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The Fair of the Future: Developments in Society and Modernity at the 1939 New York World's Fair

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Abstract

The New York World's Fair of 1939 is often considered the first World's Fair to theorize about the future of society instead of celebrating the industrial achievements of the recent past. Historical studies of this Fair have generally ignored the social ideas that inspired the Fair's future-oriented theme. Nevertheless, these ideas represent an experience of modernity that responded to the paradox of Depression conditions in a technologically advanced society. Early in the Fair's development, a group of artists and architects, including social critic Lewis Mumford, proposed that the Fair's theme represent a unified, centrally-planned society that would harness modern technological advances for the good of the whole. A close reading of this proposal, and several related documents, reveals how this envisioned society would rely on 1) a strong central government to coordinate and plan the community and 2) private industry to support the public good. This paper argues that the Fair's social ideas reflect a larger transition away from a view of modernity dominated by technological questions towards one characterized by social questions. The theme of the Fair demonstrated a response to modernity contemporary with the rise of modern fascism and communism but particular to the US before the Second World War.

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Introduction

The 1939 New York World's Fair was the first World's Fair with an explicitly future-oriented focus. Its theme, "Building the World of Tomorrow," celebrated the possibilities of the future rather than the progress of the past. "[T]he visitor," as one planning document described, "will leave [the Fair] . . . amazed at its architectural unity, and enriched in his understanding of life" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939 Incl. The School of Tomorrow* 22). The first thing that that visitor would see was a gleaming, six hundred-foot-tall spire and a 180-foot-wide globe at the center of the Fair. Walking down the main boulevard, past billowing banners of red, yellow, and blue, past special buses zipping visitors from one sector to the next, and past guides in grey jackets and matching uniform hats, the visitor would see the globe, dubbed the "Perisphere," grow until it "seemed to fill the sky" (Doctorow 250). Inside the Perisphere was a vast diorama—"Democracity"—of the city from the year 2039. Visitors would watch a simulated day of the city of the future. The famous radio broadcaster H. V. Kaltenborn narrated the view of Democracity, "a brave new world built by . . . hands and hearts that work as one." It was a world where "nation leans on nation," one that "march[es] towards unity and peace" (Kohn). Eight thousand people saw this utopian city every hour for the duration of the Fair's two seasons in 1939 and 1940 (Rydell et al. 94).

The Fair's visions of the future continue to live on in visitors' memories. As one ten-year-old fairgoer described it later in his life, "Every child who . . . seeing home movies or finding in a drawer a blue-and-white button or souvenir postcard, wishes, just for a moment, that he could go back to the future—to that 'World of Tomorrow' now contained forever in a lost American yesterday" (Rydell et al. 94). The Fair was always meant to amaze fairgoers. This quote demonstrates the Fair's success in this regard. Fairgoers looked back on the 1939 World Fair for the rest of their lives.

The Fair successfully captured the imagination of US society in the late 1930s. What to do with this attention was another question altogether. In the minds of a few, the World's Fair could be leveraged to unlock the potential of modern society. The Fair's planners felt that past World's Fairs had focused too much on new developments in industry and technology. The most memorable icons of fairs of the past—London's Crystal Palace, Paris's Eiffel Tower, and the marvelous electric lighting at Chicago's Columbian Exposition—celebrated the latest in past technological developments. The New York Fair of 1939 tried to do something different. The "Fair of the Future" was an intentional effort to repurpose the World's Fair genre in order to imagine a better, *future* society and to inspire a mass audience to embrace that image of society.

In 1936, a group of independent artists, architects, and social thinkers formed the "Fair of the Future Committee" to develop the Fair's theme. This committee was reckoning with 20th-century modernity and particularly questions of industry, technology, and the Great Depression. The development of the Fair's theme took place at a moment when fascism and communism were still newly realized as official state systems. In the Fair's "Court of Peace," the

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Italian Pavilion represented Mussolini's fascist synthesis of ancient Rome and 20th-century Italian modernism. The USSR's pavilion presented the accomplishments of the relatively young soviet system, including a life-sized reproduction of the Moscow Metro. The Japanese Pavilion emphasized traditional arts (e.g. tea and silk) to draw attention away from Japan's aggressive colonialism (Hart). The Fair's theme was an experimental response to these 20th-century developments. This experimentation took place before mid-century attitudes towards fascism and communism (e.g. McCarthyism) were crystallized, providing an example of alternative mid-century responses to 20th-century modernity.

In the words of one member of the Fair of the Future Committee, social philosopher Lewis Mumford, "[w]e know perfectly well what the achievements of the mechanical civilization are. . . . We also know perfectly well [that] they are ready to make hell on earth" (Mumford, *Address to "Progressives in the Arts"* 1). In the 1920s, people in the US had high faith that technology would solve society's modern problems. That faith was beginning to shake in the 1930s (Hughes and Hughes 4). Mumford had written several books criticizing the unchecked influence of technology on the development of modern western society. He believed that blind faith in technology was both out of date and unproductive in the 20th century (Hughes and Hughes 5). The theme of the 1939 Fair was meant to show how *organization* in society, not technology, was the key to improving social conditions. By analyzing the Fair of the Future Committee's reports, this paper will look at how the Committee imagined the future of society in 1939. In particular, this paper will look at how the Committee believed centralized coordination of government and private industry was crucial to taking advantage of modern technology. The final section of this paper will suggest that the Fair's theme demonstrated a

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transition between two visions of modernity: one based in technology and the other based on questions of social structure.

Government, or The Importance of Society as a Unified Whole

The Fair of the Future Committee believed that the proper development of society required intentional, central planning of the whole community. As Mumford described in 1935, "[t]he story we have to tell . . . is the story of this planned environment, this planned industry, this planned civilization" (Mumford, *Address to "Progressives in the Arts"* 3). The idea of a planned society, surely influenced by the Roosevelt Administration's New Deal politics, was the bedrock of the Committee's proposal.

The strict organization of the Fair reflected the ways in which the Fair of the Future Committee believed planned communities should be realized. They warned against "the traditional scheme of planning the Fair as a number of separate and unrelated structures . . . housing unrelated or improperly related exhibits" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 5. Emphasis original.). The Fair of the Future Committee felt the elements of the Fair should be interrelated and interconnected, almost like the parts of a machine. They recommended, "in place of the old arrangement, the organization of the Fair into a unified whole which will represent all of the interrelated activities and interests of the American Way of Living" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 5. Emphasis original.). As a visitor would walk around the nine thematic sectors, representing activities like "Education" or "Work," they would feel the same unity and interrelation of activities in the Fair that they felt in the unity of their activities in an average day. Thus the exhibits at the Fair

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would fold into one another in the same way that one's daily activities flow organically from one to the next. This was seen as a more logical organization than the old World's Fair categories such as "Machinery" or "Science."

The Fair of the Future Committee felt strongly that powerful central leadership was required to achieve such unity. The Committee proposed "an Advisory Committee on Social Planning to serve under the Executive Committee . . . which will coordinate all aspects of the Fair" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 5. Emphasis original.). Similarly, a strong leader would be at the head of the related Design Committee. Without such a leader, "each designer is sure to work as an individualist competing with and consequently nullifying the work of every other designer" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 17–18). These proposals demonstrate the Committee's belief that strong leadership was necessary in order to achieve a unified result. This would hold true whether that result was a World's Fair or a community. Their emphasis on coordination demonstrated a concern that "individualist" competition would endanger both the thematic unity and, by extension, the theme itself. The Fair of the Future Committee felt that a strong coordinator was needed at the top of the Fair (like a community) in order to properly coordinate its activities.

Likewise, those in charge of coordination also needed to consider the "whole" as a unified entity, not as a series of disparate parts. Thus the members of this Committee on Social Planning "should be of a type capable of seeing beyond the immediate horizon of their own profession and capable of grasping the whole problem of the Fair as a unit" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 18). The Committee feared that, without their Committee on Social Planning, the Fair would become "a series of unrelated

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buildings . . . with little conception of their functions . . . a gargantuan duplication of Coney Island" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 17–18). This was explicitly what they wanted to avoid. A Fair that merely entertained, like Coney Island, and did not express the unity of the everyday, "American Way of Life" would be a complete failure of the theme.[i] Thus the Committee advocated for powerful leadership that could look at the community as a unified, complex entity.

The Fair of the Future Committee knew that strong governmental control over public projects was possible. The proposal explicitly described government in reference to its services to society, writing, "A striking characteristic of modern government is the extensive range of its services to its citizenship." They listed diverse services like "forestry," the "army and navy," and "agriculture" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 14). This wide-ranging list suggests that the authors saw the government as something that could and should be involved in many parts of public life. Given the plethora of New Deal programs that took place at that time, it is not a stretch to think that entirely planned communities could be one such service. Such a community would be planned much like a house or a machine: industry, recreation, and residential areas would be physically and logistically harmonized to produce the best overall experience for the members of the community. Groups like the Regional Planning Association of America had already produced several examples of such planned communities (e.g. Sunnyside Gardens in Queens) (Wojtowicz 4).

Such intentionally planned communities would require strong centralized leadership. In regards to the Fair, the Fair planners worried about "individualist[s] competing with and consequently nullifying the work of every other designer." They emphasized the need for centralized

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leadership that is “capable of seeing beyond the immediate horizon . . . [and] grasping the whole problem of the Fair as a unit” (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 17–18). If strong, centralized leadership was important for the Fair as a model for society, it would be that much more important in the development of this proposed society itself. Fortunately, the New Deal projects of the Roosevelt administration demonstrated that such centralized organization was, through the federal government, possible. The Public Works Administration’s Housing Division was, at the time of the Fair, in the middle of a five-year effort to create 20,000 new housing units in fifty different projects. Before the Fair opened, the Government had approved an $800,000,000 budget for public housing (Gutheim and McAndrew 311–14). The Fair of the Future Committee knew that major government projects were possible.

The advocacy for a strong central government was further supported by the proposal’s comment that such a fair “would provide a magnificent ‘Machine for Display’” (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 16). As a “Machine for Display,” the elements of the Fair would contribute to a unified, consistent effect on each individual visitor. The Committee called for “nothing less than . . . building [the Fair] around the visitor, rather than leaving the visitor outside to penetrate it only as far as his strength permits”(Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 16). The Fair was to be designed around the visitor. That is, the visitor would be integrated into the Fair as much as any other element of the Fair. This would be convenient for the visitor. It would also serve the greater thematic purpose of the Fair. The visitor “should find himself led . . . his further progress should be subtly controlled and directed so that he sees the maximum of exhibits with the minimum of effort,

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and in the proper sequence"(Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 15. Emphasis original.). The Fair accommodates the visitor, preserving their energy by minimizing effort, while also controlling them. The Fair planners would determine how the visitor should and would move about the Fair. The fairgoer would feel as if their movements were freely chosen whereas, in reality, they would be subtly led to view the Fair in the manner most conducive to the Fair planners' intentions. Thus the movements of the visitor would be not only determined by the individual's interests but by the interests of the Fair in its entirety. The visitor, as an analogue for the citizen of "everyman" of society, would feel themselves to be an independent agent while simultaneously being harmonized with the rest of the community. In the Fair's proposed society, as in the Fair, the relationships between each element in the community would be likewise harmonized with each other.

The term "Machine for Display" recalled Le Corbusier's maxim that "the house is a machine to live in" (Gutheim and McAndrew 289). Le Corbusier was rather influential in Europe at this time. Architectural historian Richard Guy Wilson argued that Le Corbusier's community planning and housing projects in the 1920s and 1930s inspired US corporations to explore the ways that life could be improved in the US (Rydell and Schiavo 197). Indeed, Mumford later wrote that the "aim [of the theme] was to make as decisive an innovation in city building as Le Corbusier made in his individual 'machine for habitation.'"[ii] The metaphor of machine in both of these instances suggested a unified system that produced consistent results from the seamless combination of its constituent elements, much as the Fair of the Future Committee was describing the Fair's proposed organization. This "Machine for Display" was meant to

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demonstrate the coordinated interplay of the different elements of society acting in concert to produce a unified whole.

The idea of the preservation of proper relationships between elements of society can be best demonstrated by the central thematic exhibit, Democracity. Democracity was "an exhibit showing in panoramic form the incoming and outgoing resources of every kind, in urban and city life" (Hare, *Draft of The Theme of the Fair* 3). The coordinated production and consumption of goods is one example of the efficient organization of the Committee's proposed society. Democracity was intended to "illustrate . . . the idea of the Fair itself, namely, to make clear . . . the prevailing interdependence of man on man[,] city on country, nation on nation, and the ever-increasing, interlocking of factors that contribute to man's welfare" (Whalen 61). The Fair of the Future Committee was envisioning an interconnected web of "factors"—people, workplaces, factories, public services, etc. A person's dependence on this web, their connections with the rest of society, would increase their welfare. As a draft of the script for the exhibit's presentation described, the city would be "[n]o longer a jumble of slum and grime and smoke, but town and country joined for work and play in sunlight and good air" (Kohn). The connections between "town and country" would allow one ready access to the natural resources of the country, the "sunlight and good air," no matter where one's work or play required them to be. The whole society would be organized such that one would enter the city only for city activities and have access to the country for leisure and home life. The script continued, "At the center [of the city and community] are government, business, amusement, while out beyond are home and workshop, mine and mill, dependent on each other" (Kohn). In this system, business and home are separated. Business is productively accessible and

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coincident with government services and other businesses. Industry requiring natural resources, including mines and farms, are located away from the city. Home and amusement are given their locations separate from work but with easy access to sunlight and fresh air.

This is, of course, only a general overview of the interdependence and "interlocking" of the various aspects of modern life. That was the purpose of Democracity, to show the overview of these interrelations that would be further elaborated in each of the nine thematic sectors. For instance, the Food and Drink Sector, as described in the Fair of the Future proposal, "should . . . show the relation of the country worker who produces the raw material to [the] city worker who today manufactures and distributes this raw material in the form of food" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 9). The visitor would see how agriculture, industry, and private consumption were connected. The exhibit would show the interdependence of the countryside and the urban centers. This demonstration would "bring farmer and consumer together in sympathetic understanding" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 9). The visitor would leave with a better understanding of how they were dependent upon farmers, factory workers, and, by extension, the entire community. Furthermore, they would see how each element of society could be coordinated to improve the welfare of society. The Fair presented an image on social unity. Each individual would see themselves as part of a highly-interconnected, centrally-coordinated whole. This idea of unification represented the theme's depiction of social superstructure: the political management of the community. Yet, unlike socialist systems in Europe at that time, the Fair's society would work with, not against, private business. The next section of this paper will look at the role of private industry within the Fair's proposed society.

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Private Industry in Collaboration with the Public

Private enterprise is often seen as self-interested. A centrally coordinated society could be seen as antithetical to self-interested private industry. The Fair of the Future Committee challenged this perspective. They believed that private industry had a vested interest in serving the public good.

Admittedly, the Fair of the Future Committee had pragmatic reasons to emphasize the benefits of private industry. The Committee initially had neither the authority nor the money to guarantee their suggestions would be adopted by the official Fair Corporation. The Committee members had to show that their idealistic "Fair of the Future" would be profitable despite its break from tradition. A key motivation for the creation of the Fair was to energize the New York economy, much as the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition did for Chicago (Rydell et al. 90–91). Yet the Fair of the Future Committee wanted the 1939 Fair to have a very different thematic focus than the 1933 Fair. If the Committee's ideas were to stand any chance of adoption by the Fair Corporation, they would have to be clearly profitable. This meant creating a plan for the Fair that would attract private industry as well as visitors. In this context, the Fair of the Future Committee had to make a concerted effort to show how their plan would be attractive to private industry.

That said, the Fair of the Future Committee genuinely saw private industry as a central part of modern society. The Committee defined the "purpose" of the Fair thus: "[b]oth the Fair and Industry will be best served if Industry adopts the strategy of emphasizing its place as a servant

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of man . . . If the Fair is dedicated to the portrayal of expanding life in America it will be a challenge and stimulus to Industry" (Committee on Theme 2). This is interesting in two ways. First, it encouraged Industry to take up an attitude of service towards society. The use of the word "adopt" showed that the Fair of the Future Committee was aware that this attitude was a choice, not a necessity. Second, it argued that this choice would benefit the private interests of "Industry." Industry, in the view of the theme committees, should be intrinsically interested in the welfare of humankind (and thus be in service to it) because the corporations themselves would benefit from that welfare.

In an earlier section of the proposal, the Fair of the Future Committee provided a further rationale for this claim, explaining that, "the products of Industry must be consumed not by our parents and grandparents but by ourselves and our children. The eyes of Industry inevitably are turned toward the future; there its success or failure lies . . . History pays no dividends."[iii] The Fair of the Future Committee saw the future as the ultimate target market, indispensable to any private enterprise. When private industry serves the future of society, it is simultaneously investing in its own future success. Thus private industry has an inherent motivation to invest in the future success of society. The Fair of the Future Committee believed that this should (and would) lead private interests to align themselves with public interests.

The Committee provided no clear explanation as to why private businesses had not already aligned themselves with public interests. Perhaps they believed that industry merely needed to be reminded that their interests aligned with those of the public. In a concerned letter to the President of the Fair Corporation, Committee Secretary Michael Hare explained that the old organization of World's Fairs, i.e., into, "an electrical building, a home commodities building,

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etc. etc. . . . presume[s] that Industry derives most benefit by exhibiting its wares simply as saleable products" (Hare, *Letter to Mr. McAneny*). The World's Fair as a concept has always been about exhibiting saleable wares to potential buyers. This letter from Hare shows that he had a larger goal in mind. Exhibiting saleable wares merely as products in themselves was not, according to Hare, in the best interest of the exhibitors. Hare continued, "our study leads us to believe that Industry will benefit most by demonstrating the use of their products in the every day [*sic*] life of the citizen" (Hare, *Letter to Mr. McAneny*). Hare was arguing that industry influenced society primarily in the everyday lives of consumers. In other words, industrially produced goods were not as important to the Fair of the Future Committee as the lives that those goods influenced. The Fair of the Future Committee saw that private industry was the backbone of modern US life.[iv] As such, it had a more significant role in society than suggested by the mere sale of products. A presentation of industrial goods "simply as saleable products" would emphasize the economic role of industry, i.e. the source of employment and goods. The Fair of the Future Committee saw that private industry's role was larger than that. Mass-produced products were essential to the everyday life of the modern person. Thus private industry occupied a central and pervasive role in modern society.

This integration of private industry and modern, everyday life would be demonstrated in the nine thematic sectors of the Fair. The proposal explained that this "direct connection of his [the 'industrial exhibitor, or space buyer's'] business with the phase of living to which it contributes will be stressed as will the part he can play in the expanding life of America" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 7). The private exhibitor would show how

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their products improved the daily lives of the Fair visitor. The Fair visitor would see how communal life was benefiting from private industry.

One can see this thinking at work in the proposed Education sector. The "physical environment" of the Fair's model school would "be the best that industry can devise" (Dearborn and Zorbaugh 2). The proposal authors suggested automatically regulated lighting and temperature controls, sound-absorbing walls, escalators, and automatic doors "for the benefit of crippled children" (Dearborn and Zorbaugh 2–3). Television would "bring into the classroom events going on in the city," "the moving picture will supply much supplementary visual aid," and "the talking book will replace the printed page for blind children" (Dearborn and Zorbaugh 3). A range of industries, from building materials to buses, from office, medical, and laboratory suppliers to kitchen and restaurant suppliers, would benefit because "the schools of America are among the biggest consumers of the products of these industries" (Dearborn and Zorbaugh 9). Furthermore, the authors continued, "one of [industries'] greatest problems is to educate the public and create demand. . . . Beyond this, many of these industries have a truly pioneering spirit, and are eager to see technology make its possible contribution to our social living" (Dearborn and Zorbaugh 9–10). Yet this school would not merely be a marketing demonstration. Technology, like television, films, and audiobooks, has a real pedagogic value. The attention paid to children with disabilities shows the authors' desire to make education more widely accessible. Furthermore, these technologies were presently available, not hypothetically imagined. Visitors to the Fair would see a real demonstration of practical advances in the realm of education while simultaneously seeing that those advances were made possible by private enterprises.

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Notably, the Fair of the Future Committee's recommendations did not glorify private industry. Other parties at the Fair celebrated private enterprise as leading society into the future.[v] Although the Fair of the Future Committee did suggest that private industry plays an important role in forming the society of the future, they did not heroize private enterprise. Rather, the Fair of the Future Committee saw private enterprise as a central, neutral reality of modern life in the US. This contrasts with the spreading Communist ideology in Eastern Europe and Asia. If the Communist ideal was to socialize industry in order to force it into service to the community, the Fair of the Future Committee believed that the interests of private industry were inherently aligned with the public good. The Fair of the Future Committee rejected the idea that private corporations were antagonistic to the wellbeing of the masses. Rather, private interests needed to be coordinated so that the proper relationship between private industry and the public was maintained. This attitude struck a balance between anti-capitalist communist beliefs and laissez-faire capitalism. The Committee's views implied that one did not have to be opposed to private industry just because living conditions were poor. These living conditions, the argument went, were poor because industry was not yet aligned with the public good. Remedying this would negate any necessity for proletarian revolt. Thus, the Fair of the Future Committee wanted to demonstrate that private industry could still serve society in the 20th century.

Conclusion

The Fair's theme, overall, could be seen as an effort to rescue a utopian vision of democratic capitalism. Instead of denouncing oppressive forces in society, the Fair's theme represented the society of the future as one that was ripe for the picking. The theme, "[a]bove all else, . . . must stress the vastly increased opportunity and the developed mechanical means which this

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twentieth century has brought to the masses for better living and accompanying human happiness" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 2). This statement implies that a utopian future was only waiting to be realized. The "vastly increased opportunity and developed mechanical means," the "better living and . . . human happiness" of the 20th century is described in the past tense. It already, according to the Committee, "has [been] brought." The tone of this statement is representative of the Fair of the Future's tone in general. They imagined what society could be without explaining why it was not already so. Thus they did not place blame on any particular aspect of society. They avoided such a direct criticism entirely. Rather, their insinuated critique asked how a society with the technological prowess of the mid-twentieth century could simultaneously be one with the mass poverty and poor living conditions that characterized the 1930s. The Committee wrote that the Fair "must demonstrate that betterment of our future American life which may be achieved only through the coordinated efforts of Industry, Science and Art" (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 2). The necessary activity, so the Committee thought, was to coordinate these elements of society. A lack of coordination was what prevented mechanical progress from resulting in better living and human happiness.

A properly organized and unified society could efficiently produce and distribute wealth to everyone. This would provide leisure time for the masses with which they could engage in leisure activities—such as creating or appreciating art, taking part in sports, or traveling for educational and restorative purposes. All of the activities proposed by the Fair were distinctly modern, either because they were novel or because they were previously inaccessible to the masses. Ultimately, the telos of this society was to enable the masses to improve themselves

via modern activities. This society would fulfill the original democratic promise, to provide the opportunity to the masses for their self-improvement, and the promise of industrialization, to allow masses the leisure time for such pursuits. The Fair's theme was meant to promise fairgoers that their hopes for this modern, democratic life could still be fulfilled.

Yet, people in the 1930s had already seen how fragile faith in modernity could be. Optimism in technology was common in the 1920s (Hughes and Hughes 4). The 1920s was a period of modernist experimentation and reinvention of society. After 1929, conditions were much bleaker. Even though industry continued to modernize, society struggled with unemployment, homelessness, and hunger. After a decade of the Depression, belief in technology and capitalism to overcome modern difficulties was low. Thus, the Fair was meant to instill hope for a better future by showing how technology and capitalism went wrong, namely in being uncoordinated with society. The promise of leisure and self-development as a result of this new social organization was a way out of the Depression and into the modern life people had expected. Furthermore, for the individual, this meant being able to address parts of their lives, like art, religion, or family relationships, that were previously strained due to economic pressures. The Fair's theme was intended to show that this sort of life was still possible.

When the Fair opened in April 1939, it did not have the effect that the Fair of the Future Committee had intended. In a review for the *New Yorker*, Lewis Mumford faulted the Fair for being disjointed and unoriginal. He wrote that the major utopian exhibits, Democracity, General Motor's Futurama, and the Town of Tomorrow, "have absolutely no relation to each other; they are scattered across the great spaces" (Mumford, "The Sky Line in Flushing" 38). As described above, the central unity and coordination of the Fair was a key feature of the society which the

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Fair of the Future Committee intended to demonstrate. Something must have gone awry for the Fair of the Future's centrally organized "Machine for Display" to have become a scattered collection of unrelated exhibits. Worse, the exhibits themselves were, according to Mumford, old ideas being sold as new ones. The "tomorrow" he saw at the Fair "remains the bootleg tomorrow that used to be sold as genuine Scotch before October, 1929" (Mumford, "The Sky Line in Flushing" 41). That is to say, even though the Fair's theme was designed to show that dreams of a modern, democratic, capitalist utopia were possible despite the Depression, the Fair merely provided a disorganized collection of pre-Depression ideas and presented them as if they were new.

The gap between the Fair's proposed theme and its execution was likely due to a variety of factors that extend beyond the scope of this paper. One contributing factor was the Committee's underestimation of private industry. In his *New Yorker* review, Mumford described the Committee's naïveté of believing that such a utopian social theory could be effectively presented at the Fair. He wrote, "for a few sanguine moments those who had never met the prima donnas and sentimentalists who run many of our great business enterprises were convinced that a bold, large scheme might be carried out by their coöperative efforts" (Mumford, "The Sky Line in Flushing" 38). Mumford reacted to the disappointing results of the Fair by deciding that it never had a real chance to fulfill its social mission in the first place. He decided that the "great business enterprises" would never cooperate in the way or to the degree necessary to realize the Fair's utopian premise. The whole proposed society depended upon the voluntary cooperation of private interests. Thus this "utopian" vision depended upon

the existing capitalist power structure which maintained the status quo instead of reimagining society. When private enterprises did not cooperate, the vision floundered.

This does not mean that the Fair's theme failed in its entirety. The Fair was an important intermediate step between 19th-century industrial World's Fairs and 20th century, socially-oriented fairs. The Fair reflected a larger transition between two views of modernity. It imagined a society that could effectively embrace modern technology and use it to the benefit of the entire society. This was notably, and intentionally, different from the 19th-century celebrations of technology and industry. The 1939 Fair did not celebrate technology itself but asked how the promise of technological progress could be truly fulfilled. Nevertheless, the Committee still viewed modern society as fundamentally characterized by new technology. Private corporations could continue to celebrate technology as they had at past fairs. The Fair's theme, although novel in many ways, still subscribed to a technologically defined modernity.

And yet, the social orientation of the theme introduced the idea of social imagination as a World's Fair theme. The Fair asked how modern society was going to react to technology that would inevitably continue to "progress" as it had (and has) throughout the modern age. It set a precedent for discussing social questions, i.e. how the conditions of society should and could be improved. This contrasts with earlier World's Fairs which asked how technology would change society. Around the time of the 1939 Fair, Western society was finally adapting to and adopting modern technological reality. Technology could slide into the background. It remained an important element of society but one that was no more surprising or concerning than any other element of society. Technology no longer defined the modern experience. It merely contributed to it. In the 20th century, technological development had become normal, even banal. Social

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structures and dynamics themselves could take center stage. Society became the active agent in setting its own norms and characteristics. The presumption of the Fair, seen in elements like Democracity, was that society, not technology, was responsible for social conditions. Thus, social change was seen as a prerequisite to technological adoption, not the other way around. This shows a transition from a paradigm of modernity characterized by technology to one defined by debates about the nature and conditions of society.

These debates became particularly relevant after the Second World War. The atrocities of the war, especially the destructive 'technology' that enabled genocide in the Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bombs in Japan, firmly shook people's confidence in and unconditional optimism for technology (Hughes and Hughes 4). Furthermore, the rise of 'ideology' as a fear, particularly a fear of fascism in Europe and communism in the US, brought renewed interest in social questions that were largely unrelated to technological questions. People wanted to know where totalitarian ideologies came from and how to protect their societies against them. By the time of the next World's Fair in 1958, these social concerns were more popular than the technological concerns of the 1930s. People were more skeptical about technology than they had been in the interwar period (Hughes and Hughes 4).

Perhaps this shift would have taken place regardless of the 1939 New York World's Fair. Even so, the theme of the 1939 Fair proves that this shift from a technologically inspired modernity to a socially-oriented one existed before the Second World War. The New York Fair set a precedent for subsequent World's Fairs to project images of imagined society. They became a hallmark of 20th-century fairs. The 1939 New York World's Fair took place at a major crossroads between vestigial 19th-century and developing 20th-century attitudes towards technology and

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society. The Fair's theme embodied this transitory period, demonstrating a changing balance between social and technological concerns. The theme of the Fair and its development demonstrated a growing concern for the nature of post-industrial society. This concern was part of a trend which was larger than and pre-dated the Second World War. The Fair of the Future's theme demonstrated this transition as it was happening.

The fairgoer would spend a day at the Fair, waiting in line, seeing exhibits and shows, spending their savings on food and amusements. At the end of the day, they would take a taxi or the train back to their home or hotel. Eventually, the excitement of the Fair would fade. These visitors may not have noticed the ideological changes that the Fair reflected. They may have come away from the Fair thinking only of the sights and sounds they had seen (and perhaps of the new blisters on their feet). Yet, the subtlety of the social ideas at the Fair did not make those ideas any less real. The Fair was a reminder that society is ultimately responsible for itself. Technology is amoral, it argued, and cannot be trusted to singlehandedly uphold one's hopes for the future. Social change has to be driven by society itself. As the Fair closed and the Second World War opened, this lesson would become clear. In the meantime, the 1939 New York World's Fair was teaching this lesson via glimpses of utopia in the US.

Notes

[i] The Fair of the Future Committee was explicit that the Fair should not be a mere amusement park. “A Fair must always be a popular fete and a great spectacle. But ‘shoot-the-shoots’ and ‘sky-rides’ are of themselves tame to a generation that rides with outboard motors and commutes with airplanes. The most exciting and spectacular feature a Fair could have is the demonstration of the wonders of contemporary life now within the reach of the man of the millions as well as the man with the millions.” (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, “The Fair of the Future 1939: Social Theme, Physical Concept, Design Organization, Design Organization, Summary,” 4. Emphasis original.)

[ii] Mumford, “The Sky Line in Flushing,” 38.

[iii] (Hare and Fair of the Future Committee, *The Fair of the Future 1939* 3) Lewis Mumford provided another demonstration of this concept when, at the Progressives in the Arts dinner in 1935, he suggested that insurance companies could be convinced to fund the Fair because they have a vested interest in people’s health and longevity. See: (Mumford, *Address to “Progressives in the Arts”*)

[iv] Hare used the term “continuous spinal column” to describe how industrial exhibits would be grouped around the central representation of “modern American life” (Hare, *Letter to Mr. McAneny*).

[v] See, for instance, Robert R. Snody, *The Middleton Family at the 1939 New York World’s Fair*, 1939. This film promoted the Fair and, particularly, the Westinghouse exhibit and the technology exhibited therein. An overarching theme of this film was the ways in which Westinghouse engineers were contributing to society.

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