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## The Anthropological Niche of Douglas W. Hume

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Jungle Fever

Marshall Sahlins

**DARKNESS IN EL DORADO**  
How Scientists and Journalists  
Devastated the Amazon  
By Patrick Tierney  
Norton. 417 pp. \$ 27.95

Guilty not as charged.

Well before it reached the bookstores, Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado* set off a flurry of publicity and electronic debate over its allegations that, at about the same time American soldiers were carrying out search-and-destroy missions in the jungles of Vietnam, American scientists were doing something like research-and-destroy by knowingly spreading disease in the jungles of Amazonia. On closer examination, the alleged scientific horror turned out to be something less than that, even as it was always the lesser part of Tierney's book. By far the greater part is the story, sufficiently notorious in its own right, of the well-known anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon: of his work among the Yanomami people of Venezuela and his fame among the science tribe of America.

The pre-publication sound and fury, however, concerned the decorated geneticist and physician the late James Neel--for whose researches in the upper Orinoco during the late 1960s and early 1970s Chagnon had served as a jungle advance man and blood collector. Sponsored by the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), Neel's investigations were designed to establish mutation rates in a population uncontaminated by nuclear radiation for comparison with the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But according to Tierney, Neel also had another agenda: He wanted to test an original theory of immunity-formation in a "virgin soil" population, exposed for the first time to a devastating foreign disease. Hence the sensational chapter on "The Outbreak," where Tierney alleges that Neel abetted, if not created, a deadly measles epidemic by inoculating Yanomami Indians with an outmoded type of vaccine known to cause severe reactions. Or so it says in the original review galleys of the book.

But by the time *Darkness in El Dorado* was published, it was already in a second, revised edition, one that qualified some of Tierney's more sensational claims in the galley proofs of "The Outbreak." Tierney is an investigative journalist, and critical aspects of his original indictment of Neel took the form of well-documented speculation, leaving plenty of space for the heated exchanges by e-mail and Internet that ensued among respectable scholars who for the most part hadn't read the book. These hasty incriminations and recriminations created their own versions of what Neel had done--and, accordingly, criticisms of Tierney that had nothing to do with what he had said. Still, it became clear enough that Neel could not have originated or spread genuine measles by the vaccine he administered. Tierney then revised the conclusion of the relevant chapter in the published version, making the vaccine issue more problematic--and to that extent, the chapter self-contradictory. Other issues, such as whether Neel was doing some kind of experiment that got out of hand, remain unresolved as of this writing.

The brouhaha in cyberspace seemed to help Chagnon's reputation as much as Neel's, for in the fallout from the latter's defense many academics also took the opportunity to make tendentious arguments on Chagnon's behalf. Against Tierney's brief that Chagnon acted as an anthro-provocateur of certain conflicts among the Yanomami, one anthropologist solemnly demonstrated that warfare was endemic and prehistoric in the Amazon. Such feckless debate is the more remarkable because most of the criticisms of

Chagnon rehearsed by Tierney have been circulating among anthropologists for years, and the best evidence for them can be found in Chagnon's writings going back to the 1960s.

The '60s were the longest decade of the 20th century, and Vietnam was the longest war. In the West, the war prolonged itself in arrogant perceptions of the weaker peoples as instrumental means of the global projects of the stronger. In the human sciences, the war persists in an obsessive search for power in every nook and cranny of our society and history, and an equally strong postmodern urge to "deconstruct" it. For his part, Chagnon writes popular textbooks that describe his ethnography among the Yanomami in the 1960s in terms of gaining control over people.

Demonstrating his own power has been not only a necessary condition of Chagnon's fieldwork, but a main technique of investigation. In a scientific reprise of a losing military tactic, he also attempted to win the hearts and minds of the people by a calculated redistribution of material wealth, and in so doing, managed to further destabilize the countryside and escalate the violence. Tierney quotes a prominent Yanomami leader: "Chagnon is fierce. Chagnon is very dangerous. He has his own personal war." Meanwhile, back in California a defender of Chagnon in the e-mail battles has lauded him as "perhaps the world's most famous living social anthropologist." The Kurtzian narrative of how Chagnon achieved the political status of a monster in Amazonia and a hero in academia is truly the heart of Darkness in El Dorado. While some of Tierney's reporting has come under fire, this is nonetheless a revealing book, with a cautionary message that extends well beyond the field of anthropology. It reads like an allegory of American power and culture since Vietnam.

"I soon learned that I had to become very much like the Yanomami to be able to get along with them on their terms: sly, aggressive, and intimidating," Chagnon writes in his famous study *Yanomamo: The Fierce People*. This was not the usual stance toward fieldwork in the 1960s, when the anthropologist already enjoyed the protection of the colonial masters. Chagnon was working in the Amazonian Wild West, populated by small, independent and mobile communities in uneasy relations of alliance and hostility that could readily escalate to death by poisoned arrow. Moreover, when Chagnon began to collaborate with biological scientists, his fieldwork became highly peripatetic itself, and highly demanding of the Yanomami's compliance. By 1974, he had visited 40 to 50 villages in less than as many months, collecting blood, urine and genealogies—a tour punctuated by stints of filmmaking with the noted cineaste Timothy Asch. Hitting-and-running, Chagnon did fieldwork in the mode of a military campaign.

This helps explain why many other anthropologists who have done longer and more sedentary work in particular Yanomami villages, including former students and colleagues of Chagnon, have disavowed his one-sided depiction of the Yanomami as "a fierce people." "The biggest misnomer in the history of anthropology," said anthropologist Kenneth Good of Chagnon's use of that phrase in the title of his popular textbook.

Good and other Yanomami specialists make it clear that the supreme accolade of Yanomami personhood—the term *waiteri* that Chagnon translates as "fierce people"—involves a subtle combination of valor, humor and generosity. All of these, moreover, are reciprocal relations. One should return blow for blow, and Chagnon is hardly the only male anthropologist to get into dust-ups with Yanomami warriors. But according to his own account, while Chagnon readily joined the negative game of holding one's ground, he knowingly brought contempt on himself by refusing to be generous with food. Continuous food-sharing is a basic criterion of humanity for Yanomami, the material foundation of their sociality.

Needing blood and information quickly, Chagnon would announce his visits to a village in the guise of a Yanomami warrior: dressed only in loincloth, body painted red, feathered—and carrying a shotgun. His field kits have been known to contain chemical mace and an electric stun gun. He tried to cultivate a reputation for dangerous magical power by engaging in narcotic shamanistic seances. When someone stole from him, he got children to inform on the thief; then he returned the favor by carrying off the latter's hammock until he got his stuff back. But when it came to the reciprocity of food sharing, he protested that he could not feed the whole village. On the contrary, he disgusted curious Yanomami by telling them the canned frankfurters he was eating were animal penises, and peanut butter likewise was just what it looked like. Unselfconsciously, he acknowledges that his unwillingness to share food generously or widely made him "despicable in their eyes."

"The next morning," he writes, "I began the delicate task of identifying everyone by name and numbering

them with indelible ink to make sure that everyone had only one name and identity." Chagnon inscribed these indelible identification numbers on people's arms--barely 20 years after World War II.

But he indeed had a delicate problem. He badly needed to know the people's names and their genealogies. This information was indispensable to the AEC biological studies. He was also engaged in an absurdist anthropological project, which he took seriously, of finding ancestor-based lineage institutions among a people who by taboo could not know, could not trace and could not name their ancestors--or for that matter, could not bear to hear their own names. To utter people's names in their presence is the gravest offense, a horror: "In battle they shout out the name because they are enemies." As for the dead, they are completely excluded from Yanomami society, ritually as well as verbally, as a necessary condition of the continued existence of the living. But for the sake of science, Chagnon had to know--and so set in motion an opposition between their humanity and his epistemology that developed progressively through his professorial career.

Chagnon invented draconian devices for getting around the name taboos. He exploited animosities within the village to induce some people to tell on others. He "bribed" (his quotation marks) children to disclose names when their elders were not around. Most productive of all, he went to enemy villages to get people's genealogies, and then confirmed the information by seeing if they got angry when he recited the names to their faces. By the early 1970s Chagnon had collected some 10,000 Yanomami names, including 7,000 names of the dead. It must have caused a lot of pain and hate.

Collecting names and blood was destabilizing not only for the insults it required, but because Chagnon was buying these with large payments of machetes, axes, utensils and other steel trade goods. These were prize objects of Yanomami desire, but not simply because of their economic advantages. The history of native Americans is too often written as if there had to be a white man behind every red man. Incorporating the foreign technology in their own cultural order, the Yanomami became the authors of its distinctive historical effects. They placed imported steel in the highest category of their own hierarchy of values, together with their most precious things, a position to which the foreign objects were entitled because of their analogous associations with marvelous powers--in this case, European powers. Surely steel was useful, but its utility was transcendent, beyond the ways Yanomami knew of making or controlling things. And as signs and means of power, the foreign goods were engaged in the fundamental transactions of a native Yanomami system of alliance and competition. They were materials of feasting, marriage payments, trading, making alliances, attracting followers, sorcerizing and much more. More than producing food, trade goods produced and reproduced Yanomami culture, hence every kind of satisfaction the Yanomami know. Accordingly, the foreign goods themselves became objects of native competition--as did their human sources, notably Napoleon Chagnon.

Chagnon was not the only outsider whose distribution of steel goods plunged him in a maelstrom of Yanomami violence, although it's doubtful that any other anthropologist became so involved in participant-instigation. "The distribution of trade goods," as Chagnon observed early on, "would always anger people who did not receive something they wanted, and it was useless to try and work any longer in the village." Yet moving could only generate further contention, now among the villages so favored and disfavored by Chagnon's presence. Hostilities thus tracked the always-changing geopolitics of Chagnon-wealth, including even pre-emptive attacks to deny others access to him. As one Yanomami man recently related to Tierney: "Shaki [Chagnon] promised us many things, and that's why other communities were jealous and began to fight against us."

Movie-making was an additional mode of provocation, especially when Chagnon and Timothy Asch used wealth to broker alliances among previously hostile groups for that purpose. The allies were then disposed to cement their newfound amity by combining in magical or actual raids on Yanomami third parties. Deaths from disease were also known to follow filming, prompting Tierney to observe that Chagnon and Asch were being awarded prizes for "the greatest snuff films of all time."

Over time, the demands on Chagnon's person and goods became more importuning and aggressive, to which he would respond with an equal and opposite display of machismo. ("He glared at me with naked hatred in his eyes, and I glared back at him in the same fashion.") Soon enough he had good reason to fear for his life, by magical as well as physical attack--including the time when some erstwhile Yanomami friends shot arrows into an effigy of him. Yet Chagnon also knew how to mobilize his own camp. Early on, he fostered what was to become a life-long sociology of conflicts whose "basic logic," as Tierney put it,

saw "Yanomami villages opposed to Chagnon attacking those villages that received him."

By 1976, however, Chagnon's ethnography had cost him official anthropological support in Caracas, and for nearly a decade he was unable to secure a permit to resume fieldwork. In 1985, when he did return, in the company of one of his students, the latter reported they were greeted by a crowd of Indians shouting the Yanomami version of "Chagnon go home!" In 1989 Chagnon was again kept out because the law required that foreign researchers collaborate with Venezuelan scientists, and, as he complained to a missionary whose help he sought, "the local anthropologists do not like me." Bereft of legitimate support, Chagnon returned in 1990 under the dubious aegis of Cecelia Matos, the mistress of then-president of Venezuela, and one Charles Brewer Carias, a self-proclaimed naturalist, known opponent of Indian land rights and entrepreneur with a reputation for illegal gold mining. The trio had concocted a scheme to create a Yanomami reserve and scientific biosphere in 6,000 square miles of the remote Siapa Highlands, to be directed by Brewer and Chagnon and subsidized by a foundation set up by Matos. According to Tierney, Brewer had his eye on rich tin resources in Yanomami territory. In an intensified repetition of a now-established pattern, the huge amount of goods that military aircraft ferried in for the project helped set off the bloodiest war in Yanomami history, with Chagnon's people pitted against a coalition of Yanomami opponents, directed by a charismatic leader of their own.

In three years, the scheme collapsed. Matos was eventually indicted for corruption, in part for her role in commandeering military support for the reserve caper, and she remains a fugitive from Venezuelan justice. In September 1993, in the wake of huge protests that followed from their appointment as administrators of the reserve, Chagnon and Brewer were expelled from Yanomami territory by judicial decree. (Among the protesters were the 300 Indians representing 19 tribes at the first Amazon Indian Congress, who took to the streets against Chagnon and Brewer in the town of Porto Ayachuco.) An army colonel escorted Chagnon to Caracas and advised him to leave the country, which he did forthwith.

In America anyhow, he suffered no such indignities. On the contrary, the more unwanted Chagnon became in the Venezuelan jungle, the more celebrated he was in American science. The day before his last expulsion from Yanomami land, the New York Academy of Sciences held a special meeting devoted to his work.

In the course of Chagnon's career, the further away he got from any sort of anthropological humanism, the more he became a natural scientist. (This could be a lesson for us all.) Whatever the accusations of ferocity and inhumanity made against his ethnography, he increasingly justified it by claims of empirical-scientific value. So he was able to answer his growing chorus of critics by the scientific assertion that they were "left-wing anthropologists," "anti-Darwinian romantics" and other such practitioners of the "politically correct." One might say that Chagnon made a scientific value of the belligerence in which he was entangled, elevating it to the status of the sociobiological theory that human social evolution positively selects for homicidal violence. Whatever the other consolations of this theory, it brought Chagnon the massive support of prominent sociobiologists. The support remained constant right through the fiasco that attended his attempt in 1988 to prove the reproductive (hence genetic) advantages of killing in the pages of *Science*.

The truth claims of the argument presented by Chagnon in *Science* may have had the shortest half-life of any study ever published in that august journal. Chagnon set out to demonstrate statistically that known killers among the Yanomami had more than twice as many wives and three times as many children as non-killers. This would prove that humans (i.e., men) do indeed compete for reproductive advantages, as sociobiologists claimed, and homicidal violence is a main means of the competition. Allowing the further (and fatuous) assumption that the Yanomami represent a primitive stage of human evolution, Chagnon's findings would support the theory that violence has been progressively inscribed in our genes.

But Chagnon's statistics were hardly out before Yanomami specialists dismembered them by showing, among other things, that designated killers among this people have not necessarily killed, nor have designated fathers necessarily fathered. Many more Yanomami are known as killers than there are people killed because the Yanomami accord the ritual status of man-slayer to sorcerers who do death magic and warriors who shoot arrows into already wounded or dead enemies. Anyhow, it is a wise father who knows his own child (or vice versa) in a society that practices wife-sharing and adultery as much as the Yanomami do. Archkillers, besides, are likely to father fewer children inasmuch as they are prime targets for vengeance, a possibility Chagnon conveniently omitted from his statistics by not including dead fathers

of living children. Nor did his calculations allow for the effects of age, shamanistic attainments, headship, hunting ability or trading skill--all of which are known on ethnographic grounds to confer marital advantages for Yanomami men.

Supporters of Chagnon, and lately Chagnon himself, have defended his sociobiology by referring to several other studies showing that men who incarnate the values of their society, whatever these values may be, have the most sex and children. Even granting this to be true--except for our society, where the rich get richer but the poor get children--this claim only demonstrates that the genetic impulses of a people are under the control of their culture rather than the other way around. For dominant cultural values vary from society to society, even as they may change rapidly in any given society. There is no universal selective pressure for violence or any other genetic disposition, nor could genes track the behavioral values varying rapidly and independently of them. It follows that what is strongly selected for in human beings is the ability to realize innate biological dispositions in a variety of meaningful ways, by a great number of cultural means. Violence may be inherently satisfying, but we humans can make war on the playing fields of Eton, by sorcery, by desecrating the flag or a thousand other ways of "kicking butt," including writing book reviews. What evolution has allowed us is the symbolic capacity to sublimate our impulses in all the kinds of cultural forms that human history has known.

In time, Chagnon became a legend of ferocity in the Amazon. Representations of him grew more monstrous in proportion to the scale of the struggles he provoked, and even his trade goods were poisoned with the memories of death. Tierney reports that shamans now portray his cameras, guns, helicopters and blood-collecting equipment as machinery of black magic, the products of a factory of xawara wakeshi, the deadly smoke of disease.

Yet in America, the scientific doctors accord the sociobiological gases emanating from this same technology the highest esteem, worthy of hours and hours of inhalation in the rooms of the New York Academy of Sciences. On college campuses across the country, Chagnon's name is a dormitory word. His textbooks have sold in the millions. In the huge undergraduate courses that pass for education in major universities, his prize-winning films are able to hold late adolescents spellbound by primitivizing, hence, eternalizing, their own fascination with drugs, sex and violence. America.

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