

## Culture

**Martin DALY and Margo WILSON, *Homicide*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1988. 328 pages, US \$42.95 (cloth), US \$18.95 (paper)**

Elliott Leyton



Volume 8, Number 1, 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078809ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078809ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Leyton, E. (1988). Review of [Martin DALY and Margo WILSON, *Homicide*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1988. 328 pages, US \$42.95 (cloth), US \$18.95 (paper)]. *Culture*, 8(1), 106–107. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078809ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1988

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**Érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

duites en yiddish, ce qui aurait fait ressortir plus de la richesse culturelle du monde du *shtetl*. La pratique du métier d'ethnologue exige l'apprentissage des langues d'origine, dans la mesure du possible, et sur ce plan, *Listen While I Tell You* ne met pas à jour comme il aurait été souhaitable toute la complexité du passage d'un univers à l'autre, tel qu'incarné par l'immigration. Malgré cette réserve Alison Kahn a très bien réussi à faire ressortir l'évolution historique et culturelle des Juifs terre-neuviens, presque sans recours aucun à une documentation écrite, à supposer qu'elle existât. *Listen While I Tell You* conserve néanmoins, à cause justement de ce parti-pris ethnographique, un caractère très intimiste, qui est quasi à l'inverse des livres d'histoire rédigés sur un mode traditionnel. Comme dans le *Boléro* de Ravel, les différentes entrevues s'y recoupent en partie et élaborent un motif récurrent, qui donne l'impression que se trouve sans cesse repris sur des variations mineures le thème commun de la vie communautaire juive. Ceci rend parfois l'ouvrage difficile d'accès, mais assure à l'ensemble une unité de pensée qui explique pourquoi, dans sa table des matières, l'auteur a utilisé pour présenter son sujet une analogie graphique et conceptuelle avec l'écriture musicale.

---

Martin DALY and Margo WILSON, *Homicide*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1988. 328 pages, US \$42.95 (cloth), US \$18.95 (paper).

By Elliott Leyton  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

It is a curious fact that while actual homicide rates are stable or declining in much of the world, the study of homicide appears now to have become a growth industry. Indeed, it is becoming difficult to keep up with the explosion of fresh material in a "field" that until recently had produced only a handful of books in anthropology, sociology, and psychiatry combined.

Unfortunately, the current work appears to be even narrower in its ideological and disciplinary biases than the classics. Thus, what should be an exciting forum for debate and deepened understanding has been transformed into an essentially *political* process - in which each intellectual empire rushes to stake claim to the territory of homicide. Rather than engaging in a collegial debate, they tend to dismiss or ignore the work done by other disciplines: in some cases, they do not even appear to have read the work by their "competitors". All this

is an inevitable political consequence of the misguided splitting of human reality into "bits" so eloquently attacked by Eric Wolf in his critique of disciplinary specialization.

If reality is an indivisible whole, and the human being a complex creature whose behavior is a consequence of biological, psychological, sociological and historical factors, you would never know it from most recent work on homicide. I recently addressed a psychiatric conference on the four major books that now exist on serial sex murder. The psychiatrist Lunde (*Murder and Madness*, 1975) had surveyed all the available data and concluded that psychiatric disorders caused the killings. The biologically oriented psychologist Norris (*Serial Killers*, 1988) studied the data and found the cause not in psychiatric disorder, but in biological and genetic abnormalities. The feminists Cameron and Frazer (*The Lust to Kill*, 1987) reviewed the data and found the cause neither in psychiatric nor biological abnormality, but in the violent essence of males - both caused and symbolized by the male role in the sexual act, conquest and penetration. The anthropologist Leyton (*Hunting Humans*, 1986) surveyed the data and found the cause lay not in psychiatric or biological abnormalities, not in the nature of males, but in cultural and structural forces. Surely such disparate views arise more from politics than from science.

Daly and Wilson's *Homicide* performs the same narrow task for the subject of homicide in general. They insist that one of their prime goals is to overcome what they call the "biophobia" of most social scientists, and announce that they are part of a major new school of thought which they rather grandly call Evolutionary Psychology. I do not think the book will do much to reduce the epidemic of biophobia, for anthropological data are often abused; and provocative and dubious conclusions are sprinkled throughout the book (are women really, as the authors claim, less sexually jealous than men; and if they are, would someone please explain this to my wife?). Moreover, they have a tendency to make pronouncements with a Jesuitical, even Papal authority, that will annoy many scholars. For example, "Many other theories that are still debated by social scientists implicitly deny the action of natural selection, and *are therefore surely wrong*," (p. 8, my italics); and the "nature vs. nurture" debate is dismissed as "an inane formulation" (p. 9).

Nevertheless, we would do ourselves and the authors a profound disservice if we dismissed the book in the spirit in which too much of it is written.

Despite its many flaws and pretensions, it is a serious, scholarly and sustained attempt to examine one aspect of biology's contribution to the study of human aggression. They very ambitiously try to "account for violence within the framework of a well-founded general theory of human nature...Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection" (p. 2). They argue that the "ultimate objective of our conspicuously purposive physiology and psychology is not longevity or pleasure or self-actualization or health or wealth or peace of mind. It is fitness," (p. 10) defined in the Darwinian sense of survival. Thus "perceptions of self-interest," rooted in the adaptation of the human organism over many thousands of years of evolution, lie at the centre of all conflict, including homicide.

They have an important point to make, that aggressive responses may be more deeply rooted in the human repertoire than we have hitherto acknowledged. They also ask a number of important questions. For example, they ask why is one of the most frequent provocations for homicide - historically and cross-culturally - a "personal conflict or altercation (insult, curse, jostling)" between males? Moreover, how has our understanding of homicide been diminished by social science's failure to distinguish spouse killings from killings of blood relatives - lumping them all together unhelpfully as "family killings", and thus ignoring the profound differences between them? Moreover, they assemble an enormous range of anthropological, sociological and biological data to substantiate some of their points.

It is significant that biologists and biochemists rarely comment on human behavior. Typically, they conclude that humans are too complex to reduce to simple formulae, and they leave the biologizing to recycled psychologists and anthropologists like Daly and Wilson. This is most unfortunate, for many social scientists are now well aware of the fact that no full understanding of the human condition can emerge until we have a truly multi-disciplinary approach which incorporates the insights of all of 20th century science. Still, Daly and Wilson have nudged us a little further along this path.

---

Gilbert H. HERDT, *Guardians of the Flutes*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. 382 pages, US \$14.00 (paper).

By J.R. Rayfield  
York University

Many years ago Pedro Carrasco remarked to a third-year class in one of those round-the-world-in-eighty-days ethnography courses, "As an anthropologist I really ought not to say this, but the people of New Guinea are the *queerest* people." In whatever sense Carrasco used the word, the flute-guarding Sambia must surely be the queerest of the queer.

Reo Fortune, also indiscreet, remarks in the introduction to the paperback edition of *Sorcerers of Dobu* that when preparing this edition he felt that the Dobu could not really be as horrible as he had described them in the original book. But on re-reading his earlier work he had to admit that they were. Similarly, though he had done further fieldwork in the interval, Herdt finds no reason to change his views on the Sambia since the first edition of *Guardians of the Flutes* was written in 1978.

The book was intended as a contribution to that field of anthropology which used to be called "culture and personality". That term is now old-fashioned, but the field continues to be explored under more sophisticated rubrics; it is still essentially the study of the interaction between the individual and his culture, of how symbolic systems work and are constantly re-created and reinterpreted both by members of the culture and by anthropologists. For this purpose it is appropriate to study a culture whose customs are bizarre by the anthropologist's standards, so that his sensibilities are not dulled by the taken-for-granted quality of his own and similar cultures.

Like Gregory Bateson, Herdt focuses his study on what he and apparently the Sambia themselves regard as the central and most meaningful activity of their culture, an initiatory cult:

Why should an anthropologist select this focus on sex and gender? What warrants this interest when so many other aspects of a ritual cult want attention? The reasons follow from the form of Sambia gender identity formation, a pattern that raises a number of problems for all the behavioral sciences.