The Centennial Exhibition of 1876: An Image of a Healed and Homogenous America

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The idea of rebirth—being able to re-write one’s story and start anew—is a common theme in psychology and religion. This idea can also be applied to understanding how the United States of America used the Centennial Exhibition of 1876, held in Philadelphia for the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, to tell a new story about itself and its future after having survived the Civil War. The Centennial Exhibition celebrated the rapid progress the United States had made in only a century, but this was not the sole purpose, as many accounts suggest. The Exhibition reflected cultural aspects of the United States as it was, along with significant underlying intentions of presenting a new narrative of the country as an industrial and political world power ready to take its place alongside the great European nations. In order to demonstrate its revival and to follow European nations in linking white dominance with advancement, the Exhibition was used as a medium through which other racial groups in the country, specifically Native Americans and African Americans, were portrayed as subordinate to white citizens, also foreshadowing their marginal position in American society in subsequent years.

On the eve of the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the United States began planning its commemoration, while at the same time dealing with ongoing issues involving Reconstruction and Indian relations. In the years preceding the event, much of American politics was focused on building a society where whites and African Americans could coexist, and even have equal rights. Radical Reconstruction in the late 1860s brought many rights to the former slaves of the nation, but Southern states reasserted their power during the 1870s, actively resisting Northern calls for racial equality and returning to a government and civil society dominated by whites. Indeed, by 1876, all of the Southern states had reinstated conservative governments bent on preserving white privilege and dominance throughout the South.[[1]](#footnote-1) While African Americans were losing their political and social rights in the South, in the West, Native Americans were losing their rights as recognized tribes. Though westward expansion had been occurring for decades, the mid- to late-nineteenth century brought a slew of settlers out to the Western territories. Between 1860 and 1880, the number of settlers in territories that had not yet been granted statehood rose from about 341,000 to 784,000.[[2]](#footnote-2) The discovery of precious metals like gold and silver in these territories meant the creation of towns on land that had been granted to the Native Americans, beginning with the California Gold Rush in 1849. Railroads soon crisscrossed the nation, cutting through prime Indian territories and further antagonizing the Indians. The various infringements on the rights of the tribes by white settlers escalated historical tensions that remained present for many years, often causing violent encounters between the groups. In the years leading up to the Centennial Exhibition, the prevailing issues in American society were those of the question of racial equality during Reconstruction and conflicts with the Native Americans over westward expansion.

While the nation was dealing with societal problems in the years preceding the Centennial, industrialization was spreading rapidly. The new systems of rails and telegraphs connected the nation in ways never before imagined. Between 1860 and 1880, railroad trackage increased from 30,000 to 93,000 miles, with much of the new line focused on connecting the east and west coasts.[[3]](#footnote-3) Not only was society attempting to remake itself during this time, but also many affluent men were “investing wealth…[to] help rebuild—literally reconstruct—the American nation” through industrial projects.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Centennial Exhibition was held in an era of rapid industrial expansion that the United States was actively involved in, along with various other nations.

The Centennial Exhibition of 1876 was far from the first World’s Fair to be held among the great nations of the time, but it was the earliest one to be successfully hosted in the United States. The Crystal Palace Exhibition, held in London in 1851 and named for its massive main building constructed of glass, was the first modern international exhibition demonstrating progress of the industrial age. The United States, along with other nations, was highly impressed by the display of innovations, culture, and architecture from all over the world, and the Crystal Palace Exhibition, a symbol of progress, inspired several subsequent World’s Fairs all over Europe in the following years.[[5]](#footnote-5) In 1853, America hosted its first World’s Fair, located in New York. However, there was a “lack of federal support,” along with inadequate organization, causing the Fair to open three months late.[[6]](#footnote-6) Held in the antebellum years, this fair attempted to “reunite a divided nation” and “inspire…a sense of nationalism,” goals that were not achieved, as sectionalist tensions continued until they erupted in the Civil War.[[7]](#footnote-7) Not only did the New York Exhibition fail in its aims to reunify the nation, but it was also a financial disaster, losing $340,000, which resulted in its frequent exclusion from the history of America’s World’s Fairs, giving recognition to the Centennial Exhibition as the first hosted by the nation.[[8]](#footnote-8) Acknowledged as the original American World’s Fair, the Centennial Exhibition represented the formal demonstration of the progress of the republic, and much planning was done to ensure its success.

Though the preliminary organization of the Centennial Exhibition began in 1866, when the idea was first proposed, it took the full decade leading up to the commemoration of the Declaration of Independence to organize the event. On the eve of this monumental anniversary,

it was generally regarded as the duty of the nation to celebrate it in a manner worthy of the great fame and wealth of the republic…In 1866 a number of gentlemen conceived the idea of celebrating the great event by an exhibition of the progress, wealth, and general condition of the republic, in which all the nations of the world should be invited to participate.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Originally, Congress refused to give financial support to the Exhibition coordinators, as they viewed it as a “private undertaking” that should be handled by individuals and independent groups.[[10]](#footnote-10) After years of selling ten-dollar shares in order to attempt to raise the required $10,000,000, the fair organizers once again turned to Congress in early 1876, a few months before the grand opening, as $1,500,000 was still needed in order for the Exhibition to begin.[[11]](#footnote-11) If the nation could not successfully organize and open a world’s fair after immense amounts of time and money had been spent, it would reflect badly on the republican government that was being celebrated. Because the “reputation of the country was at stake” and Congress did not want to present the idea that it was part of an ineffective government, it finally agreed to loan the requisite amount.[[12]](#footnote-12) Once the money was acquired, construction on the fair could be completed and the Centennial Exhibition of the United States of America in Philadelphia was prepared to welcome the rest of the world.

As with many World’s Fairs, one of the formal, surface reasons that the Centennial Exhibition was held was to display the progress of the host nation in order to increase its prestige. The clearly stated purpose of the Centennial Exhibition was to commemorate the signing of the Declaration of Independence in a manner appropriate of celebrating a century of progress and “the industrious, moral and physical growth” of the republic.[[13]](#footnote-13) As one of the few republics in the world at the time, the fact that the United States had made it through a century, not only surviving, but also thriving, was a great achievement for the principle of democracy. Though the Civil War in the mid-nineteenth century brought turmoil to the country, the nation endured and did not collapse, proving the strength of democracy. The Centennial Exhibition also aimed to demonstrate that America had developed its own unique culture, and was not merely a larger Great Britain across the Atlantic Ocean. Massive halls, designed by American architects and filled with exemplary arts, technology, scientific discoveries, and agriculture, covered the 236 acres of the Philadelphia fairgrounds, establishing the great cultural wealth of the nation (Appendix A).[[14]](#footnote-14) The displays of the Centennial Exhibition were constructed to officially “demonstrate…the thrift, intelligence, enterprise, and energy” of the republic of the United States, but this was only a superficial purpose.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Besides the prestige of the nation, another formal goal of the World’s Fairs of the nineteenth century was to encourage international economic growth and trade. In the case of the Centennial Exhibition, the fair organizers hoped that it would alleviate some of the lingering effects of the Panic of 1873 that had greatly injured the national economy. To prompt other nations to bring numerous displays, import tariffs were suspended for all exhibition goods shipped into the United States.[[16]](#footnote-16) It was hoped that this incentive, along with the “publiciz[ing] [of the] national resources and industries,” would extend trade.[[17]](#footnote-17) Displays of a wide variety of American materials, from cotton to precious metals, were shown with aims of increasing demand, both domestically and internationally.[[18]](#footnote-18) Though the economic gains and prestige of the nation are often thought of as the main purposes of hosting the Centennial Exhibition, these were only surface reasons and more important to the United States was portraying itself as a nation that could succeed along with the great European powers of the time.

At the time of the Exhibition, European nations defined world progress, which was measured in part by their industrial and economic capabilities. Great Britain was one of the dominant world powers at the time and had been the first nation to industrialize, with others soon following. By the late 1800s, much of Europe had done so, along with the United States and Japan.[[19]](#footnote-19) As it had industrialized soon after Great Britain, the United States was already one step closer in placing itself alongside the strongest European nations. In order to further America’s attempts at proving its worth, the Exhibition was used to advertise America’s industrial achievements, such as the massive Corliss steam engine, which was “the most conspicuous object in…[Machinery] hall” (Appendix B).[[20]](#footnote-20) The impressive engine “drove several miles of shafting and belting” and was the source of power for all of the other machines displayed.[[21]](#footnote-21) In addition to industrial prowess, progress as defined by European powers included possessing an expansive economy that stretched across the globe.

For hundreds of years, European nations had been colonizing territory all over the world, and inherent to this imperialist policy was intense racism. The theory of Social Darwinism, which held that the white race was evolutionarily superior to all other races, was the basis on which expanding nations justified their control over other peoples in various territories. During the late nineteenth century, it was assumed that “great nations were homogenous,” so colonies were viewed as entirely separate entities from the imperial powers in order to avoid any “deplorable amalgamation” between the colony and the mother country.[[22]](#footnote-22) Both the principle of social Darwinism and its application towards defining society as homogenous were present at the fair through various colonial exhibits brought by powerful nations. The display of Dutch imperial efforts of “civilizing of a barbarous land” in southern Africa was regarded as highly impressive.[[23]](#footnote-23) Though many colonies, including those in Africa, were presented at the Exhibition, the peoples or cultures living there were not displayed, as these lands were viewed merely in terms of their economic resources and benefits. The exhibits brought by many Western nations reflected the belief in the superiority of the white imperial nations that America was looking to mimic in its own displays, but around the time of the Centennial Exhibition, the United States did not possess any major colonies through which it could establish its international authority. However, because of the precedent set by these powers, America projected an image of itself at the Exhibition as a homogenous nation, dominated domestically by whites, in an attempt to appear a powerful, unified nation with no internal conflict. The racist attitudes presented by European powers of the era were a more significant aspect of progress for the United States to follow than the economic supremacy that is often emphasized, and America tried to demonstrate its goal of homogeneity in its treatment and display of various groups in the country.

After the Civil War, tensions were extremely great between the Native Americans and the United States and violence often broke out between the groups. In the late 1860s, as the drive for westward expansion increased greatly, trails and railroads out to the Pacific were rapidly built. Though the Indians protested the many routes constructed directly through their prime territory, the government did nothing to stop the westward campaign into their lands, and even encouraged it. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1872, Francis Walker, recognized that “progress…on the Northern Pacific Railroad will… leave [Indians]…incapable of resisting the government,” demonstrating support for the rapid settlement of masses of people out West, such as the great number of towns built on Indian territory during the Colorado Gold Rush in 1858, even if it meant devastation for the tribes.[[24]](#footnote-24) Because of the close proximity between settlers and the tribes, violence often broke out between them, with much of the friction concentrated in Colorado and the Great Plains. During the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864, Colonel John Chivington led an attack on a Cheyenne village in Colorado, brutally killing 180 tribe members.[[25]](#footnote-25) Hostilities in the region continued until the Battle of Summit Springs in 1869, where the military was crushed the Cheyenne’s “most formidable band of warriors,” ensuring continued expansion of white settlements in Colorado without further Indian resistance.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Though the United States government had proved its dominance in the Colorado territory, greater issues lay with the Sioux tribe in the Great Plains, and growing tensions erupted in the Great Sioux War in 1876. In late 1875, the United States government ordered all of the Indians in the Dakota region onto reservations by January 1, 1876, as gold had been discovered in the Black Hills and several incidents between the tribes and settlers had already occurred.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, the land off which the government was forcing the Indians had been granted to the tribes in a treaty in 1868, so Cheyenne and Sioux warriors joined forces, facing three commands of government troops who were “hoping to trap the nomads and force them onto reservations.”[[28]](#footnote-28) General George Custer’s command of about 200 soldiers attacked 2,000 Indian warriors at the town of Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876, and all of the US troops were killed, leaving the event with the name, “Custer’s Last Stand.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Custer was hailed as a martyr who “[died] for timeless ideas in the face of overwhelming odds” and for the “progress of civilization.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Ruthless attacks on the Indians followed, so that by 1877, all Northern Plains resistance was gone. The American public’s interpretation of Custer’s unintelligent move in combat as a “pivotal battle between barbarism and civilization” emphasized the idea that Native Americans were savages who attacked all unprovoked.[[31]](#footnote-31) The experience with the Indian Wars, and especially Custer’s Last Stand, demonstrated American hostility towards the Indians, which was carried into cultural exhibits at the Fair.

Portrayed at the Centennial Exhibition as uncivilized and inhuman, this view of the Native Americans not only reflected the ill will of the previous decade but also allowed for the justification of their oppression as the United States pushed closer towards establishing white dominance in its attempt to align itself with the dominant Western powers at the time. The Smithsonian Institute, a venerable and trusted scientific establishment, was assigned the responsibility of assembling the Native American display (Appendix C). Artifacts, specifically ones that “would ‘present savage life’” were gathered from around the country, focusing on the idea that these supposedly uncivilized people would soon be extinct.[[32]](#footnote-32) Wax figures presented terrifying images of Indians that seemed to not have done them justice, as they were reportedly even more vicious in reality.[[33]](#footnote-33) Though the Native American exhibit, which presented the tribes as representative of “humanity’s dark and stormy beginnings,” reflected the attitude of many Americans towards the tribes, it also served as “counterpoint to the unfolding progress” of the white American presentations.[[34]](#footnote-34) The exhibit was purposefully chaotic and unorganized, displaying the tribes as the “antithesis to the forces of progress,” and the few Indians visitors at the Exhibition were “viewed as leftovers of a bygone age.”[[35]](#footnote-35) This projection of the Indians as inhuman and obsolete as a civilization was strengthened by their portrayal in the display of American resources, which indicated, “both Indians and raw materials could legitimately be exploited in the interest of American expansion.”[[36]](#footnote-36) The representations of the tribes at the fair “provide[d] a rationalization for the extreme violence that the federal government deployed in the ensuing wars against [the] Indians,” as well as reinforced Custer’s status as a martyr who died for civilization.[[37]](#footnote-37) The portrayal of the Native Americans at the Exhibition linked together ideas of race and progress, supporting and encouraging the association of advancement with white Americans. This connection, established by leading Western nations, was emphasized through the Native American displays as a way for the United States to demonstrate its belief in a society dominated by whites in order to appear united and to promote its international status.

The Indians’ portrayal at the fair as part of America’s projected image foreshadowed an active government policy to marginalize the remaining Native Americans by minimalizing their numbers to suggest homogeneity through forced assimilation into the American populous. In the United States Census, when the population was counted, officials were instructed: “Indians not taxed are not to be enumerated” and “the families of Indians who have renounced tribal rule…are to be enumerated.”[[38]](#footnote-38) This method of taking the Census demonstrated America’s desire to include in its official population only those Indians who would assimilate into American society. Between 1870 and 1880, there was a dramatic rise in the Indian population in the Census, from 25,700 to 66,400, demonstrating how, in this decade, the United States defeated many tribes, forcing them onto reservations under the control of the United States government.[[39]](#footnote-39) The Census officials also counted untaxed Indians, not to be included in the formal report, and in 1870, there were about 288,000 Indians, which is more than ten times the amount given in the Census.[[40]](#footnote-40) The misleading numbers in the report made America’s population seem much more homogenous than it actually was, allowing the nation to portray itself as more similar to the white Western nations, even though Indian relations were a significant aspect of American life. Overall, the Exhibition’s savage depiction of the Native Americans accurately indicated that the tribes would be forcibly disassembled and assimilated into American society in order to fulfill the nation’s wishes of becoming a homogenous nation.

Held during the last months of Reconstruction, the Exhibition not only established dominance over the Native Americans, but also over the African Americans. Around the time of the Exhibition, the American population was losing interest in the attempts at equality that the government had been working towards, and this sentiment was reflected in the lack of African Americans at the Fair itself, also demonstrating America’s focus on presenting a narrative of a white-dominated, united power. In the 1860s, the Thirteenth Amendment freed four million African Americans from slavery, and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, along with the Civil Rights Act granted citizenship and voting rights, attempting to lessen discrimination against blacks. However, African Americans were stuck at the bottom of the racial hierarchy and increasing numbers of Southern blacks were sharecroppers, which was essentially like working for a slave master. A journalist visiting a Southern plantation around 1875 reported that “the thing which struck me as most astonishing…was the absolute subjection of the Negro,” showing how, in reality, African Americans were not gaining many rights and Southern life was transitioning back to its status antebellum.[[41]](#footnote-41) Though the leaders of Radical Reconstruction envisioned a nation of “multiracial democracies,” this hope only lasted for a few years, as most Americans rejected the idea of racial equality, and by 1876, all of the Southern states had “redeemed” their governments and diminished African American involvement in politics by reinstating white rule.[[42]](#footnote-42) In Amite County, Mississippi, 1093 blacks voted in 1873, while only 73 voted in 1876, as they were highly discouraged from voting, showing the great setbacks experienced by African Americans during “Redemption.”[[43]](#footnote-43) By the time of the Exhibition, the nation had lost its post-war drive for equality, and people no longer envisioned an unprejudiced society, reverting back to ideas of white supremacy, which could be seen at the Exhibition itself.

African Americans had expected the fair to be a place where they could finally show their contributions to the country; however, this was not the case, reflecting the trend away from Reconstruction towards “Redemption,” where white supremacy was reinstated, and demonstrating America’s desire to project itself as a homogenous society. African Americans were not involved in the construction of the fair and were only permitted to work menial jobs as entertainers and waiters, “relegating [them] to the shadows of the vision of progress projected at the Fair.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Only two works by African American artists were displayed. However, whites directed an exhibit of blacks at “The South” concession, a restaurant where “‘a band of old-time ‘darkies’…[sang] their quaint melodies and strum[med] the banjo.’”[[45]](#footnote-45) These ignorant and childish caricatures of African Americans contributed to America’s image of a nation whose progress was led solely by whites. Though briefly acknowledged through racist exhibits, for the most part, African Americans were largely excluded from any participation in the fair, further supporting the nation’s goal of presenting itself as a healed, homogenous nation that encountered little racial conflict.

The lack of African American presence at the Fair indicated their marginalized position in the nation both immediately and for decades to come as America focused on portraying itself as a homogenous nation. In the 1880s, sharecropping became increasingly dominant, with 91% of Southern blacks working plantations, as white Southerners prevented them from owning land so that they could control black labor.[[46]](#footnote-46) As “Redemption” took over with full force, Jim Crow laws and the rise of racist terrorist groups ensured a secondary status for all African American citizens and prevented them from voting. The Supreme Court even became involved in discrimination policy in its ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, where the principle of “separate but equal” access to public amenities was upheld, though in reality, life was not equal for both races, and government support of discrimination continued for the next several decades until the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-twentieth century. The lack of involvement of African Americans at the Centennial Exhibition, where America projected its desired image, indicated a future of prejudice and social inferiority to whites as the nation tried to represent itself as a united nation ready to join European powers.

America’s narrative of a white dominated nation hoping to join ranks with the great European powers of the time, presented through its exhibits of Native Americans and African Americans, cumulatively displayed the United States as a healed nation after the devastating Civil War. In the late nineteenth century, the country was experiencing a “time of renewal…[it was] a border time separating the infant Republic from the emerging world power,” and America needed to impress the world with its new image at the Exhibition. [[47]](#footnote-47) As America was attempting to portray itself as united and healed, there was tension over how to recognize the Civil War. Great bitterness between the North and South still lingered, and “Americans had not yet been able to form a coherent group identity…and therefore had difficulty agreeing on a collective memory of [the war].” [[48]](#footnote-48) Many people did not want any direct reminders of the war that represented the disunity of America at a time when it was trying to show unity and power, so the only significant recognition of the war was in artwork. Xanthus Smith’s painting of a naval battle between the North and the South showed a “modest and restrained image of warfare,” downplaying the severity of the overall crisis (Appendix D).[[49]](#footnote-49) Rather than focusing on the brutality and hostility between the North and the South, Smith’s piece had “nationalistic implications” and “hope for a redeemed nation,” centering on the fact that America was able to survive the war intact.[[50]](#footnote-50) At the Exhibition, the effects of the Civil War were understated through limited displays that largely ignored the period of disunion and focused on an image of a healed nation, ready to take its place alongside great European powers.

The political cartoon, “Stride of a century,” published in 1876, summarizes the image of a cohesive, dominant nation that the United States wished to present at the Exhibition (Appendix E). In the background of the sketch is the United States of America, which takes up half of the globe, presenting the image of America as central to the world’s existence. The “stride of a century” taken shows industrial progress through the railroads and telegraph lines crossing the nation, in an effort to highlight the development of the nation and its potential of becoming an industrial power. This background image represents the formal goal of the Exhibition, of showcasing progress. However, at the forefront of the drawing is a patriotic figure triumphantly standing over the Main Building of the Exhibition displaying international flags, demonstrating America’s desire to portray itself as a world leader, which is connected to the more significant motive of placing the country among other dominant European nations. The idea that this advancement was made in a swift, fluid step suggests that another step could easily be taken, with even more progress, contributing to America’s image as a rising world power that it wished to present at the Exhibition. As seen in the cartoon, the Centennial Exhibition was not only a place to demonstrate America’s progress and development, but was a significant time in its emergence on the world stage as a superior nation.

Though the Centennial Exhibition “lift[ed] the visitor above the narrow limits of his surroundings,” and demonstrated the progress of many nations, including the United States, it also did so much more.[[51]](#footnote-51) Cultural events like World’s Fairs, though entertaining, are not merely held for the leisure of the population, but also provide insight into the political, social, and economic issues of the period. At the Exhibition of 1876, America presented its narrative as a healed nation that was accepting white dominance as means to success, so that it could establish its place alongside the great Western nations of the time like Great Britain. Though the ideal of homogeneity became increasingly difficult to stand by in a rapidly diversifying society, the United States attempted to elevate the white man for several decades after the Fair, demonstrating its importance in establishing America’s goals and its place in the world.

Word Count: 4,481

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