



# Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists

*David H. Price*

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## Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists

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A vital reminder of the importance of academic freedom, *Threatening Anthropology* offers a meticulously detailed account of how U.S. Cold War surveillance damaged the field of anthropology. David H. Price reveals how dozens of activist anthropologists were publicly and privately persecuted during the Red Scares of the 1940s and 1950s. He shows that it was not Communist Party membership or Marxist beliefs that attracted the most intense scrutiny from the fbi and congressional committees but rather social activism, particularly for racial justice. Demonstrating that the fbi's focus on anthropologists lessened as activist work and Marxist analysis in the field tapered off, Price argues that the impact of McCarthyism on anthropology extended far beyond the lives of those who lost their jobs. Its messages of fear and censorship had a pervasive chilling effect on anthropological investigation. As critiques that might attract government attention were abandoned, scholarship was curtailed.

Price draws on extensive archival research including correspondence, oral histories, published sources, court hearings, and more than 30,000 pages of fbi and government memorandums released to him under the Freedom of Information Act. He describes government monitoring of activism and leftist thought on college campuses, the surveillance of specific anthropologists, and the disturbing failure of the academic community—including the American Anthropological Association—to challenge the witch hunts. Today the “war on terror” is invoked to license the government’s renewed monitoring of academic work, and it is increasingly difficult for researchers to access government documents, as Price reveals in the appendix describing his wrangling with Freedom of Information Act requests. A disquieting chronicle of censorship and its consequences in the past, *Threatening Anthropology* is an impassioned cautionary tale for the present.

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