
Napoleon A. CHAGNON, *Noble Savages. My Life Among Two Dangerous Tribes—The Yanomamö and the Anthropologists* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2013)

IN *NOBLE SAVAGES. My Life Among Two Dangerous Tribes—The Yanomamö and the Anthropologists*, it is as if there are three books within one cover. First we have some chapters that could be dubbed *The Adventures of Indiana Jones in Yanomamöland*. Second there is a revisiting of Chagnon's ethnographic findings and interpretations. And in the third "book," Chagnon attempts to even the score with those many critics that he calls his "detractors." Chagnon's career has been filled with controversies of all kinds, from labeling the people he studied as "fierce" (Asch 1991¹), to claiming that Yanomamö killers have more children (Albert 1989²; Ferguson 1989³), to facilitating a raid by taking a 10-man raiding party upstream in his motorized canoe (Chagnon 1992a: 201-202⁴). In short, his ethics have been questioned and his methods and interpretations repeatedly called into doubt (e.g., Asch 1991; Albert 1989; Corry 2013⁵; Ferguson 1989, 1995⁶; Miklikowska and Fry, 2012⁷; Sponsel 1998⁸). In *Noble Savages*, readers do not find a senior scholar reflectively grappling with the ethical, methodological, or theoretical issues, but rather a disgruntled elder who sees himself as misunderstood, falsely accused, and unfairly maligned.

Fictional archaeologist Indiana Jones, across a trilogy of Hollywood action films, spent far more time tomb-robbing, slaughtering "bad

¹ ASCH Timothy, 1991. "The Defence of Yanomami Society and Culture: Its Importance and Significance", *La Iglesia en Amazonas*, 12: 35-38.

² ALBERT Bruce, 1989. "Yanomami 'Violence': Inclusive Fitness or Ethnographer's Representation?", *Current Anthropology*, 30:637-640.

³ FERGUSON R. Brian, 1989. "Do Yanomamö Killers Have More Kids?", *American Ethnologist*, 16: 564-565.

⁴ CHAGNON Napoleon A., 1992a. *Yanomamö* (fourth edition, Fort Worth, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers).

⁵ CORRY Stephen, 2013. "The Emperor's New Suit In The Garden Of Eden, and Other Wild Guesses or, Why Can't Napoleon

Chagnon Prove Anything?" <http://truth-out.org/opinion/item/18795-the-emperors-new-suit-in-the-garden-of-eden-and-other-wild-guesses-or-why-cant-napoleon-chagnon-prove-anything>

⁶ FERGUSON R. Brian, 1995. *Yanomami Warfare: A Political History* (Santa Fe, NM, School of American Research Press).

⁷ MIKLIKOWSKA Marta and Fry Douglas P. 2012. "Natural Born NonKillers: A Critique of the Killers-Have-More-Kids Idea", in Christie Daniel and Evans Pim Joám, eds., *Nonkilling Psychology* (Honolulu, Center for Global Nonkilling: 43-70).

⁸ SPONSEL Leslie E., 1998. "Yanomami: An Arena of Conflict and Aggression in the Amazon", *Aggressive Behavior*, 24: 97-122.

guys,” and battling snakes and other perils than engaging in any serious archaeology. Chagnon (2013) emits a similar air of bravado as he describes his field adventures among the “last of the Stone Age warriors” (82). The Yanomamö, after all, are bestowed the epithet a “dangerous tribe” by Chagnon (2013) in the subtitle of his book—a label reminiscent of the controversial subtitle “The Fierce People” that he used for the first three editions of his popular textbook *Yanomamö*. Chagnon (2013) calls the people he studied “recalcitrant and uncooperative” (49) and assumes that they should do his bidding, for instance, building him houses, carrying his bountiful provisions, and serving as guides. Chagnon’s air of superiority is reflected in such statements as, “I announced that I wanted everyone to stay at home and not go off hunting or to their gardens” (63). What anthropologist announces to a whole village that they should stay around to be at his beck and call for his research purposes? Chagnon even refers to the unacculturated Yanomamö as wild Indians that, in contrast to their cousins living near missions, can be recognized by “a kind of glint in their eyes and haughty look” (39). A haughty look? Chagnon recounts how the Yanomamö conspired to “sabotage” (56) his research by lying to him, and how he triumphed in the end against their duplicity. At the same time he recounts how he lied to the Yanomamö to achieve his ends (*e.g.* 137; see also Asch 1991: 35). Not only does Indiana Chagnon survive illness in the isolated jungle, being stalked by panthers and lunged at by a predatory anaconda, but he also relates the numerous ways that he stood his ground against the people he came to study. As anthropologists, we are generally trained to establish and maintain good rapport with the people we work with, not to elicit their irritation and even hatred. In his own words, Chagnon (369-370) relates, “He glared at me with hatred in his eyes, and I defiantly glared back at him. He was clutching an ax in his hands and was trembling with anger. We stared at each other for some moments before he hissed: ‘You aren’t following my orders, you son of a bitch! And don’t you ever look at me that way!’ He then raised his ax to strike, and I saw how white his lips and knuckles were. He hissed at me: ‘Either you give that machete to that man over there, or I’ll bury this ax in your skull.’” Is Chagnon sure it was not his own knuckles that turned white? This certainly is the stuff of Indiana Jones adventures, but it would seem that Chagnon is oblivious to why some of his colleagues question his conduct in the field (Asch 1991; Sponsel 1998).

The “second book” involves Chagnon’s ethnographic findings and interpretations, most of which have been published previously. Are

the Yanomamö really as aggressive as Chagnon maintains? Many other anthropologists who have worked with the Yanomamö dispute this. For instance, Sponsel (1998: 106; see also Albert 1989) notes that what has been recorded as Yanomamö aggression is actually “remarkably sketchy and incomplete.” In the book Chagnon (2013) reproduces previously published results that he claims show that Yanomamö men who have participated in a killing out-reproduce their peers. If a Yanomamö man participates in a killing, he must undergo a purification ritual and thereafter holds the distinction of being an *unokai*. As in previous publications (Chagnon 1990⁹: 95, 1992a: 205, 1992b¹⁰: 239-240), Chagnon (2013) still asserts that that *unokais* average more than three times the number of offspring as same-aged non-*unokais*. However, I have demonstrated mathematically using Chagnon’s own data that this statement is simply false (Fry, 2006¹¹; Miklikowska and Fry, 2012). For one thing, Chagnon did not properly control for age differences between the *unokai* and the non-*unokai* groups. Calculations show that there is at the very least 10.4 years average age difference between the *unokais* and non-*unokais* and this is important because older men have more wives and more children than younger men simply because they are older—aside from whether or not they have participated in a killing. An additional problem is that he only included in his study Yanomamö men that were alive at the time of his research. Not surprisingly, however, ethnographic data suggest that killers have a higher chance of being killed in revenge raids than do non-killers (Ferguson, 1989, 1995; Fry, 2006), so the *unokais* who were killed-off, thus cutting short their reproductive careers, were omitted from Chagnon’s (1988¹²; 2013) statistics. Additionally, two attempts to replicate the finding actually found the opposite tendency (Moore, 1990¹³; Beckerman *et al.*, 2009¹⁴). Among the Waorani of Ecuador, for instance, active warriors had lower, not

⁹ CHAGNON Napoleon A., 1990. “Reproductive and Somatic Conflicts of Interest in the Genesis of Violence and Warfare among Tribesmen” in Haas Jonathan, ed., *The Anthropology of War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 77-104).

¹⁰ CHAGNON Napoleon A., 1992b. *Yanomamö: The Last Days of Eden* (San Diego, Harcourt Brace).

¹¹ FRY Douglas P., 2006. *The Human Potential for Peace: An Anthropological Challenge to Assumptions about War and Violence* (New York, Oxford University Press).

¹² CHAGNON Napoleon A., 1988. “Life Histories, Blood Revenge, and Warfare in a Tribal Population”, *Science*, 239: 985-992.

¹³ MOORE John H., 1990. “The Reproductive Success of Cheyenne War Chiefs: A Contrary Case to Chagnon’s Yanomamö”, *Current Anthropology*, 31: 322-330.

¹⁴ BECKERMAN Stephen, P. ERICKSON, J. YOST, J. REGALADO, J. JARAMILLO, L. SPARKS, M. IROMENGA, and K. LONG, 2009. “Life Histories, Blood Revenge, and Reproductive Success among the Waorani of Ecuador”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 106: 8134-8139.

higher, lifetime reproductive success. Beckerman *et al.* (2009) conclude that: "More aggressive men (*i.e.*, zealous warriors) no matter how defined, do not acquire more wives than milder men, nor do they have more children, nor do their wives and children survive longer. In fact... bellicose men have fewer children who survive to reproductive age, a finding that strongly suggests that they have lower individual fitness than less aggressive males." In his book, Chagnon (2013) repeatedly criticizes his cultural anthropological colleagues of being biased and unscientific. Yet in his book he republishes the same *unokai* findings from 25 years ago without any serious engagement with commentaries and critiques of the original study (Albert, 1989; Ferguson, 1989, 1995; Fry 2006; Lizot 1994¹⁵; Miklikowska and Fry 2012; Moore 1990) or nary a mention of the subsequent studies reporting opposite results to his Yanomamö findings (Beckerman *et al.* 2009; Moore, 1990). He is not open to any reassessment or re-evaluation of his original interpretation in light of new developments, and such closed mindedness does not make for good science.

Chagnon (2013) also inflates the uniqueness and importance of his interpretations, while at the same time demonstrating a lack of knowledge about anthropological literature relevant to various topics he discusses. For example, Chagnon (2013) tends not to discuss in a comparative manner the findings of other Yanomamö ethnographers (Sponsel 1998). Thus Chagnon (2013) simply speculates about descent groups and fighting without citing literature central to a consideration of fraternal interest groups and violence (*e.g.*, Thoden and Wetering 1960¹⁶; Otterbein 1970¹⁷, 2004¹⁸). And Chagnon proposes that his studies of the Yanomamö provide insights about the evolution of warfare and of social hierarchies but totally ignores the research on social complexity within archaeology or forager studies (Fry 2006; Fry and Söderberg 2013¹⁹; Knauft 1991²⁰).

The other "dangerous tribe" at whose hands Chagnon has suffered are his anthropological colleagues. Chagnon lumps together a huge

¹⁵ LIZOT Jacques, 1994. "On Warfare: An Answer to N. A. Chagnon (Translated by Sarah Dart)", *American Ethnologist*, 21: 845-862.

¹⁶ THODEN Van VELZEN H. U. E. and Van Wetering W., 1960. "Residence, Power Groups and Intrasocietal Aggression", *International Archives of Ethnography*, 49: 169-200.

¹⁷ OTTERBEIN Keith, 1970. *The Evolution of War: A Cross-Cultural Study* (New Haven, CT, HRAF Press).

¹⁸ OTTERBEIN Keith, 2004. *How War Began* (College Station, TX, Texas A&M Press).

¹⁹ FRY Douglas P. and SÖDERBERG, Patrik, 2013. "Lethal Aggression in Mobile Forager Bands and Implications for the Origins of War", *Science*, 341: 270-273.

²⁰ KNAUFT Bruce, 1991. "Violence and Sociality in Human Evolution", *Current Anthropology*, 32: 391-428.

number of scholars with different backgrounds, training, specializations, and nationalities. One has to wonder at Chagnon's identification of a whole academic discipline as a "dangerous tribe." At various places in the book, but especially in the final chapters, we hear Chagnon's interpretations and defenses against a long string of accusations, entanglements, and controversies. Here are some members of Chagnon's (2013) enemy list. Brazilian anthropologist Alcidia Ramos is called "one of my longtime detractors." Chagnon (2013) also mentions "my activist opponents in Brazil" (432), "my disgruntled former Venezuelan student Jesus Cardozo" (425), "my persistent and academically jealous opponents in anthropology" (393), "my annoyed anthropological detractors" (412), and French anthropologist Jacque Lizot as "one of my longtime academic detractors" (424). I find it interesting that Chagnon uses the personal pronoun *my* with such regularity. Terence Turner also is characterized as "one of my long-term activist anthropological critics" who "had publicly denounced me at a number of anthropological meetings" (Chagnon 2013: 426, 427). Regarding collaborator James Neel, Chagnon (2013: 201-202) writes that there was "a fundamental misunderstanding between us from the outset." Anthropological filmmaker Tim Asch, who collaborated with Chagnon in the field, concluded that "You could never say that a society is the 'fierce people.' [...] You could say, however, that Chagnon is 'the fierce person'" (Asch 1991: 35, order reversed). Apparently confusing Cultural Survival with Survival International (Corry 2013), Chagnon concludes that "Cultural Survival regarded my nonprofit Yanomamö Survival Fund as a competitor for charitable donations because it attempted to denigrate me" (441). Joining Chagnon's (2013) seemingly endless list of critics, detractors and denigrators is journalist Patrick Tierney (2000)²¹ who authored *Darkness in El Dorado*, a book with many complaints about Chagnon, some of which are unsubstantiated in my view. I see no evidence, for instance, that Chagnon started a measles epidemic among the Yanomamö. Joining the list of "detractors" are the Salesian missionaries whom Chagnon (2013: 374) laments "turned against me." In reading the book I had begun to think that somehow I had escaped being put on the "detractor list" for my mathematical recalculation of Chagnon's *unokai* data (Fry 2006; Miklikowska and Fry 2012), but then I discovered that he cites a book I co-edited (Kemp and Fry 2004) as a supposed example of an *ad hominem* attack related to his

²¹ TIERNEY Patrick, 2000. *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Dev-* *astated the Amazon* (New York, W. W. Norton).

1988 *unokai* article (Chagnon, 2013: 278). However, Chagnon got the basic facts wrong. The only mention of Chagnon in the edited book involves his use of the label “fierce,” has nothing to do with his 1988 article, and says nothing that could be considered *ad hominem* (Kemp and Fry 2004²²: 5).

One has to wonder how one anthropologist can manage to evoke criticism from so many different colleagues over so many different issues (not to mention inciting the wrath of the Yanomamö men who, by Chagnon’s own account, wanted to kill him). Chagnon implies there are three main reasons for the bountiful criticism of his activities: ethics, methodology, and interpretations. First, he maintains that some “detractors” hold a romantic and naïve image of humanity, and thus his findings “disturbed, even offended, a number of my colleagues in cultural anthropology, colleagues who clearly favored the Nobel Savage view of tribesmen” (Chagnon 2013: 275). Second, Chagnon attributes much of the criticism to a bias against the evolutionary approach he has taken in his research. He states that “anthropology has become more like religion—where major truths are established by faith, not facts” (Chagnon 2013: 232). Third, Chagnon (2013, *e.g.*: 393) suggests that simple envy comes into play.

Personally, I do not see much support for the idea that criticism stems from either love of Rousseau or envy of Chagnon. It is true however that some cultural anthropologists do not look favorably at evolutionary models of human behavior. As an early adopter of an evolutionary perspective within anthropology, Chagnon went against the theoretical current. But, in my opinion, it is an ineffective and unconvincing ploy to blame an anti-evolutionary bias for the bulk of the criticism he has received. Ultimately Chagnon’s legacy in science, for better or worse, will rest not on his proclivity for arousing controversy and criticism but on the actual quality of his work.

DOUGLAS P. FRY

²² KEMP Graham and Douglas P. FRY, eds., 2004. *Keeping the Peace: Conflict Resolution and Peaceful Societies around the World* (New York, Routledge).

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Douglas P. Fry

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