

The Exploitation of Non-Westerners for Evolutionary Evidence

Jerry Bergman*

Abstract

Africans and other non-Westerners were exploited in American and European sideshows for decades as evidence of Darwinism. These displays were a major attraction at many fairs and shows for over a century, and they probably helped to influence millions of people into accepting the idea of the evolution of humans from a lower primate. Although monetary gain was probably the primary motive, the promoters of these shows deceptively tried to pass off various

non-Western peoples as “missing links,” or at least as “primitive” humans who were evolutionarily less developed than Westerners. These displays had a significant influence on racial attitudes, and thus became important to movements such as the American Ku Klux Klan. Today, we see this history as a major example of the unethical exploitation of minorities.

Introduction

For decades, many fairs, amusement parks, and carnival attractions included displays of African, Asian, South American, or Australian natives that were billed and widely advertised as a scientific presentation of primitive or barbaric subhuman “men-monkeys,” “ape men” and “ape women,” or “missing links” (Bogdan, 1988, p. 177). These non-Westerners were typically “elaborately embellished” and wrapped “with a profusion of creative tales and twists” all packaged “within a pseudo anthropological framework” (Bogdan, 1988, p. 178). As a result, in the late 1800s to the early 1900s the general public was “fascinated by, or addicted to, the spectacle of primitive man” (Bradford and Blume, 1992). These attractions “popularized Darwinian notions of racial progress from ‘savagery’ to ‘civilization’” (Rydell, 1999, p. 140). Historically, these popular shows were, at least for the masses, one of the more convincing evidences for Darwinism (Gordon, 1999; Parsons, 1999).

From the early 1800s until today, hundreds of millions of people the world over have visited fairs and circuses. Fairs were a leading form of entertainment for over a century, and even were popular for some time after the introduction of motion pictures (Durant, and Durant, 1957; Bradna and Spence, 1952). These fairs and circuses became a primary venue for these “wild man” exhibits. Consequently millions were exposed to these Darwinian propaganda shows during a period “sometimes called the

Age of Darwin” (Lindfors, 1999a, p. vii).

These shows used Africans and other ethnic minorities who were made to appear to be convincing primitive men or ape-human links between humans and monkeys as Darwin’s theory required (Lindfors, 1999b). Although the classic case is the display of a Pygmy named Ota Benga in a Bronx zoo, this practice had been going on for decades before this (Bradford and Blume, 1992; Bergman, 1993). One of the most famous circuses, Barnum and Bailey, regularly featured displays of humans that they claimed, or at least implied, proved Darwin’s theory of human evolution or, more often, dishonestly led visitors to conclude they were valid evidence for Darwinism (Bergman, 2002). However, it is now well known that all of these claimed “Darwin’s missing links” were normal humans from non-Western nations and cultures, usually Africans, but also some Asians, Australians, and South Sea islanders.

Many of the advertisements for these exhibits were specifically tailored to satisfy the public’s curiosity about Darwin. One researcher concluded that Barnum was an expert in coming up with fake intermediate species, and “missing links were his specialty, and he kept his museum stocked with them, whether to fleshout the Great Chain of Being, or after 1859, when Darwin’s *Origin of Species* appeared, to buttress the theory of evolution” (Blume, 1999, p. 190). The importance of these shows was noted by Kunhardt, et al. (1995) in their history of P.T. Barnum.

... Barnum brought forth perhaps the most important spectacle of his entire career, a “Grand Ethnological Congress of Nations” made up of native “tribespersons” from all corners of the globe. He

*Jerry Bergman, Ph.D., Northwest State College,
22-600 State Route 34, Archbold, Ohio 43502-9542
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had been planning such an assemblage since at least 1860 and possibly since 1851 ... in the 1880s, he wanted to show forth “the uncivilized.” “I desire ... a collection, in pairs or otherwise,” he had written in August 1882, “of all the uncivilized races in existence.” ... employing agents on every continent, eventually the project began to yield the longed-for “specimens”—Zulus and Polynesians, Nubians and Hindus, Todas Indians and Afghans, Australian aborigines and Sioux Indians and Laplanders. ... Nothing of its kind had ever been seen before in America or elsewhere. ... Public fascination with Barnum’s “Congress” was intense; mostly white audiences howled with laughter at the “inferior” beings on display. The Chicago *Tribune* summed up Americans’ attitudes by describing the Australian aborigines’ “almost jet black skin” and “gorillaish features.” (p. 296).

Many “scientific” displays also tended to add to the problem. For example, displays of “native villages” at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago inspired circuses to enlarge their own displays of tribal people (Bogdan, 1988, p. 185). The anthropology displays of “primitive” humans at the 1917 World’s Fair received fully 40% of all press notices (a further indication of the popularity of such exhibits). This particular fair, as did many, “displayed” a group of Pygmies, and “the historical record shows that Pygmies had been heavily in demand since time immemorial” (Bradford and Blume, 1992, p. 18). Apparently, the “animality” of Africans was one trait thought to set them “apart from more rational varieties of the human species” (Lindfors, p. viii). For years it was believed, even by some “experts,” that “the Pygmy race was a race of apes” (Bradford and Blume, 1992, p. 20). The Pygmies “seemed scarcely human ... not more intelligent than the trained baboon on a bicycle” (Green, 1999, p. 172) and “were the subject of ethnological inquiry and debate by scientists in learned societies” (Bogdan, 1988, p. 188). Many of these primitive people, the showman claimed, had no recognized language, no marriage state, and lived like animals.

People flocked to see such “ape men” at these shows. Green (1999) estimated in one week “well over ten thousand Britons were entertained by the Congo Pygmies” (p. 174). Only following Turnbull’s work, in the 1950s, were the Pygmies, as a people, more accurately understood and the conclusion that they were “ape-humans” was finally and fully discredited (Turnbull, 1968).

Likewise, many other races also were considered less evolved than whites, serving as living “links” to human evolutionary past. Other persons from Africa (such as from the Zulu tribe) were marketed as “apelike creatures” and

“bestial Africans” (Bogdan, 1988, p. 187). The Hottentots were also commonly displayed, often billed as “examples of the most primitive people in the world” (Bogdan, 1988, p. 187). Advertisements of the day frequently claimed that, from an evolutionary viewpoint, the Africans were as near to the ape as they were to humans. Often, they would not openly claim that Negroes were a missing link, but rather use expressions similar to “we cannot help but wonder if” the Africans were not “Darwin’s missing link” (Bogdan, 1988, p. 192). Only with the eventual discrediting of the eugenic idea of human racial inferiority (as well as the whole eugenic movement), were such races no longer viewed as evolutionarily inferior.

The Influence of Darwin

Darwin’s writings were critical in popularizing the view that humans evolved from some apelike ancestors. His work was also a critically important impetus to the exploitation of non-Westerners in freak shows. For example, Darwin’s writings directly supported the conclusion “that some forms of humans were closer to their primitive ancestors than others” (Bogdan, 1988, p. 249). Darwin devoted a whole chapter in his book, *Journal of Researches* (Darwin, 1939), to the “primitive” people who lived on this territory. He claimed they were so primitive that “when pressed in winter by hunger, they kill and devour their old women before the people kill their dogs” (p. 214).

Soon after evolution became widely discussed (and later widely accepted) due to the work of Darwin, both the frequency and diversity of “exotic people” shows grew steadily (Rothfels, 1996, p. 164). Under the subheading “*The Search for Man’s Ancestors*,” Smith, et al. (1931) noted that after Darwin “the interest of anthropologists and of the intelligent lay public has been keenly alive to the possibility of finding, dead or alive, other links in man’s ancestry” (p. 20). It was through these displays that people could see humans who, so it was claimed, were similar to how humans looked not long after they had “left the ape behind” (Rothfels, 1996, p. 164). Ape-looking tribes had been used as evidence of evolution before Darwin published his classic work *The Origin of Species*, but many people, at least until the middle of the nineteenth century, believed that African inferiority was due to environment (Erlmann, 1999, p. 112; Fiedler, 1978, p. 240). Certain ethnic groups especially were exploited prior to Darwin’s time, but the problem became far worse after evolution was popularized by scientists (such as Erasmus Darwin in the early 1800s) and writers (such as Robert Chambers).

Although it was widely known in pre-Darwin times that many humans lived in primitive conditions or an uncivi-

lized state, they still were considered noble beings created by a loving God (Snigurowicz, 1999). When Darwinism was embraced by the masses, all this changed. Once it was accepted that humans evolved from lower primates, these savages were no longer viewed as people living in primitive conditions, but biologically primitive creatures that were less evolved than Westerners. Certain races (such as the Hottentots) were widely believed to be the “missing link” between humans and animals (Strother, 1999, p. 10). When humans became “only transformed monkeys,” as a result of Darwinism, finding people groups who were still transforming and evolving was expected (Snigurowicz, 1999). Some Darwinists even claimed that “Negroes were a result of cross breeding between humans and Simians” (Fielder, 1978, p. 240). The impetus behind the display of non-Westerners in fairs was once explained as follows:

With such sensational discoveries as the Neanderthal Man—one of the most important freaks of all time—in a cave outside Düsseldorf in 1856, and even more importantly, the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, which was eagerly received by German scientists, the idea of evolution gained a scientific and popular currency in Germany that contrasts with reactions in other Western countries. Broad sectors of the public and scientific community became fascinated with what the theory of natural selection suggested about the development of man from non-humanoid species, as well as with what it implied about the origins of races and cultures. Recalling the acceleration of interest in evolutionary theory in Germany, anthropologist Carl Stratz noted in 1904 that “the various more primitive human races were examined for their resemblance to apes ... a list of pithecoïd (ape-like) characteristics of man was compiled, and the missing link—the last connecting link between human and ape—was sought after with enthusiasm” (Rothfels, 1996, p. 162).

Trained to Act Like Darwin’s Missing Link

The men and women selected for these displays not only *looked* the part, but also were often trained to *act* the part as well. For example, they were told how to act, and often were given props such as sticks to hold, implying that they did not normally walk on two legs, but rather locomoted like a monkey. Some were dressed in only loincloths, and were taught “jungle language”—mostly hideous grunts—to help them act out their Darwinian ape-man charade. Many were good actors, and convinced millions to believe

that they were in fact “ape-men” (Cook, 1996). Although most were non-whites of normal intelligence, they learned how to act stupid and primitive (and had to be good actors to draw the crowds needed to make money). Common distortions of their culture included claims that they were cannibals who practiced polygamy, head hunting, or human sacrifices, and ate rodents, insects, and dirt. Other “lies and extravagant, overstated claims” were common (Bogdan, 1988, p. 107). These “phony Zulus” were “easy to hire, cheap, and cooperative” (Bogdan, 1988, p. 176). Not unexpectedly, after the widespread acceptance of Darwinism, a rapid rise of exploitation of foreign races occurred:

Darwin’s evolutionary theorizing gave impetus to ever more fantastic speculation about the nature of the intermediary between “man” and monkey in the French social imaginary. Exhibits such as *hommes-* and *femmes-singes* (monkey-men and -women) and various other types of “primitive” intermediaries and *savages* proliferated in fairs and carnivals and other venues of popular entertainment, such as music halls and cafés-concerts. Press reports and articles, and dramatic and literary works satirized, lampooned, and otherwise conjectured about a possible intermediary between “man” and monkey (Snigurowicz, 1999, p. 57).

The “Aztec Children” and other displays in the early 1850s preceded the great surge of excitement in evolution, but Darwinism soon became a major component in the enfreakment of a wide range of individuals (Rothfels, 1996, p. 162). An example Rothfels (1996) mentions is the “Terra del Fuego” people, which Darwin discussed in his writings:

The 1881 “Terra del Fuego” exhibit presents a classic case. ...the “Fuegians” simply sat quietly, walked around the grounds, and prepared their food on an open fire without the use of pots. The public, despite the apparent mundaneness of these activities, was staggeringly enthusiastic. In Paris more than 50,000 people visited the show on one Sunday, and at the Berlin Zoological Gardens, “in order to avert the earlier wild scenes of the rush of the public, a large stage some four feet in height had to be erected upon which the Fuegians were situated.” Most of the public was clearly more than satisfied with simply gazing upon these apparently “primitive people” (p. 164).

Some Americans—who were fakes posing as African natives in the exhibits—later were “exposed for the ‘civilized’ humans that they were” (Snigurowicz, 1999, p. 59; see also Killingray and Henderson, 1999). Lindfors claims

“many” of the Zulu “performers” at one time were frauds (1983, p. 11). These “fake savages,” though, were, just as fake as the real savages pretending to be Darwinian “ape-men” links. Bogdan (1988) cited several cases of native-born Americans who were misrepresented as foreigners, such as Ohio-raised dwarfs who claimed to be from Borneo; a tall, black, North Carolinian who, it was claimed, was from Dahomey, and “African natives” who actually were Blacks recruited from Chicago pool halls. Another example is, when in front of the public, the Aztec’s bushy hair always was tied up on topknots to emphasize their small heads, and they often were photographed in profile to display their “ape-like sloping foreheads” and noses (Snigurowicz, 1999, p. 58). The people in many exhibits wore leopard-skin shorts or similar attire to look more primitive and more animal-like (Peacock, 1999). The makeup department did such a good job that some Africans “seemed scarcely human at all” (Green, 1999, p. 172).

The Belgian Congo Ape-Like Ubangis

A notable example of the exploitation of Africans was the Ubangis tribe. The Ubangis were a group of women imported from the Belgian Congo to play the role of Darwin’s missing link in Barnum’s circus. To emphasize their putative primitive human attributes, Ubangis often were displayed almost nude, often with monkeys and sounds of drums in the background (Bogdan, 1988, p. 195). The Ubangi show advertisements claimed that they lived “like animals” and “smelled like hogs.” When tossed bananas “as though they were so many chimpanzees,” they ate the bananas “like apes” (Bradna, 1952, p. 245). They were “easy to feed”—their diet consisted of only two meals a day, “bananas with skins, peeled oranges, and raw fish” (Bradna and Spence, 1952, p. 245). Bradna and Spence (1952) also report that the “Ubangis had a hypnotic fascination, and the public could not get enough of them. Men and women gaped at them for five minutes steadily in the sideshow, then returned at the next performance for another look” (p. 246). The Ubangis ape-women were claimed to have drawn a greater crowd than any sideshow the circus ever presented (Bradna and Spence, 1952, p. 318). The Ubangis were displayed until at least 1932 (Lindfors, 1983). The popularity of such shows was so great that:

By the nineteenth century, most cities of Europe had hosted regular exhibits of “strange” peoples, including the almost traditional appearances of Sub-Saharan Africans, Moors, Sami, and other Old World peoples, as well as such new arrivals as Native Americans, Inuit peoples, and South Sea Is-

landers. In the second half of the nineteenth century, both the frequency and diversity of the shows of “exotic” peoples grew steadily. ... [and] among the most consistently popular exhibitions in the latter half of the century in Germany were those that focused on “primitive” peoples, who could, like “Krao,” somehow be freaked as evolutionary ancestors of modern Europeans (Rothfels, 1996, p. 164).

The Influence of Ape-Men Exhibits on the Common People

An important myth derived from Darwinism was the belief that creatures intermediate between humanoids and anthropoids must exist. Related to this idea is that of devolution, i.e., that our children or our children’s children may revert to the subhuman creatures that we once were in the distant past (Fiedler, 1978, p. 241).

In the words of Odell (1931), “the world was gradually preparing for Darwin and checking him up in terms of Barnum” (p. 413). These ape-human exhibits were no doubt both highly impressive and very convincing to the large, naive, and often uneducated audiences who regularly viewed them. Otherwise, why would millions flock to see the shows for a price that was not cheap in their day? It is not known how many hundreds of millions of people visited these “ape-human” exhibits, and as a result became convinced of the truth of Darwinism. It is known that the shows “made a lasting impression” on a large number of people (Bondeson, 1997, p. 217).

These exhibits were not only blatantly dehumanizing, but dishonest. The exhibitors in virtually all cases deceptively pawned off their exhibits to the public either as proof of Darwin’s theory of evolution, or occasionally as evolutionary throwbacks called atavisms. That most of these ape-humans were normal humans was well recognized even in the 1800s (Gould and Pyle, 1896). The circuses and exhibitors usually were not motivated primarily to prove evolution and, indeed, in many (if not most) cases, they knew that their exhibits were fully humans. The primary motive in most cases was largely financial, resulting in a “big business” that enabled many people to become rich (Bogdan, 1988, p. 198). Nonetheless, the end effect was to help convince the common people of the truth of Darwinism, which was one more factor that was influential in causing the rapid conversion of large segments of the population to belief in Darwinian evolution.

Common Objections to the Exhibits

One of the most common objections to the exhibits was

the concern, especially by the clergy, that they could cause people to question the divine origin of life. Specific objections included the belief that they could cause some of the public to doubt that “life was the result of the Creator’s ‘divine spark,’ and, moreover, that human life was endowed with special God-given qualities such as reason, creativity, and speech” (Snigurowicz, 1999, p. 62).

Of course, this objection was fully valid since these shows probably helped to convince large numbers of people of the validity of Darwinism, as well as to accept (or reinforce) racism. These freak shows were “accompanied by the rise of the eugenics movement, a vicious use of social Darwinism which cautioned the nation that because modern societies protected their weak, the principle of survival of the fittest was not working” (Bogdan, 1988, p. 62).

Many people also objected to these shows because the exhibits often were misleading, and deliberately tried to give the impression that those individuals on display were less than human and were to be observed like animals in a zoo. Many persons recognized that the shows contributed not only to racism, but also to acts of violence as well, especially against blacks (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2001).

Most Scientists Were Silent

In general, scientists “limited their commentary to specific exhibits, describing them and reflecting on their scientific importance” (Bogdan, 1988, p. 64). Some scientists recognized that many of the shows were, at best, misleading. Although Darwin concluded that the Feugians were “the lowest of human forms yet discovered,” other scientists, such as German anthropologist Rudolf Virchow, recognized that this ethnic group did *not* represent “some form of transitional stage between ape and man” (Rothfels, 1996, p. 165). The latter view did not tend to help the “ape-man” business, nor did it support Darwinism, and so was ignored as much as possible. The “popular perception ... a perception rooted in the way the ‘savages’ were displayed and enfreaked—tended to focus on the deep differences between them and Europeans” (Rothfels, 1996, p. 165). Consequently, the views of scientists like Virchow usually were silent (or silenced). Carlyon (2001), in a history about showman Dan Rice, said that the “racism of the day included confused racial categories, with the ‘darkey’ neither white, black, nor colored,” and museums of the day did little to help clarify the confusion.

An important element of the Museum was the lecture room, which made the claim of education manifest. ... Though the jumble of attractions at the Museum seems unscientific, it was not frivolous.

Louis Agassiz, the famous naturalist and Harvard professor, came to New Orleans the same season for the same reasons as Rice’s Dr. Koch, to lecture on natural history to inquisitive citizens. The Wild Men of Borneo may have been slaves, as many such exhibited “natives” were, and the Zeuglodon might have been a fake, but, as people turned their gaze to the Pacific seas or into prehistory, the ground was being prepared for the work of anthropologists, and for the ideas of Darwin (Carlyon, 2001, p. 154–155).

The problem of exploitation of non-Westerners was also usually ignored in the academic press, and the “ape-men” shows were rarely or never criticized or exposed for the harm they caused. All too often, non-Westerners were exploited by Darwinists in an attempt to document their case, even into the 1960s (for example, see Coon, 1962). Steinitz even quoted Darwin’s words from his *Journal of Researches* (Darwin, 1839) that the “Fuegians hardly seem to be fellow creatures and inhabitants of the same world” as we Westerners are. Rather, they “were crude, wretched creatures” that “smeared their ugly faces with paint” (quoted in Rothfels, 1996, p. 165). No doubt Darwin’s writings and those of other persons with similar ideas (such as his cousin Francis Galton) contributed to the later “genocide launched from the barrel of a gun” when the “Fuegians were mercilessly hunted down by European settlers” (Hazlewood, 2000 p. 12, and illustration facing p. 273). Hazlewood (2000) adds that the story of Tierra del Fuego has been told many times by many writers including Darwin, but in all of these stories the:

Fuegians are absent, save as freaks and novelties or nuisances and obstacles to the advance of the white man and his civilization. To most of the Europeans and North Americans who ventured into these parts, they were a primitive and wretched group of savages, lawless atheists who lived in squalor—as Darwin was to say, they were “the most abject and miserable creatures I anywhere beheld”—and thus undeserving of a history. Eventually, when they began to be heard, as in the accounts of the Ushuaia mission station, established in the 1870s, it was both too late. ... Most tragically, by the time historians, anthropologists, archaeologists and ethnographers with a different, more sympathetic approach to the native population arrived on the scene, there was virtually no one left to study. Wiped out in a genocide launched from the barrel of a gun and the spread of alien diseases, much of the history of the Fuegian peoples died with them (p. 12).

Darwin’s (and his followers’) eugenic ideas were in-

cluded in major textbooks as late as 1962 (Coon, 1962). The civil rights movement had a major impact in ending the exploitation of non-white races, especially those from Africa. Such displays would be unthinkable in the Western world today. However, this new enlightenment cannot change the fact that for decades “evolutionary theory propelled the search for individuals such as ‘Krao,’ and even whole peoples such as the ‘Fuegians,’ who could somehow be construed as representing links in human evolution” (Rothfels, 1996, p. 165). Interestingly, Darwin at first judged the Fuegians as primitive humans, but later changed his view of them after he recognized the changes in their lives that occurred after they converted to Christianity. As a result of this experience, Charles Darwin personally contributed to the mission society working in Terra del Fuego (Hazlewood, 2000).

Human-Animals Claimed to be Darwin’s Missing Links

Some exhibits presented creatures that were allegedly a result of “crossbreeding between man with beast [which] ... also implied a biological link” (Bogdan, 1988, p. 106). Another popular explanation was that the humans on display were atavistic or evolutionary throwbacks to earlier evolutionary stages of humans (Bogdan, 1988). Animals, especially trained primates including apes, chimps, and orangutans, also were touted by many circuses and shows as “missing links” between animals and humans. For example, in the 1840s, Barnum displayed—in a wildly popular exhibit—normal orangutan as “the connecting link between man and brute” (Saxon, 1989, p. 98). Kunhardt, et al. (1995) relate the story of one primate that became a famous “missing link.”

In 1846, Barnum purchased, for \$3,000, “the only living orang-outang in either England or North America.” Calling her Mademoiselle Fanny, after the great ballerina Fanny Elssler, Barnum promoted the animal as a possible missing link. “Its actions, the sound of its voice while laughing and crying, approach as closely as possible to the human species,” one paper reported. “Its hands, face and feet are pure white, and possess as soft a skin as any child living” (1995, p. 110).

Summary

For decades, charlatans have exploited non-Westerners as “missing links” for profit and entertainment. The promoters of these shows not uncommonly, and quite deceptively, passed off various non-Western peoples as missing links, or at least as primitive and less developed, compared to

Westerners. Africans and other non-Westerners were exploited in sideshows for over a century as evidence of Darwinism. These displays were a major attraction of many fairs and shows, and they likely influenced millions of persons to accept the theory of human evolution from the lower primates. The contribution of these displays to racism and racist movements also was significant. Many of these non-Westerners “lived miserable lives,” were exploited, and, in general, poorly treated. But this “did not seem to concern pre-1940s American audiences or the exhibitors—after all, the people being exhibited really were cannibals, savages, and barbarians” (Bogdan, 1988, pp. 198–199).

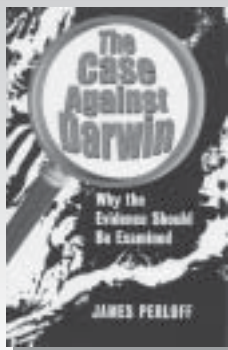
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