

## COMMENTS ON JÜRGEN OSTERHAMMEL'S "IN SEARCH OF A NINETEENTH CENTURY"

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History used to be a growth industry. There was, after all, more everyday. Lately, like much else in the modern world, there is reason to call this bad joke into question. In fact, more and more history seems to be disappearing. First, it was the French Revolution, as historians turned against the great climacteric, dissolving the differences between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie and finding more to say about the Counter-Revolution than the Revolution itself. By the time the revisionists were through—and, mercifully, I think they are through—it was hard to know why folks were writing so much about the Counter-Revolution if there was no Revolution in the first place. The Industrial Revolution suffered the same fate, as the period of manufacture blended so easily with the rise of the factory, and the factory itself became a series of workshops not commanded by the great captains of industry, but by some rude foremen, who ruled imperiously over workers and bosses alike. Finally, it was the transition to capitalism that at first could not be located—was it in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?—and then could be located everywhere and nowhere. Here was a train that may have left the station but never arrived at the terminal.

Yet the magicians who have done away with these great watersheds of history have nothing on Jürgen Osterhammel, whose prestidigitation has far exceeded their cheap magician's tricks, for he threatens to do away with a whole century.

Historians of Africa, China, India, and Europe or even antiquity might shrug this off, after all they have lots of centuries. Who would really mind if we somehow misplaced the fourth century or some of those before the common era. But American historians do not have many centuries with which to work. Take away one century and you reduce the history of the mainland North American settlement at least by a full quarter and the history of the American Republic by nearly a half. It took far less than that to tip Enron and WorldCom, so if you hear my voice get a little strained you know I fear for all of American history, perhaps all of history. With university budgets collapsing everywhere, Jürgen Osterhammel may have struck a nerve. So let me look behind that curtain.

Like the great magicians who vanquished the French Revolution, routed the Industrial Revolution, and have so hidden the transition to capitalism that we cannot locate it, Jürgen Osterhammel begins by dem-

onstrating that the chronology of those great markers is not nearly as obvious as we thought. When did the nineteenth century begin and when did it end? Those neat century-long periods, Jürgen Osterhammel shows, have little reality. However nice the roundness of the figure of one hundred years is, it has no independent reality. Switch from the decimal system to another, centuries do not seem as round; switch from the Gregorian calendar to some other calendric system, and dissolve those round dates entirely.

But even when scholars get on the same page, the same calendar page that is, they disagree about when the century begins, and when it ends. Indeed, as Professor Osterhammel reminds us, if Eric Hobsbawm has made the case for the long nineteenth century beginning with the Age of Revolutions—aforesaid (and previously lost) French as well as American and Haitian revolutions—others have made the case for the nineteenth century beginning in the 1820s or later. Likewise, if some think the nineteenth century ended with World War I, others have maintained that the 1870s and 1880s might be an appropriate end point. Still others have a much longer nineteenth century, beginning with the great imperial wars of the mid-eighteenth century (1756) and ending with the Great Depression of the 1930s. And there are still shorter versions. Is the nineteenth century really 150 years, or is it 50, or is it more or less?

Moreover, Osterhammel demonstrates that not only do scholars disagree about the boundaries of the nineteenth century, they also disagree on its internal chronology. Here the number of permutations grows larger and larger, as Osterhammel, with ingenuity, insight, and seemingly limitless depth, views the nineteenth century from various perspectives. Like a shadow box, each perspective provides a different vision. That, I presume, is the point of Jürgen Osterhammel's wonderful, erudite essay. History, after all, is a matter of perspective, and perhaps nothing is more determinate of perspective than chronology. Indeed, chronology is the high ground of interpretation: seize it and you command the field, lose it and you will forever work in someone else's garden. That is precisely why this struggle for the high ground is so intense and there are so many contenders. Periodization is not simply a necessary evil, but the very essence of historical interpretation. Let us therefore accept Osterhammel's reminder of the critical importance of chronology in history. Let us concede his point that the nineteenth century has no more reality than race, gender, or nationality—social constructions all. What of *a* nineteenth century, if not *the* nineteenth century? It is hard to fault Osterhammel's review of the evidence, the different perspectives which lead us to bound the nineteenth century variously, and divide it internally. It is hard not to be amazed by Osterhammel's learned reach, pulling us into the reunification of Vietnam under Gia Long and connecting Gia's rule to that of the

disastrous tenure of John Quincy Adams. But does any “nineteenth century” tell a meaningful story? If it does, which of these many contenders best explains that story? Or, as Osterhammel suggests, have we paid such great attention to the nineteenth century because we live among its rubble (material and intellectual) or because, of all centuries, it marks the birth of the modern historical profession, hence is ground zero for historical understanding?

So let me rise to the bait and join Jürgen Osterhammel in a search for a plausible, global nineteenth century. Naturally, I enter the contest with no pretension of success, as I understand the contest between the Age of Fossil Fuel and the Age of Revolutions is an uneven and unstable one which can be overturned by the transfer of power in Siam or the liberation of serfs in Eastern Europe, or trumped by the elevation of some event previously deemed insignificant. Does embourgeoisement top proletarianization or are they encompassed by class formation? Is the Atlantic trumped by the interior continental developments? Does the definition of manhood or womanhood (defining gender) take precedence over citizenship? If Arno Mayer has demonstrated that the landed classes survived very well into the twentieth century, does that deny the centrality of the middle class? It is small wonder that Osterhammel ends his talk with questions.

To make a case for a nineteenth century, one would have to develop criteria to measure one nineteenth century against another. If one is preferred to another, there must be a reason or logic, a standard to be met, criteria that can be measured. That reason cannot simply be inclusiveness. History is made and interpretations constructed as much by what is left out as by what is put in. To include everything is to make a chronology that can start or end at whatever point is chosen, but not to make a history. On the other hand, history gains value by its inclusiveness. A nineteenth century constructed to explain the rise of the nation state, industrialization, urbanization, the emancipation of women, or the triumph of free labor have their own value. But a nineteenth century that could encompass all of them would have still greater value. It is here that much of the problem lies in finding a global nineteenth century. For the chronologies (or histories) of these phenomena—the rise of the nation state, industrialization, urbanization, the emancipation of women, the triumph of free labor or some of the others Osterhammel mentioned—have mutually exclusive or conflicting chronologies. Indeed, many of these phenomena, like the rise of the nation state, for example, militate against the construction of a global history. In short, world history is not an additive phenomenon. It cannot be the sum of all national histories, any more than the history of industrialization can be derived from putting the history of all factories end to end, or histories of wars back to back, or history of sexuality. . . . (I won't go there).

Let me instead try my hand and make a case for a nineteenth century by looking not at what the nineteenth century was, which Osterhammel has done with consummate skill, but by looking at what it was not; that is, by examining how the nineteenth century differs from the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, short or long. I would begin this discussion by speaking to the presumption of equality, a presumption that is put into effect and acted upon with ferocious energy after the Age of Revolutions. The nineteenth century was a century of inequality, extraordinary and enormous inequality that in some ways outdistanced anything previously known, as the distance between rich and poor and the differences between men and women, white and black, colonizer and colonized, and perhaps most significantly, civilized and uncivilized, expanded. Yet, even as the massive hierarchies grew, they had to be explained away since the normal order of things was now presumed to be equality. Indeed, it was precisely that presumption that drove the creation of new ideologies to explain subordination or superordination by race, sex, or class. New forms of racism, gendered understandings, and social Darwinist configurations had not been needed when inequality was the normal run of mankind. It was the presumption of equality that mandated their presence and which required a reconfiguration of social relations. Unlike any century in the past (certainly the eighteenth century), the nineteenth century struggled with the matter of equality.

So, too, the distinction that more than any other separates the twentieth century from the nineteenth is the advent of modernity. Here I define modernity—even more slippery than equality—by a new universality that comes from a mixing of people. Here, I think of the cultural diversity of the Harlem Renaissance or postwar Weimar, the mixing of architectural styles in Rio de Janeiro, or the movement of peoples as a result of a century of warfare.

Employing the ubiquity of equality and modernity as the lower and upper boundaries of the nineteenth century fits in some places, perhaps in the larger Atlantic world and other areas touched by the west. However, does it fit a global history? I am not sure. Certainly it does not if we mean the portions of the world unconnected by ties of trade, communication, exchange of goods, ideas, or even disease. But what is global history if not the history of those parts that are connected? That, of course, brings us back to Professor Osterhammel's largest point that chronology is a function of interpretation. If that is a truism, it is one which we often forget. Professor Osterhammel has reminded us of its importance with particular power, elegance, and poignancy. It also provides confidence that not only does the nineteenth century survive this exercise, but it will survive others as well.