing is said by Price in clarification, specification, or in defense of an ethics of “humanity as a whole.” The lapse is surprising, given that many intellectuals have a fairly complex and ambivalent love-hate relationship with humanity as a whole. Moreover (and especially), most anthropologists study specific peoples, many of whom draw moral distinctions between in-group and out-group mem-

2. David H. Price, *Anthropological Intelligence: The Deployment and Neglect of American Anthropology in the Second World War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 273, xiii.

bers; participate in illiberal (although not necessarily immoral) political, social, and family-life practices; and harbor notions about their own loyalties and ethical obligations in comparison to which a postulated moral duty to “humanity as a whole” will seem to be unmoored and insubstantial.

Indeed the training of a cultural anthropologist is largely an education in the deep and significant particularities associated with human variety. Our training militates against lowest-common-denominator thinking and against the dehumanizing distance or “view from afar” that is achieved by detaching persons from time and place and treating them as sets of abstract objects. Notably, those who have believed, at various points in human history, that they knew what humanity essentially was, or should be, have often assumed themselves to be exemplars of humanity, and then, judging others to be less exemplary, have taken steps for which the others have typically not been grateful. The seductive and unsettling relationship between the ideology of universalism and the practice of conquest—sometimes cloaked as a “liberation” or a “civilizing project” or a “human rights intervention” or a show of solidarity with populations whose members it is presumed want to become just like us—may be among the “*specifically intellectual* obstacles” that Katz would like intellectuals to clear away.³

So what, with Price’s book on hand, can we learn from the experience of those social-science researchers who ventured outside the academy during World War II? *Anthropological Intelligence* assembles a wealth of detailed information, much of it drawn from previously hidden and unusual government archives, about the work of anthropologists at the Japanese-American relocation camps and the U.S. Office of War Information, as well as about their combat and espionage activities in Southeast Asia and North Africa. Anthropologists who read this book are sure to bounce around in the index, as I did, curious about the wartime activities of their teachers or of famous ancestral academic figures. One of my own graduate school teachers Cora Du Bois—described by Colonel Richard P. Heppner, her Washington-based military boss as “sharp,” “tactless,” and “overbearing”—was the acting chief of the Office of Strategic Services Research and Analysis branch in Kandy, Ceylon. Assuming a descriptive posture, Price informs us that Colonel Heppner implemented most of Du Bois’s proposals from the Southeast Asian front and honored her with the “Exceptional Civilian Award.” Still, even in a descriptive historical work of this quality, it is easy, in many large and small ways, to throw up rather than clear away “*specifically intellectual* obstacles to commensuration, communication and understanding”—and in this smaller instance, the historian cannot resist the temptation to moralize (indulging himself in a fashionable variety of presentist social and political judgment) by imply-

3. See Richard A. Shweder, “George W. Bush and the Missionary Position,” *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 133 (Summer 2004): 26–36.

ing that the colonel's description of Du Bois as "sharp," "tactless," and "overbearing" was probably a reflection of "gender bias."⁴ A claim in response to which it is not very hard to imagine the Cora Du Bois I knew herself offering up a blistering, peremptory reply.

Admirably, Price has given careful consideration, as he examines files and reports of the war era, to the probability of what Natalie Zemon Davis terms "fiction in the archives." He has approached all his sources with an appropriate and welcome skepticism. As he writes: "All FBI reports need to be read with skepticism, as innuendo and speculation are mixed with facts" (290). Yet *Anthropological Intelligence*, for all its historical intelligence and its awareness of the chastity that professional ethics and good archival method require, does not fully escape its own strictures. One small example from Price's book must suffice—one that set off my own skepticism alarm. There may be innuendo and speculation mixed with facts in FBI archives, but not only there.

The case in point concerns George Peter Murdock and the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF). Murdock was an undergraduate teacher of mine. He helped establish the HRAF, an archive of ethnographic information on societies studied by anthropologists, when he was in the Institute of Human Relations (IHR) at Yale University. My own institution, the University of Chicago, was among a small number of core "sponsoring members" that had hard copies of the HRAF files in their libraries. There were also many "associate members" of the HRAF who were subscribers and received ethnographic reports. Price writes:

Of all of the research programs undertaken by the IHR, Murdock's Cross-Cultural Survey would become the most historically significant, and as the IHR became the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) in the postwar years, Murdock's database of crosscultural information became a resource used by academic anthropologists and the intelligence community. (90)

Price then quotes the president of the HRAF, as follows: "According to Mel Ember, 'The CIA was an Associate Member of the HRAF consortium between 1979 and 1983, and I don't think the Board of Directors was told about it' (Mel Ember to the author, July 18, 1995)."⁵

Since I was on the HRAF board during the relevant period, I was quite surprised to read the comment attributed to Mel Ember. So I sent him an e-mail, to which he responded on February 17, 2009. I also spoke with him on the phone the next day. Ember wrote me that he did tell Price by phone that the CIA was briefly an associate member of the HRAF and then resigned. But Ember dis-

4. Price, *Anthropological Intelligence*, 237.

5. Price, *Anthropological Intelligence*, 295 n. 2.

puted the accuracy of Price’s quotation. Ember wrote to me that “the board of course knew about [it], because all members have to be approved by the board.” Ember went on to remark, in our phone conversation, that he remembered being told that the CIA had cancelled their subscription because they did not find the HRAF very useful—a factoid that did not surprise him because the ethnographic files had nothing to do with current events. (I myself would guess that, instead of wasting their time in making nefarious use of an ethnographic library, the CIA found it far more useful to subscribe to the *New York Times*.)

Most of the ethical questions raised in *Anthropological Intelligence* about the proper role of anthropologists beyond the academy’s protective walls are not really satisfactorily answered; but at least they are raised, either directly or indirectly. *What are the responsibilities of anthropologists toward the peoples they study?* and *What ethical stance or attitude should anthropologists adopt toward those outside the academy who want to fund their research activities?* Such questions can be made quite specific. For example, what should we say about the \$45 million recently made available by the Pentagon in the form of “Minerva Grants” for basic and unclassified anthropological research, which the Department of Defense apparently believes will help it learn more about the world as it pursues a “global war on terrorism”?⁶

After I finished reading David Price’s book, I found myself pondering the work and life of Noam Chomsky, one of the great linguists and intellectuals of our time and a well-known critic of American foreign policy. In the 1950s Chomsky published a revolutionary piece of basic scholarship titled *Syntactic Structures*. In its preface, the reader finds the following acknowledgment: “This work was supported in part by the U.S. Army (Signal Corps), the Air Force (Office of Scientific Research, Air Research and Development Command), and the Navy (Office of Naval Research); and in part by the National Science Foundation and the Eastman Kodak Corporation.” Was the discipline of linguistics politically compromised or ethically demeaned by the publication of *Syntactic Structures* or by Chomsky’s willingness to include corporations, public foundations, and several branches of the American military as research sponsors? I would hazard the following generalization: the bigger a mission-oriented government agency’s budget for research (excluding those few agencies where the mission is support for the life of the mind, regardless of mission), the more likely it will be willing and able to fund fundamental or basic research, regardless of its official bureaucratic mission.

Price worries about the corrupting influence of the mission—and academic cultural anthropologists (in contrast, for example, to academic psychologists or

6. See “DOD Funds New Views on Conflict With Its First Minerva Grants,” *Science* 323 (January 30, 2009): 576.

applied anthropologists) are especially sensitive to the risk of moral and political contamination, as well as the risks to their reputations with colleagues and research populations at home and abroad. Academic cultural anthropologists would much rather have support from the National Science Foundation (viewed as pure) or the National Institute for Mental Health (though, unfortunately, little interest is evinced there these days in having social scientists do research in this area) than from the Department of Defense. Other scholars in the academy seem to care more about just getting their research done and might accept funding from the devil as long as no strings were attached. They think that, when it comes to asking and answering questions about involvement with the American military, academic anthropologists have a way of shooting themselves in the foot. “Intellectual philanthropy” does have its risks. The obstacles to “commensuration, communication, and comprehension” are many. And these days, one does not even have to look beyond the academy’s protective walls to become petrified by various threats to the intellectual mission of the university.