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SUL NOVECENTO

INTERVIEW WITH JÜRGEN OSTERHAMMEL

1.

A first question seems to be that of the twentieth century temporal boundaries and of its internal periodization. The hypotheses that historians have provided about this (let us think in particular of Eric Hobsbawm's famous thesis on the short century) have in fact favored the European scale. Thinking instead of a global twentieth century, which embraces a global scale, what is or what are the periodizations of the global twentieth century that you think can help us – and above all our students – to read the important phases that characterized this period and understand it as a whole?

J. Osterhammel. Perhaps we can get into a lively debate when I start by challenging two of your unspoken assumptions. One the assumptions is that it would be desirable to understand a century “as a whole”. It is very difficult to isolate “wholes”. History does not come as a sequence of clearly demarcated entities that can be grasped in a holistic way. Sometimes there are clearly identifiable wholes. A parliamentary debate or a military battle seems to be unambiguous “wholes” with a clear beginning, a clear end and a clear structure in between. Already a major domestic crisis – for example the disintegration of the Weimar Republic – is much more difficult to construct as a coherent object of understanding. The same is true for wars. We know when the First World war began and when it ended. But even the current war in Afghanistan is a highly amorphous affair without a clear starting point. The second proposition that is debatable is the usefulness of the calendric century as a tool to structure historical continuity. Of course, we have been thinking in terms of centuries for a very long time. Nobody can escape the calendar. On the other hand, professional historians should free themselves from the illusion that centuries have a temporal shape that is derived from their inherent nature. Publishers hate this kind of argument because they have to put dates on the cover of history books. But my only criterion is usefulness, and in my own book on the nineteenth century (*The Transformation of the World: A History of the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton UP, 2014) I refused to commit myself to temporal boundaries and used different time scales for different aspects of history. Theoretically speaking, the various subsystems have their own temporalities.

I very much admire Eric Hobsbawm but I think that the famous thesis, as you call it, on the short twentieth century is not one of his profoundest contributions. When Akira Iriye and I had to decide about the chronological sequence of volumes in our six-volume series on world history that is being translated and published by Einaudi under the title of *Storia del Mondo*, we came up with the solution not to have volumes on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but one on the period from 1750 to 1870, the next one on 1870 to 1945, and then a final volume on the post-1945 period (the fitting Italian title is *Il Mondo Globalizzato*).

Since you probably want a more specific answer: I do think that 1945 was a cesura of global significance. Otherwise, we could perhaps think of a long twentieth century beginning in the 1870s or 1880s and ending with the crisis of globalization that we seem to be witnessing in our time.

2.

*One also finds many definitions of the century that attempt to sum up its characteristic traits in a pithy statement. To name a few: A. Besançon, *Le malheur du siècle* (2005, published in English as *A Century of Horrors*), E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (1994), AA. VV., *Un secolo innominabile. Idee e riflessioni. <An unmentionable century. Ideas and reflections>* (1998), C. Pinzani, *Il secolo della paura <The century of fear>* (1998). Or, perhaps, is the definition of the “American Century” given by the journalist Henry Luce in 1941 still valid? What are your thoughts? How would you define the twentieth century?*

J. Osterhammel. My answer to your first question already pointed to my reluctance to squeeze entire centuries into very simple catchphrases. The books you mention would be completely uninteresting if they

would do nothing but develop monomaniac theses about the essence of a particular century. I suspect that these titles were chosen in close collaboration with the respective publishing houses. They, of course, love simple and striking titles. The nineteenth century is a paradigm of a “secolo innominabile”. It does not have a conventional name in the way that we call the eighteenth century the “Age of Enlightenment”.

By contrast, many suggestions have been made to label the twentieth century. Again, if you want to pin me down, I would answer: It was a period when science and technology impacted on people’s material life and cultural outlook in a completely novel way. This century of science begins sometime after the middle of the nineteenth century. It is impossible to give a precise year or even a decade. The new period began with breathtaking advances, for example, in the study of electricity and chemistry. Early on, Charles Darwin developed his theory of natural selection that continues to shape our world view until the present day. At the same time, the modern social and cultural sciences as we still know them took shape during the second half of the nineteenth century. We are still living in this age of science with all its ambivalence, including the destructive side effects of scientific and technological change.

3.

A central question of the twentieth century is that of the extermination of the Jews and of the various genocides carried out during the last century, of mass violence and modern rationality, of the nuclear threat and scientific development – ultimately the relationship between progress and humanity. How is one to confront this issue/problem – between historiography and memory, uniqueness of the Shoah and comparison, critical understanding and risk of celebratory rhetoric – and read these events in the context of the global history of the twentieth century?

J. Osterhammel. Your readers should know that I have written books on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that I have done much more specific work on selected topics from twentieth-century history. I do not intend to write a general or “global” history of the twentieth century. Therefore, I am not responding to this difficult question as someone able to offer a solution. One of the reasons – there are many others – for not attempting to write such a general history is a dilemma faced with a particular intensity by a German historian: how to affirm the absolute centrality of the Shoah, while running the danger of relativising it within the vast landscape of twentieth-century horrors. A global approach is not the coveted way out but rather, as I tried to say, part of the problem. I have not seen a convincing solution while I am alarmed by one-volume world histories – none of them so far by a German author – that devote several pages to standard topics of world history such as the Mongol world empire or the transatlantic slave trade while they barely mention what happened during the Second World War in the countries occupied by Germany and Japan and even a few years later in the GULAG camps during Stalin’s final years. Another way to circumvent the issue is to focus entirely on memory. In that sense, there is no “real” history but only remembered history, and the efforts of historians to reconstruct the past from sources are nothing but an illusion. I would go along with this position only to a very limited extent and rather insist on the critical task of historiography – critical in the dual sense of treating sources in a scientific manner and not shying away from critical judgements on developments in the past.

4.

To approach the twentieth century and comprehend this period globally, alongside periodisations and definitions, it seems essential to identify the key conceptualisations, the most relevant changes and problematizations. What can you tell us about this?

J. Osterhammel. There is a brief and simple answer: The twentieth century is full of self-conceptualisations, in other words, it is a century of the social sciences. Societies observed themselves to an unprecedented degree. Global historians studying that age should know the literature of the social sciences very well and apply their concepts in a non-dogmatic manner. They range from very general concepts of “modernisation” and “globalisation” (that are often too vague to be useful) to highly specific theorems in economic history or demographic history. Historians have rarely developed viable concepts of their own – Eric Hobsbawm’s (and Terence Ranger’s) “invention of tradition” would be an influential example. But they are in a position to plunder the storehouse of concepts that already exists.

5.

The new historiographies born in the last century have re-read the past, and the twentieth century itself, through new subjects and historical objects. What's more, the subjectivity of those who investigate the past has progressively established itself as an essential element of the writing of history. Historians in particular have asserted and employed new points of view, modified the research questionnaire, and recognized the inevitable interaction between observer and field – the observed object. And, it seems to us, this may be especially true of the twentieth century. Or is it not? Will we have not just one, but many twentieth centuries?

J. Osterhammel. What you say seems to be quite obvious to me. That historians look at the past from different vantage points of basically equal value has already been established by the Enlightenment theorist Johann Martin Chladenius (1710-1759). The great Leopold von Ranke may have thought of himself from time to time as an objective observer who could banish his own individuality. But already with the emergence of philosophic hermeneutics – and Ranke himself was a much more subtle thinker than many believe today – such a position became untenable. I have a lot of sympathy with literary experiments. As a reviewer of my book on the nineteenth century wrote, the book is partly written in the style of the great realistic novels of the period. If I had to design – and perhaps write – a history of the twentieth century I would proceed quite differently and would take account of the fact that we are in a century of avantgarde in all the arts. How does one write history in and for the age of James Joyce? At the same time, I would draw a strict dividing line between historical research and fiction. Even counterfactual speculations, eye-opening as they may be as games with virtuality, are not part of the serious work of historians.

6.

Another important change was that of the sources: to learn about the twentieth century on a global scale, there exists an array of sources that have never before been published. How do these new resources affect historical research, what problems do they pose and how, in your opinion, can they also be used for educational purposes?

J. Osterhammel. This question is impossible to answer in a general way. When responsible global historians work “on a global scale” – and I am thinking here, for example, of the Ph.D. candidates I had the pleasure to work with – they do not sail on an ocean of sources but use very specific documentations for their research problem at hand. The main practical challenge is that global topics often require greater linguistic skills than single-country research. In addition, there is the welcome challenge of the digital humanities. Some global topics lend themselves very well to a big data approach. But that kind of research requires a huge amount of resources. Digital projects are usually much more expensive to organise and implement and something to be shouldered only by munificent teams and institutes. As for education, any source can be used if well-prepared for the purpose. I don't see any difference between old and new sources.

7.

*The narration of the past in the form of a short story addressed to the new generations is a genre of history that has lately begun to assert itself (for instance: A. Wieviorka (1999), *Auschwitz expliqué à ma fille* <Auschwitz explained to my daughter> and for Italy: A. Cavaglioni (2005) *La Resistenza spiegata a mia figlia* <The Resistance explained to my daughter>). Imagining one has to explain / tell the story of the twentieth century to a daughter or son, what are the issues that cannot be ignored?*

J. Osterhammel. You will probably be surprised to hear that I would never tell "the story" of the twentieth century to anyone. There are thousands of stories to be told and, sooner or later, children and young adults will come up with their own questions, and then we should have the stories ready. The more realistic question would be what I would do as a minister of education in charge of curricula. This is where global history becomes really important. At least in my own country, the teaching of history is mainly limited to German history, usually seen in a highly critical and realistic light – national history, but not nationalistic history, which are two different things. Global history can only be taught through stories and case studies (including films). This is very difficult, and study materials remain to be developed. We as university teachers have a great responsibility to support history teachers in schools.

8.

The story of the past as told by historians, especially the recent past, today risks being sidelined or drowned out altogether (beyond the audience of specialists) compared to other modes of communication (via Internet

and in general the media). The public uses of history and the connected communication styles are often aimed at supporting ideologically predefined theses, political choices and tendencies, when not the simple affirmation of one's opinion and of one's stereotyped judgment. How, and under what conditions, can the history of the twentieth century told by historians be an effective tool for the formation of a good historical culture for an informed citizen?

J. Osterhammel. Historians of the twentieth century may be in a better position than experts on earlier periods, unless their material is displayed in museums and historical exhibitions many of which are excellent these days. The knowledge about anything that happened before the rise of the documentary film is now in danger of being marginalized or relegated to mere phantasy. Historians of the Middle Ages who care for the public impact of their work have a hard time battling against entirely fictitious images of “their” period, stereotypes of “barbaric” Dark Ages and so on. In general, the crucial variable is access to quality media. Some historians have it, others don’t. Some are talented media personalities, others make fools of themselves and should better stay away from television. I may be too conservative given the rapid changes all around us. But it seems to me that there is still a market for serious history books and that this classical way to reach an audience should continue to be our main line of business. In Germany, history is one of the last remaining fields of expansion in book production. Talking about myself, I wrote very long and very short books. I now feel that history books should be brief and concise. Even the odd politician should find the time to read a few of them. There are so many topics these days, historical and actual, that demand our attention. I am also old-fashioned in believing that “informed citizens” are able to create “a good historical culture” for themselves. We only have the duty to provide them with materials.

9.

The twentieth century was the century of hyper-nationalism and world wars that led to the creation of supranational institutions. Are we really experiencing a “global” era? To what extent? Or in light of the trend toward sovereinism (nationalism) and the primatism (egoism) of one's nation that is spreading throughout the world, can we already speak of a “third world war fought in pieces”, as Pope Bergoglio declared?

J. Osterhammel. The optimistic expectations of the 1990s, the high point of globalist enthusiasm, have now largely disappeared. We have obviously entered “a global era” in the sense that we do not have to make a personal effort to establish global connections. They are already here at a time, when I am virtually able to read thousands of daily newspapers in hundreds of languages on the desktop computer in my office. Yet, our “globality” is highly contradictory. It should not be confused, as it was in the 1990s and still is in certain quarters of global studies and global history, with a victory of cosmopolitanism, human rights and rational global governance. Global historians, if I may again choose a narrow disciplinary focus, have neglected war and peace for too long. There has been an unfortunate antagonism between global history and international history where, in fact, they should two sides of the same coin. The present trend toward sovereinism (a very Italian concept) is frightening and dangerous both at a domestic and at an international level. Even the United States, with all their strength and power, are likely to learn that their kind of unilateralist nationalism is not the best recipe for the future. The consequences of Brexit will provide a lesson for Europe. The most frightening development in recent years is the dismantling of institutions that so far shielded us from a relapse into international anarchy. This ranges from specific treaties and international law in general to climate accords, modest as they may have been so far. What is especially frightening for Germans of my generation is the virtual meltdown of the oldest democracies in the World. We were brought up in admiration for the political systems of Britain and United States (also called “the West”). Now there is little left to admire.

10.

We close this interview by entrusting to you the arduous task of suggesting to our readers two or three books, websites, and/or films that you believe adequately describe and represent the global twentieth century.

J. Osterhammel. I recommend the great Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007) whose books and shorter pieces have been translated into many languages. In a way, he continues the work of another Polish author, the great fiction writer Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) who is a magnificent guide to the early twentieth century.

