

---

**INTRODUCTION**

## World's Fairs, Modernity, and the Demand for Authenticity

**THIS** book is a comparative study of how five nations during the tumultuous 1930s engaged in a fierce ideological struggle to define the future. The venues were world's fairs; the means were dramatic displays of their own national versions of modernity. The international expositions planned or mounted just before the outbreak of the Second World War are especially revealing. These expositions reflected the political regimes of the host countries, and in some cases serious divisions within them. They also highlight increasingly tense ideological divisions among nations representing liberal or social democratic republics (France and the United States), communist government (the Soviet Union), and reactionary modernist or fascist regimes (Germany, Italy, and Japan).

This book will examine world's fairs and expositions that were extensively planned just before the outbreak of hostilities in 1939, drawing upon three actually built—Paris 1937, Düsseldorf 1937, and New York

1939—and two planned in detail but never executed, Tokyo 1940 and Rome 1942. The chapters will illuminate the representation of science and technology at these fairs as indicators of modernity as part of the ongoing culture and propaganda wars preceding the outbreak of one of the most horrific conflicts of modern times.

These expositions and fairs differ from their predecessors in one fundamental way: they focused their spotlights on ideological struggle. The first fair to do so was Paris 1937. As the *New York Times's* foreign correspondent Anne O'Hare McCormick noted at the time, the traditional world's fair celebrations of patriotism were being replaced by creeds such as fascism, Nazism, and communism, and their claims to the future.<sup>1</sup> A fuller understanding of what McCormick termed “national projections” at these major events requires three essentials: an inspection of the evolving role of world's fairs and expositions, an examination of international relations during the run-up to the expositions, and an appreciation of the internal ideological situation in each nation.

The First World War challenged many common assumptions inherited from the nineteenth century, especially about unlimited progress, the role of technology, growth, and not least, the naturalness of the political order. The dynastic empires—Russia, Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire—which had seemed so solid, just melted away. The thrones that had held together disparate peoples quickly disappeared. British rule in Ireland and the monarchy in Italy teetered. Class warfare became more intense, even in the relatively liberal states of the West. In a world flying apart, new leaders intensified their search for unifying, centripetal forces. For many, the bright, shiny promises of science and technology required reevaluation. For some, the loss of recognizable common values and common goals was at the core of the crisis. For them, modernity was conceived as a machine without a soul. In Western Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, America—especially the skyscrapers of New York and Fordist mass production—became emblematic of modernization without purpose, without heart or soul.<sup>2</sup> What was required was to infuse spirit into the machine. Authenticity—what makes us who we are—and how to vitalize modernity became searing questions.

Such issues were sorted out in a number of different ways, and led to significant national varieties of modernity. Several authors have examined

## 2 Introduction

how public cultures were constructed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, notes how schools, public ceremonies, expositions, and public monuments were enlisted in molding public sentiment by what he terms the “invention of tradition.”<sup>3</sup> Maurice Roche has discussed the role of “mega-events” such as world’s fairs, expositions, and Olympic Games in the formation of public cultures.<sup>4</sup> Paul Greenhalgh points out that “throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, [world’s fairs] were the only events capable of bringing such a wide selection of people to the same place for the purpose of edification and entertainment. They were intended to distract, indoctrinate and unify a population.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, along with radio, cinema, print media, monumental architecture, staged public events, and elaborate funerals of public figures, world’s fairs and international expositions were to play a major role in defining and displaying the various national versions of modernity.

World’s fairs in their now recognizable form began with London’s Crystal Palace Exposition of 1851. These fairs were products of the mature Industrial Revolution, an upheaval that saw the birth of new social classes, the creation of massive cities out of old market towns, and political upheavals in Europe and North America. In short, the Industrial Revolution marked a new world being born. The world’s fairs, or international expositions, were part of an attempt to bring a semblance of order into this world that often seemed about to lurch out of control.

As early as 1848 Marx and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* of modernity in the form of industrial capitalism as a centrifugal force. They marveled at its “constantly revolutionizing the relations of production and with them the whole relations of society.” They described “all fixed, fast frozen relations” being swept away. “All new formed ones [become] antiquated before they ossify. All that is solid melts into air. All that is holy is profaned.”<sup>6</sup> Examining the other side of the coin, Émile Durkheim, the French sociologist, concerned himself with the need for social solidarity in a complex industrial society. For Durkheim, organic solidarity (as he termed it) was fortified by the mutual interdependence demanded by specialization and the division of labor. But building what Durkheim termed “collective consciousness” (*conscience collective*), the totality of which could serve as a solidifying force, remained a problem for modernizing societies.

Expressing and to a large extent shaping collective consciousness are

society's institutions of communication and education such as schools, museums, and mass media. In this light, world's fairs or international exhibitions played a new and important role beginning in the last half of the nineteenth century. The world's fairs became a way for national and local economic and political elites to educate the populace by encouraging a collective consciousness more welcoming to the vast changes then being experienced.<sup>7</sup> They made these novelties seem less threatening by relabeling rapid change as "progress." They portrayed these transformations as natural and indeed inevitable. If modernity had its costs, these costs, if mentioned at all, were displayed as minor.

Beginning with London's Great Exhibition of 1851, world's fairs were exercises in mastering the Industrial Revolution. They celebrated national skills by displaying inventiveness, the production and distribution of goods, and advances in communications and transport, and at the same time placing all these innovations within a comprehensible and comforting context of history, tradition, and high art. The depiction of past and future at these popular events enabled a benign view of what must have seemed at the time incomprehensibly rapid alterations. In short, world's fairs encouraged a culture disposed to accept change itself as a positive good.

By the end of the century and the uniting of laboratory science and technology, leaders in science-related industries such as the electrical and chemical industries used world's fairs to come together to set standards to nurture the growth of the industries and benefit the wealth of nations. Also by the end of the nineteenth century, land grabs in Asia and Africa allowed nations participating in world's fairs to display their command of modernity (increasingly defined in industrial, military, and bureaucratic terms) by showcasing conquered "primitive" peoples and their folk arts and crafts. These "colonial" displays served to underline the necessity of modernization and the costs of nonparticipation. They served one other important purpose: to justify the colonial mission as one of bringing primitive peoples within the compass of modern civilization.

Accordingly, by the beginning of the twentieth century, world's fairs began to assume a somewhat different coloration. Instead of concentrating mainly on displays of industrial prowess for purposes of trade, they began to emphasize national economic, military, and scientific might. The major

powers began to stress their claims to a dominant role in shaping the future, and the minor powers their claims to a seat at the table.

By the 1930s and the advent of the worldwide Great Depression, there existed a basic consensus regarding the foundation of what was termed “the modern.” All nations participating in the international expositions represented in this volume accepted the necessity of industrialism and the importance of science-based or “high” technology. All understood the inevitability of the rationalization of production despite differing interpretations regarding its implementation. All grew their own bureaucracies and most recognized the importance of rational, strategic economic and social planning. The critical differences among them centered upon how each nation was to come to terms with modernity with regard to what it deemed its own national character. Each in its own way chose to present a unifying and inspiring message to its people and to the world in order to display a posture that demanded respect and, in some cases, fear.

Fear has consequences. In 1931, Japan invaded China and subsequently assumed control over Manchuria. The League of Nations named Japan the aggressor; Japan withdrew from the League and distanced itself from Western allies. The United States opposed Japanese conquests in China and by the end of the decade imposed export restrictions. In 1935–1936 Italy invaded Ethiopia in order to subjugate it and reduce it to colonial status. The League of Nations imposed relatively weak sanctions on Italy, and failed to impose, after much discussion, oil and gas sanctions.<sup>8</sup> In 1936 Germany remilitarized the Rhineland in contravention of the Treaty of Versailles. Only the Soviet Union urged sanctions at the League of Nations; Great Britain refused to consider them. Demanding appeasement, “the dynamisms” (as McCormick phrased it) of the authoritarian nations at world’s fairs undeniably had important international consequences.

For Italy, its depiction of the ancient Roman Empire served as both justification and prophecy for Mussolini’s new imperium. Just as the old empire provided important roots of European civilization, the new Italian empire would lead through science, technology, art, and culture, and once again dominate the Mediterranean world. For a racially and culturally united Germany, the Aryan nation would satisfy its destiny through scientific and technical modernity while demonstrating its unity and power

through its timeless roots in blood and soil. The Japanese empire, united by kinship and history through their divine emperor, aimed at exerting pan-Asian leadership through its mastery of Western technology infused with its Asian spirit and values.

The two democracies represented in this volume, France and the United States of America, mounted expositions whose multiple messages reflected the political processes that produced them. France acknowledged and celebrated its diversity—of geography, of industries and agriculture, of types of workers—as well as its commitment to democracy. But in a world of mass production, France's uniqueness lay in the application of its intelligence and skills in design. Blending art and technology, France could make sense of and add value to modernity. America's fair was an open, though muted, contest between two factions: those who saw the fair as an opportunity to educate the public in its power and responsibility to plan and create a new and better world, and those who wished to kick-start the Depression-era economy by portraying a future created by corporate research and American individualism.

The following chapters examine these pathbreaking international expositions mounted or planned by nations that would soon be at war. Two of the fairs discussed, though extensively planned, were never opened—Tokyo 1940 and Rome 1942. The time frame of 1937 through 1942 marked supremely intense ideological rivalry, for these five nations were competing not merely for industrial leadership but for command of the world of the future. The struggle that would, in a few short years and months, be waged by armies and navies was then (when the fairs were in their planning stages) still, for the most part, propaganda warfare. As it turns out, the war of ideas was not only remarkably revealing but significant for the outcome of the fighting as well.