

Rudolf Virchow, Report from the Special Meeting in the Zoological Gardens on November 7, 1880: “Eskimos from Labrador” (1880)

Abstract

Professor Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902) was one of Bismarckian Germany’s nearest approximations of a public intellectual: physician, anthropologist, pathologist, biologist, writer, editor, and (liberal) politician. In the following excerpt, we see that Virchow used the visit to Berlin by the Labrador Inuit Abraham Ulrikab and his family as an opportunity to engage in comparisons of human hair, skulls, and facial angles. In the second part of the report, Virchow rejects the charges levelled against him in an article published two weeks earlier in the *Magdeburgische Zeitung* (October 21, 1880). The author of the article (“J. K.”) had criticized the then-popular *Völkerschauen*, which were “ethnological exhibitions” or human zoos. The author took issue with the manner in which “ethnic” (i.e. non-white) peoples were exhibited and with the sensation-seeking public interest surrounding the shows. Virchow refuted the criticism and defended the *Völkerschauen*, arguing that they supported scientific interest in humankind and its various stages of development.

Source

Special Meeting in the Zoological Gardens on November 7, 1880

Chairman Mr. Bastian.

Having introduced the relevant parties, Mr. Virchow spoke about those persons brought to Berlin by Mr. [Carl] Hagenbeck:

Eskimos^[1] from Labrador.
(see plate XIV.)

The Eskimos we are concerned with, although all of them come from a region of Labrador that is situated at almost the same latitude as the southern tip of Greenland, fall into two groups, or it can also be said, families, even though one “Loskaerl” [single guy], as they say in Norwegian, is included. They are two self-contained units that differ not only in their religion but also in many aspects of their external appearance. The one group, namely the Abraham family, consisting of the husband, the wife Ulrike, and two small children, in addition to the single man Tobias, come from the mission at Hebron, which the Herrnhuter established in 1830 at about 59 degrees north latitude and 60 degrees west longitude, south of Cape Chidley. It is one of six stations maintained by the Brethren Church on this coast; the oldest of them, Hopedale, has already been in operation since 1770. According to the report of Mr. [Johan Adrian] Jacobsen, who recruited the people and brought them to Hamburg in one of his own ships, 1,500 of the approximately 2,000 Eskimos living in Labrador had been converted to Christianity. In any case, the missionaries succeeded in promoting instruction for the people to such an extent that their intelligence has actually developed in no small measure and they are able to easily write, draw, and practice all the arts of civilized life. [...]

In contrast, the other family, consisting of the husband Tiggianiak, his wife Paieng (Bairngo), and his daughter Noggasak, is still completely heathen and in fact is endowed with characteristics that are highly suitable for demonstrating the primitive nature of this population.

[...]

This family was employed by Mr. Jacobsen in Nachvak, a station of the Hudson Bay Company located north of Hebron on a fjord. [...]

The hair of our Labrador people corresponds to that of the Greenlanders in every way. The color of their hair is uniformly black. Even the small children have very dark hair on their heads; only their eyebrows are more brownish. The hair of the adult men is relatively long, covering the back of the neck, and in the case of the heathens, even the shoulders. It is very thick, shiny black like ebony, similar to horses' manes, and not at all curly or wavy but completely straight. In women it has the same characteristics, only it is worn relatively shorter and thus gives the impression of a certain sparseness. The woman Ulrike wears it simply parted and in braids. In contrast, the heathen wife and her daughter wear a knot at the back and at each temple; the side knots have long festoons attached that are braided from reindeer hair and richly decorated with multi-colored (European) beads. Their eyebrows are mostly heavy; only the woman Ulrike's are sparser. Even the men have almost no side whiskers; in contrast, their moustaches and chin whiskers are more abundant, except that the latter are limited to the actual chin. The woman Ulrike also has a light moustache. The remaining parts of their bodies, as far as I saw them, i.e., chest, forearms, and lower legs, are almost completely hairless.

[...]

I will limit myself to these comments, and only request that you allow me a few words to refute an aggressive attack that was recently made in the *Magdeburger Zeitung* (no. 493, from October 21). The attack is directed, on the one hand, against all these kinds of ideas about foreign races, and on the other hand, against the use of zoological gardens to display human beings. As a widely read newspaper was used as the vehicle for this attack, and as we live in a time, as you know, when everything considered impossible happens, it therefore seems necessary to decisively confront this first attack by a wild-eyed feuilletonist.

In an article, "Eskimos in the Zoological Garden in Berlin," the author not only generally objects to exhibiting human beings but also states very explicitly in closing that one can expect that, on closer consideration, there will be retreat from the practice of displaying human beings in zoological gardens. I will briefly read this conclusion aloud:

"We are completely prepared for our view to be derided and ridiculed as sentimental by various quarters. Nevertheless, we want to have said this here and now. If these 'interesting' human specimens were to be put on display, the feelings for 'racial decency' would have to prevent us from allowing our peers to be seen in zoos."

The argumentation on which this view is based essentially assumes—and that is actually what I want to touch on especially—that there is absolutely no scientific interest there, and that for the vast majority of people there is nothing but a very crude interest based on curiosity. The feuilleton writer likes to say from time to time, "but it is indeed very interesting," as if in reproach. In this regard, the gentleman does not seem to have clearly comprehended that "interest" in itself can be multifaceted. Of course, many things are interesting in the sense of curiosity, but everything else that we explore for the sake of knowledge and to advance our investigation of nature and humans basically only begins to make sense if it interests us. Yes, in fact, these ideas about humans are very interesting to anyone who wants to more or less understand the position of humans in nature and the course of humankind's development.

Whoever cannot comprehend this, or whose poor preparation prevents him from understanding that by far the most important and greatest questions that humankind can ask are contained therein, whoever believes that such things can be passed over for the business of daily life should be the last to write for

feuilletons. At the very least, the editorial staff should think twice before it prints such nonsense in its columns.

I wanted to state, and confirm at the same time, that a positive scientific interest of the highest order is associated with these ideas. For that reason, I do not want to let this occasion pass without publicly extending our special thanks to Mr. [Carl] Hagenbeck and to implore him not allow such attacks to deter him from continuing as he has up to now, to the very great benefit of anthropological science.

[...]

NOTES

[1] Please note, the term “Eskimo” has been carried over from the original German report from 1880. The term has been used historically to denote Inuits (as in the present text) as well as Yup’iks, indigenous people from Alaska. The term is considered derogatory in current usage and is preserved here only because it was included in the original historical source—GHDI.

Source: Rudolf Virchow, “Ausserordentliche Zusammenkunft im zoologischen Garten am 7. November 1880: Eskimos von Labrador,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, vol. 12 (1880), pp. 253–54, 261, 270–71; published in *German History Intersections*, <https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-189>.

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