



Jürgen Osterhammel. *Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia.* Translated by Robert Savage. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 696 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-17272-9.

Reviewed by Dilip Menon (University of Witwatersrand)

Published on H-Asia (September, 2019)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Unfabling the East?

This book on the landscape of European thinking on Asia in the Age of the Enlightenment examines the prehistory of the emergence of European exceptionalism from the nineteenth century. Jürgen Osterhammel is at pains to show that the engagement of French, German, and Russian travelers, philosophers, and missionaries with “Asia” cannot be understood through a model of “autistic discourse”—of Europe talking to itself by transposing its categories on foreign lands—alone (p. 10). The invisible interlocutor here is, of course, Edward Said, understood in a reductive and simplistic manner and engaged with through a veritable avalanche of empirical information that overwhelms the reader over more than six hundred pages. Said’s argument about the ideological paradigm that he called Orientalism was that European knowledge about the “‘East’” was a product neither of navel-gazing fantasy nor about native intellectual passivity. Said’s book *Orientalism* having been written in 1978 is remembered now more through its misrecognition in public discourse than its textured rigor and sweep of its arguments.

Asia itself is disaggregated in the book under review, *Unfabling the East*, taking in Arabo-Persian Islam, India, Southeast Asia, China, Mediterranean Islam, Central Asia, and the Ottoman Empire. However, the categories of both “Europe” and “Enlightenment” are taken for granted, given the author’s belief in the concreteness of these very unstable concepts. Recent work on

the Enlightenment moves toward historicizing the idea itself and looks at non-European actors around the world who produced different understandings, emphasizing the contextual usage of ideas. That said, the book is a wide-ranging discussion of sources, trawling through a plethora of genres across a period of two hundred years. The trajectory of the book moves from the period 1680-1730, “the heroic age of Asian travel,” to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s dyspeptic lectures of 1822 on history that saw little to admire in Asia or Africa. An earlier romance with Asia ended, and the “unfabled East became the lectured, harried, and ultimately vanquished East” (p. 32).

In the seventeenth century, Asia was seen as the motherland of civilization, and into the next century, the history of the Mediterranean, for example, was seen as constituted through the influence of Huns, Mongols, Tartars, and Arabs. Osterhammel argues that until the late eighteenth century, “almost nobody” believed that European predominance “might have a biological or racial foundation” (p. 59). In the case of William Jones and Johann Gottfried Herder, their work could be said to have been characterized by an “inclusive Eurocentrism” (p. 65). Such instances as Denis Diderot’s and Edmund Burke’s critiques of European conquerors, Montesquieu’s technique of “contextual alienation” in *Persian Letters* (1721), or Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi’s use of China to critique Eurocentrism were cases of a differ-

ent engagement (p. 73).

Travel seemed to be oriented in one direction. While only about twenty thousand South Asians reached Britain between 1600 and 1857, there were “floods of Europeans flowing in the other direction” (p. 141). This is presented as a neutral fact to account for the paucity of travelers’ accounts by Asians (Mirza Abu Taleb’s travels to Britain in 1799-1803 being an exception), without consideration of broader geopolitics. Osterhammel argues that once the age of Christopher Columbus, James Cook, and Louis Antoine de Bougainville were over, Europeans began to explore the world by land. There were some parts of Asia that were traveled to more than others; because of the Jesuits, “China was as well known to Europe as France” by the mid-eighteenth century (p. 116). The same was true of Iran, because of the open border policy of the Safavid Empire and the fact that it was the gateway both to ocean and land. However, Korea, large tracts of the Ottoman Empire (Libya, Yemen), and Japan after the suppression of Christianity were less visited and written about. Private globetrotters flooded the Mediterranean near east in the second half of the seventeenth century and India in the early nineteenth. The iconic figure was Gemelli Careri who journeyed around the world between 1693 and 1698, taking in Mexico and China, using scheduled transportation services. And there was, of course, Chateaubriand, traveling through Venice, Athens, and Tunis, remarking blithely that “I have always purloined something from monuments where I happened to pass by” (p. 125). Private travel was being transformed “into an instrument of public or private officialdom” by the eighteenth century and there was a slow move away from the “accounts of adventurers” (p. 133). For instance, the tsarist exploration policy of Kamchatka means that Johann Georg Gmelin and Gerhard Friedrich Mueller clocked close to thirty thousand kilometers in the service of the empire.

By the late eighteenth century, “the last unicorn had fled” with the progressive disenchantment of the world, and the observations of the private traveler gave way to empiricism and description, the privileging of the eyewitness over the “earwitness” (pp. 173, 181). The skepticism expressed by Louis Castillon when he asked in 1769 “what if the people of Asia were staging a great gigantic theatrical performance for their European audience?” became an exemplar for the period (p. 183). The process of purification from prejudice and random observation were to give way to James Mill’s apodictic and ill-informed judgment on India, which were exalted by the fact that he had never been to India, therefore presum-

ably maintaining an objectivity of a higher order. Officials and respondents who did travel abroad were in the service of emerging imperial powers, like the Dutch and English, and an “apodemics” or a methodization of academic travel emerged with questionnaires on specific themes (p. 188).

Travel literature began to be collected as empires moved to systematic and strategic information for reasons of rule: Richard Hakluyt’s *History of Journeys* was published in twenty-one volumes between 1747 and 1774 in Leipzig (p. 212). A process of “re-écriture” began as a class of “literary middlemen” began processes of “deletion and insertion, rearrangement and paraphrase, commentary, translation, and incorporation of supplementary matter” (p. 235). Sometimes, as in the case of Johann and George Foster’s editions, the annotations and translations were more erudite than the originals! Until as late as the eighteenth century, Asia was seen positively as a “continent of revolutions”: the coups in the Ottoman Empire, the ousting of the pro-European prime minister in Siam, and the fall of the Sultanate of Golkonda as much as the enlightened absolutism of Haidar Ali in Mysore being viewed as signs of vital, historical societies (p. 285).

The idea of the savage and the barbarian began to acquire nuance over time. For instance, savages were seen earlier as peoples that lacked law, religion, and morals. Montesquieu, Adam Ferguson, and others introduced the sociological idea of technology and the division of labor laying the ground for the savage as a stage rather than merely a state. Barbarism came to acquire a definite connotation. The Tartars of Inner Asia in their “endless expanses” and Arab nomadism became metaphors of restlessness and energy, and it is not surprising that Edward Gibbon’s analysis of Arab nomadism and Muhammad is characterized by great subtlety (p. 329). The triumph of colonization abroad and settled societies under stable rule in Europe by the late eighteenth century meant that pirates, pastoralists, nomads, and other itinerant groups became objects of suspicion and chastisement.

While the idea of the Oriental despot ranged from Akbar as a sage legislator to despotism as a feature of barbarian societies (Montesquieu), it was clear that this idea served as a foil and warning to European monarchs. Voltaire saw in contemporary descriptions of despotism “a frightful phantom” that was meant to highlight the virtues of European monarchs (p. 358). Osterhammel makes a subtle and important point that after conquest, the idea emerged of an “Asia that for the first time gave Europeans the opportunity to slip into the role of oriental

despots themselves” (p. 368). By this time an “inclusive Eurocentrism” had given way to an “exclusive Eurocentrism” and forms of narration transitioned from humor and irony to condescension and caricature (p. 489). And thus the East was unfabled.

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Citation: Dilip Menon. Review of Osterhammel, Jürgen, *Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment’s Encounter with Asia*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. September, 2019.

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