

Bowling with Bonobo Bashers

Pieter Primatus

In my life I've met only two bonobos face to face. I stared at them and they at me through the glass of their cage in the Berlin Zoo. The experience gave me the same creepy feeling I get whenever I see gorillas or chimps in cages. Their sadness at being confined is obvious, as is their slightly accusatory attitude, which seems to say, "Why me? and why are you free?"

But it was New Years Day 2004, and I had spent Silvesterabend at the Brandenburger Tor, where we sampled the wares of a lot of wine-shops and breathed the sulfur of a lot of exploding cherry bombs. So perhaps it was just my headache, but I can't seem to shake the intelligence in their looks.

I'm admitting from the start that I'm not a professional primatologist. But, like a lot of people, I'm fascinated with the bonobos, the primates with the genetic setup closest to our own, the creatures famous for their peacemaking ability and their general sexiness. They have also improved our understanding of animal intelligence by demonstrating cognition. They did this by raising a ruckus in time to keep zoo keepers from flooding a low area and thus unintentionally drowning a group of small creatures.

The bonobo is also endangered, largely due to the poor peacekeeping abilities of the humans who live near their native habitat. Now, you would think that would be trouble enough for any species, but no, bonobos find themselves in the middle of one of the minor skirmishes of the culture wars.

Several articles have appeared recently (particularly in *The New Yorker* and *Smithsonian*) with the apparent purpose of proving bonobos ain't all they're cracked up to be. The bonobo, with its matriarchal social structure and its hippie-like attitudes (make love, not war) has to be revised to coincide with our contemporary conservative mood. Or, in Hobbesian terms, if we can show that the bonobo's life is short, as well as nasty and brutish, we will win a battle for church, state, and stricter requirements in grade school.

Much of this criticism is aimed at Franz de Waal, who made the bonobo famous in an important study called *Peacemaking Among Primates*. It was there we were first treated to photos of bonobos resolving conflicts by making faces at one another and having intercourse in a variety of interesting positions. De Waal also studied chimps, rhesus monkeys and humans to show the importance of peacemaking techniques in developing cultures. In fact the notion that animals have cultures is radical enough for most of us. True, he did much of his work at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where the primate labs do occasionally smell like weed, but De Waal is a sober scientist, a careful observer who spend years gathering data.

However, as Ian Parker points out in his *New Yorker* article "Swingers" (30 July 2007), De Waal spent very little time watching bonobos in the wild, and he is certainly right to point out that confinement will affect the behavior of animals. So, to correct this, Parker travelled to the Congo with a German primatologist named Gottfried Hohmann, a man who doesn't care much for either the bonobo or its habitat. Parker makes his trip sound like hardship and challenge, much like those embedded journalist who wanted us to believe their flak jackets and helmets would make them aware of nuances of the invasion of Iraq not available to the rest of us.

He spent some miserable hours with Hohmann trying to surprise the bonobos in some bad behavior. He was able to come up with one dramatic example. When a strange male came on the scene, the females of Hohmann's

study group descended upon him, surrounding him and giving him a noisy time. When the females were finished, there was no sign of the stranger, so Parker concludes the male must have been killed. Apparently Hobbesian logic requires no corpse.

But what if Parker had discovered a dripping carcass? What if he could show that female bonobos had dispatched an intruder? No one, certainly not De Waal, argues that bonobos must be nice to all comers, or that their peacemaking methods always work.

Other than that, the nasty behavior he encountered was when the bonobos threw their shit at the observers. Here I have to admit I cheered a little for the bonobos.

Their reputation for raunchiness is another sore point with the anti-bonoboists. Parker didn't see that much sex going on in the wild, so he concludes that the abundance of sexual activity De Waal and others observed is a result of boredom. Perhaps so, but he never bothers to address the role sex seems to play in the peacemaking process. It would be interesting to see if sex works that way in the wild as well, or if it is something invented in captivity.

DeWaal also studied the rhesus, a smaller primate whose behavior is almost the opposite of the bonobo's in many ways. The rhesus lives, in a strict hierarchy, constantly squabbling over its position in the cage or tree. Every rhesus knows immediately the social position of any other rhesus who appears on the block. I saw a lot of this behavior among rhesus maques in Madison's Vilas Zoo, but I never stared at them. Or they at me. They were too busy screaming and fighting.

So it should be no surprise that the rhesus has suddenly risen to prominence in a new book titled *Macchiavellian Intelligence: How Rhesus Maques and Humans Have Conquered the World*. Besides the neat pun in the title, the book is devoted to showing how the rhesus has successfully proliferated, like his human counterpart, due to its marvelous aggressiveness. It seems to be post-9/11 primatology, where evolutionary success depends on a strong sense of homeland security and the will to attack your enemy before he comes up with weapons of mass destruction.

An attempt to explain the efficacy of aggression' in this way leaves out a couple of important factors. The first is something Konrad Lorenz pointed out in *On Aggression*, where he reminded us of the difference between interspecific violence, in which one animal preys upon another, and intraspecific violence. Good predators need to develop an inhibition against killing members of their own species to insure survival.

Lorenz believed homo sapiens to be a strangely vulnerable species, because we are not naturally very good at predation. Good predators, like tigers, develop strong inhibitions against intraspecific aggression to promote survival. We, unfortunately, never had to develop such an inhibition, which was okay, until we stumbled upon weaponry. We are now a colossally well-armed creature with weak inhibitions against killing members of our own species. According to Lorenz, we need to work on our peacemaking techniques seriously and soon.

Promoting rhesus behavior leaves out one other important factor. The rhesus may be more successful in one way, but the bonobo is, in fact, much closer to us genetically. That may seem like bad news, since the bonobo is endangered, but there's more to that story as well. The rhesus may have proliferated widely, but there are insects that make the rhesus look rather weak in that area. Successful proliferation may not be the only reason to model our behavior on another species. At least I don't hear anyone suggesting we ought to act like mosquitoes.

DeWaal's observations of bonobo behavior do not evaporate because of the dearth of information we have on the animal's life in the wild. If the bonobos developed peacemaking techniques in the wild, then good for them. If they did it in captivity, they have shown themselves to be amazing, adaptable creatures.

The most important point De Waal makes in his study is that the evolution of behavior may not be strictly determined. In describing the aggressive and rather unattractive behavior of the rhesus, he points to a measure of choice-making in the way collective behavior unfolds.

Finally, while the bonobo may be on its way out, it has probably contributed something to our repertoire of choices. Other groups, like the Neanderthal, have also contributed before they disappeared or were absorbed into a more successful population. That may account for the existential quiver on the lips of the Berlin bonobos as they stared at me that cold morning. Happy New Year!

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