

Cultural relativism

November 5, 2009

Are all cultures equally valid and commendable? asks Peter Tatchell. I just received an email describing speeches Peter Tatchell has delivered on this subject. (You can follow him with twitter at <http://twitter.com/PeterTatchell> or Facebook at <http://tinyurl.com/cj9y6s>). Tatchell argues, correctly I think, that these rights are not a "western invention and imposition" and that they are under direct attack " by tyrants and war-mongers" as well as being "under de facto attack by the exponents of cultural relativism and by those who ignore human rights violations by non-white dictators because they fear being branded racist, imperialist or Islamophobic." Tatchell makes the case that Left should defend "multiculturalism and the right to be different" but that respect for different values and cultures can elide into "collusion with the violation of human rights." This means we should not "bow to demands for cultural sensitivity by tacitly accepting that some peoples and communities can be exempt from the norms of universal human rights when it comes to issues like women's rights and incitements to homophobic violence." My own take on this matter of cultural relativism and defense of human rights is that Tatchell is right in attacking cultural relativism as a "shameless double standard" that "smacks of racism." At the same time, his position does not take into account the much more powerful and pervasive double standard that exists in the West's faulting other societies for lapses in human rights. Colonialism and imperialism have somehow (for some) morphed into a post-colonial consciousness that allows the West to forget the injustices committed in the name of "civilization." Post-colonialism often means erasing the legacy of imperialism as well as the continuing double standard that allows the US to pontificate about human rights while employing drones that kill civilians. A case in point is the uncritical reception given to the Tarzan exhibit at the Musee du Quai Branly, Paris, which I saw in July. One aspect of the exhibit that was especially disturbing was that outside the museum, a tent was set up to allow visitors to record themselves doing the infamous Tarzan yell/yodel. One website that waxes on about the museum's "post colonial splendor," <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2009/07/last-week-i-went-t...>) describes the curator's intent: "The idea is to tackle the imagery through which we westerners see our friends from Africa," explained curator Roger Boulay to The Guardian. "It's about exploding stereotypes and looking at how this big western Tarzan myth was created through an intellectual mish-mash of ideas. It's also about explaining the big ideas at the turn of the century from Darwinism to the enfant sauvage, the concept of nature and the King Kong myth of the giant ape kidnapping the white woman." Perhaps that was the curator's intent, but that's not the way the exhibit has been perceived. I thought (wrongly), it turns out, that the exhibit would be soundly trashed in US mainstream circles. But writing in the New York Times about the Tarzan show, Michael Kimmelman focused exclusively on France's romance with cartoons, comic books, and popular culture. His review contained only one sentence suggesting Burrough's racism. His comments contained no critique of the exhibit, even about the yodeling. There's no mention of Burrough's racism in the websites I've seen. Says one typical description: "The exhibition allows the public to discover the legend of Edgar Rice Burroughs' famous character in the collective images and representations he embodies, which are the cornerstones of some of the greatest legends of our age," says Artknowledgenews.com (<http://www.artknowledgenews.com/edgar-rice-burroughs-tarzan.html>). In contrast to the positive take on the exhibit from Westerners is analysis of the museum and the exhibit's racism at www.modernghana.com: "Though it is housed in a new building, the museum inherited looted artifacts that had been in other French institutions such as Musée de l'Homme and the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens as well as the racist superiority complexes which underpinned colonialism and neo-colonialism. The museum and its officials also inherited the manifestations of arrogance and feelings of superiority which Westerners have demonstrated in their encounters with non-European cultures and peoples since the sixteenth century."

<http://www.modernghana.com/news/243501/1/does-tarzan-still-rule-the-west...> Given the West's pervasive embrace of Western superiority and amnesia about colonialism, I think a defense of universal human rights is more persuasive if it is contextualized in the West's abuses, historic and present day.