

CHAPTER 1

Shaping the Exposition

International expositions illustrate a phase of history, express the soul of a generation, reveal its qualities or its weaknesses, and, for the informed observer, reveal the coming destiny of societies and races. . . . 1937, in its turn, will appear to our descendants as the symbol of our moving and tormented era.¹

Throughout its years of planning and preparation between 1932 and 1937, the 1937 World's Fair embodied the conflicts, contradictions, and ideological tensions of the "moving and tormented" era it symbolized. The years leading up to the fair's inauguration in May 1937 corresponded to a period of mounting despair and divisiveness in France, forcing successive governments to redefine their goals and objectives with regard to the exposition.² Economic depression, political destabilization, and the erosion of social consensus contributed to a breakdown of the "Republican synthesis" in France. Criticism of the parliamentary regime, seemingly incapable of responding to the economic crisis, became widespread, and ministerial instability reached disastrous levels, peaking between December 1932 and February 1934, when five cabinets lasted an average of less than twelve weeks each. Right-wing leagues such as the Croix de feu and the Jeunesses patriotes brought their disputatious politics into the streets, leading leftists to fear that fascism was taking hold in France. In response, the Socialists and Communists, joined by the centrist Radicals in June 1935, formed a united leftist front and organized their own demonstrations to counter those of the Right. One French scholar counted "1,063 riotous assemblies, processions or demonstrations"—more than one a day—between February 1934 and May 1936, the month of the Popular Front victory.³ The agitation during this "time of hatred" fueled class antagonisms and created a climate of moral and psychological civil war.

These internal developments occurred within an increasingly volatile international context. Fascism and communism emerged as the "unavoidable

ideologies" of the 1930s in Europe, attracting fervent supporters within France as well. Even French men and women who did not adhere to either ideology became acutely aware of the need for economic and political reform in France; some imbued with the "spirit of the 1930s" sought a "third way" to bring modern society out of its crisis. The struggling Third Republic urgently needed to redefine its national vision, both to counteract these competing ideologies and to rally French consensus in the face of the mounting military threat across the Rhine.

Planned against this backdrop of ideological warfare in Europe, and as real battle was launched by Italy against Ethiopia in 1935, and by Franco against the Spanish Republic in 1936, while Hitler rearmed Germany for the war he would soon wage, the 1937 Exposition was inevitably transformed into a propaganda battleground, and therefore also an *affaire d'Etat*. The French fair planners, as well as the government officials who became gradually more involved as plans progressed, felt compelled to reshape the French exhibits to reinvigorate a flagging national pride and avoid being upstaged by visiting countries. To this aim, the fair was expanded considerably, and entire new sections were added in haste. However, the quest for a strong and cohesive national display was thwarted to some extent by domestic politics, which led to an increasing politicization of the fair and to a fracturing of the national image it projected. In particular, the Popular Front introduced a number of changes in the final months before the inauguration, leading many critics to denounce the event as the "Popular Front's Expo."

Thus, the exposition's ultimate configuration was the cumulative result of changes, additions, and reorientations negotiated by the planning commission, a changing cast of political characters, and various interested parties involved in the planning process. The fair's regional, rural, and folklore exhibits resulted, like the other displays, from an "eternally fluctuating" planning process that turned the exposition into an "ongoing creation." Taken collectively, the fair exhibits formed a composite self-portrait created by French leaders who were struggling to redefine their country's strengths and ambitions, while they also debated whether and how to negotiate a fuller entry into modernity.

Imagining the Fair: Origins

The 1937 Exposition must not be approached as a singular, ready-made event. It emerged and evolved as a collective endeavor, imagined at first, only later taking shape as an eclectic collection of palaces and attractions erected temporarily in the center of Paris. During its conceptual phase, politicians, businessmen, architects, artists, and social visionaries embraced different notions

of what the fair might be or accomplish. Some hoped it would encourage international understanding and peace, others thought it might promote social reform, and still others had more pragmatic goals of boosting the economy, providing employment for artists and artisans, or bringing tourists back to Paris. These competing aims and visions, and the process by which they were negotiated during the years leading up to the inauguration, are vital to an understanding of the fair and of the social forces that shaped it.

The earliest ideas for the 1937 Exposition were articulated in three separate parliamentary proposals presented between 1929 and 1932, which would be combined into one program in late 1932. The first proposal was submitted in December 1929 by Julien Durand, a Radical deputy from the Doubs region, and signed by a handful of Socialists and Radical-Socialists. Durand envisioned a decorative arts exposition modeled on the successful 1925 Exposition des arts décoratifs et industriels which, he argued, had improved the nation's balance of trade, widened the influence of French "taste," and inspired better cooperation between artists and industrialists.⁴

Three years later, two other proposals were submitted: one for an "international exposition of civilization" and another for an "exposition on workers' and peasants' lives." Both of these projects echoed the growing malaise of the early 1930s, when France began to suffer the effects of the depression. The themes of the two 1932 fair proposals suggest that concern over the perceived breakdown of the international economic and social order had begun to eclipse the aesthetic questions addressed in Durand's 1929 proposal. The project presented in January 1932 by Republican-Socialist Senator Tournan, and signed by more than one hundred senators from diverse parties, primarily of the Left and Center, called for an "international exposition of civilization" that would highlight international achievements in science, arts and letters, and industry, and promote the peace-seeking goals of the League of Nations.⁵ Tournan hoped it would elevate France to a position of moral leadership during "this troubled period when an unprecedented economic crisis is afflicting the entire world, and bellicose passions, heightened by the depression, appear to be overcoming so many countries, pushing humanity towards formidable conflicts."⁶

Following the victory of the Left's "second cartel" in the parliamentary elections of May 1932, Socialist Deputy Eugene Fiancette presented yet another project, heavily supported by fellow Socialists, for an "exposition on workers' and peasants' lives." Fiancette's proposal argued that the depression, because it was "general, planetary, and universal" and affected "all areas of human activity," had proven the economic interdependence of modern societies, and confirmed that questions relative to work and workers "extend from one profession to another, from one region to another, from one nation to another, and should be considered as a whole."⁷ No doubt the Socialists,

seeking to widen their rural constituency, hoped by representing workers and peasants together in a single exhibit to emphasize their common needs and interests. "It seemed to me a good idea," Fiancette asserted, "to associate [in the title] agricultural workers, so often isolated, with industrial workers, who are so much better organized. Associating them in principle affirms, between these two kinds of workers, a link of moral solidarity."⁸

The three proposals presented by Durand, Tournan, and Fiancette were combined into one project in October 1932, and endorsed by Radical Premier Edouard Herriot. In January 1933, under a different Radical cabinet (headed by Edouard Daladier), the government officially decreed its intention to host an international exposition which would include the three themes of decorative and industrial arts, workers' and peasants' lives, and "intellectual cooperation." Aimé Berthod, a Radical deputy and philosopher by training, was named as general commissioner. Among his five designated assistants was Jean Locquin, a Socialist former deputy who would later return as Léon Blum's personal delegate to the fair.

Cancellation and Revival

Berthod's work, however, was soon cut short. On January 27, 1934, he announced without warning that "the 1937 Exposition in the heart of Paris will not take place."⁹ The news outraged members of parliament and city officials alike, who had apparently not been consulted or forewarned about this change of events. The principal reason for the cancellation was presumably financial: in a time of depression and of deflationary economic policy, the central government and city of Paris could hardly justify such an expensive venture. Indeed, Berthod maintained that neither the state nor the municipality had been willing to make "the necessary financial commitments."¹⁰ But the heated political climate—and particularly the Stavisky Affair—also undoubtedly contributed to the decision to cancel the exposition.

In December 1933, court proceedings had begun against Serge Alexandre Stavisky, a gambler, police spy, and swindler—and a foreign-born Jew to boot, inculcating him further in the eyes of right-wing xenophobes—for his most recent scam involving the sale of fraudulent bonds. Stavisky, whose influential friends reputedly included Premier Chautemps, quickly became a symbol of parliamentary corruption and tainted the Radical party in particular, since it had received contributions from the crook and several of its well-placed members had intervened to protect him from the authorities. Stavisky's reported suicide on January 8 was seen widely as a cover-up orchestrated by the police to prevent him from making embarrassing revelations. The Stavisky Affair inflamed

already existing antiparliamentary sentiments and encouraged rightist protests against the "corrupt" Republic. These would culminate in the infamous demonstration of February 6th, launched by the Union nationale des combattants (a veterans' association), and right-wing leagues such as the Croix de feu, which mobilized tens of thousands of demonstrators and proved the scope and depth of the dissatisfaction with French political leaders and parliamentary institutions. Premier Chautemps, exhausted by the growing furor over the Affair, faced with yet another scandal involving his minister of justice, and recognizing that the political climate and economic conditions in France were unfavorable for hosting an international exposition, allowed the untimely event to be aborted just as he resigned from office.

If the February 6 crisis did not bring about the overthrow of the Republic, it was successful in forcing Daladier's cabinet—formed just a few days earlier after Chautemps resigned—to step down. President Lebrun then turned to the conservative ("moderate republican"), aging former president, Gaston Doumergue, to form a coalition cabinet "of respite, appeasement and justice" leaning clearly to the Right, even though Radical ministers were retained to ensure majority approval.¹¹ No sooner had he taken office than Doumergue was flooded with appeals from parliament and the Paris Municipal Council, and from the artistic and business communities, to reinstate plans for the moribund exposition. In response to these lobbying efforts, he decided to resuscitate it, claiming at the time that it would help in "reducing unemployment in the Parisian region and alleviating the crisis in our art industries."¹² Doumergue would later justify this decision by saying he had wanted to prove, "at a time when people spoke only of crisis, and when some people, inside and outside France, were beginning to doubt the importance of our country's resources and its abilities, that we were capable of assuming the risks of a great and difficult undertaking and of ensuring its success."¹³

However, Doumergue's conservative government jettisoned the three-part program adopted in 1932, dropping the sections on "workers and peasants" and "intellectual cooperation" which had been framed and endorsed by parties on the Left, and retaining only the theme of decorative and industrial arts. Doumergue also intended to restrict the central government from participating in an event to be financed and organized by the city of Paris and by artistic, industrial, and commercial interests.¹⁴ In keeping with the anti-parliamentary mood of the time, Doumergue dismissed Berthod—whom he retained, however, as his minister of national education—as well as Locquin and the other assistant commissioners, replacing them with non-politicians.¹⁵ Doumergue appointed his friend Edmond Labbé, a recently retired high civil servant, as the exposition's new general commissioner. Labbé, the son of modest Parisian artisans, had begun his career as a school teacher and moved up the

ranks in the Ministry of Education to become general director of technical education after the war.¹⁶ Another retired civil servant, Paul Léon, who was an architectural historian and professor at the Collège de France and had worked in the Ministry of Education and the Beaux-Arts, became Labbé's assistant. François Latour, a right-wing member of the Paris Municipal Council, would be designated as second assistant commissioner in March 1935.

Labbé assumed his task with relatively limited means: twenty-seven hectares (about sixty-five acres) and a budget of 300 million francs, of which 285 million were to be provided by the city of Paris. Because this was to be a specialized exposition and not a "general" one, according to guidelines recently established by the Bureau international des expositions, the program was supposed to adhere to a limited theme.¹⁷ Doumergue's government had determined that it would focus generally on the applied arts, but gave Labbé "the greatest latitude" to outline a fair program "within the general framework traced out for him."¹⁸

The composition of the fair's central planning committee provides a measure of the relative influence exercised by different interest groups in the initial planning stages. Alongside members of parliament and of the Paris Municipal Council, artists (primarily in the decorative arts) and industrialists were clearly the best represented.¹⁹ Their presence initially ensured that the fair program laid out in November 1934 focused on art and industry.²⁰ The "International Exposition of Arts and Techniques in Modern Life" was supposed to meet the following relatively modest agenda:

The exposition will bring together the original creations of artisans, artists, and industrialists. . . . It will endeavor to show that attention paid to art in the details of everyday life can make one's existence more pleasant, regardless of one's social condition. . . . The exposition will include presentations relating to the art of living, gardening, interior design, furniture, theater, cinema, radio, and publicity.²¹

In his earliest vision of the exposition, Labbé favored two of the themes explored in this book: regionalism and artisans. He intended to give the French regions "a place of honor" in a regional center which would represent the "infinitely diverse spectacle of a France at work, a France which does not want to follow the fashion of Paris and where every region has a soul."²² Devoted in his earlier professional career to promoting the industrial arts, Labbé also adopted a pro-artisan discourse in speaking of this fair he hoped would "highlight the work of man and not that of the machine."²³ This discourse resonated strongly with the ideology of the Union corporative de l'art français, the Coopération des métiers d'art, and similar quasi-corporatist

organizations defending French artists and artisans in the 1930s, which were influential on the fair's planning commission.

The Fair Expands: National Pride, Propaganda, and State Sponsorship

Thus, Doumergue's government and the fair commissioners it appointed in 1934 did not expect the exposition to embody grandiose ideas or address explicitly social issues, even if Labbé hoped it would lessen the "catastrophic outlook of the masses," and help people "forget all the present difficulties."²⁴ Instead, the planners desired to stimulate the depressed economy, reduce unemployment, attract tourists, and showcase "French quality." The government's financial role was minimized, and its ministries were not to be directly involved in planning the exhibits. However, in the months ahead, an unexpected number of French exhibitors and foreign countries (forty-four in all) accepted invitations to participate, often requesting vast lots for their pavilions (Germany and the Soviet Union each asked for some 3000 square meters). Moreover, if proponents of the exposition in France had argued that it would demonstrate French superiority in industry and the arts, they neglected to consider that, in the context of the warfare of ideologies raging in the 1930s, invited nations would also view the fair as a showcase for propaganda. Moreover, they were able to use French funds for this purpose since France, as host country, was obliged to cover a large portion of the construction costs for guest countries.²⁵

French fair organizers soon began to fret about being upstaged in their own exposition, stating, "It would be intolerable for our participation to be manifestly inferior to that of the foreign delegations. They are making extremely serious efforts and it is indispensable that we do so as well."²⁶ Thus, in order to attract foreign participants and to ensure that the French pavilions be "worthy of France and of Paris," the fair planners repeatedly expanded the fairgrounds and budget, and the enterprise began to grow almost uncontrollably beyond their original intentions. The master plan would be redrawn more than twenty times to accommodate foreign pavilions as well as the growing ranks of French exhibitors. By the time of the inauguration, the total area of the fairgrounds (including three annexes) would quadruple to about 250 acres (see fig. 1.1).

These expansions, along with inflation under the Popular Front, required huge increases in the fair budget. From an initial estimate of 300 million francs, expenditures escalated to nearly 900 million francs by the end of 1936. By 1939, once demolition costs and other bills were settled, total costs reached

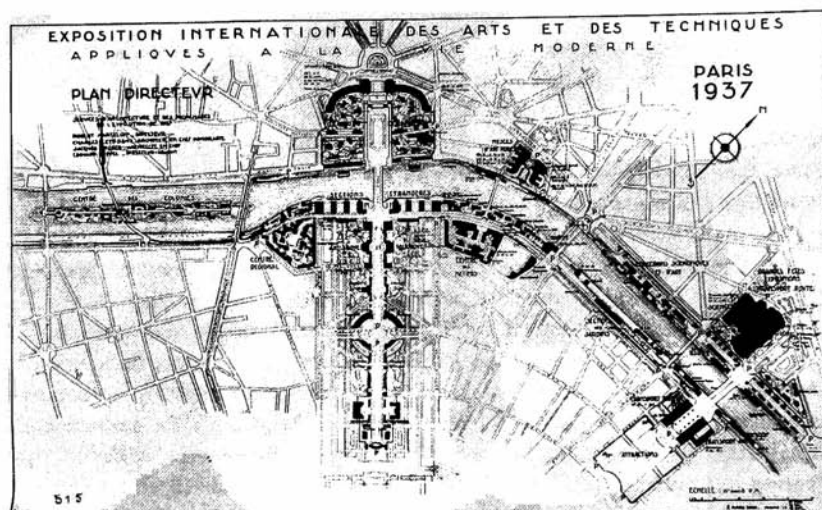


Fig. 1.1. Final layout of main fairgrounds. Centre historique des Archives Nationales (F12 12144), Paris

nearly 1.5 billion francs.²⁷ Revenues amounted to only 168 million francs, leaving an overall deficit of 1,300 million francs.²⁸ Although the original budget had placed the major financial burden on the city of Paris, subsequent increases were assumed primarily by the state. Despite severe budgetary constraints due to the depression, the parliament begrudgingly approved these increases, conceding:

We know that other countries have been working for more than two years to turn the exposition to their own advantage. It would be regrettable if our expenditures . . . were to have such a result. We want France to maintain all her prestige on this occasion. We want this exposition to be such that our country gets the greatest benefit from this huge economic effort.²⁹

As French statesmen and fair officials became more aware of how well certain neighboring countries were mastering the art of "propaganda," they also took note of French shortcomings in that area. Fascist regimes in Germany and Italy and the communist Soviet Union had devoted considerable energy and resources to promoting their political ideologies abroad, as well as cultivating positive national images aimed at attracting tourists and clients for their countries' products.³⁰ Propaganda ministries masterfully exploited the modern media

through radio programs and films such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* to disseminate highly orchestrated and estheticized nationalist images, raising propaganda to the level of a science. (Though banned in Britain, the United States and Canada, Riefenstahl's film played in Paris in the 1937 Exposition's German pavilion and received a "special mention" from Labbé.³¹) By comparison, France appeared sadly deficient in its attempts to sell "la Firme France." Earlier appeals in French parliament to promote peace, prosperity, and international understanding through the exposition soon gave way to strident calls for better French "propaganda." The *rapporteur* of the Chamber of Deputies' Finance Commission insisted that French financial efforts were indispensable "if we want France, through its own propaganda, to be capable of responding to the propaganda efforts that other nations will certainly make in connection with the exposition."³² One journalist noted, "It's still true today to say that we do not know how to produce propaganda, and if we are so often misunderstood abroad, it is almost always our fault."³³

As these quotes suggest, "propaganda" was a broader and less pejorative term in the 1930s than it is today. Although it referred in some instances to the propagation of a particular ideology or nationalist program, it could also designate the use of techniques—often borrowed from modern advertising—to promote a product or event such as a world's fair. Today such efforts might be categorized as publicity, promotion, or perhaps public relations. The 1937 discourse on propaganda suggests that world affairs forced French authorities to reconsider how "propaganda" might better serve the nation as a whole, both to promote its political and economic interests and to create a generally favorable feeling toward France. The fair's chief of propaganda, Marcel Pays, confidentially reported that the French government urgently needed to improve its propaganda, given the current state of international affairs, "when newspapers are controlled by the government in most countries, when the importing of goods and the exporting of capital are regulated and subjected to quotas, when economic crises and currency devaluations have reduced people's purchasing power . . . when international [economic] competition is made unfair through the use of dumping, and when frontiers are open to foreign tourists but closed to nationals who want to travel abroad."³⁴

As the 1937 Exposition approached, then, French planners intensified their propaganda campaign, allocated additional money for this purpose (and budgeted even more under the Popular Front), and formed committees abroad to generate enthusiasm about the fair and about France as a producer of luxury goods and as a mecca for tourists. The Paris Municipal Council hoped the fair would initiate a "renewal of tourism to Paris" that would outlast the six-month event.³⁵ However, the Parisian hotel and restaurant industries resolutely refused all requests by fair administrators to offer reductions, package deals, or other

special promotions in connection with the exposition: they had not yet accepted the idea that their individual and corporate interests could be better served by working together to promote the national tourist industry of "la Firme France."

But the fair's Propaganda Office (aided by the Office of Tourism and Transportation) was successful in giving the 1937 Exposition even more visibility than its predecessors. It produced newsreels, disseminated thousands of press releases and photographs, and seduced potential visitors with the most modern advertising gimmicks: posters and elaborate store window displays, giveaway expo calendars, cigarette cases and pens, and skywriters hired to spread word of the Parisian gala in American skies. Extensive coverage in the local, national, and international press, special issues devoted to the exposition, like those published by the popular magazine *L'Illustration*, post cards, stamps, and a variety of souvenirs ensured that images of the exposition—and the good will these were intended to generate toward France—would reach a broad international public, impressing even those who could not attend. In the end, the number of visitors to the fair did not measure up to expectations—31.5 million entries (the 1900 Exposition had attracted more than fifty million), with an estimated 1.2 million visitors coming from French colonies or foreign countries, particularly North Africa, Great Britain, Belgium, and Germany.³⁶ Nonetheless, tourism did rise noticeably in 1937, and foreign and provincial fair visitors ventured into Parisian restaurants and shops, visited theaters and museums (doubling museum revenues in 1937), and brought business to French hotels, railways, and post offices.

The fair's promotional efforts coincided with other governmental efforts to strengthen France's image and bolster its tourist trade, which had fallen off by seventy-five percent between 1928 and 1935.³⁷ Labbé argued for the need to combat France's reputation as "the most inhospitable and costly country for foreign tourists."³⁸ Many voices called for better organization and cooperation within the national tourist industry. In 1936, the government reorganized its tourism efforts and created a General Tourism Commission and a National Center for the Expansion of Tourism, Hydrotherapy and Climate Cures. In 1937, the fair's Tourism Pavilion informed millions of visitors about attractions and accommodations throughout the country. Private entrepreneurs also took initiatives to improve the tourist trade and considered launching a "welcome crusade" consisting of "a general propaganda campaign . . . to encourage French politeness, cleanliness, good humor, and hospitality."³⁹ This crusade aimed to sensitize the French to their bad reputation as hosts: "For many travelers, the 'average' French person, compared to others, is neither very hospitable, nor particularly courteous, nor especially elegant or clean!"⁴⁰ The same theme would be taken up by the French tourism commissioner, who insisted that

tourism could be revitalized "if we have a good attitude and show courtesy, calmness, and perfect behavior on an individual and collective basis" toward foreign guests.⁴¹

The desire to generate an appealing national image was driven largely by economic imperative. As Labbé reminded his fellow Frenchmen, "Patriotism is part of our agenda. Don't forget economic patriotism."⁴² In response to the economic depression, many countries had begun to restrict monetary exchange beyond their national borders. French fair organizers viewed tourism and exports as means to circumvent these policies and attract foreign currencies. As François Latour, the assistant fair commissioner, wrote to the French president:

Above all, it was important to bring the clientele back to the French tourist trade. . . . It was the only way to attract into France the carriers of the most valued foreign currencies which, alone, ensure our industries and luxury products the "invisible exports" that constitute an indispensable element of our national prosperity.⁴³

In his confidential 1935 report, Marcel Pays stressed that the objective of the fair's propaganda must be to "conquer foreign elites, who determine the evolution of favorable or unfavorable public opinion about our country and, in particular, to conquer feminine elites, who will decide in the end the future of our luxury industries, and therefore the fate of our national prosperity."⁴⁴ This targeting of upper-class female consumers as trend-setters shows that French fair officials continued to link the international success of French luxury goods to the refined tastes of upper-class women, as they had since the earliest fairs of the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁵

Government-imposed currency restrictions became a serious concern for the fair's Propaganda Office. To attract foreign visitors who could become "clients of our firms and propagandists for the 'French' label,"⁴⁶ the French government eventually intervened to negotiate a series of bilateral agreements with fifteen different countries, in some cases accepting a measured increase in import quotas for goods originating from those countries in exchange for loosened restrictions on the amounts of money their citizens could bring with them into France.⁴⁷

Thus, on the one hand, concern for expanding trade and tourism compelled the organizers to aggressively publicize the fair, while on the other hand, an effort to compete with other countries forced them to reconsider their agenda and undertake more ambitious plans to promote French interests. In particular, since other countries "had no intention of ignoring social issues,"⁴⁸ the fair commission added six new sections devoted to "social questions" between mid-1935 and early 1936: "Women, Children and Families," "Cooperation,"

"Solidarity," "Security," "Youth Projects" and "Hygiene."⁴⁹ The rhetoric used to describe these new additions suggests that they were intended to defend France's record in comparison with the reigning regimes in Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union, whose official discourse gave social issues a prominent place.⁵⁰

Members of the French fair commission found themselves competing with fascist and communist regimes to prove their government's concern for the health and well-being of its citizens, at a time when French pronatalists and population experts were debating about their country's declining birth rate (*dénatalité*) and aging population, problems which were sometimes linked to criticisms concerning the moral and physical "degeneration" of the French "race."⁵¹ The fair's eugenics exhibit, for example, showed visitors "scientifically, all that has been done or proposed for the improvement of the race."⁵² More than 350 deputies signed a proposal in February 1937 for a "triumphal gathering of athletic youth" at the exposition, intended to give sports a boost in France; their proposal expressed concern that "most European countries are ahead of us" in organizing physical education and sports for their nation's youth, and that Germany in particular had "improved the modelling of its race."⁵³ In France, by contrast, the parliamentary proposal stated that "no man of experience can *not* be alarmed by the physical deficiencies of our generations since the war."⁵⁴ Worried that their country had not strived hard enough to cultivate its own "youth mystique," French politicians of different political persuasions advocated for greater French efforts in this area. Ultimately, it was Léo Lagrange, the Popular Front undersecretary of state for sports and leisure, who organized a series of large-scale sports events to coincide with the exposition.⁵⁵

Thus, whereas Doumergue had hoped in 1934 to exclude exhibits based on social themes rather than on aesthetic, technical, or commercial ones, subsequent center-Right, then center-Left, governments felt compelled to include and promote "social questions."⁵⁶ The state also began to assume a greater portion of the financial burden for the exposition, and Albert Sarraut's center-Left government used this increased financial role to justify the direct involvement of its ministries. In March 1936, Premier Sarraut proposed that the state allocate funds so that certain public services could participate in the fair.⁵⁷ A subsequent report suggested that this money be used to allow the Ministries of Education, Public Health, Labor, Agriculture, Public Works, Aeronautics, the Interior and Foreign Affairs, and the Post Office to mount exhibits for the fair.⁵⁸ But it was Blum's cabinet which would ultimately determine exactly how these new funds were to be distributed.

Even before the Popular Front came to power, the fair had become a symbolic outlet for competing national economies and ideologies, and therefore necessarily an *affaire d'Etat*, although not yet an "*affaire de parti*" within France. The political leadership had come to realize that the French pavilions

would be interpreted as an expression of French national identity, as well as publicity for "the French label." Just as the foreign delegations sought to use the fair for self-promotion, so French fair organizers and, increasingly, French statesmen, deemed it essential to project a positive image of France, both to attract and impress foreign visitors and to raise French morale. These goals necessarily affected the shaping of the various French exhibits, including the Rural Center, Regional Center, and folklore displays studied in later chapters.

The Popular Front's Expo

When the Popular Front came to power in June 1936, less than a year before the fair was to open, construction on the site had barely begun. Although workers had started building the Palais de Chaillot and twin Musées d'Art Moderne, most of the other structures still existed only on blueprint. Blum briefly considered delaying the exposition's opening, but resolved to proceed as planned for May 1937. In his introduction to the official fair guide, Blum expressed his hope that the exposition would give French citizens "the feeling of national cohesion." However, his cabinet introduced changes in the final months of preparation that antagonized its opponents, who would come to criticize the enterprise as "the Popular Front's expo." Blum's government increased the fair budget several times, to finance new pavilions as well as cover rising construction and labor costs which escalated after the adoption of the forty-hour work week, wage hikes and two-week paid vacations. This money was drawn partly from funds designated for public works projects since, it was argued, "the exposition does have, in fact, an essential role in the revival of economic activity and in the fight against unemployment."⁵⁹ Indeed, the venture did employ some twenty-five thousand workers, with another ten thousand working for businesses supplying builders on the site.⁶⁰

Although the precedent had already been established, the Popular Front ultimately determined the nature and extent of state participation in the expanding enterprise. Its ministers were instrumental in shaping the newly added social pavilions, including the Solidarity Pavilion and the Hygiene Pavilion, whose "model health clinic" demonstrated the new government's commitment to affordable, modernized health facilities. The Popular Front Ministries of Agriculture, Air, and Public Works mounted, respectively, a Rural Center, an Aeronautics Palace, and a Museum of Public Works. Blum's government also approved the creation of the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires to coincide with the fair.

While Blum introduced these particular changes early on, he tried nonetheless to avoid overt sectarianism at first, insisting that this would be "the

expo of all the French people." However, the pretense of a neutral stance was hard to sustain given the hostile political climate, and circumstances soon rendered such impartiality even less plausible. First, in November 1936 the assistant commissioner, François Latour, wrote a letter of sympathy to the imprisoned Charles Maurras, extreme right-wing leader of the *Action française*.⁶¹ Blum promptly dismissed Latour from his post and replaced him with a Radical-Socialist politician, Pierre Mortier. That same month, Blum designated Jean Locquin, the former Socialist deputy who had served as assistant commissioner under Labbé's predecessor Berthod, as his personal delegate to the exposition. For Blum's critics, these personnel changes signaled a deliberate politicization of the exposition. Members of the conservative Paris Municipal Council decried Latour's dismissal as an overtly "political act." Virulent attacks multiplied in right-wing newspapers, as the rightist and leftist press alike began to interpret the fair in more sectarian terms.⁶²

These political tensions were exacerbated by hostility between workers and employers on the construction site, which was turned into a symbolic arena for class warfare. In May 1936, in the euphoric wave of strikes following the leftist victory, the unions—led by the reunified CGT (combining Socialist and Communist members)—began organizing widespread strikes on the construction site (see fig. 1.2). At the same time, according to leftist accusations, some building contractors—plagued by strikes, union demands, and rising costs, and most often politically opposed to the Popular Front and hostile to the unions—stalled work on the pavilions. By December 1936, due to late starts, strikes, and various setbacks including winter flooding, construction had fallen an estimated five months behind schedule—worrisome indeed, since the expo was scheduled to open five months hence; at this rate, the pavilions would be finished just in time for the fair to close its gates. This lag widened even further when the new forty-hour work week took effect for the building trades in December 1936.

The new government tried, at least in appearance, to maintain a conciliatory stance vis-à-vis the employers and unions throughout the winter. But it soon became clear that without a massive effort on the part of the laborers, the exposition would be far from complete by its planned inauguration on May 1—ironically, Labor Day. Under these conditions, Blum visited the site in February 1937, and personally appealed to the workers, declaring, "The failure of the Popular Front would be a triumph for fascism. A delay of the exposition would be its victory."⁶³ Léon Jouhaux, general secretary of the CGT, lent his support by saying, "The exposition will be the triumph of the working class, the Popular Front, and liberty."⁶⁴ These appeals directly linked the completion of the project to the political success of the united Left. Blum proposed that new workers be enlisted and multiple shifts organized so that construction

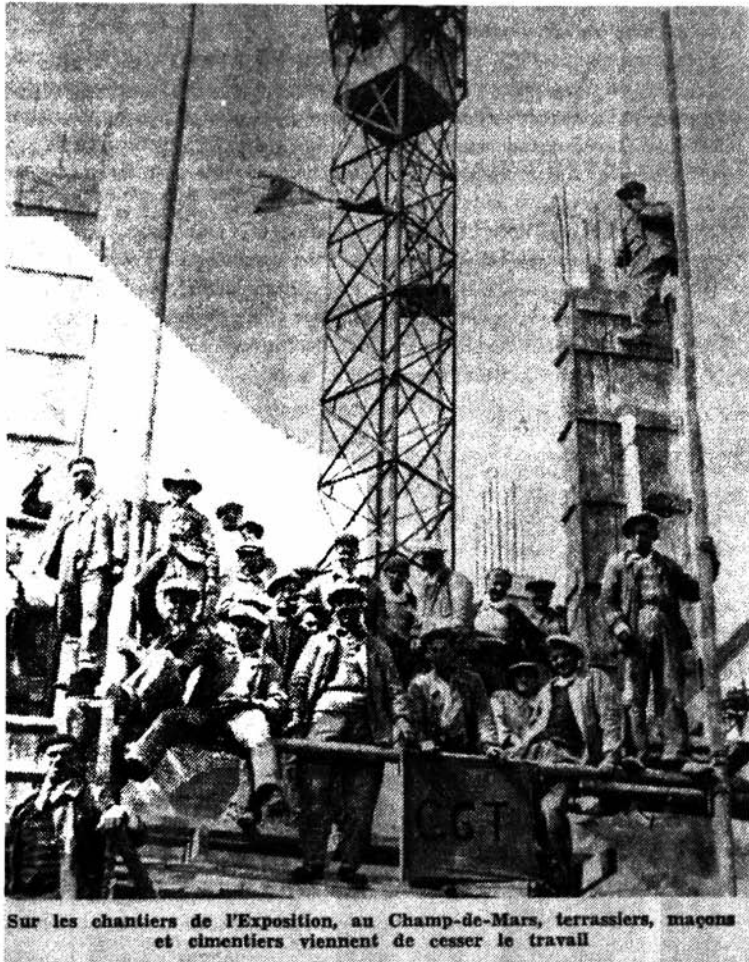


Fig. 1.2. Masons, cement workers, and road workers on strike on the construction site of the exposition, *Le Petit journal*, 9 June 1936. Centre historique des Archives Nationales (F12 12139), Paris

could continue around the clock, seven days a week, until the triumphant opening day.⁶⁵

The right-wing press interpreted Blum's speech to the "rabble-rousing" strikers as an appropriation of the exposition by the Popular Front. An article in *L'Insurgé*, published by "non-conformists" Thierry Maulnier and Jean-Pierre Maxence, vented in hyperbolic prose the hostility of the extreme right:

It is Léon Blum who made the exposition into a project of the Popular Front, and systematically pushed French people, belonging to any party other than his own, away from something which should have been the work of France. The government and its press should not, therefore, complain about the criticisms directed against the exposition by those who fear that it will fail miserably and bring ridicule on our country. The best service we can render France is to warn foreigners that they're likely to visit an exposition of scaffolding and piles of crap. The decline of France is too evident to anyone who compares the Belgian, German, Italian or Russian pavilions to the French pavilions. We are reduced to hoping that there will be the minimum number of foreign visitors because if they should, upon returning home, spread France's reputation as a nation of imbeciles and degenerates, their absence would constitute a lesser harm.⁶⁶

Right-wing journalists continued to accuse the CGT, that "state within the state," of creating a revolutionary climate on the fair "battlefield"—red flags had indeed been spotted flying over pavilions under construction—and of blocking efforts by contractors to complete the work on time (see fig. 1.3).⁶⁷

The paradox was not lost on supporters of the Popular Front: how could the Right criticize them simultaneously for appropriating and sabotaging the fair? In their turn, the CGT and leftist press accused the *patrons* of deliberately impeding construction efforts in order to humiliate the Popular Front and working class. An article in the communist paper *L'Humanité* claimed:



Fig. 1.3. Exposition workers on strike march in front of the Place de la Concorde, *L'Ami du peuple*, 10 June 1936. Centre historique des Archives Nationales (F12 12139), Paris

The bosses have tried, throughout the construction phase, to fight against the implementation of the labor laws, and have refused to adopt new ways of organizing work. They have hampered economic recovery and have delayed construction. . . . The entrepreneurs, out of hatred of the Popular Front and the working class, have sacrificed the interests of France to their individual interests.⁶⁸

In the final months of preparation, then, the rightist press accused the exposition's political patrons of partisanship and interpreted the strikes as an overt expression of class warfare. As the stakes were raised in what critics were calling "the Popular Front's expo," Blum's government added several important exhibits in last-minute haste, including a Work Pavilion built by the CGT (and one of the few to be completed on time), a Peace Pavilion, and a major retrospective of "Masterpieces of French Art," these last two personally backed by Blum. Blum also intervened through Locquin to impose two modernist projects which had encountered resistance from the fair commission: Le Corbusier's Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, and a series of abstract geometric murals designed by Sonia and Robert Delaunay and Félix Aublet for the aeronautics and railway pavilions.

In addition to these changes, the leftist government progressively "popularized" the fair, in a move consistent with its policy of cultural democratization.⁶⁹ Max Hymans, appointed by Blum to oversee fair operations, instituted several measures to "democratize" access to the fair. He created "popular trains" offering reduced fares to visitors from the provinces, "who would not otherwise have been able to visit the exposition."⁷⁰ Beginning in August, Hymans introduced a half-price day—three francs instead of the usual six—on Monday, later changed to Sunday, a better choice for the working-classes, since it corresponded with their day off. Hymans imposed this weekly *journée populaire* in return for the "double-price day" (Friday) proposed by the fair's planning commission, with the aim of raising needed funds and enticing bourgeois clients willing to pay more to avoid the popular hordes who, according to one observer, liked to sit "in a slovenly way at the feet of the most monumental and pure pavilions to eat their sandwiches" (see fig. 1.4).⁷¹ Hymans also mounted several "popular accommodation centers" for fairgoers, including "Pantagruel-sized" dormitories housed in the buildings of the Foire de Paris, where army bedding was borrowed to lodge up to 26,000 overnight guests, and as many as 50,000 meals could be served per day (see fig. 1.5).⁷² A mere twenty-two francs would buy room, board and entrance to the fair. However, the hotel industry successfully lobbied to ensure that these inexpensive facilities not be made available to adult tourists, even as it also refused requests by the fair commission to offer reduced rates or even guarantee reasonably stable prices for clients while the fair was open. In the end, the dormitories were mostly used by youth groups such as the Jeunesse



Fig. 1.4. Fair visitors resting in front of the Soviet pavilion. Centre historique des Archives Nationales (F12 12116), Paris



Fig. 1.5. The Halle aux Vins at the Foire de Paris converted into an immense low-cost dormitory for fair visitors. Centre historique des Archives Nationales (F12 12139), Paris

ouvrière catholique and the thousands of young athletes who came to participate in the fair's large-scale sports events (see fig 1.6).⁷³

In contrast to the smaller, more elitist spectacles planned before the leftist victory, Popular Front appointees also created more "popular" spectacles during the fair, reviving Socialist Deputy Fiancette's earlier proposal to create festivals emulating those of the French Revolution. Five open-air festivals were organized around the themes of wine, work, the harvest, folklore and the colonies. Popular music and theater groups, including the *Comédiens routiers* and the *Théâtre des Quatre Saisons*, were also invited to give outdoor performances. And Léo Lagrange sponsored hundreds of popular sports events (some of them planned previously), including an aviation festival that attracted some four thousand amateur enthusiasts.

Leftist efforts to broaden access apparently had some effect. According to the general commissioner, this fair attracted a more diverse audience than previous ones, and drew in more visitors from the rural provinces:

At the last universal exhibitions in 1889 and 1900, the statistics carefully counted those who came from cities and those who ventured in from the countryside.



Fig. 1.6. Young members of the Jeunesse ouvrière catholique with their boxed lunches provided by one of the exposition's "popular accommodation centers." Centre historique des Archives Nationales (F12 12139), Paris

The organizers of these great festivals felt a certain pride in thinking that they had roused the rich farmer from Saintonge, the older tenant farmers from the Dauphiné or younger farmers from Picardy. . . . But, in 1937, the times have changed. Old and young alike, parents and children, women and men, everyone got to make the great trip to the capital. You might even say they had a responsibility to come, now that everyone has the right to education, just as they have the right to play their part in the nation's economy.⁷⁴

Labbé's statement echoes contemporary notions about the need to widen access to education and culture that were not limited to the French Left in the 1930s.⁷⁵ But the Popular Front made particular efforts in this area. With regard to the 1937 Exposition, the minister of agriculture argued that world's fairs no longer functioned primarily to create a new clientele for products; they had also become "centers of attraction and education for the masses."⁷⁶

The rightist press continued to virulently attack the "Popular Front's expo" up through its delayed inauguration on May 24. News of the upheaval in France also reached the foreign press, where reports of "social revolution" in Paris and of delayed completion discouraged potential visitors. According to one French correspondent in New York, French newsreels of Léon Blum, surrounded by exuberant workers raising their fists and singing the *Internationale*, caused Americans in the audience to exclaim, "Revolution in Paris! Now is no time to go there!"⁷⁷ Leftist papers accused the right-wing press of spreading slanderous rumors abroad; according to one article in *L'Humanité*, "The reactionary papers succeeded in creating in distant regions a delusional panic by making people believe that civil war reigned non-stop in the capital."⁷⁸ In fact, news reports abroad suggest that the fair also came to be interpreted in the foreign press along political lines. That is to say, those countries and political movements that supported Blum's government tended to depict the exposition in a more positive light, while ideological opponents of the Popular Front, most notably in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, emphasized the strikes, delays, and social discord troubling France during the months before its opening.⁷⁹

The Fair Opens—Late and Unfinished

What the inaugural party christened a month late, on May 24, was not a completed project but a work in progress: although the German, Italian and Russian pavilions were finished, as were those for Denmark and Holland, only two of the French pavilions opened on time. Public attendance was discouraged until mid-June.⁸⁰ Even then, many French pavilions still remained hidden behind scaffolding, leading a journalist for *Le Jour* to ask: "When will the half-