

Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia. By Jürgen Osterhammel.

Translated by Robert Savage.

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Since the 1980s Jürgen Osterhammel has produced or coedited several books on the intellectual and socioeconomic roots of crucial historical phenomena in modern European and global history, including orientalism, colonialism, imperialism, and decolonization. By combining erudition, command over a large body of historiographies, analytical acumen, attention to detail, and a style that is both elegant and accessible, Osterhammel has reached not only an academic readership but also a larger public interested in understanding the making of the modern world.

Unfabling the East appears in English twenty years after the publication of its first German edition, *Die Entzauberung Asiens: Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert* (1998). The American translation (accomplished with finesse by Robert Savage) is a thoroughly revised version of the original, and it incorporates new secondary literature and references to critical editions of primary sources published since the late 1990s. Osterhammel notes that “this . . . version . . . brings the study back to life and should now count as its standard edition” (xiii).

The hefty tome is organized in two parts, “Pathways of Knowledge” (37–256) and “The Present and the Past” (257–517), containing six chapters each, preceded by a substantial introduction (1–22), followed by notes (519–98), bibliography (599–662), and index. The preface states succinctly the main argument of the book: “The Enlightenment’s discovery of Asia entailed a more open-minded, less patronizing approach to foreign cultures than suggested by those who see it as a mere incubation period of Orientalism” (x). The author also sets some limits in scope, excluding the Enlightenment

discourse on Asian religions and languages, topics too large to cover. The focus is rather on the writings about Asian social customs, ethnography, gender relations, politics, and economics by “philosophically-minded travelers on the ground,” including Jesuit missionaries and other adventurous individuals who visited and resided in Asia, and by “armchair travelers,” mainly European philosophers and public intellectuals (ix–x).

Osterhammel’s attack on those who see “the Enlightenment’s discovery of Asia” as “a mere incubation period of Orientalism” might have been rather more polemical and pointed in the late 1990s than it is today. The 1980s–90s saw a wave of postcolonial scholarship inspired by Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and by the fifth centenary of the “discovery” of the New World in 1992. Discourse analysis, literary criticism, and anthropological interpretations were applied to past works of travel literature, ethnography, political economy, and intellectual history in a devastating critique of cultural imperialism and colonialism. Texts were mined for representations of other cultures, and their European authorship made them suspect, foggy mirrors distorting the reality of the orientalized Other. The same degree of anthropological understanding used in the study of non-European cultures was not afforded to imperialist and colonialist literature, and with some reason. Said carefully limited his study to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, starting with the 1798 Napoleonic expedition to Egypt and the consolidation of academic and institutional Orientalism after the 1830s, which assisted the formation of the modern British and French colonial empires. Others, however, extended the critique into the previous three centuries, dramatically expanding the span of the Western orientalizing gaze into the past.

While salutary and enormously illuminating, this approach could become anachronistic when applied to texts preceding 1800. Eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers, in particular, were blamed for establishing the basis of the following century’s orientalist narratives, and subjected to sweeping condemnations together with early modern conquistadors and missionaries. With *Die Entzauberung Asiens*, in gestation since the early 1980s, Osterhammel reacted to the wholesale censure of all European intellectual attempts at understanding extra-European cultures (10–16). He chose to focus on Asia as a prime example of nuanced and diversified attitudes by Enlightenment travelers and intellectuals, contrasting their complex stances with “the nineteenth century’s smug assumption of superiority” (484). Today this prescient denunciation of much sweeping and uninformed work can also be seen as a precocious contribution to the current rising wave of global history.

Part 1 explores the textual “logistics for producing images of foreignness” (16) and their social context, through analysis of the “inclusive Eurocentrism” by Enlightenment writers commenting on Asia—mostly French, British, and German. Osterhammel relies on luminaries like Montesquieu, Voltaire, Gibbon, Burke, Smith, Leibniz, Niebuhr, Herder, and Hegel, and noted ethnographers and travel writers like Bernier, von Humboldt, Kaempfer, the Russell brothers, and Lady Montagu, but also rediscovers forgotten voices such as Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi, author of an original comparative critique of Eurocentrism in 1762 (77). Part 1 explores how these authors’ “pathways of knowledge” unfolded between the mid-seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, through the process of travel, encounter, and eyewitness testimonies, followed by the reporting, editing, and reading in print form of those lived experiences in Asia. These intellectuals certainly created projections of the European imagination, but they also tried “to grasp reality with the epistemic toolkit of the time” (17), engaging in serious debates over savagery versus civilization, progress versus decadence, the wealth and poverty of nations, and so on. Part 2 delves into disputes over these conceptualizations of Asia’s “past and present,” identifying a remarkable variety of opinions about Asian nomadism, civilizations, despotism, slavery, castes, feudalism, and polygamy, just to name a few. The last chapter considers the “new age of exclusive Eurocentrism,” incubated in the “saddle period” between 1780 and 1830,

and in full bloom thereafter. Asia was then seen through the discursive categories of decline, degeneration, and stagnation, and from a beacon of civilization it became an object of the West's civilizing mission. As well put at page 513, "the universalist theory and history of civilization of the Enlightenment became in the nineteenth century a tool for slotting every society on earth into a hierarchy based on how far they had progressed—or failed to progress—on the path to modernity." Is the Enlightenment to blame for imperialism? Osterhammel believes it would be short-sighted to think so. Ideas are only one factor among many. But they do matter in the long run in unexpected ways, and he concludes that the "unfabling of the East" had dire consequences: "The unencumbered Europe of the Enlightenment made the fateful decision to take up the white man's burden" (517).

In conclusion, this is an expansive book to be savored unhurriedly and used as an encyclopedic entry point into many topics worth exploring on their own merits. Osterhammel shows us the paths and gives us a compass. The bibliography and the notes become a guide to rediscover both Asia's past and the Enlightenment minds. Many neglected works, today more easily available than ever thanks to digitization projects, will keep us busy for many more years with their delightful revelations about Asia's past, jarring ethnocentric views, and stark critiques of human folly.

EUGENIO MENEGON

Boston University