

A Gorilla Takes On Civilization—Sort Of

Book review

John Zerzan

1995

a review of

Ishmael, Daniel Quinn, 1993, Bantam/Turner, New York, 262 pp., \$6.00.

Ishmael is a gorilla who places classified ads in search of those who would learn “how to save the world.” The narrator of Daniel Quinn’s critique of civilization is the (human) applicant to Ishmael’s one-gorilla school on what went wrong with humanity. In Socratic dialogue-type style, the nameless student learns the story of how Homo lived as a “Leaver” for two or three million years, only to become a planet-destroying “Taker” in the last 10,000 years.

Quinn, in the “person” of Ishmael, imparts some fundamentally important points concerning the history of our species. He notes for example, that hunter-gatherer Leavers, which is what we humans were until the Agricultural Revolution ushered in civilization about 10,000 years ago, enjoyed a peaceful, secure life of very little work. Of similar importance is his understanding of how civilization arrives: “Throughout history, the only way the Takers [agriculturists] have found to tear them [hunter-gatherers] away from that life is by brute force, by wholesale slaughter.”

The book’s indictment of civilization, then, is far-reaching and implies its fundamental refusal if the planet is to be saved from impending ruin. One concurs that the present is becoming increasingly apocalyptic, with its ensemble of worsening social, psychic, and environmental crises. But how is it that Ishmael garnered the Turner Tomorrow Fellowship, funded by mega-techno-capitalist Ted Turner? A closer look at Quinn’s critique reveals it to be less ferocious or thorough-going than it might initially appear.

For starters, some of his basic terms and descriptions seem inadequate to his task of critical analysis. Employing Leavers and Takers, for example, in lieu of primitive and civilized—or better yet, perhaps, undomesticated and domesticated—blunts or softens Quinn’s contribution. It has the effect of making the crucial distinction less a matter of a qualitative, epochal shift of social existence and more a matter of moral mindset, of mere attitude.

He fudges this divide still further by the method of explicitly renouncing it. More than once, Ishmael says that agriculture itself is not the problem, nor is civilization. He concludes, in fact, in a way that clearly undercuts his entire thrust, by telling his pupil that “if being civilized means anything at all” it should mean peaceful coexistence with nature, respect for diversity, etc.

He also rules out the relevance of the structure and dynamics of society to the possibly terminal crisis of the totality. The challenge of reorienting humanity is portrayed as classless, a “common cause of all.” Deep Ecology is never mentioned, but the entire lesson plan is contained by that ideology, especially the assertion that socio-cultural critique is irrelevant to the degradation of nature. With the argument emasculated in these ways, corporate giants like Ted Turner and Bantam books are not only assuaged, but confer their blessings.

Ishmael, upon closer inspection, announces that all will be fine with a simple change of heart, a dropping of the species-imperialist frame of mind. Real aspects of the real world, such as symbolization, division of labor, hierarchy, the core expansionism of the system of global capital, alienation, to name just a few, need not be mentioned.

Nothing real will need to be jettisoned, apparently, and the new mindset itself ends up sounding very much like the poisonous one we need to reject. An actual reversion to primitive ways would be “inane,” he finds. What is required is that we go “forward” and be “inventive.”

Given the seriousness of the times and the supposed seriousness of Quinn’s intentions, *Ishmael* is a serious disappointment.

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