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MUSEUMS AND THE POLITICAL WORLD: CIVIL RIGHTS AND REFORM MOVEMENTS AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY

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Introduction

Social and political reform movements are typically polarizing. They are identified by some people as universal human rights issues, whereas others may see them as minority claims of exceptionalism that compromise mainstream concepts of equity. In this paper I explore some controversies that arose from attempts by curators in the Division of Political History at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) to exhibit controversial contemporary materials that reflected current-day socio-political change and debate through the 1960s. I also move beyond the historical angle to argue that the issues of authority, credibility and political legitimation that can come from an association with the NMAH as they were debated in the 1960s, remain current, if not exacerbated, in today's complex political climate.

My main case study is the *Human Rights* exhibition that was developed and shown at the NMAH in 1968. This exhibition engaged directly with the questions and challenges facing cultural history museums that sought to address the public within a rapidly changing world. The second example I will consider, if time permits, is the Glenn Beck 'Restoring Honor' Rally that took place a year ago, on 28 August, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC. This is of course the same place that Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his 'I have a dream' speech 47 years earlier. The Glenn Beck Rally aimed to, in Beck's own words, 'reclaim the civil rights movement' (Frank Rich, *NY Times*, 29/08/2010). I will consider the ways that Beck invoked the NMAH through the national media in the days following the rally. Linking my two examples is the broader context for this paper – that is, the rolling series of anniversaries commemorating 50 years of the African American Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and the questions currently being asked, and indeed answered, by museums about how to mark these events. In the final instance I suggest that not only are culture and politics entwined, especially for museums on the National Mall in Washington DC, but that museums have a central role in recording, as well as negotiating and actively investigating this relationship for their visiting public.

1968 *Human Rights* exhibition

1968 was an important year globally, and in the USA a great deal of social and political disruption took place, including protest and reform actions such as the Poor People's Campaign, which was designed to extend the goals associated with the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Other events to occur in 1968 in the US included the assassination of Martin Luther King (4 April), the race riots that

spread across Washington, DC and many other American cities, and the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy (5 June). At this time, senior administration at the NMAH (or, as it was then known, the Museum of History and Technology) also exercised a newfound confidence in addressing the civil rights movement. This confidence was in stark contrast to the apprehension they had displayed only a couple of years previously when an exhibition on civil rights had progressed to an advanced stage of development before ultimately being rejected as too controversial (see Message 2011).

What made things different in 1968 was that the proposed exhibition was aligned with the official commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. The exhibit opened on the 10 December, which was also the formal beginning of Human Rights week, as inaugurated in President Johnson's Proclamation made in October the year earlier. Rather than emerging as the sole result of curatorial activism, or from attempts to collect contemporary material that reflected the full range of reform movements taking place on the Mall at this time (although these were certainly factors), it came about as a result of the President's Commission for the Observance of Human Rights Year, which requested the museum develop an exhibit on the topic. The Chairman of the Commission, W. Averell Harriman, informed S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, that: 'One of the purposes of the Commission, as stated by the President, is to "provide a focus for governmental participation in Human Rights Year, enlisting the cooperation of organizations and individuals"' (Harriman to Ripley, 25 March 1968).

President Lyndon B. Johnson's Proclamation (3814 of 11 October 1967, 'Human Rights Week and Human Rights Year' (*Federal Register* 32(199), 13 October 1967) needs to be understood as occurring within a continuum of events that included Martin Luther King's prompting (through his 1963 March on Washington speech) of President Kennedy to release a 'proclamation' on civil rights that would be equivalent to Lincoln's anti-slavery Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that 'all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons' (The Emancipation Proclamation, 1 January 1863). It has also been suggested that 'in his attempts to encourage, cajole, and even shame the White House into providing decisive assistance for the black freedom struggle, Martin Luther King had earlier drawn on a suggestion emanating from the US Civil Rights Commission to urge President Kennedy to emulate Lincoln by issuing his own emancipation edict – in this instance, to end segregation' (Cook 2007: 190). However, Kennedy did not take up this suggestion, and following his assassination, the social reform agenda became the responsibility of President Johnson's administration.

A key feature of the *Human Rights* exhibition was its emphasis on 'the continuing struggle for human rights in America' ('Smithsonian Exhibit Shows Struggle for Human Rights' 1969; Smithsonian Institution Press release, 6 December 1968), through which it showed the links between Lincoln's

Emancipation Proclamation and anti-slavery reform movements, and present-day civil rights struggles and commemorations of Martin Luther King, Jr. Associate curator Keith Melder, who was responsible for the exhibition, wrote at the time that, ‘The implication of this exhibit is that emancipation has been a gradual process, still far from complete. It is not a very affirmative statement, though of course accurate’. In the only real indication that there may have been a level of concern about the exertion of undue influence by the State Department over the material or narratives included in the exhibit, Melder commented in an internal memo that while the inclusion of Native American suffrage might also be a suitable focus for the exhibit, ‘it may not’, he conceded, ‘be positive enough to suit the parameters of this commemoration’ (Melder to Bedini, 11 April 1968).

Melder was prescient in his argument, and despite President Johnson’s Proclamation and the government’s *prima facie* support for the *Human Rights* exhibition, the topic of civil rights continued to be contentious within the broader public sphere. Two years after the exhibition opened it was the subject of an arson attack (‘King flag destroyed in Smithsonian arson’, *Washington Daily News*, 10 September 1970; Smithsonian Institution incident report, 10 September 1970). Hanging underneath the ‘Human Rights Credo’ at the introduction to the exhibition, its signature item, a memorial banner to Martin Luther King, Jr., was damaged irreparably when it was set on fire. The banner had been handmade by residents of Resurrection City, on the Mall, where it had been displayed in May 1968 during the Poor Peoples’ campaign. It was especially symbolic given the assassination of Dr King, which occurred only a few months before the exhibition opened.

While the vandal was never identified or apprehended, it is tempting to hypothesize about possible perpetrators, who may have included white supremacists; more moderate visitors unhappy about the museum’s apparent and progressive political support for the Civil Rights Movement; or others at the opposite end of the spectrum, such as radical African American activists who were critical of the prominence accorded Martin Luther King in the exhibition. Indeed, representatives of each of these groups, including the more moderate visitors, had submitted letters and other types of formal correspondence and criticism about the proposed plans for the *Civil Rights* exhibit two years earlier (Message 2011). The State Department’s support of the exhibit may have also been problematic for some African American activists who had, for example, argued in 1963, that Martin Luther King and his co-organizers had compromised their cause by working closely with federal officials to plan the March on Washington. This position was popularized by Malcolm X, who, convinced that only radical actions could change the situation of African Americans, objected to the idea that civil rights activists might want presidential support. ‘When he [being the President] joins you,’ he warned the leaders, ‘you’re not going in the same direction you started in’ (quoted in Barber 2002:153). On the other hand, however, this ‘compromise’ could be interpreted to mean that federal authorities became the movement’s regulators and supporters, even as they remained, to some extent, its target. Although there was ultimately no evidence to make any case about the identity of the arsonist, the burning of the banner is

important for showing that human rights continued to be a controversial and contentious topic for many Americans in the late 1960s.

2010 ‘Restoring Honor’ Rally

Forty years later, human rights continues to be a hotly contested topic – both in the museum sector and broader civil sphere. This was exemplified for me when I attended the competing Glen Beck ‘restoring honor’ rally and Al Sharpton ‘Reclaim the Dream’ march on 28 August last year, which was, as I’ve already noted, the 47th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington, and needs to be understood in context of that event. Glenn Beck, a provocative and famously right-wing Fox News personality aligned with former Republican Presidential candidate Sarah Palin and the Tea Party Movement, reportedly had scheduled his rally for this day ‘coincidentally’, without being aware of the significance of the day. Unable to use the iconic Lincoln Memorial, the Sharpton-led march moved from Dunbar High School to the site of the almost-completed Martin Luther King memorial, close to the Jefferson Memorial.

The NMAH was interested in the Beck and Sharpton rallies because they took the 1963 March on Washington as their central referent. The museum has significant collections related to the March on Washington and they continue to collect material from events that acknowledge the ongoing impact of that event. According to a news article written a few days later: ‘The museum’s political history division also has memorabilia from the original 1963 March on Washington, part of its “ongoing effort to capture the spirit of American democracy and the American political system, including how people express their identity and the identity of the nation through political rallies, demonstrations and protests.” Recent acquisitions include materials from the 2008 Presidential campaign, immigration demonstrations on the National Mall, gay marriage, the “Obama Care” Tea Party rally in March and the April 15 tax day rally.’ (Annie Groer, *Politics Daily*, 31/08)

The article was based on an interview with a curator whose statement clearly suggested a bi-partisan line, which may have been an attempt to diffuse fears that had arisen when Beck joyfully proclaimed on national primetime television that the museum had solicited materials from the rally for its collections. In his announcement, Beck said:

I’ll tell you something that no one knows. Saturday night I woke my family up. It was 11pm that I got the news, the Smithsonian had called. They want items from the event preserved for the Smithsonian. Why would America’s Museum of History want something about a rally that had 87,000 people and just wasn’t [*sic*] racist? Is that worthy of a museum or held in archives? The reason it’s not being reported is that the media doesn’t understand things like this. And the other reason [big sigh], is because those who do understand, know that if it is explained, and you understand what it really, really is, it could change the course of our country (Glenn Beck, *Glenn Beck Show on Fox News*, 31082010)

Conclusion

Beck's attempts to gain national legitimation, authority, and credibility by recruiting the national museum to his cause demonstrates the political as well as cultural and social currency of museums. There is much more that can be said about Beck's attempts to conscript the national museum to his project of reclaiming the civil rights movement. There is also a whole other story here about the way that the museum has worked with Dr King's family and other individuals and activist communities to accurately represent their agendas and voices in the museum over multiple generations. A third story is that of government interference in the life and activities of the museum throughout the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in relation to attempts to collect and represent contentious contemporary topics. It is not possible to elaborate further on any of these stories in this short paper (but see Message 2011). It is, nonetheless, important to make the point that each of these are important factors, and that an awareness of them helps to demonstrate the role that the NMAH has played as a point of contact and contention, not just between the government and the political protest and reform movements that have occurred on the National Mall and been represented to various extents within the museum, but also with the general public who visit the museum, and with various other stakeholder organizations, communities and individuals. In so doing the museum has played and continues to play an important role in the social life of the Mall itself.

Note

This presentation is based on archival research and interviews conducted during my tenure as Smithsonian Institution Research Fellow in 2010, during which time I was jointly located in the Division of Political History at the National Museum of American History and at the National Museum of the American Indian. I am grateful to the Smithsonian Institution and the National Museum of American History, as well as the Australian Research Council and the Australian National University, which have supported this project. This presentation has been abstracted from a much fuller published discussion on the topic, which includes full documentation and references, as well as greater information and analysis than was possible in this 15 minute presentation. Please see Kylie Message, 'Commemorating Civil Rights and Reform Movements at the National Museum of American History' in Laurajane Smith, et, al. (eds), *Ambiguous Engagements: Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums*. London: Routledge, 2011.