

The Destruction of Conscience in the National Academy of Sciences

by David H. Price

Last Friday, esteemed University of Chicago anthropologist Marshall Sahlins formally resigned from the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), the United States most prestigious scientific society.

Sahlins states that he resigned because of his “objections to the election of [Napoleon] Chagnon, and to the military research projects of the Academy”. Sahlins was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1991. He issued the below statement explaining his resignation:

By the evidence of his own writings as well as the testimony of others, including Amazonian peoples and professional scholars of the region, Chagnon has done serious harm to the indigenous communities among whom he did research. At the same time, his “scientific” claims about human evolution and the genetic selection for male violence - as in the notorious study he published in 1988 in Science - have proven to be shallow and baseless, much to the discredit of the anthropological disciples. At best, his election to the NAS was a large moral and intellectual blunder on the part of members of the Academy. So much so that my own participation in the Academy has become an embarrassment.

Nor do I wish to be a party to the aid, comfort, and support the NAS is giving to social science research on improving the combat performance of the US military, given the toll that military has taken on the blood, treasure, and happiness of American people, and the suffering it has imposed on other peoples in the unnecessary wars of this century. I believe that the NAS, if it involves itself at all in related research, should be studying how to promote peace, not how to make war.

Napoleon Chagnon rose to fame after his fieldwork among the Yanomami (also known as Yanomamo) in the rainforests of northeastern South America Orinoco Basin in the 1960s and 70s. He wrote a bestselling ethnography used in introductory anthropology classes around the world, describing the Yanomami as the fierce people because of the high levels of intra- and inter-group warfare observed during his fieldwork, warfare that he would describe as innate and as representing humankind in some sort of imagined natural state.

Chagnon, is currently basking in the limelight of a national book tour, pitching a memoir (*Nobel Savages*) in which he casts the bulk of American anthropologists as soft-skulled anti-science postmodern cretins embroiled in a war against science.

The truth is that outside of the distortion field of the *New York Times* and a few other media vortexes, there is no “science war”□raging in anthropology. Instead the widespread rejection of Chagnon’s work among many anthropologists has everything to do with the low quality of his research. On his blog, *Anthropomics*, anthropologist Jon Marks recently described Chagnon as an incompetent anthropologist adding:

Let me be clear about my use of the word incompetent. His methods for collecting, analyzing and interpreting his data are outside the range of acceptable anthropological practices. Yes, he saw the Yanomamo doing nasty things. But when he concluded from his observations that the Yanomamo are innately and primordially “fierce” he lost his anthropological credibility, because he had not demonstrated

any such thing. He has a right to his views, as creationists and racists have a right to theirs, but the evidence does not support the conclusion, which makes it scientifically incompetent.

The widely shared rejection of Chagnon's interpretations among anthropologists comes from the shoddy quality of his work and the sociobiological nature of his analysis, not with an opposition to science.

Among Chagnon's most dogged critics was my dissertation chair, anthropologist Marvin Harris, himself an arch positivist and a staunch advocate of the scientific method, yet Harris rejected Chagnon and his sociobiological findings in fierce academic debates that lasted for decades, not because Harris was anti-science, but because Chagnon was a bad scientist (I should note that Harris and Sahlins also famously feuded over fundamental theoretical differences; yet both shared common ground objecting to the militarization of the discipline, and rejecting Chagnon's sociobiological work).

I suppose if there really were battles within anthropology between imagined camps embracing and rejecting science, I would be about as firmly in the camp of science as anyone; but if such divisions actually existed, I would be no closer to accepting the validity and reliability (the hallmarks of *good science*) of Chagnon's findings than those imagined to reject the foundations of science.

In 2000, there was of course a huge painful crisis within the *American Anthropological Association* following the publication of Patrick Tierney's book *Darkness in El Dorado*, in which numerous accusations of exploitation (and worse) were leveled against Chagnon and other anthropologists working with the Yanomami (see Barbara Rose Johnston's essay on the José Padilha's film, *Secrets of the Tribe*). Without detailing all the twists and turns involved in establishing the wreckage of Chagnon and the paucity of his claims, suffice it to say that the choice of offering one of the select seats in the National Academy of Sciences' Section 51 to Dr. Chagnon is an affront to a broad range of anthropologists, be they self-identified as scientists or not.

Marshall Sahlins' resignation is an heroic stand against the subversion of science to those claiming an innate nature of human violence, and a stand opposing the increasing militarization of science. While Sahlins' credentials as an activist opposing the militarization of knowledge are well established - he is widely recognized as the creator of the "teach-in", organizing the February 1965 University of Michigan teach-in - it still must have been difficult for him to resign this prestigious position.

In late 1965 Sahlins traveled to Vietnam to learn firsthand about the war and the Americans fighting it, work that resulted in his seminal essay "The Destruction of Conscience in Vietnam". He became one of the clearest and most forceful anthropological voices speaking out against efforts (in the 1960s and 70s, and in again in post-9/11 America) to militarize anthropology.

In 2009 I was part of a conference at the University of Chicago critically examining renewed efforts by U.S. military and intelligence agencies to use anthropological data for counterinsurgency projects. Sahlins' paper at the conference argued that, "*in Vietnam, the famous anti-insurgency strategy was search and destroy; here it is research and destroy. One might think it good news that the military's appropriation of anthropological theory is incoherent, simplistic and outmoded - not to mention tedious - even as its ethnographic protocols for learning the local society and culture amount to unworkable fantasies*".

Yesterday, Sahlins sent me an email that had been circulated to NAS Section 51 (Anthropology) members, announcing two new "consensus projects under sponsorship of the Army Research Institute. The first project examined "The Context of Military Environments: Social and Organizational Factors", the second "Measuring Human Capabilities: Performance Potential of

Individuals and Collectives”. Reading the announcement of these projects forwarded by Sahlins, it is apparent that the military wants the help of social scientists who can streamline military operations, using social science and social engineering to enable interchangeable units of people working on military projects to smoothly interface. This seems to be increasingly becoming the role Americans see for anthropologists and other social scientists: that of military facilitator.

Below is the exchange, I had with Sahlins yesterday discussing his resignation, Chagnon’s election to the National Academy of Sciences, and the Academy’s links to military projects.

Price: How has Chagnon so successfully turned numerous attacks on his ethically troubling research and scientifically questionable methods and findings into what is widely seen as an attack on science itself?

Sahlins: There has been no address of the issues on Chagnon’s part, notably of the criticism of his supposed empirical results, as in the 1988 *Science* article, and the numerous criticisms from Amazonian anthropologists of his shallow ethnography and villainously distorted portrayal of Yanomami. These Cro-Chagnon scientists simply refuse to discuss the facts of the ethnographic case. Instead they issue ad hominem attacks - before it was against the Marxists, now it is the ‘fuzzy-headed humanists’. Meanwhile they try to make it an ideological anti-science persecution - again ironically as a diversion from discussing the empirical findings. Meanwhile the serious harm, bodily and emotionally, inflicted on the Yanomami, plus the reckless instigation of war by his field methods, are completely ignored in the name of science. Research and destroy, as I called the method. A total moral copout.

Price: Most of the publicity surrounding your resignation from the National Academy of Sciences focuses either exclusively on Napoleon Chagnon’s election to the Association, or on the supposed “science wars” in anthropology, while little media attention has focused on your statements opposing the NAS’s increasing links to military projects. What were the reactions within NAS Section 51 to the October 2012 call to members of the Academy to conduct research aimed at improving the military’s mission effectiveness?

Sahlins: The National Association of Science would not itself do the war research. It would rather enlist recruits from its sections - as in the section 51 memos - and probably thus participate in the vetting of reports before publication. The National Research Council organizes the actual research, obviously in collaboration with the NAS. Here is another tentacle of the militarization of anthropology and other social sciences, of which the Human Terrain Systems is a familiar example. This one as insidious as it is perfidious.

Price: Was there any internal dialogue between members of NAS Section 51 when these calls for these new Army Research Institute funded projects were issued?

Sahlins: I was not privy to any correspondence, whether to the Section officers or between the fellows, if there was any - which I don’t know.

Price: What, if any reaction have you had from other NAS members?

Sahlins: Virtually none. One said I was always opposed to sociobiology

Price: To combine themes embedded in Chagnon's claims of human nature, and the National Academy of Sciences supporting to social science for American military projects; can you comment on the role of science and scientific societies in a culture as centrally dominated by military culture as ours?

Sahlins: There is a paragraph or two in my pamphlet on *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*, of which I have no copy on hand, which cites Rumsfeld to the effect (paraphrasing *Full Metal Jacket*) that inside every Middle eastern Muslim there's an American ready to come out, a self-interested freedom loving American, and we just have to force it out or force out the demons who are perpetrating other ideas [see page 42 of Sahlins; *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*]. Isn't American global policy, especially neo-con policy, based on the confusion of capitalist greed and human nature? Just got to liberate them from their mistaken, externally imposed ideologies. For the alternative see the above mentioned pamphlet on the one true universal, kinship, and the little book I published last month: *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*.

Price: You mention a desire to shift funding streams from those offering military support, to those supporting peace. Do you have any insight on how we can work to achieve this shift?

Sahlins: I have not thought about it, probably because the idea that the National Academy of Sciences would do such a thing is essentially unthinkable today.

There is a rising international response supporting Sahlins' stance. Marshall shared with me a message he received from Professor, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, of the National Museum, Rio de Janeiro, in which de Castro wrote,

Chagnon's writings on the Yanomami of Amazonia have contributed powerfully to reinforce the worst prejudices against this indigenous people, who certainly do not need the kind of stereotyping pseudo-scientific anthropology Chagnon has chosen to pursue at their cost. The Yanomami are anything but the nasty, callous sociobiological robots Chagnon makes them look - projecting, in all likelihood, his perception of his own society (or personality) onto the Yanomami. They are an indigenous people who have managed, against all odds, to survive in their traditional ways in an Amazonia increasingly threatened by social and environmental destruction. Their culture is original, robust and inventive; their society is infinitely less "violent" than Brazilian or American societies.

Virtually all anthropologists who have worked with the Yanomami, many of them with far larger field experience with this people than Chagnon, find his research methods objectionable (to put it mildly) and his ethnographic characterizations fantastic. Chagnon's election to the NAS does not do honor to American science nor to anthropology as a discipline, and it also bodes ill to the Yanomami. As far as I am concerned, I deem Chagnon an enemy of Amazonian Indians. I can only thank Prof. Sahlins for his courageous and firm position in support of the Yanomami and of anthropological science.

We are left to wonder what is to become of science, whether practiced with a capital (at times blind) "S" or a lower case inquisitive variety, when those questioning some its practices, misapplications and outcomes are increasingly marginalized, while those whose findings align with our broader cultural values of warfare are embraced. The NAS's rallying around such a divisive figure as Chagnon, demonizing his critics, claiming they are attacking not his practices and theories, but science itself damages the credibility of these scientists. It is unfortunate that the National Academy of Sciences has backed itself into this corner.

The dynamics of such divisiveness are not unique to this small segment of the scientific community. In his 1966 essay on “The Destruction of Conscience in Vietnam”, Sahlins argued that to continue wage the war, America had to destroy its own conscience - that facing those destroyed by our actions was too much for the nation to otherwise bare, writing: “*Conscience must be destroyed: it has to end at the barrel of a gun, it cannot extend to the bullet. So all peripheral rationales fade into the background. It becomes a war of transcendent purpose, and in such a war all efforts on the side of Good are virtuous, and all deaths unfortunate necessary. The end justifies the means*”.

It is a tragic state of affairs when good people of conscience see the only acceptable act before them to be that of resignation; but sometimes the choice of disassociation is the strongest statement one can courageously make.

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