Robert H. Kargon, Karen Fiss, Morris Low, & Arthur P. Molella


The bibliography on universal exhibitions in relation to science and technology has grown steadily and consistently in the last few years, with a special attention to the nineteenth century. I refer to recent publications such as those edited by Fontana, Pellegrino (eds.), *Esposizioni Universali in Europa. Attori, pubblici, memorie tra metropoli e colonie, 1851–1939* (2015); Demeulenaere-Douyère, Hilaire-Pérez (eds.), *Les expositions universelles. Les identités au défi de la modernité* (2014); Cardoso de Matos, Demeulenaere-Douyère, Souto (eds.), *The World’s Exhibitions and the Display of Science, Technology and Culture* (2012); Cardoso de Matos, Gouzévitch, Lourenço (eds.), *Expositions universelle, musées techniques et société industrielle* (2009); Geppert, Baioni (eds.), *Esposizioni in Europa fra Otto e Novecento. Spazi, organizzazione, rappresentazioni* (2004), among the others.

The flourishing of publications attests the profound interest of scholars in the topic of world’s fairs in connection with representations of modernity, ideologies of progress, industry and visions of science and technology. The volume by Robert H. Kargon, Karen Foss, Morris Low, and Arthur P. Molella adds a significant contribution to the knowledge of interwar period world’s fairs in Europe, u.s., and Japan thanks to five case studies and a closing remark on the first postwar exposition held in Brussels, Belgium, in 1958. Each chapter deals with one twentieth-century exhibition: its aims, organization, topics at stake and main pavilons. Some of these exhibitions have actually taken place, like the Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne opened in Paris in 1937, the international exhibit Schaffendes Volk (“People at work”) in Düsseldorf in 1937, and the 1939 New York World’s Fair – The World of Tomorrow. The other remaining two were planned in details but never executed. They are the Grand International Exposition of Japan, to have been held in Tokyo and Yokohama in 1940 to celebrate the 2,600th anniversary of the mythological ascension of the Emperor Jinmu, and the Esposizione universale in Rome in 1942, commonly known as E42. Bibliography and archival sources are available at the end of the volume.

This coauthored work focuses mainly on the time frame between 1937 and 1942, presenting five nations that would soon be at war competing not merely for industrial leadership, as it would have been in the second half of the nineteenth century, but, as the authors underlined in the introduction, for world domination and a leading role in shaping their own visions of modernity and
future. Thus, as explained in the introduction, this book presents “a comparative study of how five nations during the tumultuous 1930s engaged in a fierce ideological struggle to define the future” (p. 1). The five chosen nations are particularly revealing thanks to their different political and ideological situation and their specific use of international events such as world’s fairs representing either liberal or social democratic republics’ values (France and United States) or reactionary modernist, nazist, and fascist regimes’ ideas (Germany, Italy, and Japan).

In a moment of ideological struggle, compared to nineteenth-century exhibitions, in these world’s fairs patriotism was replaced by ideologies of Fascism, Nazism, Communism. The different host countries appealed to different visions of future and modernity, shaped by a science-based technology, strategic economy and social planning. Therefore, authors underlined that “the chapters will illuminate the representation of science and technology at these fairs as indicator of modernity as part of the ongoing culture and propaganda wars preceding the outbreak of one of the most horrific conflicts of modern times” (p. 2). The five case studies are intertwined with a more general reflection regarding the evolving role of world’s fairs at the time, the struggle for internationalism, the political ideology of each nation in reinterpreting its own history and past, as well-shown in the cases of Japan and Italy. The book succeeds in pointing out the strong relationship existing at the time between the imagination of modernity and the invention and reinterpretation of tradition through “mega-events” like world’s fairs together with radio, cinema, and monumental architecture. The study of these international and temporary events serves also as an ideal platform to investigate the cultural politics and propaganda promoted by these countries for instance in relation to the formation of public cultures of science and the foundation of permanent institutions of communication and education like science and technology museums.

The last chapter is devoted to the first postwar international exposition held in Brussels in 1958. It tries to redefine cultural conflicts after the Second World War completely altered the political and social scenario. According to the authors, the Brussels exposition represented the battle between the two major superpowers’ pavilions: the U.S. and the Soviet Union, while a new message of cooperation among nations and peaceful uses of nuclear energy were underlined under the symbol of the Atomium. If the Russian pavilion proudly exhibited scientific and industrial achievements, like the Sputnik (models of the two Sputnik were displayed alongside a model of a future Soviet cosmic space platform), together with big machines and industrial wares; on the other side, the American pavilion was aimed at showing the American people as engaged in constant change, confronting their challenges in a creative way. The