### Title

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# *Book Reviews*

FEATURED REVIEW

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It is one thing to invoke global history with a wave of the hand and to theorize about all that it can do (someday) for historical scholarship; it is another thing to actually practice it. Jürgen Osterhammel's *The Transformation of the World* is, as its subtitle announces, "a global history of the nineteenth century" that seeks to provide a non-Eurocentric interpretation of what the author acknowledges was the "European Century," the era in which Europe dominated the world as in none before or since. Here we have "real, existing" global history, and as so often when theory is put into practice, the result is a mixed bag. But it is a very large bag, containing numerous nuggets offering genuine insights, novel perspectives, and unexpected juxtapositions. I wish to say at the outset that this is a serious book with much to teach the attentive reader. It is, however, much like so many works by nineteenth-century writers, a book that requires a reader with the requisite *Sitzfleisch*.

It is hard for global history to avoid being structural history. The influence of the Annales School on early modern historiography was so great that we are not surprised to find a form of structuralism return to early modern global themes via transnational and "entangled" histories and reciprocal comparison—all moves that emphasize horizontal interactions over chronological, narrative development. In contemporary historical work these strategies are also commonly accepted, since we are understandably hesitant to claim to know "the end of the story." But, if there is an historical epoch that resists structuralism and continues to offer a hospitable home to grand narrative, surely it is the nineteenth century. Here, the great themes of industrialization, the demographic transition, urbanization, nationalism, and the emancipatory processes of democratic political life all proceed through their dynamic trajectories to "transform the world."

Osterhammel's great challenge was to write a history of this transforming world in more-or-less structural terms. His book offers, as he puts it, "the portrait of an epoch," and you need to sit still to have your portrait taken. In practice, Osterhammel's approach to portrait taking is to work up a succession of sketches at the "sub-totality level" via "successive orbital paths" across his historical terrain. He begins by describing three "approaches" to his task, followed by eight "panoramas" of as many spheres of reality, and then seven interpretive essays on what he regards as the key "themes" of the era, before offering concluding reflections.

His repeated reconnoitering reveals to him a nineteenth century that itself has a structure. Its core, or *Sattelzeit*, conforms roughly to the classic Victorian age, 1830s to 1880s, and within this core Osterhammel detects an "anchor" in 1860–1880. A flexible penumbra that, depending on the topic, can reach back to the 1760s and forward to WWII and even to the present, surrounds this core. The set of forces that gave the nineteenth century its specific global characteristics were put into motion by the Seven

Years War, the Atlantic Revolutions, and "the weakening of the Asiatic empires, partly for reasons specific to each one, which for the first time caused them to fall behind Europe in military capability and in the game of power politics" (p. 59). He also sees its demise, or more correctly its dissolution, as the result of a combination of factors. The assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand does not draw the curtain on nineteenth century history for Osterhammel; not only do old institutions and mentalities continue to exert their influence for some time but, more positively, some of its prime achievements (political emancipation, especially) come to fruition only in the twentieth century.

Another way of appreciating Osterhammel's project is to see it as an attempt to analyze the nineteenth century as though one had not yet heard of its reputation—had not read the interpretations of earlier historians or absorbed the clichés and commonplaces that have circulated since the nineteenth century itself. He observes, correctly and perceptively, "Today's perceptions of the nineteenth century are still strongly marked by its own self-perception" (p. 3). This was the first century equipped (with museums, newspapers, national archives and libraries, photography) to cultivate a self-image, and this image was almost entirely Europe-based. Thus, a non-Eurocentric history of what he accepts as *the* "European century" requires both a skeptical and an inquiring mind, prepared to seek out connections, make comparisons, and follow leads without presuming to know the outcome in advance.

Proceeding in this spirit, Osterhammel offers his readers a succession of speculative insights and acute observations, indeed, more than enough for several satisfying books. But he also makes a number of fundamental interpretive decisions about how to achieve what he calls "the portrait of an epoch" that seem questionable and/or puzzling. Puzzlement may come particularly to readers with a background in economic history; in many respects the portrait of the epoch that Osterhammel fleshes out in this book's 919 pages of bare text will seem to miss something at its core, like Hamlet without the prince.

Consider his treatment of the demographic transition and the related rise of migration. Osterhammel addresses these issues under the heading of "mobilities" where he sets the demographic transition aside as a controversial and undecided issue. He focuses instead on migration, but here, again, he sets aside rural-urban migration and the intercontinental migration flows that most historians regard as fundamental to nineteenth-century transformations in favor of a "mosaic" of population displacements, with an emphasis on forced movements involving slavery, indentured servitude, penal colonies, ethnic cleansing, and contract labor. In this way mobility becomes a global phenomenon. He offers here a corrective to an exclusive focus on the voluntary migration of free labor in response to economic incentives and demographic pressures, but he also turns a set of coherent testable propositions into a mosaic of (almost) random events.

When Osterhammel turns to urbanization, in what is a particularly stimulating chapter, he concedes at the outset that there is a distinctive and important European transformation at work: in 1800 most of the world's largest cities were not European; by 1890 nearly all of them were. But he defangs the Eurocentric implication of this fact by insisting (wrongly, in my view) that urbanization was little influenced by industrialization or demographic growth but "followed a logic of its own"—an undefined logic

that exhibited a global reach (p. 249). He also argues (correctly, in my view) that the colonial cities that were so characteristic of the nineteenth century were not simply European impositions on the "outer world" and that, in fact, a great deal of "urban self-westernization" took place in these regions. He mischievously asks whether European ports oriented to colonial trade, say Dundee or Marseilles, were any less colonial cities than, say Batavia or Rangoon.

In order to argue the universality of nineteenth-century urbanization (which is certainly not supported by population data) Osterhammel must dissociate it from industrialization, and this goes to the heart of his idiosyncratic take on the nineteenth century. He turns to industry only in Chapter 12, where he declares: "it is time to decenter the industrial revolution" (p. 637). This call is no longer novel or even alarming for economic historians, but it is puzzling coming from a specialist in Chinese history, a field whose great recent historiographical contribution is the "great divergence," which turns on the epoch-making importance of the industrial revolution. Osterhammel has surprisingly little to say about the great divergence concept except that it is mysterious (p. 650), as, indeed, it must be if nineteenth century industrialization is decentered.

Even if one thought modern industry had little to do with the great divergence, one might still be curious about the epochal rise in living standards experienced by part of the world and not by the rest in the course of the nineteenth century. Osterhammel does not ignore this issue, but he is skeptical that statistical measures of income growth reveal what is most important about living standards and social perceptions of well-being. Thus, he relativizes the great divergence at every point, ultimately arguing that mortality was the best indicator of living standards and fell by very little in rich and poor countries alike since, "in many respects the medical history of the nineteenth century belongs to the ancien régime" (p. 194). Despite this he claims that nineteenth-century people everywhere managed to improve their material circumstances of life. Osterhammel devotes a chapter of 73 pages to the topic of living standards without making a great deal of headway.

Osterhammel's chief problem with ascribing importance to industrial development is that even by 1920 it was not global—there were only a few genuine industrial societies in his nineteenth century. The limited diffusion of modern industry until the mid-twentieth century is, of course, a familiar theme; in the course of the nineteenth century it came to define the terms on which the world's societies interacted with each other. For many writers, explaining industry's limited reach is to explain something fundamental about the nineteenth-century world. But Osterhammel believes it necessary to explain it away: industry couldn't be important because urbanization occurred both with and without it (p. 249); non-industrial states managed to secure modern armaments and become proficient in their use (p. 486); the [German] historical school's institutional definition of capitalism is preferable to that of Marx, wrongly focused as it was on the rise of factory industry and the proletariat (p. 668); indeed, the rise of free labor is much exaggerated—the nineteenth century labor force long remained one dominated by various forms of extra-economic coercion (p. 707). In short, Osterhammel goes to considerable lengths to put "the rise of modern industry" back in its box. This cannot be a defining feature of his global nineteenth century.

Nor, it appears, can the "rise of the bourgeoisie" define this era for Osterhammel. It was a century of empire more than of nation-states and of monarchy more than

democracy. Social groupings with an international reach included aristocracies, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and Jewish high finance, but otherwise, he asserts, "social history has no narrative structures that surpass the nation" (p. 751). In an original and persuasive chapter on "Hierarchies" he argues that nineteenth century middle classes "all around the word . . . recognized one another by their wish to be modern" (p.771). But, just as Marx's vision of proletarian internationalism crashed on the shoals of war and nationalism, so the utopian vision of bourgeois cosmopolitanism—the shared ideals of virtue and respectability of a classical bourgeoisie—ultimately came to naught. What took its place after the ruins of the twentieth century's world wars was something quite different, and quite inferior: a global middle class defined by consumption practices. In short, the ideals of the German *Bildungsburgertum* yielded tragically to the reality of the global *Genussmensch*.

Frontier and settlement movements are often subjected to comparative treatment in nineteenth-century history and Osterhammel gives them considerable emphasis. In his view the urban-rural binary that dominates history in earlier time gives way to a city-frontier binary. The frontier is in the periphery, but in the nineteenth century it is neither peripheral nor passive. Indeed, a frontier for a time became major foci of the historical dynamics of the age (more important than industrialization), and nowhere was this truer than in the United States. Osterhammel makes the familiar comparisons of the United States with South Africa and Russian Siberia, but he finds that comparative frontier analyses have their limits. America, he concludes, was truly exceptional (p. 331). He is unapologetic in his appreciation of the insights of Frederick Jackson Turner. It is regrettable that he did not take up the recent work of James Belich, who argues that the distinctive frontier settlement process of a London-New York focused "Anglosphere" differed fundamentally from frontier processes elsewhere in the nineteenth century world, and shaped it in distinctive ways.[1] Belich's argument is a challenge to the spirit of global history (and to American exceptionalism), to be sure, but he supplies an explanation of the frontier's nineteenth-century dynamism that Osterhammel's account lacks.

There is far more that is worthy of discussion and debate in this volume rich to overflowing with insights and surprising observations. Not a few of these surprises derive from the fact that the author observes the world from his perch in Central Europe. It is a peculiar characteristic of global history as a movement that a large majority of its practitioners write in English and have an Anglo-American educational background. Osterhammel's German points of orientation allow him to see the British Empire's nineteenth century achievements in a different (and very positive) light than most; perhaps it also disposes him to favor an historical approach that decenters war as the cause of the nineteenth century's sudden death. But I would not push this interpretation too far; more important in accounting for this book's stimulating but sometimes peculiar arguments are the ecumenical habits of mind of its author. This book is global in its historical aspirations, but is very much a personal statement.

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[1] James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth. The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009).