ISSN: 1753-5794 (online)

Human Terrain: War Becomes Academic, dir. James Der Derian, David Udris and Michael Udris. Bullfrog Films, 2010.

Markus Kienscherf*
Free University Berlin

Human Terrain: War Becomes Academic engages with the controversies surrounding the U.S. armed forces' Human Terrain System – a programme designed to provide and produce knowledge about foreign populations by embedding social scientists (so-called Human Terrain Teams) with military units on the ground. Supporters of the programme maintain that it allows U.S. soldiers and marines to become better at winning local populations' hearts and minds during "counterinsurgency operations". Opponents, on the other hand, argue that by harnessing socio-cultural knowledge to the demands of military strategy, the Human Terrain System seeks to "weaponize" the social sciences.

Human Terrain consists of four parts, each of which deals with specific ethical and political dilemmas raised by the Human Terrain System, and concludes with a short requiem. For part I, James Der Derian and his team were granted access to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in the Californian Mojave Desert to observe how junior marines are drilled in "tactical cultural awareness" before deploying to Iraq. The training takes place in a vast virtual space, which includes a whole mock Iraqi town. What actually happens in Iraq is fed into the virtual training space, and the training in turn feeds back into what happens on the ground in Iraq. Virtual and actual realities blend almost seamlessly into one another. The main goal of this highly sophisticated, and forbiddingly expensive, training programme is to hammer home the point that in counterinsurgency operations the basic friend/enemy distinction needs to be replaced by a more nuanced division of local communities into three slots: "supportive," "non-hostile," "hostile." But can a couple of weeks' training actually instil a more nuanced understanding of the "human terrain" in young warriors who are trained to kill enemy soldiers? In fact, counterinsurgency's more

* Markus Kienscherf has just completed his doctorate at the Graduate School of North American Studies at Free University Berlin. He is currently preparing a monograph on U.S. domestic and international regimes of security. He published an article on the U.S. armed forces' Human Terrain System in *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, and another article of his is due to appear in *Security Dialogue* later in 2011. The author can be contacted at markus_kienscherf@yahoo.com.

ISSN: 1753-5794 (online)

complex differentiation between elements of targeted populations seems to be grounded in an attempt more effectively to perform the much more fundamental sovereign distinction between friend and enemy. Or as one simulation trainer, Sgt. Frank Tramano, puts it, "we are not killers – we're professional killers" (13:30).

In part II, the documentary lays out the strategic background against which the Human Terrain System was developed. The recent shift towards counterinsurgency in general, and the launch of the Human Terrain System in particular, were above all prompted by the failure to pacify post-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan. Many critics have pointed out that the Iraq and Afghanistan quagmires were compounded, if not caused, by the U.S. military's blatant lack of cultural knowledge and language skills. The U.S. military's job has always been to destroy enemy armed forces with overwhelming firepower, rather than to understand the socio-cultural intricacies of the societies it happens to operate in. Yet in types of conflict in which conventional state armies are pitted against non-state enemies, who hide amongst and rely on the support of the civilian population, socio-cultural knowledge is considered a strategic as well as tactical necessity. Counterinsurgency operations, moreover, require soldiers and marines not only to kill or capture violent extremists but also, and perhaps far more importantly, to engage in nation-building. And in order to provide security, development and good governance to local communities, one has to understand their language and culture. But, as James Der Derian puts it, "would it somehow pacify the military to bring culture into it, or, the other, the corollary of this, would it somehow militarize peace-making?" (20:46)

Part III takes a closer look at the academic contribution to counterinsurgency. In the words of Montgomery McFate, senior social scientist for the Human Terrain System:

> The goal of the programme really is to use the knowledge and wisdom and methodology of social science to enable the military to complete their mission more effectively, with less loss of life – both military and civilian (31:06-31:22).

Whereas the military officially claims that the input of social scientists is merely used for non-kinetic operations, such as the design and implementation of social programmes or information campaigns, Roberto Gonzáles, an anthropologist and vocal critic of the Human Terrain System, argues that the information produced by

ISSN: 1753-5794 (online)

Human Terrain Teams is also employed for purposes of kinetic targeting, such as tracking and killing (suspected) militants (34:12). So, does the military deployment of socio-cultural knowledge help make military operations more humane? Or does it ultimately lead to a "weaponization" of culture? Is the Human Terrain System a genuine effort to understand foreign populations? Or is it merely a PR stunt to garner domestic as well as international support for protracted counterinsurgency campaigns by portraying them as both beneficent and humane?

Part IV strikes a much more personal note. It follows the journey of Michael Bhatia, who decides to sign up for the Human Terrain System in 2007 only to be killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan in May 2008. Michael Bhatia was a Visiting Fellow at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University and became the first member of a Human Terrain Team to be killed in action. We are shown how Michael grappled with some of the ethical dilemmas of participating in and contributing to military operations. Above all, this section highlights a particular issue that is highly relevant to almost all scholars and critics: Is it enough to study and critique something at a distance? Or do we have to get up close and get our hands dirty?

Human Terrain avoids providing readymade answers to these complex ethical and political issues. Rather, by teasing out the central dilemmas raised by the use of cultural knowledge in military operations, it invites its viewers to make up their own minds. The fact that the film does not adopt a clear position on the issues raised may appear as a weakness at first. But I think it is a major strength because it allows us to think these major dilemmas through for ourselves.

Yet, the documentary could have tried to draw out more fully the historical, and above all imperial, genealogy of the relations between politico-military power and knowledge about foreign cultures. In fact, the current hype over "culture-centric warfare" shows how Edward Said's concept of Orientalism reverberates in the current "war on terror." This is borne out by the fact that the literature on counterinsurgency draws heavily on British and French experiences of imperial policing and warfare, and is replete with references to T.E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia. This is, however, merely hinted at in some of the interviews.

Nevertheless, *Human Terrain* is a compelling account of the current relations between socio-cultural knowledge and politico-military power and will be of interest not only to scholars and students in the Humanities and Social Sciences, but also to a much wider general audience.