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The Prospect of Global History

Edited by James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz, and Chris Wickham, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 222, Hardback £35.00, ISBN: 978-0-198-73225-9

REVIEWED BY ALEXANDRA LEONZINI

The Prospect of Global History, edited by James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz, and Chris Wickham, is a compelling anthology and the first book of a planned series to be produced by the Oxford Centre of Global History. Expressing an intention to “show how global history can be applied instead of advocated”, the book is divided into three parts - Conceptual Considerations, Global Circulations, and Global Networks - and seeks to highlight the geographical and chronological range of global history studies today. The result is nuanced, informative, and, while not ‘perfect’, certainly promising.

The introductory essay written by Belich, Darwin and Wickman situates the book within the field and identifies three promising approaches to the writing of global history; globalization, comparison and connectedness. It is an interesting read, drenched in historical detail, which highlights global networks from the Romans to the present day, and argues that the global can be found further back in time than most historians have previously theorized. This argument, which is very much at the core of Peter Frankopan’s recent publication *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (2015) is elaborated upon by Robert I. Moore in his chapter, ‘A Global Middle Ages?’, which challenges the convictions of historians like Christopher Bayly and Jürgen Osterhammel who, in their books *The Birth of the Modern World: Global Connections and Comparisons, 1780-1914* (2004) and *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (2014) respectively, have argued that global connectedness is a modern phenomenon. Moore instead argues that 500-1500 CE was an ‘Age of Global Intensification’ characterized by a sustained agricultural development in Eurasia which withstood the disastrous spread of plague in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and enabled the development of urban centers. As such, it is his suggestion that global historians turn to the history of the ‘middle ages’ to better understand the development of the modern world.

The first chapter of the anthology, Jürgen Osterhammel’s ‘Global History and Historical Sociology’ is a fascinating piece and should be read by all students of history due to its strong emphasis on the benefits that interdisciplinary exchange has on scholarship. It is Osterhammel’s contention that global history is not a self-contained field, but one in need of theoretical and terminological support from various parts of the systematic social sciences, particularly Historical Sociology, stating that, in the case of global history, “a lack of discursive autarchy and a shallow rootedness in mainstream historiography turn an interdisciplinary orientation

into a daily necessity” (p.24). Arguing that “historians are very rarely ambitious and competent originators of big ideas” (p.25), he states that it is in the best interests of historians to be “rational and discriminating shoppers at the marketplace of theory,” for the discipline “suffers when it is chained to theoretical orthodoxy” (p.27). After highlighting the many methodological interests shared by global history and historical sociology, including the rejection of Eurocentrism and a focus on long-distance connectivity across national and cultural boundaries, Osterhammel discusses six types of global history and how their specific needs for theory can be met using sociological considerations and categories. His explanation of the differences between the Comprehensive, Universal, Movement, Competition, Network, and Connection histories produced by global historians today is illuminating, demonstrating a thorough and profound understanding of the current state of the art, and his predictions of decline should global historians continue to uncritically adopt and adapt key concepts from other fields offer much food for thought.

Belich’s ‘The Black Death and the Spread of Europe’, Antony G. Hopkins’ ‘The Real American Empire’, and Linda Colley’s ‘Writing Constitutions and Writing World History’ also provide the reader with much to consider. An entertaining read, Belich’s chapter discusses the positive impact that plague had on living standards and per capita trade in Europe from the mid-fourteenth century. It is his contention that the sudden depopulation of formerly overcrowded European centers triggered significant technological advancement and led to a restructuring of politics and socio-economy which facilitated later European expansion. Particularly fascinating is Belich’s throwaway discussion on the relationship between disease and expansion in non-European centers by non-European actors, which really was worthy of greater attention.

Hopkins’ ‘The Real American Empire’, discusses the territorial empire of the United States, issuing a call to historians of the US to resurrect and research this “real American Empire,” which he argues was formally decolonized by 1959. The success of Hopkins’ argument is reliant on a definition of ‘empire’ that is limited to territorial considerations, precluding culture, economy, and other spheres of influence. He rallies against what he perceives to be the anachronistic labelling of the United States as an empire in the second half of the twentieth century with little discussion as to why it has been perceived as such. In doing so, he ignores completely the relationship between culture and imperialism so eloquently outlined by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), and the effect America has had on the world since the decline of their territorial empire. Rather, this is examined by Linda Colley in ‘Writing Constitutions and Writing World History’, which is a wide-reaching study highlighting what historians can learn about empire, war, and gender in the long nineteenth century by examining the proliferation of written constitutions, like that of the US, in a global perspective.

It is important to emphasize that as a total package *The Prospect of Global History* is not prescriptive: it does not provide a blue print for the construction of a 'perfect' global history. Instead, Belich, Darwin, Frenz and Wickman have collected nine essays with diverging perspectives regarding how to best approach the writing of global history. These approaches will not strike any reader already familiar with global historiography as particularly new or innovative - globalization theory, comparative studies, and network theory are 'old hat' by now, but are important to recapitulate nonetheless. The volume's use of multiple approaches in the writing of global history, however, means that authors tend to contradict each other as to how to best approach scale and scope when writing global histories. The role of microhistory in a global framework is particularly contested, with Nicholas Purcell, in his essay 'Unnecessary Dependences: Illustrating Circulation in Pre-modern Large-scale History', stating that global history needs microhistory on a purely practical level as it is unrealistic to expect global historians to do and know everything, while Mather W. Mosca in 'The Qing Empire in the Fabric of Global History' is more circumspect, arguing that it can be difficult to 'scale up' from the micro and ensure that what is observable on a local scale is representative of larger 'macro' historical dynamics. Belich's argument that "a global approach need not be universal" (p.93) is emphasized in such disagreements and highlights the multi-faceted and dynamic nature of this developing field.

The nine essays collected within this anthology address many of the considerations and concerns historians have had when approaching history from a global perspective. Unintentionally, however, they also highlight some of the more troubling structural inequalities within the field today. For example, of the nine authors featured, all but one are male; with the exception of Osterhammel, all contributors are Anglo-American; only Purcell provides an in-depth analysis of non-English language materials, and even then, works with English translations of Arabic sources rather than the originals; and, Africa and Latin America are peripheral figures at best, while the bulk of the book is dedicated to Eurasia and the ever popular 'East vs West' divergence debate. While Darwin argues in the anthology's afterword that the appeal and values of global history "lie in the multiple vistas it opens up, in the connections it suggests, in the questions it asks" (p.183), it would be encouraging to see more diverse vistas 'opened up' and these questions asked by more diverse historians as the series continues. Despite these concerns, however, *The Prospect of Global History* has much to offer those in the field, and I have no doubt that Osterhammel's chapter alone will be mandatory for all students of global history to read in years to come.