

7

From Scientific Racism to Popular and Colonial Racism in France and the West

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In two preliminary publications in 2000 and 2001 we examined the nature of 'human zoos' and the impact of these exhibitions in the West.¹ Key questions concerned their effects on our relationship with the Other; on inter-colonial relations; and on the schism which occurred in the course of the nineteenth century between the West and 'elsewhere'. We attempted, there, to demonstrate that, in barely half a century, a shift occurred in what we described as 'human zoos' (in a wide sense of the term), from a form of racism which was exclusively scientific in nature to a popular racism, which spread rapidly, taking root throughout Europe. This shift began with exhibits in the zoological gardens of the middle of the century and ended with the great universal and colonial exhibitions of the first third of the twentieth century, with the 'freak show' as its intermediate form.

Anthropozoological exhibitions were the first points of mass contact between so-called exotic worlds and large swathes of the population of Europe (from Paris to Moscow). As such, they established a relationship with the Other which would last for several decades and which was founded on the twin processes of objectification and domination. By staging a world in which the divide between civilized peoples and 'savages' was clear to see, they contributed to the legitimization of the colonial project and to interracial xenophobia. This text is reproduced here, with additional contextual information and materials from the lively debates at the Marseille conference of June 2001.²

Difference: collect it, examine it, measure it and promote it

The appearance, and increasing success, of the fashion for human zoos resulted from the conjunction of three concomitant processes: the

construction of a social imagination of the Other (whether colonized or not); the scientific theorization of the 'hierarchy of races' in the wake of advances in physical anthropology; and the construction of a fast growing colonial empire. Over a relatively short period of about fifty years, these three elements formed the basis of a model which has yet to be deconstructed, and whose repercussions are still to be felt.

The idea of promoting a zoological show of exotic peoples emerged in several European countries in the 1870s (although its origins went back to the beginning of the nineteenth century), as well as in the United States, in particular through the agency of the famous P. T. Barnum, who had been one of the first to set up 'living museums', to popular acclaim.³ In Germany, from 1874, Carl Hagenbeck, a dealer in wild animals and the future promoter of the major European zoos, decided to create regular exhibits of Lapps (Sami) and Samoans, who were presented as 'entirely natural' peoples for the entertainment of visitors avid for new sensation. The success of these first exhibitions led him, in 1876, to send one of his colleagues to the Egyptian Sudan in order to bring back animals and Nubians to renew the display. The latter embarked on a tour which took in various capital cities such as Paris, London and Berlin and, like most of the peoples put on show by Hagenbeck, were immediately successful throughout Europe.

This success undoubtedly influenced Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, director of the Paris Zoological Gardens (the Jardin zoologique d'acclimatation), who was looking for new attractions to improve his establishment's problematic finances. Noticing, moreover, that the 'native' camel drivers provoked greater curiosity in their audience than the animals they were accompanying at a Parisian display, he decided to organize two 'ethnological shows' at the Zoological Gardens in 1877, presenting groups of 'Nubians' and 'Eskimos' (Inuit). The shows were an immense success. Attendance at the Gardens doubled and in that year reached a million paying visitors. Parisians rushed to discover what the general press described as a 'band of exotic animals, accompanied by no less singular individuals'. From 1877 to 1912, about thirty 'ethnological exhibitions' of this type were put on at the Zoological Gardens (Blanchard 2001) with repeated success, making it the main site (in terms of numbers and number of shows) for human zoos in France.

Many other venues would soon promote similar shows, or would adapt them to more political ends, for example the Parisian Universal Exhibitions of 1878, 1889 (this exhibition presented a 'negro village' with 400 'native' performers as one of its chief attractions) and 1900, where 50 million visitors saw the famous living Diorama of Madagascar. The

exhibits continued in the later colonial exhibitions in Marseille in 1906 and 1922, and in Paris in 1907 and 1931. Certain venues specialized in lighter entertainment, such as the Champ de Mars, the Folies Bergère and Magic City, while the Porte Saint-Martin theatre presented the reconstruction of the defeat of Behanzin's Dahomeans by the French army. In order to respond to a more commercial market and to the draw of the provinces, regional fairs and exhibitions soon became the major promotional sites for such shows. As part of this process, troupes were quickly put together. They moved between exhibitions and regional fairgrounds, and the famous 'black' or 'Senegalese villages' became popular, appearing, for example, at the Lyon exhibition of 1894. Henceforth, there was not a town or exhibition which did not have its 'exact' reconstruction of 'savage' lands, allowing all French citizens to view the exotic human and animal inhabitants of such lands between an agricultural competition, Sunday Mass and a walk beside the lake. It was in this context that millions of French men and women, between 1877 and the early 1930s, encountered the Other. This was a staged Other, whether it was a strange people from the far corners of the earth or a native of the empire, and for most of those in the home country it represented the first contact with difference. The social impact of these shows in the construction of the image of the Other appears considerable, all the more so because they were combined at that time with an omnipresent colonial propaganda (conveyed through word and image), which profoundly influenced the imagination of the French.

With the establishment of colonial empires, power of representation over the Other was asserted in a new political context and in a period of unprecedented territorial expansion. The key turning-point remained colonization, for it demanded that the Other be dominated, tamed and, consequently, represented. Superposed over earlier ambivalent images of the 'savage', which were marked by both a negative difference from and positive memories of Rousseau's myth of the 'noble savage', there now lay a new vision which clearly stigmatized 'exotic' peoples. In this new order, images were used to inferiorize the native, and human zoos unquestionably played a significant role in the construction of paradigms relating to colonized peoples.

It is an irony of history that these troupes who crossed Europe (and even the Atlantic) often stayed away from their home countries for ten to fifteen years and accepted their own staging in return for payment in hard cash. Behind the scenes of savagery in the zoo, the 'savage' demanded a salary from the organizers.⁴

The ethnological shows of the last third of the nineteenth century were

the product of a specific scientific and media-related context. Indeed, a popular racism appeared in the general press and public opinion, constituting a backdrop to colonial conquest. All the major media, from the most popular illustrated papers (such as *Le Petit Parisien* and *Le Petit Journal*), to publications with claims to scientific content (such as *La Nature*, or *La Science amusante*), not forgetting papers devoted to voyages of exploration (such as *Le Tour du Monde*, and *Le Journal des Voyages*), portrayed exotic peoples as the relics of early states of humankind. Their vocabulary stigmatized savagery ('bestiality', 'bloodthirstiness', 'mystic fetishism', 'atavistic stupidity') and was reinforced by an iconographic production of unprecedented violence, giving credit to the concept of a stagnant sub-humanity that was to be found at the furthest-most boundaries of empire, existing on the margin between the human and the animal (Bancel, Blanchard and Gervereau 1993).

At the same time, the inferiorization of 'exotic' peoples was reinforced by the trinity of positivism, evolutionism and racism, in a period where knowledge of the Other was in its infancy. Indeed, the members of the Société d'Anthropologie (founded in 1859, at the same time as the Zoological Gardens) often attended exhibitions for anthropological research purposes. Physical anthropologists obsessively sought to establish a racial hierarchy, with the consequence that 'race' became a central paradigm in explanatory theories of human diversity. Human zoos provided a representation of this classification of the 'races of man', creating a metaphor of the evolutionary model. Such categorization was to be found in the planning of the Parisian human zoos and acted as the major influence on the ideology of such shows. When, for example, the Cossacks were invited to the Zoological Gardens, the Russian Embassy insisted that they should not be mixed up with 'negroes' from Africa. Likewise, when Buffalo Bill arrived with his troupe, his place in the Zoological Gardens was assured by the presence of Native Americans in his show. The system of racial differentiation became firmly entrenched in the collective conscious at this time. Highly significantly, exhibitions of so-called monsters (dwarves and Lilliputians in the Zoological Gardens in 1909; hunchbacks or giants in the many itinerant fairs; macrocephalics or 'negro' albinos in Paris in 1912) were extremely popular, accompanying and merging with the outstanding success of the human zoos. It is probable that a dialectic relationship developed between eugenics, social Darwinism and the belief in a racial hierarchy. It is likewise probable that their proponents experienced a common distress when faced with difference, a distress which found its outlet in a non-egalitarian rationalization of

the 'races', stigmatizing both the 'degenerate' and the 'native'.

Scientific discourse, by legitimizing colonial domination through its theory of racial inequality, and by relentlessly rationalizing racism, created a truly horrifying vision of the world. These exhibitions provided a partial, but nevertheless crucial explanation which popularized evolutionist ideas on race. Through them, 'anthropological discoveries' attracted a large and captivated audience while conveying a clear hierarchical message promoting Western hegemony. They thus popularized the principle of the inequality of 'human races' and partly justified (by illustrating it) the domination associated with colonization in the context of the Third Republic's 'civilizing mission'.

Human zoos, quite obviously, combine scientific detachment and popular hierarchical racism, both of which are carried on the tide of colonial expansion. The 'ethnological exhibitions' in the Parisian Zoological Gardens provided a remarkable indicator of this combination. They were legitimized by the Société d'Anthropologie, whose members saw the different imported peoples as living specimens to be exploited in their own research. Even though, between 1890 and 1900, the Society clearly became more circumspect with regard to the 'scientific' nature of such shows, it could not help but appreciate the research potential of this stream of peoples from all the corners of the earth. The break would eventually result from the growing outlandishness of these entertainments and their increasingly popular and theatrical nature.

Taming the 'Savage'

The staging of these shows, along with the exhibitions at the Champ de Mars and the Folies Bergère, involved an increasingly complex portrayal of 'savagery'. Baroque props, frenetic dances, and simulations of 'bloody combats' or 'cannibal rites', were accompanied by advertising programmes which emphasized 'cruelty', 'barbarity' and 'inhuman customs' (human sacrifice and ritual scarring). During the period between 1890 and the First World War, a particularly bloody image of the savage dominated. Put together with no concern for ethnological authenticity, human zoos repeated, developed, updated and legitimized the most unhealthy racist stereotypes, which constituted the imaginary Other during the period of colonial conquest. Indeed, it is essential to emphasize that the 'supply' of these 'natives' closely followed the overseas conquests of the French Republic, was approved by the colonial administration, and supported the French colonial project. Thus, for example, the Tuareg were exhibited in Paris during the months

which followed the French capture of Timbuktu in 1894; Madagascans appeared a year after the occupation of their island; and the success of the famous Abomey Amazons followed the much publicized defeat of Behanzin by the French army in Dahomey. The will to degrade the Other, to reduce him or her to the level of a beast, but also the need to glorify France abroad in the frenzy of ultra-nationalism which followed France's defeat by Prussia in 1870, was fully supported by the press, which depicted the colonists as faced by raging, cruel 'natives', who were blinded by fetishism and lusting for blood. Quite different 'exotic' peoples thus tended to be shown in the same unflattering light,⁵ all the 'races' being presented in a uniform, caricatural way which made them almost indistinguishable from each other. Between 'them' and 'us', there was now a barrier which could not be crossed.

Without doubt, the 'savages' brought to the West were an attraction, but they nevertheless provoked a feeling of fear. Their actions and movements had to be strictly controlled. They were presented as completely alien and their European surroundings obliged them to act as such, since they were forbidden to show any signs of cultural integration for as long as the show lasted. Thus, at the turn of the century, in most instances, it was unthinkable that they should mingle spontaneously with the visitors, and usually few opportunities for such contact were provided. They were made up to conform to the most recent stereotypes and were equipped in the most outlandish manner possible. Furthermore, the exhibited peoples had to remain within a clearly circumscribed area of the exhibition space (they had to pay a fine, which was subtracted from their wages, for any infraction), marking the intangible frontier between their worlds and that of the citizens who came to see them. A frontier, both physical and mental, was established between the 'savage' and civilized worlds, between nature and culture.

The most striking element of this brutal animalization of the Other was the reaction of the public. During these years of daily exhibitions, very few journalists, politicians or scientists showed concern for the sanitary conditions of the 'natives', or for their confinement, both of which often had catastrophic results. Indeed, many deaths occurred among the visiting peoples, for example, among the Kaliña Indians on show in Paris in 1892 (Collomb 1995), who were unused to the European climate. A small number of writers did, nevertheless, emphasize the fear caused by these shows, noting that visitors would throw food or trinkets to those on show, comment on their physical appearance by comparing them with apes (adopting one of the mantras of the physical anthropologists, eager to flush out the 'simian characteristics' of the

'savages'), or laugh heartily at the sight of a sick and trembling African in his hut. These descriptions – albeit incomplete – are sufficient to demonstrate the success of the latent racialization of minds among contemporary visitors. In this context, the empire could start work with a clear conscience, creating internal structures which allowed judicial, political and economic inequalities between Europeans and 'natives', founded on an endemic racism.

Human zoos clearly tell us nothing about the 'exotic' populations exhibited. However, they are an extraordinary tool for analysing Western attitudes from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1930s, and for exposing declarations of popular racism in almost all the countries of the West. The aim of these zoos, exhibitions and parks was, essentially, to display the rare, the curious and the strange as expressions of the unusual and the different, set in opposition to a rational construction of the world that operated according to European standards (McClintock 1994). It is reasonable to ask what the meaning of these frenzied performances was. Were they not, in the end, the reverse image of the very real ferocity of colonial conquest itself? Can we not see in them the will, whether deliberate or subconscious, to legitimize the brutality of the conquerors by animalizing the conquered? It is probable that a central concept was that of the establishment of two distinct racial worlds: the world of the colonizers and that of the natives; that of a ruling civilization and that of a subjugated group. From this perspective, the use of language relating to the transgression of the sacred is a useful indicator, and the recurrence of the theme of cannibalism in these shows is revealing. While almost nothing was known at the end of the nineteenth century about this highly ritualized social practice, which was, in any case, extremely limited in sub-Saharan Africa, images of 'savage cannibals' pervaded every medium and were one of the greatest selling points for human zoos right up to the Paris Exposition Coloniale Internationale of 1931, where Kanaks were exhibited on the fringes (see Daeninckx 1998).

The Paris exhibition of 1878 marked the appearance of one of the first 'negro villages', legitimized by its appearance in this institutional setting. These villages would subsequently become an essential and inevitable feature of all exhibitions, whether colonial, international, universal or regional. Indeed, from the 1890s until the beginning of the Second World War, the number of exhibitions would increase, in particular colonial exhibitions. In almost every one, a 'negro', 'Indo-Chinese', 'Arab' or 'Kanak village' would be on offer to the curious eye of the visitor. Simultaneously, 'negro' then 'black' then 'Senegalese' villages (the interesting semantic shift took place following the First

World War) were turned into independent travelling attractions in the French regions, throughout Europe, and in the United States. Often shows would succeed each other, year after year, as four or five distinct troupes worked their way between the major regional exhibitions, such as Amiens, Angers, Nantes, Reims, Le Mans, Nice, Clermont-Ferrand, Lyon, Lille, Nogent and Orléans, and the chief European cities, such as Hamburg, Anvers, Barcelona, London, Berlin and Milan, where as many as two to three hundred thousand visitors would attend each exhibition. Here, the decors were more 'ethnographic', and the 'villages' resembled card and paste sets worthy of contemporary Hollywood productions on Darkest Africa, anticipating an extremely rich crop of films on the theme in both Europe and the United States. Gradually, the fantastical reconstructions of 'native dances'⁶ and famous historic episodes (the capture of Samory seems to have been a great morale booster) became less common.

Clearly, a new situation was emerging, where the 'savage' became peaceful (once again) and cooperative, mirroring the French Empire, which, on the eve of the First World War, was officially portrayed as completely and permanently under control. This was, in fact, the moment at which the limits of the Empire were finally set. Expansion was replaced by the 'civilizing mission', whose discourse was passionately defended by the colonial exhibitions. The soldier was succeeded by the administrator. Under the beneficent influence of the French Enlightenment, followed by a colonizing French Republic, 'natives' were put firmly back at the bottom of the scale of civilizations, while racist themes were cloaked in euphemism.

The 'negro' or 'black villages' were the sanitized successors to the human zoos of the preceding period, and the violently humiliating vision of the zoos was replaced by a less brutal objectification of the colonized peoples, as their image was re-orchestrated to respond to a new set of audience expectations. Certainly, the colonized native remained an inferior being, but he was tamed (as a step on the road to colonial redemption), and was now found to be possessed of a potential for evolutionary improvement, which justified the colonial act. This new perception of the 'native Other' would reach its peak at the 1931 Vincennes Exposition Coloniale Internationale, which, covering hundreds of hectares, was the most highly developed form of the human zoo, under the guise of colonial achievement and republican sainthood.

This exploration of some of the complex interdependences between the colonial endeavour, scientific movements and the visual appropriation of 'different' cultures in the context of ethnographic exhibitions

and native villages allows us to understand to what extent those peoples put on show in the West were objectivized, decontextualized and racialized, stranded in an eternal backwater which justified the 'civilizing mission' of the colonizer. Human zoos were a new and essential cultural phenomenon, both in their vast scale, and in their contribution to our understanding of how the relationship with the Other was constructed in colonial France and across Europe. In fact, most archetypes generated by the human zoos can be said to represent the root of a collective unconscious (whose many faces change over time), which urgently needs to be understood today (Blanchard and Bancel 1998b). A century later, these types are still operative in different forms (cinema, television, the print media, stereotypes of the Other).

Human zoos can be seen as the crucial link between a nineteenth century that created the theory of the hierarchy of races and a twentieth century that put it into practice, from the heights of colonial empire to today's so-called 'war of civilizations'. This requires an examination of the manner in which racializing Western discourses were constructed and how and where they spread. This, in our view, is the most important aspect of human zoos: they reveal the basis on which we construct the Other.

Notes

- 1 The initial summary article on human zoos appeared in *Le Monde diplomatique* in Summer 2000 (Bancel, Blanchard and Lemaire 2000), while the study of their impact is to be found in a special issue of the same publication 'Polémiques sur l'histoire coloniale' (Blanchard, Bancel and Lemaire 2001).
- 2 This conference, 'Zoos Humains. Corps exotiques, corps enfermés, corps mesurés' [Human Zoos. Exotic Bodies, Incarcerated Bodies, Measured Bodies], brought together about fifty international specialists in the fields of colonial history and imagination, the representation of the Other, and the history of the social sciences.
- 3 Across Europe and in the United States, individuals, families and small troupes had formed exhibits from the beginning of the nineteenth century, appearing in fairs, circuses, other zoos, and also in touring shows such as those in Germany and Switzerland (Brändle 1995; see also the many contributions to the Marseille conference). They were not yet linked to the colonial project, or to the assertion of a structured racial discourse. They nevertheless foreshadowed later developments which would continue through the last third of the nineteenth century.
- 4 Not all the 'imported' groups had an exclusive and unique status. The Fuegians, for example, appear to have been 'transported' as genuine zoological specimens, whereas the 'Gauchos', who were closer to contracted artistes, were fully aware of the masquerade they were putting on for visitors.

- 5 See Blanchard, Blanchoin et al, 1996, in particular the articles by Beaugé on images and types; Coutancier and Barthe on the representation of the Other in the Paris Zoological Gardens; Collomb on photography; Dauphiné on the Kanaks, and Blanchard and Blanchoin on the idea of races in the French colonial imagination.
- 6 Some idea of these can be gleaned from the famous film, made by a Lumière operator in Lyon in 1897, of an Ashanti procession which had been reconstructed for the spectators and the camera.