

Chapter Six

## RACE, SCIENCE, AND ETHNICITY

### MOLDING THE IDEAL CZECHOSLOVAK

I have so far examined how emphasizing different aspects of culture, society and business contributed to the construction of place a that the Czechoslovak state occupied, both physically and mentally, in the world's fairs. As a newcomer on the political scene, the state had to find a meaningful spot next to the world powers and their colonies as well as other nation-states. I have argued that the construction of the Czechoslovak nation and the state was based on the presentation of Czechs and Slovaks as a single group albeit with important ethnic or cultural distinctions. I have pointed out the hierarchy in what roles the Czechs and the Slovaks (let alone other groups) played within this narrative, whether it was in, for example, art and design or the representation of businesses in the national pavilions. These somewhat crude dividing mechanisms often casually bypassed the inclusions of minorities at the expense of the dominant Czech culture and economy.

The hierarchies in the national pavilions were symptoms of more general perceptions of who the Czechoslovak people were. They also reflected wider trends in understanding how nations and ethnic groups were formed. In the interwar period, many scholars of history, anthropology or culture, as well as politicians, philosophers and writers explained ethnic hierarchies within Czechoslovakia in lectures, articles, illustrations and exhibitions. They represented official attitudes to how racial groups, using contemporary terminology, and human development more generally were classified and systematized.

This chapter concentrates on discussions about the nature of the Czechoslovak people and the nation for the purposes of exhibitions as much as for the more universal location of the Czechoslovaks in the global structures. Throughout the interwar period, a range of individuals tried to describe not only who

the nation and the people were but also how they can be improved. World's fairs and large exhibitions were an ideal outlet for such practices as they were themselves driven by the idea of progress, however abstract or utopian. As Robert W. Rydell reminded us, "at the fairs, the idea of technological and national progress became laced with scientific racism" from quite early on.<sup>1</sup> He associated exhibits related to scientific racism with the efforts of exhibitors and organizers to convey a vision of specific progress, linked to ever improving and prospering society.<sup>2</sup> While Rydell has mainly discussed the American world's fairs from the point of view of American society, "scientific racism" and related beliefs have been widespread inside and outside other world's fairs.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I focus on the proposals for the improvement of humanity that were informed by social Darwinism, Mendelianism and eugenics known particularly from the United Kingdom and the USA and I show how these ideas were linked to the constructions of the "Czechoslovaks" inside and outside exhibitions. Social Darwinism argued for the survival of the fittest not only in terms of biology, but also culture, politics, or economics. Mendelianism, a set of theories named after the Moravian monk Gregor Johann Mendel (1822–1884), explained how certain traits were passed from parents to offspring, while eugenics has been considered "a biological theory of human improvement grounded almost exclusively in ideas of race and class."<sup>4</sup>

As a term, eugenics was first introduced by the British scientist Francis Galton in 1883 to define the study of the hereditary differences of mental, moral and physical traits of individuals, classes and races and second, measures of social control to ensure the general improvement of the species.<sup>5</sup> It came to stand for a diversity of things and ideas, adopted into many political ideologies, most notably Nazism, fascism and nationalism. The links between eugenics and the Nazi racial hygiene program have been explored well but as Marius Turda has pointed out, eugenics needs to be scrutinized as a concept closely tied to modernism and the construction of modern identities.<sup>6</sup> The place of eugenics in world's fairs, driven by the idea of progress and improvement, therefore does

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- 1 Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), 23.
  - 2 E.g., Robert Rydell, "Fitter Families for Future Firesides: Eugenics Exhibitions between the Wars," *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 38–60; Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 220–233.
  - 3 E.g., Tenorio-Trillo, "Natural History and Sanitation in the Modern Nation," *Mexico*, 142–157.
  - 4 Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.
  - 5 Green, "Veins of Resemblance," 8. Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (London – New York: J.M. Dent and E.P. Dutton, 1907).
  - 6 Turda, "Introduction," *Modernism and Eugenics*, 1–2.

not surprise and is informed by the hierarchical distinctions between various ethnic groups established in colonial displays and ethnographic shows that also applied narratives of selectiveness and racial betterment.

Eugenic theories have generally been intertwined with racist ideologies and the belief in the superiority of one group over another; and this was one of the characteristic features for the display of people in these environments. Therefore, as Rydell suggested, “world’s fairs provide a partial but crucial explanation for the interpenetration and popularization of evolutionary ideas about race and progress.”<sup>7</sup> Considering eugenics in the context of nationalism in modern central and eastern Europe, Turda has further noted that eugenics also served as a cultural and social philosophy of identities, which—and this is what I emphasize here—had a grave impact on exhibitions and world’s fairs.<sup>8</sup> Eugenics was therefore an important aspect of both world’s fairs and nation-building. Czechoslovakia yet again serves as a pertinent example of how a smaller nation adopted and promoted such ideologies for its own purposes and advancement. The way the internal, or rather national, divisions of the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia were perceived and presented at world’s fairs also reveals the attitudes towards more general development of humankind and understanding of race and ethnicity.

### Establishing hierarchies

Creating comparisons between pavilions, goods, the arts or different groups of people was a common feature of exhibitions of various sizes.<sup>9</sup> Colonial and ethnographic exhibitions were most known for establishing hierarchies between people, combining political and commercial motivations with entertaining displays of picturesqueness and cultural diversity. From mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards,

7 Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 24.

8 Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics*, 1; and Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs. The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 38–58.

9 Zeynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World’s Fairs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Sadiah Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011); Nicolas Bancel et al. eds. *Zoos humains. Autemps des exhibitions humaines* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002); Dana S. Hale, *Races on Display: French Representations of Colonized Peoples, 1886–1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Matthew F. Bokovoy, *The San Diego World’s Fairs and Southwestern Memory, 1880–1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); James Gilbert, *Whose Fair? Experience, Memory and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).