

Book Review

“Thou shalt not sit With statisticians nor commit A social science”

W. H. Auden

Books Discussed:

Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001).

Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead in Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

Derek Freeman, *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: An Analysis of Her Samoan Research* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

Napoleon Chagnon, *Yanomamo: The Fierce People*, 4th edition (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1992).

Patrick Tierney, *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Human beings are, among other things, storytellers. Our species has a remarkable history of coming up with dramatic, imaginative, inspiring, descriptive and analytic tales covering such weighty matters as the origin of the universe, the meaning of life, the nature of good and evil and so on. We have also a noteworthy record of producing entertaining, exciting, sentimental and lyrical expressions, sometimes of great artistic value and sometimes as charming diversions. We commonly allocate our stories into categories. We compose scientific investigations, philosophical treatises, social studies, political constitutions, theological speculations, myths and legends, novels, plays, poetry, songs and comic strips. Our words are diversely intended to explain, inform, animate and amuse. The lines which separate our disparate utterances are, however, not always clear. Novels are now highly valued but once were dismissed as vulgar. Phrenology, on the other hand, was once taken seriously as a sound technique to determine individual character and was even acclaimed as a boon to criminal investigation. According to the late Abbie Hoffman, the finest evocation of the 1960s was a book by Norman Mailer subtitled *History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (see: *The Armies of the Night* [New York: New American Library, 1968]). According to the late Stephen Jay Gould, at least with regard to baseball: “Context matters. Truth is a circumstance, not a spot.” Lines of distinction between subjectivity and objectivity seem to be becoming increasingly blurred.

Telling Stories and Telling the Truth

Though we can easily admit that fashions change and that old stories (whether those of Virgil and Chaucer or those of Ptolemy and Lamarck) risk obsolescence in a changing world, we do like to hold on to some basic distinctions and fundamental conventions. One of the most

persistently endorsed is the separation of what may variously be called fact and fancy, science and art, empirical and normative discourse. Some stories are enjoyed for their aesthetic allure; others gain a following by dint of their apparent correspondence to the allegedly real world.

With some exceptions (Paul Feyerabend's provocative *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchist Theory of Knowledge* [London: Verso, 1978] being a case in point), most scientists are content with this arrangement. For their part, scientists are eager to maintain their claim to objective knowledge. They are especially concerned about recent postmodern, postcolonial and feminist assertions that empiricism yields only socially constructed knowledge, inevitably serves the interests of dominant social groups, and has no greater independent claim to truth than any other method of interpreting the world.

Likewise, most artists (with the possible exception of "social realists") are happy to forswear the notion that their works are scientifically valid representations of reality. Indeed, they revel in the understanding that their works reflect internal inspiration, emotional sensibilities and subjective expression whether of a Dionysian, an Apollonian or even a Protean kind. They seek to present mainly the sublime or the beautiful, but occasionally the playful.

Within the middling and highly contested domain of the social sciences, truth claims are especially precarious; ideological distortion is regularly detected in reactionary writings dedicated to the restoration of traditional values, hegemonic treatises eager to maintain the status quo, and dissenting essays impatient to advance social justice. In the field of anthropology, as in any social science, the matter of ideological foundations has been of enduring concern. Upon what assumptions are we to define the nature of the "other," the people and societies who are the objects of research? To what purposes should anthropological research be put? What are the responsibilities of scholars toward the people they study and toward the society that employs them?

Though few citizens are likely to be able to name even a small number of professional anthropologists, the impact of the discipline has been enormous. The stories anthropologists tell us about human origins and human nature have filtered down in various ways to the public and their governors. The lessons they have taught us have had a profound impact on public policy decisions in areas as diverse as criminal law, education, social welfare, immigration, and aboriginal relations. They have helped define the innovations that are possible and the innovations that are necessary, on the one hand, to maintain social order and, on the other hand, to enhance the quality of life by working toward a more equitable society.

The Canadian experience with devising and revising policy with respect to First Nations is arguably the most prominent current illustration of the way that anthropological writing has influenced and continues to affect how the Government of Canada has set and continues to set policy with respect to native Canadians. John Maynard Keynes' famous suggestion that the self-professed pragmatism of practical businessmen thinly masks their reliance on the jottings of some obsolete academic economist applies equally to the bureaucrats and politicians now attempting to reconstruct the Indian Act. The only difference is that the obsolete academic scribblers are, in this case, usually anthropologists rather than economists. What are at issue are different sets of assumptions about what traditional societies were and are about.

The Anthropology of Anthropology

Anthropology arose naturally enough from questions about the origin and nature of humanity, questions that were of special interest in the centuries following the early exploration and settlement of America, Africa and Oceania by Europeans. Contact with exotic cultures and especially cultures that Europeans would long regard as primitive gave rise to speculations about “natural man.” Popular works such as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611) and Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) nicely illustrate the literary attention paid to those “natural societies” that predated or existed quite apart from what Europeans were pleased to call civilization. The contrast between civilized men such as Prospero and Crusoe and aboriginals such as Ariel, Friday (good natives) and Caliban (an obvious anagram for cannibal and an obviously bad native) helped to shape both colonialism and anti-colonial ideology for centuries to come.

The related topics of aboriginal innocence and barbarism also engaged philosophers from Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 1651), through Locke (*Two Treatises on Government*, 1689) and eventually Rousseau (*The Social Contract*, 1762). They took the idea of the “state of nature,” whether hypothetically or literally, to be the condition of human beings prior to the development of political authority, and constructed elaborate social and political theories about the origins of community, culture and the state upon it. Of particular interest was the origin of civil society. How, it was more than rhetorically asked, could creatures like Shakespeare’s Caliban or Defoe’s cannibals, albeit with innumerable false starts, ultimately enter into a social contract and produce the refined, eloquent and prosperous civilization evident to the inhabitants of seventeenth and eighteenth-century France and England?

This sort of exercise had been attempted before. *The Bible*, wrote Sir Ernest Barker, “taught that the powers that be are ordained by God; but it also taught that David made a covenant with his people.” The idea of a social contract cropped up in Aristotle’s *Politics*. It was an important doctrine in Roman law. It found its way into the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. But the discussion of a social contract and the potential for progress that it implied was carried on with special urgency at the outset of the age of European expansion and, in due course, of capitalist global hegemony.

Who were these natives? What could they reveal to Europeans about the nature of the human animal? Rational philosophical reflection, appeals to the “greats” of the western canon, and advocacy of principles such as “natural law” were employed by scholars, but the taste of queer and quaint customs and ideas, overlain with the obvious odor of racism, also flavored the intellectual stew. The tales of travelers and the imagination of writers drawing on themes as old as *The Odyssey* gave piquancy to learned argumentation. The spices provided by Defoe, for example, are noteworthy. As David Nokes observed, Defoe disdained a fastidious distinction between fact and fancy, and “preferred to describe his tales as ‘true histories’, faking his fictions to read like facts, and filling in the broad sweeps of his adventure stories with minute circumstantial details.” While making no claim that Hobbes took direct instruction from Shakespeare nor Rousseau from Defoe, it can hardly be gainsaid that these entertainments contributed greatly to popular talk about state of nature, the social contract and the origins and evolution of humankind. They contributed much to the “climate of the time.”

In due course, the proximity of the colonialist and the native furnished enough evidence about traditional societies to permit the growth of systematic studies of human cultures. This trend, however, was not easily established. For much of the nineteenth century, ethnography was the preserve of inspired (and sometimes uninspired) amateurs who resisted the professionalization of their arcane and antiquarian interests. It also did not sit well with those who, as traders, missionaries or colonial administrators had a practical interest in “backward” peoples and sought only useful advice about how best to deal with them economically, spiritually, politically and militarily. Neither government-sponsored research expeditions nor university-based programs of instruction won immediate applause for those who ventured into remote areas for other purposes, especially if the researchers and educators seemed overly sympathetic to the natives.

The Truth about Cannibals and the Joy of Cooking

Meanwhile, in popular culture, stories of aboriginal societies were largely the product of travel books written by individual author-adventurers. From Herman Melville’s *Typee* (1846) and Farley Mowat’s now doubly controversial *The People of the Deer* (1951) a mix of facts and truth that transcend mere facts come prominently to mind. The same prurient interests remain today in one of the intramural arguments that are common among cultural anthropologists. Whether stimulated by the fact of some South American soccer players or the fiction of Hannibal Lecter, much current interest has been stirred in the subject of cannibalism. Following in the Hobbesian tradition of popular writers who sought several decades ago to portray human ancestors as nasty, brutish and short, there is no shortage of interest in the question of how grisly our forebears happened to be. (See, for example, Pierre Clastres’ “Cannibals,” a singularly nuanced study of the Aché Gatu people of Paraguay in *The Sciences* [May/June, 1998]).

With few notable exceptions, those who tell rude tales are commonly associated with physical anthropology; more liberal souls are usually practitioners of cultural anthropology. Their tiffs often and tiresomely come down to this: is there a biologically based “human nature” that universally determines the structure of societies and the character of individuals within them, or are human beings culturally pliant and are their ideas and behavior determined by the “environmental nurture”? To help find the answer to such questions, anthropologists have spent over a century and a half recording native languages, describing native customs and institutions, and classifying native ideologies and symbol systems. In the process, they have not always behaved laudably. With respect to the Zuni Indians of the Southwestern United States, for example, US author Larry McMurtry has described them as “bloodsucking leeches.” Less strident is the structural anthropological icon, Claude Levi-Strauss’ admission that “anthropology ... is the outcome of a historical process which has made the larger part of mankind subservient to the other, and during which millions of innocent human beings have had their resources plundered and their institutions and beliefs destroyed, whilst they themselves were thrown into bondage, and contaminated by diseases they were unable to resist.” The relationship between academic investigation and imperialism is as complex and ethically disputed as it is unrelenting.

Highly acrimonious arguments arose early in the last century. Then, pioneering anthropologists such as Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead advanced the view that human beings were highly malleable and that, with proper education, both substantial material, social and moral progress were possible. At base, they insisted, all humans were equal and equally deserving of respect. Moreover, they had the audacity to say that some ethical progress might

also be needed by and available to modern society. Worse, they intimated that “we” could become less racist and more prepared to embrace universal human rights (to say nothing of becoming more “spiritually literate” after a careful study of the mores of so-called uncivilized societies. Others, following the lead of Herbert Spencer and the “social Darwinists,” supported the view that innate biological factors (often presented with an expressly racist sub-themes) dominate. Such individuals frequently asserted that human beings are inherently aggressive and some went so far as to insist that these aggressive impulses should be encouraged in pursuit of promoting the “survival of the fittest.” At one extreme, this led to the embrace of eugenics, a movement supported equally by social engineers among Fabian Socialists such as Sidney and Beatrice Webb, H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw and also by Nazis and more recent advocates of “ethnic cleansing.” Between the horrors of the 1940s and the 1990s, the work of ethnologist Konrad Lorenz gave rise to popular books such as Robert Ardrey’s *African Genesis* (1961) and *The Imperial Animal* (1966) and Desmond Morris’ *The Naked Ape* (1966) and *The Human Zoo* (1969) which gave succor to anyone interested in justifying domination and exploitation at home or abroad. Well before the Hollywood gave us “Greed is good,” some anthropologists told anyone would listen that greed is natural.

The controversy conflated the argument about “nurture” vs. “nature” as the primary cause of behavior and the derivative arguments about whether people (following the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes) are inherently nasty or (in the tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau) are essentially nice. It also took hold in the argument about genetic determinism with genuine biologists such as Stephen Jay Gould (*The Mismeasure of Man* [1981]) and Richard Lewontin (*Human Diversity* [1982]) lining up against such diverse writers as Richard Dawkins (*The Selfish Gene* [1976]) and Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray (*The Bell Curve* [1995]). Their intellectual struggles have had and will continue to have importance for all those seeking to respond to the challenges of colonialism (whether internal, as on Indian reserves or external as in the current G-7’s discussion of IMF and World Bank “assistance” to Africa). The question boils down to which side can cook up the winning story.

Anthropological Stories and Public Policy

In pre-anthropological times, the controversy over the status of aboriginal peoples set church against state. As early as 1537, the reigning Pope produced the Papal Bull *Sublimus Deus*, which clearly stated that aboriginal peoples were humans and possessed souls, thus making them acceptable candidates for conversion to Christianity (and potential contributors of tithes) and setting the stage for subsequent debates about aboriginal legal rights that continue to challenge contemporary Canadians. Later, some academic anthropologists, assuming “white man’s burden,” wanted to assimilate aboriginals and bring them the assured advantages of civilization. Innovative programs to raise native people to the highest level of which they might be capable were undertaken. Hence, residential schools for native Canadians were created. The manifest reason for these innovative institutions was to foster individual and social development of native society; the hidden reason and, some say, the primary mandate was to destroy traditional society and to create a race-based underclass of manual workers and domestic servants.

Other examples abound. Early anthropologists had profound effects on social theorists. William Henry Morgan’s monumental study *Ancient Society* (1877) formed the basis of Marx and Engels’ analysis of pre-capitalist economic formations. Margaret Mead’s *Soviet Attitudes*

Toward Authority (1955) helped Americans better understand their Cold War foes. Other anthropologists participated in the framing of contemporary attitudes toward aboriginals. In Canada, it is possible to trace the evolution of anthropological (and of public and political) thinking about First Nations peoples. From “primitive barbarians” to “noble savages” to “social problems” to “endangered species,” the pendulum has swung to and fro over the past few centuries. Some have thrown up their hands at the surly ingratitude of the “lesser breeds without the law.” Many have recognized the devastation caused by both government policy and practice but remained committed to a paternalistic model in which law enforcement and social assistance become the two-sided coin of social control. Still others have insisted that each culture has its own right to be respected and that “we” ought to encourage “them” to stay just as they are (“they have such heart-warming attitudes toward nature”). All options have led down their well-intentioned paths to monstrous forms of imperialism. It was, however, just such options that played a significant role in determining the anthropological research agenda and insinuating the findings of such research into the process of public policy determination. To grasp the depth and enormity of the internal political debates among anthropologists and their implication for public policy implication, it is well to examine some current examples of conflict within the profession.

Five Books that Shook the World

If compelled to come up with a list of the five most significant contributions to the public understanding of the science of anthropology, I would not hesitate to suggest these as prime candidates:

Margaret Mead’s studies of South Seas adolescents, first published in 1928 which set the agenda for cultural anthropology for over half a century;

Derek Freeman’s iconoclastic critiques of her work which prompted a radical re-evaluation of her influence and helped change anthropology’s course;

Napoleon Chagnon’s studies of the Yanomamo people of South America helped chart that course in the direction of “sociobiology”;

Patrick Tierney’s devastating assault on Chagnon’s ethics, ideology and scientific credibility left Chagnon considering legal action and official anthropology reeling at the end of the 20th century.

In the case of Margaret Mead, *we have an example of a soft-hearted, progressive “culturalist” whose *Coming of Age in Samoa* was by far the most popular anthropological work of its time. It quickly sold close to half a million copies and remains in print today. Mead captured the public imagination and pretty much set the agenda for academic research as well. She contrasted the lives of the carefree and natural children of Samoa with the repressed and restrictive experience of their counterparts in the United States. Together with her *Growing Up in New Guinea* (1930), *Coming of Age in Samoa* provided a stark contrast between the purity and simplicity of the Melanesians and the neuroses of modernity. While never denying the material advantages of industrial society, she criticized the repressive pathologies of our way of life and held out the practices of an ostensibly simpler community to be in many ways superior. Mead’s popularizations led directly or indirectly to a re-evaluation of child-rearing practices, education*

and, by extension, to new thoughts about co-operation and competition in the larger society, all well before Dr. Spock told us about baby and child care and various experiments in “progressive” education became the innovations de jour in both public and private schools.

Over the past quarter-century, however, Derek Freeman has written devastating critiques that affirmed that Mead’s idyllic account was false. She had insisted that, in Samoa, adolescent sexuality was open, happy and psychologically healthy when, in reality, her South Pacific paradise had one of the world’s highest rates of violent rape. This was not simply a matter of flawed research of little interest outside academe. Mead’s story had an influence on educational and social policy innovations for decades and was at least partly responsible for the growth of what critics called the “permissiveness” that was said to dominate modern thinking about parenting. Not only did she get the facts wrong, according to Freeman she was actually taken in by some friendly Samoan girls who, like many other subjects of social scientific inquiry, told Mead only what she wanted to hear. One, Fa’amotu, features prominently in Mead’s autobiography *Blackberry Winter* (1972) and, though of advanced age, was one of Freeman’s most important sources. The “hoaxing” of Margaret Mead, it seems, was a kind of gentle practical joke by a couple of girls with whom Mead had become quite friendly; if so, its unintended consequences were extraordinary. In Mead’s story and Freeman’s story about her story, an important ethical question is intertwined with methodological concerns as related to the issue of “subjectivity.” How reliable are studies in which the observer becomes intimate with the observed? Who, in the end, is kidding whom?

In the case of Napoleon Chagnon, we have a hard-hearted, reactionary sociobiologist whose *Yanomamo: The Fierce People* was the big hit of the past quarter century. Selling over 400,000 copies in its first year of publication, it has gone on to replace *Coming of Age in Samoa* as anthropology’s all-time marketing success. Widely praised, particularly by the likes of sociobiologist E. O. Wilson, it is the most conspicuous item in a series of works (including three prize-winning films) that catapulted Chagnon to international fame. *The Fierce People* described and to some degree perversely idealized an Amazonian tribe that Chagnon declared to be among the most aggressive and vicious societies known today. Considered the largest “in tact” and “untouched” aboriginal population on earth, the Yanomamo were regarded as a unique and invaluable resource for anyone interested in probing the character of “natural man.” The picture was not pretty. Originally commissioned to take blood samples from this pristine community as a control group for studies of radiation sickness among survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Chagnon went on to compose a full-scale ethnography of the Yanomamo tribe. According to one standard anthropological textbook, his account revealed that “violence by men against women, violence among men in the same village, and warfare between villages are part of their daily life and the focus of their culture. Yanomamo myth,” it continues, “points to their origin as a violent people coming from blood.” Motivated largely by the desire to obtain women, the internal warfare among Yanomamo villages was described as almost constant, a Hobbesian war of all (villages and individuals) against all.

Now, however, Patrick Tierney has come out with a denunciation of Chagnon that goes a lot farther than Freeman’s respectful demolition of Margaret Mead. Tierney accuses Chagnon of falsifying his data, of staging inter-tribal conflicts to demonstrate the ferocity of the Yanomamo, of precipitating actual conflict by playing favorites in the distribution of machetes and other goods, by countenancing rape, and by ignoring the fact that the rate of violent death among the

Yanomamo was only about two persons per year in a population of about 15,000 with most of the killings taking place in three outbursts that took place immediately after white men (including Chagnon) had insinuated themselves into Yanomamo territory. Indeed, Tierney stops just a libel suit short of charging Chagnon of spreading, through no less than negligence and possibly malice of forethought, an epidemic of measles that killed hundreds and possibly thousands of aboriginals. (Chagnon, of course, was not alone; James Neel, his mentor and head of the Department of Human Genetics at the University of Michigan, as well as several unsavory local characters including mining executives and corrupt politicians do not come out well either). The matter has prompted a special inquiry by the American Anthropological Association and has become the focus of numerous websites some of which defend Chagnon and some of which assail him.

In the end, Mead emerges as a naïve social reformer whose gullibility (or, perhaps, ideological blinders) set her political agenda back a good deal because her scientific work seemed so sloppy. Meanwhile, in Tierney's account, Chagnon comes close to meeting the clinical definition of a sociopath whose efforts were consciously directed toward one of the most apparently mendacious research programs in the history of social science.

The two cases involve two of the dominant anthropologists of the past century. Their legacy and those of their critics offer a caution about social scientific research. Both Mead and Chagnon employed the language (and to some degree the legitimate methods) of their discipline in the interest of pre-existing political goals. Mead wanted to show that repressive North American social values led to unhealthy psychological development. Chagnon wanted to demonstrate that North American society had gone "soft" and that only the recovery of the aggressive attitudes and warlike behavior of our tribal ancestors could bring us back from the edge of the abyss to which pacifism, socialism, feminism, postmodernism and a serious shortage of testosterone has led us. (Asked by one ingenuous graduate student if he did not find even one pacifist among the tribesmen, Chagnon thundered that he did not go there to study cowards!).

A Story about Stories

Does all of this imply that the products of academic researchers and theorists are valueless (or of equal value, which amounts to the same thing)? Certainly not. There remain standards of good science and epistemological assumptions about the independent reality of an external world that can be properly and confidently explored using scientific methods. If, therefore, I were to compose a short list of books that I would have preferred to be among the most influential recent anthropological texts, that list would certainly include *Reinventing Anthropology* (1974), an anthology edited by Dell Hymes, and *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (1980). The first revealed many of "the skeletons in the anthropological closet" and pointed toward the creation of a "critical and reflexive anthropology." The second put forward an explicit theoretical statement that went beyond the tired old "nature/nurture" controversy and generated a template for the kind of research design that would not only provide more satisfactory answers to the legitimate questions that anthropologists ask but would also form the ground upon which pertinent information could be transmitted by public policy decision makers. Until such books win the audiences that Mead and Chagnon commanded, however, we must make do with what we have.

Meanwhile, we should at the very least understand that *all* stories (and that includes all social science) have an ideological dimension. The very selection of a topic for research betrays an interest in the subject and, at minimum, some tentative definition of the *problem* for which the research is intended to provide at least a provisional solution. This is inescapable and should neither be denied nor acknowledged only with embarrassment. Rather, we should be forthright about why we are studying something, what we hope to discover and how our discoveries might ameliorate conditions that we judge to be bad or enhance conditions that we judge to be good. None of this contravenes the canons of science nor the criteria generally understood to be applicable to excellence in the research endeavor. It does not counsel an uncritical, spongy cultural relativism. Bad science is bad science, no matter how honorable the intentions of the scientist (e.g., Mead); bad science is also bad science no matter how disagreeable the intentions of the scientist (e.g., Chagnon). What it does, however, is contextualize the scientific project and thus render its conclusions not only valid in the narrow methodological sense but also credible in terms of the social basis and social aims of the scientific enterprise.

If we are successful, we will be able to deconstruct such innovations as the current Government of Canada's proposed *First Nations Governance Act*. Setting aside any consideration of former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's unabashed assimilationism as expressed in part by former Indian Affairs Minister Jean Chrétien's well titled "White Paper" on Indian affairs a quarter-century ago, we would be enabled to disclose the ideological premises upon which the Government of Canada has called for procedural codes for Band Council elections, financial accountability measures, and the application of the Canadian Human Rights Code to Band affairs. We would also be enabled to understand why measures that seem reasonable enough on their face, have been angrily rejected by native leaders such as Matthew Coon Come, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, as encouraging "legislated extinction" and "forced assimilation" of native peoples, and have resulted in preparations for legal challenges well before the Bill becomes law.

In the meantime, by acknowledging that research and publication are inherently political acts, that the theme of the story that is produced will be read as supportive of some policy and critical of others, and that all such stories take place in a given political context to be used with or without the author's expressed complicity, we will take a great step toward transparency in what we produce either as academics or policy innovators. A careful reading of Mead, Chagnon as well as their critics will prove enlightening, a worthy step on the path toward understanding how our own scholars have almost imperceptibly shaped our own attitudes and cultural assumptions. And besides, they make awfully good stories.

About the author:

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