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At the southern tip of the Sixth Arrondissement in Paris, flanking the Jardin du Luxembourg, four female statues balance a globe in bronze on their slender shoulders. Neither of the four figures, representing the European, African, Asian and American continents (minus Australia and Antarctica), express the pain that the weight of the world once wrought upon Atlas. Nothing could better illustrate the effortlessness, elegance and virtuosity with which Jürgen Osterhammel has now shouldered the global history of the long nineteenth century.

Osterhammel prefers the play with diverse perspectives (Isaiah Berlin’s “hedgehogs”) to the penetrating lookout for a single root cause (the pursuit of “foxes”), however complex or overarching that root cause may turn out to be. To the delight of his readers, the author applies to these pages a motley (and not necessarily rosy) set of lenses to make out how the nineteenth century overcame resistance, large and small, against global interconnectedness.

The introduction hastens to refute what most global historians might initially suspect: This book, the author declares, is not an “Anti-Bayly”, referring to that other recent masterpiece, Christopher Bayly’s *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (2004). Although three times as long, covering the same century and even more of human experience, the book presents an alternative “in sympathetic spirit” (16). It is inspired by the same search for global analogies as Bayly’s, while shifting emphasis from the latter’s elaborate analysis of proliferating nationalisms, forms of religious belief and “bodily practices” to the phenomena of migration, the global economy, the environment, international politics and international cultures of knowledge, both in the sciences and in the humanities. And more than that. With the burden and the benefit of four to five years more hindsight than Bayly, Osterhammel opens up far-flung panoramas on settled and mobile communities, standards of living, cities, frontiers, empires and nations, systems of power, revolutions and the changing meaning of the state. The generous panoramas are followed by neat thematic clusters that trace the global fluctuations of energy and industry, labor, networks, hierarchies, knowledge, “Civilization” and exclusion and finally religion.

Such a treasure house of historical phenomena, most of them unraveling across rather than within world regions, calls for an elaborate system of organization and explanation. The author’s insistent denial of mono-causality will continue to receive approving nods. No single powerhouse, economic machine, or miraculous mentality in “the West” alone could create the early twentieth-century world as an enlarged social arena, trapped in its own inequality. Accordingly, in
this “portrait of an epoch”, no one group of states or societies takes center stage; instead the stage is considerably wider than before. Europe’s global influence, Osterhammel argues, was more encompassing in the nineteenth century than in any other before or after, but the meaning of this influence was ambivalent: European “power of innovation” was as excessive as its determination to subjugate and its arrogance (20). To the book’s credit, it balances European preponderance, so long the preoccupation in the historiography of European expansion, with a multiplicity of countervailing forces in each of the investigations named above.

Combining Bayly’s “lateral” and synchronistic approach to culture, politics, social mobilization and economic activity with the merits of mini-narratives through time, the book demonstrates how global integration and interdependence intensified. The awareness of genuinely global hierarchies and inequalities (1292-1295) provoked demands to counteract them. Conceptually, Osterhammel untangles global complexity into a series of sub-systems, each endowed with its own logic of development. To narrate the history of these sub-systems can be likened to passing, door after door, through the halls of the human past. (19) The telling allegory is, of course, taken from Braudel.

Yet this thematic gallery of global impressions, while admittedly a practical necessity of shaping and placing perspectives side by side, comes with a cost. Causalities across disparate chapters remain necessarily tentative. The narrative challenge of global history revolves around the question how to capture synchronous processes in their disparate locales. Where Bayly took synchronicity by its horns, Osterhammel divides it into clusters to rule them with the gentle hand of logic. Synchronic structures affect the capacity to assign causality: They capture growth and outcomes, but rarely render roots. Revisiting these hurricanes of historical transformation, the reader is left to wonder where to search for the notorious butterfly that first flapped his wings. Unless, of course, that butterfly is but a phantom of our imagination.

The most conspicuous butterfly of the nineteenth century, called empire, remains ubiquitous yet unnamed. Empire seems to run through the book as a kind of carpet: unobtrusive yet always there. As Osterhammel admits, colonialism and imperialism are so essential to the nineteenth century that he has refrained from relegating their impact to single chapters (16). Did imperial relations overall – that is, fundamentally unequal hierarchies in the distribution and recognition of power, capital and the re-channeling of cultural and religious forms of expressions – support or resist the global metamorphosis of the long nineteenth century? Did they stand apart from or rather behind the increasing the global bundle of complexity which marked the modern world as its most widespread, shared feature? In what ways did empires influence global change, if at all, and how were they affected in turn?
In terms of a global, social history, Osterhammel allows groups to make countless appearances, but the proper names are few. Like the lady-figures of the Fontaine des Quatre-Parties-du-Monde in the Jardin Marco Polo, most cultures, societies and continents share the same world without having come face to face. This is where the responsibility of present readers and future researchers comes in. They have to find passages and bridges to territory that the wisest mapmaker had to leave unmarked. Osterhammel’s insights suggest many possibilities.

For example, in advancing a new periodization, Osterhammel extends Reinhart Koselleck’s narrowly conceived Sattelzeit from about 1760 to 1830 far beyond an “Atlantic Revolution” as the formative pivot for global imperial expansion to a longer period that includes the rise of “White” hegemony, the spread of modernity, the formulation of an ideal of civic equality, the “contestation and undermining of dated, social hierarchies,” and, finally, what Osterhammel terms “the Ancien Régime of energy,” namely fossil fuels. For him, unlike Koselleck, culture possesses the least degree of global synchronicity, Rather, the Sattelzeit was a comprehensive, “crisis-ridden transition” that inaugurated a truly global nineteenth century (104-109).

In raising balanced judgment and relational rather than absolute arguments to global dimensions, Osterhammel’s book holds essential lessons for colleagues in all research fields and regions. Historians who, like Osterhammel (an expert of late imperial and twentieth century China), began their careers in “area studies” will find countless doors to more spacious halls, and no dead end in sight.