From Satire to Struggle: An Analysis of Changing American Identity Using *Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition*

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A father proudly walked into his home, announcing that he had obtained a copy of the latest work by Daisy Shortcut and Arry O’Pagus. With the centennial year quickly approaching, the family had spent countless hours poring over various forms of literature regarding the great Centennial Exhibition of 1876. However, none of the publications could match the wit and humor found within the 82 pages of *Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition*. Its pages contained stories of members of the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee wooing young delivery boys, architects bringing buildings to the United States from Rome, and inventive machines that could make men fly. Complete with illustrated cartoons and clever page headings, *Our Show* included all of the bells and whistles to make it “a markedly original and an intensely funny book, describing in advance the Centennial Exhibition and incidents (as the authors conceive them) attendant thereupon.”¹ Shortcut and O’Pagus, pseudonyms for David Solis Cohen and Harry B. Sommer, published *Our Show* in 1875 as a precursor to the Exhibition, inviting readers to think about the fair in a unique and imaginary, yet critical, way.

The Exhibition operated as a platform for the distribution of American mass media, which is one way Americans could express, share, and wrestle with their identity. Because the growth of print culture in the 19th century resulted in the greater accessibility of printed materials, *Our Show* had the potential to reach a larger audience than solely the 10 million

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¹ Henry Samuel Morais, *The Jews of Philadelphia: Their History from the Earliest Settlements to the Present Time; a Record of Events and Institutions, and of Leading Members of the Jewish Community in Every Sphere of Activity* (Levytype Company, 1894), 345.
people who visited the Exhibition.² Our Show exceeded even the typical reach of print media about the Exhibition because of its early publication date. Different publications regarding the Exhibition had diverse goals, ranging from advertising to informing readers and even to providing humorous sketches of the fairgrounds. The use of humor in publications, however, was changing in the 19th century. As Helen Bailie discusses her essay “The High Pressure Principle,” authors used a “wide range of styles and techniques” to cover “varying subjects from personal anecdotes to social or political commentary...Humorous sketches were particularly effective as a forum for questioning conventions.”³ Cohen and Sommer wrote Our Show to do just this, by using humor to question a variety of societal conventions in the United States.

The strategic publication of Our Show and use of humor reveals that Cohen and Sommer were not amateur writers in any sense. Both authors were very distinguished members of the Jewish literary community in Philadelphia. Cohen was about 25 years old when he wrote Our Show and had already established himself as a comedian. He played amateur comedic roles in various plays and produced a humorous section of the Sunday Dispatch, a weekly newspaper. Eventually, this section became a featured part of the Sunday Dispatch.⁴ Together, he and


Sommer served consecutive presidencies over “The Irving,” a Jewish literary association in Philadelphia. Cohen remained heavily involved in Philadelphia society until he moved to Portland, Oregon in 1878, while Sommer remained in Philadelphia for the entirety of his life. Sommer was recognized as a “distinctive writer of literary ability in the field of humor” and also wrote for the Sunday Dispatch, along with various other publications. Sommer’s writing was widely read and largely circulated throughout his lifetime.

Together, with their combination of wit and intellect, Cohen and Sommer wrote more than a satirical book: they wrote a work that addressed the major changes the United States was facing from gender roles to industrialization. The authors provided political and social commentary, through the use of humorous language, cartoons, and stories in Our Show, to question American conventions and tensions surrounding 19th-century American identity as a whole. In discussing gender, industrialization, and the United States’ need to establish its own historical foundation at the Exhibition, the authors criticized and provided a space for Americans to think about the fluctuating identity of the nation.

The pages of Our Show, without a doubt, expressed opinions that would have caused controversy in 19th-century America, but Cohen and Sommer reminded readers from the first page that they “desire, above all things, the general good. Under no circumstances would we insist upon anything apt to disturb the peace and harmony of the world; therefore, we select

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6 Ibid., 344-345.
for the honor of a dedication, the private parties we think most deserving, ourselves." This dedication provided the first glimpse into the type of humor Cohen and Sommer used throughout Our Show. By immediately revealing their intentions, the authors provided a disclaimer that told readers to expect controversial discussions. However, readers could decide if they were going to take Our Show at its surface value of a humorous account of the Exhibition or if they would dig deeper into its text and think about their own identity as Americans.

Both Cohen and Sommer were from Philadelphia, which undoubtedly shaped their interpretation of and interest in the Exhibition. However, the Centennial Board chose Philadelphia as the platform to showcase 100 years of United States’ development for more reasons than the literary talent housed within its city limits. With an increasing population from 110,000 in 1820 to around three-quarters of a million by 1875, Philadelphia retained a booming society that was embracing issues of gender, politics, and industrialization. Chosen for its beautiful landscape among the flourishing city, Fairmount Park hosted the grand celebration, and building on the grounds began as early as 1873. Over 160 buildings settled on


450 acres of land at Fairmount. Along with five key buildings – the Main Building, Memorial Hall, Agricultural Hall, Horticulture Hall, and Machinery Hall – many states had their own buildings, some of the foreign nations, such as Japan, built exhibition houses in the fashion of their architectural culture, women displayed their goods and innovations in the Women’s Pavilion, and many other buildings scattered the grounds.

Some 30,000 exhibitors from across the globe brought goods to display at the grand fair. Visitors could try new foods, such as Heinz ketchup, view extravagant works of statuary in the Art Annex, and interact with intriguing new forms of technology, like a dog-powered cart in which two dogs were placed inside the wheels, resembling modern-day hamster wheels, and ran to make the cart function. Other items of note included a table knife that was 9 ½ feet long and hundreds, if not thousands, of vases from around the world. Visitors could even climb to the top of the Sawyer Observatory to gain a bird’s-eye view of the Exhibition. Some exhibits were more popular than others. Particularly, the great Corliss Steam Engine. Standing at 45 feet tall and packing 2,500 horsepower, the engine provided enough energy to power all of the exhibits in Machinery Hall. It was the most significant piece of machinery on display and showcased the progress of industrialization in the United States. The city of Philadelphia, fairground, and exhibits provided the backdrop for Cohen and Sommer to discuss American identity in terms of gender roles, industrialization, and a historical foundation.


11 See Figure 1

12 See Figure 2
Women played a significant role in the planning and execution of the Exhibition, which was uncommon in the 19th century, especially at world’s fairs. Paris and Vienna hosted exhibitions prior to the United States; however, neither of them had a building dedicated solely to women’s innovations. Desiring to play a part in the Exhibition, a group of women created the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee, which the Exhibition organizers assigned with the task of raising national and global awareness of the fair. In turn, the Committee achieved its goal to the point that the women lost their own exhibit space. The women then raised enough funds to build a separate pavilion located in the center of the fairgrounds. With women making this change from a private life inside the home to a public presence, *Our Show* provided the opportunity for Americans to think about their stance on this developing, independent role for women.

Rather than taking a firm stance on the issue of gender, Cohen and Sommer used humor and ambiguity to discuss women’s place in society. From appearing extremely supportive of women to mocking their lack of control, the authors invited readers to form their own opinions in the matter. Cohen and Sommer began this discussion with the title of the women’s chapter. The chapters of *Our Show* follow a theme of fire, beginning with “The Spark” and finishing with “The Smoke.” The chapter dedicated to women is called “The Fuel...What the Women Did,” which indicates that women were the catalyst to starting the Exhibition, as an accelerant would be to a flame, which is an accurate description. 

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forming the Women’s Committee were visible signs that women’s role in American society was changing. However, the title also demonstrated that women were taking charge within the context of the Exhibition. Labelling women as the “fuel” of the fair provided a supportive interpretation of what women were doing. Had women not taken initiative, the Exhibition would have been a complete failure with a lack of global participation.

Along with the chapter title, Cohen and Sommer projected a view of women within the chapter, and throughout the book, that praised them for challenging gender norms. Cohen and Sommer acknowledged women’s efforts and even said that if they were “writing a work in twenty quarto volumes ... [they] might faintly hope to do justice to the prodigies accomplished by the noble women of America, and especially by our own Philadelphia ladies.”¹⁴ This statement praised women and placed them on a high pedestal, which is further illustrated in a cartoon accompanying their quote.¹⁵ In the cartoon, a man and woman are talking to each other about what seems to be a very serious matter, and the woman is sitting up so that she is taller than the man. This illustration exemplified the belief that women were capable of taking on a serious role in society. Women did not need to be sheltered from the public sphere and could take part in, and even contribute to, American culture.

Conversely, Cohen and Sommer presented the idea that, regardless of what women decided to do for themselves, men were ultimately in charge. The authors demonstrated that,
even though women put forth an immense amount of effort in assisting with the preparation and execution of the Exhibition, men were in control. Cohen and Sommer illustrated a scene in *Our Show* of an event in which “electric wires being attached to each department, General Hawley sat comfortably in his office, and as he touched the springs, the women smiled, frowned, wept, and laughed in concert.”\(^{16}\) By using this example to contrast their previous statements, Cohen and Sommer elicited ambiguity to reveal tensions surrounding the roles of women. Readers could interpret this use of ambiguity in a couple of ways. One interpretation shows that even in the Women’s Pavilion, women were under the invisible command of men. Americans who agreed with common 19\(^{th}\)-century gender ideology would have read this as affirmation that the Women’s Committee could not have carried out its plans without the direction and leadership of men like Hawley. However, readers could also take this as a criticism of Hawley’s leadership and affirmation that women did not need male guidance to succeed.

Further utilizing ambiguity, Cohen and Sommer addressed the amount of work that women did for the Exhibition with a lack of support from the Centennial Board for a women’s exhibition space. *Our Show* quoted the Centennial Board as saying:

> “Ladies,” said they, “we have taken your money; we have urged you to labor; we have induced you, in the person of our special partner, to travel to sister cities to persuade the daughters of our land to make a proper exhibition of their importance and standing in this home of equal rights; but, ah, unfortunately, we shall not be able to allow you any space in our buildings; the old women of China, the aged females of Timbuctoo claim it, and if you want to display that standing and importance we have mention, why

\(^{16}\)Cohen and Sommer, *Our Show ; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition*, 60.
– ah – here are plans for a building; take them, get up a side show for yourselves, pay for it yourselves, and be – happy.”17

Obviously, with the book being written prior to the Exhibition, Cohen and Sommer made up this statement, although women losing their exhibit space did happen. However, through this quote the authors encouraged readers to think about what the Exhibition meant for women. This is the closing statement from the women’s chapter and again left readers to form their own opinions about whether or not women should be challenging gender norms. Cohen and Sommer went back and forth throughout the chapter, acknowledging and praising women’s changing roles as exemplified at the Exhibition. Through this account, readers could criticize the Centennial Board for not supporting the Women’s Committee, or they could interpret it as a reinforcement of the idea that women should stay within their sphere. Significantly, the authors ended the chapter with this quote, which left the possible interpretations extremely open ended.

Throughout Our Show, it is hard to determine whether the authors were writing in support of changing gender roles for women or against them. Cohen and Sommer provided a blurred demonstration of whether or not they thought women should be taking on new roles in the public sector of American society. In Centennial: American Life in 1876, William Pierce Randel discusses how Americans viewed women’s role in the Exhibition differently. Although some people saw the Women’s Pavilion as making great progress for women in America, others disagreed. As American identity changed and began accepting the idea that “women were no

17 Cohen and Sommer, Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition, 20.
longer expected to stay at home,” some Americans disagreed and did not accept changing gender roles. Cohen and Sommer’s use of ambiguity provided the platform for Americans to form their own opinions about this matter. Readers could choose to accept the changing roles and allow women’s new identity to shape American identity as a whole, or they could continue supporting traditional gender roles that confined women to the home.

Cohen and Sommer changed literary techniques from using ambiguity, as they did when talking about women, to relying on superfluous and hyperbolic language to address how the United States was developing into a culture that praised having everything in excess. As Matthew Frye Jacobson discusses in his book *Barbarian Virtues*, the United States was growing into a culture that produced goods in surplus. Using a variety of examples, Cohen and Sommer revealed how this movement toward an excessive culture was underway by the time of the Exhibition. The authors demonstrated this specifically in the way they described certain exhibits and ceremonies at the fair.

Cohen and Sommer began their criticism in the first chapter of *Our Show*, providing the example that “[i]f the late Christopher Columbus, Esq., could have foreseen ... the infliction of


the following pages upon posterity, Mr. Columbus, very likely, would have stayed at home.”

A cartoon depicting a very thin Columbus on a ship pointing towards the Main Building at the Exhibition accompanied this statement, and with that, Cohen and Sommer did not mention Columbus again. 

During the time between 1876 and 1917, the scale at which the United States began to produce goods and embrace industrialization “lent a particular cast to this period.” The United States would not fully transform into a consumer-driven culture for another 40 years, but by 1876, Americans could begin to imagine how their identity might change with the influence of industrialization on United States’ culture. This discussion of Columbus led readers to consider whether or not industrialization was creating an excessive culture, even to the point that it would be better off had Columbus never discovered the land.

Cohen and Sommer further questioned industrialization in a section about the United States government’s financial contribution to the Exhibition. In one sense, the Exhibition was supposed to be a way to “challenge doubts and restore confidence in the vitality of America’s system of government,” which had been under scrutiny for the corrupt administration under President Grant, as Robert Rydell discusses in his book *All the World’s a Fair.* However, Cohen

20 Cohen and Sommer, *Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition,* 2.

21 See Figure 4


and Sommer did not highlight any ways that the government was improving. Rather, they criticized the government for providing minimal funding for the Exhibition, which caused groups, like the Women’s Committee, to raise funds for the Exhibition. According to Cohen and Sommer, congress “had nothing but its moral support to offer” because it had “bestowed all its material aid up railroad and steamship subsidies.”

This again exemplified the place industrialization had taken in American culture. The United States had become so reliant on industrialization and developing transportation across the nation that the government could not afford to pay for an Exhibition to display its industrial gains. Instead, it was so wrapped up in having the best of everything, in excess, that it expected citizens to provide the money to fund the Exhibition.

Cohen and Sommer were critical of industrial exhibits, as well as the way industrialization effected the government. Machinery Hall housed the majority of pieces of industrial equipment displayed at the exhibition. Cohen and Sommer described Machinery Hall to their readers by encouraging them to “[i]magine all the machinery the world contains in motion at the same time, and add about five million more machines to that. This will bring you to as near the truth as this volume ventures to approach.”

Directly, the authors stated that they exaggerated the volume of machinery at the Exhibition. More importantly, Cohen and Sommer pointed out, yet again, the excess with which the United States displayed its industrial

24 Cohen and Sommer, Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition, 10.

25 Cohen and Sommer, Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition, 55.
prowess. This example did not serve the same purpose as others, as it was not critical of the amount of machinery itself. Cohen and Sommer stated this amount as an example that complemented their later discussions of machinery and made it clear to readers that an unnecessary volume of machinery would be on display as a demonstration that the United States was dominating the rest of the world in terms of industrialization.

This segment continued to discuss industrialization with descriptions of the pieces of technology being manufactured. The United States was willing and eager to put everything that it had to offer on display, in order to point out the way it could be identified as a leading power in industrialization, even if this meant displaying the absurd. Cohen and Sommer showed these absurdities with nonexistent displays, such as an “automatic hen for laying egg plants.”26 With this ridiculous claim, Cohen and Sommer meant to make readers laugh, but it was not all that outlandish of an assumption. Some pieces of technology did have exhibits that people thought were ridiculous. One example of this was Alexander Graham Bell’s telephone. During the Exhibition, Bell did not receive much attention for his revolutionary device. There were many pieces of technology, such as the telephone, that Americans could simply not wrap their minds around.27 Cohen and Sommer had the foresight to see that improvements in technology might be hard for some Americans to understand. To prepare readers for these new gadgets, Cohen and Sommer invented their own imaginary devices to challenge Americans to think outside of the box. American identity changed with these changing forms of

26 Ibid., 56.

27 Randel, Centennial; American Life in 1876, 397.
technology brought about by industrialization. A simple, witty example of an automatic hen challenged readers to think about smaller ways that industrialization was shaping their identity.

Advancements in industrialization were undoubtedly molding the United States by the time of the Exhibition. Cohen and Sommer discussed these changes using humor, and their own form of satirical excess, to criticize the excessive culture America was supporting. As with the sections describing women’s involvement in the Exhibition, the authors gave readers a choice in how they interpreted the material about excessive industrialization. Readers could choose to accept a culture of surplus and add it to their changing identity or reject it and pursue a simpler life.

Cohen and Sommer did not solely focus on excess in terms of industrialization and machinery displays. The authors proposed that other exhibits, and even ceremonies, would demonstrate America’s growing excessive culture. One exhibit they specifically mentioned was located at the Patent Loan Office exhibition. In this exhibit, “[o]ld pots, pans, and dishes were suddenly endowed with incalculable value,” and the text further described that the authors themselves “worked industriously to produce relics.” 28 The United States was looking to place itself historically. However, being a young country, developing a foundation as firm as that of Britain, for example, was impossible. Cohen and Sommer presumed that exhibitors would force this foundation by asserting historical value on insignificant items, like pots and pans. The Exhibition, then, housed more than items representing an excessive culture in terms of

28 Cohen and Sommer, Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition, 19.
industrialization. Exhibits like this one displayed a culture that would use any means of excess to establish itself historically. Furthermore by using dishes as the item displayed, Cohen and Sommer toyed with the idea that excessive culture affected more than the industrial sphere of American society: it also affected the domestic sphere. Thus, as Americans were faced with accepting the developing excessive culture as part of their identity, they would also have to accept that it was an all-or-nothing deal. Excessive culture would encroach on every part of their lives, from public to private.

In contrast to the need to display a strong American heritage through an excessive amount of historical relics, Cohen and Sommer addressed American identity through the use of music. In their description of Opening Day, the authors described the chorus singing the national anthem. To add humor to the situation, Cohen and Sommer declared that the national anthem was “Pop Goes the Weasel.”

The authors’ song choice appeared to be another example of their wit; however, “Pop Goes the Weasel” is an English nursery rhyme. Therefore by using it as the national anthem, Cohen and Sommer cleverly asserted that the United States could not hide behind false historical relics. The history of the United States was not separate from England, rather it could not have developed into a thriving nation had the British not settled America in the first place. As American identity was changing and developing, the authors’ use of music was a reminder of the United States’ British roots. Readers may not have picked up on this piece of wit, seeing it as a funny choice for a national anthem and nothing more. For the readers who did recognize “Pop Goes the Weasel” as an English song, Cohen and Sommer...
Sommer challenged them to think about what the song choice was saying about American identity.

Along with establishing the United States historically, Cohen and Sommer claimed that the Exhibition was a way for America to declare that it was a better country than others, specifically countries that previously hosted their own expositions. The authors made up a speech in which a French leader praised Grant saying, “God bless Grant, our noble President, our Chief Executive. (Cheers and applause of five minutes’ duration.)” In this speech the Frenchmen claimed President Grant as “our noble President,” insinuating that Grant belonged to more than just the United States. The speech represented the idea that the United States used excessive patriotism in order to establish its identity. The speech illustrated that support of the United States would be so excessive at the Exhibition that leaders of other countries would praise the nation. Having a Parisian leader give this speech further solidified the excessive need for patriotism. Paris hosted two world’s fairs prior to the Centennial Exhibition, so the United States not only needed to assert its place in the world, but specifically needed to impress visitors and make itself look better than the Paris exhibitions. One of the ways the Exhibition did this was the grand, excessive nature of the fair as a whole. By 1875, when Cohen and Sommer published Our Show, the grandeur of the Exhibition was no secret. Cohen and Sommer wrote this fictional speech to portray how the Exhibition forced an excessive amount of pride for the United States. The authors drove this point home by having a French leader

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30 Cohen and Sommer, Our Show; a Humorous Account of the International Exposition, 29.
deliver the speech. The expositions in Paris were popular events, and the majority of Cohen and Sommer’s readers would have recognized the irony in having a French leader deliver a speech praising the United States. Cohen and Sommer used this example that most readers would understand, unlike the “Pop Goes the Weasel” reference, to demonstrate that the coming Exhibition would utilize excessive patriotism and American pride to establish the United States’ greatness in comparison to other countries.

Cohen and Sommer effectively employed excessive and exaggerated language to express how the Exhibition would display an extreme pride in America. These fictional displays of patriotism that the authors used opened up a discussion about how the United States was trying to establish its own historical significance in relationship to countries it had been in competition with. As a young nation, the United States had only 100 years of its own history since gaining independence in which to contextualize itself, whereas other countries had hundreds, and even thousands, of years to do the same thing. Through clever and unique examples, Cohen and Sommer used Our Show as a space for readers to consider how the young history of America would affect American identity.

The family flipped through the final pages of Our Show, an illustration of the Director General as a skeleton on the final page resonated within their minds, as they considered all that they had read. Their guts hurt from laughter. The wheels in their brains were turning. Our Show was more than they ever expected out of a book rooted in humor. Cohen and Sommer challenged political and social conventions but not without a purpose. Through contrasting discussions of gender, industrialization, and the need to develop and establish the United States historically, the author’s created a book that all Americans could embrace. As the year
leading to the opening of the Centennial Exhibition on May 10, 1876, the stories in *Our Show* stayed in the hearts and minds with the American family and citizens who read the book across the country. While American identity continued to grow and change, *Our Show* belonged to everyone. It reassured readers that although the United States’ identity was uncertain, all Americans could unite together in their search for answers to the varying questions about American society and where the United States was headed as a nation. Cohen and Sommer had written a book that truly “afforded rare amusement” and was worthy of the praise it received. A true cultural product of 1876, *Our Show* questioned, criticized, and provided an open platform to wrestle with the changing identity of individual Americans as well as the identity of the United States as a whole.

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Figures

Figure 1.
“Carriage propelled by dogs, from France.”

Figure 2.
Sawyer Observatory

Figure 3.
Figure 4.
Bibliography


