Recent visitors to the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum were greeted with some unpleasant news: the museum was contaminated. Not by asbestos or toxic chemicals, mind you, but by far more noxious substances: racism, sexism, and anthropocentrism. To protect the unwary, warning labels throughout the halls identified which of the museum's venerable dioramas were infected by which ideological error. "Female animals are being portrayed in ways that make them appear deviant or substandard to male animals" warned a label next to an exhibit of American hartebeests. A beloved family of lions at a watering hole was also branded for sexism, because the standing male and reclining female suggested to the museum's gender police a pre-feminist division of labor. A leaping Bengalese tiger was dismissed as too predatory, a violation of the communitarian animal ethic.

The Natural History Museum is not the only Smithsonian institution to have re-thought its mission in recent years. Next door at the National Museum of American History, visitors encounter an America characterized by rigid class barriers, ever-growing economic inequality, predatory capitalists, and oppressed minorities. Several blocks away, curators at the Smithsonian's American Art Museum are busy exposing art as just another "social text" masking illegitimate power relations. And across the Mall, Air and Space Museum curators, still fuming over the cancellation of the shameful Enola Gay exhibit, whine like grounded teenagers about the old military fogies now directing the museum who are inhibiting the curators' revisionist lust.

Anyone who still doubts that the madness currently possessing American universities matters to society at large should take a stroll through today's Smithsonian. The Institution has been transformed by a wholesale embrace of the worst elements of America's academic culture. The staples of cutting-edge academic "research"--smirking irony, cultural relativism, celebration of putative victims, facile attacks on science--are all thriving in America's premier museum and research complex, its showcase to itself and to the world. The changes at the Smithsonian are not unique to that institution. Museums across the country have rushed headlong into what may be called the "new museology" based on a mindless parroting of academic fads. But the Smithsonian's embrace of postmodern theory and identity politics is of greatest import, because of the Institution's contribution to America's public identity.

For most of its history, the Smithsonian has been driven by the thirst for knowledge. In 1835, the U.S. charge d'affaires in London received news of a most unusual bequest. James Smithson, a British aristocrat and amateur scientist, had left his estate of a hundred thousand pounds to the "United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." Smith-son, a bastard of august lineage, had never been to America; his gift may have been revenge against his native society for snubbing him for his illegitimate birth, or it may have simply reflected his admiration for the democratic experiment under way across the Atlantic.
Smithsonian's bequest caused an enormous stir. After eight years of heated debate over its interpretation—suggestions included an agricultural college and an observatory—Congress finally defined the institution in 1846 as a national museum for government collections, a laboratory, an art gallery, and a library.

An explosion in scientific knowledge and America's passionate desire to discover what lay west drove the Smithsonian in the nineteenth century. Smithsonian naturalists accompanied westward expeditions, and returned to the Castle (the Smithsonian's first building) on the Mall with crates of mineral, animal, and vegetable specimens. Smithsonian geologists heroically mapped unknown territory, and Smithsonian ethnographers lovingly chronicled Indian cultures. For the next century and a half, this drive for knowledge would continue, until eventually, the Institution's collections would constitute a veritable library of the world.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, while the Smithsonian's scientific research continued apace, its historical and cultural identity subtly changed. As its current curators proudly describe it, the Institution became sensitive to the social and political currents swirling around it—ghetto riots, Vietnam War protests, and women's "liberation." Museums nationwide became terrified of the charge of "elitism" and adopted the media of popular culture to increase their "relevance."

The Smithsonian of the 1970s already looked to the academy for its inspiration, particularly to the new fields of social and cultural history. A 1976 show on immigration at the Museum of History and Technology (since renamed the National Museum of American History) reflected this influence in its acute attention to race and class. Also academically inspired was the Institution's newfound zest for exhibiting the detritus of popular culture, most famously, its Archie Bunker Chair.

But nothing in the 1970s matched the changes ushered in by anthropologist Robert McCormick Adams, who assumed the Smithsonian secretarship in 1984. Adams had been sold to Congress as someone who would increase the scholarly standards at the Institution, illustrating yet again the utter cluelessness of politicians and ordinary people regarding the academically enfranchised cultural Left. Described by The Washington Post as a "happily successful Establishment radical" Adams declared the purpose of museums to be "confrontation, experimentation, and debate"--a politically charged manifesto that pointedly ignored the Smithsonian's mandate to increase knowledge. Adams dictated an aggressive program to "diversify" the Institution, and set out to hire curators, mostly from the academy, that shared his commitment to "critical" scholarship.

The Adams regime (which ended in 1994) perfected the "new museology" at the Smithsonian. The most important principle of the new dogma is "honoring multiple ways of interpreting the world." Curatorial expertise and scientific knowledge are out; "multiple voices" and relativism in all its forms are in. (As we will see, however, only certain "voices" ever seem to get heard.) In furtherance of the "multiple interpretations" principle, the new museologist consults with "the community" in devising exhibits. Moreover, those exhibits must aim to enhance self-esteem: they are designed to increase the ethnic pride of minorities. Concomitant with this redressive principle, a new museological exhibit is grossly ahistorical: it exports contemporary standards of equity to the past in order to make its case against oppression and victimhood seem stronger.
The final two principles of the new museology are contempt for the public, and infatuation with high-tech wizardry. With the exception of these last two tenets, the new museology is directly imported from the academy. The Smithsonian's recent public relations fiascoes all embodied one or more of its principles.

A prototypical new hire of the Adams regime--and classic "new museologist"--was Robert Sullivan, responsible for the warning labels on the Natural History Museums dioramas. Sullivan was brought to the museum in 1990 as director of public programs, and his existence there is particularly unfortunate, for no museum better embodies the Smithsonian's glorious past. To Sullivan, however, that past is cause for shame and criticism. Sullivan is nothing if not steeped in theory, and he can reel off Foucauldian riffs with the best of them. Natural history museums embody the concept of "Safe Terror" he explains; they were part of the "Victorian campaign of containing wildness." "While the etiquette books were talking of how to conceal, repress, and deny bodily functions of any sort" he says, "natural history museums were created as a place to exhibit such wildness from a safe distance." Among the practices that were being "repressed on the street" while being shown in museums, according to Sullivan, were scarification and tattooing--not heretofore recognized as important Anglo-American traditions. Sullivan's sinister interpretation of natural history museums clashes with their philanthropic origins. Such institutions, their advocates argued, would allow the urban poor, increasingly imprisoned by large industrial cities, to enjoy the "refreshment, humanism, and inspiration" of nature, as one nineteenth-century proponent wrote.

Sullivan shares Foucault's contempt for civilization, which he characterizes as "quote-unquote 'civilization.'" He also has fully imbibed the postmodern academy's skepticism about science (though of course he continues to enjoy its benefits daily). He announced breezily upon his arrival that the "western-scientific anthropological world view is merely one more alternative way of knowing and encoding the world, no more valuable or accurate, no less ideological or culture-bound, than any other."

A critic espousing such contempt for the achievements of Western civilization is poorly suited to help lead an institution so intimately related to the "western-scientific-anthropological world view." Indeed, Sullivan almost didn't accept the position. As he confided to Frank Talbot, the museum director at the time, "I was so frightened and discouraged by the overwhelming needs I see [at the museum] and the seeming indifference of the visitors." Those annoying visitors, he explained, "don't want to be engaged, empowered, or even educated, [but] just want to be distracted ... from the dailiness, the tedium, the fear of their lives" But courageous and self-sacrificing fellow that he is, Sullivan manfully accepted the job at the largest research museum in the country, explaining grandiloquently: "We must affirm life, have the courage to name what is intolerable to us, and act against it."

Sullivan immediately set to work "erasing [the museum's] racist belief system." He assembled a gender-race bias task force to "critique exhibits and produce policy and practices manuals on Gender and Race Equity." Faced with budget limits, Sullivan was unable to tear down and replace everything he found offensive about the museum; his second-best solution was the so-called "dilemma labels" (since removed) placed next to the dioramas. "If you couldn't change the
exhibits, can you make an exhibit out of the exhibit, and show the cultural values in science?" Sullivan explains, demonstrating his close familiarity with self-reflexive postmodern practice.

Ironically, many of the museum's naturalists had complained for years of scientific inaccuracies in some of the exhibition labels, but their complaints went ignored. Science has no constituency, however; politics does.

Sullivan also acted on his announced intention to grant to "minority cultures ... access to collections and meaningful influence on interpretive points of view." Upon his arrival at the museum, he started a "dialogue" with a radically Afrocentric "community" group that had long complained of the museum's alleged racism. Sullivan invited the group Tu-Wa-Moja to advise the museum regarding planned revisions to its Africa Hall and Human Evolution exhibit.

The result was predictable. The group made life extremely difficult for the archaeologists and anthropologists who had been ordered to find common ground with it; but little else was accomplished. The museum tried to defuse Tu-Wa-Moja's objections to the Africa Hall by putting "dilemma labels" on the exhibits, but the group was not satisfied. In a remarkable symbol of the new museology, Sullivan simply shut down the hall. "Tearing down the hall was a way to build trust" he explains. Leaving it up while the new hall was in development would have damaged the Smithsonian's credibility, Sullivan concluded, because the "community had great mistrust about whether the Smithsonian would redo it in an inclusive way." As a final gesture of "trust" Sullivan allowed Tu-Wa-Moja to film the shuttered hall for its Afrocentric propaganda materials; Leonard Jeffries served as de facto master of ceremonies. The moral of the story is that in order to stoke an ethnic interest group's self-esteem, the new museology demands that everyone else be denied the opportunity to learn from the Smithsonian's collections.

To his credit, Sullivan has not pressured the museums curators to accept Tu-Wa-Moja's views on the African origins of everything. But why was the group invited in the first place? What did this group of Washington residents know about evolution to justify their advising a team of physical anthropologists, with all the extra labor that that interaction cost the museum, or about Africa to justify their advising cultural anthropologists? The answer, of course, lies in skin color--more specifically, in the racial essentialism that holds that a young, black Washington male is an expert on all things African.

The "community consultation" imperative that brought Tu-Wa-Moja into the Natural History Museum has cast a wider net than just local Afrocentrics. Over one hundred people are advising the museum on its new Africa Hall, most of them black. Again, the process is extremely time-consuming. Mary Jo Arnoldi, an African curator at the museum, explained why the community consultations are necessary: "Museums are becoming aware that in a postmodern world, the people you're representing say: how come you're the expert? Sullivan's only echoing what the academy has been talking about for a long time."

The new Africa Hall will be impeccably postmodern. It will tell African "stories" with African "voices." Its theme is not Africa per se, but African identity: over half the hall will be devoted to the "African diaspora"--peoples of African origin living elsewhere. Geographical divisions of Africa will be minimally included as a grudging concession to visitors who expect it. The new
museology has little use for the traditional organizing tools of natural history, such as geography or species classification, which are seen, no doubt, as relics of the "western-scientific-anthropological world view." But what is a natural history museum if not the record of the interaction of humans with a particular patch of the natural world? In an era when Americans' geographical and historical knowledge is shrinking into nothingness, a deemphasis on geography is dangerous.

The old Africa Hall was criticized in the press and the "community" as showing a timeless Africa of quaint or barbaric customs; curators of the new Africa Hall are determined to avoid such charges. "We have to make sure to let people know there are as many Africans in science labs as are working in the fields," says Mary Jo Arnoldi. The self-esteem imperative seems to have overridden truth here: given the backward state of Africa's still largely rural economy, it seems highly unlikely that Africa is producing as many scientists as subsistence farmers. Oddly, when identity groups seek to legitimate themselves, they draw on traditional Western criteria of accomplishment, such as science, despite the cultural left's disdain for such alienating forms of thought.

To date, Sullivan has been better at shutting things down than putting them up. Occasionally, his revisionist agenda has met with stiff internal opposition. He had tried to remove from the museum's rotunda its famous charging elephant, for example--as a hunting trophy, a symbol for Sullivan of white capitalist aggression. But a passionate protest by the museum's animal scientists shelved the plan. Anyone who cares for museum aesthetics can be glad for that, since Sullivan's suggestions for a replacement included a "large animated programmable globe" illustrating the cardinal truth that while the new museum bureaucrat may be chock full of political opinions, he is absolutely devoid of taste.

But there are large changes in the offing, and readers with a love of traditional natural history museums are advised to visit the Smithsonian soon, before it's too late. Eventually, all of the museum's enchanting human culture halls will be torn down, to make way for the new museological extravaganza "Changing Cultures in a Changing World." This overarching cultural anthropology exhibit will focus on three or four big ideas about "cultural change"--one of the watchwords, along with "global change" of the new thinking.

The ideology of "cultural change" is the antithesis of everything natural history museums once stood for. The naturalists and anthropologists who created those museums wanted to present the vast wonders of the earth in a logical, coherent fashion; they had an enormous respect for details and facts. The Smithsonian's glorious dioramas --the creation of scientists with obvious artistic flair--gave visitors a panoramic, but specific, view of the world's cultures. But museums no longer strive for comprehensiveness or specificity. Instead, the educator's favorite "idea" is paramount. "We have the space to tell four to five potent stories" says Sullivan. "All the dioramas will be gone, we're not worried about covering the same ground" There is considerable irony to this breezy indifference to coverage. Native American activists have attacked the museum for only showing one tribe of Eskimos; now, there will likely be none. (In the interim, to respond to Native American complaints, Sullivan will put a video next to the Eskimo diorama showing contemporary Aleut life--a gross and unconscionable violation of the aesthetics of the Americas Hall.)
If the theme of "cultural change" does not highlight specific places and peoples, what then is it all about? Like most everything in postmodern politics it is about "identity." But there is a twist. "Every visitor [to the new hall] should find something about themselves" says Sullivan. Future visitors should find that they are "the culmination of cultural change that makes them the same as every other visitor. They will not meet the exotic other here, they will meet themselves" The unspoken agenda here is that all cultures are equal, and influence each other equally.

The Natural History Museum provides one further contrast between the old and the new museology. The old museology created places of refuge, where visitors could contemplate nature in stillness. The new museology abhors stillness; the key word is "interactivity." The new museum halls are starting to resemble video arcades: recorded voices drone over and over from all corners, TV screens run the same video endlessly, and computers beep and blink before jamming up. For all Sullivan and his ilk's professed distaste for "rational-logical-technocratic society," they are absolutely besotted with gadgetry. An exhibit on marine ecosystems features several video screens embedded in fake rock and tacky plywood, as well as an LED display. On either side of the cluttered exhibit are the traditional bird and mammal halls, featuring such endearing vitrines as "Mammal Parachutes" and "Concealing Coloration." The brilliance and variety of the animals, many collected by Theodore Roosevelt, makes the point about "biodiversity" far more effectively than the beeping, whirring technologies next door. With so splendid a species collection, why would the curators opt for the simulacrum of video?

"Interactive" museum technologies are supposed to allow visitors to "create the meaning" of the exhibit, or, less pretentiously, learn at their own speed. But the new technology is about as interactive as a factory time clock. Typically, the viewer punches a few keys on a computer screen to access data, and the computer spews it out. The answer was predetermined; there is no reason the information could not have been presented in straight graphic format. But the new technology allows curators to feel up-to-date with the information age.

To be sure, there is only so much a new museologist at an old museum can do. Despite the best of revisionist intentions, not all the old exhibits can be junked immediately. To achieve a perfect embodiment of the new museology, one must start from a clean slate. What luck for Secretary Adams that such a slate existed--the last undeveloped piece of land on the Mall. On it, Adams decreed the erection of the National Museum of the American Indian, planned for completion in 2001. The project has sucked money out of existing parts of the Smithsonian, but from Adams's perspective, nothing was too good for the museum, for it would seal his reputation as protector of ethnic identity groups. The American Indian Museum provides an ominous harbinger of museums to come.

The museum was born in racial animus. Its administrator declared early on: "If we do not take responsibility for the work, the white people will win the day. ... We cannot let some arrogant, racist, or stupid people defeat us." The museum is supposed to be not just about America Indians, but by them and for them as well. Museum planners describe American Indians as their "constituency," an overtly political concept. Naturally, a Native American is designing the building; he renews himself for further battles by retreating to his "sweat lodge" in Rock Creek Park.
Anyone eager for a foretaste of this pure new museological creation can get it in the Smithsonian's historic Arts and Industries Building. There, a preview exhibition, predictably called "Stories of the People" is installed. And what a preview it is! The first jolt comes from the wall labels, which use the first-person plural throughout: "As tribal people, ... we are wonderfully diverse yet essentially similar"; "our Cherokee story is one of balance--men and women, animals and plants, complementing each other's lives" Had a white curator presumed to use the first-person plural, the postmodernists would be busy deploring the "construction" of the viewer as "the Other."

The second jolt from "Stories of the People" is the embarrassing vacuousness of the accompanying texts, many of which seem transcribed from Chinese fortune cookies. "Apache culture is adaptive and reflects the times" reads one. The conceit of "living in balance" with nature pervades the exhibition, though one does wonder about the buffalo run off cliffs by Indians: did they, too, feel in perfect harmony with nature? Even "men and women" lived in balance, as the Cherokee text quoted above claims. Let us recall that that balance consisted of the women doing hard labor domestically while the men hunted and went to war. If an eighteenth-century burgher had made a similar claim for his domestic arrangements, he would be impaled on the stake of false consciousness.

Finally, there is the overtly political nature of the show. The exhibition is a piece of advocacy from start to finish, arguing the validity of Indian legal claims against the U.S. government. The following statement is typical in its clumsy juxtaposition of folksy English translations and hard-nosed legal claims:

Today, the environment is not as rich as it was before the House on the Water People came. Conflicts between our Tribe and the House on the Water People still exist. The harvest and management of fisheries is a contentious issue, despite court decisions affirming our right to half of the fish in our waters.

Although construction of its new multi-million-dollar taxpayer-financed building on the Mall proceeds apace, there may be little to fill it when it is completed. The museum is depleting its collections under the aegis of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, which governs the return of native remains to tribes. In essence, the museum sent around a shopping list of goodies, asking tribes if they wanted to make a claim on its collections. The claims are becoming increasingly attenuated. Anthropologist Clement Meighan laments: "Adams sold us out. The institution is spending to destroy its collections."

Like the Natural History Museum, the National Museum of American History is firmly tied to the Smithsonian's past; and like the Natural History Museum, it has just as surely betrayed it. Repository for over a century of the nation's tangible heritage, the museum is conducting a fierce revisionist campaign. Like the other Smithsonian museums, it has taken its cue directly from the multicultural-mad, victim-celebrating universities.

The collections at American History originated when the U.S. Patent Office transferred the contents of its National Cabinet of Curiosities to the Smithsonian in 1858. Included were George Washington's tent and the Star-Spangled Banner. The collections got another boost in 1876, from
the Centennial Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia. The present museum, a windowless battlement possessing all the charm of an airplane terminal, opened in 1964 as the National Museum of History and Technology. Its ground floor, now featuring a noisy, high-tech exhibit about industrial materials, resembles a food court in a large suburban mall. The museum was ominously renamed the American History Museum in 1980, confirming a change of emphasis that was already taking place inside it. While some wonderful traditional exhibits of great hulking machines still stand, the social historical exhibits take an attitude toward technology that is typically ironic and skeptical.

Anyone looking for political history in the museum will be disappointed. It features nothing on the American Revolution or the constitutional conventions, nothing that embodies the ideals that animated the United States. America's presidents? You'll find their shadowy images sticking out from underneath the First Ladies' portraits ar-rayed across a wall. And tucked back in a tiny case behind an escalator are some presidential possessions, such as Woodrow Wilson's golf clubs and Lincoln's gold cane. Good luck finding the case, however.

Instead of political history, the museum focuses on a congeries of identity groups. Two themes emerge: America's ever-growing inequalities, and the unpleasantness of white people. Take any point in time in the Smithsonian's America, and you will find shocking inequalities that only get worse. After the Revolution: "The gulf between rich and poor, powerful and powerless ... did not vanish after 1776. ... Whatever their race or gender, working Philadelphians found that the Revolution had not solved the problems of social and economic inequality." During the nineteenth-century industrial revolution: there was increasing "economic inequality" Turn of the century: "By the 1890s. ... growing contrasts of wealth and poverty, and rigid racial barriers had created urgent social problems." Modern era: "It is much easier in the United States to be decently dressed than it is to be decently housed, fed or doctored" (quoting socialist Michael Harrington).

What is most striking about the Smithsonian's survey of American inequality through the ages is its utter lack of historical awareness. The curators bring to the past no historical context; they observe and judge the past as if it were simultaneous with the present. The postrevolutionary period was characterized by "social and economic inequality" say the curators. Compared to what? Judged by contemporary European standards, America was the least class-bound society in the world, and would remain so for two centuries. Titles, primogeniture, feudal rights, strict distinction between the nobility and the merchant and servant classes--those were the indices of eighteenth-century inequality, and America had cast them off.

Similarly inapt is the observation that during the Progressive era, the "rigid structures of American society were difficult to overcome in building cross-class and inter-racial alliances." That is an agenda straight out of the 1990s multicultural campus, with its vacuous talk of class consciousness and rainbow coalitions; it has nothing to do with the Progressive agenda.

Nowhere is the Smithsonian curators' self-absorption more apparent than in their treatment of "women's issues." Barbara Clark Smith, a curator, notes scornfully that late eighteenth-century Philadelphians "continued to assume that women of both races would and should be dependent on men." Well, of course they did--"women's lib" was still one hundred and eighty years away!
A young student reading such comments will nevertheless come away with the impression that the American past was a shamefully inadequate place.

Even the language used to describe the past is self-absorbed. The "settlement house" movement, wherein social workers helped immigrants assimilate, "enabled women to use gender concepts as a source of empowerment" coos an exhibition on women's social movements. The statement would have been absolutely incomprehensible to an early twentieth-century citizen; it is still meaningless today, rendering it a bona fide product of the academy.

The Smithsonian's assault on the American past doesn't end with its obsessive harping on social and economic inequality. The museum has a far more specific agenda to pursue, and that is against whites. An exhibition on postcolonial society suggests that American history was formed of equal parts white, black, and Indian influence, and a good thing, too, because black and Indian cultures, according to the exhibit, were superior in every way. The first generation of American citizens were social-climbing, ruthless, obsessed with status and power, indifferent to equality, sexist, and, of course, viciously hypocritical in their embrace of slavery. Their victory over Britain was due to the "labors of the African-Americans they enslaved" not, apparently, to their zeal to found a new, classless society.

A display of a Virginia planter's parlor says it all. Droning incessantly above the barren room is a recorded male voice that interprets the space. "Every aspect [of the room] is designed for social advancement" the tape sneers. "The construction of the staircase was fashionable, [long pause], expensive [long pause], showy." The narrator practically spits out the words: "This is more than just a room; this is an elaborate proclamation of prosperity and ambition, the public face of a man, [who is] part of a fiercely competitive social system." The planter and his neighbors, the narrator sniffs, used "every occasion to prove themselves better [pause], richer [pause], more powerful than each other."

It is no surprise, then, when we learn later in the exhibit that the planter had murdered his wife. This is the family the Smithsonian chose to highlight as a typical early Southern family! Not only were the white citizens slavers and social-climbers, they were also domestic murderers. Now there undoubtedly was a pecking order in postcolonial society. But there is little reason to suppose that early Americans were more socially aggrandizing than potlatching "native peoples" or a king in a slave-trading African dynasty.

The Smithsonian's selection of a New England family is also telling. Did it choose one with a glorious revolutionary past? Not a chance. It selects an opponent of equality and possible Royalist. Merchant Samuel Cotton "disapproved of the notions of equality that were spreading in the northeast." Not only a reactionary, Cotton is also a greedy capitalist: an audio tape ceaselessly reenacts a court hearing that found him guilty of profiteering off the Revolution by overcharging for sugar, molasses, salt, and rum.

Fortunately, there is an escape from this backbiting, petty society: we can visit the Seneca Nation of the Iroquois Confederacy. And suddenly, we reencounter the curatorial "we": "Our ancestors considered it a great transgression to reject the council of their women" Apparently, the Indians deserve a "voice" and the whites do not. This carefully chosen female-centric aspect of Iroquois
society contrasts sharply with eighteenth-century white society, wherein women, Clark notes, had more rights as widows than as wives. Whom is she kidding? Does Clark really believe that "gender roles" were less rigid among the bloody Iroquois than in England or America? The "rights of women" a concept even then being debated in England, would have been incomprehensible to the Indians.

There isn't a single myth about the nobility of the oppressed to which Clark doesn't subscribe. "Most African-Americans, Native Americans, and women white Americans ... studied nature in order to work in harmony with it, not to control it" she declares breathlessly. If Native Americans and blacks did not "control nature" it is because they did not possess the technology and scientific knowledge to do so. African-Americans performed voodoo rituals with animals. Was that more "harmonious" than cultivating livestock?

But the Smithsonian knows no such ambiguity. It presents the so-called "systematic spirit--or deep faith in the power of reason and science" as white man's religion, no more efficacious or valid than the lore of illiterate peoples. Astoundingly, it puts the onus on white Europeans to understand native cultures, not vice versa: "Because of cultural bias, Europeans frequently were unable to comprehend the systems by which the knowledge passed from teacher to student in these traditional cultures, and the content of that knowledge." This is balderdash. First of all, if Europeans were "unable to comprehend" the "knowledge systems" of traditional cultures, it was undoubtedly because the high priests who presided over those "knowledge systems" kept them shrouded in mystery, not only to outsiders, but to members of the native culture itself. The notion of the public availability of knowledge and scientific research was a Western creation and a great tool of equality, to boot. It was utterly foreign to primitive cultures, who understood long before Foucault that knowledge (and even the appearance of knowledge) was power.

Second, if "cultural bias" prevented Europeans from understanding the occult mysteries of native "knowledge systems" fairness would require mentioning that illiteracy and scientific ignorance prevented native cultures from understanding Western "knowledge systems." But the Smithsonian sees the deficiency only on the whites' side.

The notion that native peoples lived in "harmony" while whites lived in conflict with the natural world pervades the exhibit. A label in a case on popular science announces darkly: "The air pump subjected nature to unnatural forces." There is no room in Clark's intellectual universe for the joy of experimentation; in her scheme, eighteenth-century popular interest in physics smacks of imperialism, aggression, and probably also racism and sexism. Eli Whitney's cotton gin, an ingenious invention, is simply labelled: "An Engine of Slavery."

The romanticization of native peoples continues in another American History exhibit: "New Mexico: An American Encounter" about the interaction of American Indians and Hispanics, and their fight against white imperialism. The exhibition states that Indian tribes take in tourists because of their "desire to share"; apparently the aggressive marketing of Indian artifacts springs from a similarly disinterested motive. A full-length mirror shaped as a human with a camera hanging from the neck (actually, the camera has been stolen, leaving just a plastic mount) silently accuses the museum visitor of "objectifying the Other." Again, no one is forcing the
tourist industry on the Indians. The show glosses over the often brutal missionizing of the Indians by the Spaniards.

Smirking irony is a favorite conceit of academic demystifiers, and it pervades the Smithsonian. It entails liberal use of scare quotes, or implicit scare quotes, to debunk concepts that twenty years ago were quite unproblematic. Echoing Robert Sullivan's theme that middle-class manners are tools of power, the American History Museum questions the most basic mechanisms of American history: assimilation. A section called "Social Service v. Social Control" in the women's reform movement exhibition argues that

middle class reformers ... often imposed their concepts of the "American Way" on people. ... Teaching immigrants and the less fortunate how to "better" themselves involved making judgments of moral and cultural "superiority."

For those immigrants who came over without a proper sense of hygiene, who beat their wives, who took their children out of school to work, that "bettering" process was essential to their social progress. But the adolescent sees all forms of authority as oppressive.

The cynical debunking of core American beliefs doesn't always use scare quotes. Another favorite ploy is the "Americans believed" construction, which introduces a note of irony into what are generally unobjectionable views. A show on the American industrial revolution from 1790 to 1860 subtly mocks Americans' enthusiasm for the new industrial inventions: Americans "believed that economic progress depended on technological advance." Why is this noteworthy, unless we are to understand it as a bizarre belief? But Americans saw daily the impact of technology on the economy. Nineteenth-century Americans' belief in the efficacy of gifted individuals is another howler to the Smithsonian: "Many Americans believed ... that progress was the work of a few great inventors." One can almost hear curator Steve Lubar's guffaws as he wrote this. A sophisticated social historian such as Lubar understands that such concepts as "greatness" and even the "individual" are just political fictions designed to conceal oppressive power relations.

Curator Lubar also singles out for implicit scorn the "widespread [nineteenth-century] assumption that work was good for people." How repressive, we murmur sympathetically. Even worse, "'houses of industry' helped to keep the poor busy and out of trouble." How much more humane are the ready welfare benefits that cultivate a huge class of non-working, dependent, and often criminal people!

No museum has better employed academically inspired scorn, however, than Air and Space, and nowhere is the effect more jarring. If ever there were a testament to the power of science, engineering, and mental mastery, it is the Air and Space Museum. Yet as the recent Enola Gay debacle revealed, the museum is now populated by curators and, until recently, a director who sought to debunk technology and military prowess. Pilots and former military men once dominated the museum; today, academic historians rule the place. Secretary Adams orchestrated this change, to bring the museum into line with the academy, which had long derided Air and Space for its allegedly celebratory attitude toward aeronautic technology.
The results of this academic incursion were in long before the Enola Gay controversy. A curator recalls the heady pre-Enola Gay days, when the public hadn't yet noticed the changes underway in the museum: "There was a sense of optimism in the 1980s and 1990s that we could stretch boundaries and do cultural history." A show on World War I fighter pilots argues that Americans have been hoodwinked into a naive romanticization of air war. Displays of commercial detritus with pilot themes drive home the point that Americans can't tell the difference, say, between Snoopy in his Red Baron flying gear or a Red Baron pizza box and the realities of war. This dour "deconstruction" of popular culture comes right from the academy. A previous exhibit--a wildly popular show on "Star Trek"--also drew on academic fads to reveal the searing social critique in the TV series. The important point about the exhibit devoted to "Star Trek" is not that it represented a crass pandering to popular culture (although it did), but that it found in the series a criticism of racism, sexism, militarism, and, in an earlier draft of the exhibition's script, the Vietnam War.

But nothing, obviously, can match the enormity of the Enola Gay disaster. The true outrage of the project was not that it used spurious analyses to second-guess the military necessity of the atomic bomb, or that its authors chose the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II to propound their revisionist views, or even that it portrayed the Japanese as quasi-victims during the war they started with a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. The true outrage lies in the disgusting condescension and contempt shown to the public and to the wars veterans by the Smithsonian personnel, from Adams on down.

The abortive exhibition presented Hiroshima not as the conclusion of World War II, but as the start of the arms race. To Martin Harwit, director of the Air and Space Museum, the conjunction of the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the end of the war was purely coincidental. This perspective on the bomb set the stage for the follies to come, guaranteeing that the veterans and the curators would be talking past each other.

From the start, Smithsonian officials held themselves out as the only people sensitive enough to understand the horrors of nuclear war and the anxieties of the nuclear age. Responding to one of the many World War II veterans campaigning tirelessly for the restoration and exhibition of the Enola Gay, Secretary Adams intoned piously: "Decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires us also to touch on the demonstrated horror and yawning future risk of the age that the Enola Gay helped to inaugurate." Adams's condescension was not lost on the vet, who shot back that Adams was a "Washington satrap."

Harwit easily matched Adams for self-righteousness. Hand-picked by Adams to bring a critical perspective on strategic bombing to the museum, Harwit, an astrophysicist, was the first director of the museum without a flying or military background. Writing to Japan's ambassador in Washington, Harwit revealed his deep contempt for the public: "Unless the public is willing to understand the events that led to the bombings, and the terrible destruction they wrought, the most valuable lessons that can be learned from history will be lost." The gall of this message is nearly unfathomable. Harwit posits the public as his quasi-adversary, determined to hold on to its blind ignorance in the face of his preffered enlightenment. It is the height of arrogance for Harwit to present himself and his curators, none of whom served in the war, as the repositories of wisdom regarding the "events that led to the bombings."
Even more offensive than the museum's condescension toward the public was its contempt for the veterans. In statement after statement, the museum's personnel caricatured the vets as an annoying, insignificant, self-engrossed interest group in conflict with the public good. In one of the most explosive statements during the public controversy, a curator named Tom Crouch wrote to Harwit: "Do you want an exhibit to make veterans feel good, or do you want an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don't think we can do both." In his self-exculpatory book, Harwit adopts the same stance, alleging that the vets merely sought to "satisfy their nostalgia" or to be celebrated.

Only someone who had never served in a war could characterize the vets' desire for a public history as "nostalgia" or "feel-good" therapy. Harwit and his curators exemplify the offensive self-righteousness most often found in academia--that of a generation that has lived without sacrifice and that sneers at tradition. Contrary to the Smithsonian's dismissive rhetoric, the vets showed themselves throughout the battle as extraordinarily eloquent, informed, and morally wise.

But few at the Smithsonian seem to have learned anything from the episode (except the current secretary, Michael Heyman, who, upon succeeding Adams in 1994, canceled the original exhibition and fired Harwit.) Throughout the Institution, curators and historians stew about the grievous injury done to their intellectual freedom by the cancellation of the show, and complain darkly about continuing censorship. The resentment is strongest, naturally, at Air and Space, which is still licking its wounds. "The outlook in this place is bleak; we can't do anything that's critical of anything, we're so constrained by the political right wing" one curator fumed to me. Note his assumption: his primary goal is to be "critical," not to share knowledge or edify. But even more remarkable is the curator's shocking lack of respect for experience and seniority. "A bunch of seventy-five-year-olds--two World War II vets--are running this place now," he complained, who "bring the mindset of that generation."

Next up at Air and Space: a show on the Star Wars trilogy, one of the last Harwit projects still on the books. A bid for popular appeal, to be sure, but don't be surprised to find trenchant social criticism served up as well--perhaps a paean to diversity and sensitivity. In line with the redressive mission of the Smithsonian, Air and Space is also planning an exhibit on the black experience in aviation, following the precedent of a 1994 show on a female aerial acrobat that demonstrated that young girls really can triumph against the sexist odds!

If many of the Air and Space curators seek to debunk the alleged myths of flight technology, many curators at the American Art Museum, housed in the splendid neoclassical Old Patent Office Building, are determined to debunk art itself. Ideally, some believe, there would cease to be any distinction between art--what one curator snidely calls "so-called paintings"--and ephemera such as political cartoons. All would be marshalled to the great project of tearing down America's ideals.

Mention of the sublime to some curators provokes a recoil of distaste. In a recent essay on art curating, curator William Truettner scoffs: Museum visitors used to believe that works of art "disregard everyday life in favor of expressing what was profound and lasting about the human
spirit." Such aesthetic idealism is repugnant to Truettner; he wants to "bring art museum visitors back to earth [and] make them believe that works have more-limited [sic] meanings."

Truettner brought the public thuddingly to earth in his much-criticized "The West as America" exhibit of 1991. The show argued that the great heroic canvases of the Western expansion were really about Eastern capitalism, ethnic strife, and greed. Truettner, who has read his Derrida, finds exploitation and despair in the most peaceful of canvases, for the very absence of social strife and oppression from a canvas "has the ironic effect of calling them back to life," he argues.

Truettner’s heavy-handed decoding of art violates the interpretive code he professes to follow. Mouthing platitudes about the open-ended nature of meaning, Truettner’s interpretations admit of no variation over time; they are presented as the definitive decoding of the canvas. Though he invokes a populist philosophy--everyone can understand art--his bizarre allegorical readings of paintings must appear far more arcane to an average viewer than a formal or moral analysis. Like his colleagues in the academy, he approaches canvases with a checklist of politically correct "issues": if a painting contains a woman, that's a "gender issue." If it contains a black person, that's a "race issue." If it contains a woman and a black person, it’s time to cash in. Analyzing an 1861 historical allegory called The Founding of Maryland, Truettner fills out his score-card: "The demure colonial wife, her head covered by a blue shawl, looks askance at the three bare-breasted Indian women, raising not only racial but gender issues." If the painting had been half as skilled, presumably the analysis would be identical: the "issues" would be duly noted, and not a word said about the aesthetic qualities of the work.

In the odd world of the museum, curators regard shows as failures if the public innocently enjoys them. A recent show on the nineteenth-century landscape painter Thomas Cole sought to portray the paintings as a reactionary critique of Jacksonian democracy. "We got nowhere with the show," laments one curator. "Visitors just didn't get it." The visitor comment books contained such responses as "Great show! Wonderful paintings!" "Do more shows like this!"--a source of curatorial embarrassment.

A forthcoming exhibition scheduled for March 1999 continues the museum's project of debunking American history and culture. A companion to "The West as America" it will focus on late-nineteenth-century images of New England. Such images, often idyllic, the curators will argue, represent a desperate attempt of whites to hold on to an ideal Anglo-Protestant America, in a time of black migration from the South and ethnic migration from Europe. What else is new?

If aesthetic values are meaningless and transitory, the museum finds enormous value in identity politics. A spate of recent contemporary art shows focused on ethnicity and "political orientation." Serving up the worst atrocities from SoHo, the museum has displayed repulsive installations and tasteless postmodern junk art, such as Pepon Osorro's tacky chandeliers constructed from plastic beads, tiny soccer balls, and cheap knickknacks. As Osorro explains: "My work is socially relevant because that is the need I see in the community." How about the need for a good grammar-school education in using the English language? Isn't that socially relevant?
The museum's acquisitions policy is just as bad, causing some traditional curators to despair that the Smithsonian is selling off its heritage to buy politically correct junk. The Institution's race- and ethnicity-based acquisitions policy is part of a much broader diversity drive. Adams made diversity the centerpiece of his tenure, ordering museum directors to bring in a staff that was more "representative" of the country. "Sometimes these hires worked out, others were dead on their feet" recalls a curator at Natural History. The deadwood is the most likely to have survived, given the difficulties of firing Federal employees. The only practical recourse available to a manager of an incompetent employee is to find an unwitting supervisor in another museum and try to palm the employee off on him.

Adams also encouraged the formation of identity-based employee advocacy groups. These have increasingly flexed their muscles regarding the content of exhibitions. the Hispanic lobby seems to be in the ascendancy today. In 1993, Secretary Adams authorized the formation of a Task Force on Latino Issues, charged, in essence, to prove that the Smithsonian is guilty of discrimination. The Task Force was chaired by Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza, one of the most radical Hispanic advocacy groups in the country.

The Task Force performed exactly as expected. A year after its formation, it published "Willful Neglect," an extraordinarily dishonest report charging the Smithsonian with deliberately excluding Latinos from its collections and staff. Count one of the indictment was the absence of a separate museum dedicated to Latinos--ethnically coded museums have now become the primary litmus test of the Smithsonian's ethnic good faith. Like all arguments for Hispanic power, "Willful Neglect" cast a wide net in its definition of Hispanic, including Mexican-, Puerto Rican-, Cuban-, Dominican-, Central American-, South American-, and Spanish-Americans, despite the wide cultural differences between those groups. When I asked the Smithsonian's new counsel for Latino affairs, Miguel Bretos, if these groups really constituted a single identity, he responded with an amazing reinterpretation of American history. A common Hispanic identity was "emerging rapidly" Bretos said: "The American tradition of E Pluribus Unum is taking root in the Hispanic community; there is an increasing sense of a common fund of culture that cuts across tribes." That, in a nutshell, describes American ideals today--assimilation no longer means assimilation to a common American identity, but to a heightened ethnic identity.

"Willful Neglect" worked its anticipated magic. The Smithsonian created an entire office dedicated to Hispanic advocacy within the Institution, headed by Bretos. "Basically, Bretos wants a gallery in every museum devoted to Hispanics" says a curator of natural history who has had repeated dealings with him. In a particularly cowardly move, the Smithsonian changed the name of Bretos's office from Latino Affairs to Community Affairs, trying to cover up its partisan nature, though no one within the Institution is fooled.

But the bureaucratic spawn of "Willful Neglect" spilled over beyond the Community Affairs office. Secretary Heyman, in continuing token of his ethnic good faith, empowered two high-level panels to study employment and affirmative action policy, on the one hand, and programming and acquisitions, on the other. Their reports will undoubtedly find grievous gaps in the Smithsonian's efforts to achieve a "diverse" museum.
All this is pretty impressive fallout from a report based on misrepresentation and virtual falsehood. Even its authors back-pedal wildly when confronted with its misstatements. "Willful Neglect" charges the Smithsonian with deliberately failing to hire an ethnically proportionate Hispanic workforce. A chart grimly documents the absence of Hispanic curators. Such a charge makes sense only if there is a pool of Hispanic qualified museologists upon which the Smithsonian should have been drawing. I asked Breto if such a pool exists. He responded: "It's relatively small, which is part of the difficulty of making sure that all the voices are represented" More accurately, the number of Hispanic art history or archeology or aerospace Ph.D.s is probably close to zero, given the continuing problem of low academic achievement among Hispanics. What about lower-level staff, also a target of scathing criticism in the report? "The Smithsonian is at a disadvantage in Washington in attracting Latinos" admitted Breto, "because it's a first-generation immigrant community." In other words, few qualified Hispanics for clerical work either.

How, then, can you charge the Smithsonian with willful neglect, I asked Breto. He dodged the query. "The question is one of focus: how do you present the narrative of America?" he replied. He laughed: "I wrote poisonous pages regarding the Smithsonian Institution." No wonder he's laughing: these days, there is no better way to end up in a sinecure than to blast an institution with false charges of racism.

The reports allegation that the Institution's collections ignore Hispanic material is just as spurious. Smithsonian archaeologists have been lovingly collecting and documenting culture in the Southwest almost since the Institution's founding; a curator at American History has specialized in His-panic-American material since 1965. And again, the report's authors now take a far different line. "The collections from Latin America are incredible" says Breto. "We are one of the largest Latin American collections in botany and zoology."

The precedent set by "Willful Neglect" is ominous. If the Smithsonian capitulates so spinelessly to ethnic extortion, a parade of other ethnic lobbies will be sure to follow the model of the Hispanics, splintering the Institution further into just so many grievance groups.

Ironically, the only place one can consistently find traditional curating in the Smithsonian these days is in the non-Western art museums--the Sackler and Freer galleries of Asian art and the National Museum of African Art. All three are elegant and understated, displaying art and even ritual artifacts as aesthetic objects, rather than as social texts. Apparently, the concepts of beauty and the sublime are still appropriate for non-Western cultures, while the West is busily deconstructing itself.

The Smithsonian's future is not auspicious. On the positive side, Secretary Heyman, a former chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley, is far more sensitive to the commemorative, celebratory function of a national museum than Robert McCormick Adams ever was, and he has openly questioned the advocacy curating favored by the Smithsonian's academically inspired professionals. His cancellation of the Enola Gay exhibit was welcome. Yet there remain many reasons for apprehension. Heyman vehemently promoted racial quotas at Berkeley; he is continuing race-conscious policies at the Smithsonian, putting further out of reach the ideal of a national museum that transcends race and ethnic differences.
Moreover, Heyman's proposed solution to the controversies that have scorched the Institution recently misdiagnoses the problem. In a speech last year at Georgetown Law Center, Heyman argued that issue-oriented curators should follow the model of the legal system and present both sides of a political debate: "Presenting at least two sides of an important issue, and letting the visitors know exactly what is evidence and what is interpretation, can only enhance broader public understanding."

But the problem with the politicized exhibitions at the Smithsonian is not that they present only one side of an issue; the problem is the manufacture of such specious "issues" in the first place. When William Truettner is spotting his race and gender issues, what possible "other side" could be presented? When the American History Museum sets out to multiculturalize and relativize Anglo-American culture, when it deliberately selects unsympathetic white families to contrast with the virtuous natives, no counterargument is even possible, because the ground of debate is already so skewed. To accept the terms of debate is already to have lost.

Short of a total housecleaning of staff, there is little that can save the Smithsonian from being further engulfed by the poisonous trends of identity politics and postmodern theory. These chic academic assumptions are by now thoroughly ingrained in the Smithsonian's bureaucracy. Ultimately, only a change in the powerful culture of universities can restore America's public culture.

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By Heather Mac Donald