

ESSAY REVIEW

Criticism: Fair and Foul, Mostly Foul

Noble Savages: My Life among Two Dangerous Tribes—The Yanomamö and the Anthropologists by Napoleon A. Chagnon. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013. 531 pp. \$32.50 (hardcover), \$14.44 (Kindle). ISBN 978-0684855103.

Darkness's descent on the American Anthropological Association—A cautionary tale by Alice Dreger. *Human Nature*, 22(3) (June 2011), 225–246.

The controversy surrounding *The Man Who Would Be Queen: A case history of the politics of science, identity, and sex in the Internet age* by Alice D. Dreger. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 37(3) (June 2008), 366–421.

Anomalists know that being criticized goes with their territory, and that at times it is less substantive and more personally derogatory. But the same thing can be said about many controversies within mainstream disciplines. One instance concerns the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon, who had studied isolated tribes in the Amazon, the Yanomamö, for about a quarter of a century when he came to national attention through being charged with major malfeasance, including responsibility for a measles epidemic fatal to many natives. The charges came in an article by Patrick Tierney (2000), soon followed and augmented by Tierney's book-length disquisition (2001).

The media coverage and reports of investigations by the American Anthropological Association left the clear impression that Chagnon had behaved badly and unprofessionally. Certainly that had been my own recollection, and a book review (Povinelli 2013) of Chagnon's recent memoir, *Noble Savages*, did nothing to change that impression. However, this book review seemed so mean-spirited, and its accusations were so broad-brush and non-specific, that I resolved to read the memoir and try to make up my own mind.

The first 13 chapters of *Noble Savages*, about 380 of about 460 pages of actual text, report Chagnon's studies in great detail, unlikely to be of

absorbing interest to anyone who does not have anthropologic interests. The last three chapters are Chagnon's critique of the attacks made on him from within anthropology and by the Salesians, a Catholic order that had been doing mission work among the Yanomamö (as, rather competitively, had been the Protestant New Tribes Mission).

The first part of the book describes Chagnon's work as creating detailed genealogies which enabled him to collate biologic relationships with customs and behavior and also made his cooperation fruitful for the human geneticist James V. Neel. Chagnon found that as Yanomamö villages grew, they would split; they combine a sort of mobile agriculture with hunting and gathering that places a practical upper limit on the size of a village. Tracing kinship is complicated by perpetual village-splitting.

Chagnon describes a state of almost constant fighting, largely over women, and including within-village "club fights," somewhat ritualized and thereby limiting the physical damage. Women themselves are subject to much violence by their mates. Between villages, fights can lead to death, and one of Chagnon's highly controversial findings is that men who are known to have killed others benefit by accumulating more wives and achieving more reproductive success. Altogether, Chagnon explains much about Yanomamö behavior in terms of biology and evolution.

Chagnon also described the Yanomamö as rather avaricious, always on the lookout for chances to receive gifts of trade goods—metal tools and weapons, even shotguns.

Long before Tierney's attack, Chagnon had already been *non grata* to a large sector of anthropologists who believed culture to be essentially everything and biology essentially nothing as causes of behavior; so Chagnon's coupling of reproductive success with success in war was anathema, as was his description of the Yanomamö with warts and all rather than as—following Rousseau—peaceful, happy, natives unspoiled by civilization and living in eco-friendly harmony with Nature. Chagnon describes his troubles within anthropology in those terms, as a clash of explanatory worldviews. He also describes less-than-happy interactions in the jungle with the Salesians, who to his mind were interfering in a damaging way with the Yanomamö way of life.

Chagnon's memoir did not make the best impression on me. He is rather ungenerous in comments about Neel, the geneticist who worked with him and gave him his first job. He has rather bad things to say about a number of other people, including most Venezuelan and Brazilian anthropologists. A large ego is clearly on display, from the earliest times when he was a graduate student who presents himself as already equally authoritative as more senior people—thus he "agreed" to collaborate with the well-established senior

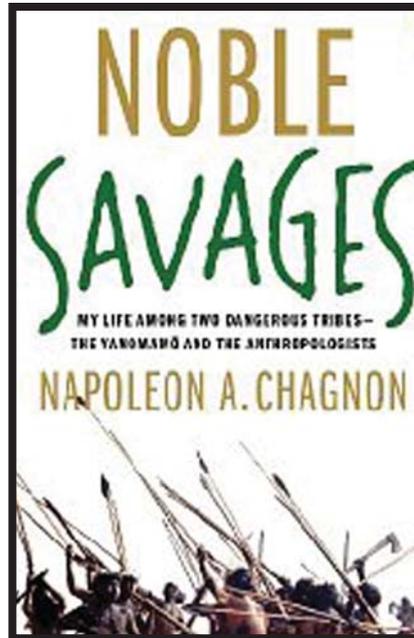
Neel. Nevertheless, even if only a few significant parts of Chagnon's allegations are true, then he was disgracefully mistreated by official representatives of American anthropology and by the Salesians.

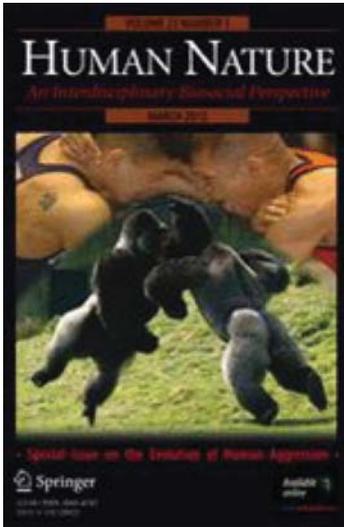
The only way to reach an informed view seemed to be to undertake a thorough analysis of all sides of the pertinent literature. Fortunately, I did not have to do that because I soon came across just such an analysis, the article in *Human Nature* cited above. Its author, Alice Domurat Dreger, came to the controversy almost as late as I did. She is Professor of Clinical Medical Humanities and Bioethics at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern

University; her Ph.D. had been in History and Philosophy of Science. She had been told to look at the Chagnon case because she was working on a book about scientific controversies and activism in the age of the Internet. Her analysis of the Chagnon affair is stunningly evidence-based and scrupulously documented, and carries many worthwhile as well as disturbing lessons about contemporary academe and science and the media.

Most striking: Dreger found numerous references that had almost immediately exposed Tierney's charges as thoroughly false and his approach shockingly deceitful, in particular that the sources he cited do not say what he claims they said. So Dreger looked into "how and why certain individuals—but especially leaders within the American Anthropological Association (AAA)—played a supporting role to Tierney's work," and her article "chiefly seeks to highlight the problematic aiding and abetting of Tierney by scholars who had the power to know better and to do better." That, I believe, is what makes this affair pertinent to anomalistics in general, and indeed to contemporary science in general, as more and more fields display unwarranted dogmatism and highly uncivil behavior toward anyone who questions mainstream beliefs and practices (Bauer 2012).

One point of similarity with other controversies is that the attacks on Chagnon had been initiated and stimulated and kept alive by a very small number of true believers—in this case a few anthropologists with





a politically correct faith that culture is all, as well as some (especially in Brazil) who resented Chagnon for infringing on their turf: “Tierney’s book appeared to represent a rich new opportunity for drawing attention to Chagnon’s alleged misdeeds.”

Another characteristic of controversies is the sheer irrationality of polemic extremes so that observers may wonder how they could ever have been taken seriously. When it comes to savaging heretics, anything goes, apparently. Thus a memorandum circulated widely began, “In its scale, ramifications, and sheer criminality and corruption, [the scandal] is unparalleled in the history of Anthropology.” Dreger comments, “the most unbelievable claims seem like they must be believed. . . . Because how could you make this stuff up?”

Once the media have sniffed a big story, the facts have a hard time catching up. “In the current media market, reporters are rewarded for primacy and speed, not for accuracy,” and some stories are “what journalists call ‘too good to check’.” As Dreger points out, the original sin had been committed by Tierney’s publishers, W. W. Norton, and by *The New Yorker*, neither of which had done appropriate fact-checking. It is not difficult to discover that cited references do not say what they are claimed to say; Dreger’s article offers numerous examples. Several professional societies and the University of Michigan (where Neel worked) had early pointed to many falsehoods in Tierney’s book; nevertheless, the AAA embarked on further inquiries.

It’s a truly ugly story, and Dreger brings copious documentation to expose the long-standing attempt by a few individuals to defame Chagnon and hinder his work. As to Tierney: Why write what is so easily found to be false? Dreger obtains a book manuscript Tierney had tried to have published years earlier, and finds in it sufficient acknowledgments of deceit on Tierney’s own part which, if they had been known to W. W. Norton or *The New Yorker*, would surely have made them think more than twice about publishing him. That manuscript also reveals Tierney’s long-standing prejudice against sociobiology as well as reasons for taking the side of Catholic missionaries.

Much more troubling than a single untrustworthy individual, however,

is the damage done when institutions allow themselves to follow along for misguided reasons. The AAA seemed to judge that for reasons of PR it needed to be seen as making a thorough investigation even as they knew it to be unwarranted: the AAA's president wrote to a colleague:

Burn this message. The [Tierney] book is just a piece of sleaze, that's all there is to it (some cosmetic language will be used in the report, but we all agree on that). But I think the AAA had to do something.

One wonders why that "something" could not have been to announce the unanimous finding that the Tierney book was nothing but sleaze?

Dreger goes into much more detail about the culpability of the AAA. Her scrupulous logic is illustrated once again when she distinguishes taking a postmodernist approach from doing good work:

Postmodernism may have contributed to this mess, but it is not the central problem. The central problem here is ideologically-driven pseudo-scholarship pretending it is real.

Not all postmodernists ignore or distort facts.

Anomalists are prone to be misrepresented, and we need to bear in mind what Dreger says about that: "as someone frequently quoted and sometimes misrepresented in the media, there is a limit to what any of us can do to control others' use of our work." In the present case, "Chagnon was alive to experience what it is like to be drawn-and-quartered in the international press as a Nazi-like experimenter responsible for the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands, of Yanomamö." After such exposure, Chagnon could never effectively disarm his accusers, if only because people tend always to assume that "where there's smoke there's fire."

In her article about Chagnon, Dreger cites a similar case of harassment which concerns a subject even more controversial and sensitive than that of primitive tribes, namely, human sexuality and sexual unorthodoxies. Her second article cited above is an analysis of that affair.

A prominent psychologist, Ray Blanchard, had proposed that males who wanted to change sex belong in one of two categories: homosexual men who erotically desire men, and men who have an erotic desire to be women without necessarily having a sexual attraction to men ("autogynephilia"). J. Michael Bailey, also a psychologist, accepts Blanchard's view on this, and also holds that sexual orientation is determined largely by biology rather than culture, nurture, and environment. In 2003, Bailey wrote *The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism* (TMWWBQ), published by Joseph Henry Press at Johns Hopkins University

but intended for a general and not a scholarly audience.

Immediately there was trouble from individuals to whom Bailey's views are anathema:

dissatisfied with the option of merely criticizing the book, a small number of transgender activists worked to try to ruin Bailey professionally and personally. . . . [They] used the power of the Internet and the press to try to undermine Bailey's professional reputation, undo any positive praise his book received, and make Bailey as personally miserable as possible.

That included comparing Bailey to Nazi racists; his book had been nominated for a Lambda Literary Award (Lambda indicating LGBT—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) which, according to Bailey's harassers, “would be like nominating *Mein Kampf* for a literary prize in Jewish studies.” The harassers circulated “the names, addresses, URLs, and phone numbers” of people who stood by Bailey.

As with Chagnon,

there were in fact far fewer accusers . . . than all the noise in the press and on the Internet would have you believe. And of the accusations made, almost none appear to have been legitimate. . . . [Nevertheless the attacks] came remarkably close to effectively destroying J. Michael Bailey's reputation and life.

As with Chagnon, so here too the activists launched charges through the press and pushed for institutional investigations of Bailey for alleged misdeeds. One of them

used the Web to publicly harass Bailey's children, his ex-wife, his girlfriend, and his friends. . . . So very intense have been feelings around the Bailey controversy that several people were frightened to speak to me when I sent them inquiries about it a good 3 years after the book's publication.

As with other intense controversies, logic and rationality and the middle ground turn out to be dangerous: Dreger found that people

not entrenched in an 'us versus them' mentality . . . nonetheless have been repeatedly silenced, misrepresented, or misheard by those who assume one must side with an 'us' or a 'them'. . . even those who did not want to get involved often found it impossible not to be.

That Bailey's work itself is neither dogmatic nor extreme is indicated by the fact that “Bailey managed to be vilified by both the right- and left-wing presses.”

In my discussion of mainstream dogmatism (Bauer 2012), I suggest that extremist claims can at times be made to seem entirely implausible simply by the application of some common sense. In the Bailey case, the most furious attackers were those who insist that they were born with a male physiology but an essentially feminine gender and that there are no erotic feelings involved. It rather boggles the mind to imagine that anything connected to sex could be entirely non-erotic, yet much of postmodernist and feminist theorizing has pushed that view, including using the term *gender*—which used to mean grammatical rules applying to nouns that connote sex or animateness—as applying to human behavior.



As with too many other controversies, for example the treatment of Peter Duesberg in connection with HIV/AIDS (Farber 2006), “A number of Bailey’s colleagues who might have been inclined to explicitly defend him suggested to me in conversation that they feared being both ineffectual and attacked.” A number of transgendered individuals who agreed with the views of Blanchard and Bailey and who had discussed the matter with Dreger “All . . . asked to remain anonymous for fear of further attack.”

As in the Chagnon case, the most serious charges could have been disproved virtually almost on sight. Bailey had been accused of not getting approval from Northwestern University’s Board supervising research involving human subjects, yet all he had done was to interview people who knew he was going to use in his book what they said to him; Dreger explains exhaustively from every conceivable angle why this does not qualify as research on human subjects.

As in too many other controversies,

many people—including professional scholars—were ready to give me detailed opinions about the book while admitting they hadn’t bothered to read it . . . many people reacted negatively to TMWWBQ before (or whether) they had even read it.

One of Bailey’s harassers is clearly unbalanced mentally, paranoid, and a conspiracy theorist. Dreger refrains from specifying that, merely pointing out that “All this might sound crazy, petty, or amusing to some, but such a reading would minimize the actual damage done to people in the whole TMWWBQ affair.”

That the reaction, “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” is virtually universal is attested by Dreger herself, who had had no wish to interact with Bailey when she knew only “what everyone else knew,” before a mutual

friend convinced her to look into the facts. Then she found that Bailey's book, described as hostile to all sorts of people and theories, instead

isn't simply pro- or anti-gay or pro- or anti-trans. It isn't simply socially constructivist or biologically determinist. It's significantly more complicated than it at first appears, and much more complicated than its cover and title would lead one to believe. Most importantly for this discussion, TMWWBQ is not the book many people assumed it to be—particularly after the phenomenal backlash it received.

“Don't judge a book by its cover,” in other words; especially since it is often publishers and not authors who determine what the title and cover ought to be. (I've published a dozen books, and only rarely was I even invited to comment on a sketch of the cover, and my suggested titles have never been used, though I was able to modify a couple of them.)

Ideologically determined, foul and *ad hominem* rhetoric not only does considerable damage to people: “from questioning the message to questioning the messenger—effectively directed public attention away from the book itself and Blanchard's theory towards TMWWBQ's author.” As to why such viciousness is aroused? Bailey's attackers “are so angry . . . not because they are so sure that Bailey is wrong. It is because they worry that he might be at least partly right and this realization is potentially fatal for their hard-earned sense-of-self.”

A point Dreger does not make directly, but which her analyses make plain enough, is that—as in so many other controversies—the attacked scholars or scientists are not their own best advisors or defenders.

Dreger's fine analyses of these two controversies have much of interest to all anomalists. I recommend them unreservedly. Many of the same points apply in all controversies. When anomalists are called “flat-earthers,” it avoids substantive discussion of UFOs, psychic phenomena, Loch Ness Monsters, etc. Calling Peter Duesberg an “AIDS denialist” finesses having to try to show that his arguments are not sound. And so on. When a claim is readily disproved, it doesn't stimulate intense personal attacks; only when the claim is feared to have some truth to it do defenders of the faith stoop to character assassination and the like.

Henry H. Bauer

Professor Emeritus of Chemistry & Science Studies, Dean Emeritus of Arts & Sciences
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University
hhbauer@vt.edu, www.henryhbauer.homestead.com

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