

## On A Neglected Aspect Of Western Racism\*

Kurt Jonassohn, December 2000.

(Paper presented at the meeting of the Association of Genocide Scholars,  
9–12 June 2001 in Minneapolis)

For more than half a century – from the beginning of the 1870s to the end of the 1930s – the exposition of so-called exotic peoples in zoological gardens\*\* and international expositions attracted a huge public eager to be fascinated by the unfamiliar and the unknown. Throughout Western Europe travelling exhibits of non-European natives were recurring features of zoological gardens where they eclipsed the drawing power of the more usual animal exhibits. Both exhibits were isolated by fences that variously protected sometimes the animals and more often the public; but in the cases of the human exhibits the main purpose of the fences seems to have been to stress the distinction between them and us.

Until recently this phenomenon has been largely ignored. Surviving contemporaries denied remembering this feature of their youthful visits to the local zoo and then denied that it ever happened. (Hilke Thode-Arora, ch. 17) Curiously, this was true in spite of the fact that their parents seem to have considered such visits an important educational experience for their children.

The first serious scholarly attention this phenomenon seems to have received was as the subject of a Ph. D. dissertation at the University of Basel (Balthasar Staehelin). It not only documented such exhibitions in the zoo at Basel, but also mentioned some of the other localities in Central and Western Europe and the USA that were visited by these travelling exhibits. Since then there have been several publications that have removed any doubts that such events really did occur. However, these publications appeared in places that even specialists were often not aware of. The topic did not receive wider attention and legitimation until it became the subject of a feature article by Blancel, Blanchard, and Lemaire in *Le Monde diplomatique*.

It is the purpose of this paper to begin to explain the origins and the demise of these exhibits and to explore their theoretical significance for the development of modern racism.

ORIGINS. Since we are not dealing with a uni-causal event, it is important to take account of several contributing factors.

The most proximate cause may be located in the financial difficulties of zoological gardens throughout Europe. Attendance had been declining, costs had been rising, and new attractions were difficult to find in the animal kingdom. The impresarios who financed expeditions to all parts of the world to supply animals to zoos were also caught in this economic dilemma. The largest and most prominent among these was Karl Hagenbeck who quickly realized that adding human specimens did not substantially increase the costs of these expeditions. (Günter H. W. Niemeyer) The great increase in zoo attendance due to these exhibitions of peoples from different parts of the world instantly cured the financial difficulties of impresarios and zoos alike. In fact, exhibitions of humans had another advantage over those of animals. Unlike the latter, which were sold to the zoos, the former which eventually had to be returned to their country of origin were treated as travelling exhibits; they were rented to several zoos for a limited time, thus producing a much greater income.

Another cause of the success of these human exhibitions may be located in the wide-spread European interest in foreign cultures and peoples. Many early explorers carried scientists on their voyages of discovery. They collected and brought back samples not only of cultural artifacts, but also of tropical plants, strange animals, and native peoples. Already in 1493 Columbus brought Indians from the New World to the Spanish court. The reports of Marco Polo's travels, the spread of the enlightenment, and the evidence brought from foreign shores by the explorers, all contributed to an increasing curiosity about and appreciation of the non-European world. Since movies and television did not yet exist, it was much harder for ordinary people to satisfy such curiosity than it is today. The demand for art and artifacts from China, India, Japan, among others, was so great that it created new industries in these countries that profited from catering to this demand. This curiosity also extended to the people, their behaviour, and their customs. Therefore, it was not sufficient to exhibit these peoples; they had to be seen in their native villages, wearing their traditional clothing, and engaging in their customary ways of eating, dancing, etc. Such exhibitions quickly became a standard part of World Fairs where they were often sponsored by participating countries. (Richard D. Altick) Perhaps the largest and most elaborate exhibition of this kind was seen during the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904. (Paul Greenhalgh)

Another cause of the success of these "human zoos" was the scientific legitimation that was provided by the enthusiastic support of evolutionists, eugenicists, phrenologists, and especially by anthropologists (Phillips Verner Bradford & Harvey Blume, ch. 10). Some were trying to find the evolutionary link between monkeys, apes, and men, some wanted to study the variety of family and sexual arrangements, and the physical anthropologists collected all possibly relevant measurements that might distinguish these natives from Europeans and from each other. These "human zoos" provided them with frequent and extended access to data without the costs, difficulties, and dangers associated with field work. Therefore, zoos and fairs that included these exhibits were supported and lent scientific importance by the research activities that they attracted. Some, like the St. Louis World's Fair, even had formal anthropology departments. (Phillips Verner Bradford & Harvey Blume, ch. 1)

It was, of course, known that some royal and aristocratic households included "exotic" specimens of unfamiliar peoples. As mentioned above, these had been brought to Europe by the early explorers. While some of them were taught to perform simple household tasks, they served primarily to demonstrate the wealth of their owners and to impress their peers. But they were not accessible to a wider public. By the late nineteenth century, the movements toward democratization, universal public education, and greater equality in the distribution of wealth, expanded the participation of people in all aspects of the life of the community. Visits to zoological gardens, regional exhibitions, and world fairs were a significant part of both entertainment and education. (Karl Max Schneider) The inclusion of human exhibits in these institutions did a great deal more than just provide family entertainment on weekends.

The end of the nineteenth century was also the period when the European powers competed in colonizing those parts of the world that had not already been claimed for their colonizing ambitions. As more and more European administrators of these new acquisitions and their military personnel came into contact with a greater variety of natives, interest and even curiosity increased -- both in the field and at home. When Europeans came into conflict with indigenous peoples they benefitted from their vastly superior military technology and ruthlessness. Success in conquests, acquisition of natural resources, and economic exploitation was widely interpreted as proof of the superiority of the European peoples. But it was not so clear in what specific ways the conquerors differed from their victims. This question sparked the interest of the masses, the research of scientists, and the theorizing of scholars. Differences were located in physiological make-up, or native intelligence, or cultural developments, etc. All explanations had one common goal: to provide conclusive evidence for the inherent superiority of the victors. The "human zoos" became one piece of evidence in the search for that goal. In addition they were seen as providing evidence for the then familiar family tree that illustrated man's origins from monkeys and apes, through various stages of development, to the Europeans at the top of the tree.

DEMISE. Many of the factors that hastened the end of these "human exhibitions" are similar to those that facilitated their appearance.

The economic depression that followed the crash of 1929 meant that neither the zoos nor the public were inclined to or able to spend money on this form of entertainment. Curiosity about the rest of the world could now be satisfied by the increasing spread of radio and the novelty of the cinema. The ubiquity of short newsreels as well as the occasional feature film provided visual information without the need for the subjects' physical presence.

One hypothesis for the demise of these shows in Germany was that under the Nazi regime they had been forbidden. While there is no documentary evidence for this, the fact is that none occurred after 1932.

The use that both sciences and pseudo-sciences had made of the zoo exhibits had become widely documented in academia and the literature. The establishment of the League of Nations had started to spread the notion of the equality of peoples. The quite obvious demonstrations of European superiority had become less convincing. In addition, some colonial powers were becoming quite ambivalent in their perception of the colonized. They not only exploited their labour but they also inducted them into their armed forces, albeit at first only to fight against their compatriots. (During World War I, when France deployed African units against Germany, racists on both sides interpreted this action as a calculated racial insult.) Some of the European powers opened up citizenship status to some of their colonial subjects and France even allowed some of them to vote and to send locally elected representatives to Paris.

Another factor contributing to the disappearance of these exhibitions is the dramatic change in the technology and cost of transportation after World War II. Relative to the increasing prosperity in the West, the cost of travel declined. Commercial air travel became available. International contacts for economic, political, and touristic reasons increased. Thus, it became more common to encounter in daily life people from various parts of the world in most larger cities. This realization of their common humanity may also help to explain why people who must have visited these human zoos in their childhood deny any memory of these experiences.

While some of these factors explain the demise of the "human zoos", the impact of these exhibitions on modern racism



remains to be explored.

Hannah Arendt, in *Imperialism*, locates the roots of modern racism in the European colonialisation of sub-Saharan Africa and argues that it is "the main ideological weapon of imperialistic politics." (p. 40) The encounter between the black population and the white adventurers in search of wealth was too disorienting to leave unexplained. The differences in cultures, life styles, and value systems were too sudden and too large to be ignored. The difference in skin colour facilitated the rise of racism to explain the innate superiority of the Europeans and the inferiority of the Africans. It also explained the Europeans' right to conquest and rule as well as their exploitation and oppression of the Africans. These encounters had an impact on European nation states. They used to define membership in their collectivity in terms of such traditional criteria as common history, language, religion, etc. Now they increasingly defined the national collectivity in terms of race. Clearly, the exhibition of Africans in European zoos helped to convince the spectators that they were members of a superior race with a superior culture.

Once this racial interpretation was firmly established, it also became easier to explain a variety of social distinctions in Europe in racial terms. One great attraction of this explanation of differences was that it voided accusations of bias and prejudice. Instead, such differences were now seen as grounded in objective science. Race became a part of university teaching and the subject matter of research centers. This helps to explain the wide-spread support, before World War II, for racism in academia and among intellectuals generally. It may also help to explain the self-righteous certainty in their superiority that is so characteristic of many contemporary right-wing and white supremacist groups.

However, the last word has not yet been said on this topic. The recent advances in techno-biology and genetics are already being used to explore the origins of peoples. What they will show and how they will be interpreted remains to be seen. One way or another they will have a great impact on race theories. However, people who know more about these new biological technologies than I do will have to deal with the interpretation of their findings.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY / ENDNOTES

\* This paper is an elaboration of an idea briefly discussed in the context of Holocaust denial. See: pp. 70–72 in: Kurt Jonassohn with Karin Solveig Björnson. *Genocide and Gross Human Rights Violations in Comparative Perspective*. New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.): Transaction Publishers, 1998. For comments and suggestions my thanks go to Karin Björnson, Mervin Butovsky, Karen Doerr, Hubert Guindon, and the members of the MIGS workshop. There is, of course, a long tradition of exhibiting people with unusual characteristics in county fairs, freak shows, circuses, etc. They are not dealt with in this paper because they were meant to amuse and entertain and had no bearing on the development of racism.

\*\* Zoological garden, in French is *jardin zoologique*, in German it is *Zoologischer Garten*, but in Austrian it is *Tiergarten* (Tier=animal) which gave Theodor Herzl the opportunity to refer to it sardonically as "Menschengarten" (Menschen=human being). I am indebted to Klaus Müller-Richter for this tid-bit.

Richard D. Altick. *The Shows of London*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978. Africans were regularly displayed in London since the 1850s. When the Ethnological Society, founded in 1843, was recognized in 1847 as "an ethnological subsection of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, the new group fell under the heading of "Zoology and Botany". p.279.

Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard et Sandrine Lemaire, "Ces zoos humains de la République coloniale". (These human zoos of the colonial republic.) *Le Monde diplomatique*, Août 2000, pp. 16–17. Also in English as "Human Zoos". *Le Monde diplomatique*, August 2000, pp. 8–9.

Phillips Verner Bradford & Harvey Blume. *OTA: the Pygmy in the Zoo*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. See: Ch.1 on the Anthropology Department in the St.Louis World's Fair of 1904; Ch.10 on participating anthropologists; Ch.16 on Ota in the monkey house at the Bronx Zoo.

Paul Greenhalgh. *Ephemeral vistas: the Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851–1939*. Manchester University Press, 1988.

Volker Harms, ed. *Andenken an den Kolonialismus: Eine Ausstellung des Völkerkundlichen Instituts des Universität Tübingen*. (Memories of colonialism: An exhibition of the institute for ethnography of the University of Tübingen.) Tübingen: ATTEMPTO Verlag, 1984. This exhibition celebrated the 100th anniversary in 1984 of the start of German colonization. Note esp. Sibylle Benninghoff-Lühl, "Die Ausstellung der Kolonisierten: Völkerschauen von 1874–1932." (The exhibition of the colonized: the display of people from 1874–1932) on pp. 52–65. "Frühes Zeugnis einer Völkerschau gibt uns die beigefügte Abbildung. Sie zeigt ein brasilianisches Indianerdorf, das am Ufer der Seine in Rouen nachgebaut wurde, zu Ehren Heinrich II, der die Stadt in 1533 besuchte." p.52. (Early documentation of the exhibition of people is provided by the attached illustration. It shows a Brazilian Indian village that was erected on the banks of the Seine near Rouen, in honour of Henri II who visited the city in 1533.)

Helen H. Horowitz. "Animal and Man in the New York Zoological Park." *New York History*, 4 (Oct. 1975): 426–55.

Kurt Jonassohn, "Some Antecedents of the Holocaust Denial Literature." [MIGS Occasional Papers](#), November 1994. Reprinted as chapter 6 in: Kurt Jonassohn with Karin Solveig Björnson. *Genocide and Gross Human Rights Violations in Comparative Perspective*. New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.): Transaction Publishers, 1998. Although Germany lost its colonies after World War I it continued to maintain schools for colonial administrators right into the post-Hitler period. Even after regaining its former colonies was considered hopeless, these schools continued to graduate students for a career of spreading German high culture among the lesser races. (pp. 77 and 82)

Klaus Kreimeier, "In die schwarze Farbe der Nacht gehüllt ..." (Enveloped by the black colour of the night.) pp. 96–131 in Thomas Theye, ed. *Wir und die Wilden: Einblicke in eine kannibalische Beziehung*. Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1984.

Klaus Müller-Richter, "Containing the Orient in the Midst of Vienna: Colonial Power and the Inter-medial Text." Vortrag auf der GSA-Konferenz, 6. 10. 2000, panel: Colonial Power and Inter-medial Texts.

Günter H. W. Niemeyer. *Hagenbeck: Geschichte und Geschichten*. (History and stories.) Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 1972.

Wolfe W. Schmokel. *Dream of Empire: German Colonialism, 1919–1945*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press. 1964.

Karl Max Schneider, ed. *Leipziger Zoo; aus der Entwicklung einer Volksbildungsstätte*. (The Zoo in Leipzig; from the development of an institution for the education of the people.) Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Geest & Portig K.–G., 1953. The book was produced on order of the "People's Education Department" of the Council of the City of Leipzig and emphasizes the educational mission of the zoo. See esp., Alfred Lehmann "Schaustellungen im Leipziger Zoo. Mit 11 Abbildungen." (Exhibitions in the zoo at Leipzig. With 11 illustrations.) pp. 72–92.

Balthasar Staehelin. *Völkerschauen im Zoologischen Garten Basel 1879–1935*. (Exhibitions of people in the zoo at Basel 1879–1935.) Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien. 1993.

Hilke Thode-Arora. *Für fünfzig Pfennig um die Welt; Die Hagenbeckschen Völkerschauen*. (Around the world for fifty cents; the exhibition of peoples by Hagenbeck.) Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 1989. See Anhang (Annex) 1 and Anhang (Annex) 2 for tables of zoo exhibits.

Thomas Theye, (Hg.) *Wir und die Wilden: Einblicke in eine kannibalische Beziehung*. (We and the wild ones: Insights into a cannibalistic relationship.) Rowohlt, 1988. See esp. Klaus Kreimeier "In die schwarze Farbe der Nacht gehüllt ...." pp.96–131.



Montreal Institute For Genocide and Human Rights Studies  
 Concordia University  
 1455 De Maisonneuve Blvd. West  
 Montreal, Quebec, H3G 1M8 Canada  
 Tel.: (514) 848-2424 ext 5729 or 2404  
 Fax: (514) 848-4538