

Jürgen Osterhammel: *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*

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Some people may object to calling a book with over 1500 pages a monograph. They may have a point. But for lack of a better word I would want to claim that *Die Verwandlung der Welt* (München 2009), to my knowledge of course, is the best monograph dealing with the history of the world in any period of time that has as yet been published. It is written with an almost un-German clarity and contains a very fine mix of description, analysis and synthesis. It has not, as is so often the case in German scholarly works, been overburdened with tortuous excursions into historiography and historiographical debates, although no one would want to doubt that Osterhammel knows the relevant literature in that respect. Point is that he only refers to it when that actually makes sense. The core of the book consists of eighteen essay-like chapters in which the author presents an amazing amount of information in a systematic but very digestible way, almost like a teacher would discuss and explain his subject-matter in class, always attentive to divisions and subdivisions, comparisons, summaries and examples. Although at times this gives the book a somewhat state-of-the-art, textbook-like flavour, it never becomes boring, probably because, overall, the author does not shy away from presenting his own opinions when he sees fit or from indicating where questions are still open and further research would be welcome. He always does so succinctly, in clear terms, even-handedly and without being pedantically present. His erudition is absolutely stunning and never escalates into an encyclopaedic *Anekdotenkrämerei*. Occasionally he may have a tendency to indulge in German *Gründlichkeit*, e.g. in the chapters on space or on cities, where some readers may feel he could have trimmed the text somewhat down. This slight, occasional overkill, however, is more than compensated by the numerous illuminating, enlivening and often striking examples, details and anecdotes that he can come up with exactly because of his erudition. It is these concrete references, amongst many other things, that make the book a joy to read.

Osterhammel at the moment is probably best known for his publications on globalisation and colonialism. Earlier on in his career he focused on the history of Asia, in particular China. His *China und die Weltgesellschaft*, published in 1989, is a brilliant synthesis that ought to have been translated in English. In the very beginning of that career, he published on, amongst other things, British imperialism in China. As he indicates himself in the book under review, he has become increasingly interested in the history of the United States, a history that often tends to be under-represented in books on global history. Although one can never be sufficiently prepared to start writing a book like this one, Osterhammel in any case had a first-rate and first-hand knowledge of the modern history of many parts of the world when he set out to do so.

In that respect the great ease with which he switches from one branch of the discipline of history to another one is also striking. Whether he is discussing environmental, economic, social, political or cultural history, he does so with great knowledge and competence. Especially his expertise in the field of political, social and cultural history is extremely valuable. In global history – though, admittedly, this might apply more to studies of the early modern than the modern era – attention often tends to be paid to the so-called hard infrastructures of material life like demography, technology and the availability of resources at the expense of other factors. Osterhammel's more 'sociological' look at historical processes is a very welcome complement to that rather one-sided, materialist approach.

In the Epilogue, Osterhammel indicates he wanted to write this book because he felt that in Germany the moment had arrived to practise global history instead of basically only discussing it. In dealing with the nineteenth century, that has become 'his' century, all history other than global history, so he claims, can only be second best. As such, that need not be a major problem: he does not consider the work of 'global' historians to be fundamentally different from that of 'ordinary' historians. Basically, they confront quite similar problems. To become a good global historian one, according to Osterhammel – apart from the general historical skills – needs a sense of proportion and orders of magnitude, of fields of forces and mutual influences, and a notion of what is typical and representative. The good global historian does not have to be omniscient. What he should be, however, is humble in his recognition that in the end his writing is dependent on the empirical studies of other scholars. That recognition implies that in his efforts to come up with macro-views and -arguments he should consult the best and most recent of those studies and distil their essence. One can only agree.

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The book claims to be a global history of the nineteenth century. That sounds deceptively simple. What does or can 'writing the global history of a century' mean and how did Osterhammel actually try and do it? I will begin my review with some general comments on these methodological matters. Then I will comment on the role of connections and

comparisons in the book. Next I will indicate what I learned from reading it, focusing on topics on which I feel competent. The content of the book is so rich and so diverse that a full review of it would require far more expertise than I can claim. I will continue with a comment on what Osterhammel thinks his book could teach the reader. I conclude with my views on that ‘synthesis’ and a general evaluation.

Some of my methodological comments may strike the reader as contradicting my very positive overall opinion on the book. They are not. I simply want to point at some major problems that every historian encounters when trying to write global history. As such, these problems are inherent to *every* form of history writing that wants to describe and interpret a part of the past. Point is that in global history they usually become more pressing and visible because of the scale on which global historians work. Osterhammel is aware of these problems, discusses them and deals with them. He does not solve them. That is not a fundamental critique. I think no one can. He comes up with a pragmatic solution in a beautiful book. The only thing I actually do in my comments is explicitly pointing at those problems and suggesting that a somewhat different, more problem-oriented approach might have provided the book with a sharper ‘razor of Ockham’ and a clearer conclusion. Whether that would have resulted in a better book in the end I think is *Geschmackssache*.

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My main methodological comments concern the way Osterhammel selects and defines his research object. What is the book actually about and how can such a topic be ‘coherently’ described? A century is nothing but a slice of time filled with events. As such it does not present a historian with an obvious story to be told or an obvious problem to be solved. That implies that studying and presenting it to one’s readers may mean various things. One may want to figure out how it was ‘experienced’ at the time. The result will then be a ‘cultural’ history. Or one may, in contrast, look for its underlying structures that ‘elude’ the actors at the time and that can only be disclosed with the benefit of distance and hindsight. There is the possibility to study it ‘in its own terms’ and ‘for its own sake’ or, on the other hand, look at it in terms of what it means for the contemporary world. In that case one turns it into a prehistory of the present, as, for example, occurs in Wallerstein’s modern world-systems project.¹ Osterhammel in his book apparently wants to try and go for the best of many worlds by combining various goals. He does not structure his material along chronological lines and is not bent on exclusively charting a flow of the main tendencies in nineteenth-century global development. Nor is it his intention – and even less his claim – to lay bare ‘the signature’ of that period, as in the end Bayly

1 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The modern world system*. Up until now three volumes have been published, one in 1974, one in 1980, and one in 1988.

does in his book on the long nineteenth century.² He definitely does not want to bypass how people in the nineteenth century themselves conceived of their age. But neither does he want to confine his story to that. He seems to be striving for a combination of approaches that would enable him, as he puts it, to give the nineteenth century its place in history (pp. 1279–1301). This would include how the century saw itself, how it lives on and how it can be looked upon from various contemporaneous angles. He resents taking it out of history or turning it into a mere prehistory. He agrees that a historian has to try and structure his period of study, but does not think his century has *one* definite character or *one* main tendency. In that respect it need not come as a surprise that he thinks it is quite close to us in some, and far away and strange in other respects.

Taking into consideration these (various) goals, the actual chronology used in the book can not simply coincide with the period from 1800 to 1900. Sensible periodisations in historiography are never based on purely formal indicators. They therefore are not ‘inconsequential’ but debated and debatable. Osterhammel is well aware of that and devotes an entire chapter, the second one, to answering the question ‘When was the nineteenth century?’ Not surprisingly he comes up with an open and flexible answer. To be honest, I think the conclusion is inescapable that there is no chronology that makes real sense for the entire world of the nineteenth century. That world, apparently, knew no ‘global time’, nor a ‘global rhythm’.

‘The world’, of which Osterhammel wants to write a history, as such is just a geographical expression. Here too, one may wonder what it means to write ‘its’ history. The author seems to realise there might be a problem here and devotes his third chapter to the question: ‘Where is the nineteenth century?’ In it he deals with many interesting geographical issues, including mental maps. He does not, however, as might be expected, address the fundamental question whether and in what meaningful sense(s) one might say that in the nineteenth century *the world* had a history. Is there actually such a thing as ‘the world in the nineteenth century’ about which one might write a *coherent, meaningful and global* narrative? Answering that question entails an analysis of ‘globalisation’. Debates about the meaning of that term and about the history of the processes it is supposed to describe, are not always very interesting or enlightening. But in a project like this, the question to what extent the globe in the nineteenth century was globalised simply has to be addressed. The answer to it has wide ramifications for the type of book a global historian of the period could or even should in the end write and for the feasibility and significance of his project. It is ironic that Osterhammel, who is eminently suited to discuss this question – and who actually says many very interesting things about it also in this book – does not tackle it in a separate, introductory chapter. Basically globalisation, or rather *economic* globalisation, is only discussed explicitly in Chapter XIV. The answer – I am quite confident – that he would come up with when asked whether there existed

2 Chris Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914*, Malden 2004.

‘one world’ in the nineteenth century, would be: No. So there was no ‘global space’ at the time either.

This means that Osterhammel wants to write a global history of a period that has no (known) common time or rhythm, nor a common space. That of course does not exclude the possibility that someone as yet might ‘see’ them. Nor is it meant to deny that all sorts of ‘globalising’ were taking place. It only means that Osterhammel faces serious problems of demarcating and structuring his object. That would also have been the case, had he decided to write a history of Vorarlberg in the nineteenth century. But in a huge book about a huge topic, these problems may easily also become huge. All historical writing that aims at presenting a synthesis of whatever kind has to fix its ‘object’ in time and place. This is done not so much by *describing* an existing object as by *constructing* one in the actual act of writing about it. When Osterhammel tries to find out ‘when’ and ‘where’ his global nineteenth century was, he apparently, like every history writer, is looking for an object of study about which a significant and coherent story might be told.³ He realises the necessity of having ‘a narrative substance’ for his story, but he thinks he has good reasons to not strictly confine his object of study in time and place and to not choose one single plot for overview. He does construct ‘narratives’ with various ‘plots’. But he does not want to push the search for coherence to its limit, i.e. to the level of a grand narrative or ‘meta-narrative’ as Patrick O’Brien would say: the story that encompasses all the other stories one has told or could tell about one’s subject.⁴

This reticence is not a matter of a principled post-modern stance that opposes any grand narrative. It springs from the conviction that all-encompassing stories that cover the history of the globe in its entirety – whatever that may exactly mean – are ‘straitjackets’ that enforce a tight coherence on what actually is a fairly messy set of interacting and open processes. It is not by accident that Osterhammel does not come up with one single story encompassing the essence of the nineteenth century: he never set out to find one. He presents *a history* of a nineteenth century, not *the history* of *the* nineteenth century. Probably *histories* of the nineteenth century would have been an even more adequate title. The author does not want to pretend to be a neutral, omniscient story teller who fully ‘grasps’ his age.

This reticence to go for one over-arching theme is understandable and one can very well defend the thesis that if one wants to do ‘justice’ to the past, one simply has to be reticent in this respect. In my view, however, Osterhammel does have to pay a price for his laudable open-mindedness and his multi-faceted approach. They involve the risk that the reader starts wondering what the book is actually about, which will have a negative effect on his ability to absorb and digest the information that has been presented to him. Osterhammel’s stance is also somewhat surprising because actually he *does* have an out-

3 For further explanation of the ‘narrative logic’ of the writing of a historical synthesis and of the concept ‘narrative substance’ that I use in this paragraph see F. R. Ankersmit, *Narrative logic. A semantic analysis of the historian’s language*, Groningen 1981.

4 See e.g. his Meta-narratives in global histories of material progress, in: *The International History Review* 23, 2 (2001) 345-367.

spoken view on 'the nature' of his century and makes no secret of it. Already in the very beginning of the book, he claims that the nineteenth century was the century of Europe: never before were events all over the world determined to such an extent by what happened in one place and that place happened to be Europe or rather, the West. Whether one hated the Westerners or loved them, and whether one wanted to imitate them or rejected their way of living: with their industry, military power, science and technology, Westerners were changing the world beyond recognition and simply *could not* be ignored (pp. 20-21). Osterhammel is too good a historian to be impressed by weirdly Sinocentric and fashionably anti-Eurocentric books like those that have recently been published by authors like Frank or Hobson. When he refers to them, he, as a rule rather tongue-in-cheek and nuanced, can hardly conceal his annoyance (p. 1391, note 47).

Why then does the author not present his book as a thesis on modernization or on 'the rise of the West'? He is quite clear about that: he thinks that these concepts have both been object of severe and often justified critique. Classic stories about the rise of the West, in particular, are now often considered to be teleological and determinist and wedded to the idea of 'European exceptionalism'.⁵ Osterhammel also, and explicitly, rejects the idea of turning the Great Divergence, as it is defined by Kenneth Pomeranz, into the overarching theme of his book.⁶ According to him, that too would imply that one, from the very beginning of one's writing and research, tackles the historical material with an exclusive focus on European exceptionalism. In my final comments, I will come back to these claims and indicate that in my view Osterhammel exaggerates the dangers of using such grand narratives, in particular in case of the Great Divergence.

In the end it all boils down to the fact that Osterhammel wants to sail firmly between the Scylla of over-systematization that distorts history and the Charybdis of postmodernism that dissolves it. He does look for what one might call 'narratives of the middle range', hoping to come up with statements that have explanatory value. But while doing so, he constantly changes perspective, and looks in all corners of the world for similarities *and* differences, to in that way also keep things 'open'. It is this dialectic that more than anything else makes the book such a brilliant example of global history. He presents various separate stories, not one. He does assess them in a final chapter without, however, wanting to provide a conclusion or a closure. His final comments are not but, as Osterhammel puts it, an overview from the heights of generalization after which one should again descend into new detailed research (p. 1278).

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5 This critique is not only, understandably, often addressed at the best-seller by David S. Landes, *The wealth and poverty of nations. Why some are so rich and some so poor*, London 1998, but also, less understandably, at the works of Immanuel Wallerstein.

6 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy*, Princeton 2000.

Global history usually comes in two flavours; one that primarily focuses on connecting and one that is more interested in comparing. Osterhammel practises both, although I would say the *forte* of his work lays in his comparisons. When it comes to connections, he provides many fine anecdotes that show that the world in various respects was getting smaller during his century. What to think of the Ethiopian emperor Menelik II, who in the early 1890s bought 100,000 French Lebel guns with two million rounds of ammunition, built up his own weapons production with the help of a Swiss adviser and in March 1896 defeated an Italian Army? (p. 697); or of the fact that in the Ottoman Empire and in Iran, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Belgian constitution of 1831 had a good reputation? (p. 805) Western imperialism could be at the basis of quite peculiar exchanges of information. After 1882, the British saw to it that Egypt got a police force organised after the model of that of India (p. 888).

This shrinking of the globe would have been impossible without revolutionary changes in communication and transport. Again Osterhammel gives very illuminating examples. In 1798, the message of Bonaparte's invasion in Egypt took sixty-two days to reach London. On 8 January 1815, 1000 British and American soldiers were killed in the battle of New Orleans. That could have been avoided, had the news reached their commanders that already on December 24, peace had been concluded between their countries (p. 1026). Just before there was a telegraph connection between London and Australia, in 1871, a message from London, which then still meant a letter, took sixty days to arrive in Sidney. At the end of the 1880s, news from whatever place on earth reached London in some two days. Transport became much faster and cheaper too: in 1906, costs of transport per unit of weight between Great Britain and India were only two per cent of what they had been in 1793 (p. 1035).

This of course had its implications for long-distance trade. The nineteenth century witnessed an enormous increase of it. Between 1850 and 1913 alone, the value of international trade in constant prices increased tenfold (p. 1033). Foreign investment basically was a nineteenth-century European invention. In the period 1820–1913, Europeans invested some nine to ten billion pound sterling overseas (p. 1047). Mobility of people also increased. Between 1815 and 1914, according to Osterhammel, at least eighty-two million people voluntarily migrated to another country (p. 235). As a matter of fact, that seems a fairly low estimate to me.

Quite interesting with respect to the question in how far the nineteenth-century world was indeed 'one world', is the fact that in the period 1876–1880, about three-quarters of international trade was on account of Europe, including Russia, and North America. In 1914, that proportion had hardly changed (p. 1033). When we look at international migration or capital flows, basically the same conclusion has to be drawn: only very specific parts of the world were really well-connected. In that context it is fascinating to see that Japan, the only non-Western country at the time that at least began 'to make' it, kept both foreign investments and foreign debt to an absolute minimum (pp. 1050-1051). If one wants to describe the nineteenth-century world as a web, then it was a web with huge holes. Just like the current world, I may add, that, for example, when it comes to

foreign domestic investments in regions like Africa and Latin America, has become *less* interconnected than it was a century ago (p. 1052). All this information is taken from Osterhammel's book. The implications it may have for his project are not really spelled out. In that respect one would like to know why the book is called *Die Verwandlung der Welt?* Is it because Osterhammel regards the nineteenth century as the global century *par excellence* in the history of the world as he implies on page 14? Does this title also have Kafkaesque connotations?

Global interconnectedness did increase. But that of course does not mean that all major events on the globe at the time can only be understood in a global setting. The revolutionary upheavals in Europe in the late 1840s, for example, had no impact whatsoever in the rest of the world, nor was there anything 'extra-European' in their origins. In 1888, the French philosopher and cultural historian Louis Bourdeau could still comment that for 400 million Chinese there had been no French Revolution (p. 96). The Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) in China, the major upheaval in terms of casualties in the world during the nineteenth century, was completely unrelated to what had been going on in Europe only a couple of years before. But on the other hand; its leader claimed he was inspired by Christian texts and the rebellion was in the end suppressed by China's rulers with help from the West.

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What is most interesting and challenging in the book, from a scholarly perspective, are the numerous comparisons it contains. The reader will not come across extensive, 'methodical' analyses with a large methodological apparatus. Osterhammel himself describes his style of comparing as a prudent, controlled game of association and analogy (p. 16). His book contains so many examples that it would make no sense to even try and enumerate them. Let me just refer to a couple of them, almost all fascinating eye-openers. The author, for example, compares instances of hunger in Ireland, the Russian Empire, Africa and Asia (pp. 300–314); department stores and restaurants all over the globe (pp. 341–345); frontiers in the Americas (the United States, Argentina and Brazil), in Eurasia (Russia and China) and South Africa (chapter seven); the specific ways in which national states were created in Japan and in the United States (pp. 596–601); various revolutions in the Atlantic region (pp. 747–769); the upheavals in Europe in 1848–1849 and the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) in China, what in the West used to be called 'the Great Mutiny' in India but is now better known as the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and finally, the American Civil War of 1861–1865 (pp. 777–798); revolutionary movements in the beginning of the twentieth century in Russia, Iran, Turkey and China (pages 800–816); the reforming monarchies of Queen Victoria, the Meiji Emperor and Louis Napoleon (pp. 838–846); the development of bureaucracy in India, China, the Ottoman Empire and Japan, (pp. 870–882); routes of economic non-development in Latin America, China and India, contrasting them with what happened in Japan (pp. 938–950); the his-

tory of aristocrats in France, Russia, Britain, India, Japan and that of the mandarins in China (pp. 1066-1079); the way the European university was adopted and adapted in the rest of the world (pp. 1132- 1147); abolitionism in various parts of the world and post-emancipation society in South Africa, the United States and Brazil (pp. 1188-1214) Western and non-Western racism (pp. 1214-1228).

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I am not going to try and give an overview or summary of the content of the book. That simply is not feasible. I can only advise everyone interested in global history to read it and enjoy its enormous width and depth. I actually read the book from the first to the last page: can one say more in praise of such an enormous book? A review of a book that is so rich in data, interpretations and comparisons and that leaves hardly any topic one might think of untouched, cannot, however, confine itself entirely to general 'methodological' matters. Some comments on the actual content are in order. When reading the book, what patterns, what narratives of the medium range does one see? What can one learn from its content and methods? I will confine my comments to economic developments and matters related to the state in the widest sense of the word. These are topics on which I hope I have developed a certain expertise. Just like Weber and Osterhammel, who in that respect follows in Weber's footsteps, I will in particular refer to examples that show how our views on Europe's history during the nineteenth century might change when we adopt a more global perspective (see e.g. p. 1284).

A first observation one can make on the basis of information provided by Osterhammel, would be that the 'Old Regime' persisted much more stubbornly than grand narratives on modernization liked to suggest. The 'classic' image of the nineteenth-century, especially in the social sciences, is that of the age of modernization, the era in which, to put it in sociological terms, traditional *Gemeinschaft* made way for modern *Gesellschaft*.⁷ In economic history textbooks the emphasis is then laid on industrialisation. Of course, the nineteenth century is the age of the first industrial revolution. But Osterhammel rightly points at the fact that at its very end there still were only a handful of nations that in any meaningful sense could be called 'industrial'. They, moreover, were all in the West: outside that part of the world, there was only one nation – namely Japan – that had *begun* to industrialise. The modern factory still was a rarity.

As a matter of fact, world-wide the number of peasants may well have increased. Agricultural production in any case did, as did the amount of land under cultivation. Agriculture continued to be by far the biggest sector of the global economy. Nor should

7 The literature about modernity, what it might mean and what is wrong with simple, unilinear universal theories of modernization, is staggering, and this of course is not the place to address it. I simply assume that it, in its main propositions, is known to the reader. For a very knowledgeable and up-to-date overview and analysis, that is historically surprisingly well-informed, see Wolfgang Knöbl, *Die Kontingenz der Moderne. Wege in Europa, Asien und Amerika*, Frankfurt a. M./New York 2007.

one underestimate the importance of services. Let me just give one striking example of what may be called a 'traditional service': In 1911, there were no less than 2.5 million domestic servants in Britain. They were the largest occupational group in the country's census, twice as large as that of people working in quarries and mines (p. 991). The importance of so-called 'modern services' like banking, finance, insurance or transport, that actually might already be quite old, could also be substantial in advanced economies, if not in terms of people working then in any case in the amounts of money involved. In the most advanced economy of the world, Britain, where these sectors had already been quite important in the eighteenth century, they, after a brief industrial interlude, quite soon again became the leading sectors of the national economy. It did not take long before London with its harbour and its 'City' would again be more important for Britain's economy than 'Lancashire'.

However that may be, industrialization – or more in general, modern economic growth and development – did not come about spontaneously. Authors as diverse as Marx, Weber or Sombart, basically agreed about its main cause: they all, as Weber put it, regarded capitalism as the "most fateful force of our modern life."⁸ These scholars have had a long-lasting, big influence and they, of course, had a point. But Osterhammel's global overview shows that their interpretation of capitalism as a mode of production characterised by free labour, historically speaking, is too superficial. Even in Britain's factories, free labour, in the modern meaning of the word, only became normal in the second half of the nineteenth century. There definitely was no world-wide, smooth transition from un-free to free labour, if only because distinctions in practice were rather blurred. From a global perspective, emancipation of labour during the nineteenth century was a protracted and unfinished process. It could hardly have been otherwise: the role and importance of un-free labour at its beginning was simply staggering. It was still quite substantial at its end. As an economic historian I found Osterhammel's analysis of capitalism and labour in chapters XII and XIII very informative, clear and knowledgeable.

A third concept that usually pops up in studies of the (economic) history of the nineteenth century is 'imperialism'. It often is directly related to the phenomena I just referred to: industry and capitalism. The connection that is then suggested between them is normally quite straightforward: industry and capitalism made imperialism possible and after some time they could not persist without it. Osterhammel shows that in fact things were not that straightforward at all and that the suggested 'succession' is quite debatable (pp. 621-622).⁹ Let me give one telling and important example: the British were already building their empire in India *before* their country was 'industrialised'. On the other hand, during the process of its industrialisation, their country was *less* dependent on its

8 This famous quote is taken from Max Weber, Vorbemerkung, in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. There are many editions. I here quote from Max Weber, *Religion und Gesellschaft. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Frankfurt a. M. 2006, p. 13.

9 See for interesting observations in this respect, John Darwin, *After Tamerlane The global history of empire*, London 2007, e.g. chapters four and six. I wrote a review of this book in: *British Scholar*, vol. 1, issue 1 (2008) 111-117.

empire than during its pre-industrial eighteenth century, when it still had its thirteen colonies in Northern America, or during the first half of the twentieth century, when it was becoming 'post-industrial'.

In all the textbooks on European history I know, the nineteenth century is depicted as the century in which nation-building – something supposedly typical for Europe – was *a* if not *the* major driving force in history. Nation-building implies some form of nationalism, which can be defined as the political ideology that claims that the state and the nation, both to a large extent also regarded as products of Europe's nineteenth century, should coincide. Here too, Osterhammel presents a more nuanced story. To begin with, he thinks it is exaggerated to regard nationalism, the state and the nation as typically or even exclusively European. He is right. To then draw the conclusion that European states and nations therefore were nothing special, however, would be erring in the opposite direction. Not that Osterhammel explicitly says so, but I must say he is rather quiet on European peculiarities in this respect.

More important, and certainly to the point, is his second comment that, globally speaking, empires were much more characteristic of the era, until its very end, than nation states. The Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Empires only perished in and because of the First World War, with the Russian Empire basically being succeeded by a Soviet Empire. The German Empire, that may not actually fit Osterhammel's definition of an empire, also only disappeared in 1918. For Asia and Africa the nineteenth century was even less a century of national states than it was for Europe. Around 1900, Asia was still firmly in control of empires.

The related idea that the nineteenth century was a century of intense *state-formation* can and should also be nuanced. The most important new state on the world stage, the United States of America, in many respects was anything but a Weberian state, and did not aspire to be one, as Osterhammel shows in chapter 11. In most European states, expenditure by government as a percentage of GDP, in real terms at least, tended to *decrease* over the century instead of *increase*, a fact to which Osterhammel does not refer.¹⁰ Colonial state-building, moreover, had a logic that was quite different from that prevailing in the Western colonising states themselves. Osterhammel's book provides succinct descriptions when it e.g. discusses the situation in India or Algeria (see for Algeria pp. 629–631, the situation in India is discussed at various places).

Talking about state- and nation-building in the context of nineteenth-century Europe as a rule implied references to emancipation, extension of the right to vote and the coming of democracy. Again Osterhammel prefers a more prudent stance. On a global scale it is anything but clear that in 1900 more people were living in circumstances that might be regarded as 'democratic', than in 1800. References to 'the people' and 'the nation' as ultimate sources of power and legitimacy did become increasingly fashionable. But that need not mean much for actual power relations. As always, appearances can be deceptive.

10 See Michael Mann, *The sources of social power. Vol. II, The rise of classes and nation states, 1760–1914*, Cambridge 1993, chapter 11: The rise of the modern state.

In no part of the world were so many constitutions declared as in Latin America: eleven between 1826 and 1880 in Bolivia and ten in Peru between 1821 and 1867 (p. 856). In many regions of the world, moreover, government rule continued to be unabashedly un-democratic. That definitely also goes for Eastern and Central Europe, where, for example Joseph II, let alone Nicolas II, can hardly be accused of posing as fanatic democrats. In Western Europe politicians like Bismarck and even more Louis Napoleon realised the growing importance of public opinion but regarded it as something to use rather than something to obey. If one regards the extension of the right to vote to all adults and the principle – and its institutional safeguard! – that the people are sovereign as fundamental to democratic rule, then one must conclude that in 1914 democracy still was extremely rare. Most countries on the globe still were highly un-democratic.

In the eyes of many modernizers in the nineteenth century, to become modern at least initially had meant to get rid of crowned heads and aristocrats. As a matter of fact, not many new republics were created. Monarchy proved to be quite resilient. In countries like Britain and Japan – and in France under Louis Napoleon – it was renewed and even gained in importance. In Europe the role of the aristocracy as an estate may indeed have declined, but for many aristocrats individually the nineteenth century was a kind of Indian summer (p. 1071). Again, a look at the situation outside Europe, in this case at the decline of the Chinese mandarins – of course not a real i.e. hereditary aristocracy – and at the transformation of the Japanese samurai, two groups Osterhammel also compares to each other, proves to be very enlightening and interesting (pp. 1073-1079).

A second ‘lesson’ one may draw from the book is that ‘the modern’ and ‘the traditional’ were not simple opposites, but could interact in such a way that ‘the new’ not so much destroyed ‘the old’ but in a way gave it a boost. This may go as far as enforcing or even actually ‘inventing’ it. I could give elementary examples of this in the field of economic history, e.g. the fact that in the beginning of industrialisation the consumption of wood and water as power sources *increased* instead of *decreased* as one might have expected. The same, by the way, goes for the use of horses in production. More interesting is the broader phenomenon that traditional sectors or modes of production could receive a boost through the increase in production in those sectors of the economy that had been ‘industrialised’. The most famous example here undoubtedly is the increase of handloom weaving of cotton after cotton spinning had become mechanized. Household producers often reacted to competition by factories by working harder and longer and trying to hold their own through their flexibility and their cheap labour. In that way industrialisation might set in motion processes of ‘involution’. Big factories, moreover, might be supplied by small-scale ‘traditional’ production-units like households, sweatshops and the like. As a rule they delivered semi-finished products to them. In current interpretations, the revolutionary image of the first industrial revolution, epitomised by steam-engines and factories, has been toned down quite substantially. A growing awareness has developed of continuities and of the existence – even in industrialised societies – of forms of flexible and dispersed production and of labour-intensive industrialisation. On a global scale, the rise of a modern proletariat in a couple of pockets of industrial production

hardly changed the overall composition of the labour force in terms of free versus unfree labour. Slavery only officially disappeared in the Western hemisphere in the second half of the nineteenth. In parts of Africa and Asia it persisted even then. The number of indentured labourers increased in that half century and was not unrelated to growth in certain *modern* economic sectors. The main change in this respect actually was the emancipation of the peasants as it occurred in many countries over the century.

In the field of politics one can quite easily give examples of a reinforcing or even (re-)inventing of tradition. State and nation in their nineteenth-century appearances undoubtedly were new, 'modern' phenomena. They as a rule, however, were provided with all sorts of invented traditions to make them look 'ancient' and 'respectable' and thereby legitimise them. A similar mechanism can be seen at work in Western colonies, where the new foreign rulers tended to *create* a neatly-arranged 'traditional' society that was easier for them to rule and that 'primitivised' their colonies and their inhabitants with the added advantage of providing the colonisers with good reasons to embark on a civilising mission. Again Osterhammel has a telling anecdote: in 1947 there were 3.5 million people in India who had been classified by their colonisers as hereditary (sic! P. V.) criminal members of certain tribes or caste's. The caste-system in many respects owed more to Britain's rule than to India's history (p. 891). In that context one often sees a propping-up of 'ancient' rulers to ensure that behind traditional appearances the new foreign rulers might try and rule via middlemen. It, more in general, is striking how the nineteenth century was fascinated by 'the modern' *and* by 'the past'. It definitely was the most historically-conscious century in world history and the era when history as a discipline was born. Osterhammel tells us that in 1921 the state-owned Historical Museum in Peking wanted to sell 60.000 kilo's of archival records to a dealer in waste paper (p. 33). A bibliophile scholar saved these texts by buying them. This sort of behaviour would have met with much more public uproar in Western Europe.

A third conclusion one can draw from reading Osterhammel's book to me would be that there was more than one road leading towards 'modernity'. Amongst economic historians that of course became general knowledge already quite some time ago. Gerschenkron already in the 1960s thought about the implications of the fact that backward economies had to catch-up with economies that were quickly moving forward and pointed at the fact that 'the big spurt' they had to make, implied a larger role for e.g. the state, banks and capital goods industries than in countries that had industrialized earlier on.¹¹ Later studies could only corroborate his ideas and conclude that there is no general model or theory that fits all cases of nineteenth-century industrialisation.¹² Osterhammel refers to them and agrees. Ever since the seminal publication of Barrington Moore Jr. we basi-

11 Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic backwardness in historical perspective*, Cambridge 1962.

12 See e.g. Rondo Cameron, 'A new view of European industrialization', *The Economic History Review* 38 (1985) 1-23; Patrick O'Brien, 'Do we have a typology for the study of European industrialization in the XIXth century?', in: *Journal of European Economic History* 15 (1986) 291-333, and Mikuláš Teich/Roy Porter (eds.), *The industrial revolution in national context*, Cambridge 1996.

cally know this also applies to modernisation and industrialisation in general and on a world-wide scale.¹³

Basically the same applies to the process of state-formation. Charles Tilly some twenty years ago, pointed at the existence of different trajectories of state-formation in Europe before the nineteenth century. For that century he postulated a certain convergence as the national territorial state became the rule.¹⁴ As such that is correct. But under the cloak of 'the national territorial state', there, even in Europe, over the entire long nineteenth century continued to exist quite different state-structures with quite different trajectories. One only needs to compare, for example, Britain, Germany and the Habsburg Empire to see that. Differences outside Europe could even be bigger. Here as in so many respects, the comparison of Japan and China proves to be very instructive.

If there have been various roads to 'modernity', it almost by necessity can not always have had identical ingredients. That is another lesson one can learn from Osterhammel's work: modernity is not a package deal, in the sense that a society either has all its supposed characteristics – assuming that scholars would agree on what exactly these would be – or none.¹⁵ As such, this can hardly be denied. Whether Eisenstadt's program of looking for 'multiple modernities' to which Osterhammel refers, is really as promising in this predicament as he thinks, I personally doubt (p. 1281). Here again, I hope a couple of examples will suffice. Britain became the first industrial nation in the world. Thanks to its fiscal-military state that was underpinned by a highly efficient fiscal bureaucracy, it had also become the most powerful state in the world. There are good reasons to claim it also was the first modern nation. But on the other hand, with the passing of time its not-so-modern or not-modernising sides also began to show clearly: in the nineteenth century it had no constitution, used a system of 'common law' and had no conscription. When it comes to the extension of the vote and the creation of a state that also undertakes many activities in the *civil* sphere, it was quickly surpassed by various other countries in Europe. In terms of its formal democratization and the structure of its state, post-Napoleonic France would be an excellent candidate for the title 'most modern state of the world'; its agriculture with its large number of peasants, however, does not strike most observers as very modern. Germany at the end of the nineteenth century had become an industrial and military world power. In standard modernization theory that is hard to square with the continued power of its Junkers. One would be really hard-pressed to find a city where 'modernism' had more impact in arts, sciences and culture than 'fin-de-siècle Vienna', the capital of an empire that was not exactly known for its modernity. One can easily find examples of this 'simultaneity of the non-simultaneous' outside Europe too. Meiji Japan quickly became an industrial and military nation to be reckoned with. It borrowed all kinds of modern institutions from the rest of world: in

13 Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social origins of dictatorship and democracy. Lord and peasant in the making of the modern world*, Boston 1966.

14 Charles Tilly, *Coercion, capital and European states, 990–1990*, Oxford / Cambridge 1990.

15 This of course implies that the concept of 'early modernity' that is so often used in global history basically is also highly problematic.

these respects it certainly modernized. In other respects, for example when it comes to democratisation and the position of its godlike Emperor, not much ‘progress’ was made. In the Chinese case it is striking that in the eighteenth century the country had an economy that in many respects was more ‘Smithian’ and capitalist than that of most parts of Europe at the time. Comparatively speaking, competition on its markets was quite free and fair. Its administration, moreover, in various respects was more bureaucratic than that in most Western countries. This, as we all know, did not entail an across-the-board modernization in the nineteenth century.

* * *

This is what I distilled or one may say ‘abstracted’ from the text, although I think the real value of this book does not so much consist in any abstract conclusions it may yield as in its concrete stories and analyses. But then, what characterises the nineteenth century *according to Osterhammel*? Notwithstanding his reticence to draw firm, hard conclusions, he obviously can not simply let his huge book ‘peter out’ without any general reflections. He therefore synthesizes his findings in five main points.

The first one is the emergence of asymmetric increases in efficiency and effectiveness. Human productivity during the period increased enormously. The era discussed in the book witnessed the birth of modern economic growth, defined as a sustained or even self-sustaining and substantial increase in wealth per capita. In advanced economies it even became to be regarded as normal. This ‘new economy’ was based on an increasing and more efficient use of energy, to which Osterhammel devotes an entire chapter, and on permanent technological innovation. The increase in production that characterised it was also due to the fact that all over the globe frontiers were opened and new land put to use. Huge increases in efficiency and effectiveness also occurred in military affairs, which basically means, that the military became a much more efficient killing machine, wielding much more lethal power. Finally he points at big increases in the effectiveness with which governments could rule over society.

The meaning of the adjective ‘asymmetric’ is obvious: apart from Japan, that at the eve of World War I was still quite poor as compared to the richest Western countries, fundamental ‘progress’ in the respects Osterhammel refers to, was basically confined to the West. The growing gap between rich and poor shows clearly in table 6 on page 255 of the book. The world, as never before, became divided in a couple of rich and a lot of poor countries, but also – and again on an unprecedented scale – between a couple of ruling countries and a lot of countries that were ruled by them. Both these facts of course were not unconnected to the huge differences that had emerged in government efficiency. Again, this ‘progress’ was not a package deal: one could be frontrunner in one sector and rather backward in another one.

The divergence that emerged was really great. Let me just give a couple of examples, taken from the book, to show how wealthy some were becoming as compared to many

others. The examples refer to Britain. In 1850, this country produced sixty-five per cent of all coal in the world. In 1914 that was still twenty per cent (p. 934). In that year, of total tonnage of all fleets in the world, forty-five per cent belonged to Britain and its colonies (p. 1016). Again in 1914, fifty per cent of all foreign investment on the globe was British (p. 1048). British income per capita in 1914, was about nine times as high as that of China, whereas according to most economic historians that ratio would have been two to one around 1800, very probably even less. When it comes to Western power, I think one figure can suffice: According to Geoffrey Parker by 1914, Westerners, i.e., Western states or descendants from colonisers from these states, ruled over almost eighty-five per cent of the world's land surface.¹⁶

A second characteristic of the nineteenth century according to Osterhammel would be the enormous increase in mobility. The figures for international and especially long-distance, intercontinental migration are staggering and dwarf those of earlier periods. I already referred to the eighty-two million people who are supposed to have migrated abroad in the period from 1814 to 1914. Most of them crossed the Atlantic Ocean. But it has become increasingly clear that migration also grew enormously in other parts of the world. Productivity and total production may have increased. But that applies even more to international trade. We already indicated it grew no less than tenfold. Enormous increase also characterised another type of mobility that we have already pointed at: foreign capital investment. Huge flows of capital moved around the world, or rather from specific core regions to specific peripheries. That the new means of transportation and communication made people more mobile and life more speedy is clear.

Then there was, and that is Osterhammel's third characteristic: what he calls 'an asymmetric tightening of referencing'. The word 'tightening' refers to an increase of intercultural observations and transfers. It is described as 'asymmetric' because more than ever before certain societies, in this case certain *Western* societies, became point of reference if not model and example for many other societies. Their wealth, power and dynamism were such that even non-Westerners who did not like the Western way of living – and there were many of them, see e.g. the striking lack of success of the West in exporting what is often seen as its main cultural characteristic, to wit Christianity – *had* to face the challenge the West posed. It will not have been by accident that in matters that really mattered, cultural exchange was a one-way street: from 'the West' to 'the Rest' (p. 1295).

A fourth characteristic of the age according to Osterhammel, would have been the emergence of a worldwide, increasing tension between equality and hierarchy. Inequality tended to become something 'unnatural', i.e. something that was no longer obvious and needed defending. There emerged a clear willingness to lessen or abolish it in terms of formal law and to come to a general equality. Westerners liked to use this ideal as a yardstick for showing how 'uncivilised' other societies were and to legitimise intervention in

16 Geoffrey Parker, 'Introduction: the Western way of war' in: idem (ed.), *Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare*, Cambridge 1995, p. 9.

their affairs. Those on a civilising mission may have been patronising and arrogant but they at least thought ‘other’ people could be civilised in the end, which in practice often meant in an ever receding future. There also, however, emerged a current in Western thinking – one should be wary though of claiming that this occurred *only* there – that other people *could* never be civilised as they belonged to a different race. The nineteenth century is also, as Osterhammel points out, the century of the spread of ‘scientific’ racism which explicitly denies that all people are equal and should be treated accordingly. But this too, and that is Osterhammel’s point, set the topic of equality versus inequality firmly on the agenda.

That brings us to the last characteristic of the age as seen by Osterhammel. He thinks the nineteenth century can also be described as the century of emancipation. Not in sense that everyone was emancipated of course. But it increasingly was understood that this *in principle* had to be the case. The ideal was set on the agenda and would not go away. Opinions were of course divided on how exactly and fast this ideal should be implemented. What is more, especially in colonial situations, the West became increasingly less serious about the glaring gap that existed between its high principles and its actual behaviour. This fundamentally undermined its credibility and caused Gandhi’s famous comment that Western civilization would be a good idea.

* * *

If the above is indeed a correct *description* of the main facts of the history of the globe in the nineteenth century, which I think it is, then the main challenge of any *analysis* of that history can only be to find the explanation of these facts. That, I think, boils down to finding the causes of the Great Divergence. For the first three ‘facts’ this is so obvious that there is no need to expand on that. For the other two facts, or rather tensions, it is also quite clear that without ‘the rise of the West’ to its dominance, they would at least have been much less acute.

Osterhammel’s description and interpretation of that divergence is quite good and nuanced. The reader willing to do that would probably be able to compile a satisfactory explanation from various parts of the text. I think, however, the book would have definitely won if in the comments at the end, the author would have briefly synthesised what he thinks about nature *and* causes of the Great Divergence, the main event of his century. Such a synthesis would have been very welcome: It would have helped people very much in assessing what they may have actually learned. Considering the enormous amount of topics discussed in the book and the enormous amount of pages devoted to them that may not be superfluous. I am sure that, let us say, twenty pages could have easily been skipped someplace else and devoted to that theme.

Asking what caused the Great Divergence in economic terms actually is asking four different questions. Firstly, why did any country at all manage to escape from the Malthusian constraints of the economic *ancien regime*? Basically that boils down to asking

for the causes of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain. This is a topic that is competently and amply discussed by Osterhammel. Secondly, it means asking why the new type of growth that emerged with this revolution did not stop as had always been the case before, but continued. In his discussions of science and technology Osterhammel provides his reader with sufficient material to construct an answer to this question too. Thirdly, explaining the Great Divergence means explaining why various countries in the world – in the nineteenth century all of them Western except Japan – were able to catch up with Britain. The Great Divergence up until far into the twentieth century remained a matter of ‘the West plus Japan versus the Rest’ not of ‘Britain versus the Rest’. Here I think the author could have done more: What is it that made catching up for most countries in Western Europe, like Germany and France, so relatively easy? Then finally, there of course is the problem of why so many countries did *not* catch up. This topic again is quite extensively dealt with by Osterhammel.

Western economic hegemony was combined with military and political hegemony. These enabled the West to set equality and emancipation on the global agenda and provided people elsewhere with the challenge to respond. Military and political hegemony meant military and political strength. Anyone reading about the history of the world in the nineteenth century sooner or later will have to deal with the surprising fact that tiny Britain turned a huge country like India into a colony and forced the government of the enormous Chinese empire to allow opium imports into its realm. As indicated, this strength was not simply a derivative of Western economic strength. Next to matters of finance and technology, that did of course play a role, organisation, discipline, cohesion, and motivation, also were important. In this respect too, it would have been helpful if Osterhammel had done some synthesising at the end of his book in effort to show us what specifically was behind Western dominance in these respects.

* * *

There are good reasons to be wary of studying nineteenth-century global history with one leading question in the back of one’s mind. But I think Osterhammel tends to exaggerate the dangers of a more problem-oriented approach, and to underestimate its advantages. If one basically is convinced that the nineteenth century was the age of the Great Divergence, as I think Osterhammel is, using that topic to structure one’s ‘grand narrative’, *need* not imply a biased approach. Nor need it imply an exclusive focus on Western exceptionalism, i.e., on what is different in Europe and on the advantages of those differences (p. 21). The literature dealing with developments in the nineteenth century in terms of the Great Divergence as it is defined by Kenneth Pomeranz, explicitly rejects teleological or determinist thinking, and explicitly rejects European exceptionalism. Using the Great Divergence-narrative, on the other hand might have provided Osterhammel’s text with a clearer theme and more coherence. That is not something to be scorned in case of a text as voluminous as his. But as I indicated before, I am not claiming

that this by necessity would have turned it into a *better* text. Osterhammel chooses for assessment, openness, breadth, playfully comparing and connecting, I personally tend to go for problem-solving, closure, focus and methodological seriousness. But that means we apparently prefer different styles. I see no objective grounds for calling one style better than the other or to even go as far to prescribe one at the exclusion of the other. The house of history indeed has and should have many mansions.

* * *

In his Afterword, Osterhammel writes he thought the time had come for him to no longer discuss the writing of global history but to actually practise it. In his terms, it is time to no longer bother about cooking books and start cooking. That may sound as an amateur cook giving it a first try. Actually we are dealing here with a world-class master chef, who has prepared a delicious, quite huge and affordable meal. *Vaut le détour*, as the Guide Michelin would say.