
BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN

Roland Wenzlhuemer:
Globalgeschichte schreiben. Eine
Einführung in sechs Episoden,
Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft
mbH 2017, 302 S.

Rezensiert von
Matthias Middell, Leipzig

This volume is meant to be an introduction to global history; it does not, however, present its subject in form of a textbook but rather as a series of notes taken by the author during his own process of doing global history. Therefore, the title should not be misread as a guide to writing global history in all its different dimensions but as a guide to topics that are central to Wenzlhuemer's work, which has focused thus far on the telegraph cable network emerging in the late nineteenth century and the global communication processes that were becoming possible through these new means of transregional connections. He starts the journey – to which he invites novices of global history – with the quite frustrating message that a large part of the literature that has argued in favour of de-centring history and overcoming Eurocentrism as well as methodological national-

ism has not yet achieved to define its own ambitions in a positive manner, tending to be over-optimistic with regard to the changes in the historical culture towards global perspectives. To become a global historian is obviously more difficult than the repetition of a series of sympathetic claims suggest. Here is the starting point for Wenzlhuemer, who intends to propose a trustworthy bridge between theoretical ambition and empirical operationalization; or in other words, his goal is a translation of the conviction that global history is necessary into a plausible research strategy that meets the standards of today's professional historical sciences. He is, undeniably, not the first author to raise this issue, and he is well aware of this fact as the footnotes and listed books demonstrate, which provide an additional wealth of information and further reading that complement the author's own research examples that he uses in the six chapters of the book. All the stories are chronologically located between 1789 (the mutiny on the *Bounty*) and the early twentieth century, when Dr Crippen, following the murder of his wife, took a ship to Montreal but was pursued by Scotland Yard as well as the international press, which, due to fact that the telegraph allowed communication on sea, was able to follow him by making use of the many ships that transferred the news to the next

station. A long nineteenth century is thus covered, and the episodes reported are all to one degree or the other media scandals that provide insights into not only the new possibilities and risks but also the unevenness of communication that used new technologies, which helped to enormously speed up the circulation of news.

Before he comes to these examples, Roland Wenzlhuemer argues in the first part of the book, considering Sebastian Conrad's recent introduction to the field (Princeton 2016), that global history is a perspective that can be practiced both as a larger synthesis as well as more narrowly designed case studies. In both cases, events, structures, and connections at the centre of the narrative are contextualized globally. But he disagrees explicitly with Conrad's (and others') claim that global history can and (perhaps should) address the different degrees of connectedness. He further objects that it would be very difficult – if not impossible – to define a point of no return where global integration goes beyond the sheer existence of transborder connections and has reached a level where it cannot be completely dismantled again. The scepticism towards the existence of, or the possibility to define, such a historical moment when the world entered the global condition and can be distinguished from “archaic” globalization (as Christopher Bailly [2002] puts it) does not come with a longer explanation referring to the relevant literature but with an extensive methodological consideration about the gap in historiography concerning the ways in which people connect globally. This serves as an opening to the subsequent chapters, introducing the reader to possible avenues for research on how connectedness comes into

existence. – The first of these substantial chapters reconstructs the rumour around the “discovery” of human beings on the moon, attributed by the New York-based newspaper *Sun* to the well-recognized British scientist Sir John Herschel. This early version of fake news, meant to increase the number of copies sold of the newspaper, serves as an excellent example of the use of already existing global (better perhaps, transregional) connections (real and imagined) that produced, for example, the global fame of the British scholar, while the readers of the *Sun* had no chance to check, at least at short notice, the reference made to academic publications. This asynchronicity helped the journalist at the *Sun* to make his audience believe in the reported news. What Wenzlhuemer argues here is the unevenness of global connections, which gave (and still give until today) enough room to manoeuvre to play with geographically far-reaching imaginations that remain uncheckable for larger parts of the media audience.

The following chapter goes back to Wenzlhuemer's special field of expertise: the role of the telegraph in the construction of new ways to perceive space and time in the nineteenth century.¹ The telegraph facilitated connections between places that were far away from each other faster than for places nearby but not connected through the new means of communication. The relations between different spaces were therefore perceived as more complex and probably more problematic than in the past, especially when – as the author presents with telling examples – people were able to profit from this difference between geographical and communicative distance for the purpose of financial spec-

ulation. The tension between connected peoples and those remaining in the relative isolation of remote places and regions is again nothing that only applies to the nineteenth century – it can be observed up until today and remains a challenge for the interpretation of the seemingly ever increasing global connected world. More recently, we can even observe an enormous potential to mobilize against a liberal version of globalization when referring to this tension and the insistence on the differences between a cosmopolitan elite and a rather bounded majority of people.

In another episode, the author addresses the central terms of social history, namely structures and actors. He stresses the role of individuals as actors of and intermediaries in connections who constitute (some of) the (many) relationships at play in such an entangled world while they are themselves constituted by the connections and many of their professions are a product of the connected world. Wenzlhuemer illustrates this with the mutiny on the *Bounty*, famously known from various film versions of the mutiny itself, while still surprisingly disputed when looking at the archives of reports for the event provided by the many different intermediaries.

Structures are discussed here with regard to the example of the railway through and over Mont Cenis, which increasingly became the very last obstacle to an efficient route between Europe and Asia made possible by the opening of the Suez Canal. The story can also be read as one of the dramatically felt impacts of global connections on local infrastructural configurations.

The last episode presented is the flight of Dr Crippen, who had killed his wife

in London and tried to escape Scotland Yard's pressure via Antwerp to the New World by ship. Since the captain had already recognized him during embarkment and informed the police, it was possible for the police officer to overtake him with the help of a much faster ship before Crippen even arrived in Canada. Wenzlhuemer uses the again well-known story for more theoretical considerations concerning media coverage, the situation of transit between two worlds now increasingly under the (still incomplete) control of communicating bureaucracies. Crippen was recognized by the captain right when he came aboard in Antwerp because there were already portrayals of him in the British press and he had no chance to flee afterwards since he became a "prisoner in transit" (p. 242) on the *Montrose* liner and was arrested even before arriving in Montreal.

As one can see, Wenzlhuemer profits from episodes that had not only been subject to larger reports in the contemporary press but had, in most cases, also attracted film directors and novelists afterwards. He therefore can reduce the narrative to the necessary in order to awake the reader's memory of the one or the other film and can switch from the historical anecdote to his own theoretical conclusion. This connects very well the anecdotal evidence with such conclusions and is clearly intended to invite students following this path by identifying similar episodes and turn them into something meaningful for global history interpretations.

Roland Wenzlhuemer is a gifted storyteller. He likes to narrate anecdotes, but he does so for a theoretical purpose. The chapters therefore are organized in almost the same way. At the beginning of each

chapter, a problem is raised that could also be addressed by more abstract considerations but is presented in the form of fascinating stories of individuals experiencing the new global condition of the nineteenth century. This allows the author afterwards to make a conclusion that brings him back to his original idea of presenting the reader his thoughts about how to do global history.

It is not quite clear if this book targets undergraduates as a sort of “appetizer” to the field of global history not yet very well anchored at this level in German university curricula or if it rather addresses graduate students with a language of theoretical sophistication that presupposes a certain preparatory reading. The latter will probably discover that Wenzlhuemer’s ideas are embedded in a larger literature he refers to only to the degree a textbook for undergraduates may allow. But one can also take the book as evidence that the clear distinction between undergraduate and graduate training that has been transferred and translated from the Anglo-Saxon model to Germany’s universities has not yet arrived in full. If this a disadvantage or advantage is another matter of dispute for which this review is not the right place.

Note:

- 1 R. Wenzlhuemer (Hg.), *Global Communication. Telecommunication and Global Flows of Information in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century*, Cologne 2010; R. Wenzlhuemer, *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World. The Telegraph and Globalization*, Cambridge/New York 2013.

Jürgen Osterhammel: *Unfabling the East. The Enlightenment’s Encounter with Asia*, Princeton / Oxford: Princeton University Press 2018, 696 p.

Rezensiert von
Sven Trakulhun, Konstanz

Unfabling the East von Jürgen Osterhammel ist zuerst 1998 unter dem Titel *Die Entzauberung Asiens* erschienen. Vor zwanzig Jahren war die deutschsprachige Fachwelt von diesem Buch tief beeindruckt. Es war ein erster systematischer Überblick über die geistige Erfassung Asiens im langen 18. Jh. und zugleich ein meisterhaftes Epochenportrait Europas im Spiegel der „Anderen“. Allein das Verzeichnis der Quellen und Forschungsliteratur wirkte auf den damals noch weitgehend analogen Forschungsbetrieb geradezu einschüchternd. Ich spreche aus eigener Erfahrung, als jemand, der das Buch als Student gelesen hat und der später zeitweilig auch ein Mitarbeiter Osterhammels an der Universität Konstanz gewesen ist. Die große Wirkung der *Entzauberung* lässt sich aber kaum bestreiten. Große Belesenheit, Formbewusstsein und sprachliches Feingefühl fanden darin glücklich zusammen. Wer sich im deutschsprachigen Raum fortan wissenschaftlich mit der Geschichte der Beziehungen zwischen Asien und Europa beschäftigen wollte, musste dieses Buch kennen.

Worum geht es? Osterhammel greift mit *Unfabling the East* eine Kontroverse auf,