Margaret Mead and the Bonobos

Anthropologists working in specific fields have challenged the details of this study; in a sense its inaccuracies in terms of ethnology make it all the more valuable as a created structure through which men see history, a myth like those of the Greeks.

— Page DuBois, *Centaurs and Amazons*

The following pages look at two controversies in the so-called soft sciences that at least claim to be understood or constructed according to the methods of the hard sciences; they are based on the observation and definition of facts, and the presentation of those facts within a coherent scientific narrative. My association of these two subjects could be dismissed as arbitrary, an example of the humanistic “juxtaposition” that I criticized in Chapter 4 of this volume. Yet I don’t associate these simply to “see what happens.” I know what happens; these two subjects have always seemed to me to be the same.

The two subjects are (1) Margaret Mead’s now classic 1928 study *Coming of Age in Samoa*, along with its recent critiques, led by Derek Freeman’s *Margaret Mead and Samoa*, and (2) the bonobos along with their attendant mythology. Bonobos were discovered or defined in 1919; what I call their mythology developed in the 1950s and 1960s, when Mead’s book reached the

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height of its popularity, and culminated in a series of studies by Frans de Waal.²

The sets of facts on which these arguments are based would seem to be these: the sexual lives of young girls in Samoa at the time of Mead’s interviews, and the social lives of the bonobos in the twentieth century. Yet even as I describe these, the limits of those things become problematic. Mead’s subject — the sexual lives of Samoans — was redefined as Mead’s study became controversial. What is at issue is (or should be) “the sexual lives of the Samoans when Mead was there”; Samoans either were or were not as she describes, or more or less as she describes. They aren’t that way today, and therefore there can be no retesting or confirmation of what Mead reported. Both Mead’s supporters and her detractors agree on this. Researchers affect and at times effect what they intend to study. Because the experiment is unrepeatable, what it claims as facts (whether right or wrong) are beyond normal scientific critique. For the bonobos, things are different or at least seem to be. We assume their behavior is genetically determined except in the most extreme of cases (confinement to a prison). Bonobo society, whether today or in the not very distant past, whether wild and undocumented or closely studied, either in nature or in a modern zoo, is a constant. The popular understanding of them depends on this assumption.

Unlike the human subjects of Mead’s study, bonobos have evolved through history and without this evolutionary assumption there would likely be little interest in them; but they do not,
as we do, possess a history: we speak of them as if they are static— that is, “bonobos as presently evolved” rather than “bonobos as presently evolving.” Mead’s society, by contrast, evolves very quickly, although the meaning of the word *evolve* is not quite the same here. Whatever naive/native state the Samoans once enjoyed (and even stating that makes the assumption seem shaky) was corrupted by their association with Westerners. The Samoans were not just observed — they were imprisoned within the language and conventions of early to mid-twentieth-century Europeans, as surely as bonobos were often confined to zoos.

There are further paradoxes involved in these assumptions. One of the reasons we are interested in the bonobos is the evidence they provide about evolution, specifically, our own evolutionary history. They are, perhaps, more “like” the ancestor of the bonobo/chimpanzee/human than are either chimpanzees or humans. And this may or may not tell us something about ourselves, just as could our assumption that humans uncorrupted by modern technology are spared distinctly modern neuroses. Either our ancestors were the violent, murderous beings we see among us today (and now see in chimpanzees), or a gentler, kinder race, corrupted by whatever one wants to put at the origin of corruption (civilization, say, or evolution itself).

The Bonobos

If we define an animal species through DNA, the bonobos have been around as long as we have. But “bonobos,” in the sense we understand that word, have existed for less than a century. The now standard behavioral description is from a study by Eduard Paul Tratz and Heinz Heck conducted in the early twentieth century, published only in 1954. The study is brief, only a few pages, and presented in a summary version by de Waal “in slightly compressed form.” De Waal summarizes the characteristics identified in Tratz and Heck as follows:
1. Bonobos are sensitive, lively, and nervous, whereas chimpanzees are coarse and hot-tempered.
2. Bonobos rarely raise their hair; chimpanzees often do so.
3. Physical violence almost never occurs in bonobos, yet is common in chimpanzees.
4. Bonobos defend themselves through aimed kicking with their feet, whereas chimpanzees try to pull attackers close to bite them.
5. The bonobo voice contains a and e vowels, whereas the chimpanzee uses more u and o vowels.
6. Bonobos are more vocal than chimpanzees.
7. Bonobos stretch their arms and shake their hands when calling, whereas chimpanzees do not.
8. Bonobos copulate more hominin and chimpanzees more canum.3

The outlines of the full-blown bonobo myth are here, supported even by the kind of phonetic analysis one might see in freshman essays. Points 1, 3, and 8 involving violence and sex are the key components of the myth. This is the basis for the full sexual myth found in de Waal: female dominance over males; no jealousy or competition for females; non-nuclear families; and indiscriminate sexual play: male/male, male/female, female/female:

[In chimpanzees and baboons] male superiority remained the “natural” state of affairs. In both chimpanzees and baboons, males are conspicuously dominant over females… Enter the bonobo, which is best characterized as a female-

centered, egalitarian primate species that substitutes sex for aggression… Sexual encounters of the bonobo kind are strikingly casual, almost more affectionate than erotic.\(^4\)

And quoting Tratz and Heck, de Waal writes, “The bonobo is an extraordinarily sensitive, gentle creature, far removed from the demoniacal primitive force of the adult chimpanzee.”\(^5\)

It is almost too good to be true. At the same time a society was described by Mead freed of such modern neuroses as jealousy and competitiveness, a new species was discovered that seemed to exhibit much the same thing. The Samoans expose our own neuroses and thus suggest a possible avenue to free ourselves from them; the bonobos expose the violence in both human and chimpanzee society, and again, suggest that this is not something to which we are doomed genetically. These are presented not as mere utopian projections, but as “facts.”

### Coming of Age in the 1960s

The story of Mead’s Samoa, the late-twentieth-century attack on her, and the counter-attack is well-known. The purpose of Mead seemed always satiric in the classic sense, as its very sub-title indicates: “A Psychological Study…for Western Civilisation.” Like classical bucolic poetry, her Somoan research was more about “us” than “them,” a commentary and critique of our society rather than a description of a supposedly more primitive one:

If it is proved that adolescence is not necessarily a specially difficult period in a girl’s life…then what accounts for the presence of storm and stress in American adolescents?\(^6\)

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5 Ibid., 9. Cf. Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape* (New York: Dell, 1967) or with Konrad Lorenz, whose books (like those of Mead) were required reading for undergraduates in the 1960s. According to de Waal, the notion of “the killer ape” prepared him for his “discovery” of the bonobo in 1978 (*Bonobo*, 153).
6 Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, 137.
Reading such statements in the twenty-first century makes it easy to see why they were critiqued at the end of the last:

The life of the day begins at dawn, or if the moon has shown until day light, the shouts of the young men may be heard before dawn from the hillside. Uneasy in the night, populous with ghosts, they shout lustily to one another as they hasten with their work.

Romantic love as it occurs in our civilisation, inextricably bound up with ideas of monogamy, exclusiveness, jealousy, and undeviating fidelity does not occur in Samoa.

Familiarity with sex, and the recognition of a need of a technique to deal with sex as an art, have produced a scheme of personal relations in which there are no neurotic pictures, no frigidity, no impotence, except as the temporary result of severe illness, and the capacity for intercourse only once in a night is counted as senility.\(^7\)

These statements, some singled out by Freeman, are at odds with even the general descriptions by Mead that document them. Contrary evidence is simply explained away:

Cases of passionate jealousy do occur but they are matters for extended comment and amazement.\(^8\)

In nine months, Mead recorded only four cases:

a girl who informed against a faithless lover accusing him of incest, a girl who bit off part of a rival's ear, a woman whose husband had deserted her and who fought and severely in-

\(^7\) Ibid., 12, 73, and 105.
\(^8\) Ibid., 111.
jured her successor, and a girl who falsely accused a rival of stealing.⁹

Jealousy does not occur. If testimony indicates it does, then that testimony calls for “extensive comment”: the more extensive the testimony, the less factual the event that elicited it.¹⁰

Because of the nature of Mead’s research, the facts, if understood as the sexual habits of the Samoans at the time she interviewed them, are irrecoverable. All that can be in dispute is the quality of Mead’s testimony. And an important aspect of this is Mead’s later response to critiques. Mead’s book went through several printings and revisions: 1939, 1947, 1953, 1961…. And Mead had many opportunities either to revise it, to provide a self-reflective critique of what she had done, insofar as she remembered the particulars, or to respond seriously to critics. Derek Freeman, the most important of these, did not call upon her to renounce her thesis, or even to revise her findings — that is to say, rewrite the interviews. He only asked that she respond to recent objections. Yet instead of defending the quality of her interviews, Mead redefined what constitutes fact by shifting it from the object of research to the research itself. What seems to be placing her research in historical context is actually a sleight-of-hand making it invulnerable to critique:

It must remain, as all anthropological works must remain, exactly as it was written true to what I saw in Samoa and what I was able to convey of what I saw; true to the state of

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⁹ Ibid., 112.
our knowledge of human behavior as it was in the mid-1920’s; true to our hopes and fears for the future of the world.\footnote{Margaret Mead, Preface, \textit{Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization} (New York: American Museum of Natural History Press, 1973), xxiv.}

What Freeman claims is that Mead misrepresented a set of facts (sexual behavior) because she took as valid the oral testimony of her witnesses. Mead never even addresses this question. Instead, she turns the question away from “a set of facts” (behavior) to “evidence” (a contemporary summary of behavior). What is in dispute now is not how Samoans behaved, but rather her own words in the earlier monograph — that is, her own testimony, not that of her witnesses. And the question seems now, not whether that testimony (her own) reflects the testimony of her witnesses, but simply whether it “exists.” With that, the set of facts she seems to uphold is irrefutable. In the 1930s, she transcribed and analyzed a set of witness statements in a way that became the book. Those are the facts, she states, and they will last longer than the currency of the language it took to create them. No one has a scientific basis to demand that she revise and thus “falsify” (that is, “change”) what she wrote or said in 1928.

Mead’s preface thus turns on a mischievous use of the word true. In the first sentence, the word “true” means that her statement corresponds to “what I saw” (immediately qualified as true to “what I was able to convey of what I saw”); this qualification is not really a qualification at all but a simple tautology. In the second case, it means something quite different: “an accurate expression of what we thought of human behavior in the 20s” (is this before or after the study of the Samoans?) and finally “true” to our vision of the future, a vision which can hardly be the same or even coherent over time. The society Mead described no longer can be observed; the experiment cannot be reproduced. The scholar’s own words and analysis, by contrast, are fixed, and thus factual, and thus eternal. Mead the anthropologist has become Mead the Shakespearean sonneteer. And
if all statements, like poems, are facts, then it is meaningless to claim any of them are.

In both cases, a set of facts could easily have been defined: what were, or are, the social habits of the bonobos? What were the social habits of the Samoans in 1928? Those facts could then have been interpreted and used for a number of purposes: as anthropological data, as a critique of scientific or social scientific method, or legitimately as a form of social satire. The bonobos and primitive societies tell us, in our own Eurocentric ways, something about ourselves. Even though most of us know little to nothing about any of these topics, we could at least take such imagined scientists seriously enough to distrust them.