Introduction

On the Universe of Fairs

In the modern world, progress is the standard by which the age prefers to measure itself. The history of modern progress is the history of the self-awareness of progress and modernity; that is, of how modern times produced a comprehensive picture of itself. This transformation was conceivable only by the modern view of history as a totality that progresses—both as a matter of fact and as a form of knowledge—but that is never completed because the future always remains unidentified. The consciousness of this totality in a particular span of time has formed what historians have habitually called an era, an epoch. Certainly, and however post-this-and-that we may feel, we must modestly realize that the growing secularization, rationalization, and technologization brought about by the modern era, together with our inability to escape our own present, have made "the modern" our inescapable frame of reference. As if we are all partners in crime, we have modernity as our common code: to it we constantly refer; on it we depend. But to what extent? This study of world’s fairs seeks to recount a history that belongs to the fleeting realm between the emergence of modern, industrial, and capitalist progress and its duration as a seemingly ahistorical and natural stage of humankind, between what is already history, albeit of yet-unclear meaning, and what is difficult to observe before us because it molds the consciousness of our own times.¹

World’s fairs are excellent vantage points from which to examine these phenomena. Indeed, nineteenth-century world’s fairs were the quintessence of modern times almost as much as were the cities that hosted them—London, Paris, and Chicago—because metropolitan centers that were truly bubbles of universal modernity arose in the Western world during this period. These cities were cosmopolitan, financial, and cultural nuclei that con-
centrated and combined both national and international trends. Powerful European and American cities offered both a culture and an order that were believed to be ecumenical and atemporal yet were in fact full of incongruities and, above all, unmanageable. Late-nineteenth-century cosmopolitan cities combined canonized fashions, habits, and aesthetic forms with the uncontrollable chaos of inequality, marginality, and practices of survival and protest adopted in desperation by large segments of their inhabitants. By contrast, world’s fairs were the controlled portrayals of these cosmopolitan cores, as much as they were the cities’ greatest spectacles.

World exhibitions were conscious universal representations of what was thought to be progress and modernity, and they were thus both the métier and the ideal rendition of the modern city. Such exhibitions aimed to be object lessons about those beliefs, and often, indeed, their vestiges became the symbols of modern cities. But a late-nineteenth-century world’s fair was also invariably a magnificent show, an “oasis of fantasy and fable at a time of crisis and impending violence.”

To investigate the nineteenth-century world’s fairs is to grasp the internal composition of the awareness of modernity. The fairs embodied and fostered primary components of nineteenth-century modern existence: the belief in positive, universal, and homogeneous truth; the presumption of freedom achieved and the inherent contradictions of this idea; the concept of ending history by recapitulating the past and controlling the future (that is, the potential for considering the present as the best of all possible times, which has already revealed the essential course of the future); and the creed of nationalism as an intrinsic part of both international cosmopolitanism and economic imperialism. These ideas guide this study, leading it both to the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

UNIVERSAL TRUTHS

In the last part of the nineteenth century, the ultimate foundations of progress were held to be science and industry. Both were paranational, natural, objective, and unstoppable forms of human production and knowledge. The world’s order and self-confidence were set accordingly. The era of progress assembled an ideal picture of itself, and this picture became the optimal model of how the world ought to be. Only modern times were capable of delimiting a comprehensive view of how all that belonged to them looked. Once this modern world picture emerged, cosmopolitanism was made possible in all spheres: science, art, costumes, and technology.

As a common experience of accelerated time and simultaneity, since its inception the modern world picture was composed of various and often contradictory versions. And yet, as a more or less harmonious abstraction, the
picture was by necessity articulated and developed independently of views and facts of the world. After all, what has been regarded as modern has never referred to the real world; it has conformed to notions about the most advanced and optimal world as made publicly intelligible by economic, political, and intellectual elites.

Nineteenth-century universal exhibitions were consciously erected to satisfy the requirements of this comprehensive picture; in turn, they reinforced the authenticity of such a picture. They were conceived to be a miniature but complete version of modern totality. And in the quest for universalism and completeness, world’s fairs reincarnated the principle that had fostered late-eighteenth-century encyclopedias: they reinforced the possibility of conceiving a general picture of the world. They epitomized what Ortega called “the disquieting birth of a new reliance based on mathematical reasoning.” They could never be more than an attempt, however, because the modern world was too multifarious and complex to be homogeneously and harmoniously represented. Therefore, the idea of modern became an unobtainable and supreme metaphor, one which nonetheless was included in each thing that was thought to be modern.

World’s fairs were thus selective versions of the picture they aimed to represent. They were moments when industry and science could exist with all of their virtues and none of their imperfections. They were natural residences of industrial innovation, as well as of scientific and commercial development. Therefore, nineteenth-century world’s fairs were indeed petite cosmos of modernity formed, observed, and copied for all modern nations—extravagant spectacles for the confirmation of universal truths.

For today’s historians, it is not clear whether the exhibits at world’s fairs aimed to confirm belief in scientific and industrial progress by making the beliefs come true or aspired to be celebrations that honored those universal truths in a quasi-religious way with countless symbolic appeals: the challenge of the weight and strength of a steel building, the numerous industrial, commercial, and social statistics, the bright reality of electric lights, and the very altitude of the Eiffel Tower.

This study examines how Mexico joined the world’s fair circuit in order to learn, imitate, and publicize its own possession of the universal truths of progress, science, and industry. It shows how the Mexican elite, in doing so, had to confront an ideal reality that was difficult to understand in its full scope and simultaneity. Yet it was easy to imitate. Consequently, Mexico had to undertake an additional selection in the already selective nature of world’s fairs, in order to make the idea of the modern world even more suitable for the Mexican elites’ own circumstances and interests. That additional selection is what came to be known as Mexican: Mexican sciences, Mexican art, Mexican nationhood. . . .
In participating in world’s fairs, however, the Mexican elites learned the universal truths in order to consolidate their national and international integrity. In fact, they mastered what was fundamental in those universal truths: form, style, and facade. This mastery was especially visible in three aspects of Mexico’s presence at late-nineteenth-century fairs: the scientific exhibits, the statistical demonstrations, and the constant use of a scientific discourse to express everything from an understanding of public administration to the effects of pulque on the Indian population; from the measurement of skulls to the calculation of the resistance of the hymens of Mexican women. These tools were used to emphasize the necessary components of a modern nation: a well-defined and well-integrated territory, a cosmopolitan culture, good sanitation conditions, and a racial homogeneity that squared with Western notions of white supremacy.

THE IDEA OF FREEDOM

World’s fairs promoted the idea of freedom as it has been understood in the political, economic, and social thought of the West since the late eighteenth century. Rousseau, for example, believed that history was the unfolding of human freedom to achieve self-consciousness in order to be even more free. In turn, belief in free economic decisions governed by invisible rules overthrew the meaning of moral economy, thus marking the beginning of neoclassical economic thought. Reason, in enlightened thought, had liberated humankind; history was only the development of reason. This modern freedom was what world’s fairs acclaimed. Universal exhibitions were neither carnivals of collective or individual passions nor mere rituals of harvest. Their festival character was, above all, the celebration of the human accomplishment of productive liberty that was epitomized in the veneration of free commerce. In the report of the 1889 Paris exposition, Alfred Picard traced the history of world’s fairs back to the proclamation of freedom of commerce and industry in 1791, when, he argued, “public administrators, learned and worried about the country’s future, understood the vices and dangers of an ominous regime which kills initiative, suffocates progress, and places national production in the most humiliating situation of inferiority.” Indeed, “the idea of trade was transformed from the relatively simple exchange of goods for profit, to a concept having metaphysical dimensions.” Freedom to profit, to purchase, to sell, to exhibit, and to advertise, it was assumed, would not only naturally develop but would also ultimately serve to equalize humankind with the immense wealth produced therefrom. World’s fairs, then, were above all expressions of belief in the civilizing capabilities of the free market and a laissez-faire economy. They strived to be the visible and tangible attestations to the modern promises of freedom and equality. Hence a description of London’s 1851 world’s fair claimed that “[a]s the wind
carries winged seeds over the earth, so commerce carries arts, and civilization, and humanity as a consequence.\textsuperscript{6}

Like the terms \textit{republic} and \textit{nation}, the word \textit{democracy} was, of course, fundamental to the concept of modern freedom. The connotation of democracy had often changed, however. At times it tended to have a social connotation (equality); at other times it favored political aspects (popular representation). Modern republican freedom—understood as the political and social rights granted by the French Revolution—was to democracy what in fact democracy was to late-nineteenth-century political regimes: a fundamental philosophical principle, \textit{not} an indispensable practice. Thus democracy, without a fixed meaning, was conceived by special, and often nondemocratic, adjectives—authoritarian, conservative, socialist, liberal, caesarean. The need for an economically or militarily strong state and the heavily nationalistic environment made democracy and its inherently ambivalent liberty dispensable though valuable components of the model modern nation. Economic and productive \textit{laissez-faire} was at the core of the late-nineteenth-century’s pride in freedom.

In the great world’s fairs of the nineteenth century, Mexico aspired to participate in the economic advantages and civilizing effects of commerce. The Porfirian elite created commercial commissions to promote Mexico’s traditional and yet-to-be-discovered \textit{raw} materials. They expected those products to give Mexico a place in the international economy.

In turn, freedom as a political virtue was understood as peace. Mexican intellectuals followed the legal and philosophical discussions of the French Third Republic and proposed constitutional limitations to a strong government. Peace, however, was Mexico’s greatest achievement and also the supreme achieved liberty that became freedom from violence and uncertainty. In Mexico, as in the French Second Empire, the term \textit{democracy} became synonymous with \textit{republic}. The concept of a Mexican republic already included as much democracy as was possible in a country that could not even attempt to hide its internal inequality and racial differences, let alone afford the luxury of effective suffrage. Therefore, the Porfírian elite decided to exhibit in universal expositions the advantages of a strong government. And Mexico’s authoritarian and enlightened government stood in good stead at world’s fairs hosted by countries like France, which, however modern, were both constantly facing the ungodnernability of democracy and maneuvering its meanings.

\section*{THE GREAT ENDS}

World’s fairs would have not been conceivable if the concept of universal progress had not offered a chance to experience contemporaneity as a sort of culminating moment. Within the sense of progressive, linear time, all present tense became unmistakably \textit{paradise}, and the various exhibited
phenomena of the modern world were perceived most of the time with admiration—but some of the time with terror or nostalgia.

Technology and progress made it possible to appreciate present time as the best of all feasible worlds, and universal expositions were the vivid confirmations of the greatness of the present tense. The understanding of the present was composed of a specific recapitulation of the past and exceptional previews of the future. In the 1900 Paris universal exposition, for instance, a pamphlet argued that “the expositions are not only days of leisure and gaiety in the midst of the toils of the people. They appear, at long intervals, as the summits from which to measure the course we have traveled. Mankind goes out from them comforted, full of courage and animated with profound faith in the future.”77 Along similar lines, a commentator on the 1904 Saint Louis world’s fair observed that “expositions accentuate the deficiencies of the past, give us a realization of our present advantages, predict the developments of the near future, and equip the arm and brain alike of the mechanic, the engineer and the philosopher for further and immediate advances into the realms of the possible.”78

Although the notion of progress had achieved visible manifestations and an extensive theoretical corpus by the 1880s, to sense that the final stage of history had been achieved was not necessarily to share in the optimistic industrial view of the world. The feeling was also expressed in what world expositions overlooked in their enthusiasm and pomposity—the sensation of decadence, a weakening of the moral and intellectual strength of the times; the sense that the “events experienced during a lifetime” could seem to be not in the present but in the past.9 In fact, for some late-nineteenth-century modernists, all that seemed familiar and secure was disappearing, and there was neither an assurance of future progress nor anything by which to teach individuals how to live in what appeared to be a weightless present. As Baudelaire said in commenting on the 1855 Paris world’s fair, “but where is, I ask you, future’s guarantee of progress? . . . Within the realm of imagination, the idea of progress . . . appears to be a gigantic absurdity, something so grotesque it reaches the horrendous.”10 Thus, in their affirmation of a Panglossian world of progress, late-nineteenth-century world’s fairs were bright lights that did not enable one to see the shadows beyond.

Hence world’s fairs encompassed and confronted two contradictory connotations of modernism. Expositions were capitals of modernism informed by industrial optimism. But they were also unintended stages on which to view the achievements of the age while deploiring the accompanying degeneration of the spirit. In this sense, world’s fairs furnished images and pretexts for quintessential modernists such as the young Eliot, whose early work, “The Man Who Was King,” was inspired by his observations of the Philippine village displayed at the 1904 Saint Louis world’s fair;11 Dostoyevsky, who was sarcastic in the face of the “halcyon days” of the 1851 Crystal Palace, which
covered everything with calculated reasoning but also (in his view) with boredom and desperation.\textsuperscript{12} that cunning observer, Henry Adams, who saw the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition and, full of amazement, said, “After this vigorous impulse, nothing remained for a historian but to ask—how long and how far?”\textsuperscript{13}

From the great openings to the colossal closings, world’s fairs epitomized a full cycle of the linear and progressive realization of time. And yet they were ephemeral, passing moments of self-congratulation and self-deceit. Each exhibition was like a succinct epilogue for history, because the life span of a fair was as evanescent as it was complete: modernity’s “eternity in an hour.” They were, as a U.S. senator noted in 1889, “the flash photograph[s] of civilization on the run.”\textsuperscript{14} Their short existence certified the infinite power of their creators: technology, industry, and capital. Therefore, on one hand, it was possible for them to become moments of reconciliation—all nations together despite past troubles and advancing increasingly paranatical interests. On the other hand, rather than mere futurist theaters, they were able to amalgamate past and present promises. They included the future, but only insofar as it was an inevitable outcome of present greatness.

Consequently, the concept of great ends constituted the historical consciousness of modern progress and the control of the discernible future. Thus the fairs were occasions for reviewing the Western past and its contrasts and for evaluating the antique and the different, by rewriting the past and by gaining and governing the exotic. In this sense the colonial exhibits in French world’s fairs were the archetypical expressions of a blend of exoticist, economic, and imperialist desires. These displays lasted until the 1940s, when colonies were neither politically nor economically profitable, as if a nation could not be modern or cosmopolitan without its beloved colonies.

Confidence in the superiority of the Western present—and thus of the inferiority of any other past, present, or future—was achieved through sciences—anthropology, scientific history, ethnology, criminology, archaeology, economics, sociology, medicine, architecture, engineering, and so forth. Furthermore, the goal of world’s fairs was to assure that only one future could be derived from their revision and reinvention of the past: that of inevitable progress.

Mexico’s presence at world’s fairs shows how Mexicans were capable of enjoying the grand finales while presenting themselves as part of them. But it also shows how Mexicans’ self-positioning in the last stage of evolutionary time made them the most fit to exercise the power they already had domestically. In fact, Mexico in nineteenth-century world’s fairs shared Europe’s orientalist and exoticist concerns and in turn undertook an “autoethnography.” It fed the hunger of these exhibitions for exotic objects and people. Mexico thus offered indigenous food and drink, dresses, and \textit{tipos populares} (popular characters) at the fairs; in the same way, it exhibited the head of
the Indian Juan Antonio in Paris 1889 and Indian people in the so-called Street of Mexico exhibited at the 1901 Buffalo world's fair. In turn, what the fairs epitomized in their rewriting of the past and conquest of the exotic, the Porfirian elite did with their own country's history and reality.

In sum, "the normal organization of humanity" that world's fairs aimed to enact achieved its ephemeral grand finales in the nineteenth century when they were, as the great French critic of modern bourgeois life, Flaubert, described them, "sujet de délire du XIXe siècle" (a cause of the delirium of the nineteenth century). Neither before nor since has the self-consciousness of an era obtained such a visible, comprehensive, and astonishing materialization.

NATIONALISM

World's fairs emerged out of—and embodied—nationalistic interests in an international cosmopolitanism. For the nation-empires of the late nineteenth century, universal exhibitions were both settings for the display of power and expansionist interests and part of the paraphernalia of presumed racial and cultural superiority. Impressive military exhibits thus contrasted with the spectacles of flags, national anthems, and national culinary and literary traditions. In fact, nineteenth-century fairs were often the zenith of particular patriotic calendars.

For impoverished nations, in contrast, world's fairs were opportunities for being part, albeit briefly, of the cosmopolitan concert of nations, to be one with the modern community of values, beliefs, and concerns. Simultaneously, world's fairs were showcases for the exhibition of whatever was demanded by the international market of commodities and ideas, a stage on which poor nations could exhibit everything from their raw materials to their native peoples and customs.

As nationalistic commemorative events, world's fairs included all modern forms of expression—from art to science, from commercial propaganda to statistics, from landscape canvases to architectural structures. In this way, through universal exhibitions and their assembled belief in universal truths, freedom, and ideas of great ends, nations were imbued simultaneously with a recognizable and acceptable national uniqueness and an approved cosmopolitanism and modernity.

But world's fairs were also sites for the encounter of antagonistic views. Nationalistic, cultural, and racial prejudices battled in the images, symbols, and commentaries of visitors to world's fairs. For instance, remarking on the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exhibition, the American artist W. Hamilton Gibson claimed that the exposition was the realization of the "Heavenly City," or the "New Jerusalem"—and to him its creators were almost gods. At the same exposition, the Franco-Argentine historian Paul Groussac saw in
Chicago a mammothlike expression of American primitivism, a display of a “young nation, newly arrived at the historical scene,” a sad effort of a naive people. “Pobre ¡White City!” he concluded.¹⁹

Late-nineteenth-century world’s fairs were thus the most comprehensive and outrageous attempts to portray in miniature a modern picture of the world. Indeed, because the rise of modern industrial societies made possible both the universal language of progress and the world extension of fairs, to analyze fairs is both to make a checklist of modernity’s components and to dissect the craftiness of nationalism as a global phenomenon.

World’s fairs, albeit scientifically managed, contained the contradictions inherent in the very attempt to reproduce the modern world in miniature. As a picture of the modern world itself, a world exposition was the simulacrum of something that never had a concrete existence. Nevertheless, the modernity of the times resided in the conscious endeavor to isolate a coherent, optimistic, and promising representation of the world. Ironies and conflicts were inevitable in such an attempt.

For instance, cultural, economic, and political nationalism was at odds with both cultural and political cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism was a model of modernity that simultaneously required the homogenization of all human characteristics and desires and recognized and appreciated the exotic and bizarre. That was an insurmountable existential irony: an organized model of the world, and a fascination with what was not part of the model but which ought to be part of the picture of the modern world. In addition, the very national need to be cosmopolitan seemed to be in conflict with the requirement of being culturally and racially unique and, presumably, superior.

Furthermore, whereas world’s fairs did not reflect the contradictions of the modern world, they displayed so-called progress in the well-being of the masses, as if that progress came solely from technological advancement and philanthropy and was not prompted by fear of the growing discontent of peasants and workers. However, nineteenth-century world’s exhibitions gradually started to display new concerns that had to do with the growing problems of modern times. For example, by 1900 social economy exhibitions and women’s pavilions were part of the ideal conception of the world.

What was more ironic about the values epitomized by world expositions was their momentariness. For the astute observer, the short life of world’s fairs was less a testimony to technological and industrial improvement than a caution about the universality and reliability of the pledges symbolized by world’s fairs, a warning that all good things could not last forever. Implicit doubts abounded. Why were not modern times a perennial fair of progress?

Both questions inquire into the sincerity of what world’s fairs exhibited
and what they ignored. Both questions certainly address the same predicament, namely, the dichotomy between the real—that mutating and historically created reality we strive to grasp—and the fictional—that imagined actuality we assign to human beings in history. World’s fairs are valuable for historians not to establish the falsity of modern capitalist ideologies but to situate the parameters and changing characteristics of the disparity between a presumed reality and its perception both by contemporaries and by historians. Therein, I believe, lies a clue for understanding the history of modernity as more than a purely economic phenomenon.

By the 1930s the Western world as conceived and defined during the nineteenth century seemed to be undergoing serious political, social, and cultural transformation. The Baudelairean critics of modern times were becoming the prophets of modernist disenchanted thought. Around 1910, it was asserted, even human character changed radically. That assertion was made not by a Mexican revolutionary in reference to the Mexican Revolution but by Virginia Woolf, commenting on the aesthetic, cultural, and social transformation that Europe underwent between 1910 and 1914.20 The nineteenth century finally concluded in 1914, historian Eric Hobsbawm has argued.21 Consequently, the monumental nineteenth-century world’s fairs became unrepeatable. The picture of the modern world changed, and its comprehensive pocket portraits, the world’s fairs, acquired a new nature.

The survival of world’s fairs throughout the twentieth century illustrates how durable belief in progress has been. However, whereas late-nineteenth-century expositions (from the 1860s to the 1910s) were the paradise of modern optimism, world’s fairs during the 1920s and 1930s became the epitome of modernist ambivalence. Ironically enough, it was progress itself and its avatars that made obsolete expositions like those that created the Crystal Palace, the Eiffel Tower, or the White City. Modernity is ungrateful: it devours its own portraits, thus making its identity even more ambiguous. This is so because, first, the universal expositions, as miniature ideals of the virtues of progress, had to confront the growing intellectual and artistic criticism of progress in the first decade of the twentieth century. World’s fairs lost their technical optimism and innocence. In turn, the philanthropic, Saint-Simonian type of optimism that gave French fairs their concern with social economy in the nineteenth century was dimmed by growing socialist and anarchist discontent. Second, industrial and technological progress itself made it impossible to comprise all human production in a single space-time location. It was not only difficult but useless to try to encompass and classify the entire production of modern industry, agriculture, mining, and sciences. Instead, countless specialized fairs began to take place all over the world: displays of machinery, art, agricultural products, and so forth. Finally, although the nationalist and imperialist aspects that propelled international
expositions in the last part of the nineteenth century did not significantly
decrease during the first decades of the twentieth century, the more or less
stable crystallization of European national identities transformed the gen-
eral symbolic displays. Museums, scientific exhibits, sporting events, and, es-
pecially, the emergence of radical nationalism and massively destructive wars
fulfilled the symbolic functions that had been entrusted to fairs. Ironically
enough, the nationalistic ideologies that had emerged during the second
half of the nineteenth century radicalized in the 1910s and 1920s, thus mak-
ing partially obsolete the nationalistic uses of world’s fairs.

Moreover, by the beginning of the twentieth century modern capitalism
had produced what thereafter would become the mainstays of world’s fairs:
great corporations, tourism, and mass consumption with its inherent pro-
paganda. Throughout nearly a century of world expositions, the liberty they
epitomized gradually conquered unimaginable economic and ideological
frontiers. International corporations started to emerge. With them came so-
phisticated advertisements disseminated by the latest technology and a mas-
sive appropriation of popular taste and consciousness.

Still, today’s or tomorrow’s universal exhibitions will follow their nine-
teenth-century counterparts because, as William McKinley, the U.S. presi-
dent who was assassinated during the 1901 Buffalo fair, noted, “Expositions
are the time-keepers of progress.” In the late twentieth century, world ex-
hibitions seek to continue this role because the belief in universal truths, in
productive freedom, in progress, and in national symbols, however dispersed
and weak, remains alive. Yet the modern world picture has suffered numer-
ous cracks. What would the paradise of modernity look like if we were to de-
lineate it in these overwhelmingly disenchanted times? The great future
imagined by past visionaries is not in the present but in the past, in the great
late-nineteenth-century universal expositions. They were the “futures of the
past,” and today, because of their very attempt at totality and progressivism,
they appear to be part of modern capitalism’s nostalgia for a golden age. Late-
twentieth-century world’s fairs are themselves less an endeavor to continue
to portray the modern world than an effort to duplicate previous attempts:
the nineteenth-century universal expositions that have become modernity’s
archetype.

In effect, Disneyland has become the model of twentieth-century world’s
fairs, a “degenerated utopia” that was a particular ideology materialized in
the form of a myth. Assuch, late-twentieth-century world’s fairs reflect the
era’s supports (international capital and mass consumption) and enduring
obsession (nostalgic faith in progress). They are as modern as the Quixote
who finally realized he was insane; but they are Quixotic efforts to continue
the delirium, as if Alonso Quijano would decide, once aware of his madness,
to play again the role of Knight for the sole sake of nostalgia. Nonetheless,
because of their extremely futurist emphasis—which always becomes a record of past promised futures—the fairs are the headquarters of the twentieth century: echoes of Disneyland or Hollywood.

To examine the role of powerless and peripheral nations such as Mexico in the fairs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is to write the history of what modernity and progress have meant for them: a continual, tiresome, expensive, hopeless, and yet unavoidable attempt. World exhibitions were, in the words of Mexican Minister Manuel Fernández Leal, the opportunity for Mexico to become a “part of the admirable group of countries that, sharing ideals, ambitions, and trends, advance together, led by progress.”

In 1889, for instance, Mexico was in Paris with the expressed goal of learning from and duplicating the French example. This was so because Paris was indeed the “capital of the nineteenth century.” Despite France’s economic weakness vis-à-vis England, by the late nineteenth century French culture was believed to be the natural and universal conclusion of the evolution of modern Western thought. This belief was given substance by the predominance of French culture throughout the Western world and by France’s notorious patriotism based on the idea of France as the center of the universe. Jules de Michelet, one of the great creators of the epic of universal France, modestly but confidently argued that “France imports and exports new ideas enthusiastically and builds on them with a wonderful strength. It is the legislating country of modern times, just as Rome was for antiquity.”

Indeed, for Mexico, Paris was the arbiter of progress, as it was for all of the nineteenth century Western world. Elisée Reclus, the insightful French geographer, clearly saw this at the beginning of the twentieth century: “Paris is the city Mexicans consider the center of the world. . . . It is to Paris that they turn to find out what is good or bad, to ask about science, art, poetry, novel ideas or the futility of fashion, the nonsense of false spirits, the perversity of vice.” Accordingly, it is only natural to take as my focus of analysis a Parisian fair. Ironically, the ambitions of Mexico and Paris were the same—the attempt at modernity proved to be what modernity consisted of. The supreme and complete modernity that Mexicans aimed to reach had never existed. Mexico began its entrance into the modern world during the late nineteenth century, and thereafter its development and problems would fundamentally be those of the modern world. To learn the cultural or intellectual lessons of the late-nineteenth-century modern world was relatively easy, because, after all, cosmopolitanism was nothing more than a set of parochial figures made universal. What was difficult was to be powerful, because power was, and is, a matter of competition, exploitation, and comparative advantage. There was no fixed paradise of modernity, and it was impossible for either Mexico or Paris to stop the transformation, invention, and re-creation of traditions.