

# Looking back in anger

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**Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence.** By Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson. *Houghton Mifflin*: 1996. Pp. 332. \$22.95.

HUMAN violence is a topic of prime concern in most cultures, an expression of the dark side of human nature, a focus of research and a favourite ingredient in the daily headlines. The primatologist Richard Wrangham has joined the writer Dale Peterson to explore whether men's violent behaviour is cultural or has ancient roots in our ape ancestry.

In tracing the roots of human violence, the authors draw parallels between the human species and free-ranging chimpanzees at Gombe, Tanzania. Males from one group seemed to kill systematically and brutally former compatriots; survivors and their descendents now form a neighbouring community. This observation in 1974, the first of its kind after 13 years of chimpanzee-watching, is often considered to reveal the ancestral origin of warfare and is the foundation for the authors' case that a unique combination of social characteristics is shared between humans and chimpanzees: that is, male-bonded communities and male-driven lethal intergroup raiding.

What develops early on as a considerable flaw in this argument is that the authors discuss in detail the behaviour of only one of the two species of chimpanzees. The genus *Pan* includes two species, *P. troglodytes* and *P. paniscus*, but, throughout the book, the authors use 'chimpanzee' to mean only *P. troglodytes*. The term 'bonobo' rather than the original term 'pygmy chimpanzee' is used for *P. paniscus*. This usage reflects valid disagreement within primatology but is sure to confuse and mislead a nonprimatologist. Calling *P. paniscus* bonobos wrongly implies that they are not chimpanzees, which they are. And, in their social behaviour, *P. paniscus* in many ways is the opposite to *P. troglodytes*.

Cross-cultural studies provide the authors with examples of the universality of male violence against men, against women and against members of other communities. The Yanomamo people from Brazil are well known for their lethal raids and counter-raids, and the raiders are allegedly the most genetically successful. There are no known human cultures, the authors report, that are rape-free or that have equality between the sexes. The island paradises of Paul Gauguin and Herman Melville existed only in their imaginations, and Margaret Mead's vision of Samoa was hopelessly astigmatic. Patriarchal male-bonded cultures are "world wide and his-

tory wide", a feature that "has its ultimate sources in male violence". Like chimpanzee males, men try to dominate their peers and want to win no matter what the cost.

Much of the book is devoted to dealing with violence in humans and apes — but not in *P. paniscus*. Males are found guilty of acting abominably towards members of the same species, hence the judgemental title of the book. Males form coalitions to raid and murder their neighbours; males rape and batter females and kill their infants. Yet females are obliged to turn to these very persecutors for protection. Females — ape and human — perpetuate this pattern through sexual selection by being attracted to the more aggressive males and bearing their progeny.

It is understandable why *P. paniscus* appears very late in the book and is dismissed as a deviant late arrival on the evolutionary scene, a dead end. Focusing on a *P. paniscus* 'model' rather than *P. troglodytes* would of course undermine the whole 'demonic' argument. In *P. paniscus* there is little aggression between males; males tend to avoid each other and stay close to their mothers. Males do not domi-

nate females, and relationships between males and females are congenial and highly sexual; encounters between communities are generally friendly.

The authors maintain that *P. paniscus* is highly specialized anatomically, as shown by their smaller shoulder blade. The authors emphasize similarities in anatomy and behaviour between *P. troglodytes* and gorillas. But genetically the two species are much closer to each other than to any other primate, and both species are equally distant from *Homo sapiens*.

Language here is a problem. Rather than describe as neutrally as possible what animals do and avoid tendentious interpretations that have specific meanings for human institutions or legal systems, the authors, from the title onward, schuss down the slushy slope describing ape behaviour in terms of assassination, murder, infanticide, battering and rape. After this downhill run, it seems easy to coast to the conclusion that the behaviours so described have the same genetic, developmental and social context for both apes and humans.

From the authors' point of view, *P. paniscus* is "a tale of vanquished demonism". They speculate that the species moved away from a violent ancestry because of the particular conditions of the environment. *P. paniscus* does not share its rainforest habitat with gorillas, the argument goes, allowing it to take advantage of the abundant herbs that are normally eaten by gorillas. The more abundant food



THE great apes have a diverse range of social organization, from the solitary lives of orang-utans to patriarchy in gorillas. *Great Ape Societies* describes recent research on all four species. The book, edited by William C. McGrew, Linda F. Marchant and Toshisada Nishida, opens with a foreword by Jane Goodall, famous for her fieldwork with chimpanzees, making a plea for conservation. Cambridge University Press, £55, \$64.95 (hbk), £19.95, \$24.95 (pbk).