

You turn a page and then there is suddenly something on a turtle': Interview with Jürgen Osterhammel

On 1 September 2011 Jürgen Osterhammel, Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at the University of Konstanz, and his wife, the historian and sinologist Sabine Dabringhaus (University of Freiburg), visited Leiden to participate in a conference on 'Forms of Dynastic Power in Late Imperial China and Early Modern Europe.' The conference marked the start of a new comparative research programme on 'Eurasian Empires: Integration Processes and Identity Formation.' After discussing the aims and objectives of the new programme in a highly stimulating roundtable with the fresh researchers, Itinerario (Andreas Weber and Jos Gommans) took the opportunity to have a talk with Jürgen Osterhammel about his career and the writing of his recent masterpiece, Die Verwandlung der Welt (The Transformation of the World). This monograph is a painstaking and thought-provoking attempt to write a global history of the nineteenth century. In more than 1,500 pages, Osterhammel offers a kaleidoscopic view on topics such as cities, frontiers, empires and nation states, nomads, music, science, religion, work, revolutions and living standards. Reviewers have praised the book for its thoroughness and innovative methodology, and an English translation will appear in the course of 2013. Already dazzling in itself, it is 'just' the latest addition to an awe-inspiring oeuvre of one of the leading historians in Europe.

First things first: why and how did you decide to become a historian? Was there some kind of 'natural road' in your family that paved the way?

No, there was no natural road; quite the contrary. I was born in 1952 in a small town in the Bergisches Land (Rhineland) in the north-west of Germany, which is a part of the country well known for people like Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Habermas. Nothing prepared me for becoming a historian. My immediate family had a strong natural science emphasis. My father was a physicist; he did not prevent me from studying humanities but also did not think it would be the best of all possible choices. The inspiration probably came from attending a very good school, a public school (Gymnasium) where in the late 1960s questions especially

of politics and recent history played an important role. My original impulse to do history as an academic subject was very much related to contemporary concerns. And in a way it still is. I still consider myself a historian who in whatever he does tries to address questions which are relevant today.

Being born in 1952, to what extent was this present-minded agenda inspired by the generation of the roaring 1960s and 1970s, which aimed to reform society. Were you ever a political 'activist' yourself?

My school was not in the Bergisches Land, but in Hanau, a city in the state of Hesse. That is important because in 1968, when I was 16, obviously the intellectual hothouse after Berlin was Frankfurt. Hanau was quite close to Frankfurt and sometimes I managed to go there. I even played with the idea of going to Frankfurt to study philosophy and sociology with Theodor W. Adorno. He was a man who mastered the entire literary and philosophical tradition, also a brilliant pianist and composer himself, and of course an anti-capitalist radical—that is an interesting tension. I might have done that, but unfortunately he died in August 1969, which was a year before I took my A-levels (*Abitur*). So the chance was missed and I decided to study at the university in Marburg.

This means that you fostered a strong and serious interest in philosophy at a rather young age. To what extent was this special at that time?

Many young people were interested in philosophy at that time. I can't really reconstruct the exact origins of that. A couple of friends and I, we all claimed a broad range of authors, and in the German language and literature classes read excerpts from Hegel and Nietzsche and a lot of the dramatist and poet Bertolt Brecht, who was re-emerging as an important author at that time. Philosophers were much more in the public eyes than they are today. That was the time when you opened *Der Spiegel*, a weekly political magazine, and you found interviews with philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, the Marxist visionary Ernst Bloch and the great men of the Frankfurt school, Adorno, Max Horkheimer and the young Jürgen Habermas. So it was in a way natural to become acquainted with their ideas and texts which were made available in the famous rainbow-coloured books in Edition Suhrkamp in their original shape, with a loose paper flap. A real treasure. These little books were my early intellectual nourishment.

So at that time you were not really at the frontline of the new intellectual movement?

No, I was too young to be an active rebel, and at my school in Hanau there were no sharp confrontations between conservative teachers and the wider revolutionary world. The school was quite progressive, and contemporary history played an enormous role. I read, as part of a regular school education, Hannah Arendt, another important author for me. When I was 17 or 18, I worked my way through *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (first published in English as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) and a couple of other social science classics. We read, for instance, Ralf Dahrendorf, so it was not just Marxism and the Frankfurt School. I always had an interest in contemporary history and a direct engagement with questions of National Socialism and the recent German past, which was a generational experience elsewhere as well. Those were themes openly discussed in a way that a young person easily felt encouraged to study history and politics.

To what extent was Germany special at that time? Didn't the Cold War and the division between East and West Germany have a huge impact?

Yes, definitely so, because of two factors. There was, on the one hand, the need to reconsider the past and move against attempts to cover it up and not face its horrors. I still remember the tremendous shock caused by Peter Weiss's drama *Die Ermittlung*, based on documents from the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (1963–65). And, on the other hand, there was of course the divide between East and West, resulting, among other things, in two competing historiographies. A burning issue at the time, more important to my generation than the division of Germany, was the Vietnam War. We were really concerned as young people about things going on in Vietnam. And at the same time, in 1968, we were intrigued by the Cultural Revolution in China that, just in 1968, was moving into its hottest phase.

So you decided to study in Marburg. What was the academic environment there?

The environment was that of a quintessential university town. There are these old-style university towns, only a few of them are left in Germany. When I was a student, there were still dueling fraternities (*schlagende Verbindungen*). You did not meet those people frequently (most of them were law students) but they had special inns and you saw them on the street with their peculiar outfits; they were remnants of a different age.

More characteristically, this was an age of enormous expansion in the student population. It was not unusual to have large lecture halls with 300 or 400 students attending one lecture.

How was history taught in Marburg?

History was a fairly conservative field in Marburg. On my very first day in mid-October 1970 there was a huge public debate—in the main auditorium in front of around 1,000 students—pitting the right-wing Ernst Nolte, who was at that time a professor at Marburg (he later left for the Freie Universität in Berlin), against Wolfgang Abendroth, a veteran socialist jurist and political scientist who had suffered severe persecution during the Nazi period, a *Bildungsbürger* of the radical Left. Nolte and Abendroth had a vehement public debate about National Socialism and its legacy. It was an event with great rhetoric and a scandal at the end when Abendroth walked out. That kind of political polarisation between history and the social sciences was quite symptomatic of the situation in Marburg. History was a conservative discipline also in a methodological sense with the fresh impulses coming from the Bielefeld School of social history making little headway among the teachers of history. As I studied both political science (and also some sociology and philosophy) and history, I moved in different worlds without really committing myself deeply to any of them.

This was still very much a German debate. At some point you left Germany and developed an interest in China. How did that happen?

It is quite difficult to reconstruct how that came about. Part of the story was a revulsion against a kind of narrow Germano-centrism. Really everything was German, the whole curriculum was German, not for nationalistic reasons, but because it had always been that way. My early irritation with the Vietnam War led me to an interest in the Third World. In the early 1970s, people like Dieter Senghaas from the University of Bremen—he was quite influential at that time—published books on *dependencia* and the economics and politics of poverty and underdevelopment. We also read radical economists such as Paul A. Baran and, a little later, Immanuel Wallerstein. For a historian, the development of the Soviet Union held a special interest, and even more so the attempts of the People's Republic of China (especially in the 1950s) to jump across historical periods, ages and stadia towards an industrial future.

At some point I thought I had made a mistake in choosing my subjects and that I should learn another language in addition to the languages you

learn at school; and it should be a challenge. So I took up Chinese and did that as a sort of sideline subject. I accumulated a modest knowledge of Chinese, and by the end of my studies in 1976, when I passed my *Staatsexamen* (roughly equivalent to a Master's), I was able to get the gist of a modern Chinese text, admittedly with the help of a dictionary. That didn't really qualify me for being a sinologist. At one point I considered moving entirely into Chinese studies, but then my interests were too broad—you may say, too superficial—to be confined in one particular kind of area studies.

Was this an acceptable road for academic historians at that time in Germany?
No. It was quite impossible to work on China, and also on Japan or on Arabic countries within the discipline of history. Only a handful of universities offered lecture courses on the history of Asia or on decolonisation. Despite the new methodological approaches and theories of the Bielefeld School, German historical studies in the early 1970s were dominated by a strong fixation on Germany and on the development of industrial modernity in the Atlantic West. And that was mirrored in the composition of history departments. There were very few history departments at that time—perhaps Hamburg was the most important one—where you had chairs or at least lectureships for non-European or even non-Western history. Only Latin American history enjoyed a high reputation, being considered less 'exotic' than Asian or African history.

How did you find a job after your student years in Marburg?

I completed my studies in Marburg and then I was looking for, not a job, but a post-MA opportunity. Fortunately I was a scholarship-holder of the *Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes* (German National Academic Foundation), a highly rated institution which, at that time, supported less than 0.5 per cent of the student body who were considered to be the best. They leave you incredible leeway, even to change your subject, to do what you want as long as you give them good reasons. They allowed me to go to the London School of Economics for a year after graduation. And I went there with all those more or less contradictory ideas in my head about history and politics.

Tell us more ...

I went to London with the idea that I should forget all German subjects, should do something else, and should continue with China. So I went to LSE's department of international history. I also discovered the library of

the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) which I used quite a lot. At LSE I was registered as a research-fee student, which meant you neither had any obligations nor studied for a degree; you just spent a year there, doing whatever you wanted. I went to many lectures—by luminaries like the historian James Joll and the polymath Ernest Gellner—and at the fairly advanced age of 25, I met my first teacher in an emphatic sense. He was Ian Nish, Professor of International History and a great expert on the history of Japanese foreign relations; perhaps next to Akira Iriye at Harvard the greatest non-Japanese authority in the field. He was and still is—he is 85 now—a great and good man, and he took this wayward German student under his wing. I went to his very small classes (mostly three or four students) and got almost personal tuition in diplomatic history. Later on, in his 60s, Ian Nish became a much more general historian, but at that time he was an excellent specialist in diplomatic history. And that is what I learnt from him: diplomatic history. So I am a trained diplomatic historian; I am not ashamed to say that after doing all sorts of other histories, and one might detect traces of it in my latest book because there is a chapter on *Die Verwandlung der Welt* on the international system, international politics and war—somewhat unusual for global historians these days. This is a legacy of my brief and intense training at the LSE in the late 1970s.

Meanwhile, what happened to your research—was there a Ph.D. topic in your mind already?

My Ph.D. topic was a combination of my two most important historical interests at the time. That was first of all the development of China in the twentieth century, and secondly imperial Britain. I never warmed to Japan, which was Ian's subject. He probably never understood why I didn't care to learn Japanese, but he was generous and supported my developing orientation. So I tried to bring together my old interest in China, especially in the pre-1949 Republican period (which one has to study in order to understand what happened later) and my newly-acquired interest in Britain's international position, and in particular the British Empire.

So the British part of your research was born in London?

Yes, very much so. And I think that was, looking at those origins from the vantage point of today, a good starting point. China as that quintessentially closed (of course that is a cliché) civilisation with its enormous continuity and, on the other hand, the British Empire, waterborne and scattered

all over the world. I intuitively found that to be a fascinating tension. From that I developed a Ph.D. topic on the question of what happened to British imperialism in the Far East after the British had lost their dominant position in China after the First World War. Despite the rise of China's nationalism, British business was going strong in the 1920s and 1930s without being much affected by the political turmoil in the country. My question was very simple: how did the big British firms in Shanghai and elsewhere manage to safeguard and even extend their economic interests and their physical establishment of wharves, factories, coal mines and whatever else on the territory of the Chinese Republic in an age of emerging nationalism and the erosion of Britain's power to control events in China?

Was that still a politically inspired research question connected to your early years at the Gymnasium and Marburg?

No, my political engagement was quite weak at that time. There was perhaps a tenuous link through Marxist interpretations of Chinese history, especially a peculiar attempt to explain China's 'special path' in modern history. The idea was that before 'socialism' was victorious in 1949, there had been neither a purely 'feudal' nor a 'bourgeois' stage. Rather, China was a 'semi-feudal, semi-colonial country,' and when capitalism came, it assumed the characteristic form of 'bureaucratic capitalism,' especially under the rule of Chiang Kai-shek's [Jiang Jieshi] Guomintang during the Nanjing period from 1927 to 1937. I wasn't empirically convinced, but found that an intriguing idea and wondered what 'bureaucratic capitalism' was. In a different way, this question continues to be relevant today.

The main result of my thesis was to have shown in great detail how the big British companies such as BAT or Butterfield & Swire operated quite independently from British politics on the spot in China, and how they dovetailed with the policies of the Guomintang for opening China to foreign capital. So in a way this is the pre-history of the opening up of China for foreign business that occurred on a far grander scale after 1978. The Guomintang started a precursor of that policy in the 1930s in conjunction with Western business interests, and with only the tenuous involvement of the government in London and of British diplomats and consuls in China. In a way, it was business imperialism after political imperialism. And I developed a model to explain that. The book was published under very difficult circumstances in Germany. No historical series accepted it because China was anathema to any decent history series, so it was published in a small sinological series.

But then, to my utter surprise, it won the attention (and this was probably the great turning point in my professional advancement) of the famous Paul Kennedy at Yale, who reviewed it very favourably in the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* and alerted the readers of the journal to an article summarising the book that I had just published in *China Quarterly*. That article was fairly successful; one of the younger scholars later to use the model was actually Frans-Paul van der Putten of Leiden University and editor of *Itinerario*.

Did you ever consider leaving Germany for good to extend you career somewhere else?

Not really. The Kennedy review was an enormous encouragement. When I applied for a research fellowship at the German Historical Institute in London, I got it and went back to London in 1982. My boss at the Institute was Wolfgang J. Mommsen who, at a fairly late stage of my academic education, became my second genuine 'teacher'. He had no regional stake in China but was generally interested in imperialism and a comparative approach. In Germany there had been for a short while a broad concern with imperialism. Hans-Ulrich Wehler had published his book, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus*, in 1969. A couple of other books, especially on the German colonial empire, appeared during the following years. Within that generation of historians studying imperialism Wolfgang Mommsen was the only one with an almost universal perspective. He was also the person who introduced foreign theories of imperialism to Germany. He was a friend of Ronald Robinson whom I met several times, of David Fieldhouse and of many others of that seminal generation of historians. He brought many of them to the Institute. Immediately after I joined the Institute in 1982 we had a big conference called 'Imperialism and After.' The volume emerging from it was later published in English.¹ It is still a very good collection. Robinson was there, Fieldhouse, the economic historian Paul Bairoch from Geneva; many of those prominent in the field; from the German side, among others, the best-known historian of modern India on the European continent, Dietmar Rothermund, who held a chair at the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg, founded in 1962. Also present was Rudolf von Albertini, a scholar who was instrumental in establishing non-European or non-Western historical studies in the German-speaking countries, perhaps comparable to Henk Wesseling in the Netherlands. He was Swiss and had been a professor of modern European history at Heidelberg before moving to Zurich in 1967. Albertini inspired a whole generation of talented Ph.D. candidates, and he established a series of

monographs on 'colonial and overseas history' where much of the most important work in German has been published up to the present day.

But to answer your original question: for my generation leaving Germany in pursuit of a career elsewhere in Europe or in the United States was far less of an option than it has been for younger colleagues in recent years. I never received an offer, and I never considered becoming an academic emigrant.

After your second stay in London, you got a position as reader in political science at the University of Freiburg. Could you include non-European subjects in your teaching by that time?

Within certain limits I could include non-European subjects. I offered courses on international relations, colonialism, theories of imperialism, China, etc. But my main duty was political theory. Anyway, I maintained my old interest in China. And at some point—I can't remember why and when—I decided to write a synthesis of the integration of China into the modern world system—a non-Wallersteinian synthesis that would include political but also economic aspects and in a sense even vaguely cultural aspects. That was my earliest book of synthesis. Since then I have found it always quite helpful to have a broadly conceived book to follow upon a research monograph. So, almost a decade after my Ph.D. thesis I wrote the book, *China und die Weltgesellschaft* (China and the World Society), covering the period from the eighteenth century onwards. It wasn't meant to lead to anything because I did not have the intention of a '*Habilitation*' at the time. I just wrote this manuscript and I gave it to a history professor at Freiburg, Ernst Schulin (my teacher number three), and he passed it on, without telling me, to Beck Publishers in Munich. One day I received a letter from the history editor at Beck's expressing his interest in the manuscript. How long would it take to finish the book? Would I be interested in a contract? I was. The book came out in 1989. C.H. Beck have been my principal publishers ever since. They also published my study of European attitudes towards Asia during the eighteenth century (*Die Entzauberung Asiens*, 1998), a personal favourite among my books, meant as a contribution to the debate about historical 'orientalism' triggered by Edward Said.

It was possible under the rules of Freiburg University to submit a published book in application for a *Habilitation*, in Germany still an unavoidable stepping-stone towards becoming a professor. Thus, I obtained a *venia legendi* [permission to lecture] for modern and contemporary history. And then I was lucky again. The Open University in Hagen had

just established a professorship for non-European history. I got that job and I spent the next six years writing study materials across a broad range of non-European topics. That allowed me to read a lot since I didn't have physically present students; it was almost like being in a vacuum. I was left with plenty of time on my hands to acquire a broad knowledge of colonialism and imperialism, something that stands me in good stead nowadays, as a teacher of 'general' history at the University of Konstanz.

Would you say that the German approach to this topic, the history of European expansion, was in any way different at that time from the more maritime historiographies in Britain, France and Holland?

In Germany, there was a fairly strong interest in the continental empires—the Habsburg Monarchy, the Ottoman Empire and the Tsarist Empire. A superb book on an obvious but much-neglected topic had been written by Dietrich Geyer. Geyer was the intellectual giant among German historians of Eastern Europe. His *Der russische Imperialismus* of 1977 is still a classic study to be read alongside Andreas Kappeler's great *Russland als Vielvölkerreich* (1992).² Geyer successfully transposed ideas and concepts of Wehler's Bielefeld School into a Russian context.

A power in his own right was and is Wolfgang Reinhard, a professor of early modern history at the University of Freiburg. Reinhard never belonged to any 'school'; in a sense, he created his own. His magnificent four-volume work on the history of the European expansion (1983–90), for mysterious reasons never translated into English, remains internationally unrivalled.³ Reinhard blends the maritime with the continental dimension. Long before the onset of post-colonialism, he was much more sensitive towards culture than all the other German and Swiss historians mentioned before. Whereas the Wehlers, Mommsens and Geyers hardly ever cared for anything earlier than 'High Imperialism,' Reinhard, who is also a world authority on early modern Italy, the Papacy and the evolution of the state, always bears the long-term sweep of history in mind. His scope of vision is unique, while certainly not being 'typically German.'

*Let us now switch to your recently published book, *Die Verwandlung der Welt* (*The Transformation of the World*). What struck us most was the architecture of the book. Could you tell us how the book's idea and fabric emerged?*

The general answer is that it is a NIAS [Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies, in Wassenaar] book. I spent a full year there thinking about the architecture of it. There is actually an intriguing story in the background. I came to NIAS with the intention of doing a comparative

history of European overseas empires in the nineteenth century. Upon arrival, I knocked at the door of Henk Wesseling, the rector of NIAS at that time. After a pleasant chat, Henk said: 'I have just sent my book on the nineteenth-century European empires to the publishers.' I protested, as politely as possible, 'What, that's my subject!' And that serene master merely said: 'Don't worry!'

So what can you do in such a situation? There were just two options: either to go several steps backwards and do a research monograph, or to hazard a *Flucht nach vorn* [take the bull by the horns] and attempt something even grander with empires being just a facet of a comprehensive portrait of an age. I decided on the latter option. So I spent my time at NIAS considering many alternatives of the contents and construction of the book. Peer Vries, now at the University of Vienna and one of the sharpest minds in comparative history, was a fellow at the same time, and we had frequent conversations. He doesn't agree entirely with the book as I later wrote it. For very good reasons he prefers a more problem-oriented historiography, but we are still on the best of terms. After returning from Wassenaar to the mundane duties of a German professor, I shelved the project. In 2004, Chris Bayly's masterpiece, *The Birth of the Modern World*, appeared out of the blue, and for some time seemed to have killed off my own venture. But I overcame the 'Bayly shock' and managed to write the bulk of my manuscript in 2006 and 2007. An invitation from the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation to spend a sabbatical year in Munich made the completion of the book possible.

So Die Verwandlung der Welt didn't follow an existing paradigm?

No, and I was lucky in not having to comply with a series template. I had nurtured many minor obsessions with things which should somehow be included, for instance animals and opera. This is one of the reasons why even people in search of scholarly entertainment like the book. You turn a page and then there is suddenly something on a turtle. You cannot devise such ornaments of the 'architecture' at the very beginning. They crop up spontaneously when you are sitting in front of the screen.

Several features of the overall design had to be corrected during the process of writing. For example, the division between the long 'panoramic' chapters and the shorter 'thematic' chapters was a fairly late invention. It is the result of a change of gear required for straightforward practical reasons. If I had continued in the original epical manner, the book would have run into two or three volumes. Therefore, I pulled the emergency

brake and developed a kind of more concise *écriture*, dispensing with much of the illustrative materials I had collected.

There was also a certain influence from my university. Things I learned from my colleagues in the department of history and sociology at Konstanz include the importance of communication, memory and the media. The very first chapter is soaked with those issues. Other things had to be corrected in the course of writing. Thus, I never wanted to write a chapter on religion, an especially demanding subject. But then I came to the conclusion that, for systematic reasons, such a chapter would be indispensable. A few people seem to have found it worth reading.

Where would you yourself situate the book in the field world history?

It is in many different respects a middle-of-the-road or compromise book. What I mean is that it is neither a 'synthesis' nor an 'analysis,' but both at the same time. Books like this one and also Chris Bayly's *Birth of Modern World* are analytical syntheses. We cannot have enough of them. Someone else should write another global history of the nineteenth century. A middle-of-the-road book is also one that includes all kinds of concepts and theorems without committing itself to any grand theory, be it Marxism, or world-system theory, or post-colonialism. My approach is deliberately eclectic. And, third, the book is middle of the road in that the barriers between the usual compartments of history are lowered. The greatest personal joy in writing was in combining so many different approaches to history.

Your book is very successful in the German book market. How did people in Germany respond to the book? Did you write it with a particular audience in mind?

The most amazing thing is that even today I get emails and letters from all kinds of people pointing out mistakes or making comments. My most contentious reader is a retired military officer who has sent me a thirty-page list of errata, most of them justified. The later editions from edition number four onwards are much improved. No, I didn't have a particular audience in mind. I am optimistic enough to imagine students tackling such a big 'think book' even though much of it is unlikely to be useful for their exams. And of course it is gratifying that there is a general audience interested in such a broad, but in no way racy, narrative. I defend the position that a historian should communicate with a broader audience without letting his standards slip.

What is your next project?

After having co-edited, with the much-admired American historian Fritz Stern, an anthology of historiography, I haven't got any plans ready to present to the public. But two things are already clear. The new book will focus on the twentieth century and people will play an important role in it. At the moment I am groping for ways—I always need a lot of time for that—to come closer to individuals than in my previous work. Certainly not a biography, but something with a clearly articulated biographical touch.

Notes

- 1 Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.), *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (London: German Historical Institute, 1986).
- 2 For English translations see: Dietrich Geyer, *Russian Imperialism: The Interaction of Domestic and Foreign Policy, 1860–1914* (Leamington Spa: Bergahn, 1987); and Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (Harlow: Longman, 2001).
- 3 Wolfgang Reinhard. *Geschichte der europäischen Expansion*, 4 vols (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1983–90). And more recently: Wolfgang Reinhard. *A Short History of Colonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

