

## **Alice Dreger and the academic retrosexuals.**

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As a lowland South Americanist, I have been following the Chagnon controversy across its unfolding, and share the concerns expressed by my fellow panelists today. Like many other anthropologists in the discipline at large, I have found "teaching the controversy" to be pedagogically useful and thinking about the controversy to be professionally bracing. And, as an American, I have appreciated the take offered by Marshall Sahlins in his 2000 *Washington Post Book World* piece as an analysis of the ways in which the initial reception of Chagnon's work, and the continuing defense of it, are emblematic of some of the most distressing tendencies in U.S. social and intellectual life.

But I am not going to speak here today as a lowland South Americanist, an anthropologist, nor an American. I am going to speak as a feminist. Now, probably you are anticipating I am going to critique Chagnon's sociobiological approach and its latest incarnation among his partisans as "evolutionary psychology". I do find these irritating in all the ways you might rightly predict, but – for today – never mind that. For the Chagnon story has taken a very weird turn since the intervention into it of Alice Dreger. My own familiarity with Alice Dreger comes not from my professional work as an anthropologist, but from my hobby as an avid reader of feminist blogs.

While Alice Dreger's name is probably unfamiliar to most anthropologists (though some of you may have read the very favorable profile of her involvement in another academic controversy in the *New York Times*: Carey 2007) it is a lightning rod in

feminist internet conversation about transexuality, intersexuality and gender normativity. Given that she intervened at last year's AAAs as a Chagnon supporter, one might suppose that this is because she is an old-fashioned sexist, and that what she has to say falls neatly into line with sociobiological chest-pounding of the old school variety. That is not the case.

In fact her position is at first blush perplexing. The combination of ethical and intellectual indeterminacy that characterizes it bears a striking resemblance to the combination of ethical and intellectual indeterminacy characterizing the reaction of the AAA to the Chagnon challenge. Although when I first heard her name attached to the Chagnon controversy I was surprised – *the* Alice Dreger? – I now feel her involvement creates an opportunity to think about the ongoingly “awkward relationship” (Strathern 1987) between feminism and anthropology, and feminism and the social sciences more generally. The ethical and intellectual terrain here cannot be separated, and the attempt to draw a bright line between them is a dead end. It's important to understand the ways that this “dead end” is the goal for Chagnon supporters in the Chagnon conflict. A similar “dead end” is the goal for Dreger in the other conflict in which she has been involved – in fact it is this parallel that explains why she has popped up here).

Arguing, as so many have done regarding Chagnon and the AAA's responsibilities, about the line between ethics and intellectual inquiry feels productive, worthy, and in itself value-neutral. I want to suggest today that to do so is to take a side in a debate the two actual sides of which lie elsewhere. I don't mean to be presumptuous, but my own observations suggest to me that most members of the AAA – here I am speaking of the vast majority who did not, for example, vote in the referendum – have effectively

taken a side without acknowledging (or, more damningly, quite understanding) that they have done so in the Chagnon debate. Consideration of Alice Dreger's antecedents, and what her intervention on the pro-Chagnon side indicates, might help them to become mindful of where they presently stand and prompt them (or so I hope) to consider whether their present default position is one they want to continue to occupy.

Alice Dreger is an interesting figure. A professor of clinical medical ethics at Northwestern University, she is not a rigid absolutist, but instead – and very much in the style of today's professional ethicists – a supple thinker indeed. In the mid-1990s, she became an important leader and spokesperson with the Intersex Society of North America. The society, which grew out of the new possibilities for self-organization provided by the internet, helped connect adults born presenting a range of atypical genetic and/or phenotypic profiles with respect to sex, some of whom had been subject to surgical intervention in early childhood; helped connect parents of such children; and served as a medical advocacy group, specifically urging more caution about surgical intervention – particularly on children – and more leeway for informed patient choice. This meant, in practice, urging parents and doctors to make fewer permanent choices on behalf of intersex children at a stage when they were too young to participate in such decisions.

This was and is important and laudable work. Intersex conditions may raise questions of gender and sexuality more generally, though – and this is important – they don't **have** to. The advice of the ISNA is, essentially, cautionary; this in response to an earlier generation of medical advice to intervene as soon as possible, to "pick a gender" for intersex babies and do whatever was necessary (surgically and socially) to mold the

developing child to the selected gender. The ISNA does not take a position on later-life choices nor was the initial scope of its activism more than medical. This neutrality has become controversial over time, however. Dreger (who is not herself an intersex person) now supports a shift in terminology – from “intersex” to “disorders of sex development” – that many intersex people and allies condemn as stigmatizing. While the notion that children should participate in permanent decisions about their bodies and sexualities remains a shared premise, what the broader social and political context of those decisions should be and how much advocacy should be devoted to changing those conditions, including promoting acceptance of “intersexuality” itself, and rejecting the label of “disorder” – as opposed to advocacy limited to modifying medical practice involving babies and small children – has given rise to bitter recrimination and effectively split the organization. Since 2005, Dreger has not been affiliated with ISNA.

This debate, however, only accounts for a small fraction of Alice Dreger’s internet notoriety. The greater portion arises out of her defense of Northwestern psychology professor J. Michael Bailey, author of the book *The Man Who Would be Queen: The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism*. Published in 2003, the book’s thesis is that male to female transsexuals can be divided into two groups: men who are effeminate homosexuals, are able to present as conventionally attractive women with or without surgery, and who are promiscuous; and men who are not homosexual, who have difficulty presenting as conventionally attractive women even after surgery, and who have an erotic fixation on the idea of themselves as women. Although superficially similar, their orientations and motivations divide them into two discrete categories: the

opportunity to have sex with lots of heterosexual men on the one hand, and an enhanced ability to realize what Bailey terms “autogynephilic” fantasies on the other.

Criticisms of the book and of the research on which it was based fall into three categories that will resonate with anthropologists who have followed the Chagnon controversy. First, Bailey’s research has been challenged on empirical grounds: the study upon which the book is based involved a small sample of interviewees, and the “two type” model which the study both assumed and set out to demonstrate was not original to Bailey’s study but adopted from the earlier and much-criticized work of another researcher. Second, Bailey’s research conduct has been challenged on ethical grounds: Dr. Bailey and several of his research subjects clearly do not agree about whether an appropriate standard of “informed consent” was met when he included their personal histories in his work; critics have suggested that some other of his subjects may have felt some degree of duress about participation in his studies because Dr. Bailey also provided medical letters regarding their psychological readiness for sex reassignment surgery; and one research subject alleges she had a sexual relationship with Dr. Bailey. Finally, Dr. Bailey’s research has been most roundly criticized by trans activists for promoting and perpetuating what they describe as a stigmatizing and inaccurate account of the character and experience of transwomen in particular and transsexual people in general.

In 2006, under her own auspices Dr. Dreger – recently appointed to a part-time faculty position in medical ethics at Northwestern University – undertook an investigation into the charges against her Northwestern University colleague, the results of which she called a “scholarly history” of the controversy and which she published in

the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* in 2008. She did not offer a judgment as to the substantive content of Bailey's work; on the ethical charges, she said the allegation of a sexual relationship could not be proven and that Dr. Bailey perhaps could have handled the issues around informed consent more tactfully; as to the charge that his work is harmful to trans people she again does not hazard a judgment but quotes one of Bailey's supporters and Bailey himself as follows:

"At the risk of stating the obvious, the reason that Conway, James, McCloskey, [Becky] Allison, [Christine] Burns, et al. are so angry is not because they are so sure that Bailey is wrong. It is because they worry that he might be at least partly right and this realization is potentially fatal for their hard-earned sense-of-self" (p.e.c., December 11, 2006; italics added)... Bailey is more blunt in his assessment: he says that if there has been an injury from his book—a book he sees as positive in its honesty and in its acceptance of transwomen's realities—it has been a narcissistic injury suffered by a small number of autogynephilic transsexuals who wish we would all deny the truth (Bailey to Dreger, p.e.c., February 27, 2007)" (Dreger 2008).

The thrust of Dreger's account is that the main harm done in the Bailey controversy was to Bailey himself, by obsessive and intransigent critics (she focuses on three in particular) who came "remarkably close to effectively destroying J. Michael Bailey's reputation and life" (2008: 412).

Whatever the effect of the book on trans people, or the controversy on Dr. Bailey (Northwestern conducted its own investigation of his possible ethics violations; it did not

release its findings but Dr. Bailey has stepped down as chair of the Northwestern University Psychology Department while remaining on the faculty), the impact of Dr. Dreger's decision to involve herself in the debate on Dr. Bailey is clear. She is now a full professor at Northwestern University and was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 2008, in order to write on (from her website):

*The mainstream book I now want to write goes beyond that article's work to unpack further what happened in this story—to consider the particular personalities and phenomena involved—but also to consider similar cases, to try to draw some general conclusions about the modern day history and philosophy of science-meets-identity-politics. What happened to Bailey was so egregious that some scientists I've talked to take it as reason to simply pooh-pooh any activist's critiques. But while some of Bailey's critics clearly went too far, identity-politics activists are not wrong to be seriously concerned about what impact the work of scientists like Bailey will have on their rights and reputations. They are certainly right to raise the question of what leaders of marginal groups are to do when a socially powerful individual—a university-based scientist—with a claim to "value-neutral" work draws conclusions that, in fact, support or weaken important cultural values.*

*So, my plan for this book is to expand out from where I've already been, to flesh out further this one particular story but also to look comparatively at what happened in certain other highly-publicized identity-politics controversies involving academics... This book will compliment some recent works on the harm being done to science in universities and government (e.g., *The Shadow University*; *The New Know-Nothings*) but it will go beyond, both in its careful central case study and in taking seriously the reasonable, progressive goals of many identity-based activists frustrated by scientists who wish to build their reputations off hot topics but not to have their feet held to the fire.*

She says of herself: *many people know me as the "alligator-skinned" investigative historian who tracked The Controversy Surrounding "The Man Who Would Be Queen" (my Guggenheim Fellowship-winning work, also covered in the New York Times) and the craziness in anthropology over the not-really-nonfiction book, Darkness in El Dorado (as covered in Science).*

From that Science article (which she labels, on her website, as "Science magazine article on my AAA session"): She "can't imagine how any scholar feels safe" as a member of the AAA (Mann 2009: 1466). This is a peculiar take on what it is the AAA is supposed to do for scholars (protect us? From what?). In context of her Guggenheim project, we begin to see why she's taken an interest in the Chagnon controversy, and we can note that she has again assigned herself the role of fair-minded defender of a scientist unjustly attacked by loonies.

I'd like to quote at length the "peer response" to Dreger's defense of Bailey that biologist (and transwoman) Julia Serrano published in the same issue of the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*:

"[By focusing on three critics (Lynn Conway, Andrea James, and Deirdre McCloskey)] Dreger creates the impression that the entire breadth of the trans community's response to Bailey's book was wholly unjustified, unprovoked and irrational. This, in combination with her failure to provide sufficient historical background and context regarding trans people's marginalization in society and within psychology, and her continual dismissiveness toward trans people's concerns about the book, practically strong-arms the reader into viewing the entire backlash as a mass hysterical overreaction on the part of trans people. To state for the record, I do not condone personal attacks on people. And I believe that Dreger is rightly concerned about the way in which such attacks and threats can create a censoring environment in which people



are afraid to say what they believe. The problem is that she seems to have approached the Bailey controversy, not to truly understand why it happened or why trans activists almost universally decried the book, but rather to solely focus on allegations that CJM tried to "ruin" Bailey. In fact, she seems to have settled on her thesis (i.e., that trans activists took things too far and are a threat to academic freedom of expression) back in June 2006, before she began her investigation into the Bailey controversy (Dreger, 2006). The reason why many trans activists feel that Dreger's article is problematic is not because they believe that personal attacks are a legitimate tactic in activism, but because their own concerns (i.e., the psychological pathologization, delegitimization and sexualization of trans identities) have been virtually written out of the story. In this sense, one cannot help but draw parallels between Dreger's article and Bailey's book: both are one-sided renditions of issues that critically impact trans people's lives, both fail to take trans people's concerns, objections and differing perspectives seriously, and both are touted as authoritative accounts (Bailey's as "science" and Dreger's as "scholarly history"), creating the impression that they are necessarily objective, well reasoned and academically valid, in opposition to the accounts of trans people, which are (by implication) irredeemably subjective, unreasonable, and academically invalid. Perhaps the most striking oversight in Dreger's article (given her position as a bioethicist) is that she eagerly defends academic/scientific freedom of expression without ever engaging in the equally important issue of academic/scientific responsibility."

Now, let's move from that to a line in the laudatory NYTimes article about Dreger's defense of Bailey: "But that, say supporters of Dr. Bailey, is precisely the problem: Who defines responsible?" (Carey 2007).

This is the impasse at which Bailey's defenders want the discussion to end, as do Chagnon's defenders here at the AAA. This is also a spot many AAA members have found exceedingly comfortable, and which Dreger has turned into a career-building depot. If nothing definite can be said about research ethics – other than repeating, at eminently fair-minded length, that nothing can be said about research ethics – any allegation of violation is unjust, dangerous, illegitimate, and cannot but be viewed as a groundless attack to which no researcher ought be subject. But of course, everyone also acknowledges research ethics are important – and "many" "reasonable" activists might have legitimate concerns about scientific research (Dreger deserved that Guggenheim: her rhetorical strategy is flawless in its way) – but any particular expressers of such concerns can be written off as illegitimately overreaching.

To put it another way: to ask aloud, with **very** wide eyes, "who is to say what's ethical or unethical?" is as much as to say quietly & gimlet-eyed: "not you".

This is clever, but it is not extremely clever. Why, then, have so many anthropologists been suckered by it? And when I say "so many", I mean the overwhelming majority of anthropologists who simply didn't vote in the referendum. I suspect many might echo what a grad school colleague of mine told me at the time: he had "Yanomami fatigue" and couldn't be bothered to care anymore about the vote. I thought then, and I think now, that "fatigue" was not at issue but what I called at the outset "ethical and intellectual indeterminacy".

To understand it, I think we have to look at the substance of Chagnon's work. I want to go back to the ventriloquized charge Dreger levels at Bailey's critics: that they are so vociferous not because they believe him to be wrong on the scientific merits, but because secretly – at a level they aren't willing to acknowledge even to themselves – they fear he might be right. That in fact, trans identity in men really does boil down to either a desire to better get it on with other men or to better get it on with oneself.

I think the charge leveled at Bailey's trans-activist critics is enormously illuminating, but not in the way Dreger thinks. It's not the critics of Bailey and Chagnon who secretly think they might be right (nor it is their supporters, who are certain that they are). Instead, it's the silent witnesses who occupy this position of incertitude. Someone like Dreger, who articulates that ethical and intellectual befuddlement as a high kind a virtue, is richly rewarded for her flattery of the great scholarly and public majority.

As a feminist, it's difficult not to notice what kind of work enjoys the benefit of these doubts. Both Bailey and Chagnon have been charged with multiple ethical violations, including extremely serious ones; though in both cases, the most grave have not been substantiated even the less egregious – which in both cases have been well-substantiated -- would quite rightly damage any normal social scientific research career. Both Bailey and Chagnon have produced work which other researchers in their respective fields have not been able to replicate and which, in fact, the work of other researchers in their respective fields tends to undermine. On both the ethical and intellectual merits, such outcomes are under usual circumstances very bad news for scholars.

Not in these cases, however. These researchers and their work are forgiven a multitude of ethical and intellectual sins because both modes of work keep a particular kind of hope alive. Bailey's work in many respects resurrects an old typology (Blanchard 1987) that most other researchers in the field had rejected; but his retrograde attempt to put transsexual experience down to oddball eroticism rather than down to a lived experience that places a high value on being a woman still finds its champions. Chagnon's work is in a tradition, notable for its defense of patriarchy, that keeps resurrecting itself under new appellations: what used to be called socio-biology and what is inevitably someday going to be called something else, upon eventually fleeing the wreckage of evolutionary psychology. That no other Yanomami research has confirmed what Chagnon affirmed in his work is no bar to his being held in high esteem by a few scholars, and given a really puzzling benefit of the doubt by many others.

For all their invocation of "science", these lines of inquiry are robustly invulnerable to normal scientific modes of falsification, challenge, and – above all – advance. It seems clear to me that this is because retrosexuality never goes out of style. No matter how much the general trend confirms feminist perspectives, somehow these never get the benefit of the doubt: they always have to battle their way through a set of well-rehearsed arguments in new guises.

I don't lay the blame for this at the feet of Bailey and Chagnon, actually. If one reads about either man, it's clear that they are hopeless cases. Much of what has damned them is their own accounts of their own methods and perspectives. There is a kind of integrity in that.

Dreger, though, emblemizes the self-congratulatory confused cowardice that has characterized the response of the AAA leadership and membership to the Chagnon challenge. Chagnon's ideas and methods form a reassuring nether end, against which it is possible to formulate a non-position: **that** over there is a bridge too far. In the context of the Chagnon controversy, a very comfortable middle space has appeared: anthropologists can furrow their brows in dismay at **both** Chagnon **and** his critics. Dreger's opportunism is more barefaced, and more articulate; but it inhabits the same non-position.

Chagnon's (and Bailey's) supporters talk quite a bit about science and its virtues; I'm less eager to wave that banner, as it is clear to me that scientism is one of the lamentable multitude of refuges for scoundrels. However. If I were to do so, I'd note that science does not advance via interested parties agreeing to disagree on fundamental questions but instead via figuring out which answers are right and which are wrong. Though they sometimes have to live with them, good scientists don't aim at impasses. Why, then, are Dreger and the AAA so insistent about staying stuck in them?

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