

People for the Exploitative Treatment of Arabs?

-How PETA's Iraq Fur Giveaway Betrays Progressive Activism

By Lee Hall - 6 May 2004

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This week I was reminded, in a macabre sort of way, of the 1976 Saturday Night Live sketch called "Fondue Sets for Namibia." In that scene, Garrett Morris played an African spokesperson who appeared with pictures of needy children, looked into the camera, and implored, "The people of Namibia need your fondue sets. Please. Just reach up into your top shelves and dust them off."

During the first week of May, an Internet news site reported that "one lucky Iraqi will be sporting a mink coat to help them brace against the cold thanks to a program organized by animal-rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)."[1] The Wisconsin resident who donated the mink coat for this "lucky Iraqi" had "decided it was time to pass on her full-length mink coat after some Spring cleaning." [2]

Especially given its timing -- after the release of a hideous photo series of Iraqi prisoners being physically and psychologically tortured by occupation forces in Abu Ghraib prison -- PETA's latest news represents the worst in a string of abominable stunts employed by the group to grab media attention.

Two winters ago, PETA went to Britain to make a public show of distributing fur coats to the homeless of Liverpool. On the day of the give-away, a radio audience heard a homeless interviewee vowing never to wear a fur coat no matter how cold it was. A representative of the homeless community observed, "Homeless people, like everyone else, will have their own opinions on such matters." [3]

PETA pushed the stunt despite strenuous public objection from British anti-fur campaigners as well. Activists who had spent many weeks in delicate negotiations to establish a fur-free policy in a Liverpool hospice charity watched their work unravel in the midst of the PETA campaign. [4] Another group stated:

It gives the impression that homeless people are a class that can be used as pawns in an American group's cause, and that they have no right to have a moral choice on the fur issue. The marking of the coats with paint to identify them as give-aways has the more sinister effect of identifying the wearers as homeless." [5]

PETA also supervises the distribution of furs to homeless people in urban areas of the U.S., through a scheme bizarrely named the Fur Soup Kitchen. When the idea first hatched, numerous concerned activists, including long-time anti-fur campaigner Priscilla Feral of Connecticut-based Friends of Animals, asked PETA to drop the

tactic. But PETA president Ingrid Newkirk waved the critics off, telling them to “go to work, real work!” Newkirk further wrote:

When the homeless are wearing fur, you know fur has hit rock bottom. It is no longer fashionable, chic or desirable. People with money and style can choose, and they don't choose fur because nothing beats synthetics for warmth as borne out by Polar and Everest expeditions. Perhaps the only people left who can justify wearing fur are those so down-and-out that they cannot choose.[6]

So now we see that “the down-and-out” would have been better off with synthetics, but Newkirk did not try to obtain such garments. Instead, Newkirk used these people to make a point: to associate fur with the “rock bottom.” Rather than offer respectful assistance to the poor, Newkirk subverted their dignity to PETA's single-minded end.

In an afterthought that carries more than a hint of PETA's trademark misogyny, Newkirk added, “Frankly, I would love to see the look on the face of one of those Manhattan women walking in her mink past a homeless baglady pushing her grocery cart in a mink.”

True to form, PETA sells T-shirts portraying a female body in fur, a bag covering the face, and the slogan “Hag in the Bag.” The group has also commissioned commercials showing a woman draped in fur, bent down on all fours, head over an open toilet; and another with a fur-clad woman urinating in a cat's litter box.

And now Newkirk would have us take up a collection of mink coats for the Iraqis.

With Iraqis reduced to wearing PETA's fur, in the world according to Newkirk, it is clear that these people have hit rock bottom. Never mind that through years of sanctions and finally by invading their land, we were the ones who put them there. Never mind that PETA apparently supported that invasion by regularly trotting out a staffer identified as a U.S. Marine throughout the siege of Iraq. Never mind that Norfolk-based PETA gave the troops calendars with pictures of scantily-clad women along with packets of “Treats for the Troops.” Never mind that PETA distributed posters of Playboy's Kimberly Hefner in an unbuttoned Uncle Sam outfit through “Stars and Stripes,” the U.S. military newspaper given to the people ordered to invade Iraq.”[7]

“It's more than a little surreal,” as Geov Parrish once put the point, to see an animal protection group “seemingly endorsing male violence -- in the service of ostensibly encouraging people not to commit violence against animals.” As Parrish added, “It's also extraordinarily discrediting, not just to PETA, but to the entire animal rights movement.”[8]

And this is why animal rights proponents must speak out against such conduct. No coherent rights movement can debase women, insult people in other countries, glorify war, or demean the impoverished. The animal rights movement is, at essence, the quest for a non-violent humanity and basic decency; accordingly, calls for respecting nonhuman beings will go nowhere as long the message comes at the expense of the human ones.

The news report on the furs-to-Iraqis scheme said little about motives, other than to describe the Iraqis as “needy.” But it is all equally revolting, whether it’s about PETA using the occupation to display goodly-hearted sentiments about the Iraqi people -- after sending some of the enemies of those same people over with boxes of sweets -- or whether it’s just about using Iraqis as their latest image of the “rock bottom.” One of PETA’s slogans is “I’d rather be caught dead than wear fur.” However we look at it, that doesn’t say much for PETA’s view of the people of Iraq.

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[1] Charles Mahaleris, “Woman Donates Mink to PETA” - Talon News (3 May 2004) <<http://mensnewsdaily.com/archive/newswire/news2004/0504/050304-peta.htm>>.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Sarah Womack, “Protesters Give Stars’ Fur Coats to the Homeless” - The Telegraph (7 December 2002) (citing an unnamed a spokesperson for the Big Issue, a magazine sold by homeless people to raise money).

[4] December 2002 Report of the Animal Rights Coalition, ARCNews.

[5] December 2002 Report of the Animal Rights Coalition, ARCNews. Mark Glover and Nicki Brooks of the British advocacy group Respect for Animals issued a public statement denouncing PETA’s conduct in the letters section of This Is Bristol (1 January 2003).

[6] Letter from Ingrid Newkirk, circulated via Internet on 4 January 1998 (copy on file with Friends of Animals).

[7] Geov Parrish, “Treating Women Like Meat” - WorkingForChange (20 March 2002) <<http://www.workingforchange.com/printitem.cfm?itemid=12999>>.

[8] Ibid.