

April 8, 2009

Dear colleagues:

We are writing to share our thoughts on events since we wrote our letter to Professors John Agnew and Carol Harden of March 16, 2009, calling for an investigation of potential violations of ethical standards by geographers involved with the American Geographic Society's Bowman Expedition *México Indígena* project.¹ (For a copy of our letter and other relevant documents on this project, see Dr. Zoltan Grossman's website.²)

1. We would like to thank all of you who have signed on and endorsed our letter. We are pleased to say that our letter has now been signed by more than 50 AAG members. We are still seeking more signatories: we urge you to sign on if you have not already done so. To add your name as a signatory, please contact one of us.

2. On March 17, 2009, a new press statement was released in Oaxaca, written by Bernardino Montaña Mendoza and Rogelio Hernández on behalf of the community of San Miguel Tiltepec, Ixtlán de Juárez. Their letter attests:

The citizens of the community of San Miguel Tiltepec, through our Municipal Authority and the Authority of Communal Lands, wish to present to the public our position regarding the research project called *México Indígena*. [...] The researchers and students [...] presented themselves to the General Assembly of our community. They only informed us that the goal of their research was to find out the impacts of the government program *Procede* on indigenous communities. They never informed us that the data they collected in our community would be given to the Foreign Military Study Office (FMSO) of the Army of the United States, nor did they inform us that this institution was one of the sources of financing for the project. Because of this, we consider that our General Assembly was tricked by the researchers, in order to draw out the information they wanted. The community did not request the research, it was the researchers who convinced the community to carry it out. Thus, the research was not carried out due to the community's need, it was the researchers of the project *México Indígena* who designed the research method in order to collect the type of information that truly interested them.

Additionally, the community of San Miguel Tiltepec declares:

[O]ur complete disagreement with the research carried out in our community, since we were not properly informed of the true goals of the research, the use of the information obtained, and the sources of financing. Our demand is to those responsible to the project *México Indígena*, the American Geographical Society, the Foreign Military Study Office of the Army of the United States, the Autonomous University of San Luis Potosí and University of Kansas, as well as all the other institutions involved, about whose participation we do not have information. We demand [...] a public apology for having violated our rights as indigenous peoples, and for having violated their own norms.³

We encourage all geographers to reflect upon this statement by San Miguel Tiltepec.

3. The AAG Executive Committee discussed the *México Indígena* project at their meeting in Las Vegas. (Our letter had been delivered to the organization before they met; at the time, it carried 26 signatures.) At their meeting, the Committee unanimously passed a resolution to form “a task force ... to examine the AAG Ethics Statement and make recommendations for modifications” in light of this issue.⁴ The task force is supposed to be appointed soon and to present its recommendations to the AAG before the next executive meeting in October 2009.

We see this decision as a welcome and important first step. We thank the AAG Executive Committee for taking it.

4. The resolution raises important questions. Who exactly will serve on the task force? What resources and authority will they have? How will this group interpret its purview? What activities will they engage in? What role, if any, is there for ordinary AAG members in its work? What role is there for the communities in Oaxaca that are speaking out about the *México Indígena* project?

It is too soon to answer these questions. Yet, we feel that two things are clear:

First, the AAG has committed to creating a task force to conduct an inquiry into whether changes are needed for the AAG ethics statement. Logically, this implies an inquiry into recent events, because the task force must justify any proposed changes to the AAG Ethical Statement with reference to the ethical dilemmas presented by worldly affairs. Thus, the AAG resolution offers some opening into an inquiry of the allegations against Professor Herlihy and the *México Indígena* project.

Second, AAG officials are understandably interested in avoiding any sort of investigation that could be characterized as a ‘witch hunt’ motivated by political concerns rather than professional standards. We respect this position. Neither of us wants to see AAG membership policed on the basis of one’s political affinities.

5. If our interpretation of the present situation is correct – and we would be the first to acknowledge that we may not be right – then getting the AAG to address the allegations that members of the *México Indígena* potentially violated ethical standards will require active involvement by AAG members. In particular, the AAG Executive Committee ought to provide a clear statement on the purpose and purview of this task force. We remain concerned that the narrow purview of the task force proposed by the AAG seems neither adequate to address the concerns raised in the statement by the community of Tiltepec nor those raised in our initial letter. It continues to be our view that the allegations of professional misconduct ought to be analyzed and discussed in a transparent manner by the AAG. We call on concerned AAG members to actively request that the Executive Committee address these questions, and give members reasonable opportunity to contribute to the rigor and effectiveness of the task force’s work.

6. To conclude, we would like to reiterate that, by our judgment, the AAG task force must have the capacity to examine the three key issues highlighted in our initial letter:

[W]e ask that the AAG investigate (1) the evidence that [Professor] Herlihy revealed his funding source at the time of obtaining consent; (2) the extent that the FMSO shaped the design of the research itself; and (3) the extent to which [Professor] Herlihy has made the results from the research available to FMSO personnel.

Thank you for your consideration.



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cc Professors John Agnew & Carol Harden

¹ <http://web.ku.edu/~mexind/>

² <http://academic.evergreen.edu/g/grossmaz/bowman.html>

³ The text can be found at Dr. Grossman's website (see note 2).

⁴ For the AAG statement of ethics, see: <http://www.aag.org/Info/ethics.htm>