



Jürgen Osterhammel. *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts.* Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2009. 1568 pp. EUR 49.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-406-58283-7.



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The sheer extent of this book--1,300 pages of text, 120 of footnotes, 100 of bibliography, weighing in at 3.5 pounds--reveals the author's aspirations to write a truly global history of the nineteenth century. The global reach of the work is not limited to geography. Offering both broad overviews and detailed investigations, Jürgen Osterhammel discusses forms of the state, the nature and development of international relations, political movements and political contentions, long-term economic trends and short-range economic cycles, population movements, social institutions and social structures, standards of living and the lives of labor, education, high culture, science, and scholarship--a palette of topics emerging from the background of the development of the historical social sciences in Germany over the past four decades, the recent discussions about world history in English-speaking countries, and the Annales School's aspirations towards an *histoire totale*. The mention of the Annales in this context is no coincidence: this book is very much a nineteenth-century version of Fernand

Braudel's global history of the years 1500-1800, *Material Civilization and Capitalism* (1979). Osterhammel, an admirer of Braudel's work, admittedly takes as much space to deal with one century as Braudel needed for three. I, at least, think that it was thoroughly worth the effort both for the author to write that much and for the reader to absorb it all, because the work interprets the nineteenth century very convincingly as a crucial era of change and transition and an age of the "transformation of the world," as the title states.

Such a total history calls out for a total review--an impossibility, even in the generous amount of space H-German offers its contributors. In what follows, I will have to limit myself to a just a few facets of the book. In particular, I will discuss some of the book's structuring features, its account of economic developments, its treatment of politics, its placement of central Europe in a global framework, and the difficulties experienced when one author tackles the entire world over a century and more. Praise and admiration will be mixed with critical observations, but at the

beginning I should state my overall opinion: the book is a tour de force, rich in detail and challenging in interpretation, a work that deserves the widest possible readership.

The global sweep of the book is deeply impressive, whether Osterhammel is describing New Delhi as the quintessence of nineteenth-century urban planning, comparing the administration of the Raj with that of the late Ming Dynasty, the Taiping Rebellion with both the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the Mormons, the treatment of the indigenous population of North America with that of South Africa, transatlantic with transpacific migrations, or perceiving the nineteenth century as disastrous era for nomadic, tribal peoples throughout the world. Sometimes the unavailability of sources or scholarship places limitations on his account. A discussion of lower-class standards of living in the nineteenth century includes the observation that no evidence survives about the lives of the African poor. Osterhammel notes that a global history of childhood and old age would be a desideratum, but that research for it is lacking. Europe occupies a crucial position in Osterhammel's account, but it is hard to disagree with his assertion that in the nineteenth century, Europe and its settler extensions in North America and the South Pacific held a central and dominant position in global affairs, one not seen before or since.

A particular strength of the book is precisely its approach to its global aspirations. The author discusses truly global phenomena, very apparent in his account of economic development or migration, and has many clever and insightful comparisons between different regions of the earth. He also notes the simultaneity of occurrences at different points on the globe, but carefully distinguishes, as altogether too many practitioners of world history do not, between simultaneous events occurring independently around the world and global developments with common causes. If I had a criticism of the global approach it might

be that the author sometimes privileges global interconnections over more local ones. The excellent discussion of migration prioritizes long-distance travel, although short-distance rural-urban migration involved many more people and had very considerable effects for urbanization and urban social structure. In the very clear account of the one major period of Great Power warfare during the nineteenth century in the years 1853-71, Osterhammel emphasizes the Crimean War—certainly the most global of the encounters, but not necessarily the most significant for the development of the strategy and technology of armed conflict or for the balance of power.

Another strength of the work lies in its chronology. Working from Eric Hobsbawm's idea of a "long nineteenth century," Osterhammel expands it by bringing together three different concepts of periodization. He describes an initial period of transition from the Old Regime to the modern world, 1770-1830, based on Reinhart Koselleck's conception of a *Sattelzeit*. Then, he identifies a core or "eigentlich" nineteenth century, beginning around 1830 and running through the 1880s, borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon conception of a Victorian era. Finally, following the transitional decade of the 1880s, Osterhammel sees a long *fin de siècle*, starting c. 1890, but not concluding until the early 1920s. The discussion and justification for this chronology, carefully noting global trends and regional exceptions, coming early on the volume, helps structure the following complex and detailed accounts.

One very distinct feature of the book is its abstract nature. The publisher provides no illustrations, maps, or graphs, and just a handful of charts. Even more noticeable is that contemporaries have no voice: I counted a grand total of four quotations from individuals of the era: one each from Thomas Paine and Leopold von Ranke and two from Max Weber. In this respect, the work is very different from Braudel's, and it is impossible to imagine a historical work of compara-

ble length in an English-speaking country, published by a major commercial publisher, written in such an abstract fashion. Even other German academics—one need only think of the major works of synthesis of Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Thomas Nipperdey, or Heinrich August Winkler—do not carry abstraction to such an extreme. A book written in this style needs to be carried by the author's voice, and Osterhammel manages this difficult task extremely well. He provides some almost lyrical passages; my personal favorite is a description of the distance between the nineteenth century and the present: "Manchmal ist es uns fern, manchmal sehr nah; oft ist es die Vorgeschichte der Gegenwart; zuweilen versunken wie Atlantis" (p. 17). Brilliant apodictic insights—such as "kein Staat ist 'modern' ohne Kataster und ohne rechtlich frei disponibles Grundeigentum" (p. 173), or the observation that geography, rather than Orientalism or anthropology, was the characteristic imperialist science and elegant exposition carry the reader smoothly across the vast expanse of text.

This abstract style and the lack of contemporaries' voices also reveal large areas of human endeavor not covered by the author. Artistic, intellectual, and scientific trends get rather short shrift. To be sure, they are not completely neglected: a fascinating passage traces the worldwide spread of European opera. Institutions of secondary and higher education and the development of the structures of scientific research are portrayed in detailed accounts, but artistic and scientific trends—Impressionism and Darwinism, for instance, to mention two such nineteenth-century trends of truly global scope—receive little or no attention.

In contrast, a central focus of the book is economics. More than anything else, it was substantial economic growth—in Europe and its overseas extensions, at least—that made up the nineteenth-century transformation of the world. The usual suspect here is the Industrial Revolution, but Os-

terhammel is skeptical, noting both the very limited extent of industrialization in a worldwide context, and citing the recent research that has ascertained relatively slow rates of economic growth during the key decades of England's industrialization. Rather, his focus is on the expansion of trade and commerce on a global scale as the key to nineteenth-century economic dynamism.

This focus on commerce and de-emphasis of industrialization extends over wide sections of the book. The fascinating discussion of port cities as a distinct type of urbanization, and the accounts of harbors and shipping, for instance, offer one example; the lengthy investigation of international flows of labor, another. The author's excellent account of the creation and working of the gold standard covers a very important topic, especially as the pre-1914 decades marked a high point in international commercial and financial flows, a proportional level of global output not equaled again until the 1960s, but rarely considered in most textbook accounts. In the author's discussion of nineteenth-century forms of labor, the seemingly obvious candidate, factory work, receives little mention, while detailed accounts of both canal-building and plantation agriculture are included. Somewhat surprisingly, in discussing changes in agriculture, the author primarily covers the growth in crop yields, and the opening of virgin lands to cultivation (the two are confusingly conflated) while neglecting the very considerable increase in regional specialization—a distinctly trade-related development that made a very large contribution, possibly even larger than the increase in crop yields, to the growth of agricultural productivity.

A problem emerges from this emphasis on trade: namely, what made the nineteenth century different from the eighteenth, itself an age of rapid expansion of global commerce? Osterhammel is keenly aware of this problem and argues that the nineteenth century's distinguishing characteristics included the increase in global trade of

mass commodities and not just luxury goods, growing global integration of markets, and a global division of labor. Of course, these developments were prominent in the eighteenth century as well. A particular difficulty for the author's global approach is his endorsement of three conclusions of recent economic history research--that output, productivity, and standards of living around 1800 were as high in India and China as in Europe; that the initial decades of industrialization did not produce any particular acceleration of the rate of economic growth; and that by the middle of the nineteenth century, output and standards of living in Europe had increased greatly, while those in Asia had stagnated. It is hard to see how all of these conclusions can simultaneously be correct. I suspect that historians are substantially overestimating eighteenth-century Asian affluence, but it is a very much a virtue of Osterhammel's global approach that it brings the conjunction of these questions to the fore.

The author's revision of the standard picture through a global approach also appears in his account of government and politics. Here, the usual nineteenth-century suspects are nationalism and democracy, but the author gives them short shrift. The idea of the nineteenth century as a global age of nationalism is described as an obsession of Franco-German historians; as late as 1910, Osterhammel perceives only three completely formed nation-states: France, Germany, and Japan. The era of the nation-state, according to him, is found in the post-World War I twentieth century; the nineteenth century was the age of empire.

The discussion of the development of and the forms and consequences of empire make up a very large portion of the work. It is quite clear that the author, rather unlike most central European intellectuals, holds a considerable admiration for the British Empire. He sees it as benevolent global hegemon, a crucial organizing force in creating a global market, and a largely peaceful system of international relations. While not deny-

ing the many coercive elements of the empire--his discussions of, for instance, the Opium Wars, the 1857 Indian uprising, or the Boer War are explicit and detailed--Osterhammel tends to see British rule in more interactive terms. He emphasizes the cooperation of the imperial administration and indigenous elements, bringing out the fundamentally benign nature of Britannia's sway. This stance appears in the modest-sounding claim that the empire never used genocide as an instrument of policy but found in the emancipation of slaves and the end to the slave trade a source of strength.

Due to this view, the author tends to downplay the economically exploitative elements of British imperialism in particular and imperialism more generally, pointing to possibilities for cooperation between colonial subjects and ruling Europeans. He includes a most interesting discussion of the rapid economic development of the Chinese city of Hankow in the nineteenth century, on its own initiative, in spite of imperialism. More broadly, Osterhammel perceives the origins of the recent rise of East Asia in the world economy in the development of Chinese mercantile networks in the nineteenth century, not thwarted by European imperial powers and in some ways facilitated by them. It is interesting that in all his discussion of imperialism, the author never once mentions the Lenin-Hobson thesis, even if only to reject it.

Another element of Osterhammel's high opinion of the British Empire is his invidious comparison of it with the United States as global hegemon. The British were more a "gendarme of the seas" than the "world's policeman"; they were restrained and measured in their use of force, quite unlike the tendency of the United States to use massive military force at an early stage in a confrontation. This judgment of the United States testifies, I would say, to the book's origination in the years 2001-05, a point also apparent in rather hyperbolic judgments about the *longue durée* of U.S.

history, such as the idea that the United States has been fundamentally protectionist since the 1860s (a particularly astonishing assertion, coming from a citizen of an European Union country), or that it has been in the throes of one long continuous religious revival since the Second Great Awakening.

Osterhammel's skepticism about nationalism is matched by his doubts concerning the nineteenth-century rise of democracy. A global history of the long nineteenth century could hardly neglect 1776, 1789, and even 1848, and Osterhammel does have a section on the age of the Atlantic revolutions, but he does not see their consequences primarily in the spread of democracy or republicanism. The republican form of government was almost entirely limited to the Americas until 1914, when monarchies--about which the author incorporates a section filled with interesting observations--remained the dominant form of government. Even universal manhood suffrage remained an exception before 1914, and countries nominally practicing it often employed various forms of racial exception and exclusion. Continuing in this iconoclastic mode, Osterhammel perceives the late-nineteenth-century women's movement as the largest and most important form of international political organization, considerably overshadowing the socialists--a judgment I find hard to endorse.

The significance of the revolutions in his work is primarily in terms of their contribution to the broader trend of emancipation: the end to serfdom and slavery, a point underscored by his description of Abraham Lincoln as "die größte weltgeschichtliche Persönlichkeit des 19. Jahrhunderts" (p. 796). More broadly, Osterhammel sees trends towards equality of rights and the rule of law--often, but not always, connected with constitutionalism--as the most important political developments of the century. He describes both their rise but also the increasing threat to them due to the development of racist ideas in the late nine-

teenth and early twentieth centuries--a trend he connects to the growth of democratic politics.

The development of a *Rechtsstaat* is, of course, a major theme of nineteenth-century German history and H-German readers might wonder how the author treats central Europe in a global context. He does this primarily in terms of exceptionalism, almost a *Sonderweg*, although the differences he delineates between central Europe and the rest of the world are far from the assertions of the *Sonderweg* thesis. One distinction, already noted, is the major role of nationalism in an age of empire. Osterhammel's concept of German nationalism, though, is not quite so innovative. Comparing German and Italian national unification, Osterhammel notes the considerable difficulties foreign rule posed for Italian national unification, while in Germany "bloß der Einfluss des habsburgischen Kaisers zurückgedrängt werde" (p. 591). Seeing the Habsburg monarch as a foreign ruler is, of course, a concept of nineteenth-century *kleindeutsch* nationalism, and it is surprising that an author with the most innovative and up-to-date global orientation could adopt, seemingly unquestionably, a very partisan position on nineteenth-century German nationalism. Another instance of German exceptionalism, this one seen in a very positive light, is Osterhammel's description of the high quality of German secondary education and universities, and their role as a global model. Continuing along the lines of exceptionalism, although in this respect not limited exclusively to central Europe, is the book's discussion of heavy industry. Osterhammel notes that Germany, along with the United Kingdom and the United States, was responsible for 80 percent of the world's coal production in 1910, as well as a similar proportion of steel output. These three countries were the only ones even remotely deserving the characterization as "industrial societies" around 1900, an idea fitting in nicely with the author's downplaying of the global role of industrialization during the long nineteenth century.

Writing an enormous global history offers a profound challenge to a single individual, and, inevitably some errors of fact will creep into such a work. I will note a few that I came across: Benjamin Disraeli was not "jüdischen Glaubens," as the author asserts; pre-industrial Sweden did not have a high illiteracy rate--quite the opposite; the Vatican was not incorporated into an Italian republic in 1870, and Mahatma Gandhi definitely did not support the British Empire during the Second World War. A particularly large number of mistakes concern the United States. The description of New York City as situated on the West Coast must be a typo, but Osterhammel assigns Charleston to Virginia and the title of "porcopolis" [sic] to Chicago; he puts the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1861 and has General Custer defeated by the Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890. The three hundred kilometers that the author asserts the Great Plains extend between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains would not suffice to get one from St. Louis to Kansas City. None of these mistakes in any way undermine the author's account, but they do underscore the heroic efforts involved when one academic tries to encompass the entire world.

"Heroic" is, in fact, not a bad one-word characterization of this book. It is a remarkable endeavor, worthy of the widest possible readership. Currently in its fourth printing, *Die Verwandlung der Welt* has done very well in Germany, combining commercial success with very favorable reviews. It has already acquired quite a buzz in the United States, and at the last German Studies Association meeting it was a frequent topic of discussion. I would urge all central Europeanists to gain access to a copy, both to expand their intellectual horizons on a global scale, but also to gain a new impression of the place of Germany in the nineteenth-century world. The book is a lot to get through but in contrast to most academic tones, it is both intellectually stimulating and enjoyable, making it eminently suitable for bedside or beach reading. Reading this work might encourage his-

torians of Germany to think globally; it has a lot to offer a broader audience of historians in the United States where interest in world history, both in college teaching and in shaping historical research, is steadily increasing. It would be regrettable if, for linguistic reasons, the book's Anglophone audience remained restricted to historians of Germany. Unfortunately, the current rise in interest in world history seems to be coinciding with a fall in ability to read foreign languages. It is hard to see a translation of this book appearing with a commercial publisher today, as *Material Civilization and Capitalism* did thirty years ago. But perhaps a university press out there is daring enough to attempt a multivolume English-language edition. The Braudel of the nineteenth century deserves no less.

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