

Entertainment and the Darwinian 'roots' of multiculturalism

by Denise M. Henderson

Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo

by Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume
St. Martin's Press, New York, 1992
281 pages, hardbound, \$22.95

This book should be required reading for anyone who still believes that the theories of Charles Darwin about the so-called origin of species have any claim to scientific validity, whether in their original form or in the currently fashionable sanitized versions. In the United States, the early 1900s became the last gasp of the generation which had either fought in or lived through the Civil War; only 35 years after the "War of the Rebellion," although many Americans still remembered the values that President Abraham Lincoln and their own fathers had represented, a new "culture" was on the rise. That "culture" included everything from so-called "popular" spectacles to the transformation of ethnology, once considered a crackpot ideology, into anthropology and Darwinism—still a crackpot ideology science, but one that was beginning to gain acceptance as a "science" among certain universities, particularly in New York and Chicago.

The assassination of President McKinley in 1901 aided in the transformation of values in the United States under the "New Age" President Theodore Roosevelt, a blatant racist who encouraged the degradation of the non-Anglo-Saxon "races," and whose personal style could only be described as brutish.

There had already risen in late-19th-century America, before the movies and television, magic lantern shows (some of which had the characteristics of a primitive movie), expositions and fairs, and "freak shows." There were many such shows available at any given time in medium and large U.S. cities. Co-existing with these "entertainments" were vaudeville (in which black-faced "minstrel singers" appeared) and circuses.

Thus post-Civil War America was already being flooded with a pseudo-culture (today designated "popular" culture) which, wittingly or not, began to implant a baser concept of man than that which had impelled the Founding Fathers to declare, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men

are created equal."

The theme of many of these fairs and expositions, after the pro-technology 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, were more and more "new age" or "multicultural," but emphasizing as well the supposed "natural superiority" of the white race. The 1892 Columbus Exposition in Chicago, for example, was one of the first to include exhibitions of human beings from all parts of the globe. Madame Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the irrationalist Theosophical Movement was present; so were swamis and gurus from India, all with their alternative lifestyles, cultures, and religions.

The theme of that exposition was carried to new heights of sensationalism in 1904 at the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Centennial Exhibition, which took place just one year after TR had taken the presidential office. This exhibition, mixing the theme of Darwinism with just plain "freak-show" sensationalism, announced that it was going to put on display a *living exhibition* of mankind, from the "lowliest" form of humanoid evolved from the ape—the pygmy—to the "highest,"—the "giant" Patagonian Indians. "A New Orleans paper pointed out that pygmies and other guests of the Anthropology Department were to be subjected to tests of 'power of acuteness of vision, delicateness of hearing, sensitiveness to touch and temperature, quickness of response to sense impressions, etc.'" The result would be a statistical method of distinguishing 'the savage from the enlightened man,' a numerical index of 'what may be called the citizen value of an individual,' report authors Bradford and Blume.

Col. William McGee, the head of the Anthropology Department of the Louisiana Exposition, as a conscious defender of Darwinism, retained Samuel Verner, who had been a missionary for several years in Africa, to bring back "One Pygmy Patriarch or chief, One adult woman, preferably his wife . . . Two infants, of women in the expedition" and "Four more Pygmies, preferably adult but young, including a priestess and a priest, or medicine doctors, preferably old," from the Congo Free State which was then under the personal rule of King Leopold II of Belgium, who was known for his brutalization of Africans in his pursuit for more and more of Africa's wealth—be it in the form of rubber, diamonds, copper, or other raw materials.

Samuel Verner, who had gone to the Congo in 1896 after

barely recovering from a nervous breakdown, eagerly offered his services, for a price, to carry out this mission. During his first visit, Verner had taught himself the pygmies' language and had been made a brother of the Batwa tribe's chief, Ndombe. He had also contracted malaria.

Unlike most other missionaries to the Congo, Verner had managed not to alienate the murderous King Leopold, and thus knew he could return to the Congo without fear of reprisal. (It is perhaps no surprise that Verner sided with Leopold and other international financial cartels throughout his life; during his breakdown in 1892, he believed he was a "Hapsburg Emperor"—Maximilian of Mexico, perhaps? Later in his life, Leopold would refuse Verner entry into the Congo on the grounds that "he knew too much," probably about Leopold's murderous labor practices.)

As Verner's first acquisition for McGee, he purchased the pygmy Ota Benga, whose tribe, including his wife and children, had been slaughtered by Leopold's Force Publique, from slave traders.

Ota Benga tells the story of what happened to one pygmy, whom Verner apparently first fantasized would be "His Man Friday" à la Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The sections

of the book dealing with Ota are unsatisfactory, mainly because they are conjecture: Whereas there are several published sources on Verner, (including a memoir which Verner addressed to an unknown future relative and left in the care of New York City's Museum of Natural History until his grandson, Phillips Verner Bradford, showed up to investigate him), the authors can only speculate on how and what Ota was thinking. Ota never left a memoir, nary a letter; therefore, we are left with the authors putting words and thoughts into his long-gone mind.

Torment and mockery

Of Verner, however, and of turn-of-the-century America, we can learn a lot. It was a society attracted to spectacles; 18 million people passed through the St. Louis Exposition. They pulled and tugged at the pygmies, forced them out of their huts in the dead of winter, poked them, laughed at them, and treated them as if they were animals. They treated Geronimo, who had been reduced to selling bows and arrows, the same way, although his manner tended to intimidate.

When the St. Louis pygmies tried to assert their dignity

New York Times defends Bronx Zoo brutality

The appendix of Ota Benga includes a wealth of documentary correspondence and news articles. In 1906, when a group of black Baptist ministers protested Ota's being placed in a cage with apes and monkeys at the New York Zoological Garden in the Bronx, the New York Times editorialized that September:

Mr. Hornaday [director of the Zoological Society] seems to have been little disturbed by the indignant comments which his exhibition of an African homunculus [sic] in rather close association with his big monkeys has excited, but the chances are that he will soon find it judicious to heed them and close this part of his show. . . . To be sure, the expressions of horror and rage are sometimes laboriously emitted, and they are justified by eloquence which deals little with fact and much with fancy, but there is some sincerity in it all, and we do not know of any measurable benefits to science that will accrue from the continued display of Ota Benga as the playmate of an orang-outang. . . .

It is amusing to note that one reverend colored brother objects to this curious exhibition on the ground that it is an impious effort to lend credibility to Darwin's dreadful

theories. To find that there are still alive those who do not accept the greatest of generalizations as a matter of course is now almost as startling as it was in our grandfather's day to find any respectable person who did. The reverend colored brother should be told that evolution, in one form or another, is now taught in the text books of all the schools, and that it is no more debatable than the multiplication table.

The New York Journal of Sept. 17, on the other hand, wrote:

The gentlemen in charge of the Zoological Garden . . . have been exhibiting in a cage of monkeys, a small human dwarf from Africa.

Their idea, probably, was to inculcate some profound lesson in evolution.

As a matter of fact, the only result achieved has been to hold up to scorn the African race, which deserves at least sympathy and kindness from the whites of this country, after all the brutality it has suffered here. . . .

It is shameful and disgusting that the misfortune, the physical deficiency, of a human being, created by the same Force that put us all here and endowed with the same feelings and the same soul, should be locked in a cage with monkeys and made a public mockery . . . and this newspaper indorses most earnestly the action of clergymen and others of the Afro-American race in protesting so vigorously against it.

as best they knew how, they were denounced in the press as “savages,” “cannibals”; the same scenes were repeated when Ota was tricked into the Monkey House to become a live human exhibit at the Bronx Zoo in 1906. At the zoo, where Ota was exhibited alone, Director Michael Hornaday—who had close ties to the anthropology mafia at Columbia University and the Museum of Natural History—even ordered that bones be scattered in Ota’s cage (to which he was confined when he became angry about his treatment at the hands of spectators), to give him a more savage aspect.

In this P.T. Barnum context, the reader can only respect a group of African-American Baptist ministers led by Rev. James H. Gordon, who took on, without any help from New York City’s white liberals (even the mayor chose to abstain), the Bronx Zoo and by implication the anthropology mafia, including Henry Fairfield Osborn, a prominent eugenicist and founder of the Nazi race science movement. It was their decision to intervene on Ota’s behalf which forced Hornaday to back down from his exhibition of Ota: Ota standing next to an orangutan; Ota holding his “little brother” the chimpanzee; Ota shooting arrows; Ota “aping” the “superior” white people who gathered around to mock him.

The ministers succeeded in freeing Ota, who had been virtually abandoned by Verner at this point. Verner had accepted an offer to engage in research on malaria (he was a victim of its recurring symptoms) during the digging of the Panama Canal, under the supervision of Col. W.C. Gorgas. Ota had thus no “blood brothers” with whom to speak his own language. After several years at an orphanage in Brooklyn and on Long Island, he was shipped off to a seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia, where, although he was allowed to resume the ways of the pygmy hunter and had several protectors and friends, he committed suicide seven years later, in 1916.

One feature of Ota’s life, which is mentioned by Bradford and Blume over and over in a non-judgmental way, is that Ota’s (and that of his tribe in Africa) chief form of recreation was smoking bangi, i.e., marijuana. Ota brought plants and seeds with him from Africa, and planted them everywhere: at the orphanage, at the Bronx Zoo, in the forest on the outskirts of Lynchburg. The authors make no comment on this whatsoever, even though today it is well known that marijuana used over a long period of time produces mind-damaging effects which harm one’s ability to make moral judgments. Could Ota’s powers of reason have been dimmed by marijuana, thus making him more prone—alone as he was, barely able to get by in English—to suicide? Given the widespread acceptance of marijuana today, I think that this is a glaring defect in a book which otherwise fascinates and makes one wonder—not so much about pygmies—but: What is it in American culture that permits us to tolerate everything from a King Leopold’s “labor system” to the abuse of human beings on the grounds of “scientific study” or out-and-out racism?

The death of ‘Topsy’

Another interesting sidelight of *Ota Benga* is its description of the electrocution of Coney Island’s main attraction, its elephant Topsy, who had become a danger to the people it was supposed to entertain. The preplanned electrocution occurred in 1903, at just about the time when the electric chair was being introduced as a means of carrying out the death penalty. Could this spectacular means of disposing of an out-of-control elephant have been designed to publicize the supposed “benefits” of death by electrocution?

Verner lived to the age of 70, dying in 1943, which is why his grandson, Phillips Verner Bradford, was able to know him. Bradford recounts his grandfather telling him more than once “that no one, including me, gets to choose their parents.”

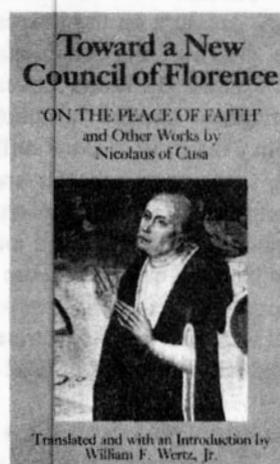
That is certainly true; and certainly imbedded within one’s family history, are cultural and political assumptions which are passed on from generation to generation. But an innate characteristic of human beings, is their ability to change—for the worse or for the better. One can only hope that Americans who read this book will reflect upon their own internal tendencies toward sensationalism and bestialism, which are manipulated and played upon daily by the One-Eyed Monster which inhabits almost every American family’s living room, television, and turn away from that, to recapture the powers of reason, invention, and creativity—powers which allow every man and woman to realize his or her humanity.

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