

OSTERHAMMEL, JÜRGEN, *THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD: A GLOBAL HISTORY OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY*, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, PRINCETON 2014, 1192 PAGES



Did you know that the collapse of the *ancien régime* in the French Revolution coincided exactly with the turbulent fall of the venerable Oyo empire in Nigeria? Or that the visionary sectarian enthusiasm of the early Mormons in America derived from the same Christian sources as the Taiping movement which simultaneously convulsed China? Or that in the 1890s Cuban rebels were herded into *campos de concentración*, shortly before the same brutal methods were employed by the British in the Boer war? Such juxtapositions pepper the pages of this wonderfully ambitious book and convey a sense of its purpose.

Osterhammel's project spans the planet. Once upon a time the 'history of the world' was the domain of amateurs like H.G. Wells and Hendrik Willem van Loon, whose *Story of Mankind* remains a classic distillation for children of all ages, or of massive undertakings driven by a wider explanatory agenda, notably that of Arnold Toynbee. Now a distinguished German professional has entered the field with this work that is itself already proving transformative of the way we view the whole subject: it first appeared five years ago in German as *Die Verwandlung der Welt*. Immensely learned, Osterhammel is also highly judicious, subtle and witty, and always thought-provoking. In his range and boundless curiosity he is reminiscent of his nineteenth-century compatriot, the explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, whose name appears more than most in these pages; though given also the acuity of Osterhammel's analysis and his pedagogical flair, perhaps he is rather Alexander and the other famous Humboldt brother Wilhelm rolled into one. Moreover, the author has been superbly well served by his translator, Patrick Camiller, who throughout the gargantuan text is very rarely at a loss for the *mot juste*.

Osterhammel seeks to profile a single century, albeit a decisive one. However, as he is the first to allow, it's an expansive view, more or less an enquiry into the making of the modern world. Can the period be defined at all? In trying to establish co-ordinates of time and space he begins with self-perceptions: how contemporaries saw their own present and past, as evidenced by some of their most characteristic material and intellectual creations—encyclopaedias, museums, newspapers and magazines, literature, photographs, geography, cartography and geopolitical notions. These early chapters, with their slightly dutiful obeisance to a Teutonic penchant for *Periodisierung*, include some of the only longueurs in an exceedingly long book; but they do yield a workable scheme: a transformative envelope which starts in the 1760s and concludes in the 1920s, with at its centre the decades from *circa* 1830 to 1890 — Osterhammel calls them a 'Victorian' age, in deference to British hegemony at that time — when the developments that he most wishes to highlight reached their zenith.

There follow four exhilarating chapters, full of stimulating comparisons and concurrences across the globe. Alongside broad treatment of standards of life — food and its production, health and disease, poverty and wealth, income and consumption — this section is mainly about mobility, a world in flux, especially as the colonial expansion of Europe took hold. A masterly survey of shifting populations and labour

flows, expulsion and exile, leads to the growth of 'cities': a worldwide phenomenon in the nineteenth century, and correspondingly diverse. Actually the English terminology here may overplay their modernity (in German Osterhammel wrote about *Städte*, many of which could more staidly be rendered as 'towns'); yet their impact was vast, not just as crucibles of industrialization, but as capitals, transport and administrative hubs, above all — for Osterhammel—as ports. The section culminates in a virtuoso exploration of the 'frontier' in its American sense: a moving, integrating band of pioneer settlement, examined here in its multifarious manifestations across the earth, over land and sea, from the Argentine pampas to the Siberian steppe, and as colonists' engagement with the human alterity of native peoples and the natural challenges of (for example) whales and big game.

This is heady stuff — like a turbulent Mahlerian first movement after its slow introduction. The reader may now pause to wonder: aren't frontiers also borders, i.e. fixed lines which separate out inhabitants and perpetuate and enhance differentiation from those on the other side? And are we not in danger of losing sight of the long-established core polities of the old Europe, where such firm boundaries were coming to assume ever greater salience? Indeed, that's a theme of Osterhammel's next, and central, block of chapters. Here he addresses, in a rather more orthodox way, the processes of state-building which were essentially an achievement of nineteenth-century Europe, and the resultant interactions within an international order that they dominated. We follow on the one hand the spread of bureaucracy (in German he had used the more neutral term *Verwaltung*), with its controls and direction of an increasingly homogeneous citizenry—at least in the eyes of authority; on the other hand the parallel spread of constitutional forms and representative institutions whereby those citizens could seek to hold governments to account. Osterhammel presents us with a kaleidoscope of outcomes, mainly as adaptations of still ostensibly monarchical structures of power. And rulers still mattered: witness King Chulalongkorn of Siam's doggedly successful defiance of colonial threats, as against his close contemporary Sultan Abdülhamid II's equally resolute but ultimately disastrous defence of the Ottoman regime.

Where change was too crudely resisted, revolutionary struggles followed. Osterhammel charts a 'rebellious age': in Europe between French upheavals of the 1790s and Russian ones from 1905; further afield between insurgencies across the Americas at the start of the period and the implosion of China, Iran and Turkey after 1900. Revolutions reveal much about the nature of international interplays, above all the telling contrasts thrown up by the mid-century turmoil which criss-crossed the globe without establishing any common ground. The Taiping rebellion — a massive civil war that left many millions dead—hardly became known beyond the borders of China, and India's great upheaval was dismissed as a mere 'mutiny', whereas the events of 1848, the only year of pan-European revolution, made no wider world-historical impact.

Osterhammel shows how homogenizing, centralizing, and rationalizing tendencies could lead to 'nation-states', often — he says — regarded as the typical political formation of the nineteenth century. But that is rather an ideal type, a straw man derived from political science. Few if any countries satisfied its criterion of comprising

a single self-aware ethnic identity, not even those recently emancipated from what had come to be perceived as foreign dominance. From the new republics of Latin America to the nascent Balkan kingdoms of Greeks and Serbs, much work remained to do in creating a sense of nationhood. Rather, Osterhammel asserts, the characteristic polity of the age was an empire. He deploys a subtle typology, which does justice to all shapes and sizes, and illustrates the very variable link between a core state territory and its 'colonies', near and far. The British Empire was much the largest, and also — maybe for that reason too — the most fluid and adaptable. In the process Osterhammel fruitfully confounds the distinction between seaborne and landward empires, but also belies his own conclusion that 'all nineteenth-century empires were autocratic systems from beginning to end'.

After more than 600 close-printed pages, there is a great deal still to come on these grand global themes of differential development, synchronicities and divergences, and modalities of Europeanization, which rarely played themselves out in a simple dichotomy of 'West' versus 'East'. In the last part of the volume Osterhammel presents seven thematic 'essays [...] lighter, more playful, more selective'. They embrace the rise of industrial capitalism amid intensified exploitation of the world's energy resources; the changing face of labour, from increased freedom on the land to new workplaces in factory or office; the transformation of networks and the advent of mass media in the passage to a first age of global commercial communication; social hierarchies and the gradual breakdown of traditional rankings in face of the advance of a middle class defined by fresh economic and cultural norms; the spread of literacy, education and scientific knowledge (whose contribution to the empowerment of Europeans leads the author to a notably dispassionate examination of the 'Orientalism' debate); the related topic of civility and improvement, especially in the context of ideas of a 'civilizing mission' which were increasingly dogged by racist ideology; and finally an anatomy of religion whose comparative brevity may surprise, till we contemplate the problems — which nineteenth-century thinkers first sought to address — of defining the term at all, and the paradoxical impact of European missionaries, profound in all sorts of ways except the spiritual.

By the end the indefatigable reader will have had much opportunity to ponder the book's myriad interplays. Often there is (quite deliberately) no clear chronological sequence; and the ordering of chapters errs on the side of indeterminacy. Osterhammel scrupulously avoids direct repetition; but he does engage in constructive overlap, whereby the same key phenomena — say the Meiji Restoration which galvanized Japan into modernity, or the thriving British dominions with their curious mix of advanced liberal democracy and race prejudice — are repeatedly approached from different perspectives, as if we were passengers on one of those serpentine Alpine rail traverses (another triumph of nineteenth-century technology, after all), where the same peak is viewed from several diverse points of vantage.

And when the journey is over, what have we learned? One important message is certainly about emancipation (a word that itself conveys strong nineteenth-century resonances), at once material, cultural and psychological. The passage from slavery and serfdom comes close to being a leitmotiv; and the revolution on the French Caribbean island of Saint-Domingue which created the independent state of Haiti in 1804

is evidently an episode Osterhammel particularly wishes to celebrate: a first blow for the rights of blacks (though even that came with its own initial trappings of empire). Yet there is overall — perhaps inevitably — more attention to exploiters than exploited. We find plenty on the world of work, but more could have been said about workers' organizations. By contrast, we find enough on the organizations which by the 1900s had begun to campaign against the political subordination of women, but more could have been said about the place of women in existing societies. Unfair as it may be to point to gaps in this more than ample text, another kind of subjugation also receives surprisingly short shrift: the coverage of environmental issues is explicitly curtailed. Osterhammel identifies 'reshaping nature' as a concomitant of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, but only *en passant*.

It's a related question whether the book affords us a distinctively German view. Germans coined the language of *Weltpolitik*; from Herder through Hegel to Spengler they were at the forefront in evolving conceptions of world history. Osterhammel draws on his intellectual ancestors, especially the historical sociology of Max Weber. He is also eloquent about music (rather than other forms of cultural creativity), with numerous telling examples and a fascinating prelude on opera (though it belonged at the 'top of the artistic hierarchy' perhaps only in the sense of being more globally exportable than the symphony or string quartet). Yet in the main Osterhammel is reticent about drawing on central European paradigms — at least until, late in the day, we reach the realms of universities and *Bildung*. He could have pointed to the pioneering reform programmes of some of the region's rulers in the age of Enlightenment, anticipating those of Napoleon and French *étatisme*; or later to the case of the German Socialist party (SPD), the world's largest and most articulate vehicle for working-class political aspirations. Even more relevant could have been the legacy of the region's own very special imperial tradition. Osterhammel evidently doesn't think much of it: he speaks of nineteenth-century German 'memories of a rather unglamorous record of political togetherness' Yet the Holy Roman Empire, the thousand-year First Reich, formed the chief source of that European heritage of universalist *imperium* which, rebranded by Napoleon, sanctified the conquest of much of the globe over the next hundred years.

Altogether there is little in Osterhammel's work of the conceptual system-building by his countrymen of that age. His superb piece of theatre deliberately lacks a plot. It seems at times to intimate this absence — after all, a methodical analysis of human activities which begins with contemporaries' intellectual self-examination and terminates in the realms of cultivation of the mind and religion might easily be mistaken for a derivative of German idealist philosophy, shot through with synthesis and sublation. Yet for Osterhammel the global nineteenth century clearly has no such essence. No Herder or Hegel or Spengler here. It's often difficult to descry larger patterns in Osterhammel's ordering of materials, and he doesn't encourage us to try. The enterprise rests on a pointed contrast: it's outspokenly world-historical, thus a challenge to those (such as the present reviewer) who have viewed the international story of that epoch in overwhelmingly European terms, with a walk-on part for the USA; yet it acknowledges, and documents, that this was uniquely an age of European power and dominance.

The new global history is thus strictly the sum of its parts. It does not — and Osterhammel insists on that — supersede other kinds of history. If there is progression, it is spasmodic, even stochastic. World history is an adventure, a journey, maybe even a purposive one, but with many delays and reversals. One of Osterhammel's tales conveys this symbolically. In 1882 the Buddhist master Xu Yun joined the new age of travel: he set off on a thousand-mile walk to a Chinese holy mountain. But, since his faith still required him to carry incense sticks in both hands and prostrate himself ritually every three paces, it took him two full years to reach his goal.

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