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Envisioning the Nation

The Early American World's Fairs and the Formation of Culture

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Introduction: The early American World's Fairs as Sites of Culture Formation

It is frequently argued that world's fairs have lost much of their relevance today as most people—at least in western societies—have access to travel facilities, television and the internet, making such giant spectacles appear increasingly superfluous. And although the world's fair genre is clearly alive and well, to which the most recent world expositions staged in Aichi (2005), Zaragoza (2008), and Shanghai (2010) testify, the organizers of such massive efforts have always had to legitimize, and all too often defend, the huge expense involved. A case in point was Germany's first (and in all likelihood, last) world's fair, Hannover's *Expo 2000*, which sparked a prolonged public debate largely over its intricate financing scheme. Apart from having to compete with other media, moreover, the focus of the fairs themselves has changed considerably since their inception in the mid-nineteenth century. In short, whereas today's world's fairs are basically spectacles by globally operating corporations loosely united by a universal theme such as "Humankind—Nature—Technology" (2000) or "Water and Sustainable Development" (2008), the early world's fairs were organized as competitions *between* different nations, without such universal themes serving as a unifying umbrella. They were thus considered, in President McKinley's famous dictum, "time-keepers of progress," with each participating nation aiming to come out ahead in the race for world leadership.

Although exhibiting distinct, national cultures in peaceful competition with each other, the nineteenth century world's fairs were also intended as nationalizing spectacles. The American expositions under consideration in this study, ranging from 1853 to 1915, took place in a core period of nation formation and played, in fact, a seminal part in it. Although there were numerous other international exhibitions staged in America following the

success of the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893,[1] this study limits itself to the principal ones representing primarily national rather than regional interests, i.e., the 1853 Exhibition of the Industries of all Nations in New York, also known as the New York Crystal Palace; the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition; the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition; the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, and finally the 1915 San Francisco Panama Pacific International Exposition. With the exception of the very first one, which lacked the required international participation and attendance, these fairs simultaneously represent the American contribution of so-called 'universal class expositions' officially recognized by the Bureau of International Expositions founded in 1928 to oversee and regulate international expositions.[2]

Broadly speaking, the early American expositions have to be placed in the context of nationalism and imperialism, whereas the world's fairs after 1915 went in the direction of globalism and the ensuing competition of opposing ideological systems rather than of individual nation states. Thus, communism and fascism emerged as alternative ideologies to capitalism, which had been the uncontested economic model of earlier world expositions.[3] In the aftermath of World War II, then, they have come to represent a world order based on the seemingly free flow of capital and people, increasingly de-emphasizing national borders.[4] More specifically, however, each fair has to be placed within its own historical context to be properly

1 Less significant international exhibitions staged in America between 1885 and 1907 include the New Orleans World's Industrial and Cotton Exposition (1885), the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition (1895), the Tennessee Centennial Exposition (1897), the Buffalo Pan-American Exposition (1901), the South Carolina Interstate and West Indian Exposition (1901–02), and the Jamestown Tercentenary Exposition (1907). Most of these fairs "presented an image of a New South imbued with the spirit of progress and patriotism," as Robert Rydell explains. *All the World's a Fair. Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago and London: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984) 73.

2 Cf. the Bureau of International Expositions' regulations and list of recognized international exhibitions at http://www.bie-paris.org (accessed July 8, 2010).

3 The world expositions held between the World Wars (e.g. Paris 1925, Chicago 1933, Paris 1937, New York 1939) have received a great deal of critical attention, with particular emphasis on the race between communism, fascism, and capitalism. Cf., for example, Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs. The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago and London: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993).

4 For another look at the emergence of global empire and its foundations, cf. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000).

understood; or, following Fredric Jameson's well-known dictum, we must "always historicize."[5]

The first American world's fair, the New York Crystal Palace, staged just two years after the original London Crystal Palace, attempted to promote national unification at a time of growing tension between the northern and the southern states in the period leading up to the Civil War. Though emphasizing world peace, the fair focused primarily on America. At the time, the frontier was steadily moving westwards after a series of treaties and purchases had been made earlier in the century and numerous wars waged with the native populations; these continued, in fact, through the 1890s. Consequently, apart from the prevailing economic system—and more specifically the question as to whether slavery should be adopted or abolished in the new states—what was at stake was the nation as a whole. The New York Crystal Palace, though not as successful as the subsequent American world's fairs in this respect, attempted to project a vision of a unified national culture, both through its innovative architecture and by exhibiting new visual technologies such as photography, as well as elaborate displays of fine and industrial arts. Particularly in the case of the latter, fair officials actively promoted public education and, more precisely, introduced Americans to European standards of aesthetic refinement to ensure that America would be perceived as equal to its European rivals.

The second American world's fair, the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876, went even further in promoting national unification following the devastation of the Civil War. While political reunion had already been achieved, a major commemorative event like the Centennial was required to promote cultural union as well—all the more so as Reconstruction was accompanied by a major surge in industrialization which, in combination with mass (im)migration, made for growing class divisions and, hence, potential for social conflict. The Centennial Exhibition was the first American world's fair to counter such threats by purposefully presenting an idealized urban environment built according to neo-classicist principles and whose imposing appearance was calculated to have a civilizing influence on Americans. The Centennial, moreover, focused on interior design and various ways of creating a strong civil society 'from within' while simultaneously increasing demand for manufactured goods on a mass scale and

5 Cf. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981) 9. The phrase "Always historicize!" is in fact the opening sentence of the book and serves as its moral.