

## Darkness in Academia: The Shadow of Stalin

by Lorna Salzman

If you thought Marx's economic determinism (economic relations determine the rest of human relations) was old hat or was not a serious topic of debate outside arcane academic journals, you'd be wrong. The musty century-old theories of a Victorian philosopher have been raised from the dead by post-modernists and transformed with the flick of a leftist wand into cultural determinism, which wields, potentially, a much broader socio-economic brush.

The first to take up this brush, or at least the most aggressive, were the cultural anthropologists who chose Nurture over Nature and followed in the footsteps of people like Franz Boas, Margaret Mead and Ashley Montagu (born Israel Ehrenberg). The academic post-modernists followed and were the first to blast modern scientists as compromised and in the intellectual pay of exploitive capitalism and corporations, going so far as to claim that there was no such thing as objective or impartial truth because of the innate biases of scientists.

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Today, they and the cultural anthropologists are making a second career of trying to destroy the credibility and legitimacy of those who, horror of horrors, suggest evolution and our genetic inheritance influence human behavior and social institutions. Since the publication of Edward O. Wilson's *Sociobiology*, the cultural determinists have been on the war path against sociobiology and its successor, evolutionary psychology.

Actually, this charge of bias is applicable to the cultural anthropologists (CA) themselves, using the same criteria to judge them as they use against scientists and in particular against Napoleon Chagnon, an evolutionary anthropologist who lived with and wrote about the Yanomamo tribes in Venezuela and northern Brazil. The CA clan, in its Charge of the Left Brigade, has unwittingly revealed its hand and its own political bias against Nature and in favor of a Marxist Nurture. Seldom has such a plot been so clearly exposed, a plot to inculcate Marxist determinism into the social sciences and relegate Darwinian evolution to a sidebar. Anyone who doubts this can research the social science curriculum of the 20th century: evolution, natural selection and Darwin are virtually absent.

Chagnon's crime for them was multifold: first, he was an evolutionist; second, he applied and used scientific and statistical methodologies as well as first-hand observation and came up with the unremarkable conclusion that the strongest and most militarily successful males had greater access to females and thus were contributing their aggressive qualities significantly to the Yanomamo gene pool. Chagnon did not inflate or deflate the human qualities of the Yanomamo and was quite explicit in noting that they shared many habits and behavioral traits with "civilized" societies... including aggression of course, but on a different scale and (ostensibly) for a different purpose.

This clashed with the hand-me-down wisdom of the social sciences, namely that humans, despite their primate ancestry, are, because of culture, no longer subject to the laws of Nature or natural selection. In addition, some anthropologists who studied tribal societies became convinced that modern industrial society had actually corrupted the "Noble savages" who had dwelt in peace and harmony until they came in contact with the developed world. Accordingly, the notion that primitive societies did not possess any innate aggressive tendencies became almost a cliché in social science circles. And Chagnon's studies of the Yanomamo raised a storm of anger and protest, accompanied by slanders, lies, distortions and a propaganda campaign of huge proportions, intended to destroy Chagnon's career and reputation.

Outside academia, books, articles and films were created to discredit Chagnon. Patrick Tierney's mendacious *Darkness in El Dorado* was hailed as a definitive body blow, and was seconded by a long article in the *New Yorker*, which made no effort to fact-check his book. A Brazilian filmmaker, Jose Padilha, got his "Secrets of the Tribe" screened at the Sundance Festival and the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH, long a hotbed of cultural determinism). Then Chagnon's new book, *Noble Savages* hit the bookstores and the battle spread out of control. (A vast amount of literature on the Chagnon debate is available on a blog by Doug Hume.)

The treatment of Chagnon by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) was shabby, vicious and mean, thanks to Terence Turner and Leslie Sponsel, and also Marshall Sahlins, who recently resigned from the National Academy of Sciences in protest against Chagnon's membership, among other things. But eventually the AAA conceded Tierney's lies, and a well-researched comprehensive history of the saga by Alice Dreger has put the accusations against Chagnon to rest. However, the battle in academia continues, and it is an important one for at least two reasons.

First is the threat to scientific and academic inquiry, that is, the freedom and ability of scientists to pursue their studies without regard to whose sensitive feet might be stepped on. The fact that there were any feet at all is profoundly disturbing,

because it demonstrates the persistence of political bias and how it can be wielded against those who do not share the same philosophy. This is the Marxist philosophy of cultural and economic determinism, in which all of human behavior and institutions are considered blank slates, to become reality only when humans chalk them. Of course, the left does not consider the possibility that a non-Marxist polity could take control and impose *its* own mark and agenda on society.

The other threat is equally onerous, the one which throws evolution and Nature out the window, which asserts that humans are above Nature, not subject to her laws, have no evolutionary history, no genetically conferred attributes...in essence a view of humans and the earth that is not only purely materialist but which then opens the earth to exploitation and commodification. This is in fact the condition we live under today, and it is not an exaggeration to connect it directly to the domination of the cultural determinists in the social sciences who have controlled the curricula in our universities for nearly a century.

It is not farfetched to trace the present unravelling of the earth's systems and rapacious resource exploitation back to those who deliberately threw evolution under the bus and elevated humanity to the pinnacle of life on earth. All belief systems and economic philosophies have their precedents, and the Marxist theory of economic determinism was neatly re-jiggered into cultural determinism, squashing the dimensions of philosophy and ethics that struggled throughout the 20th century and are still struggling against the mindless destruction of the earth's natural systems.

The ugly campaign against Chagnon is eerily reminiscent of the ideological purges of Stalin, where deviation from the official line ended sometimes in exile but more often in execution. Lysenko's theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics became Stalinist doctrine and Soviet science suffered painfully for decades as a result. Cultural anthropologists may not have the same vaulting ambition of Stalin but they have no hesitation in promoting their views in academia so as to impose their Marxist cultural determinism. Perhaps it should be called "the inheritance of acquired ideology".

This war against sociobiology and its successor, evolutionary psychology, is an urgent kind, not just an obscure debate about the mating habits of bonobos. It goes to the heart of what we have taken for granted since the Enlightenment: freedom of inquiry and dissent, of the very practice of science and in particular the science that is most needed to reconcile humanity to its role and future in Nature. The revival of the "Nature red in tooth and claw" slur by the post-modernists plays on the good intentions of compassionate liberals who commiserate with the "primitive" peoples who, they are told, struggle against colonialism...even when they are living out their lives remotely and freely like the Yanomamo.

Unless we acknowledge the supreme importance of evolution, we will never solve the problems of ecological degradation much less social injustice. The pretense that after humans pulled away from their primate ancestors they were free to make the world in their image is at the root of the global crisis. In this regard, the Marxists are remarkably like religious fundamentalists. We must be on the front line and, along with Chagnon, face down those who would destroy science in the name of ideology.

Taking all these things together, it becomes clear that the rescue of both academic and ecological integrity requires a reintegration of humanity into Nature, a reassembling of the pieces shattered by not just irresponsible corporations but by the intellectually irresponsible cultural determinists who are busy undermining the very thing that we need to save the earth: the discipline and independence of science, of free and fearless investigation unconstrained by aberrant political theories of no relevance, and the integration of evolutionary studies into the social sciences. In this context, Napoleon Chagnon's work and courage deserve commendation as well as a commitment to defend other scientists against the regressive forces of Marxism and post-modernism.♦

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*Lorna Salzman's career as an environmental activist and writer began when the late David Brover hired her to be the regional representative of Friends of the Earth in NYC. Later she worked as an editor on National Audubon's American Birds magazine and as director of Food & Water, an early opponent of food irradiation, and then spent three years as a natural resource specialist in the NYC Dept. of Environmental Protection. She co-founded the New York Green Party in 1984 and in 2004 she sought the U.S. Green Party's presidential nomination. She is the author of Politics as if Evolution Mattered, which addresses the intersection of evolution with socio-political policy. More information: [www.lornasalzman.com](http://www.lornasalzman.com) and [www.neoenigma.blogspot.com](http://www.neoenigma.blogspot.com)*

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1. Chagnon, Napoleon A. *Yanomamo: The Fierce People*, Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.
2. Chagnon, Napoleon A. *Noble Savages: My Life Among Two Dangerous Tribes – The Yanomamo and the Anthropologists*, Simon & Schuster, 2013.
3. Dreger, Alice. *Darkness' Descent on the American Anthropological Association: A Cautionary Tale*, open source at Springerlink.com, 2011. (A definitive, comprehensive and immaculately researched history of the Chagnon controversy and the internal politics of the AAA.)
4. Hume, Doug. [www.anthroniche.com](http://www.anthroniche.com), a blog listing hundreds of articles, letters, references and books about the Chagnon debate under the "Darkness in El Dorado" category.
5. Montagu, Ashley, editor, *Sociobiology Examined*, Oxford University Press, 1980.
6. Tierney, Patrick. *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists & Journalists Devastated the Amazon*, W.W.Norton, 2000.
7. Wilson, Edward O. *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, Oxford University Press, 2000. Chagnon, Napoleon

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#### ADDITIONAL READING AND COMMENTARY:

**Chagnon, Napoleon.** In his book, *Noble Savages: My Life Among Two Dangerous Tribes – The Yanomamo and the Anthropologists*, Chagnon writes:

*Increasing numbers of American cultural anthropologists – and many academics in other disciplines –*

began to view their role in the academy as one of advocacy for various causes having to do with the harm that industrialized nations, especially capitalist ones, were inflicting on the earth's rivers, forests, ecological systems, and most of all the remaining tribesmen, ethnic minorities, illegal immigrants, the homeless, and others. In principle these genuine and meritorious concerns were not incompatible with the general historical traditions and accepted canons of ethics and behavior assumed by the professionals in the sciences. But somewhere along the way the anthropological profession was hijacked by radicals who constituted the "Academic Left", an aphorism coined by biologists Norman Levitt and Paul Gross in their superb book *Higher Superstition*.

Chagnon then quotes anthropologist Roy D'Andrade:

*The [post-modernist] model does not lead one to do anything positive about bad conditions. Instead it leads to denunciations of various social practitioners, such as social workers, doctors, psychiatrists, economists, civil servants, bureaucrats, etc. and especially other anthropologists. Isn't it odd that the true enemy of society turns out to be that guy in the office down the hall?*

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**Nanda, Meera.** *Prophets Facing Backwards: Post-Modern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India*, Rutgers University Press, 2003.

Some American post-modernists, in whose company we see the cultural determinists, have succeeded in infecting progressives with their antipathy to the Enlightenment, as part of their politically deformed ideology that blasts "Eurocentrism" and western colonialism. Going one step further they try to replace secularism and rationalism with a seriously flawed belief system of superstition and alternative folk science to replace scientific modernity and reason. Meera Nanda has, in this book, done a great service by exposing the dangers behind the new "cultural relativism" and its blatant anti-intellectualism. She writes:

*these intellectuals [...] have helped deliver the people they profess to love – the non-Western masses, the presumed victims of 'Western science' and modernity – to the growing forces of hatred, fascism and religious fanaticism.*

Her book, she asserts, was written

*to reaffirm the historic association of science with the goals of the Enlightenment, secularism, and democracy, especially in non-Western societies [...] With the threat of clerical fascism staring us in the face, it is time to recover the ground lost to the feel-good but dangerous relativism of postmodernism.*

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**Pinker, Stephen.** *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. Viking Penguin 2002.

Here Pinker goes to the heart of deconstruction, saying:

*It is ironic that a philosophy that prides itself on deconstructing the accoutrements of power should embrace a relativism that makes challenges to power impossible, because it denies that there are objective benchmarks against which the deceptions of the powerful can be evaluated.*

Pinker notes:

*The philosopher Ian Hacking provides a list of almost forty categories that have been recently claimed to be 'socially constructed'. The prime examples are race, gender, masculinity, nature, facts, reality and the past. But the list has been growing and now includes authorship, AIDS, brotherhood, choice, danger, dementia, illness, Indian forests, inequality, the Landsat satellite system, the medicalized immigrant, the nation-state, quarks, school success, serial homicide, technological systems, white-collar crime, women refugees and Zulu nationalism.*

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**James, Clive.** *Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts*, W.W.Norton & Co., 2007.

Along with the late Christopher Hitchens, James has been one of the few uncompromising defenders of liberal democracy and universal human values free of ideology. While this book deals with major figures in the arts and humanities, the perspective with which he looks at these - not all of the individuals are admirable is relevant to present day scientists, social scientists and scientific institutions. James is an outstanding writer and this extremely interesting and revealing essay collection deserves a wide reading by anyone curious about the intellectual antecedents and political context of the 20th century's important thinkers, artists, theorists and philosophers.

In his introduction, James writes:

*Totalitarianism... is not over. It survives as residues, some of them all the more virulent because they are no longer hemmed in by borders; and some of them are within our borders. Liberal democracy deserved, and still deserves to prevail – one of the aims of this book is to help stave off any insidious doubts on that point – but in both components of liberal democracy's name there are opportunities for the ideologist: in the first component lies inspiration for the blind devotee of economic determinism, and in the second for the dogmatic egalitarian. From within as well as without, the Procrustean enemies of our provokingly multifarious free*

society are bound to come, sometimes merely to preach obscurantist doctrine in our universities, at other times to fly our own airliners into towers of commerce.

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**Shiva, Vandana & Ingunn Moser**, editors, *Biopolitics: A Feminist & Ecological Reader on Biotechnology*, Zed Books, 1995.

This essay collection includes rare examples of leftist humor, and is best read aloud at small gatherings when politics and philosophy become too heated. Special recognition goes to Donna Haraway who, after disparaging “compulsory heterosexuality”, writes of a case of duck “rape” she witnessed in a Boston lake and rhapsodizes accordingly: “I...held that the ducks were into queer communities. ...I knew ducks deserved our recognition of their non-human cultures: subjectivities, histories, and material lives. They had enough problems with all the heavy metals and organic solvents in those lakes without having to take sides in our ideological struggles too. Forced to live in our ethno-specific constructions of nature, the birds could ill afford the luxury of getting embroiled in what counts as natural for the nearby anglo community.”

For those not fully convinced, maybe this will do the trick: “Nature is for me, and I venture for many of us who are planetary foetuses gestating in the amniotic effluvia of terminal industrialism and militarism..., that which we cannot not desire”.

However, in the end the essay by Evelyn Fox Keller wins the prize for Thickest English Language Porridge. See her essay starting on page 52 of *Biopolitics*. Judith Butler is her closest competitor.

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**Sokal, Alan & Jean Bricmont**. *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, Picador, 1998.

This includes the original “Sokal’s Hoax”, published first in Social Text in 1994, with the hoax revealed shortly after in Lingua Franca. The hoax title is: “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity”. More recently Sokal republished the original hoax with a facing page of text providing a detailed explanation and references. Besides his astringent rebuttal of the French inventors of post-modernist thought (Derrida, Lacan, Foucault) and his exposure of their blatant ignorance of modern scientific concepts, Sokal took scrupulous care to duplicate their impenetrable writing style, in the hoax’s title and elsewhere. Amusing examples of this writing style abound in *Biopolitics* (see below), and the prize for worst writing was awarded to Judith Butler, a professor of rhetoric and comparative literature at the University of California-Berkeley, who won the prize in 1997 with the following sentence:

*The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.*

Professor Butler’s first-prize sentence appears in “Further Reflections on the Conversations of Our Time,” an article in the scholarly journal *Diacritics* (1997).

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**Soulé, Michael E.** “The Social Siege of Nature”, in *Reinventing Nature? Response to Postmodern Deconstructionism*, ed. M. Soulé & G. Lease, Island Press, 1995.

Post-modernism is here defined as “A cultural and critical movement that took form after World War II and advanced modernism to its final conclusion, namely that no authoritative and definitive expression or conception of reality is possible”. It involves a cultural “deconstruction” of beliefs in the social sciences and nature, concluding that facts are “socially constructed” and therefore irrevocably tainted by bias. In this view, “all social theories and isms are equivalent”. This led inevitably to cultural relativism, in which no societal behavior or practice could be condemned as harmful or immoral.

In his section entitled “The Myths of Constructionism”, Soulé writes: “The deconstructionist alternative, nihilistic monism, is to deny that nature is real - or to insist that if there is anything ‘out there’, we cannot know it because we are shut up in the concentric prisons of cultural bias and sensory apparatus. Therefore, it is impossible to know nature at all. All we have are culturally tainted reports, texts or words, including scientific studies about the world, none of which is more valid than any other. The social objective of this movement is to demystify and dethrone the ‘hegemonic dominance’ of science...”.

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#### OTHER RECOMMENDED READING:

- **Berube, Michael**. *The Left At War*, New York University Press, 2009.
- **Caplan, Arthur L.** editor, *The Sociobiology Debate: Readings on Ethical & Scientific Issues*, Harper & Row, 1978.
- **Ehrlich, Anne H. & Paul R. Ehrlich**. *Betrayal of Science & Reason*, Island Press/Shearwater, 1996.
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- **Sokal, Alan**. *Beyond the Hoax: Science, Philosophy & Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2008.