

Hybrids of Modernity

Anthropology, the Nation State and the
Universal Exhibition

Penelope Harvey



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Hybrids of Modernity considers the relationship between three western modernist institutions: anthropology, the nation state and the universal exhibition. It looks at the ways in which these institutions are linked, how they are engaged in the objectification of culture, and how they have themselves become objects of cultural theory—the target of critics who claim that despite their continuing visibility these are all institutions with questionable viability in the late twentieth century.

How and to what effect are representational and practice approaches brought together in the self-conscious production of culture? And what of the relationship between anthropology and cultural studies, between theory and ethnography, between representational knowledge and knowledge as embodied practice?

Through an analysis of the Universal Exhibition held in Seville in 1992, the themes of culture, nationality and technology are explored. *Hybrids of Modernity* pays particular attention to how 'culture' is produced and put to work by the national and corporate participants, and to the relationship between the emergence of culture as a commodity and the way in which the concept is employed in contemporary cultural theory.

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It was Laura Rival who first suggested that we go together to study Expo'92 in Seville. As Americanists we were interested in the ways in which the fifth centenary of the much disputed 'discovery' of the Americas was to be marked in this European setting. Our research was funded by the British Academy but even by the time we began the fieldwork the project had shifted from our original proposal to write an ethnography of the exhibition. Nevertheless I had by then decided to write about the exhibition in a rather different frame and began to try out the ideas at various seminars. I am very grateful to all the participants who on those occasions gave me so many constructive comments. The first tentative paper was given to the seminar of the International Centre of Contemporary Cultural Research at the Universities of Manchester and Keele and I have subsequently spoken at the Centre for Cultural Values at Lancaster; the Departments of Anthropology at University College London, Swansea and Cambridge; at the Department of Anthropology in Santa Cruz, California where I also had the opportunity to discuss some of my ideas with the graduate seminar;

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Introduction

THE WORLD AS EXHIBITION

Mitchell opens his book on ‘the peculiar methods of order that characterize the modern West’¹ with a reminder of the nature of a peculiarity prevalent in nineteenth century Europe:

Middle Eastern visitors found Europeans a curious people, with an uncontrollable eagerness to stand and stare. ‘One of the characteristics of the French is to stare and get excited at everything new’, wrote an Egyptian scholar who spent five years in Paris in the 1820s. It was perhaps this staring he had in mind when he explained in another book, discussing the manners and customs of various nations, that ‘one of the beliefs of the Europeans is that the gaze has no effect’.

(Mitchell 1988:2)

Today it is the turn of anthropologists to remark on this continuing European habit and to urge cultural theorists to consider the effects of such practice on both their actions and their theory. In a recent article on the temporality of the landscape, Ingold presents a painting by Bruegel, *The Harvesters*, to illustrate the difference between the landscape as picture, and the landscape in which people dwell:

The landscape is not a totality that you or anyone else can look *at*, it is rather the world *in* which we stand in taking up a point of view on our surroundings. And it is within the context of this attentive involvement in the landscape that the human imagination gets to work in fashioning ideas about it.

(Ingold 1993:171)

Ingold invited his readers to ‘imagine yourself set down in the very landscape depicted [by Bruegel], on a sultry August day in 1565. Standing a little way off to the right of the group beneath the tree, you are a witness to the scene unfolding about you’ (Ingold 1993b: 165). As I tried to imagine, another scene kept coming to mind, transposing the sultry August day in 1565 on to a sweltering day in August 1992 and I began to wonder what western cultural theory would lose if it were to discard the world as picture. What if our landscape were a universal exhibition rather than Bruegel’s rural scene? Or to put it another way, what happens to phenomenology when people live their world as picture? And how does this way of dwelling in the world co-exist with other ways of dwelling?

Imagine, for example, that you are witness to a scene in the Andalusian countryside. A couple sit under a tree on the edge of an olive grove. But this couple are not resting from their work as peasants, they are waiting for the bus, which arrives and carries them over the new bridge to the Island of La Cartuja, where they queue to enter the Expo’92. There they are faced with the last universal exhibition of the twentieth century,² an environment that has emerged through the activities of human beings with each other and with this arid island (Figure 1). The couple enter via the Triana gate and come across a strange structure, a façade where they had expected to find the Pavilion of Discovery. They remember reading that it had burnt down shortly before the exhibition was due to open, and that the exhibition space had become the venue for a discotheque. They head for the Pavilion of Navigation about which they have heard so much, but the queue is very long and they cannot imagine that they will get to the front before closing time, so they go instead to the Pavilion of Promise, and listen to the message of the American Evangelists. They queue to see Monaco’s aquarium, the Fujitsu three-dimensional movie and the art treasures of the Holy See. Exhausted they sit through the sound and light show in the Czech pavilion three times, relieved to be out of the sun. And so the tour continues, as they engage with the pavilions which might become sites for the acquisition of knowledge about a nation, for the acquisition or expression of desires for consumer goods, or for the acquisition of experience which can be displayed and traded in conversations or in the form of material souvenirs, sites in which to seek shelter from the heat, places to rest weary feet, opportunities to avoid the queues.

But our visitors are also aware that this environment has been carefully planned, it is the material outcome of the intentions, beliefs and values of many designers. They are interested in these plans and buy guidebooks, collect printed handouts, and talk to the hostesses and to other visitors in the queues to find out what is going on. They might engage with the reflexive ironies of the architecture, enjoy the intertextual references in some of the displays, even compare the ways in which nation states seek to present themselves. These comparisons might become the subject of their conversations, the content of their postcards home, the focus of their photographs. Or would they tell of how much they had enjoyed themselves, how they had occasionally felt bored and had returned home exhausted? Maybe. But I doubt that they returned home thinking how strange it was to see the world as exhibition.

Ingold's point on the representational model is well taken and complements Mitchell's interest in the ways in which colonial institutions (including the exhibitions) were instrumental in creating that distinction between representation and reality which came to operate as the central dualism through which the modern world is apprehended. Mitchell, following Heidegger, argues that once that distinction was in place, and reality standardly experienced as that which could be represented, as an exhibition open to the gaze of the (detached) observer, then we had moved from the 'exhibition of the world...to the world conceived as though it were an exhibition' (Mitchell 1988:13). This world is, according to Mitchell, distinguished by three key features:

First, its remarkable claim to certainty or truth: the apparent certainty with which everything seems ordered and organized, calculated and rendered unambiguous—ultimately, what seems its political decidedness. Second, the paradoxical nature of this decidedness: its certainty exists as the seemingly determined relation between representations and 'reality'; yet the real world, like the world outside the exhibition, despite everything the exhibition promises, turns out to consist only of further representations of this reality. Third, what I will refer to as its colonial nature: the age of the exhibition was necessarily the colonial age, the age of world economy and global power in



Figure 1 The island of La Cartuja
Source: Penelope Harvey

which we live, since what was to be rendered as exhibit was reality, the world itself.

(Mitchell 1988:13)

The nation state lies at the heart of this model of the world and has been a primary agent in its production and perpetuation. For, as Friedman has noted:

The formation of the nation state in Europe was a systemic regional phenomenon and the nation state has been able to set the bounds for a certain kind of thinking about social process. Concepts such as society, national economy and people are all modeled on the existence of a homogenizing national entity. Ricardo's world was no less globalized than that of the sixteenth century or the twentieth, but he could represent it in terms of autonomous social units because of the local identity units into which it was constituted.

(Friedman 1994:3)

One of the aims of this book is to consider the effects of changing conceptualizations of the social and the cultural in a world that has, according to many social theorists, moved from the modern to the postmodern, from certainty to ambiguity, to the self-conscious play with receding horizons and with paradox, to a post-colonial world in which multiculturalism refigures (and reconfirms) racial hierarchies and in which sociobiology is joined by biosociality:

If sociobiology is culture constructed on the basis of a metaphor of nature, then in biosociality, nature will be modeled on culture understood as practice. Nature will be known and remade through technique and will finally become artificial, just as culture becomes natural. Were such a project to be brought to fruition, it would stand as the basis for overcoming the nature/culture split.

(Rabinow 1992:241–2)

What is the world as exhibition in the late twentieth century? And how is such a world presented? What are the relationships between representation and reality in our contemporary world where communications technologies have complicated the distinctions that we habitually made between representations and realities, where

this relationship is itself the subject of observation, where the dualities of the world have been challenged as much by our technological capacities as by our theoretical advances? What difference does it make that we live in a world where hybrid forms can appear to offer connections, where previously natural distinctions are no longer held to be absolute? How are the new hybrids doing the work that was previously done by the practices of categorical distinction? How is cultural (contingent) difference operating through the relations once defined by racial (absolute) differences?

THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL

The global economy of the late twentieth century produces paradoxes of scale. Massive integrated systems operate through the participation of ever less integrated components. Images of coherence that characterized previous global systems no longer predominate. The impressive architectural monuments that characterized the working of nineteenth century industrialism are no longer necessary for companies whose material presence might be no more than a box of contracts, the enumeration of those people who belong, temporarily and for the duration of a particular service, to the network which generates wealth and power for another equally disparate and dispersed group of investors.³

Within the nation state, devolution and a concern to develop local community exists alongside federalization and a desire to create economies of scale, and both operate simultaneously against what are seen by people of all political persuasions as the cumbersome bureaucracies of medium-scale units. In national museums there has been a move away from a concern with universalism, to a search for more localized knowledges. The general topic of humanity is not seen as one to attract the museum visiting public, who in turn are no longer addressed even as citizens of particular nations, but are increasingly catered for as individual consumers (Macdonald 1992b, 1993a). The move from citizen to consumer is also a visible outcome of the current ways in which nation states are objectified as institutions.

Contemporary cultural theory now necessarily involves some consideration of the relationship between the global and the local. This relationship has come to encompass the social realities of the late twentieth century, at least for those involved in reflecting on and

writing about such things.⁴ In anthropological circles it is increasingly accepted that ‘all anthropology should be of the global’ (Friedman 1994:3), however localized the focus through which the ethnographer approaches the problem.⁵ Contemporary modernities are presented as the effects of various globalizing processes, generally deemed to hold common origins in the imperial drives of powerful western institutions. Thus the processes of globalization are those manifested in, for example, flows of capital and credit, the interconnections afforded by new communications technologies, the speed of travel and increased mobility of populations, the immediacy of image and the consumerist promotion of mass-produced cultural forms. However, it is also acknowledged that once we start to look at embodied subjectivity, the effects of globalization are extremely diverse. The particularity of such outcomes thus provokes questions about the interdependence of continuity and change, homogenization and fragmentation.

However, the effects of these general social processes are not only ‘out there’, they are also implicit in the intellectual practices of the theorists themselves. For example we find this contrast of scale, the global and the local, as a particular division of labour both between and within academic disciplines, between those who pay attention to the universal (the global process) and those who look at the particular (the local effect).

The theorists are concerned to discuss the effects of contemporary capitalism (particularly what is viewed as its current crisis) and the changes in subjective awareness caused by the advent of mass media and information technologies. Thus Lyotard (1984) discusses the destabilization of reality, and the subsequent changes in the nature of human experience. Baudrillard argues for the increasing importance of consumption over production and the ways in which self-referential media images cause the proliferation of the banal.⁶ Jameson (1984) discusses the joint demise of the modernist aesthetic and the bourgeois individual subject and shares with Harvey (1989) an interest in new experiences of space and time. Guattari urges us to look seriously into questions of subjectivity production in our present environment of ‘deathlike entropy’ (Guattari 1992:36).

The ethnographers do not tend to work with these kinds of generalizations but are more concerned to discuss the complexities of specific contemporary subjectivities. Thus while some of the trends identified by the social and cultural theorists might inform

their observations and even resonate with some of their findings, the pictures which they seek to produce are more textured and less categorical.⁷

The division between these two kinds of work points to a problem about the complementarity of ethnography and theory. It is a division of labour in which neither side is particularly convinced about the validity of what the other is engaged in. The theorists, presumably with greater cultural capital and less concern with their own status, tend to ignore rather than criticize ethnographic study. The distinction between the global and the local is treated as a difference in scale. The global is privileged as the more embracing, wider ranging perspective, the more complete approach which while it may be enriched with reference to the small-scale specificity of the ethnographic study, nevertheless works towards revealing the wider picture. In this view ethnography is the study of the particular (hence the terminology of the case study) while the theorists are those who produce more generalized abstractions, the context for local interactions. The ethnographers however have a different view of scale, and might in fact be more interested in how it is that parts and wholes are made to cohere, either in practice or in descriptions.⁸ They are keen to show how shifts in scale do not involve a move between levels of complexity. In this sense there can be no such thing as a small-scale society or a complex society (common terms even among anthropologists). If 'society' is a way of designating processes, then forms of sociality cannot be reduced to metaphors of size or density (Strathern 1991a: xix).

There are thus complex issues at stake in the relationship between theory and ethnography. It is not simply a matter of the relationship between universals and particulars, or a debate over whether there is any chance of a dialogue between the general theorizers and those who look at specifics.⁹ Anthropology is a discipline which has built itself around this issue after all, empirical ethnographic study constituting the comparative basis for theoretical models (western representations) of human social and cultural practice. The problem, from the anthropological side, seems to be a concern that the abstract theorizers actually produce false or meaningless generalizations because they do not ground their work in the specificity of actual lived practice but depend instead on introspection or text-based (secondary) accounts of practice. In this regard the ethnographic approach so central to

anthropological practice, is not primarily about the specificity of the small-scale, but about the accuracy of that observed and experienced at first hand, what people actually say and do, as opposed to what certain cultural critics suppose 'people' (whoever they may be) to say and do. The contrast has been described as the distinction between the phenomenological and the textual approach to cultural practice, and is sometimes evoked as the fundamental distinction between an anthropological and a cultural studies approach.¹⁰ The distinction is interesting to me given the circumstances of the Expo study which in many ways situated this work between anthropology and cultural studies in the terms discussed above.

In the first place the period of fieldwork on which this study was based was very short. Funding circumstances made prolonged participant observation impossible. In fact the project was funded so late in the day that there was no possibility of witnessing the whole event, yet alone being involved in the all-important prior stages of planning and organization. The Expo ran from April to October 1992 and we did not arrive there until late in August. In all I made three visits over the final three months of the fair and a further two trips in 1993. Obviously this was not a straightforward piece of participant observation. I found myself in a situation where the kind of research I was carrying out, while still ethnographic, was nevertheless of a kind that anthropologists tend to eschew. I was thus in a position to turn my attention, as an anthropologist, to the kind of knowledge that is generated by research methods which involve shorter term observation, less participation and more interviewing and textual analysis.

The second non-standard feature of my ethnographic practice was the research identity I adopted. Traditionally the ethnographer's research persona emerges in all its complexity, slowly, over time. The researcher expects to be taken as an outsider, as someone seeking some kind of local knowledge and marked out by their lack of understanding. Most researchers also gradually achieve relationships of inclusion as friends, family members, fellow workers, etc. Indeed many classic ethnographies begin with the tale of just how such incorporation was achieved, often by chance and without the explicit intention of the anthropologist.¹¹ Ethnographers' positioning involves the continual movement between the distance of the observer and the proximity of the participant. At the Expo these positions were confused in the sense

that most visitors arrived from other places, and were at least initially unfamiliar with the practices of the Expo site. To stand outside and observe the world as exhibition was a crucial participatory activity. By the same token, given that the Expo site was designed for rapid consumption and many visitors spent only a few days there, the possibilities for increasing proximity through participation was complicated by the brevity of such visits. As it was I adopted the guise of a journalist.¹² The obvious and immediate advantages of this position were entirely practical and included the ease of access to informants from the production teams and the speed with which the exhibition could be visited. Journalists were quite central to the workings of the exhibition. They were encouraged to gather information about the event and disseminate it around the world. There were press officers in all the main pavilions to answer questions and provide background information, the press had free access to the fair and did not have to queue to visit the individual exhibits. The centrality of the press to this event was reflected in the architecture of the Press Centre, an imposing white marble building, one of the most impressive permanent structures of the Expo site.

As would any journalist, I also used sources other than those officially provided. My access to informants was better than it might have been thanks to those chance happenings which affect the ways in which most ethnographic work is carried out. On my very first day on the site I discovered, in the process of trying to secure a press pass, that two friends were working in relatively influential positions in the Expo management. One of these friends had been employed by the Expo to ensure the participation of many of the African and South American nation states and subsequently to direct one of the main exhibition spaces. The other was responsible for liaising between a particular group of national participants and the Expo management. Through him I learnt about details of personnel, VIP visits, the organization of taxes, concessions and diplomatic work. Between them my friends made it possible for me to meet people who were not explicitly briefed to talk to the press. I thus worked openly as a journalist, I had a somewhat indirect experience of certain of the management processes through watching and talking to these friends, I had interviews and casual conversations with many different kinds of people working at the Expo and finally there was always that informal off-the-record information gleaned by simply 'hanging out', watching and listening

to what went on around me as I spent my days visiting the exhibits and sitting or walking around the exhibition site. I talked to people who had visited the exhibition and last but not least I read and watched much of the massive textual coverage of the event produced by the local, national and international media.

The status of the ethnographic observer is central to anthropological self-definitions and to adopt the role of journalist might well be seen by some as sufficient to jeopardize the production of an anthropological account. Bourdieu (1984a: 3) has identified the journalist as one who 'inhabits the borderland between scholarly and ordinary knowledge', and one who has a stake in 'blurring the frontier and denying or eliminating what separates scientific analysis from partial objectifications'. Ironically Bourdieu's formulation might well be taken as an incentive to adopt the journalistic stance by anyone worried about the unthinking imposition of the representational model with its associated detached observer. On the other hand an obvious problem with journalism is the association of the practice with a vision of the world as external reality, that which can be represented, that which presents itself as an exhibit before an observer (Mitchell 1988:29). In such practice the observing subject stands apart from the world and observes and represents but in his or her own image. But as in anthropology the journalist wants to be there, to know through experience:

While setting themselves apart...from the world as picture, Europeans also wanted to experience it as though it were the real thing. Like the visitor to an exhibition, travellers wanted to immerse themselves in the Orient and 'touch with their-fingers a strange civilisation'.... There is a contradiction between the need to separate oneself from the world and render it up as an object of representation, and the desire to lose oneself within this object-world and experience it directly; a contradiction which world exhibitions were built to accommodate and overcome.

(Mitchell 1988:29)

Anthropological practice certainly inhabits this paradox, but can use it self-consciously to develop a critical method. For while anyone reading this book can recognize the world as exhibition, it can also be recognized that others do not necessarily see the world in