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The exhibition of living foreign peoples in 19th Century Britain

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Intro VO: *Welcome to the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast from the University of Birmingham. In each edition we hear from an expert in a different field, who gives us insider information on key trends, upcoming events, and what they think the near future holds.*

Andy: Hello, today we're with Dr Sadiah Qureshi (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/history/qureshi-sadiah.aspx) who is lecturer in Modern History at the University of Birmingham. Hello Sadiah.

Sadiah: Hello everyone.

Andy: So do you want to tell us a little bit about what you do?

Sadiah: Well, I'm a new lecturer here in Modern History, I've just moved here after having been in Cambridge for fourteen years, both as an undergraduate and post-graduate and as part of my lectureship I will be teaching students about the history of science, race and empire and I'm particularly interested in thinking about how science, race and empire are connected, both within the 19th Century but also how they have lasting impact upon our modern perceptions of ideas of, kind of, colonialism and so on.

Andy: And you've got a book coming out that launches on November 4th in Cambridge and the book is called *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire and Anthropology in 19th Century Britain* (http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo11235268.html) . It's a beautiful looking book -

Sadiah: Thank you.

Andy: - full of absolutely amazing images. Can you just tell us a little bit about what the book is about, what does it deal with?

Sadiah: My book is about the commercial exhibition of living foreign peoples in the 19th Century. Not many people are aware of it but throughout the 19th Century up until the mid-20th Century in fact, it was very very common to especially import foreign peoples to perform in special exhibitions for the paying public and this would involve, for example, performing songs or ceremonies or dances that Victorian people could then go and see at the local theatre, museum or even zoo or world fair such as the **1851 Great Exhibition (http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p003c19x)** . And my book looks at why such shows took place, why they were so popular, how they were interpreted by the audiences that went to see them, how performers were recruited, their experiences of being abroad, as well as looking at how and why scientists used these shows in order to conduct research into human racial difference.

Andy: Now I didn't know anything about this beforehand, or not an awful lot, and you say in your book and rightly so that modern audiences will instantly have a feeling of revulsion about it all and find it totally abhorrent. Why did these shows happen at all?

Sadiah: I think there are many many different reasons but I think some of the most important are political and kind of cultural interest in empire and human racial difference. For example, often in Britain anyway the people that are imported and put on display are often formerly colonised peoples, for example many many of the kind of Africans that are put on display are from South Africa which was Britain's former colony, but also they were put on display at a period when there'll be some form of contemporary relevance. For example, in 1879 there's a show called '**Farini's Friendly Zulus (http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/evanion/FullImage.aspx?EvanID=024-000000798&ImageId=50237)** ' that is set up by the showman, The Great Farini, precisely to take advantage of the ongoing Anglo-Zulu war. So there's often a kind of newsworthiness or timeliness that's involved in kind of bringing about commercial appeal of these shows. At the same time they're often marketed as opportunities to meet and greet people from across the world that you wouldn't otherwise have a chance to see. And I think this is quite important because, for instance, I mainly focus on London within the book and London is an extremely demographically diverse city, it has plenty of residents, communities of say Jewish peoples or black peoples or Asian peoples, but it doesn't necessarily represent the world equally and there are certain kinds of people that are still very very unusual to meet in the 19th Century in London and so showmen often present their shows as an opportunity to meet people that you would never have encountered before. Or, occasionally, they present the shows as opportunities to meet people who are one of a kind, so for instance in 1853 there's a show of two South American children that are reputed to be the last remaining Aztecs and there the claim is that, you know, this is the last opportunity to meet survivors of this civilisation.

Andy: Fairly recent I suppose really, the 19th Century, that this was occurring. What kind of lasting significance do those shows have?

Sadiah: Well, the shows actually continue into the 1930s which is when they become far less popular, but some of the biggest and most popular exhibitions are towards the tail-end of the 19th Century. In terms of their lasting impact, for me one of the most interesting is scientists' interest in these shows. People who've worked on these shows have known about scientists' interest in these shows but they often think about this interest as somehow separated from their kind of research and they often think of this as pseudo-science. But I think it's far more productive and constructive to think about how and why scientists went to the shows and how they used them to often perform experiments on performers as well as use the shows as forms of public engagement with science and I think in that respect they have an enormous lasting influence in terms of promoting particular ideas about human difference. Also, particularly critical I think is the 19th Century sees the emergence of disciplines like anthropology and the professionalisation of the scholarly study of race and so I think the shows have a huge, huge impact on that because anthropologists want to use the shows in order to promote a kind of disciplinary agenda.

Andy: Having read a little bit about this subject I'm absolutely horrified that the foreign peoples that were brought over for exhibition and display, that the people who were promoting them were essentially described as 'their keepers' or acted as their keepers and that audiences who came to see the people, prodded them with canes and enticed them off the stage with oranges and money and were just curious about them in every possible way. Has anything like those shows or those exhibitions happened in more recent times? One would hope not.

Sadiah: Well I think we all like to think ourselves as being free of those kinds of prejudices but I think there's two things I would point out. One is a performance piece by an artist called **Coco Fusco (http://www.thing.net/~cocofusco/performance.htm)** in 1992 where she and her colleague dressed up as supposedly authentic recently undiscovered Amerindians and they put themselves in a cage and then exhibited themselves at various museums across the world. As well as the couple in the cage there was also a security guard on hand to answer questions and visitors would often, for example, question the security guard as to the authenticity of the couple and once they felt comfortable that they were Amerindians they would then often proceed to, for example, abuse the pair or to poke them and prod them and things like that. And her account of people's responses to their performances is quite extraordinary. So I think although we like to think ourselves as being free of those kinds of prejudices we may well have all sorts of responses within ourselves so we wouldn't necessarily feel comfortable with because when people did realise that this was a performance piece, they often got very very upset with the artists and felt that they had been morally duped, for example, because they couldn't cope with their reactions. Similarly in 2005 at the Augsburg Zoo in Germany, organisers held a four day festival where they had an **African village (http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,359799,00.html)** set up and manned by African performers and traders and that caused enormous controversy because people felt that the zoo was emulating these kind of 19th Century shows. So there are analogies and there are cases where people have either intentionally or unintentionally either drawn on this tradition or come up with performances that bear striking resemblances and sometimes very very uncomfortable resemblances, so I don't think these shows are in any way near as distant as we might like to think sometimes.

Andy: So what's the modern political relevance of this work?

Sadiah: I think it has several possibilities. One of the most interesting is how you tell performers' histories. There are very very famous performers, in particular one that

I'm thinking of, a woman called **Sara Baartman (http://www.negri-froci-giudei.com/public/pdfs/qureshi-baartman.pdf)** who was put on display in Britain in 1810 and died in 1815 in Paris, whose body was then exhibited in a Parish museum up until the 1980s and became a focus of an eight year long repatriation campaign in the 1990s and was eventually repatriated and buried in Africa. So sometimes these histories have enormous political relevance in terms of, for example, modern histories of colonised peoples and performers' histories, they're often used to symbolise the kind of exploitation and oppression of colonised peoples and because of the kind of issues of repatriation and things like that involved for example, there's ongoing discussions about the return of human remains. And so one of the reasons I'm particularly interested in these shows is not just out of historical interest but because of their modern political relevance.

Andy: So people can get hold of your book *Peoples on Parade* (http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo11235268.html) through most of the normal routes I would imagine?

Sadiah: Yes, it's all very exciting!

Andy: And like I say, it is an absolutely beautiful book so do check it out.

Sadiah: Thank you very much. I'm very pleased, thank you.

Andy: Dr Sadiah Qureshi, thank you very much.

Sadiah: Thank you very much.

Outro VO: *This podcast and others in the series are available on the Ideas Lab website:* ***www.ideaslabuk.com (http://www.ideaslab.bham.ac.uk/ideaslab_podcast.htm)***. *On the website, you can find out how to e-mail us with comments, questions or suggestions for future topics for the podcast. There's also information on the free support Ideas Lab has to offer to TV and radio producers, new media producers and journalists. The interviewer and producer for the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast was Andy Tootell.*

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