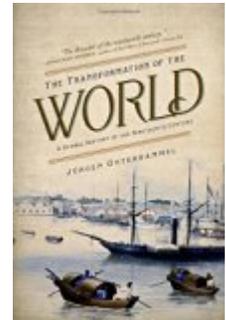




**Jürgen Osterhammel.** *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. xxii + 1167 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-14745-1.



**Reviewed by** Patrick Manning

**Published on** H-World (July, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Aaron D. Whelchel (Washington State University-Vancouver)

The nineteenth century is the most densely studied period in world history. Jürgen Osterhammel has given us the densest and arguably the most closely reasoned volume yet on this period. Osterhammel came to this task as a generalist in the history of empire, decolonization, and globalization—and as a specialist in the interaction of Qing China and Britain in the nineteenth century. The volume, *The Transformation of the World*, traces change on many fronts, providing large-scale historical lessons but stopping short of offering any dominant historical message. The author draws mostly on the literature in English and German, though he also relies on works in other languages. He is a historian of imperial politics, able to speak with authority on matters of economic, cultural, and social change. His impressive notes and bibliography show the range of resources on which world historians can now rely.

The book appeared in 2009 in German and immediately became a big seller; in addition to this English translation, it has been translated into several other languages. At 900 pages of text, it is

a weighty tome. But it appears readers have been able to get pleasure out of it, in part because the big arguments are broken into small-size stories that are told within a half-dozen pages.

After a brief introduction (to which I shall return), Osterhammel begins the book with three substantial introductory chapters, providing commentaries on the issues of memory, time, and space in the nineteenth century. The first of these, on “memory and self-observation,” reviews archives, libraries, museums, exhibitions, and encyclopedias as institutions; the social reportage of literary and travel writing and mapping; and the expansion of newspapers and photography. These resources of memory focused most heavily on relatively wealthy sections of the world, but almost no place was neglected. Then—asking “when was the nineteenth century?”—Osterhammel addresses calendars, the construction of such epochs and turning points as “the early modern,” “age of revolution,” and “fin de siècle,” as well as the ubiquitous application of chronometers. Turning to “where was the nineteenth century?” Osterham-

mel explores the naming and renaming of places, new systems of mapping, land and sea as spaces—and the interplay of territoriality, diaspora, and borders. The framework, in sum, is critical, multi-dimensional, and reflective.

Osterhammel next turns to eight “panorama” chapters, followed by seven chapters of “themes.” For the panoramic chapters, each presents a broadly cast narrative, addressing much if not all of the world. The thematic chapters focus on large topics that are discussed in specific and discrete terms. As the author argues, “Moving on from ‘panoramas’ to ‘themes,’ the book shifts the weight from synthesis to analysis” (pp. xxi-xxii). The panoramas address mobilities, living standards, cities, imperial systems, international orders, revolutions, and conclude with the state—thus giving quite substantial attention to global political history but allowing for attention to economic and social issues. The thematic chapters balance the political emphasis of the panoramas with more attention to economic, cultural, technological, and social issues. In order, those chapters address energy and industry, labor, networks, hierarchies, knowledge, civilization and exclusion, and religion.

Of the panorama chapters, chapter 5 centers on living standards: it conveys complex fluctuations but ultimate improvement in health and, perhaps, in welfare. In industrial areas, the factory system worsened health, but urban investment in sewers and clean water improved health. Pasteur’s theory of microbes was an advance, but tuberculosis, smallpox, plague, and cholera took heavy tolls. Agricultural productivity and especially international trade in foodstuffs grew, but recurring poverty and famine struck some areas. The chapter ends with department stores and restaurants. The eighth chapter, subtitled “The Persistence of Empires,” makes a clear argument that empires, rather than nations, were the leading form of polity during the century. In a set of enumerated points (pp. 422-24), he contrasts em-

pires and nations typologically, observing that, while nations had some success in Europe, in Asia politics was systematically dominated by empires. The following chapter portrays the development of an international order between two world wars—the Seven Years War and the Great War—though it focuses mostly on the late nineteenth century.

Thematic chapters are somewhat more specific. The chapter on labor begins with rural labor in India, then turns to exploring variegated workplaces of the nineteenth century, from rural to urban, including the great public works of canals and railroads. Then Osterhammel focuses on the steady expansion of wage labor, or “free labor,” until it came to be seen as the natural form of work. The chapter on networks explores expanding networks in communications (as with steamships, railroads, and telegraphic cables), and in money and finance, where he traces the standardization of monetary forms, the markets for silver and gold, and the expansion of capital and debt. The chapter on knowledge includes an excellent section on the expansion and transformation of universities during the century, focusing on the professionalization of the humanities but giving little emphasis to the natural sciences and their place in the world order. In an aptly titled chapter on “civilization and exclusion,” Osterhammel argues that “the language of civilization and civilizing was the dominant idiom of the nineteenth century” (p. 835). The chapter provides a thorough analysis of emancipation, although it underemphasizes the dramatic expansion of slavery in Africa and Asia in the late nineteenth century, which is being reemphasized in recent research.

In his introduction, Osterhammel compares his book with C. A. Bayly’s *Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914*.<sup>[1]</sup> Osterhammel’s nineteenth century does not have the precise end points of Bayly’s volume, but his discussions arguably push beyond the dates that Bayly chose. Indeed, Oster-

hammel places his own interpretation and that of Bayly in a single category of studies emphasizing a “horizontal” or “lateral” approach (exploring connections and comparisons around the world), as contrasted with the “vertical” or temporal focus of narrative in earlier interpretations of world history by John Roberts and Eric Hobsbawm.[2] As to the differences between his own work and that of Bayly, Osterhammel argues that Bayly’s approach, while ranging widely across issues, focuses on a “master narrative” tracing the growth of uniformity throughout the world up to 1914. Osterhammel argues that, instead, his *Transformation* offers a set of “grand narratives”—in effect, his panoramas—of subsystems in human experience, referring to Braudel as he does so. Osterhammel acknowledges that he is “perhaps a little more ‘Eurocentrically’ inclined than Bayly” (p. xvii), yet argues that “why Europe?” is *not* the big question of his book. Thus, he formally eschews exceptionalism, setting as his goal “to measure again, on a case-by-case basis, the gap between ‘Europe’ ... and other parts of the world” (p. xxi).

In sum, I find the book to be an effective overview of the world history literature as it now exists. The author has demonstrated the ability to draw comprehensively on the literature for many topics and regions for his long nineteenth century, and has articulated it in accounts of many large-scale issues. The book presents a multifaceted narrative of approaches, panoramas, and themes. It reaches back before 1800 to trace the origins of the nineteenth-century world, but puts more effort into showing consequences for the twentieth century. The author invites readers to skip about and read chapters in any order they choose, so that the nineteen chapters of fifty pages each are set on a par with one another.

Nevertheless Osterhammel, like the field of world history as a whole, has underemphasized social history, leaving readers with a view of the past that exaggerates elite initiatives as the source of change. Osterhammel takes on this question

quite directly in his chapter on hierarchies. As he argues it, the variations in social conditions, in political frameworks and law, make it difficult to develop generalizations about social history at the level of the nation, and more so at the levels of civilizations or the world. Therefore, he argues, “to embark on a social history of the *world* for a whole century would be the height of presumption” (p. 746). Despite the strength of this statement, Osterhammel does not entirely eschew social history: the remainder of the chapter explores historiography in social history, the decline of aristocracies, and the rise of bourgeois and quasi-bourgeois.

It remains a curious fact that there is so little communication between world history and social history, despite both fields (especially social history) growing so substantially during the past half-century. Social historians have not found ways to trace the global implications of their local analyses; world historians have not found effective ways of including the findings of social history in their analyses or syntheses so that the bottom-up view of world history is not systematically in tension with the imperial outlook.[3] The relative brevity of Osterhammel’s discussions on Africa and Latin America, as compared with Europe, North America, and Asia, reflects world-historical bias in favor of initiative from the centers of power and fits with the strengths of the published literature.

The changes of the nineteenth-century world were unquestionably massive. How are we to interpret these changes? Bayly chose to focus on a common symptom (if not the cause) of change: the greater uniformity that had appeared in so many aspects of society worldwide by 1914. Osterhammel has focused mainly on the processes of change and on the agents of change. He is willing to advance certain specific causes of change at the level of his panoramas but not yet for world history as a whole. Two basic patterns of change come up for discussion in his analyses. In the first, lead-

ing influences, visible especially in Europe, have the agency to change the world, and to do so relatively rapidly. In the second, the interaction of structures and agencies transforms the world, moving more slowly. Osterhammel gives attention to both of these patterns, but his chapters on living standards and especially on empires give the edge to agency. If this is correct, then he is right to write a history of the nineteenth century that does much to set up the problems of the twentieth century. If, on the other hand, the processes of change in health, politics, and ideology are more dependent on structure, we may also need a history of the nineteenth century that looks back to the eighteenth century and previous times, to provide a basis for understanding our own time.

What will the audience take from this volume? Readers in German, English, and other languages will find insightful comparisons, beginning with operas in China and Italy in the eighteenth century, and continuing with cities, labor organizations, diseases, and libraries, in a way that shows the century as a kaleidoscope of varied processes. I think readers may end up concluding that world history is a serious, complex, and not entirely mysterious field of study, and that it demonstrates the influence of one age on another and even the ways in which regions influence one another.

At the end of the book, Osterhammel wraps up with a list of five characteristics of the nineteenth century and supports them with brief commentary. The century was an “age of *asymmetrical efficiency growth*,” as reflected in growing productivity, the opening of new frontiers, and the increased efficiency of armed forces. *Mobility*, the second characteristic, grew in scale, in the technical innovations supporting migration, and the infrastructure supporting migration. Third was the “tendency to *asymmetrical reference density*,” the flow of ideas and cultural content, through which both the West and the East learned much about each other. The *tension between equality and hi-*

*erarchy* centered on the expanding recognition of legal equality in Europe, and on its tension with hierarchies in other parts of the world and the new hierarchy of great powers. Fifth, this was “a century of *emancipation*,” in which numerous emancipation projects advanced, but in which imperialism and colonialism stunted its expansion. These generalizations, plausible though of course debatable, should give readers nutritious food for thought in reflecting on their past.

#### Notes

[1]. C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World. Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

[2]. John M. Roberts, *Twentieth Century: The History of the World, 1901 to 2000* (New York: Viking, 1999); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* (New York: New American Library, 1962), *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987).

[3]. For my further observations on this point, see Patrick Manning, “Locating Africans on the World Stage: A Problem in World History,” *Journal of World History* 26 (2015): 605-637.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-world>

**Citation:** Patrick Manning. Review of Osterhammel, Jürgen. *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*. H-World, H-Net Reviews. July, 2016.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42123>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.