

## Images of Globalisation: Paris 1889

Review of

Beat Wyss, *Bilder von der Globalisierung. Die Weltausstellung von Paris 1889*. Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2010, 285 pp., 112 b. & w. illus., € 49.90 hbk, ISBN 9783458174851

In many respects this is an exemplary study. It outlines with admirable clarity and succinctness the stakes of the World Fair of 1889 which, ostensibly staged to celebrate the centenary of the French Revolution, turned out to be about something else: the emerging global world order. Generously illustrated with images from *L'Illustration de Paris*, the journal published to accompany the exhibition, this book provides a panoramic overview of the world spectacle best known for its lasting monument: the Eiffel Tower. At the same time, however, *Bilder von der Globalisierung* exemplifies the limited perspective of much of the literature on nineteenth-century world fairs. Before dwelling on that particular issue, however, it is important to give ample space to this book's many positive qualities.

Although the World Fair is now a celebrated event, it was, Wyss notes, fraught with difficulties. The first of these was linked to its political purpose: to celebrate 100 years of French Republicanism. Given that France was one of the few non-monarchical states in Europe this guaranteed from the start that her neighbours were reluctant participants. While individual entrepreneurs were allowed to take part, there was no official representation from many states, including Britain, Russia and Germany, which all turned down invitations to take part. Diplomacy dictated that this was mostly excused on the basis of economic difficulties, but some explanations were more direct.

It is on this point, however, that the new global world order made itself felt, for if there was limited official participation from Europe, this was made up for by the states of the New World, all of which shared the republican sentiments of the organisers. Hence, although slow to respond to the invitation, the United States was officially represented, and impressed visitors with exhibitions of Singer sewing machines, Bell telephones and Edison's lightbulbs. Most popular by far, however, were not the exhibits in the official pavilion but rather the re-enactments of the Wild West by Buffalo Bill, with some 150 horses, 20 buffalo and 200 Indians, trappers, cowboys and cowgirls. There was also extensive representation from the states of Latin America, including Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, Mexico and Brazil, which all used the exhibition to signal their arrival on the world stage as political actors and also, crucially, as emerging economic powers.

The global reach of the exhibition was cemented by the bewildering array of world cultures and states represented, from the 'peripheral' and 'exotic' regions of Europe such as Romania to others such as India, Siam, Java and Algeria. Central to

this attempt to present the world was the rue de Caire (Cairo Road), a global bazaar that made clear the intimate link between globalisation and the emerging culture of consumption.

Much critical commentary on the world fairs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has examined the ways in which they served to bolster the colonial order, providing a spectacular instrument for the legitimisation of European imperialism. The fair of 1889 was no exception but, as Wyss points out, this issue was not as straightforward as might be assumed. Indochina was highly visible at the exhibition and underlined the status of France as a great colonial power, despite her republican credentials, yet the project of colonial expansion, pursued by prime minister Jules Ferry in compensation for defeat at the hands of Prussia at Sedan in 1871, was not universally popular. Only four years before the Fair, in 1885, Ferry had been brought down as a result of the 'Tonkin Affair,' when the French expeditionary force had been compelled to retreat in the face of its Chinese enemy. Predictably, perhaps, the recent political crisis was glossed over in the Fair and instead a colourful panoply of colonial peoples from Indochina as well as other French colonies in Africa and the Middle East provided an aestheticised image of the benefits of imperial rule.

The Fair was perhaps the first time. Wyss argues, where colonial hierarchies were put on display as part of a systematic regime of knowledge-power, in which anthropology emerged as a discourse of imperial domination. In addition to the entertaining performances by colonial subjects in native costumes Charles Garnier, architectural advisor to the Fair, organised an exhibition on *L'Habitation humaine* along the Seine and the Quai d'Orsay by the foot of the Eiffel Tower Charles Garnier. Comprised of 44 model buildings, it offered a history of world architecture. But for all its global ambitions it had a depressingly Eurocentric conclusion: that only the architecture of the European races had a history. As Wyss demonstrates clearly, this was immersed in the latest scientific thinking of the time, from quasi-Darwinian ideas of evolution to Gobineau's writing on race or Lewis Morgan's tripartite developmental schema of savagery – barbarism – civilisation. In some cases such common ideas of development were internalised such that they fed into a self-exoticisation. The Mexican pavilion, for example, was a pastiche Aztec temple that took advantage of the curiosity in this ancient culture but also served the dual purpose of highlighting Mexico's complex heritage as well as its success in overcoming its barbarous past.

The book is full of insights and telling observations about the Fair, but its general underpinning narrative is not startlingly novel. Paul Greenhalgh's survey of world fairs compiled a similar account nearly 25 years ago, although admittedly not with the same level of detail as that offered by Wyss.<sup>1</sup> Since then examination of the interdependence of colonial power and public display has become a commonplace in the analysis of European world fairs, reinforced by Tony Bennett's theory of the exhibitionary complex that emphasises the rootedness of such large scale spectacles in a state-sanctioned regime of visibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: History of the Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990.

Indeed, so widespread has interest in such connections become that the radical approach might be to turn one's analytical gaze in other directions. When the Great Exhibition was organised in 1851 it was profoundly shaped by liberal beliefs in trade and the free market. Although different states, not least the British Empire, were represented as such, the over-arching theme was celebration of the fruits of industry. The organisation of the exhibits on national lines, followed in subsequent exhibitions with national pavilions, has meant that it is the national representative function of these huge events that has become the focus of interest, at the expense of other perspectives.

It is impossible to deny that national and imperial representation was perhaps the most imposing aspect of the World Fairs, exemplified most clearly, perhaps, in the spectacular national pavilions that came to be a central feature. However, there is a danger that commentators might themselves have been seduced by such exhibits, leaving the multiple subjects on display untouched. Wyss' book contains almost no reference to the Hall of Industry and its contents, or to the Gallery of Machines, the Forestry pavilion, the Fine Art exhibition, the Palace of Liberal Arts or the Pavilion of Diverse Industries.

To list such gaps could be seen as unfair, for it implies that Wyss's book should have a different focus, when in fact it takes an important topic and analyses it well. Nevertheless, one wonders when these other marginalised aspects of World Fairs might be granted the attention they deserve. In *Bilder von der Globalisierung* there is a glimpse of one such aspect, but it appears only toward the end. It concerns the activities of the economist Charles Gide, uncle of the author André Gide and one of the leading figures of the co-operative movement. The latter was first formally brought into existence, Wyss notes, during the Fair, and at the Economists' Conference held during the Fair Gide looked forward to a 'co-operative Republic' in 2089. Here a radically different economic and social vision was being put forward as part of the Fair, and one might have wished for this to be explored in more depth.

The extensive use of images from *L'Illustration de Paris* is central to the declared logic of the book, since it aims to use *L'Illustration* as the guide to the Fair and is meant to be as much about how the authors and artists of *L'Illustration* perceived the Fair. Although the images are often striking this was not an entirely convincing approach; at times the relation between image and Wyss's text is less than clear – some images seem marshalled merely to provide visually arresting background rather than to carry forward the argument. Moreover, a detailed analysis of the journal itself might have thrown up some interesting questions. For example, is it possible to talk about the principles of selection shaping the subject chosen for illustration? How did the engavings relate to other popular imagery of the Fair? What level of congruence was there between the images of the journal, as a medium of representation, and the exhibitionary practices of the Fair as a whole?

Despite such caveats this is nonetheless a valuable work of scholarship that will be a certain point of reference in discussions of the Fair, even if, inevitably, this will be more the case in Germany and Austria than elsewhere.

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