

Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com

[See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)

[Order a reprint of this article now](#)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

BOOKSHELF | February 15, 2013, 5:04 p.m. ET

Fierce Controversies

The man at the center of the debate over whether violence provides an evolutionary advantage

By CHARLES C. MANN

Napoleon Chagnon might be the world's most famous anthropologist and must be its most controversial. In 1964, he began visiting the Yanomamö, an indigenous group living in several hundred small villages scattered across southern Venezuela and parts of northern Brazil. Wearing almost no clothing, shifting their homes and gardens about the equatorial forest, the 25,000 Yanomamö seemed to have changed little for millennia. They were a window into the Pleistocene, Mr. Chagnon thought, a vision of humankind at its earliest stage of development. They were also an opportunity for an ambitious scholar to make a name for himself.

Noble Savages

By Napoleon A. Chagnon

Simon and Schuster, 510 pages, \$32.50



Luke Wilson

During the next three decades, Mr. Chagnon went to Yanomamöland about 25 times, staying for weeks or months on end, and wrote dozens of articles and five books about its residents. One of the books—originally titled "Yanomamö: The Fierce People" (1968)—became the most popular anthropology textbook ever. Mr. Chagnon's work made the Yanomamö the planet's best-known "primitive tribe"—and the center of a vitriolic intellectual battle over Mr. Chagnon's methods and ideas.

The Yanomamö, Mr. Chagnon writes in his new book, were "the last chance for an anthropologist to observe" what was "possibly the last large, warring, isolated tribe left on the planet." Studying these villagers, Mr. Chagnon hoped, would let him tackle some of the discipline's biggest questions: What is human nature? How do societies form? What is the basis of political power? His proposed answers flew in the face of what most anthropologists believed, leading to furious argument; indeed, Mr. Chagnon has been charged with almost every imaginable crime, including murder.

"Noble Savages" is Mr. Chagnon's account of his life's work, an *apologia pro vita sua*. It is one of the most interesting anthropology books I have ever read. But I suspect it will do nothing to quell the controversies.

Napoleon Chagnon grew up in a poor family in rural Michigan, one of 12 children in a house without indoor plumbing. He won a scholarship to college, where he was required to take a year of social science. He chose anthropology, which he had never heard of—and fell in love with the discipline. "Noble Savages" begins with Mr. Chagnon as a raw, inexperienced young man, "the proverbial blank slate incarnate," an ill-equipped, 26-year-old doctoral student with a head full of his mentors' theories.

Cultures, he had been taught, were wholly mental constructs—they had nothing to do with biology. Human nature was basically peaceable; fights occurred, but always over access to resources like food and water. Approaching Yanomamöland, Mr. Chagnon assumed that these ideas would guide his year of fieldwork. "I had visions of proudly entering the village and seeing 125 'social facts' running about, altruistically calling each other kinship terms and sharing food, each courteously waiting to have me interview them." The interviews would be compiled into notebooks, which he would mine from thesis to tenure to tweedy retirement.

Initially I assumed this self-presentation to be a literary device, designed to bring readers along, bildungsroman-style, as the rookie's early, crude preconceptions were overturned and he acquired wisdom and authority. Only when Mr. Chagnon confesses that he also tried to move his wife and two young children (both under the age of 5) into the hot, dysenteric forest did it occur to me that the author might mean what he said about his extreme naiveté. Insect-bitten beyond endurance, his family fled within weeks. "I had made a colossal mistake," Mr. Chagnon ruefully admits, one of many he committed as he adjusted to life in the forest.

From the beginning, Mr. Chagnon was astonished by the ubiquitous violence and terror in Yanomamö life. Walking into a village on his first day in the field, he was greeted by "a dozen burly, naked, sweaty, hideous men nervously staring at us down the shafts of their drawn arrows!" The previous day, he soon learned, a second village had abducted seven women from the village Mr. Chagnon was entering, named Bisaasi-teri. Just a few hours before, the men of Bisaasi-teri had wrested back five of the women after a "brutal club fight," provoking threats of retaliation. The villagers had every reason to greet a stranger's arrival with weapons at the ready.

Anthropologists frequently give gifts to the people who have been kind enough to endure their questions. The Yanomamö helped Mr. Chagnon in a thousand ways, and he thanked them with machetes, medicine and crackers. But sometimes the reason for his generosity was to ensure that his informants wouldn't kill him in his sleep. High among the threats was Möawä, the "tyrannical headman" of Mishimishimaböwei-teri, a thug "who had killed twenty-one men." Mr. Chagnon's relationship with Möawä began with the "selfish," "cruel" and "overbearing" Möawä demanding all the gifts Mr. Chagnon had intended for Möawä's entire village, including medicines for sick children. It ended with Möawä threatening to "bury this axe in your skull!" Parts of "Noble Savages" are among the few white-knuckle reads in contemporary anthropological literature.

For me, though, the most compelling sections involve the author's struggle to gather what would seem like the most basic facts about Yanomamö communities: the names and

relationships of their residents, along with birth and death dates. Dialing a list of telephone numbers was not an option. Instead, Mr. Chagnon had to find thousands of highly mobile people in scores of small villages that could be reached only by foot or dugout canoe. In addition, he had to learn Yanomamö, an unusual language that is not like any other in the region. All this took years.

The difficulties were compounded by the Yanomamö view that personal names have a powerful spiritual charge; a stranger who knows someone's true identity has "some kind of control over that person," Mr. Chagnon explains. As people get to know each other, the danger of knowing names drops. Still, "to be courteous and polite, one should generally avoid using someone's name in public." Prancing into a village and asking for a list was out of the question.

Worse still, the Yanomamö, like anthropology subjects everywhere, regarded the note-scribbling scholar as a choice target for practical jokes. Only after months of effort did Mr. Chagnon learn that his informants had been deliberately feeding him bogus names. Naturally, he found out in the most humiliating way possible: Telling a group of men something about a headman's wife, he unknowingly referred to her by a capillo-vaginal epithet. As Mr. Chagnon later discovered, his painfully assembled genealogies recorded her son as something equally unprintable. Each vulgarity, including a penile sobriquet for the headman himself, had been solemnly whispered into his ear, followed by the injunction: "Don't tell anyone I gave you this name!"

The genealogies paid off, though, when Mr. Chagnon used them to show that Yanomamö violence had a reproductive payoff. On the whole, he wrote in a 1988 *Science* article, village men who had killed other people had roughly three times as many offspring as non-killers.

Today, this claim may seem unexceptional. After all, genetic studies suggest that about 10% of the men living in the old Mongol Empire are descended from Genghis Khan, one of history's great killers. Why wouldn't this kind of thing be replicated on a smaller scale? But in the 1980s, Mr. Chagnon writes, "to have the lead article in *Science* suggesting that 'killers have more kids' was like pouring gasoline on a smoldering academic fire."

A little more than a decade before, the Harvard entomologist Edward O. Wilson had published "Sociobiology" (1975), his ambitious attempt to unify sociology, anthropology and economics under the umbrella of evolutionary biology. Social scientists were dismayed; in the past, such "scientizing" had been used to excuse being awful to purportedly inferior people. Mr. Wilson was charged with racism and sexism; protesters interrupted one of his talks to dump pitchers of water on his head.

Mr. Chagnon, who seems to have an instinct for leading with his chin, embraced sociobiology. He argued that Yanomamö men fought over women and that this male conflict was not only the fundamental cause of war in simple societies but "the most important single force in shaping the evolution of political society in our species." Conflicts over reproduction are fundamental in other mammals, he noted. There is no reason to see *Homo sapiens* as an exception.

For defense, people find safety in numbers. The best way to achieve those numbers was "for adult males to develop kinship-defined coalitions that peaceably distributed females and pooled their collective abilities to wield force against other groups." (Men are at the center, rather than women, because individual men can have more children than individual women and thus can assemble big kin groups faster.) Leaders of these coalitions, alpha males, almost invariably acquire authority by killing their enemies—think of the generals that Americans have elevated to the presidency. The general's ability to order people around is, paradoxically, a first step "in the direction of law."

Mr. Chagnon won many converts for his theory of the primacy of reproductive conflict. Unfortunately, more seemed to be biologists than anthropologists. Not only had he waded into the sociobiology wars, he had jumped into a second anthropological controversy, this one over the purpose of the discipline itself.

On one side were what might be called the traditional ethnographers, such as Ruth Benedict, Marvin Harris and Claude Lévi-Strauss, who viewed anthropology as the gathering and interpretation of empirical data about societies, with special focus on small-scale communities. On the other side, a new group—researchers like Darrell Posey, Alcida Ramos, Roy Rappaport, Peter Wade and the members of the Network of Concerned Anthropologists—saw scholars as advocates for the people they studied, most of whom were poor and had dreadful histories of mistreatment.

To practice "a politically committed and morally engaged anthropology," as Nancy Scheper-Hughes later put it, Ph.D.s needed to transform themselves from dweeby academics into "alarmists and shock troopers," fighting "the layers of acceptance, complicity, and bad faith that allow the suffering and the deaths to continue." Mr. Chagnon's theory of the formation of society, his major contribution to the discipline, was like fingernails on the blackboard to these new anthropologists. They feared that his depiction of violence as central to social identity in groups like the Yanomamö would be used to cast indigenous peoples as savages, who could be forced into reservations "for their own good."

As the title of this book hints, Mr. Chagnon speaks a different language than most of his colleagues. Typically, anthropologists today are told to avoid words like "tribe" or "primitive," because such words label smaller, technologically simpler societies as lower on an objective scale of development. Every society, in this view, is just a different way of being human; no culture is "above" or "below"; there are no universal patterns. Mr. Chagnon, by contrast, belongs to the school of "Oh, Come Off It." Face facts! he in effect says. Individual Yanomamö are just as worthy of respect as thee and me, but their society is at an earlier stage of development: primitive and tribal.

Early in "Noble Savages," the author describes his encounter with the Yanomamö who were aiming their bows at him: "Immense wads of green tobacco were stuck between their lower teeth and lips," he writes, "making them look even more hideous. Strands of dark green snot dripped or hung from their nostrils—strands so long that they drizzled from their chins down to their pectoral muscles and oozed lazily across their bellies, blending into their red paint and sweat." The description emphasizes his point: Village life is dirtier and more unpleasant than civilized life—get real! Later he explains that the mucus, the

byproduct of a snorted drug, is next to impossible to wipe off in a land without handkerchiefs or tissue paper. Nonetheless, this is not the kind of language that will soothe the troubled indigenous-rights activist.

By the late 1980s, Mr. Chagnon was under siege, not just intellectually but personally. Opponents leveled ever-increasing charges of racism, data-faking, brutality toward the Yanomamö (such as taking their names) and even complicity in genocide. In 2001, a book by journalist Patrick Tierney contended, sensationally, that a medical-research group that Mr. Chagnon had assisted in 1968 may have exacerbated or even caused a measles epidemic that killed "hundreds, perhaps thousands" of Yanomamö. (This claim seems grossly untrue; in fact, the team provided medical care to victims of the epidemic.) A special seminar held by the American Anthropological Association to discuss Mr. Tierney's book attracted almost a thousand people, who listened to a confusing, sometimes hysterical welter of charges and countercharges, many by people who had not read the work of either Mr. Tierney or Mr. Chagnon. One thing that was not provided: actual data from the Yanomamö that refuted Mr. Chagnon's ideas.

"There have been thirty or more anthropologists who began fieldwork among the Yanomamö after I began," Mr. Chagnon writes, his fury practically spitting from the page. "They all could have easily collected comparable data on [killers] and variations in reproductive success similar to the data [Mr. Chagnon collected]. Not one of them did this." Mr. Chagnon is exaggerating here—anthropologists John H. Moore and R. Brian Ferguson provided data-based critiques, for instance—but only slightly. The majority of the attacks were ad hominem.

This is a pity, and not just for Mr. Chagnon; his portrayal of society's origins has so much to say about the nature of our species that it should be examined thoughtfully.

Implicit in his ideas is the presumption that the Yanomamö he met in 1964 are representative of the way all or most people were in the distant past—they are, as Mr. Chagnon puts it, "pure," "pristine," even "wild." They were frozen in time, like insects in amber. But is that true? Researchers like Mr. Ferguson, Jacques Lizot, Ernest Migliazza and Neil Whitehead argue that the Yanomamö probably used to live hundreds of miles south, on the Rio Negro, a big tributary of the Amazon. Prior to 1492, these researchers say, this portion of central Amazonia was a prosperous, cosmopolitan, multiethnic network of big villages, fed by fish from the great river and reliant upon a multitude of forest products. When that network was thrown into turmoil by the arrival of European slavers and European diseases, the Yanomamö and many other groups fled into the hinterlands, where they now reside.

If this is correct, these people are not "pure" or "pristine"; they are dispossessed. And their existence in small bands is reflective not of humankind's ancient past but of a shattered society that has preserved its liberty by retreat. It would be risky to base conclusions about the evolution of society on the study of posses of refugees, perhaps especially those who have survived both a holocaust and a diaspora.

Mr. Chagnon doesn't address these concerns in "Noble Savages," which is mostly a memoir.

Nor does he try to answer the question of whether killers' reproductive success has actually changed the genetic endowment of the Yanomamö or, for that matter, anyone else. He closes the book not with further reflections on the Yanomamö and violence but accounts of his own battles with his profession (after much foofaraw, the anthropological association voted to exonerate him). Understanding what lessons we can draw from the extraordinarily detailed picture of native lives that Mr. Chagnon has so carefully compiled may be a task for another, more levelheaded, generation of researchers.

—Mr. Mann is the author, most recently, of "1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created."

A version of this article appeared February 16, 2013, on page C5 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Fierce Controversies.

Copyright 2012 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com