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: 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 or connections with the Human Terrain System?

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 people so they could map their own resources and property, thus empowering his people with information technology that could be used to defend their rights. Indeed, in the Assembly meeting mentioned above, this same Comisariado stood up to Gonzalez, even to the point of reprimanding him for UNOSJO’s failure to do promised road work.

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 withmapping 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? What scholar would presume to imply, even through innuendo, as Bryan does, that a group photo in front of the Buffalo Soldier Monument during a visit to Fort Leavensworth reveals anything whatsoever about attitudes or values of those in the photo. This is an unfair and purely conjectural attack, which appears indicative of Bryan’s rhetorical technique.

What scholar would expound on the Association of American Geographers’ Statement of Ethics without once mentioning the American Geographical Society’s “Guidelines for Ethical Conduct of Foreign Field Research” that crystallize the principles that guided our research (available online, http://www.amergeog.org/AGSethicalguidelines.pdf). How too can Bryan fail to cite geographer Scott Brady’s complimentary article in Americas based on close involvement in and direct observation of our project in Tiltepec? (Brady, 2009).

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

Who has the right to control access to indigenous peoples? Bryan portrays indigenous peoples as naive 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 plausible case but slanted and inaccurate actually. The 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


Peter H. Herlihy
Department of Geography, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA
E-mail address: herlihy@ku.edu