There is a long history of interaction between geography and the military, and few would deny that geographic knowledge can serve as a “force multiplier” for all sides in military, paramilitary, or even purely civilian conflicts. Acknowledging the interface between geographic knowledge and military/state practice, in turn, raises a host of questions about the ability and duty of geographic researchers to negotiate it: Can scholars gathering geographic knowledge truly know who will end up using their insights and to what ends? Can they ever with moral certainty identify what is a good end? Do they have the power to direct that their research be used toward one end and not another? And, even if they answer each of these three questions in the affirmative – that is, even if they feel that they know how their knowledge will be used, they are confident that they know what is a good end, and they believe that they have the ability to direct their knowledge toward that good end – should they use the institutional force of professional organizations to hold their colleagues to these same standards?

These questions were all brought to the forefront when Political Geography received an unsolicited guest editorial from Joe Bryan on the Bowman Expeditions. Previous publications in other journals had questioned the morality of the Expeditions and debated some of the facts regarding dissemination and informed consent between the research team and the community. However, Bryan’s editorial, written after at least some of the smoke from these debates had cleared, went beyond restating his interpretation of disputed facts to touch on issues that speak to the heart of political geographic practice. The PG editorial team felt that the editorial raised important questions about the relationship between scholarship and activism in political geography, and it led us to solicit responses that, in conversation with Bryan, would examine the compromises made (and opportunities gained) by political geographers as they cross the divide between academic scholarship and military–political practice.

To foster discussion, we invited submissions from representatives of two key parties involved in the Bowman Expeditions debate – Peter Herlihy, who directed the first Bowman Expedition, and Kiado Cruz, an activist from one of the communities in which the Expedition gathered data. Additionally, because Bryan addresses not just the practice and responsibilities of individual geographers but the practice and responsibilities of geographers’ organizations, the journal invited a response from John Agnew, who was president of the Association of American Geographers when the controversy surrounding the Bowman Expeditions was at its height.

It is unlikely that the editorials that follow will definitively resolve any of the questions raised herein. Nor is it likely to forge agreement among four individuals who have some very strong differences. However, it is hoped that this collection of editorials will spur deeper thinking about how, as political geographers, we continually are forced to make personal and professional ethical judgments as we cross the scholar–activist divide.

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Guest Editorial

Force multipliers: Geography, militarism, and the Bowman Expeditions

Military goals and objectives have long influenced research done by geographers (Barnes & Farish, 2006; Driver, 2001). While efforts by the likes of Sir Harold Mackinder to make geography the “science of imperialism” have fallen from favor (Kearns, 2010), the military’s influence on research persists as do the ethical, political, and intellectual concerns it raises. Both points are well illustrated by the controversy surrounding the American Geographical Society’s Bowman Expedition program. Funded by $500,000 from the U.S. Army’s Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), the Bowman Expeditions are designed to “improve U.S. understanding of foreign lands and peoples” among policymakers (AGS, 2009). The first of these expeditions, the México Indígena project, mapped indigenous lands in Mexico as part of an effort to build a nation-wide GIS database of property rights. Two indigenous organizations in Oaxaca have since accused Expedition leader Peter Herlihy and AGS president Jerome Dobson of not informing communities of the military’s role in the project (San Miguel Tíaltepec, 2009; UNOSJO, 2009). Although Herlihy and Dobson have dismissed the allegations as politically motivated, claiming that they informed communities of the FMSO’s role (AGS, 2009; Dobson, 2009), others, including myself, have urged the Association of American Geographers to investigate those allegations to determine whether ethical practices were followed (Bryan & Wainwright, 2009; Louis & Grossman, 2009). However, the controversy surrounding the Bowman Expeditions goes beyond allegations of misconduct and failure to obtain informed consent. It also raises broader questions about the relationship between academic research, military intelligence, and power relations that all geographers would do well to consider.

AGS President Dobson developed the Bowman Expeditions program to advance his claim that “foreign intelligence is geography” (Dobson, 2005; see also Herlihy et al., 2008b: 400). In Dobson’s view, policymakers’ lack of understanding of geography makes the United States “a mighty global power crippled by abysmal ignorance of its vast global domain” (Dobson, 2005: 1; see also Dobson, 2007). Such ignorance leads policymakers to emphasize military force over cultural understanding, leading to unnecessary civilian casualties and increased risks faced by American troops in places like Iraq and Afghanistan (Dobson, 2006a). “It’s one thing to know where each bomb will fall, and GPS can tell you that,” Dobson writes. “It’s quite another to know where the people are, and that requires a GIS” (Dobson, 2005). Dobson saw the military’s need for geographical knowledge as commencing the era of the “G-Bomb” that would transform geography in much the same way that the atomic bomb transformed physics (Dobson, 2005). To gather the kind of geographical intelligence required by this shift, Dobson proposed to send “a geography professor and two or three graduate students to every country in the world for a full semester each year” to conduct research using unclassified sources (Dobson, 2006a: 2). For an estimated $125 million per year, Dobson claimed, the Expeditions would produce accurate intelligence for “a pittance compared to what the intelligence community pays for far less effective information” (Dobson, 2006a: 2). Dobson named the program for past AGS President Isaiah Bowman who in 1917 led a massive intelligence gathering effort known as “The Inquiry” at the request of President Woodrow Wilson (Herlihy et al., 2008b). Bowman’s work produced a vision of geopolitical order built around democratic nation-states, laying the foundation for the rise of the U.S. as a global power (Smith, 2003).

Dobson “found allies” for his vision at the FMSO, an Army research center tasked with gathering “open source intelligence” from public sources to help the military prepare for future conflicts (Dobson, 2006a: 2). The FMSO funded the México Indígena project as a “prototype” for future Bowman Expeditions to every country in the world (AGS, 2009: 2). The core element of that prototype involved building a nation-wide GIS database of property rights in Mexico. Herlihy’s team supplemented existing government data with participatory mapping projects in two regions of Mexico where indigenous land tenure is spatially concentrated: the Huasteca Potosina in San Luis Potosí and the Sierra Juárez in Oaxaca. Herlihy planned to use the database to analyze the effects of Mexican policies aimed at privatizing indigenous lands as part of neoliberal economic reforms. Dobson and Herlihy declared the project a success, producing a GIS that “satisfied the FMSO while providing community empowerment, student training, and developing a twenty-first-century digital regional geography” (Herlihy et al., 2008b: 402).

Dobson and Herlihy have insisted that the México Indígena project operated independently of the FMSO, hailing it as a model of “open source research” with a range of potential applications (AGS, 2009; Dobson, 2009; Herlihy et al., 2008b: 400–401). Nonetheless, project documents repeatedly single out the project’s military applications, advancing efforts to map the “human terrain” (AGS, 2008; Herlihy et al., 2008b). As a concept, the “human terrain” is widely associated with General David Petraeus’s efforts to overhaul the military’s approach to counter-insurgency in light of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Nagl, Petraeus, Amos, & Sewall, 2007; see also González, 2009; Gregory, 2008). Petraeus has declared that “cultural awareness is a force multiplier,” directing military strategists to study the “cultural terrain” as a means of increasing the effectiveness of combat forces beyond what weapons alone allow (Petraeus, 2006: 51). Perhaps the most visible application of this approach is the Army’s Human Terrain System (HTS) program...
that deploys anthropologists with combat units in Iraq and Afghanistan. Designed by FMSO staff, the HTS program gathers military intelligence using many of the same techniques used by the Bowman Expeditions – including ethnographic mapping (Kipp, Grau, Prinslow, & Smith, 2006). The American Association of Anthropologists has investigated its members’ role in the HTS program, concluding that their involvement violates professional ethics (AAA, 2007). Herlihy and Dobson have sought to avoid similar scrutiny by insisting that the scholarly focus of their work will help avoid wars. “The human terrain concept,” they write, “however controversial, sits at the core of our discipline and recognizes that the same geographical understanding needed to conduct wars is also essential for avoiding them in the first place” (Herlihy et al., 2008b: 399–400).

Herlihy’s and Dobson’s logic resonates with arguments for using American military power to address humanitarian concerns, their claims to scholarly purpose thinly veiling the military applications of their work. Herlihy’s final report on the Mexico Indígena project filed with the FMSO describes using the data collected to create “digital geographies of the human terrain that the General – or general public – can visualize by moving an icon though a multi-scale geography of a place and its people, displaying the language, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, and other significant features deemed important for a particular humanitarian, military, scientific or economic reason” (Herlihy et al., 2008a: 35). The “human terrain” referred to is Petenuea. On October 20, 2006, Herlihy and Dobson had the opportunity to personally make their appeal, briefing Petraeus in a meeting at Fort Leavenworth. Following the meeting, they enjoyed a private tour of the base that included a group photo in front of the Buffalo Soldier statue commemorating the U.S. “Indian Wars” and a peek into quarters used by General George Armstrong Custer (Dobson, 2006b).

The references to 19th Century Indian Wars are ironic given Herlihy’s and Dobson’s discussion of indigenous peoples as a potential security threat, invoking colonial notions of trusteeship. Echoing assessments of indigenous organizations in Latin America as threats to (Radcliffe, 2007), Herlihy and Dobson write, “indigenous peoples’ demands for land tenancy and territorial autonomy challenge Mexico’s neoliberal economic policies – and democracy itself” (Herlihy et al., 2008b: 402). Their prognosis also appears to reference recent events in the regions mapped by the project. Herlihy’s team began mapping indigenous lands in Oaxaca in 2006 in the midst of one of the largest protests in recent Mexican history. For six months, an alliance of indigenous organizations and unions occupied the capital city of Oaxaca, making a range of political demands that included opposition to neoliberal reforms. Mexican officials branded the protests a national security threat, using Federal Police to break up the protests and killing at least seventeen people during the crackdown. Security concerns also drive interests in a third area initially included in the Mexico Indígena project, the Sierra Tarahu-mara in Chihuahua. The region is notorious for drug trafficking, an activity singled out by Pentagon strategists as placing Mexico at risk of becoming a “failed state” (United States Joint Operating Command, 2008). The area was later dropped from the project.

Military strategists are well aware of the uses of participatory mapping techniques like those used in the Mexico Indígena project, particularly with regard to counter-insurgency operations. Among the more vocal advocates of this approach is Dr. Geoffrey Demarest, Dobson’s primary contact at the FMSO and an expert in counter-insurgency in Latin America. Demarest has worked for the military in Colombia, arguing that “in the context of an internal war, when it comes to the cartographic function of the state, there can be no logical distinction between military and nonmilitary effort” (Demarest, 2003: 24). Colombia is currently the site of a Bowman Expedition. A recent report by the National Defense Intelligence College further hails the Mexico Indígena project as a model for mapping “tribal areas” in Iraq and Afghanistan (Batson, 2008).

Indeed, Herlihy mentions the possibility of a Bowman Expedition to Iraq in one of his progress reports filed with Radiance Technologies, a Mississippi-based military contractor specializing in “intelligence community support” hired by the FMSO to manage the Mexico Indígena project (Mexico Indígena, 2008).

It is one thing for the military to search scholarly sources for intelligence. It is quite another to gather intelligence for the military on “vulnerable populations” such as indigenous peoples – a practice explicitly banned by the AAG’s Statement of Ethics (AAG, 2009). The Mexico Indígena project appears to have done just that, taking advantage of indigenous peoples’ desires for land rights to gather intelligence that will let policymakers more effectively intervene in indigenous affairs. In doing so, it appears to further violate provisions in the AAG’s Statement of Ethics stipulating that “the dignity, safety, and well-being of informants and local colleagues” should take precedence over research goals (AAG, 2009). The AAG has rejected calls for an investigation, claiming that it lacks the standing to investigate its members (Bryan & Wainwright, 2009; Louis & Grossman, 2009). Its response is understandable if one regards the controversy as essentially a political dispute. But the AAG appears to have recognized that the controversy goes further. At the height of public attention to the Mexico Indígena controversy in April 2009, the AAG Executive Council convened a task force to “see whether the association should develop more specific ethical guidelines relating to research funding and practice” (Agnew, 2009). The task force completed its work without the AAG ever explaining its mandate and criteria for selecting members. Nor did it publicize the task force’s revisions to the Statement of Ethics, posted on the AAG website in November 2009. While the revisions include welcome new language on indigenous peoples, no changes were made to the guidelines on military funding.

The lack of any formal response by the AAG makes the need for the AAG to address the ethics of military funding all the more pressing. The AAG and its members ought to engage this militarism directly, beginning with an investigation of the allegations against the Bowman Expeditions. That effort must go beyond critical issues of prior informed consent, addressing the ethics of military funding through revisions to the Statement of Ethics. The fact that there are presently Bowman Expeditions to Colombia, the Antilles, Jordan and Kazakhstan makes it all the more important to do an investigation now, ensuring that future expeditions adhere to norms of professional conduct (AGS, 2009).

Left unaddressed, the military’s influence on research agendas cannot help but militarize understandings of geography in the classroom and beyond, particularly in light of the Pentagon’s increased use of ‘civilian’ research to advance national security concerns through programs like the Minerva Research Initiative (Mervis, 2009; SSRIC, 2008). Geographers can ill afford to sit this debate out, lest the discipline become a means of waging war by other means.

References


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Guest Editorial

Self-appointed gatekeepers attack the American Geographical Society’s first Bowman Expedition

From 2005 through 2008, I led the first Bowman Expedition of the American Geographical Society (AGS) to Mexico. I worked with an outstanding team of dedicated university professors, graduate and undergraduate students, elected local officials, and local investigators elected by their communities. We embraced the foreign field research model conceived by AGS president and University of Kansas (KU) geography professor Jerome E. Dobson because “geographic knowledge is essential to maintain peace, resolve conflicts, and provide humanitarian assistance around the world” (Herlihy et al., 2008).

A key principle of the AGS Bowman Expedition model is that investigators must have the right to choose their own study areas and topics. I chose to work in Mexico, first in the Huasteca and then Oaxaca, and I named the project México Indígena. I chose to study Mexico’s gargantuan neoliberal land certification and privatization program, called PROCEDE – completed in over 90% of all ejidos and agricultural communities in the country since 1993 – and its influence on indigenous lands. Our research team did archival studies, conducted participatory research mapping (PRM), and developed a geographic information system (GIS). Using PRM, we worked with eleven indigenous study communities to produce fine-scale, standardized maps and to understand how the PROCEDE program has changed their land use and tenure (Herlihy et al., 2008; Kelly et al., 2010; Smith, Herlihy, Kelly, & Ramos Viera, 2009).

Shortly before the project ended in 2008, a KU doctoral student and I traveled to Tiltepec, one of the eleven communities, to present the final community map to the community’s governing body. Culminating months of working closely with them and their two local investigators (see Brady, 2009), we felt the Tiltepec map was a great accomplishment, documenting the community’s challenging physiography, boundaries, toponyms, and archaeological sites. An indigenous activist, UNOSJO leader Aldo Gonzalez, unexpectedly showed up at the meeting. He falsely accused the México Indígena project of “geopiracy.” He falsely claimed that the AGS Bowman Expedition program was connected to the controversial Human Terrain System (HTS). He speculated about some vague U.S. military counter-insurgency strategy designed by the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) and falsely claimed that we had not explained our FMSO funding. UNOSJO followed with a press release (UNOSJO, 2009), simultaneously demanding transparency that already existed.

We took Gonzalez’s allegations seriously and responded immediately at the meeting in Tiltepec and subsequently in writing, contrary to Bryan’s assertion that we “dismissed the allegations as politically motivated.” We explained how our project and the AGS Bowman Expedition program were fundamentally different from, and not part of, the HTS (as explained earlier in the Geographical Review, Herlihy et al., 2008). We reiterated that our objectives derived purely from our own scholarly interest in PROCEDE’s impacts on indigenous lands. We reiterated that no military personnel worked with us, nor did we have any hidden military objectives. We assured them that we always protect the confidentiality of participants (or human subjects), and demonstrated that our results were neither more nor less dangerous than typical public cadastral and geographic archives. Nevertheless, I was not surprised by the alarm and confusion that Gonzalez had caused, and I sympathized with the community’s concerns. Later, the AGS and the México Indígena team issued statements reaffirming and clarifying the above (see these English/Spanish statements on México Indígena Website page, “Response to Geopiracy Accusations” at http://web.ku.edu/~mexind/response_to_accusations.htm).

We remain concerned about the circumstances that led the Tiltepec Comisariado to testify against us, but can only speculate about why such an about face occurred. The conscientious man with whom we worked was sincerely concerned about his community and grasped the importance of our mapping research. He and the community as a whole endorsed our approach of training local investigators (see these English/Spanish statements on México Indígena Website page, “Response to Geopiracy Accusations” at http://web.ku.edu/~mexind/response_to_accusations.htm).

Bryan is correct that “the controversy…raises broader questions,” but he fails to mention the most obvious ones. Can scholars be activists? Can activists be scholars? Should academics refuse funding from military sources?

Is it scholarship or activism when Bryan re-asserts Gonzalez’s false accusations? A few probing questions would have debunked any conspiracy of silence about our FMSO funding or connections with the Human Terrain System: How many students, professors, and government officials from both the U.S. and Mexico spent time in the field with us in Oaxaca and Huasteca? Over three dozen. How many of them knew of our FMSO funding? All of them. Were any of them ever admonished to hide or lie about our funding or any hidden military agenda? No. In fact, FMSO representatives twice visited project workshops in the Huasteca and Oaxaca, where they met community leaders and were introduced to participants as one of our funders.

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Any reasonable person knows it is impossible to keep a secret these days, especially if you intentionally broadcast the truth on your website ahead of time, as we did. Also, it is impossible to say something in one village and not have it spread to the next. We weren’t keeping anything secret. At the community assemblies where we sought approval to work, including Tiltepec, we discussed our past experiences with mapping indigenous lands, our project objectives, the organizations involved, and our funding sources, as well as the benefits, uses, and publication of results. A few community members expressed concern about our funding, but most focused on community involvement in the research, verification and approval of results, project benefits, standardization of cartographic results, publication, crediting community participants, and technical training of the elected local investigators. Some communities voted not to work with us, and we respected their decisions.

What scholar would claim, as Bryan does, that “using many of the same techniques” implies a philosophical connection? Who would claim that the statement, “indigenous peoples’ demands for land tenancy and territorial autonomy challenge Mexico’s neoliberal economic policies – and democracy itself,” implies anti-indigenous sentiments?

Who has a right to control access to indigenous peoples? Bryan portrays indigenous peoples as naïve and vulnerable. He would be their gatekeeper, limiting access to their villages and councils to only the pure, meaning those who share his own political philosophy. Is this new priesthood any different from those of the past? Who has a right to control access to indigenous peoples? Bryan portrays indigenous peoples as naïve and vulnerable. He would be their gatekeeper, limiting access to their villages and councils to only the pure, meaning those who share his own political philosophy. Is this new priesthood any different from those of the past?

In these and other matters Bryan’s tactic is the slanted rhetoric of an activist, not a scholar.

Who has a right to control access to indigenous peoples? Bryan portrays indigenous peoples as naïve and vulnerable. He would be their gatekeeper, limiting access to their villages and councils to only the pure, meaning those who share his own political philosophy. Is this new priesthood any different from those of the past? In contrast, we view indigenous peoples as mature, intelligent, free-thinking people who benefit from diverse ideas and wide-ranging debates, just as other world citizens do.

Science and society have advanced for centuries with the recognition that knowledge is power. As scholars we maintain the overriding belief that knowledge is good and we see how it can be empowering, useful, and good for indigenous peoples. Yet, Bryan claims, in vague accusatory terms, that geographic knowledge somehow hurts indigenous people. Again, a reality check is in order. Where are the world’s conflicts today? Most, by far, are in poorly mapped, poorly understood regions that are often home to indigenous populations. Clearly, indigenous peoples can beneficially use maps to announce their presence, defend their communities, manage their lands, and protect their cultural heritage and environments. Yet, again Bryan recasts the activist’s case against maps and geographic understanding, attempting to scare readers with vague intimations that the dark powers of maps will be unleashed against indigenous people.

I have led PRM projects working with indigenous populations to map their lands and resources in the Mosquitia of Honduras and in the Darién of Panama (Herlihy & Knapp, 2003). We collaborated with the military-run national geographic institutes of the host countries to publish standard map results. These cartographic results unquestionably have been beneficial in education, development, conservation, land rights, and resource management. Not one of the hundreds of communities involved has ever claimed the maps have caused them harm.

What harm has come from our work in Mexico? Clearly this specific geographic knowledge benefits the communities themselves. Does anyone, other than Bryan, really believe otherwise? The study communities in Huasteca have had their final PRM maps published for three years and not one has reported any harm or danger. To the contrary, most will testify to their usefulness in a variety of ways, sometimes unforeseen, such as helping one community reduce its taxes! Even in Tiltepec, where Gonzalez ignited villagers’ fears, community leaders consulted the PRM cartographic results in deliberations about a serious boundary error in the recently-completed government cadastral survey, an error brought to light by our research.

Is Bryan’s work good scholarship or good activism? Perhaps it is neither. He misuses the authority usually accorded to academic work to legitimize his intentionally constructed mythology, and he does so with ideological goals. Bryan presents a superficially persuasive but slanted and inaccurate narrative that portrays our project and all AGS Bowman Expeditions as scary, threatening military agents. He purposely supports the myth that military funding must be suspected and dangerous for projects dealing with indigenous peoples.

In concluding, Bryan admonishes us all that “Left unaddressed, the military’s influence on research agendas cannot help but militarize understandings of geography in the classroom and beyond.” He neglects to say however, what he means by “militarize,” or how that would be done.

How too could a scholarly appraisal of this issue ignore the seminal experience of the Department of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley? Led by Carl O. Sauer and James J. Parsons for 17 years, their “Caribbean Geography” program was funded by the Office of Naval Research (ONR), and it supported about forty students and faculty doing overseas field research (Parsons, 1996: 383). The Navy wanted to know about shorelines, shore processes, and coastal vegetation, but scholars selected their own research topics. The program was restricted more by Sauer’s directives than by governmental ones (Pruitt, 1979: 105). The ONR “military funding” did not taint or militarize understandings in geography, as Bryan suggests. Rather, it was foundational in the development of the “Berkeley School” of cultural historical geography (Herlihy et al., 2008: 397–398).

We believe the AGS Bowman Expeditions program, and the México Indígena project in particular, again show how military and other government funding can support valuable geographic scholarship. Our project results demonstrate that the little-known PROCEDE program represents a silent revolution in Mexico, undoing social property and changing communal ownership patterns that, in some cases, date back to pre-Columbian times. In contrast to viewing indigenous peoples “as a potential security threat,” as Bryan claims, our results raise concerns about the future of indigenous lands in Mexico. We see changes causing new boundary disputes, the breakdown of community institutions, the increased socioeconomic differentiation, the loss of forest and water resources, and the opening of new threats to the cultural survival of vulnerable indigenous societies. Contrary to the gatekeepers’ myth, the fine-scale PRM maps we produced with the eleven study communities actually empowered their Assemblies with tools needed to deal with these concerns; and our publications and presentations help explain these concerns to others (Herlihy et al., 2008; Kelly et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009).
We remain dedicated to the indigenous communities where we have worked and we plan to check back with them to see how they are doing and how their maps are being used.

References


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A living space: The relationship between land and property in the community

“Perhaps all of my hopes are nothing more than unfounded dreams.”  
Letter From Ricardo Flores Magón to Miss Ellen White

I belong to the community of Santa Cruz Yagavila, in the Sierra de Juárez in Oaxaca. My umbilical cord is buried there, as are those of my grandparents. Perhaps I should say: I am the community. It is true that I belong to it as it belongs to me. But each and every one of us is the community. The community is nothing more than we ourselves, it only exists in what we are.

We are a culturally specific collective, structured in a fabric (tejido) of social relations that is based on the principle of reciprocity. It is a collective that occupies its own territory in a permanent manner. The web of our relations becomes even more dense and complex through our participation in tequios – communal labor, assemblies and celebrations. It is an open but obligatory participation, one that affirms us as members of the community. In this way, we are a community in a communal territory, cyclically reiterating our belonging by participating in the collective, and by fulfilling our responsibilities and obligations to it.

Land has been disputed across history because it is a communal good and one of the most important means of production and life. To speak of the land means to think about how over the last few decades capital has sought to appropriate the forests, the land, the water, and minerals in a way that can only be compared to the age of colonial extraction. In colonial times, we offered continued resistance. Domination came packaged in a new religion and new political institutions. For us, both the packaging and its contents were expressions of strange foreign powers that tried to exercise their dominion over us. We endured them for centuries as they occupied our territories in different ways.

Our territory constitutes the natural space of life and is conceived as the ecological base for the construction of various expressions and political practices. Territory is the foundation of self-determination for our peoples, this natural space of life is the source of wisdom and knowledge, of culture, identity, traditions and rights. Because of this, our vision of our territory is intimately tied to the enactment of our collective rights and our self-determination.

In the community we distinguish between two ways of understanding and using natural resources: one is for the production of communal or subsistence goods and the other is for the production of those capitalist goods on which modern life depends. Today we stand before a process of worldwide reorganization, where land is first measured and then alienated, where its resources are first documented and then appropriated, to be used for a new cycle of investment and accumulation. Facing this situation, it is important to ask: what do these new processes of accumulation offer us and what good, if any, can come of them? What progress and development have we received from them? What are the cultural, social, technological and economic benefits for our people? These are some of the many questions we can ask in an attempt to understand the interests behind the México Indígena: Bowman Expeditions project that came to work in our community of Yagavila in 2006.

The researchers and students led by Peter Herlihy came before the General Assembly of our community in August 2006, claiming that the objective of México Indígena was to conduct participatory mapping in order to understand the impacts of PROCEDE (the Program for Certification of Rights to Ejido Lands) in indigenous communities. They assured us that “our purpose is to improve understanding in the United States of foreign territories and populations with the goal of reducing disagreements and for the peaceful resolution of conflicts.” After hearing these claims, many people asked specifically about the project’s financing, to which the researchers replied “The financing of the AGS Bowman Expeditions can come from any source, public or private.” It was not explicitly stated that financing came from the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) and we were not informed that the data they obtained would be given to the FMSO of the U.S. Army.

Aside from the rumors of inappropriate conduct or the lack of informed consent from the communities, this situation worries us because we have always seen a strong link between geography and the interests of the military industrial complex, especially in recent attempts to create worldwide property databases. The México Indígena project subscribes to a political-military strategy. We cannot forget that this mapping occurs in the midst of the debate over a package of military financing from the United States known as the Mérida Initiative. The control and displacement of indigenous communities is intended to prevent potential conflicts in “hot spots”, contribute to the military control of the region, and finally free up natural resources for the benefit of the government and its transnational allies.

A good example of this is the state of Chiapas with its “rural cities,” where, in the most faithful rendition of the colonial tradition, the state government, under the pretext of providing services, has evicted indigenous communities from their lands and concentrated them in new areas so that the government can freely exploit their resources. Today the police serve the function of guardians of these natural riches, making it more difficult to recover them as the communal goods they once were. But before relocation and
exploitation, there is always a plan, a plan which today requires digital data. The purpose of the México Indígena project is to take local knowledge from the community and convert it into the prime material needed to model geographic information systems, which are then used as tools for this type of planning.

We know that maps are powerful tools that can be used to exploit or to facilitate various projects, however they have long been the cause of agrarian conflicts in the region. “How long will these documents serve us?” representatives of the committee of Bienes Comunales (Communal Goods) of Yagavila asked when on the 30th of March 1995 they received the ruling from the recently created United Agrarian Tribunal of Oaxaca that officially recognized and gave title to collective “property.” I had never before recognized the utter relativism of our local institutions, particularly the judicial ones, and paradoxically the capacity that such institutions and the ‘law’ have to bestow meaning upon those institutions under their regulation. The México Indígena case makes us ask the same question.

This initial question engenders more questions: whether the document we have in our hands is truly efficient; if such a ruling puts an end to agrarian conflicts and enables us to have security over our lands; or if on the contrary, the ruling and the title superimpose plans and types of land use or mark new boundaries not based on previous landmarks (mojoneras) which could create problems or revive old conflicts with neighboring communities.

In the beginning, we were involved in México Indígena because we support the appropriation of tools for our own use and for the reproduction of our own knowledge through new means; this is why we showed interest in learning to use coordinate systems, cartographic plans and GPS devices. Nonetheless, we are firmly convinced that it is necessary for indigenous communities to be directly involved in the production of maps of their lands, instead of being ignored in processes and having their land interpreted as “empty” space available for other ends. Who or what does it serve that this local knowledge is in a public database? Who is interested in this knowledge?

These maps not only represent the transfer or collection of data, but also their creation. By placing information into empirical categories, a map serves to define a certain spatial reality, one that does not necessarily correspond to the reality of those who experience it. It creates an abstract idea of a space that is not part of a lived landscape, and fails to acknowledge flows, movement, and ways of being. In addition, the creation of public information ironically privatises the production of this knowledge. Publishing this information on a webpage does not make it more accessible to members of a local community, but rather allows that knowledge to escape local control and be used by anyone. The community is thus in danger of potential external manipulation, appropriation and alienation. Our people cannot recognize or accept these maps as being “open source” because their codes are foreign to our knowledge and our communal spaces, those parts of our surroundings that move beyond the physical territory of the community and its possessions.

This situation merits an official response by the authors of México Indígena so that others like them do not intervene in indigenous decisions related to the right to autonomy, land and territory. Projects like México Indígena are public policies that represent a grave threat to the autonomy of many indigenous peoples. The geographical ignorance of the United States is the biggest weakness within its regime, a regime whose foundation lies in its military policies and not in cultural knowledge. No explanation by México Indígena will be satisfactory unless it takes into account this aspect of American foreign policy. The matter should be clear: how to oppose the usurpation – conducted through the use of new devices and electronic systems – of the communal goods which are most intimate and important to our being. The defense of communal goods constitutes the crucial public task of contemporary political action. This task must be approached with urgency, given that often the forced transformation of communal goods into natural resources is a process which utilizes state-sanctioned violence.

Trying to unify these two types of information – that which emerges from the community of Yagavila and that which is created by the project México Indígena – is complicated. However, despite the fact that they emerge from two separate delineated spaces, the two systems are connected through a certain political geography. One hundred years ago, my grandparents were part of a revolutionary battle for land and liberty, whereby they opposed the policies of territorial demarcation imposed by the liberal policies of the Porfirian regime. The Bowman Expeditions seem to represent a modern-day version of this policy of demarcating indigenous territories in a moment of political and economic crises in Mexico. Current developments seem to have been predicted by the death of Ricardo Flores Magón, a Oaxacan intellectual who combined communalist beliefs of indigenous peoples, the liberal Mexican tradition of the nineteenth century, and the thought of European anarchist philosophers, and who ironically died in the Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas. We hope that a similar fate does not await the knowledge of our community through its imprisonment in computers from the same place.

Today, it is urgent that we recreate spaces of freedom and justice that recognize our full rights to our territory, the entire habitat (ground, subsurface, and sky) that was expropriated from us since the constitution of our country. This re-creation will allow us the autonomy to design the institutions that best correspond to our understandings of land and territory, and enable us to resolve conflicts through a methodology of conciliation that neither the law nor geography reflects upon or understands.

My argument in this essay expresses a personal position that emerges from my communal roots rather than from a theoretical or academic discourse. My vision is determined by the world that I live in, a world of people, a web of knots and relations. Based on our history, experience and the conditions that surround us, we give form to our own thoughts and knowledge. We rescue our history, which lives on in the memories of our grandparents, and we revalue what we know about ourselves. We appreciate anew our customs by confirming their vitality, their strength, their advantages. Communality is the structure of our organization. Through it we inform ourselves and raise new generations. In it we are inspired to act.

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Ethics or militarism? The role of the AAG in what was originally a dispute over informed consent

Membership in the Association of American Geographers (AAG) is open to anyone who pays the annual membership fee. The AAG Council is elected to govern the various functions (journals, annual meetings, central management, etc.) conducted by a professional–academic organization of this type. The membership has a range of intellectual interests and political viewpoints. As a result, the AAG is a pluralistic organization. Down the years the AAG has considered resolutions on a large number of public and professional issues primarily related to its major role in fostering geography as a field. It is open to considering almost any sort of resolution that can be construed in this way.

The question of whether the AAG should ever take funding that comes directly or indirectly from the U.S. federal government or divisions thereof is certainly worth considering for deliberation and vote by the membership. The AAG Council has also periodically considered questions relating to sources of research funding and the ethics of research conduct. The reason for doing so is that collectively the membership has a stake in representing the best standards of research, not least to ensure that others take seriously the modus operandi and results of research by those associated with the field. The AAG has an official Statement of Ethics that is subject to review and revision. Recently this has been bolstered in light of controversies over the use of new remote sensing and informational technologies and the dispute over the putative lack of informed consent in the case of a research project organized by the American Geographical Society (AGS) and referred to at some length in the editorial by Joe Bryan.

My intervention here is intended to set the record straight about the references in the editorial to the role of the AAG. Other aspects of the editorial are not my concern. The long history of mutual involvement of academia and war making in the U.S. and elsewhere is not news, at least to me. Much state funding of academic research everywhere reflects at least some degree of raison d’État. Those geographical organizations such as the AGS and the Royal Geographical Society with long standing expedition, exploration, and foreign fieldwork traditions have also always been and are still vulnerable to the charge that they exoticize places and people and at the same time potentially commoditize and exploit them. Of course, humanitarian motivations of all sorts are also potentially patronizing of others. Personally, I probably have many more problems with much of what goes for the geographical fieldwork tradition than does Joe Bryan.

The main question concerning the AAG in the Bowman Expedition dispute, as I see it, is why did the AAG Council adopt the strategy of reworking the Ethics Statement rather than “investigating” allegations and presumably then “disciplining” in some way those held to have violated ethical norms? The issue on the table from the start as articulated by all of those involved in the controversy was that of informed consent. Never did the involvement of the U.S. Department of Defense in funding the research come up directly at the time in any of the outside complaints, though it was indeed raised, I should add, by some of us on the AAG Council when discussing the entire affair at the spring 2009 Council Meeting. The answer is straightforward, then, as to why we decided to pursue possible changes in the Ethics Statement rather than undertake an investigation of the AGS, the University of Kansas, or the individual participants involved in the controversy: the AAG had no role whatsoever in funding or directing the research in question. The AAG has no capacity to investigate, subpoena, conduct legal discovery, etc., of other organizations such as AGS, and all of the contracts, agreements, funding, etc., involved the AGS and others, not the AAG. Furthermore, the AAG is not in the business of blacklisting or punishing anyone for putative “crimes” unrelated to the actions of the AAG itself. All we could do was revisit our Ethics Statement to see if it could be rewritten so as to cover more adequately the sorts of choices involved in research projects such as the one at the center of the controversy.

By now changing the question under purview, from that of the subject of informed consent, raised originally and among others by Bryan himself, to that of the militarism implied by any research project with funding from military sources, and then attempting to indict the AAG as somehow by extension a party to militarism because of its failure to indict, investigate, and presumably potentially ban from membership those originally judged guilty (as yet without any investigation, of course), the very ground on which the original dispute was played out has moved under our feet. This must be a rhetorical device to rope in the entire “geographic establishment” under the charge of militarism. It certainly bears no relationship to what was actually at issue last year. It is a false claim about the role of the AAG in the dispute that I find profoundly disturbing.

By the way, the names of all those involved in rewriting the AAG Ethics Statement are prominently displayed alongside the Statement on the AAG website. They represent a broad cross-section of the membership, including people involved in research with both indigenous groups and new technologies. The Statement is also readily accessed. It is not hidden away; in fact, the AAG Ethics Statement is prominently featured on the home page of the AAG website. There was no conspiracy, at least that I am aware of. Of course, I could be just a dupe.
Ethics is about people making choices on the basis of weighing the possible consequences for themselves and others of what they do. By definition, ethics cannot be mandated. As a membership organization, the AAG can help make clear what some of the dilemmas will be for those of its members engaged in certain activities. It cannot tell people what they can and cannot do, particularly when the specific projects at issue are organized and funded through a completely different organization. The day the AAG organizes “show trials” will be the day I resign my membership.

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The December 2010 issue of Political Geography (Vol. 29, no. 8) included a series of editorials on the American Geographical Society’s Bowman Expeditions (Agnew, 2010; Bryan, 2010; Cruz, 2010; Herlihy, 2010; Steinberg, 2010). After the editorials had gone to press, two of the four guest editorialists, independent of each other, requested an opportunity to clarify their points or correct what they saw as misstatements of facts in others’ editorials. In the interest of fairness, the Political Geography editorial team invited responses of 250 words or less from all four guest editorialists, although only the two who originally requested an opportunity submitted responses. These appear below.

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My intervention was intended to raise a pair of questions: under what conditions is it acceptable for geographers to receive military funding? Furthermore, what ethical concerns does such funding raise? Asking those questions does not compromise scholarly integrity. Failure to address them does. The México Indígena case compellingly raises these concerns with its well-documented link between the highest ranks of the US Army and academic geographers. As John Agnew suggests, these are old concerns that can neither be resolved by mandates nor investigations into alleged “crimes.” But that does not excise the AAG Statement of Ethics’ silence on the question of military funding. The Statement must be revised to address this omission if the integrity of the discipline is of any concern, to say nothing of the questions raised by the affected communities. Ethics statements should frame debates rather than adjudicate them. To do otherwise is to accept Peter Herlihy’s argument that the ends justify the means — if the community benefits, the funding source does not matter. Kiado Cruz’s comments demonstrate the hollowness of that position, capturing the compromises that mapping holds for the people and places involved. That level of nuance is essential to having the sort of debate needed, and the editors of this journal are to be commended for ensuring his participation. One can hope other journals will follow suit. Lastly, a copyediting error on my part implies that Sarah Radcliffe shares Herlihy’s and Dobson’s view of indigenous movements as potential security threats. She does not.

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Contrary to the impression left by Melquiades (Kiado) Cruz in his commentary, our AGS Bowman Expedition México Indígena project did receive approval from the community assembly of Yagavila during July 4–10th 2006, but we voluntarily withdrew in August 2006 after an APPO-influenced faction within the community expressed its concerns. We then destroyed the only ten questionnaires completed. No results from Yagavila were processed, presented, or displayed in our GIS, website, or publications.

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