Book Reviews

Jürgen Osterhammel, translated by Patrick Camiller

The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. xxii + 1192 pp. ISBN: 978-0-691-14745-1 (Hardcover)

Jürgen Osterhammel's celebrated global history of the nineteenth century, available in Patrick Camiller's excellent translation, is an ambitious attempt to chronicle all the ways in which the nineteenth century changed the world. "Transformations" might have been a more appropriate title, given the detailed treatment of a mind-boggling array of unrelated changes. Along the way, Osterhammel considers the global synchronization of time and space, the proliferation of "communication networks" of science and religion, the spread of new technologies of travel and preservation, the institutionalization of new academic disciplines, the "metamorphosis of empires," and many different revolutions, "from Philadelphia via Nanjing to Saint Petersburg." He writes that "more than in any other era, politics in the nineteenth century was revolutionary politics" (514). To the extent that there is an overarching direction to these transformations, this book is about global integration and elaborates the ways in which the nineteenth century fused the world into an interconnected whole. Osterhammel also considers ways in which the growing frequency of contacts among diverse places provoked new conflicts, none more widespread and violent perhaps than the First World War.

There are no clear or consistent beginning or ending dates for Osterhammel's nineteenth century. In some parts of his book the nineteenth century begins with the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and endures until the Great Depression of the 1930s. In others, it lies firmly wedged between the end of the Seven Years War in 1763 and the outbreak of the "Great War" in 1914. Osterhammel is more interested in defining the century from within than in demarcating its outer limits, drawn equally to what is foreign and familiar at its heart: "Sometimes the century is remote from us, sometimes it is very close; often as the prehistory of the present, but on occasion as deeply buried as Atlantis" (xviii). Ultimately,

the book is as much about understanding the nineteenth century on its own terms as it is about explaining our debt to it.

Many reviewers have joined in Jonathan Sperber's awestruck celebration of Osterhammel's vision. Even the most critical, Samuel Moyn, has called the book "staggeringly impressive." The problem for Moyn is that it does not in fact amount to a new or revitalized narrative of the nineteenth century. There are "few surprises," women are all but absent, and the whole is less than the sum of its parts: "Rather than a unified story, Osterhammel has offered up a series of thematic exercises." These are important criticisms, but the last one, at least, is anticipated in the insightful introduction, where Osterhammel self-consciously distinguishes his approach from that of other historians who have reduced the nineteenth century to a single story.

Written more in the tradition of Burckhardt and Braudel than Marx and Hobsbawm, the book is an exercise in seeing rather than storytelling. It is divided into three parts: "Approaches," "Panoramas," and "Themes." Each offers its own way of looking at the nineteenth century. "Approaches" explores the way the nineteenth century saw itself through institutions of memory and the measurement of space and time: journalism, museums, calendars, and maps. "Panoramas" describes eight different "spheres of reality": mobilities, living standards, cities, frontiers, imperial systems, international orders, revolutions, and the state. "Themes" takes a more analytical approach to the role of various forces, starting with industrialization, in shaping the century. These ways of looking do not fit together comfortably. Often the reader is caught in a tangle of disparate categories. Nonetheless, Osterhammel's visual orientation has a lot to offer, showing how much more there was to the dynamics of nineteenth-century life than empire and industry (Hobsbawm's key categories). Take, for example, the successive chapters on cities and frontiers. Osterhammel illuminates the one by its relationship to the other: "people flow into the city and to the frontier; they are two great magnets for nineteenth century migration" (322). They are opposites and yet perform similar functions. Here as elsewhere, Osterhammel seems caught between seeking an identity for the nineteenth century and offering a snapshot of a transitional moment between past and present.

A German historian of China, Osterhammel is highly self-aware and self-critical, sensitive to the limitations of any single perspective on the past. Often this leaves him spinning in vain pursuit of a better vantage point. In conclusion, he observes that "the panoramic view from a summit is an impressive experience." But then, citing the German medievalist Arno Borst, he asks ruefully, "How long can a historian remain on a summit?" (902). Instead of a triumphant vista, Osterhammel offers a tentative enumeration of five technically

worded “angles of vision” on the century, including such forgettable mouthfuls as “*asymmetrical efficiency growth*” and “*asymmetrical reference density*.” Still, what Moyn identified as Osterhammel’s greatest weakness might in fact be his greatest strength: a multiplicity of possible viewpoints, full of rich interpretations and unexpected juxtapositions, like the pairing of Goethe’s *Faust* and Melville’s *Moby-Dick* to introduce the nineteenth century’s unprecedented fascination with the conquest of the land and the sea.

David I. L. Beecher

University of California, Berkeley