

Last Word:

Wilbur Norman

Humans on Parade Part One: The plainer truths of Christianity

Human history is full of examples where people quite like you and me in their genetic makeup but a bit unlike you and me in their morphology, that is, their looks (OK, many looked somewhat like me, if not like you!) had lives where they were not quite slaves in the classic sense but they were either 'on show' or were in most ways 'owned,' that is, captives (with all that this word implies.) Every empire and culture of dominance had these humans in thrall to the curiosity of their citizens even as late as the 1920s.

The ancient Greeks had a particular fascination with "Ethiopians," that is, any of the various black Africans coming from the very edge of the known world. It was the height of fashion to have one as a personal house slave because it put your social status on public display; Ethiopians were a lot more expensive than the common barbarians one had normal access to. Highlighting the danger of framing human relationships in light of modernity, I do not know with any certainty that racial prejudice was a factor in this servitude — you were Greek or you were not. If not, you were fair game for servitude and show.

What was considered normal in ancient times, when practiced in more contemporary eras, strikes us as callous and inhumane according to any standard. But the display of humans in the manner we display primates today, sans the bars, was all too common as recently as the 19th century. When European expansionism commenced and explorers began to meet these "others," there was natural curiosity on both sides. Their relationships of power were, however, very uneven.

It is common knowledge that we humans have a lot to account for when it comes to the dark side of our nature. Wars, slavery, genocide and other predatory behavior are par for the course all through that portion of our history that we know as history. Evidence points to even more callow behavior



Greco-Roman terracotta vase in the form of an Ethiopian head. Courtesy Wilbur Norman.

during that long night of our existence known as pre-history, that is, our comings and goings before the written word. There is a good argument, from the archaeological record that cannibalism was on offer at various times and places — though, to toss a bone to skeptics, it may have been practiced on our semi-related homo-cousins rather than on members of our own exact species, homo sapiens sapiens.

Some of the more shabby episodes in the sweep of history are the ones where Europeans, and their American descendants, captured non-Europeans, taking them back to the home countries for purposes of religion, science, display and

schemes of money-making (not necessarily in that order.) Think of it as a Human Zoo, complete with the rhetoric of both The Church and The Enlightenment about improving the lot of benighted brethren bereft of the word of God while enabling the rain of science to wash down upon the heads of nature's noble savages. Some warders of this Human Zoo, no matter how misinformed, were motivated by the spirit of generosity, to be sure. But the end result of almost all these forays of Westerners leading natives out of darkness ended badly for the natives. And, of course, we must not forget that Westerners also publicly exhibited their own as oddities and 'freaks.' So-called sideshows were staples of the circus even as late as when I was a teen (and may still be today, for all I know.)

The descriptions written and ideas held by Europeans and Americans about captive peoples and the 'civilizations' (not a word used by the captors, by the by) from which they came, tell us more, I believe, about many of these Westerner's lack of observational skills and their prejudices than about the subjects themselves. An excellent example of this is to be found in William Parker Snow's, *A few remarks on the wild tribes of Tierra del Fuego from personal observation*. (Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London, Vol. 1, 1861, pp. 261-67.) Snow visited the southern tip of South America in 1855 and was familiar with Charles Darwin's HMS Beagle impressions of the Fuegians. Darwin's published impression is so interesting it bears repeating:

"These poor wretches were stunted in their growth, their hideous faces bedaubed with white paint, their skins filthy and greasy, their hair entangled, their voices discordant and their gestures violent. Viewing such men, one can hardly make oneself believe that they are fellow-creatures, and inhabitants of the same world. It is a common subject of conjecture what pleasure in life some of the lower animals can enjoy: how much more reasonably the same question may be asked of these barbarians! At night, five or six human beings, naked and scarcely protected from the wind and rain of this tempestuous climate, sleep on the wet ground coiled up like animals." (Darwin, C., *The Voyage of the Beagle: Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited During the Voyage of HMS Beagle Round the World, Under the Command of Captain FitzRoy*, R. (1845).

London: Wordsworth Classics reprint; 1997. Pages 203-204.)

Darwin's immediate response to the Fuegians can be read in a letter to his cousin, William Darwin Fox: "In Tierra del I first saw bona fide savages; & they are as savage as the most curious person would desire.— A wild man is indeed a miserable animal, but one well worth seeing.—" (Darwin Letter 207, 23 May 1833, paragraph 4. *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin. Volume 1, 1821-1836*. Cambridge University Press; 1985.) He also, mistakenly, believed the Fuegians to be cannibals with only about one hundred words in their language.

William Parker Snow had different observations, however. He wrote,

"... many of the Fuegians on the Eastern Islands were fine and some of them even handsome fellows. This I know to be rather different to what Mr. Darwin says of them: but I can only speak as I found, and thus mention what I myself saw.... The actual difference between a savage and a civilized man is simply the degree of cultivation given to the mind. In all other respects the savage at home is identical with the savage abroad.... In speaking of these savages, I cannot help saying that I do not consider them so degraded as many persons do. I look from effect to cause, and thus trace their present condition to the nature of circumstances." (Snow, *ibid.*)

Further, Lucas Bridges, who was reared in Patagonia amongst the Fuegians and spoke their language, pointed out that the Fuegian language, unlike what was believed by Darwin and others, was every bit as complex as any other and, in fact, more specific than English in regard to their surroundings. Darwin had written, "The language of these people, according to our notions, scarcely deserves to be called articulate. Captain Cook has compared it to a man clearing his throat, but certainly no European ever cleared his throat with so many hoarse, guttural, and clicking sounds." (*The Voyage of the Beagle*) Yet, it turns out, as explained by Bridges, that Fuegians have a variety of words for beach, depending on the position of the speaker relative to a beach and as many as fifty different words describing family relationships. There are numerous other examples. (Lucas Bridges, *Uttermost Part of the Earth*, London: Hodder & Stoughton; 1948, pp. 34-35.)

The above passages are all the more remarkable in that we think of Darwin as a man of enlightenment in these matters. But Darwin's contact with the Fuegians came early in his travels and, although he did not much alter his opinions of them, he did come out as a progressive on slavery and a variety of other social issues. For me, the above is illustrative of what happens when we let ourselves be led by stereotype: "an exaggerated belief associated with a category ... [whose] function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category." (Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Boston: 1954, page 191.) In other words, a fixed mental impression that may, or, as the word is usually used, may not, be true.

While we are on Darwin, we may as well begin our series of essays describing natives on display by examining his famous Beagle voyage and the pertinent incidents that led to it. Aboard the ship for Darwin's journey were three Fuegians who had been taken from Patagonia by Captain Robert FitzRoy on his previous survey voyage. On that trip FitzRoy had assumed command after the suicide of the Beagle's Captain, Pringle Stokes.

During this earlier voyage to the tip of South America there was an incident where the small survey whaleboat used by the Beagle's crew had been stolen while beached during a storm between Christmas and New Years 1829. In the subsequent search for the never-found boat, FitzRoy came upon its baggage in many of the searched Fuegian canoes. As recovery efforts continued FitzRoy began to take natives aboard to assist in the search. As they soon discovered they were actually 'hostages' being held in exchange for the return of the boat. When he finally gave up the fruitless effort three natives were still on board. It is humorous to read Gertrude Himmelfarb on the first attempt at holding the hostages:

"In 1828, soon after he [FitzRoy] had succeeded to the command of the Beagle, he had taken these hostages in reprisal for the theft of one of his Majesty's whaleboats ... Unfortunately, such disciplinary measures were lost on the Fuegians, who proceeded to make a farce of the affair when the adult prisoners, after eating the best meal of their lives, jumped overboard and swam home, leaving the captain with an eight-year old girl [Fuegia Basket] and three bawling infants. The girl remained, while the infants were forced upon


some reluctant natives (their parents having refused to claim them)." (Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books; 1959, p. 71.)

The most famous of the Fuegians taken to England was the last taken aboard, O'run-del'lico, a 14 year old boy who came to be called Jemmy Button. Jemmy and the group he was with paddled up to the Beagle to trade fish. They were given some pearls and buttons in exchange and Jemmy, with others, was invited aboard. After he seemed disinclined to leave, and, according to FitzRoy, his family not seeming to mind, he joined the other three Fuegians as permanent ship's residents. He was christened Button in note of what had been paid for him. His companions were 8-9-year-old Fuegia Basket (Yok'cushly), 24-26-year-old York Minster (El'leparu) and 19-20-year-old Boat Memory (real name unknown.) In the end, FitzRoy decided to take the captives back to England with him to not only show them off but teach them Christianity so that they might return to Patagonia and spread the good word. Toward this effort he undertook all expenses related to the Fuegians on the five month long journey back to England (their being taken found in disfavor, post-fact, by the Admiralty.)



Jemmy Button drawn by Captain Robert FitzRoy and published in his Narrative, 1839. Courtesy Wilbur Norman.

Boat Memory died of smallpox in the first two weeks of landing. One of the naval doctors caring for the Fuegians actually took Fuegia Basket to meet his daughter who had measles to see if Fuegia would be infected! Fortunately, she was not. As children Fuegia and Jemmy proved very popular and were soon enrolled in a pre-school so that they might be taught English and, in FitzRoy's words, "the plainer truths



of Christianity.” By the summer of 1831 they had progressed sufficiently to be presented to King William IV and Queen Adelaide. The Queen presented Fuegia with some money and a bonnet.

York Minster (named after a rock outcropping where he was met with that resembled the patronymic cathedral) was proving more troublesome. As a full adult he was not fawned over like the two children. To further strain matters, something, probably sexual, occurred between him and Fuegia that was hushed up by a very exercised RitzRoy. The solution, agreed to by the Admiralty, was to pack the Fuegians off to their home in South American in the care of an apprentice missionary. FitzRoy would again command the hastily prepared Beagle and managed to get the commission morphed into not only a continuation of the South American survey but a scientific expedition around the world. This is the voyage we all know as the famous one; Charles Darwin was eventually settled upon as FitzRoy’s gentleman companion and the vessel’s naturalist. (Young Darwin lucked out as no established scientist could be found to undertake the rigors of such a trip.) They departed December 27, 1831, the second anniversary of the theft of the Beagle’s whaleboat, the incident that began the experiment in ‘civilizing a savage’ in the first place.

The end of the tale of Jemmy, Fuegia, and York Minster is a sad one. How does one, taken at a young age from one’s family, environment... language even, cope, when returned to one’s original place of birth? Find out in the next ATADA News as this series on The Human Zoo continues!

NOTE: Liberal use, to flesh out details, has been made of Peter Nichols, *Darwins Kapitän. Die tragische Geschichte des Mannes, der an Darwins Entdeckungen zerbrach*. Hamburg: Europa Verlag GmbH; 2004.

Future installments in this series will cover Chang & Eng, the original Siamese Twins; Admiral Robert Peary and Minik; Ota Benga; Abraham Ulrikab; Ishi; and the Hottentot Venus, Sarah ‘Saartjie’ Baartman.

