

## World's Fairs and Colonialism

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### Abstract

This survey on the history of world's fairs since 1851 starts with the losers of this contest in national profiling and industrial competition: Germany and Austria, both former territories of the Holy Roman Empire and belated nation states. Both had been rather unlucky colonisers. Some of the leading colonial states, instead, organised more than three world's fairs in the time span from 1851 until today: France, Belgium, and Spain, all of them Catholic. Holland, the Calvinist colonial

power, renounced on this kind of spectacles at all, Great Britain contented itself with two performances. World's fairs don't pay off. While the USA participated regularly since 1876, two spectacular world's fair events, Osaka 1970 and Shanghai 2010, mark the rise of the Asian powers. The history of world's fairs mirrors global politics, diplomacy and wars against the backdrop of late colonial history.

## Winners and losers in national profiling

[1] Regarding the 170 years of the institution's existence, Germany was late, again, when hosting with EXPO 2000 in Hanover its first world fair in the year 2000. Despite of a millenium bonus, with only 18 million admission tickets sold, the attendance fell below the high expectations. Soberly regarded, this attendance was not that bad, as statistics of international fairs in Europe since World War II use to bob up and down within single-digit millions. The big exception was the Brussels event in 1958, a legendary spectacle, attracting 41,5 million of visitors in the heydays of Cold War. Compared to this success, EXPO 1992 in Seville fell short. Spain did celebrate, after all, the 500th jubilee of Christopher Columbus' arrival on the island of "Hispaniola" (Haiti) in the Caribbean Sea. The event attracted 18,5 million visitors, just half a million more than in Hanover.

[2] Overseas and in Asia, the attendances broke records during the same period: New York surpassed in 1964 the hitherto all-time record of 50 million, held by the *Exposition universelle de 1900*, Paris, for six decades. Nevertheless, Paris remains world champion in this discipline with six *Expositions universelles* that shaped the cityscape along the Seine. In the face of the hosting municipalities and nations, the question arises as to whether the term "world's fair" is correct. From a geopolitical point of view, the locations are unilaterally spread out with a focus on a few nations in Western Europe, the USA and Australia as a member of the Commonwealth under the British Crown. The African continent, the Middle East, the countries of Eastern Europe, and the territory of the former Soviet Union entered sporadically, randomly and late this international stage of profiling. The first world's fair in the Eastern Bloc took place in Budapest in 1971, ten years later followed a second one in Plovdiv, Bulgaria.

[3] The introduction to this essay may sound all too statistical, but, in fact, statistics represent the essence of a world's fair. Its motive is competition for inventive genius, industrial output and cultural standing, the virtues of political prestige. (Fig. 1)



1 J. McNeven, *The Foreign Department, viewed towards the transept*, interior view of the Crystal Palace, London, during the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851, colour lithograph, 29.4 × 46.6 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, Prints, Drawings & Paintings Collection, [acc. no. 19625](#) (photo: Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

[4] Besides winners, world's fair history also knows losers. The most embarrassing debacle had to be digested by the City of Vienna. The period for a world's fair in 1873 was an awkward one. The 1866 Austrian defeat against Prussia at the Battle of Königgrätz, the German victory over France in 1871, and the Treaty of Versailles clouded diplomacy among the European powers. While the German attendance was positive, several other countries abstained. Hesitantly, the young French Republic participated after losing the war against Prussia. Great Britain held back with technical innovations, showing, instead, its colonial superiority with merchandise from India. Meager as well was the range of products presented by the United States of America. The Vienna stock exchange crash of 1873 triggered an economic depression. As bad came to worse, cholera broke out in the city: The high-pressure water pipes that were to be laid in the hastily constructed Vienna *Ringstraße* (Ring Road) were not yet been completed at the opening of the Vienna World's Fair. Instead of the expected 20 million visitors, the organisers had to content themselves with only seven million and faced a huge financial deficit at the end of the event.

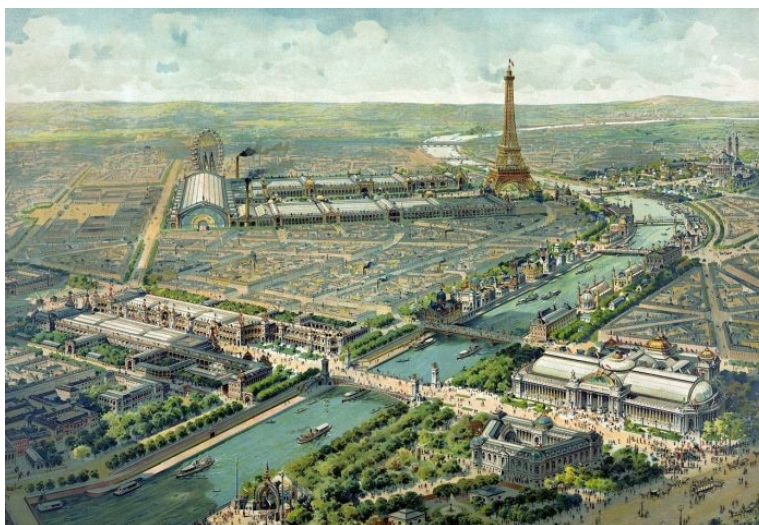
[5] Not just Austria, but all the countries of Central Europe in the succession of the Holy Roman Empire struggled with the idea of a world's fair – not least the territories of what is today the Federal Republic of Germany: the belated nation. In the period of the early world's fairs since the London *Great Exhibition of all Nations* in 1851, *Germany* did not yet exist. Lacking a national platform, German companies gathered under the label *Zollverein* (German Customs Union). Even after the foundation of the *Kaiserreich* (German Empire) through the Treaty of Versailles, the German presence on the global stage only gained momentum stutteringly.

[6] The loudest voice came from Alfred Krupp (1812–1887) who used to represent his country by the most spectacular booth, equipped with armour plates and cannons. At every world's fair, the tycoon presented a heavier calibre. At the Paris *Exposition universelle* in 1867, Krupp boasted the world's biggest cannon, weighing 50 tons. "Three years later, Krupp's cannons were back in France, this time charged with live ammunition", writes Kretschmer.<sup>1</sup>

[7] After the Franco-German War of 1870/71, the Germans boycotted the Paris world's fairs of 1878 and 1889. The German Empire didn't feel like honouring the defeated arch-enemy by its attendance. In the long run, the great revanche was planned. But the attempt of the Berlin Merchants and Industrialists Association (*Verein Berliner Kaufleute und Industrieller*) to host a world's fair in the German capital Berlin in the secular year of 1900 failed due to the bureaucratic hesitance among government, industrial and commercial associations. And again Paris was faster and organised, to Germany's anger, that giant show of 1900 which broke all previous records (Fig. 2).

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1 Winfried Kretschmer, *Geschichte der Weltausstellungen*, Frankfurt am Main/New York 1999, 87 (author's translation).



2 Lucien Baylac, *Vue panoramique de l'Exposition universelle de 1900* in Paris, colour lithograph, 72 × 93 cm. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Prints and Photographs Division (photo: Library of Congress, [PPOC](#))

[8] Megalomania met with unacknowledged feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis the more cosmopolitan colonial powers. Germany's appearances at world's fairs in the US were not particularly successful. The *Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition* of 1876, the first world's fair in the New World, celebrating the centenary of the American Declaration of Independence, ended in disgrace for Germany. Many entrepreneurs had hesitated to participate due to the Great Depression of 1873-1879. And those who exhibited, earned criticism from within their own ranks, namely from the German engineer Franz Reuleaux, a jury member at the world's fair:

*We had to listen to some truths of the most bitter kind, having still to expect yet more [...]: As a quintessence of all accuses goes the verdict, firstly: Germany's industry works according to the principle 'cheap and poor'. [...]. Secondly: In merchandize and handcraft, Germany presents nothing but tendentiously patriotic issues, [...] almost in battalion-sized units, all these Germanias, Borussias, Emperors, Crown Princes, Bismarcks, Moltkes, Roons [...] were deployed, represented in porcelain, in biscuit, in bronze, in zinc, in iron, and in terracotta. Thirdly: "By all nations represented at the World Fair", as critics say, "we have learned something, by Germany, instead, nothing!"<sup>2</sup>*

[9] Germany eventually imprinted itself upon the collective memory of world's fairs in the early 20th century. Having refused to attend the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris, the first instance of German participation after World War I was its legendary pavilion at the *Exposició internacional de Barcelona* in 1929 (Fig. 3). The Weimar Republic sought to convey a civilised image through modernist architecture. Shortly before the *Exposició*, Chancellor Gustav Stresemann had signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact, initiated by the League of Nations, for the renunciation of war as an instrument of national policy. Meanwhile, the German economy was on the road to recovery from its burdensome war reparations, supported by American export credits on the basis of the Dawes Plan.

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2 Franz Reuleaux, *Briefe aus Philadelphia*, Brunswick 1877, 3-6, quoted from Kretschmer (1999), 108 (author's translation).



3 Interior of the Barcelona Pavilion designed by Mies van der Rohe for the 1929 *Exposició internacional de Barcelona*, reconstruction on the original site by Cristian Cirici, Fernando Ramos and Ignasi de Solà-Morales, 1983–1986 (photo: Martin van Dahlen)

[10] Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was nominated as Artistic Director of the German pavilion, with *Bauhaus* designer Lilly Reich as his assistant. Mies's reputation at the time was based primarily on his architectural writings; until then he had had little opportunity for practical building. The fact that he was the architect of a monument in honour of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, two socialists killed by reactionary Prussian *Freikorps* militia in 1919, gave the choice a progressive touch. Decades later, the US émigré Mies van der Rohe recalled his rather short briefing by the committee. When he asked which purpose this pavilion should serve, "they said, we don't know – just build a pavilion, but with not too much glass".<sup>3</sup> The fact that Mies van der Rohe did not follow this guideline was to make architectural history.

[11] The notorious German habit of 'arriving too late for the party' was also manifested in its Barcelona pavilion, which was finally completed one week after the opening of the world's fair. Indeed, its only official function consisted in hosting the Spanish royal couple. The interior contained two chairs, designed by Lilly Reich and Mies van der Rohe, for the comfort of Alfonso XIII and Victoria von Battenberg during their brief visit. While the original chairs have been lost, fancy replicas continue to be offered for sale on Amazon.

[12] The Barcelona fair was still open when the New York stock market crashed in October, prompting the 1929 Great Depression. In such precarious conditions no buyer was found for the German pavilion after the end of the exhibition. Its elements, travertine and fine marble, returned to the supplier. The fame of the Barcelona Pavilion as a key building of modernism is due to a retrospective praise by architectural history. After the death of the fascist dictator General Franco in 1975, the project to reconstruct the pavilion on the same site in Barcelona was initiated and completed in 1986.

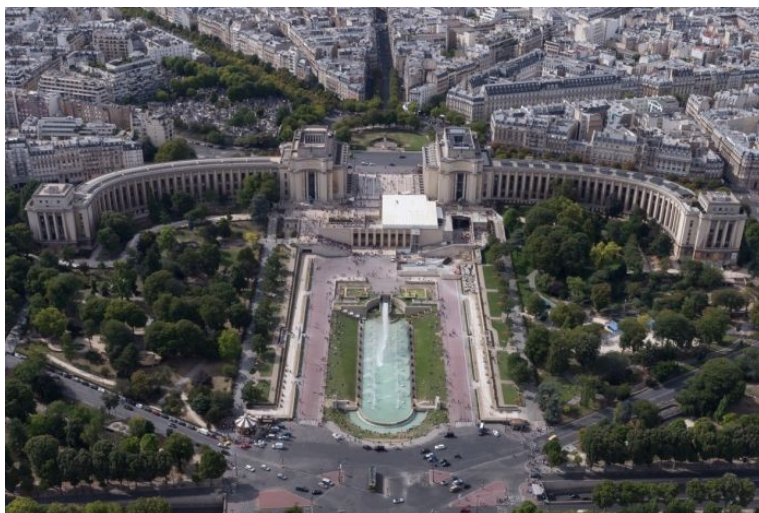
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3 Paul Sigel, *Exponiert. Deutsche Pavillons auf Weltausstellungen*, Berlin 2000, 107.



[13] Just eight years after the Barcelona International Exposition, what a contrast opened up with the 1937 world's fair in Paris. The German Reich was not alone with its taste for monumentality. *Le rappel à l'ordre* was proclaimed by Jean Cocteau in an essay in 1926.<sup>4</sup> Paul Valéry, a mentor of the exhibition concept, was likewise inspired by the idea of a classical age in the twentieth century, which he propagated in an essay entitled *Architectures*.<sup>5</sup> In the mid-1930s, the neo-Catholic intellectuals had the say in the French *métropole*.

[14] In the midst of an international economic crisis, the *Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques appliqués à la vie moderne* was the major public employer in France. The area of the world's fair covered the urban space between the *Champ de Mars*, the *Trocadéro* and the embankment of the Seine up to the *Esplanade des Invalides*. The *Trocadéro*, already built on the occasion of the third Paris world's fair in 1878 to house the *Musée des Monuments Français* and the *Musée de l'Homme*, the ethnographic collection, was converted into the re-named *Palais de Chaillot* (Fig. 4). Its layout consists of two segmental arches, whereby the steel structure of the historicist *Trocadéro* was incorporated into the new building. The twin *avant-corps* in the centre of the curved wings marked the gateway to the exhibition site and were meant, in a gesture of wishful thinking, to signify a Monument of Peace.



4 *Palais de Chaillot*, Paris, 1937, by Jacques Carlu, Louis-Hippolyte Boileau et Léon Azéma, bird's eye view from the Eiffel Tower (photo: William Crochot, 2015)

[15] There is no record of the authorship of the idea to juxtapose the pavilions of the Soviet Union and Germany. Presumably, it came from Jacques Gréber, a Franco-American landscape gardener and *commissaire général* of the exhibition, whose intention may have been to orchestrate an architectural Olympiad, a peaceful competition between two political systems.<sup>6</sup> Theatrically confronted by axial symmetry, this architectural highlight staged the ideological contest between Communism and Fascism. The *Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques* of 1937, on the

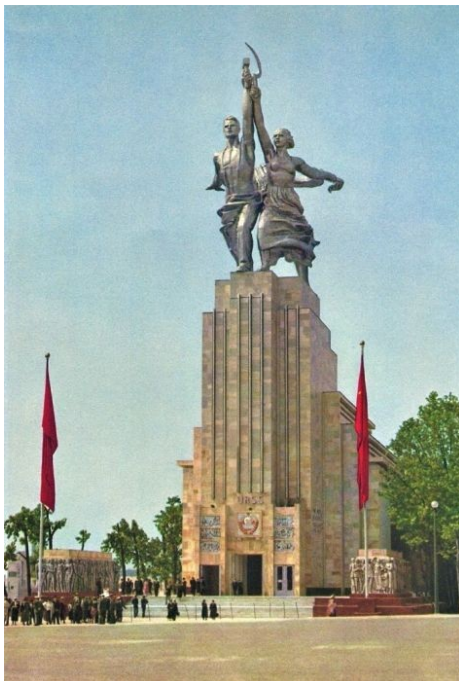
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4 Jean Cocteau, *Le rappel à l'ordre*, Paris 1926.

5 Paul Valéry, *Architectures*, Paris 1921.

6 Sigel (2000), 147.

eve of World War II, was less a showcase for goods and merchandise than a showdown between competing political ideologies, one of a magnitude seen neither before or since in the history of the world's fairs.



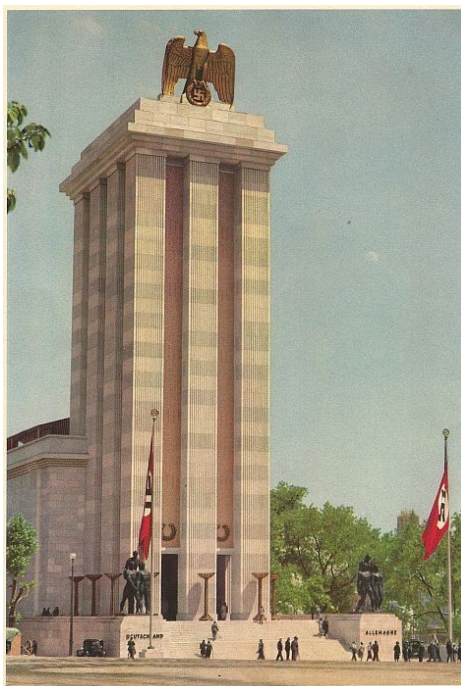
5 Soviet pavilion at the 1937 Paris world's fair, architect: Boris Iofan, monumental sculpture by Vera Mukhina (reprod. from: *Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques appliqués à la vie moderne*, Paris 1937)

[16] The Soviet pavilion stood south of the *Trocadéro* axis, on the bank of the Seine (Fig. 5). With the construction, the communist state celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution. The architect of the tiered tower was Boris Mikhailovich Iofan, while Vera Mukhina designed the 24-metres tall sculpture atop the building. Its material, stainless steel, payed homage to the name of the Soviet leader Josif Vissarionovich *Stalin*. The monumental pair of a male worker and a kolkhoz country woman hold high their working tools, a hammer and a sickle, thus forming the emblem of the Soviet Union.

[17] The prompt acceptance to participate in the world's fair was due not least to the good political relations between France, the host country, and the Soviet Union, who had agreed a pact of mutual assistance. At that moment, France was ruled by the leftist *Front populaire*. Its prime minister, Léon Blum, was to act, only three years later, as a leading figure in the *Résistance* against the German occupation. Blum, a Jewish citizen, survived Buchenwald concentration camp, while his brother, René Blum, the former director of *Les Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo*, was killed in Auschwitz.

[18] The political and the military developments at this time were largely underestimated. The *Exposition internationale* was supposed to spread optimism. Had not the German Reich, only one year before, manifested its cosmopolitanism by hosting the Olympic Games in Berlin? Of course, relations with France, the arch-enemy, remained precarious; east of the Rhine, the defeat in

World War I was badly remembered. Hesitantly, the Germans decided to participate in the world's fair. It must have been a political gesture of peace-offering that the international jury of the 1937 world's fair awarded Germany the second most medals for patents, consumer and industrial products after France.



6 German pavilion at the 1937 Paris world's fair, architect: Albert Speer (reprod. from: *Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques appliqués à la vie moderne*, Paris 1937)

[19] Albert Speer was tasked with building the German pavilion (Fig. 6), having been recommended by Josef Goebbels after Hitler's favourite candidate for the job, Ludwig Troost, the architect of Munich's *Führerbau*, had died prematurely in 1934. The four sides of the 51.55-metre neoclassical front tower of the German pavilion were structured by fluted pilasters, and the wall surfaces were ornamented by gilded swastikas against a red background. A monumental eagle in bronze was towering above the roof. The construction consisted of a steel frame, that was covered with panels of Jurassic limestone. On the right-hand side of the entrance stood two muscular Aryan colossuses, representing *Comradeship*, while on the left-hand side a group of three figures represented *Family*; all bronzes were about seven metres high. Their present whereabouts are unknown.

[20] In 1937, leftist Popular Front governments ruled in France and Spain, while Germany, Japan, and Italy formed a global axis of Fascism against the *Comintern* alliances of the Soviet Union. The *Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques* of 1937 attempted to broach the issue of political blocs by aesthetic means. This must in retrospect be considered an act of wishful thinking in the face of a war which already had started: The Spanish Civil War, in which the Republicans were unofficially supported by leftist international brigades from France and resistance fighters from Germany and Austria, was a prelude to World War II. There were also partisans from the United States, the United Kingdom, Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Canada, and Switzerland. The



Non-Intervention Agreement launched by France and the United Kingdom had been officially welcomed, but was de facto ignored. Though Stalin had signed it, the Soviet Union undermined the official embargo declared by the League of Nations and provided the Spanish Republicans with military equipment. On the other side, Fascist Italy, the authoritarian regime of António de Oliveira Salazar in Portugal and the German Reich massively supported the Nationalists led by General Franco. On April 26, 1937, one month before the opening of the Paris world's fair, the German *Legion Condor* launched a sortie against the Basque city of Guernica. Spain participated in the Paris world's fair while the civil war in the country was approaching its peak. The war ended on April 1st 1939 with a defeat of the Republicans, after Franco's troops had taken the country's capital, Madrid.

[21] The Spanish pavilion in Paris, commissioned by the Republican government, was a modernist statement (Fig. 7). The architects Josep Lluís Sert and Luis Lacasa had designed a structure made of steel and glass that poetically enclosed a living tree, certainly a reference to its famous predecessor made of glass and iron, the Crystal Palace at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, which had sheltered a group of old elm trees in Hyde Park. The Spanish pavilion presented sculptures by Julio González and Juan Miró as well as a quicksilver fountain by Alexander Calder. Pablo Picasso contributed a wall-filling oil painting on canvas measuring 3.5 metres × 7.77 metres. The artist was inspired for this cubist painting in black and white by photographs taken by his partner, Dora Maar, which were based on newspaper pictures documenting the crimes and victims of the civil war. The artist practiced media transparency by showing that this work had to rely on reproduced news footage to create a compassionate picture of an atrocity happening in his distant native country.



7 Pavilion of the Spanish Republic designed by Josep Lluís Sert and Luis Lacasa for the *Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques appliqués à la vie moderne*, Paris 1937, reconstruction in Barcelona, 1992 (photo: author)

[22] Spain did not exhibit industrial products; its pavilion served as a platform for the Republic at war, and as an opportunity to denounce the fascist terror occurring in the country. The Spanish contribution to the 1937 world's fair was the only evidence of a critical avant-garde amidst an otherwise blanket display of neoclassical monumentality. Its political message, however, was unable to garner much popularity among visitors to the fair, who largely sought fun and

entertainment there. To the organiser hosts, the Spanish contribution was rather embarrassing. Being governed by socialists, France was eager to promote a harmonious atmosphere at the fair, at which a spirit of authoritarianism prevailed, by trying to maintain good relations with the Fascist regimes through diplomacy.

## World's fair rankings and Colonialism

[23] Two years after the 1937 Paris world's fair, the German *Wehrmacht* invaded Poland, unleashing World War II which would reduce large parts of Europe to rubble. Despite their belligerent potential, the Central European states of Germany and Austria were latecomers and unlucky colonial powers.

[24] In 1722, Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI launched the Imperial Ostend Company (*Kaiserliche Ostendische Kompanie*) on behalf of the Habsburg Empire, as a vehicle for conducting trade with the East and West Indies. Despite operating quite profitably, it had to be shut down just nine years later due to diplomatic pressure exerted by Great Britain along with Holland and France. The older, more established phalanx of colonialists disliked the competition posed by the Habsburg newcomer. Nevertheless, Charles' daughter Maria Theresia dared to patronise a second colonial trade company in 1775, the *Société impériale asiatique de Trieste et Anvers*, led by Amsterdam-born English merchant William Bolts and by Charles Proli, his financial backer from Antwerp. The nationality of these two indicates that Austria had to rely on colonial mercenaries from more experienced nations. The *Société impériale*, based in Ostende and Trieste, existed for ten years before going bankrupt and closing down in 1785.

[25] The German Empire began its own colonial projects even later, a century after Austria's failed attempts. At first, Otto von Bismarck was not convinced by the idea of purchasing colonial territory. He considered it too expensive and too risky for a nation with little expertise in developing and handling a powerful navy. One argument put forward by the Chancellor almost had a social democratic ring to it: it would be hard, he claimed, to justify using tax payers' money to invest in colonial bases that would benefit private trading companies. Finally, the *Norddeutsche Bund*, an alliance of principalities and Hanseatic cities, was able to convince the Chancellor of the idea of establishing naval bases as chartered companies defended by gunboat diplomacy. This minimalist strategy was soon supplanted by the desire to catch up with the leading colonial powers. The purchase of territories started effectively in 1884. Unlike the leading colonial powers, Germany did not abolish the slave trade, preferring instead to profit from its competitors' withdrawal from this trading practice.

[26] The German colonies held for more than ten years were the following:

On the African continent: German East Africa (today comprising Burundi, Rwanda, and part of Tanzania) between 1885–1919, subsequently allotted to Great Britain, Belgium, and Portugal; German South West Africa (today's Namibia) from 1884 to 1919, conquered during World War I by South African and British forces; German West Africa (today comprising Cameroon and Togo), 1884 to 1914 in the case of today's Togo, which was conquered by British and French troops, to 1916 in the case of Cameroon, which surrendered in 1916.

In the Pacific: German Samoa existed from 1900–1914, when it was conquered by New Zealand expeditionary forces at the behest of Great Britain; German New Guinea protectorates including Kaiser-Wilhelmsland and the Bismarck Archipelago were established in 1884–1885; during World War I, Kaiser-Wilhelmsland and some islands nearby fell to Australian forces while Japan occupied most of the other German possessions in the Pacific.

In the Yellow Sea: Kiautschou Bay Leased Territory on the Shandong peninsula was leased by the German Empire from Imperial and then early Republican China from 1898; it was conquered by Japan in 1914.

As part of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, Germany's colonies were formally broken up and divided among the above-mentioned colonial victors of World War I.

[27] This brief account of the colonial efforts of Austria and Germany may suffice to show that the states of Central Europe were neither powerful colonisers nor successful hosts of world's fairs compared with the countries which were setting the tone in merchandising a national image. In contrast to this, Belgium and Spain – both heartlands of the Western Habsburg line, in an Empire where, according to Charles V, the sun never set – hosted a total of eleven world's fairs. While Spain organised four of these, the small kingdom of Belgium managed to draw level with France and the US by organising seven fairs. The United States of America, once overseas possessions of France and Great Britain, was driven by ambition to surpass their former colonial rulers. This record is all the more remarkable given that the US is a mainly Protestant nation: all the other countries that have hosted more than two world's fairs are majority Catholic: Belgium, France, Spain, and Italy. The Netherlands, a Calvinist colonial power, declined to engage in this kind of spectacle entirely, while Great Britain contented itself with putting on two world's fairs, the second one being the Great London Exposition of 1862. World's fairs don't pay off.

[28] Nowadays, Western citizens have lost interest in large-scale global events in their home countries and cities. During the Milan Expo of 2015, rioting occurred in the city center of the Lombardian capital. The procedures for awarding countries for their presentations were suspected of being subject to corruption by the Mafia. Even the act of hosting the Olympic Games (the historical offspring of world's fairs) tends to be met with increasing resistance by local people. In the Western age of television, the Internet, cheap flights, and migration problems, any attempt to stage the *big wide world* has become a rather dreadful banality. Reports from the Expo 2017 held in Astana, capital of oil-rich Kazakhstan, were few and far between. With the official sponsor of the Expo 2020, oil-exporting Dubai, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, the rich emerging nations are pushing forward, emulating colonial ambitions. It remains to be seen whether it is a good idea for the West to leave the stage of national self-congratulation to autocratic powers. The issue has received increasing attention, as the criticism of the awarding of the 2022 FIFA World Cup to Qatar shows.

## The rise of Asian powers

[29] Further strong evidence of an intrinsic link between colonial dominance and the drive to exhibit it is given in the case of Japan. With Expo 1970 in Osaka, the island state launched the first world's fair on the Asian continent, immediately setting a new world record of 64.2 million visitors. Japan achieved this just 25 years after the atom bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The young industrial nation shone in the electronics, communication media and automobile industry sectors. The most spectacular pavilions were sponsored by Sony, Toshiba, and Kodak, companies which would subsequently dominate the Western market of the entertainment industry (Fig. 8). The main feature of the Osaka exhibition was a lookout tower, 104 meters high, designed to emulate, in technical and aesthetic terms, the launch pad at Cape Canaveral, Florida. From there, two years earlier, NASA had succeeded in launching Apollo 11 with three astronauts to the Moon.



8 Toshiba-IHI Pavilion at Expo '70 in Osaka (photo: Takato Marui, [CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

[30] A highly sophisticated project in the spirit of conceptual invisibility, launched in Osaka, was *Time Capsule Expo '70*, initiated by The Mainichi Newspapers and sponsored by Matsushita Electric Company, better known by its more recent name: Panasonic.<sup>7</sup> The precursor of this idea stemmed from the Expo 1964 in New York, where a time capsule had been buried. Its 40-litre vessel sounds modest compared to the Japanese successor: the Osaka time capsule, made of stainless steel, has a volume of 500 litres and is buried next to Osaka Castle. The idea is for the capsule to be reopened 5000 years after Expo '70, in the year 6970. A second time capsule with the same contents is buried above the first as a control duplicate, to be reopened regularly every hundred years. A first test lifting of this duplicate took place in the year 2000; it was then sealed and buried again in the same place. The time capsule follows the classificatory order of a curiosity cabinet. The ark, sent out into the far future of mankind, contains examples of Japanese civilisation around 1970 from the realms of *naturalia* and *artificialia*: all kinds of metals and synthetic materials as well as technical devices such as kitchen appliances, a radio and a television

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<sup>7</sup> *The Official Record of Time Capsule Expo '70. A Gift to the People of the Future from the People of the Present Day...*, Kadoma (Osaka) 1980.



set. From the realm of commonsense knowledge and everyday life the time capsule contains the flag of Japan, trendy clothing, consumer goods, the utensils for a traditional tea ceremony, and newspaper commentaries on Expo '70. Panasonic, the sponsor of this memorial urn, did not forget to add a set of documentary movies on World War II – as an admonishment to whom it may concern five thousand years hence.

[31] One might ask how this miraculous transformation was possible. Japan, an ally of the Fascist Axis Powers, advanced briefly after World War II to become one of the leading economic powers in the world, able to organise a world's fair that occupies second place in the global list of attendance. Within the long history of the country, this development was not predetermined at all. With the exception of a limited and strongly regulated exchange with China and the Dutch East India Company, there had been no contact with other nations nor cultures during the Edo era from 1603 to 1867. The *Tokugawa* shogunate kept the local warlords in the provinces under strict political control and forced them to reside at the court in Edo, today's Tokyo. The entry of foreigners was forbidden. This regime of isolationism, which lasted for two and a half centuries, guaranteed social stability under a military government. This stability was challenged when, in June 1853, four American ships commanded by US Navy Admiral Matthew Perry anchored in Edo Bay. After months of tough negotiations, the United States forced the opening of two harbours for American trading ships. Politically, the treaty triggered a crisis for the shogunate, stirred up by local warlords. This crisis ended with the abolition of the warrior aristocracy, a traditional power which had dominated Japanese history for a millennium. Under American patronage, the legendary institution of the emperorship, which had its origins in Japanese antiquity but had been eclipsed in the Middle Ages, was re-established in 1868. The modernisation of Japan thus followed a dialectical pattern: the ancient figure of the *Tenno* was forced into the modern political corset of a constitutional monarchy.

[32] In the early 20th century, as the model pupil of Western capitalism, Japan developed its imperialist ambitions by colonising Korea in 1910 and occupying Chinese Manchuria in 1931. The young Republic of China, weakened by civil wars, had come under the strong influence of Stalinist Soviet Union. The West responded approvingly when the Japanese navy took over most of China's ports, as this measure seemed helpful to contain the expansion of communism. The allied Axis Powers welcomed these acts of aggression in the Yellow Sea and the Pacific. The US changed its policy of tolerance, however, when its interests in the Philippines began to be threatened. The conflict culminated in December 1941 when Imperial Japanese Navy airplanes and midget submarines attacked Pearl Harbor: this triggered America's entry into World War II. *Tenno* Hirohito, who was willing to enter peace negotiations, had lost control over the aggressively fascist military after the formal ending of WWII. The victorious powers were unable to stop the Japanese military operations in the island state. We know the end of this: On August 6th, *Little Boy* hit Hiroshima with its military headquarters, and on August 9th *Fat Boy* hit Nagasaki, the location of the Mitsubishi armaments company. A few days later, the Japanese Empire capitulated unconditionally.

[33] A Samurai-like spirit of military resistance turned into a spirit of industrious endeavour during the project of Japanese reconstruction and rehabilitation under American patronage. From 1945–1951 General Douglas MacArthur oversaw the dismantling of Japan's military apparatus, a

democratisation process, and the workings of the International Military Tribunal against Japanese war criminals. The demoralised population in the devastated country were cheered up by comic strips made in the US. Post-war Japan developed steadily into an outpost against Chinese communism. Like its former ally, denazified West Germany, Japan experienced a remarkable boom in economic prosperity, courtesy of the US, and became a model Western-style democracy in South East Asia. Also like the West Germans, the Japanese learned fast. From the late 1960s, the Western market was flooded with cars and electronic equipment, followed, from the 1980s, by Manga culture.

[34] To sum up, the rapid development of Japan, supported by the West, was the reason why this small island state was forty years earlier in organising its first world's fair than China. The communist republic entered the international stage when expanding its state capitalism beyond its own borders. In 2010, the time had come: With the slogan *Better City, Better Life*, the first Chinese world's fair opened in the city of Shanghai, the traditional trading town in the south of the ancient empire. With 73 million visitors, it launched a new world record for attendance, still valid today.



9 China pavilion, called "The Crown of the East", at Expo 2010 in Shanghai, architect: He Jingtang (photo: author)

[35] The landmark of the exhibition, *le clou* as the Parisians used to say, was the Chinese pavilion "The Crown of the East" designed by He Jingtang (Fig. 9). It was built to mimic the construction of a pagoda. The shape of the building is programmatic: although 63 metres high, it is the building's width that creates the impression of sublimity. Like a monumental hall of honour, the vast flat roof covers a surface of 38,000 square metres. Following the traditional model of stacked wooden constructions in the manner of *Dougong*, the beams are made of steel and painted in the seven shades of *Gugong* red, normally reserved for the buildings of Peking's Forbidden City. It is these architectural allusions by which the communist state inscribes itself into the *longue durée* of the Chinese empire.

[36] Meanwhile, China has become a colonial investor. By engaging in Land Grabbing in Cameroon, Nigeria, and South Africa, Chinese economic expansion is following in the footsteps of European colonialism. It is pursuing several initiatives with the purpose of establishing a New Silk Road across the Eurasian continent. Even in Europe, China is acting as a purchaser of industrial plants, such as investing in the Greek shipping port of Piraeus, and has development projects in

South-Eastern Europe. Such initiatives ultimately have the potential to lead to a disintegration of the European Union.

[37] In earlier times, imperial China, like Japan, had isolated itself from the world beyond its borders and did not seem to be predestined for expanding as a colonial power. However – earlier than the Europeans – Chinese culture was familiar with the lodestone compass, the process of printing on paper or with devices used for navigation that were based on practical experience. The emperor's fleet had the necessary equipment to undertake expeditions in unknown regions of the Earth, but it did not participate in the colonial division of the globe. Under the third emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Yongle (r. 1402–1424), a fleet of 317 junks with a total crew of 28,000 men, a number able to match any European standards, undertook maritime expeditions, the so-called Ming treasure voyages, to various parts of Asia and to the east coast of Africa. These were led by admiral Zheng He (1371–1433) who belonged to the ethnic group of Uyghurs and whose Muslim status facilitated encounters with the people living along the coast of the Indian Ocean. The aim of this ceremonial maritime policy was to inform seafaring nations around the world of the presence and legitimacy of the new dynasty that now ruled the Chinese empire. Foreign rulers were to be intimidated by the size of a fleet intended to represent the superiority and splendour of China. Foreign kings were invited to honour the Son of Heaven by visiting the Forbidden City and bowing to the emperor in a threefold *kowtow*.

[38] Subsequent emperors stopped practicing this kind of ceremonial foreign policy and took up the old Confucian mentality. The courtly bureaucracy cultivated an anti-commercial, ethnocentric conservatism which characterises the Ming era. In the empire, agriculture had to maintain its cultural priority over commerce.<sup>8</sup> In order to confirm this decision for all times, China's costly treasure fleet was unrigged. The Ming emperors thus acted in a similar way to the Trojan prince Aeneas, who ordered the exiled Trojans' ships to be burned when they had reached the promised shores of Latium.

## A postscript in the tone of ancient myths

[39] In recalling this Roman legend, we return to Europe. In the Mediterranean, too, an invisible border existed for thousands of years. According to Pindar,<sup>9</sup> it was defined by Heracles when he outwitted Atlas the Titan to carry the heavens over Gibraltar once more and for all eternity, with the categorical instruction: *Nec plus ultra!* The sailor had to turn back in the strait between Africa and Spain. And was the fate of Odysseus not a warning to mankind that the bold discoverer of foreign shores could provoke unknown gods and monsters? From antiquity to the Middle Ages, the Mediterranean peoples settled around the *mare nostrum* as a clearly defined sea that was a hub for the exchange of goods, gods, and warriors.

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<sup>8</sup> James Cahill, *Painting at the Shore. Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368–1580*, New York/Tokyo 1978, 21.

<sup>9</sup> See *Pindari carmina. Cum lectionis varietate et adnotationibus*, ed. Christian Gottlob Heyne, new and revised ed., London 1824, vol. 1, *Nemeaeum Carmen* III, 352.

[40] In this regard, China was at a disadvantage in geographical terms too: the Empire would have had a poor starting position in the race to colonise the West. It was too far away from the Straits of Gibraltar leading into the Atlantic Ocean. It is surely no coincidence that the European states along the Western European Atlantic coasts – in particular, France, Belgium and Spain – were champions in both colonising other nations and organising world's fairs. They had the dubious courage to violate the Heracleian verdict. Spain literally lifted the mythic ban *Nec plus ultra* by cancelling *Nec. Plus ultra* beyond magical thresholds was the new dictum. The Habsburg Emperor Charles V could proudly announce that in his empire, which included the territories of Austria and Hungary, the Burgundian Netherlands, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the Spanish crown lands and colonies in Central and South America, "the sun never sets". Charles V's heraldic *impresa* with the Pillars of Heracles and the *motto Plus ultra* has been preserved in the coat of arms of the modern Spanish nation state.

[41] A postscript in the tone of ancient myths may be allowed, as the tale of Atlas and Heracles has not yet been narrated to its conclusion. The aim of the hero's visit to Atlas was to beg the Titan for the Three Golden Apples. They were growing on a tree in the Garden of the Hesperides, the Nymphs of the Evening in the golden light of the sunset, far away, beyond the Straits of Gibraltar, beyond the Canary Islands, even, on the way to the New World, as we now know. Atlas helpfully agreed to go and get the precious fruits guarded by his daughters. Meanwhile, Heracles offered to hold the firmament. After the Titan returned with the Three Golden Apples, he was determined to abandon his previous duty, assigned to him by Zeus, the Olympian. Why should he continue to crouch under the heavenly burden? Shouldn't Atlas take this opportunity to escape and enjoy the prize of the golden fruits himself? (Fig. 10).

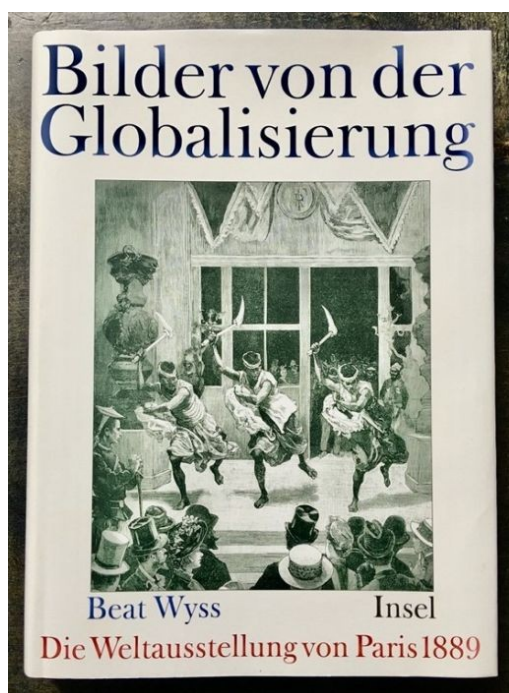


10 *Heracles, assisted by Athena, holding the firmament while Atlas presents the Golden Apples from the Garden of the Hesperides*, marble bas-relief, ca. 460 BC, fragment of a metope from the Temple of Zeus in Olympia. Archeological Museum of Olympia (photo: Wikimedia Commons)



But Heracles was smarter than the Titan. Slyly he asked Atlas to hold the firmament just for a moment so that he could adjust the collar of his garment to ease the pressure of the firmament—and again, the Titan was outwitted under his yoke. And the Atlas Mountains still stand here: on the borders of the Old World.

[42] In order to silence the memory of the offence he had committed against the Hesperides, the nymphs of the West, Heracles imposed a command on them: *Nec plus ultra*. In this sense, the myth can be read as a primal scene of colonisation: the subjugated peoples are to be tricked into handing over their treasures, and at the same time these peoples are to remain in their place of origin. The world's fairs essentially work in just the same way as Heracles. All these 'exotic' subjects were lured out for a while from Senegal, Tonkin and the Polynesian islands to be exhibited in the metropolises of the West, to be staged in traditional huts, to perform their ceremonial practices, to dance to strange primitive music for the amusement of the public in the centres of so-called civilisation (Fig. 11).



11 Kanak dancers at a soirée at Esplanade des Invalides during the 1889 Exposition universelle in Paris, period engraving; book cover, Berlin 2010

By the end of the great spectacle, the 'savages' were carried back home to the colonies. Under the custody of the Christian missionaries, they were supposed to learn from the Catechism why it is worthwhile to labour in the colonists' plantations. Like Atlas, they carry the weight of the heavens that separate those who are inside from those who are forced to remain outside. However, Hercules' magic trick no longer seems to work quite so well these days. More and more travellers are disregarding the ancient ban on travelling in the opposite direction. They want to know what happened with the Three Hesperidean Apples, the legendary ones, in the promised land of Europe.

### About the Author

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