

March 16, 2008

John Agnew, President
Carol Harden, Vice President
Association of American Geographers
1710 16th Street NW
Washington, DC 20009-3198

Dear President Agnew and Vice President Harden:

We are writing to request that the AAG conduct an inquiry into a potential violation of the ethical norms of our profession.

Our request is prompted by a letter written by the Union of Organizations of the Sierra Juarez of Oaxaca (UNOSJO) criticizing the México Indígena project, sponsored by the American Geographical Society. In their letter (attached), UNOSJO alleges that Kansas University geography professor Peter Herlihy failed to inform the indigenous communities participating in the México Indígena project that the US Army Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) sponsored his research. They write:

Project leader and geographer Peter Herlihy explained the project objectives to UNOSJO, S.C., initially stating that it was to document the impacts of PROCEDE [a Mexican Government program] has had on indigenous communities. He failed to mention, however, that this research prototype was financed by the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) of the United States Army and that reports on his work would be handed directly to this Office. Herlihy neglected to mention this despite being expressly asked to clarify the eventual use of the data obtained through research.

UNOSJO believed that the México Indígena project was a “participatory research” effort aimed at analyzing the effects of privatization of communally-held *ejido* lands, in part through the production of maps based on Zapotec villagers’ own customary practices of land use and occupancy.

To date, Herlihy has not specified how he informed his Mexican collaborators of the FMSO’s role in supporting the project. Herlihy and the AGS have defended their research by claiming that they have adhered to a strict set of “ethical guidelines,” posted on the México Indígena website, developing a program of research in voluntary collaboration with the members of the villages where they worked. More recently, they have suggested that UNOSJO does not represent the communities that participated in the project, providing further grounds for dismissing any criticism of the México Indígena project as baseless. All these points may well be true, but in our view, they fail to address the crucial issue (and the one highlighted by UNOSJO): professional ethics and common sense dictates that a geographer who accepts funding from the US military to collect sensitive information from indigenous communities in Latin America must share

the information about the source of funding with the community at the time of requesting consent.

According to project reports, representatives from the FMSO played an important role in the design and implementation of their research, particularly with regard to the data formats used to collect, organize, and present findings of the project. The FMSO's website, linked from the México Indígena website, describes its mission as:

a research and analysis center under the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command, Intelligence Support Activity (TRISA). FMSO manages and operates the Ft. Leavenworth Joint Reserve Intelligence Center (JRIC) and conducts analytical programs focused on emerging and asymmetric threats, regional military and security developments, and other issues that define evolving operational environments around the world.

Herlihy and his colleagues performed much of their research in Oaxaca under contract with the FMSO. The contract was managed by Radiance Technologies, an Alabama-based military contractor specializing in preparing intelligence and operational logistics. In progress reports to the FMSO, Herlihy and his colleagues refer to themselves as the "Radiance Research Team," further suggesting the influence that the FMSO's support had on the project. Other documents explicitly indicated that Herlihy's research is relevant to FMSO and, by extension, US Army Intelligence. For instance, the July 2005 progress report filed by Herlihy for the México Indígena project explains that they are "constructing a very broad national-level GIS that the FMSO would find useful in many different types of analyzes [sic]" ("Project status report two", p.2). Other reports to FMSO outline potential applications of the México Indígena project methods for Iraq. These and other project documents warrant further scrutiny of Herlihy's claim that the México Indígena project was "not designed in any way for military applications."

It is one thing to conduct research for the US military with full public disclosure of that relationship. It is quite another to fail to disclose that relationship to participants in a study. Failure to do so means violating basic protocol of prior informed consent. To our knowledge, Herlihy has yet to demonstrate that he informed the indigenous communities of the FMSO's role in funding his research. Moreover, he has yet to account for the apparent contradiction between his claims of scholarly objectivity and the explicit framing of the project in terms of militarized security.

Even if the México Indígena project is as transparent and scholarly as Herlihy claims, he fails to recognize that even the *perception* of impropriety constitutes a major setback for all who do similar kinds of research in Latin America. Herlihy's actions raise legitimate suspicions that may make similar kinds of research impossible for years to come in Oaxaca, to say nothing of the damage they do to other researchers already working in the area. AGS President Jerome Dobson's dismissal of UNOSJO's accusations as the work of "cyber-bullies" only exacerbates this problem. Our reputations as geographers depend upon our collective commitment to conduct research according to the highest ethical standards possible. As the AAG's own statement of ethics states, this includes doing

research in a way that “respects the dignity, safety, and well-being of the people and places” where we work.

We therefore urge the AAG to conduct an inquiry into the México Indígena project concerning the allegations brought against Peter Herlihy and his colleagues. In particular, we ask that the AAG investigate (1) the evidence that 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 Herlihy has made the results from the research available to FMSO personnel.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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See attached list of signatories (appended March 18, 2009).

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