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# Telling the Human Story<sup>1</sup>

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"The Human Story" is an exhibition sponsored by IBM that provides an account of human evolution. It opened last November at the Commonwealth Institute in London and will be touring Europe and Africa (Amsterdam, Stockholm, Bremen, Vienna, Paris, Accra, Lagos, Dakar, Harare, and Nairobi).

The exhibition starts with a bang—the big bang of the beginning of the universe. The effect is rather as if some vast intergalactic shaggy dog had returned from a particularly dirty walk and given an energetic shake, splattering the surrounding walls with multicoloured flecks. But then, representing the enormity of space and time and the insignificance of Earth is never likely to succeed—no number of zeros can really help us to an understanding of the vastness of the universe and our own insignificance. This astronomical and geological preamble sets the stage for an exhibition of what we, at least, think is the most significant event in the universe—the evolution of our own species. The origin of the universe ushers us into a story complete with attractive cast, simple plot, excellent sets, and a (dubious) moral—the human story.

From multicoloured space, the exhibition moves to the history of the planet on which we live. The analogy at this point shifts from a junior-school painting class to a board game, a sort of geological *Monopoly*. The formation of the Earth, the start of life, the colonization of the land, the appearance of the major stages of plant and animal evolution all occur in a matrix of squares. As befits the vastness of geological time (and the paucity of the fossil record?), most squares are blank, with the central events of evolution scattered unevenly and sparsely around them. The board-game analogy makes one wonder whether, had the dice fallen differently, the mammals would have appeared at all, and perhaps this is as good a way as any of representing evolution—a game of cumulative chance, not pre-ordained directional progress. The feeling of other-worldliness of the past is enhanced by the use of unnatural colour processing of the photographs—the Pre-Cambrian eerily blue, the Devonian a harsh red.

With the stage set, our story can begin. First, though, there is a methodological interlude, beloved of those of us who like to show that studying the past is really quite difficult. How do we know things about the past? How does evolution work? Simple diagrams illustrate fossilization, while computer simulation on a video screen shows the pattern of continental movements and plate

tectonics. Given that the actual process took several hundred million years, it is perhaps churlish to complain that the simulation seemed rather slow and few of the people around me waited to see what happened at the end. The mechanisms of evolution, from molecules to mutation, are presented, but this display is remarkably coy about natural selection as a significant factor in directing evolutionary change. In fact, the term is hardly used, and in an exhibition stressing that the natural world can be understood through unravelling the necessities of the environment it is sad that the core of evolutionary theory—natural selection as differential reproductive success—is absent, rather like trying to show the workings of the internal combustion engine having removed the pistons. Whether this is a sensitivity to the creationists or a mere oversight is unclear, but in my opinion it greatly weakens the case for considering human evolution to be of much significance to the modern world—surely one of the basic aims of this exhibition.

Once the actual human story begins, Africa, understandably, takes centre stage. The primates make their appearance. This group of large, highly social, omnivorous, dextrous animals provided the necessary pre-adaptations that made the human story possible. Many of their characteristics—binocular vision, grasping hands, large brains—seem to be designed specifically with later hominids in mind, and the exhibits here do well to avoid the trap of presenting non-human primates as failed humans, the ones that didn't make it.

The fossil record of apes is not a particularly rich one, although recent work, particularly by the joint U.S.-Pakistani team in the Siwaliks, has done much to improve both its quality and its quantity and made it possible to reconcile the fossil and biochemical evidence for the relationships of the various extant groups of ape. Here lies one of the great strengths of this exhibition; it is remarkably up to date and has benefitted from having been put together by researchers actively involved in this field. The main characters of hominoid evolution—*Aegyptopithecus*, *Proconsul*, *Sivapithecus*, and *Ramapithecus*—are on parade either as casts or in photographic reconstructions. Unlike many exhibitions, this one has not shrunk from putting flesh and fur onto the fossils, important when we remember that to someone not used to looking at fossils all skulls look much the same. Many of these casts can be touched and viewed in three dimensions—an innovation that should be greatly welcomed and a great improvement over old-style exhibits in which the observers are kept well away from the subject matter.

The interpretation presented reflects the growing consensus: Humans, chimpanzees, and gorillas are more closely related to each other than any is to the other great ape, the orang-utan. Consequently, the divergence for the hominids and the apes is relatively late and *Ramapithecus* is excluded from the former (although this change in interpretation is never very precisely stated). Many of the details of hominid origins remain obscure, but the shift to a shorter and more specifically African perspective is an important one, and a major

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contribution of this exhibition would be to present this new perspective to a wider audience.

To arrive at the first real hominids in the exhibition it is necessary to walk through what are pretentiously called "time boxes"—actually rather dark little corridors with a repetitive commentary. The earliest hominids are shown in many ways—through photographs, casts, text, and dioramas. Among the casts is "Lucy" (Al-200) from Hadar, here widely exhibited for the first time. She is also represented by a scientifically accurate life-size model set in a diorama. Seeing her, in flesh and blood as it were, surrounded by the technological trappings of the 20th century is striking and more than a little disconcerting. She seems remarkably small and frail, indeed rather pathetic, standing in central London surrounded by inquisitive onlookers. Those with the patience to stay and watch her for a while are rewarded by seeing her eyes gradually swing round to face the audience. It is decidedly odd to be given the eye by someone old enough to be your great-grandmother with a thousand greats!

Without doubt the dioramas are the strongest part of the exhibition. No amount of description, detail, video simulations, or casts can have anything like the impact of a single naturalistic reconstruction of an early hominid. The vividness of three dimensions will do more to convince people, particularly children, of the significance of human evolution than textbooks and time charts. It is very difficult for us to envisage something that is human-like and yet not actually human, and models such as this can do a great deal to help. My one regret was that the visual effect of these models was diluted by their being surrounded by too much text and explanation—but this was perhaps necessary given the poor quality of the accompanying handbook.

Successive rooms (with their connecting "time boxes") yield up the story of human evolution—the establishment of bipedalism, the development of tool making, the evolution of the genus *Homo* from *H. habilis* through the early sapient forms to anatomically modern humans. Running through this story is a theme of considerable orthodoxy—the gradual acquisition of culture, the evolution of the hunter-gatherer way of life from early times, the importance of cooperation, and the replacement of biological mechanisms and processes by cultural ones. These themes have been made familiar to a wide audience by popular books and television programmes such as *The Making of Mankind* of Richard Leakey, the main contributor to the structure of this exhibition. The evidence for all this comes from the traditional stock of palaeoanthropology—the stone circle dated to 1.8 million years ago from Bed 1 at Olduvai, presumably evidence for the first human structure: the inferred social life of *H. erectus* based on the reconstruction of Terra Amata from the Middle Pleistocene of France; and so on. Most of what is presented could be found in almost any textbook on the subject.

With the establishment of anatomically modern humans the pace changes. The penultimate room shows what has happened in the last 20,000 years or so. This is

largely done by lists of achievements—the shopping-list approach to prehistory. For the most part far too detailed to comprehend and absorb, these lists outline the development of agriculture and the growth of civilizations and states and the gradual absorption of the separate regional cultural trajectories within the modern world order. Finally, we reach the present, in the form of four rather gloomy world maps—one showing the dying earth, another the imbalance of world trade, another the ubiquity of war, and yet another the extent of world poverty. The future, illustrated by high-tech photographs and computer graphics, is rosier, mapping the paths to the solutions of some of these problems.

As the exhibition approaches the present, the underlying philosophy becomes apparent. The message is one familiar to those who have read Leakey's books or seen his films—that the foundation of humanity is cooperation and human evolution the extension and elaboration of cooperative behaviour. At the outset it is food sharing and males cooperating in hunting, the accumulation of social solidarity. By the end of prehistory and history that social solidarity extends to larger social groups and states. The key to the future, it is not difficult to extrapolate, lies in solidarity and cooperation beyond the bounds of individual nations. In the same way that resources were distributed from the successful hunter to the children and old in the early Pleistocene, so too should wealth be redistributed more evenly from the richer to the poorer nations. With that would come greater worldwide social solidarity.

All this is worthy, but it raises some important questions that in my mind undermine the conception of the exhibition. That there should be an exhibition describing human origins is an excellent thing. That it should have a message beyond the mere interpretation of the family tree of human evolution is also essential. But the way in which these two aims are combined throws into sharp relief many aspects of the subject that are seldom made explicit. What we see are contrasts—between the past and the present, between evidence and interpretation, and between the language and aims of palaeoanthropology as a science and what it communicates to a wider audience.

To take the last of these first, one of the problems that besets palaeontology in general is the plethora of obscure names. Because so many of the animals in the fossil record are extinct, by definition they have no common names. They become known, therefore, to the people who study them by their formal Linnaean names—*Dryopithecus*, *Australopithecus*, etc. These names are the means of communication between scientists, but they become barriers to communication beyond that "expert" community. The aim of this exhibition is to spread, not just in Britain but throughout Europe and Africa, the human story. If what is important about the story is the reason it takes the shape it does—in this case, the cooperative story—then the names are superfluous and the material presented in too much detail. Certainly the larger part of the exhibition gives some very general information about the history of the Earth

and life on it, in a way not unlike that of any basic text on these subjects. In contrast, the treatment of the australopithecines and the evolution of *Homo* seems constrained and cramped. Surely if, as I assume, the exhibition was intended to drive home the idea that there is more to human evolution than piecing together a few scrappy fossils and that there is something important to us all in the human story, then the background detail could have been sacrificed for the importance of that message. The overall impression I came away with was that in the minds of the organisers there was the potential for making an important point about the nature of humanity, using modern techniques and technology, but in the end they were unable to escape the pull of their own past—the traditional exhibition of events in the past, the gradual build-up from the stars to human life. It is sad that this exhibition could not break with orthodoxy to match the novelty of the presentation aspects of the exhibition. While many professional anthropologists may quarrel with details and feel that already much has been sacrificed through oversimplification, I suggest that the organisers could have gone further still. The ruthless asking of the question “Is this really necessary to the point we are trying to get across?” would have greatly strengthened the exhibition. In many ways this is the greatest challenge of any attempt to present the subject to a wider audience. Deciding what it is in human evolution that we are surest of and consider most important is not an easy assignment!

If the amount of detail is wrong, it does not follow that the direct evidence for the human story is irrelevant. Apart from the intrinsic interest of the fossils or their replicas—and I certainly found them the highlights of the exhibition—the evidence remains central to any story. That evidence may be open to dispute, subject to differing interpretations, but it is not infinitely pliable. What we know or think we know about the biological history of our species rests on the fossil and archaeological record. If we think certain things have been important—bipedalism, language, tool making, hunting, food sharing and cooperation—then there must be some evidence for them. They cannot be imposed on the past with the benefit of hindsight.

This raises the question of whether the human story shown in this exhibition is, not just in detail but in essence, correct. Certainly this interpretation of the fossils is the one we would expect from these organisers, up to date and clearly presented. Even that most confused area, the transition from the Miocene hominoids to the Pliocene hominids, is dealt with by a carefully calculated combination of accuracy and recognition of the areas of uncertainty and ignorance. It is not, however, the phylogeny or the dating of the human story that lies at the heart of the message that this exhibition is trying to put across. Rather, it is the nature of human behavior. The pattern to human evolution represented by this exhibition is shaped by human social behaviour, particularly its cooperative aspects derived from the evolving hunter-gatherer strategy. Here it is rather less up to date than is the case with the fossils. Over the last few years

the view of human evolution as the gradual evolution of the hunter-gatherer way of life has come increasingly under attack, and archaeologists and palaeoanthropologists have become far more sceptical about the role of food sharing in the development of mankind. Furthermore, the antiquity of many human characteristics has been questioned. If there is indeed a sharp contrast between the behaviour of early hominids and that of anatomically modern humans—and the matter is still open to dispute—the implications for the message of this exhibition are considerable. No indication of doubt is given here, however, and what is really just a myth of the way we would like to think human evolution occurred is presented as hard knowledge.

The frailty of this myth of human evolution is highlighted by the contrast that shines through this exhibition between past/future and present. On the one hand, we have a past represented by the cooperative hunter-gatherers, gradually becoming more technologically competent and existing harmoniously with their environment, and a future, guided by the benevolent development of technology, that is a direct continuation of this past. On the other hand, there is the present, blighted by war, poverty, the destruction of our habitat, and an enormous rift between the rich and the poor, the north and the south. A discerning observer at this exhibition may ask a very pertinent question: why are the past and the future, which can only be dimly observed or guessed at, so much better than the period we can experience directly, the present? Clearly, the answer to this question must be that this exhibition is not just about human evolution as science but about human evolution as an element of philosophy and current ideology. Looked at in this light, it is clearly a glorious story of which any species could be proud. It is not unreasonable for us to use the past to help us in the trials of the present, but the question is not whether the past can or should be used to illuminate the present—it always has been and always will be—but whether the perpetuation of the myths of human evolution is the best service that palaeoanthropologists can provide to the modern world. This may be a very difficult question to answer.

## Archaeology and the Norwegian Cultural Landscape

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Though the word “environment” must take a subject in order to be meaningful, its subject alters it. This is the main limitation of our terminological distinction between nature and culture. Because of the difficulties involved in assailing this paradox, archaeologists have tended to assume landscapes to be natural (or culturally