

Project Camelot

Entry term: Project Camelot

Introduction.

Project Camelot: A mid-1960s U.S. Army-sponsored behavioral science research project about the revolutionary process and counter-insurgency measures.

In April of 1965, Hugo Nutini, a Chilean-born assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh, went to Chile to recruit scholars for a U.S.-sponsored behavioral science research project about the revolutionary process and counter-insurgency measures called Project Camelot. When asked about the specific sources of funding for the study, Nutini said they included the National Science Foundation, a civilian science agency. When Chilean scholars found out that, in fact, the U.S. Army provided the funding, Nutini denied knowledge of this fact and said he would sever his connections to it. Nevertheless, subsequent criticism from leftist Chilean scholars and politicians portrayed Nutini as a degraded Chilean. And the Chilean government declared that Nutini was banned from returning to his homeland in the future.

Meanwhile, criticism of Project Camelot spread far beyond Chilean borders. In the context of the Cold War, countries that had hostile relations with the U.S., from Cuba to the Soviet Union, denounced this project as a form of Yankee imperialism, designed to undermine national wars of liberation. The international uproar caused problems for the American government as well, partly because the U.S. Ambassador to Chile had not been told about the project before the controversy erupted. On July 8, 1965, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara canceled the project in an attempt to limit the damage -- in the following years the military continued to fund such studies under the auspices of classified research. But rather than putting an end to this episode, cancellation gave rise to mounting controversy about the project among scholars, politicians, and journalists. Discussions focused on the increasingly influential roles of behavioral scientists in American foreign policy programs and military ventures. Commentators also examined the grand hope, embodied so clearly in Camelot, of developing behavioral science knowledge of revolutions that would be useful for predicting and controlling social change in Latin American nations and other so-called under-developed or developing countries around the world. Critical commentary focused on a number of difficult questions. Did participation in Camelot and related research projects mean that scholars were ipso facto engaged in a form of political action rather than, or perhaps in addition to, the pursuit of objective science? Did the content of such research have a political valence and ideological character, rather than a value-neutral orientation? And did military funding in this case, and perhaps in a much wider array of cases, pose a threat to the independence and integrity of the behavioral sciences?

Keywords.

Behavioral Science, Cold War, Counter-Insurgency, David McClelland, Development Studies, Ideology, Interdisciplinary, Objective Science, Military Funding, Modernization Theory, Revolutionary Process, Social Systems Analysis, U.S. Army Special Operations Research Office (SORO), Value Neutrality

Historical Background.

Planning for Camelot began in 1964 in response to a report from the Defense Science Board (DSB), a powerful military science advisory group. The DSB report identified numerous deficiencies in the Defense Department's behavioral science programs, especially when it came to studying the many small-scale wars and revolutionary movements around the world. Subsequently, the Army launched a major project called "Methods for Predicting and Influencing Social Change and Internal War Potential," better known as Project Camelot. Responsibility for Camelot's planning lay with the Special Operations Research Office (SORO), an Army-funded federal contract research center founded in 1957 and located on the campus of American University in Washington, D.C.

SORO's plans for Camelot were nothing if not ambitious. Had it not been cancelled, Camelot may have been the most expensive single social research project in American history up until that time. It had an expected cost of \$4 to \$6 million dollars, which in 2010 dollars would be the equivalent, depending on the particular conversion tool used, of between \$22 and \$81 million dollars to \$33 and \$121 million dollars. Moreover, SORO personnel indicated Camelot was only a pilot project. Presumably, if all went well, more elaborate and more expensive projects would follow. One scholar suggested Camelot would have been the social science's Manhattan Project. Besides relying on SORO researchers and staff, the planning process also involved a large number of scholarly consultants, thirty-three to be exact, including many from elite universities such as Michigan, MIT, Princeton, and Stanford. The project was also noteworthy for its interdisciplinary

character, which SORO, along with many other military-funded social research centers, considered crucial for the task of developing an integrated understanding of various social developments including the revolutionary process of strategic concern.

As was typical of military-sponsored behavioral science research, Camelot promised to produce actionable knowledge. In this case, by using descriptions, analysis, and explanations of past and recent revolutions, the research would produce a generalizable and predictive model of the revolutionary process along with reliable indicators of revolutionary tendencies. It was anticipated that such knowledge would help military leaders to anticipate the course of social change and enable them to design effective interventions, in order to channel or suppress social change in ways deemed desirable from the standpoint of U.S. Cold War policy objectives and military needs. From this perspective, Camelot represented a wonderful example of how the behavioral sciences, or at least certain lines of behavioral science research, had become a vital weapon in the American military arsenal.

As for its interdisciplinary framework, Camelot drew heavily on fields of inquiry that had widespread appeal. In order to analyze the revolutionary process, researchers would deploy social systems analysis, whose development in recent years received extensive support from the military and from military-funded research institutes, such as the RAND corporation, and whose proponents included the enormously influential Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons. With its emphasis on identifying the key elements, sub-systems, and processes that contributed to the stability, maintenance, or disruption of social systems, this type of analysis seemed like the perfect tool for constructing a predictive model of revolutionary potential and social change in societies of interest to American military and foreign policy leaders.

Camelot also incorporated ideas from modernization theory, one major line of inquiry prominent in the larger and booming field of development studies. According to many modernization theorists including Walt W. Rostow, a historical economist and national security advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, one could make powerful generalizations about the ways in which a so-called traditional society became a modern society. For example, in *The Achieving Society* (1961), the Harvard psychologist David McClelland argued that the transition from one type of society to the other depended on strengthening particular psychological characteristics that would propel economic growth and thus set a society on the modernizing path. More specifically, McClelland proposed that economic growth would occur when families, especially mothers, encouraged their sons to develop competitive and achievement-oriented personalities. At a time of intense struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union for resources and influence in the developing world, modernization theory offered an alternative and widely influential framework to Marxist-inspired plans for economic growth and national development. In the context of Camelot and counter-insurgency research more generally, such work indicated that promoting modernization projects was a key weapon in the effort to undermine communist penetration and prevent revolution inimical to American interests.

Camelot, then, offered a large, interdisciplinary group of researchers and consultants an opportunity to work on an unusually well-funded research project. Before its cancellation, Camelot promised to yield significant scholarly advances, to further American foreign policy aims, to satisfy the changing knowledge needs of the military, and to advance the welfare of developing nations while simultaneously protecting them from communist designs. Though noteworthy because of its impressive size and ambitious goals, Camelot reflected a more general confidence among many action-oriented behavioral scientists who believed that by working with the government and the military, they were contributing to the cause of democracy and freedom.

Critical Debate.

The discussion about Camelot among scholars, politicians, military representatives, and commentators in the mass media began in 1965 and continued for a few years after its cancellation. Critics of the project raised at least three questions relevant to the development of critical psychology -- and critical scholarship in the behavioral or social sciences more generally.

One issue concerns whether the scholar's social role requires a sharp separation between scientific and political activities. According to a popular view then and now, scientific work demands that scholars remain objective and value-neutral in their research and thus scientists should not advocate value-laden positions associated with particular social agendas or political positions. While scientific work might help to determine effective means for achieving particular ends, the scientist qua scientist should strive to maintain a detached position with respect to the ends themselves. Though some figures in the Camelot discussions adopted this position, others proposed that by participating in this sort of research project, scholars were engaged in a form of political action, in this case, had the project not been cancelled, by providing knowledge, techniques of analysis, and eventually policy recommendations that they knew would be used for particular political purposes. Some went so far as to portray Camelot's scholars as agents of

Yankee imperialism and accused them of contributing to an anti-democratic agenda, by contributing to American plans that would undermine the right to self-determination of various peoples and nations around the world. Other detractors of the project added that through such work, behavioral scientists functioned as spies, by gathering and analyzing information about target peoples, often without their full understanding or consent and for the purposes of manipulating and controlling them. From these critical viewpoints, the effort to define the role of the behavioral scientist in a manner that excluded a political dimension seems naive at best and willful obfuscation at worst.

Second, scrutiny of Camelot raised the question of whether this sort of research had political or ideological content. One could argue that regardless of the reasons why a scholar might choose to participate in this project and regardless of the political dimension of the research itself, such matters did not or at least should not interfere with the demand that the research itself remain objective and value-neutral in orientation. However, some critical voices pointed out that the language and orientation of this study indicated an ideological bias. For example, Camelot's reliance on systems analysis reflected a preference for stable social systems and an interest in undermining revolutionary forces that threatened such stability. Project Camelot's architects and supporters spoke of revolution as a disease that threatened the health of the system. They suggested that Camelot itself belonged to the field of epidemiology. They referred to anti-system activities and destabilizing processes that contributing to social pathology. And they called for the development and administration of insurgency prophylaxis, in order to restore a social system under threat to health and stability. In short, beneath the veneer of an allegedly value-neutral, objective science, Camelot seemed to be imbued with an anti-revolutionary and in this sense politically conservative, perhaps even reactionary, mindset.

Modernization theory, which informed the plans for Camelot and counter-insurgency studies more generally, seemed ideologically loaded as well. As critics noted, leading social and behavioral scientists in this area had written rather favorably about America, presenting it as a society that had undergone the process of modernization with fabulous results -- including the establishment of an admirably democratic political culture and stable political system, fabulous economic growth, widespread literacy and public education, and extensive investments in science and technology. These writers then presented the lessons they extracted from America's particular historical trajectory as the basis for policies designed to launch the modernizing process in so-called backward or traditional societies, which, due to various psychological, social, economic, and political obstacles, seemed incapable of modernizing on their own and kept them in an arrested state of development. McClelland, for example, proposed that traditional societies suffered from unproductive attitudes and personality structures that prevented them from pursuing the path to successful economic development. Such social and psychological research hardly seems value-neutral or objective in the sense of refraining from normative judgments regarding human nature, social order, and historical change.

Third, the Camelot controversy raised difficult questions about the ways in which funding from powerful patrons such as the military could compromise the health of the academic enterprise. The possibility that funding would undermine the independence and integrity of scholarship was certainly not a new concern. But in the decades following World War Two, leading scholars and their patrons, including the military, commonly suggested that a reasonable measure of independence and integrity had been achieved through the establishment of certain safeguards. For instance, by involving top scholars, the military seemed to recognize the importance of adhering to rigorous standards of scientific inquiry. In addition, by supporting work that aimed to advance knowledge in significant ways rather than seeking to satisfy a narrowly circumscribed military need, the military seemed to give researchers adequate room to pursue serious scholarship. And by funding some important studies without any classification requirements, the military seemed to encourage open discussion and critical evaluation of such research by the scholarly community. However, scrutiny of Camelot suggested that such measures were not sufficient. The harshest attacks claimed that Camelot's scholars and military-supported researchers more generally were obligated to adopt the military's outlook on things. For example, working on Camelot seemed to require that one supported or at least passively accepted the military's interest in finding the means to suppress revolutions in developing nations considered susceptible to communist influence. In this way, scholars became servants of power, rather than fully independent thinkers. Moreover, these scholars were unlikely to speak truth to power, thereby undermining their ability to develop and act as critical intellectuals who acted responsibly in the name of humanistic goals. Critics noted that defense-sponsored research seemed to imbue scholarship with a troublesome manipulative and technocratic mentality as well, which followed naturally from the military's strong interest in using the behavioral sciences to improve its ability to predict and to control human beings and social change.

More recently, Project Camelot has become an object of historical inquiry, providing scholars with a case study that richly illuminates debates about the scientific identity, ideological valence, political uses, and military patronage of psychology and the behavioral sciences in Cold War America, especially during the turbulent decade of the 1960s. Recent

discussions about Camelot also appear in the literature and critical commentary on the involvement of scholars in military and intelligence programs that undergird the War on Terror.

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