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BOOK REVIEW

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World exhibitions were concrete settings where the representation of the known world on a visitable scale was intended, as the denomination indicates. For decades, historiography from different latitudes has dealt with them from different perspectives and several disciplines and areas of knowledge. As an object of study, they have called the attention of architects, art and culture historians, economic, and working-class historians.[1]

Even though some exhibitions took place along the nineteenth century and were associated to a specific productive or creative area – for instance, machinery or decorative arts –, it was in 1851, with the exposition in London, when the exhibitions' format was standardized. Since then, exhibitions became scale models of the known world.

The European and American cities where the successive exhibitions were held became places where other events associated to them, or that tried to capture the same public, unfolded at the same time. On some occasions, in fact, these exhibitions overlapped centennial celebrations with local or national ephemeris.

The "golden age" of world exhibitions, as several historians consider it, coincided with the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. During these years, on the one hand, a clear reconfiguration of world geopolitics took place; on the other, it was a historical moment characterized (although with some differences concerning chronologies) by the consolidation of the nation-state and the invention of national identities. The age of imperialism, the 1898 war between Spain and the United States, the tensions and competition among the European nations, the effects of American expansionism, the First

[1]The literature on World Expositions is abundant. The exhaustive literature organized by Alexander Geppert, Jean Coffey and Tammy Lau can be consulted in this link: https://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/fmi/astrofuturismus/publikationen/Geppert_-_Expo_bibliography_3ed.pdf [Accessed 20 May 2020].

World War, the Mexican Revolution, and the Russian Revolution, just to mention some milestones, were the background curtain of the dynamics of these decades.

Thus, national rivalries and competition among nations overlapped within the spaces generated by the exhibitions. The efforts to represent the nations were clearly expressed in the so called national pavilions. In each one, the countries intended to represent themselves through a selection of natural products, manufactures, archeological, artistic, and literary pieces, among many other things. Each national pavilion tried, in sum, to be a scale model of a nation.

Between the 1980s and the 2000s, different specific historiographies addressed topics related to world exhibitions. From a perspective of economic history, for example, exhibitions have been studied as places where the capitalist industrial competition among nations was explicit, as well as how each nation tried to show its industrial and technological achievements, and its superiority in weaponry. In this sense, exhibitions have been thought of as one more gear of the capitalist industrial society.

Other perspectives have studied exhibitions in the age of imperialism to assess the ways in which colonial rule was staged. Experts in cultural studies have shown how different ideas about civilization, progress, and backwardness, or about forms of exoticism and romanticism, operated as articulators to show legitimated and naturalized ways of domination within the exhibitions.

Through different paths, cultural critics and art historians have studied exhibitions as spaces of visual culture. We should bear in mind that, within them, all kinds of visual shows were displayed, among which dioramas, panoramas, and cinematographic expressions stand out. But visual cultures have also been studied in the more classical sense of the term; thus, there are studies on national and "world" art collections. From urban and material culture studies, in turn, the cities that were epicenters of the expositions have been studied, as well as the buildings created to accommodate them, and the monuments built to be inaugurated on the occasion of the exhibitions, many of them considered icons of the cities, and also ephemeral architectures. Among these perspectives of study, Walter Benjamin's observations on the exhibitions have been a recurring referral. So, with different accents, the notion of world exhibition as a device of modernity, as it was understood in the Western world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has been used repeatedly in these studies. And it has been thought in relation to other forms of exhibition and window display, like museums and bazaars. The pedagogical functions of expositions have also been thought as they reinforced some senses of superiority and domination by organizing and exposing the world in display windows and showcases.

Several of these historiographies were developed in the heat of the great questions posed in the decades between 1980 and 2000 about the consolidation of the nation-state and national identities. Through the decade of 2000, in turn, they started to pose new historiographical questions that aimed to think beyond national historiographies and to ask about the contacts, transfers, and interrelationships between world regions. In this way, aspects of Atlantic history, crossed history, connected history and, more so around 2010, global or transnational history began to have presence. In the new historiographical lines developed since then, as Anne Marie Thiesse has pointed out, international exhibitions began to be studied as privileged places of identity exhibitions, a fact that allows us to verify, as this French historian has mentioned, that there is nothing more international than the formation of national identities (Thiesse 2010).

I propose here to think in the light of these new historiographical lines the recently appeared books selected for this comment. Even though several agendas from previous decades are recovered in them, some accents or modelings showing the productivity of new questions that circulate in these historiographies can be found. Of the four books read

to think about this comment, two are monographic books by an author (Uslenghi and Boone), and the other two are collective volumes (compiled by Boussahba-Bravard and Rogers, and Teughels and Scholliers). Therefore, I present here some general comments about them, and emphatically suggest reading each of them.

Uslenghi's book is, maybe, the one that dialogues more strongly with the lines featured in the previous decades. Its intention is to account for the "visual narratives," as they were portrayed by outstanding and well known writers (Rubén Darío, Enrique Gómez Carrillo, Manuel Ugarte, and Amado Nervo) at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. If visual culture links the book to previous contributions, the recurring referral to the way of thinking exhibitions that Walter Benjamin proposed decades ago is another point in common with these contributions. The author's focus is on national pavilions and writers from Latin America. Through the pages the originality lies on thinking the "visual narratives" rather than bringing new voices to the choir of known writers for that time who left written testimonies of the European exhibitions, mainly those held in Paris. Another interpretive novelty can be seen in the intention of thinking Latin American writers as cosmopolitans – in tension with national imageries – as different studies in the last 10 years have suggested. Uslenghi goes creatively through sources that, in general, are thought more as information givers than objects in themselves: celebratory books, cartographies, postcards, and cinematographic pieces. Through this strategy, the author brings new dimensions to the way of looking at known authors in order to think which kind of observer could become a Latin American writer within the frame of a world exhibition and how they could participate performatively in that experience.

Meanwhile, Boone's book, in the light of the exhaustive reconstruction of art exhibitions, architectural bets, and other elements of visual culture of numerous world exhibitions held in the Americas and in Europe, aims to think about the elements of Spanishness that deafly underlie the American identities from the North and the South. The author thrives on new questions regarding the multiple or overlapping identities as possibilities to add complexity to the history of national identity narratives. In the book, the bet to think about figures with complex appropriations, like Christopher Columbus, and to tune in American and European events stands out, focusing on centennial celebrations and exhibitions from the period between 1876 and 1915. This book offers the interested reader an excellent gateway to think visual cultures in dialogue with the objective of the nations at the time of the composition of collections that synthesized national imageries and, at the same time, to discover which elements were included and excluded in the consolidation of those canons. From my perspective, it is, in turn, a contribution to think the construction of national patrimony in a way that is more dynamic and attentive to quite different elements and actors.

The two compilations discussed here, in turn, present agendas that, taking world exhibitions as settings – rather than as objects of study – take into account actors and subjects that are little traveled in the historiographies of previous decades. The book curated by Rogers and Boussahba-Bravard, for the period between 1876 and 1937, goes through different episodes and processes with women as main characters. Through the different parts and chapters of the book, we can see contributions that, from cultural history or from the biographical perspective, put in the center of the scene collectors, plastic artists, students, professionals, and workers, women on the margin (due to their ethnic origin or their geographic belonging) who, within the frame of world exhibitions, make their voices heard as spokespeople who go from the defense of the national identity to feminism with transnational dimensions. The book's intention of highlighting women as main characters in these settings allows us to think about these exhibitions as dynamic spaces of construction of identities not always in tune. For instance, the book shows how some spokeswomen who were heard in those

events were convinced of the need of embodying the national imagery, but, at the same time, of giving a regional and transnational dimension to the forms of feminism deployed in these decades. From my perspective, and maybe without proposing it explicitly, the book operates also as an invitation to rethink the role of some women at the intersections between public and private spaces; mainly because it shows the fading away of frontiers between both promoting the radical alterations of the times and the spaces of the cities that hosted world exhibitions.

The volume compiled by Teughels and Scholliers, for its part, is inscribed in the prolific field of the history of food, that in recent years has deployed lines of great historiographical productivity. The book invites the reader to think about the conformation of another type of national canons, different from the literary or artistic ones but with a larger impact in societies. The questions about the autochthonous or local gastronomies, the very idea of products of "this" land, and the construction of myths regarding how a product or a recipe represents a city, a nation or an ethnicity go through the text that make up this volume. The book works also as an invitation to think on the common senses generated around strong images related to identities and gastronomic consumption, only to mention two with a massive impact: think about the automatic relation that even today exists between Parisians and *baguettes*! Likewise, as a reader, the book has suggested to me several interesting hints to rethink world exhibitions as places of national rituality associated to food and its appropriations. The volume can be read both by people interested in the history of the nations and its inventions, as well as curious people interested in gastronomy and its dynamics of production and circulation.

Reference

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