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FW:Chagnon e-mail; Turner/Sponsel document

by Ysmay

25 September 2000 13:55 UTC

Just to add to this debate, I've attached Napoleon Chagnon's email to the American Anthropological Association that's been circulating in the anthropology community for your information.

Tammy McJannet
Doctoral Student
City University of New York

Just in case there are one or two anthropologists on the planet who have not heard about this...

>Date: Thu, 14 Sep 2000 05:08:38 -0400
>To: schreibk@alishaw.sscf.ucsb.edu
>From: chagnonn@traverse.net
>Subject: impending scandal

>Cc:

>Bcc:

>X-Attachments:

>

>Dear Kathy:

>

> I am appending below the text of an e-mail message I have received
>from several different sources over the past four days. It's scandalous
>implications should be apparent. I have subsequently received an
>invitation from one Barbara Johnston, current chair of the AAA's Committee
>for Human Rights (CfHR) that innocently invites me to participate in a
>panel discussion at this year's meetings in San Francisco regarding Mr.
>Tierney's forthcoming book and New Yorker article. Other distinguished
>panelists include Mr. Tierney, Terence Turner, and Leslie Sponsel. I find
>her invitation deceptive and dishonest given that she was one of the
>primary recipients of the appended Turner/Sponsel document and that she is
>aware that she is inviting me to a feeding frenzy in which I am the bait.
>I am also appending her invitation at the end of this message.

> There are potentially some serious legal issues involved. I have
>been working almost around the clock since last Thursday notifying people
>whose reputations and research may be affected by this. Many of them are
>at the University of Michigan and I have been in regular contact with
>them---their legal office is now aware of this document, as are all
>members of the research group from James V. Neel's department and our
>Venezuelan and Brazilian collaborators at the time of the 1968 measles
>epidemic.

> I have contacted the Editor of the New Yorker and am currently
>'negotiating' with him in such a way that his journal avoids a libel
>lawsuit and I/we avoid being libelously accused in the New Yorker article

>this document mentions. He is willing to publish my side of the story as
>a component in the article by Tierney. The New Yorker editor confirmed
>that it will be published on approximately 1 October, but is willing to
>'negotiate' with me in advance.

> Meanwhile, I have been in contact with a (Boston-based) lawyer at,
>perhaps, the most distinguished US law firm that specializes in
>publication issues (libel etc.) like the ones involved in this document.
>He also happens to be a good friend of the editor at the New Yorker and
>urges me to try to work out some non-adversarial solution to the impending
>scandal, and also assures me that the New Yorker's offer to do this is
>almost unprecedented in their publishing history. So, I will be in
>contact again with the Editor of the New Yorker tomorrow to explore
>further his apparently unusual offer.

> Meanwhile, my lawyer also advised me to alert cognizant officials
>at UCSB to this explosive issue, in particular, the legal representatives
>there (and, perhaps by extension, legal reps at the system-wide level).
>This is what I am asking you to do.

> The text that follows can no longer be considered confidential.
>It is certain that the Editor of the New Yorker discussed my call with
>Tierney, and I think we can assume that Tierney has by now alerted Turner,
>Sponsel, and others at the AAA that their plan/intentions are now widely
>known and knowledge of it is spreading within the anthropological
>community very rapidly. Ergo, no caution on your part is necessary
>insofar as mentioning or sending this to others at your discretion. Feel
>free to do so. I need all the allies I can muster at this point, on and
>beyond the UCSB campus.

>
>The Turner/Sponsel document now follows:
>Text of the e-mail document being distributed by
>Terence Turner and Leslie Sponsel: September 2000 (Turner spells his
>first name with just one "r")

To: Louise Lamphere, President, American Anthropological
> Association (lamphere@unm.edu)

>
> Don Brenneis, President -elect, American Anthropological
> Association (brenneis@cats.ucsc.edu)

>
> From: Terry Turner, Professor of Anthropology, Cornell
> University. Head of the Special Commission of the American
> Anthropological Association to Investigate the Situation of the Brazilian
> Yanomami, 1990-91(tst3@cornell.edu)

>
> Leslie Sponsel, Professor of Anthropology at the University
> of Hawaii, Manoa. Chair of the AAA Committee for Human Rights 1992-1996
> (sponsel@hawaii.edu)

>
> In re: Scandal about to be caused by publication of book by Patrick
> Tierney (Darkness in El Dorado. New York. Norton.
> Publication date: October 1, 2000).

>
> Madam President, Mr. President-elect:

>
> We write to inform you of an impending scandal that will affect the
> American Anthropological profession as a whole in the eyes of the public,
> and arouse intense indignation and calls for action among members of the
> Association. In its scale, ramifications, and sheer criminality and
> corruption it is unparalleled in the history of Anthropology. The AAA will
> be called upon by the general media and its own membership to take

> collective stands on the issues it raises, as well as appropriate
> redressive actions. All of this will obviously involve you as
> Presidents of the Association--so the sooner you know about the story that
> is about to break, the better prepared you can be to deal with it. Both
> of us have seen galley copies of a book by Patrick Tierney, an
> investigative
> journalist, about the actions of anthropologists and associated scientific
> researchers (notably geneticists and medical experimenters) among the
> Yanomami of Venezuela over the past thirty-five years. Because of the
> sensational nature of its revelations, the notoriety of the people it
> exposes, and the prestige of the organs of the academic establishment it
> implicates, the
> book is bound to be widely read both outside and inside the profession.
> As
> both an indication and a vector of its public impact, we have learned that
> The New Yorker magazine is planning to publish an extensive excerpt, timed
> to coincide with the publication of the book (on or about October 1st).
>
> The focus of the scandal is the long-term project for study of the
> Yanomami
> of Venezuela organized by James Neel, the human geneticist, in which
> Napoleon Chagnon, Timothy Asch, and numerous other anthropologists took
> part. The French anthropologist Jacques Lizot, who also works with the
> Yanomami but is not part of Neel-Chagnon project, also figures in a
> different scandalous capacity.
>
> One of Tierney's more startling revelations is that the whole Yanomami
> project was an outgrowth and continuation of the Atomic Energy Comissions
> secret program of experiments on human subjects James Neel, the
originator
> and director of the project, was part of the medical and genetic research
> team attached to the Atomic Energy Commission since the days of the
> Manhattan Project. He was a member of the small group of researchers
> responsible for studying the effects of radiation on human subjects. He
> personally headed the team that investigated the effects of the Hiroshima
> and Nagasaki bombs on survivors,. He was put in charge of the study of the
> effects of atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and later was involved
> in the studies of the effects of the radioactivity from the experimental A
> and H bomb blasts in the Marshall Islands on the natives (our colleague
> May Jo Marshall has a lot to say about these studies in the Marshalls and
> Neel's role in them). The same group also secretly carried out experiments
> on human subjects in the USA. These included injecting people with
> radioactive plutonium without their knowledge or
> permission, in some cases leading to their death or disfigurement (Neel
> himself
> appears not to have given any of these experimental injections). Another
> member of the same AEC group of human geneticists and medical
> experimenters, a Venezuelan, Marcel Roche, was a close colleague of Neel's
> and spent some time at his AEC-funded center for Human Genetics at Ann
> Arbor. He returned to Venezuela after the war and did a study of the
> Yanomami that involved administering doses of a radioactive isotope of
> iodine and analyzing samples of blood for genetic data. Roche and his
> project were apparently the connection that led Neel to choose the
> Yanomami for his big study of the genetics of "leadership" and
> differential rates of reproduction among dominant and sub-dominant males
> in a genetically "isolated" human
> population. There is thus a genealogical connection between the the human
> experiments carried out by the AEC, and Neel's and Chagnon's Yanomami
> project, which was from the outset funded by the AEC.
>

> Tierney presents convincing evidence that Neel and Chagnon, on their trip
> to the Yanomami in 1968, greatly exacerbated, and probably started, the
> epidemic of measles that killed "hundreds, perhaps thousands" (Tierney's
> language—the exact figure will never be known) of Yanomami. The epidemic
> appears to have been caused, or at least worsened and more widely spread,
> by a campaign of vaccination carried out by the research team, which used
> a virulent vaccine (Edmonson B) that had been counter-indicated by medical
> experts for use on isolated populations with no prior exposure to measles
> (exactly the Yanomami situation). Even among populations with prior
> contact
> and consequent partial genetic immunity to measles, the vaccine was
> supposed to be used only with supportive injections of gamma globulin.

>
> It was known to produce effects virtually indistinguishable from the
> disease of measles itself. Medical experts, when informed that Neel and
> his group used the vaccine in question on the Yanomami, typically refuse
> to believe it at first, then say that it is incredible that they could
> have done it, and are at a loss to explain why they would have chosen such
> an inappropriate and dangerous vaccine. There is no record that Neel
> sought any medical advice before applying the vaccine. He never informed
> the appropriate organs of the Venezuelan government that his group was
> planning to carry out a vaccination campaign, as he was legally required
> to do. Neither he nor any other member of the expedition, including
> Chagnon and the other anthropologists, has ever explained why that vaccine
> was used, despite the evidence that it actually caused or at a minimum
> greatly exacerbated the fatal epidemic.

>
> Once the measles epidemic took off, closely following the vaccinations
> with
> Edmonson B, the members of the research team refused to provide any
> medical assistance to the sick and dying Yanomami, on explicit orders from
> Neel. He insisted to his colleagues that they were only there to observe
> and record the epidemic, and that they must stick strictly to their roles
> as scientists, not provide medical help.

>
All this is bad enough, but the probable truth that emerges, by
implication, from Tierney's documentation is more chilling. There was, it
turns out, a compelling theoretical motive for Neel to want to observe an
epidemic of measles, or comparable "contact" disease, or at least an
outbreak virtually indistinguishable from the real thing—precisely the
effect that the vaccine he chose was known to cause—and to produce one for
this purpose if necessary. This motive emerges from Tierney's documentation
of Neel's extreme eugenic theories and his documented statements about what
he was hoping to find among the Yanomami, interpreted against the background
of his long association with the Atomic Energy Commission's secret
experiments on human subjects. Neel believed that "natural" human society
(as it existed everywhere before the advent of large-scale agricultural
societies and contemporary states with their vast populations) consisted of
small, genetically isolated groups, in which, according to his eugenically
slanted genetic theories, dominant genes (specifically, a gene he believed
existed for "leadership" or "innate ability") would have a selective
advantage, because male carriers of this gene could gain access to a
disproportionate share of the available females, thus reproducing their own
superior genes more frequently than less "innately able" males. The result,
supposedly, would be the continual upgrading of the human genetic stock.
Modern mass societies, by contrast, consist of vast genetically entropic
"herds" in which, he theorized,
> recessive genes could not be eliminated by selective competition and
> superior
> leadership genes would be swamped by mass genetic mediocrity. The

> political
> implication of this fascistic eugenics is clearly that society should be
> reorganized into small breeding isolates in which genetically superior
> males
> could emerge into dominance, eliminating or subordinating the male losers
> in the competition for leadership and women, and amassing harems of
> brood females.
>
> A big problem for this program, however, was the tendency, generally
> recognized by virtually all qualified population geneticists and
> epidemiologists, for small breeding isolates to lack genetic resistance
> to diseases incubated in other groups, and their consequent vulnerability
> to contact epidemics. For Neel, this meant that the emergence of
> genetically superior males in small breeding isolates would tend to be
> undercut and neutralized by epidemic diseases to which they would be
> genetically vulnerable, while the supposedly genetically entropic mass
> societies of modern democratic states, the antitheses of Neel's ideal
> alpha-male-dominated groups, would be better adapted for developing
> genetic immunity to such "contact" diseases. It is known that Neel,
> virtually alone among contemporary geneticists, rejected the genetic (and
> historical) evidence for the vulnerability of genetically isolated groups
> to diseases introduced through contact from other populations. It is
> possible that he thought that genetically superior members of such groups
> might prove to have differential levels of immunity and thus higher rates
> of
> survival to imported diseases. In such a case, such exogenous epidemics,
> despite the enormous losses of general population they inflict, might
> actually be shown to increase the relative proportion of genetically
> superior
> individuals to the total population, and thus be consistent with Neel's
> eugenic program.
>
> However this may have been, Tierney's well-documented account, in its
> entirety, strongly supports the conclusion that the epidemic was in all
> probability deliberately caused as an experiment designed to produce
> scientific support for Neel's eugenic theory. This remains only an
> inference in the present state of our knowledge: there is no "smoking gun"
> in the form of a written text or recorded speech by Neel. It is
> nevertheless the only explanation that makes sense of a number of
> otherwise inexplicable facts, including Neel's known interest in
> observing an epidemic in a small isolated group for which detailed records
> of genetic and genealogical relations were available, his otherwise
> inexplicable selection of a virulent vaccine known to produce effects
> virtually identical with the disease itself, his behavior once the
> epidemic had
> started (insisting on allowing it to run its course unhindered by medical
> assistance while meticulously documenting its progress and the
> genealogical
> relations of those who perished and those who survived) and his own
> obdurate silence, until his death in February, as to why he carried out
> the vaccination program in the first place, and above all with the
> lethally dangerous vaccine.
>
> The same conclusion is reinforced by considering the objectives of the
> anthropological research carried out by Chagnon under Neel's initial
> direction and continued support. Chagnon's work has been consistently
> directed toward portraying Yanomami society as exactly the kind of
> ordinary human society envisioned by Neel, with dominant males (the most
> frequent killers) having the most wives or sexual partners and offspring.
> If this pristine, eugenically optimal society could be shown to survive a

> contact epidemic with its structure of dominant male polygynists
> essentially intact, regardless of quantitatively serious population
> losses, Neel might plausibly be able to argue that his eugenic social
> vision was vindicated. If the epidemic was indeed produced as an
> experiment, either wholly or in part, the genetic studies on the
> correlation of
> blood group samples and genealogies carried out by Chagnon and some of
> his students thus formed integral parts of this massive, and massively
> fatal, human experiment. As another reader of Tierney's ms commented,
> Mr. Tierney's analysis is a case study of the dangers in science of the
> uncontrolled ego, of lack of respect for life, and of greed and
> self-indulgence. It is a further extraordinary revelation of malicious and
> perverted work conducted under the aegis of the Atomic Energy Commission.
>
> Tierney's revelations begin, but do not end, with the 1968 epidemic. There
> are many more episodes and sub-plots, almost equally awful, to his
> narrative of the antics of anthropologists among the Yanomami. Enough has
> been said by this time, however, for you to see that the Association is
> going to have to make some collective response to this book, both to the
> facts it documents and the probable conclusions it implies. There will be a
> storm in the media, and another in the general scholarly community, and
> no doubt several within anthropology itself. We must be ready. Tierney
> devotes much of the book to a critique of Napoleon Chagnon's work (and
> actions). He makes clear Chagnon has faithfully striven, in his
> ethnographic and theoretical accounts of the Yanomami, to represent them
> as conforming to Neel's ideas about the Hobbesian savagery of "natural"
> human societies, and how this constitutes the natural selective context
> for the rise to social dominance and reproductive advantage of males with
> the gene for "leadership" or "innate ability" (thus Chagnon's emphasis on
> Yanomami "fierceness" and propensity for chronic warfare, and the supposed
> statistical tendency for men who kill more enemies to have more female
> sexual/reproductive partners). He documents how all these aspects of
> Chagnon's account of the Yanomami are based on false,
> non-existent or misinterpreted data. In other words, Chagnon's main claims
> about Yanomami society, the ones that have been so much heralded by
> sociobiologists and other partisans of his work, namely that men who kill
> more
> reproduce more and have more female partners, and that such men become the
> dominant leaders of their communities, are simply not true. Thirdly and
> most troublingly, he reports that Chagnon has not stopped with cooking and
> re-cooking his data on conflict but has actually attempted to manufacture
> the phenomenon itself, actually fomenting conflicts between Yanomami
> communities, not once but repeatedly.
>
> In his film work with Asch, for example, Chagnon induced Yanomami to enact
> fights and aggressive behavior for Asch's camera, sometimes building whole
> artificial villages as "sets" for the purpose, which were presented as
> spontaneous slices of Yanomami life unaffected by the presence of the
> anthropologists. Some of these unavowedly artificial scenarios, however,
 actually turned into real conflicts, partly as a result of Chagnon's
> policy of giving vast amounts of presents to the villages that agreed to put
> on the docu-drama, which distorted their relations with their neighbors in
> ways that encouraged outbreaks of raiding. In sum, most of the Yanomami
> conflicts that Chagnon documents, that are the basis of his interpretation
> of Yanomami society as a neo-Hobbesian system of endemic warfare, were
> caused directly or indirectly by himself: a fact he invariably neglects to
> report. This is not just a matter of bad ethnography or unreflexive
> theorizing: Yanomami were maimed and killed in these conflicts, and whole
> communities were disrupted to the point of fission and flight. (Brian
> Ferguson has also documented some of this story, but Tierney adds much new

evidence). As a general point, it is clear that Chagnon's whole Yanomami oeuvre is more radically continuous with Neel's eugenic theories, and his unethical approach to experimentation on human subjects, than appears simply from a reading of Chagnon's works by themselves.

> Chagnon is not the only anthropologist mentioned in Tierney's narrative.
> Some of his students, like Hames and Good, are also dealt with (not so
> unfavorably). The French anthropologist, Jaques Lizot, also gets a
> chapter. He has had nothing to do with Neel or Chagnon (in fact has been a
> trenchant and cogent critic of their work), but he has an Achilles heel of
> his own in the form of a harem of Yanomami boys that he keeps, and showers
> with presents in exchange for sexual favors (he has also been known to
> resort to young girls when boys were unavailable). On the sexual front,
> there are also passing references to Chagnon himself demanding that
> villagers bring him girls for sex.

>
> There is still more, in the form of collusion by Neel and Chagnon with
> sinister Venezuelan politicians attempting to gain control of Yanomami
> lands for illegal gold mining concessions, with the anthropologists
> providing "cover" for the illegal mine developer as a "naturalist"
> collaborating with the anthropological researchers, in exchange for the
> politician's guaranteeing continuing access to the Indians for the
> anthropologists.

>
> This nightmarish story -a real anthropological heart of darkness beyond
> the imagining of even a Josef Conrad (though not, perhaps, a Josef
> Mengele)--will be seen (rightly in our view) by the public, as well as
> most anthropologists, as putting the whole discipline on trial. As another
> reader of the galleys put it, This book should shake anthropology to its
> very foundations. It should cause the field to understand how the corrupt
> and depraved protagonists could have spread their poison for so long while
> they were accorded great respect throughout the Western World and
> generations of undergraduates received their lies as the introductory
> substance of anthropology. This should never be allowed to happen again.

>
> We venture to predict that this reaction is fairly representative of the
> response that will follow the publication of Tierney's book and the New
> Yorker excerpt. Coming as they will less than two months before the San
> Francisco meetings, these publication events virtually guarantee that the
> Yanomami scandal will be at its height at the Meetings. This should give
> an optimal opportunity for the Association to mobilize the membership and
> the institutional structure to deal with it. The writers, both emeritus
> members of the Committee for Human Rights, have arranged with Barbara
> Johnston, the present chair of the CfHR, that the open Forum put on by the
> Committee this year be devoted to the Yanomami case. This seemed the best
> way to provide a venue for a public airing of the scandal, given that the
> program is of course already closed. With Johnston's consent, we have
> invited Patrick Tierney to come to the Meetings and be present at the
> Forum. He has accepted. He has also agreed to have a copy of the book ms
> sent to Johnston, for the use of the CfHR. We have also
> tentatively agreed with Barbara that the CfHR should draft a press
> release,
> which the President (either or both of you) could (if you and the
> Executive Board approve) circulate to the media. There are obviously human
> rights aspects of this case that make the CfHR appropriate, but the Ethics
> committee, the Society for Latin American Anthropology, and the
> Association
> for Latina and Latino Anthropology should also be notified and involved,
> separately or jointly. These obviously do not exhaust the possibilities---
> a lot of thought and planning remains to be done. Our point is simply that

> the time
> to start is now.
>
>

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