

Primates are not...

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As a young man I was filled with Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Lewis Thomas' *Lives of a Cell*. The love of books insisted itself on me. Reared on science writers like George Gamow while building model rockets, the Mercury Redstone of John Glenn my favorite, I pondered how far up could one go? Chimpanzees, our small human-like cousins, were trained and used in early space travel but not rewarded with the hero's return welcome. Science was making strides in the 1960s and 70s while I watched on, with animal experimentation behind closed doors to help better "humanity". To what end and for whose benefit?

Does time heal wounds? Chimpanzees forty years ago, even more recently, were mere objects of study in human hands, whether in a zoo or laboratory. Many primates still are, as well as a huge variety of other living creatures. This is to say nothing of how we "farm" animals in order to eat their flesh, harvest their body

parts or cells and bodily fluids for all types of purposes, and use their bones, skins, and furs for our pleasure or convenience. There have been changes in those types of behaviors over forty years, too. More people, especially young adults, are turning to veganism and coming to the realization that human incursion into tropical forests is decimating biodiversity that is crucial for planetary health.

After having read Debra Rosenman's book, *The Chimpanzee Chronicles: Stories of Heartbreak and Hope from Behind the Bars* (Wild Soul Press, 2020), I could not help but reflect back on Frans de Waal's classic, *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes* (Harper and Row, 1982). While both books have captive chimpanzees at the center, with care and devotion to the details of primate needs, desires, and personalities, the books could not be more different. They are connected in a polar way: each one is on an extreme end of the same pole deal-

ing with human attitudes toward other living creatures. The difference is the span of time between these conflicting outlooks. Rosenman's book is a collection of essays by various people who have devoted their lives to rescuing chimps from the ravages of biomedical research labs, imprisoned as pets, or hostages of the entertainment industry. The personal, physical, psychological, and financial sacrifices made by these "animal" liberators is both uplifting in their heroic altruism and yet saddening in that they have been put to this task in the first place. De Waal's book, on the other hand, is an examination of chimpanzee social behaviors and intelligence at the famous Arnhem Zoo, Netherlands. While de Waal is a famous primatologist, where many in Rosenman's book are not, his approach is the scientific study of primates from their typical antics to at times restrained nobility. It almost appears that Rosenman's book is a corrective to part of the forced captivity our great ape cousins routinely endured for decades before many countries changed such laws of imprisonment.

What do these two books, published almost forty years apart, have in common? Chimpanzees. What's so different about them? Rosenman's writers interact with the chimps to save them from the horrors of confinement and experimentation. For de Waal, chimps are indeed individuals he cares about (see his many other books, especially *Mama's*

Last Hug), but at bottom they are specimen slips under a microscope. Look at the difference between the subtitles. How can chimps practice politics if incarcerated, especially if they are, as de Waal says, political by nature? Perhaps a better subtitle would have hovered around prison maneuverings for rank and status. De Waal emphasizes, overall, similarities between chimpanzees and humans in his study of reciprocity, sharing, and empathy. De Waal pretty much admits that the chimps were used as study subjects since it's easier to observe their social behaviors in a large zoo enclosure than through the underbrush of trees in the wild. He refers, several times, to the chimps' human-like Machiavellian "political" strategies. We know in the wild this is so, according to legendary primatologist Jane Goodall in her main book, *The Chimpanzees of Gombe*, but likely magnified by their isolated captivity, no choice of their own.

Generally speaking, it's well known that "animals," especially those from the wild, are not happy in custody and can suffer from anxiety and depression. Melancholy in apes can manifest itself in destructive ways to themselves and others. The portrait of the political primates with de Waal is in stark contrast to the dismal depictions of lab chimps in Rosenman's book. The apes of medical investigations were caged, anesthetized often, and subject to cruelly invasive tests for drug experimentation, therapeutic procedures,

and even surgical techniques. Yet there's a sliver of truth in the implied comparison since by de Waal's own admission the Arnhem Zoo chimps are academic study subjects with no extensive foraging time and no real freedoms. Indeed, Arnhem was used as a breeding facility, sending chimps to other zoos. The few trees in their zoo enclosure were eventually wrapped in electrical wire, off limits, and the primate inhabitants were entirely surrounded by a moat to prevent their release. Since chimps can't swim, water can be and surely was a deadly reckoning in an attempt at escape. Of course while unnatural in scale and scope, at Arnhem the apes could socialize and groom, important behaviors, but intensified by their almost always, except for sleeping, proximity in boredom. In their natural habitats chimps exercise a fission/fusion social structure during the day, scattering about. At Arnhem, aggressive encounters would increase during winter detention indoors, de Waal admits.

One striking theme in both books is that apes possess, much like humans, individual personalities. This fact runs contrary to how apes had been treated in medical labs: the justification for experimentation was they *are like us*; but yet they were tormented as objects for human use. Why is it we hardly ever talk of species-type behavior in humans but do so with other beings? Are we afraid to admit of their distinct sapience and sen-

tience that is like but not quite similar to ours because of different environments of evolved adaptations? Upon first reading *Chimpanzee Politics* I was captivated and went on to read a number of other books and papers by de Waal and colleagues. I respect his work immensely. However, having read Debra Rosenman's *The Chimpanzee Chronicles* and turning again to the classic *Chimpanzee Politics* I can't help but experience a tinge of bitter guilt as a human. Why? Primates should not be objects of experimentation for humans, and yet many still are.

The Arnhem chimps, similar to those in other study facilities like Yerkes outside of Atlanta, Georgia, where de Waal finished his career, was at one time before him used as a breeding ground of chimps for biomedical research. Animal psychologist Mark Bodamer in Rosenman's book says that the director at one lab facility viewed the inmate primates as little more than "hairy test tubes" (232). What about "zoo animals", like de Waal's subjects? Were they treated kindly and with respect, well cared for? Presumably they were. The fact remains, though, that they were held captive and put on exhibit for us. If one were to escape, he or she could be seriously harmed or killed, as has happened at zoos. By his own admission, de Waal talks of necessary human "interference" (in an already artificially created situation) imposed on the social structure of the apes, as opposed to what would

happen “in the wild” (his expression of contrast). Human intervention established an alpha male (over an aggressively dominant female) as would be natural in a forest community. Nothing that occurred in the Arnhem colony was natural. Females tried to give away infants not knowing how to care for them. In the European winter, not like the winter months of their equatorial tropical forests, the apes were confined to cement bunkers. Of course social conditions and ape interactions improved with the work and guidance of someone like Frans de Waal.

Why had humans to do any of this in the first place? To exert superiority? To satisfy curiosity? In the name of science? We’ve had so much human progress, as evidenced in the gruesome tales of Rosenman’s book, that ape and other primate communities in the wild are diminishing. This dwindling of their population by human incursion, deforestation, logging, trafficking, and bushmeat trading by poaching is not human progress. Rather, these persons of the forest, whether orangutans in Indonesia, chimpanzees and gorillas in central Africa, or other primates in South America and elsewhere have, for millennia, contributed to maintaining ecosystem biodiversity. James Lovelock’s notion of Gaia is not just a hypothesis; it’s an accurate rendition of how nature without human intrusion is self-regulating. Animals in the wild, whether beavers, wolves, bison, dolphins,

whales, elephants, or primates should be granted sovereign dominion over their lands. Legendary biologist and naturalist E.O. Wilson would advocate a hands-off attitude in his bid for leaving half of planet earth to the true ecosystem engineers, land, air, and sea wildlife.

On social media someone posted a studio-quality picture of a child with a capuchin monkey sitting on her head. Was it cute? Yes. The monkey had a collar around her neck and a lead attached. My first reaction was outrage. Primates are not pets. The image was striking; humans as a symbolic species have used visual culture as a means of morally tinged cognitive consciousness. What cultural ideas was this photo transmitting? There was no context to the capuchin image, but apparently it was posted by a man who cares for orphaned primates and was trying to get across the message of interspecies sympathy. It failed. Like me, more than a few commentators reaching beyond the cute factor objected. Besides, the caregiver who posted the picture is in Africa, not the natural habitat of capuchins.

Like images words, too, are symbolic. While *Chimpanzee Politics* stands as a means for more people to understand human-chimp similarities, *The Chimpanzee Chronicles* shows how that relationship has been abused, where apes and other primates have been, and still are, persecuted by humans. We need to acknowledge the differences between hu-

mans and other species, seeing how their life in the wild acts as a critical factor in maintaining the biodiverse health of this shared earthly home.

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