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Review of Erik Grimmer-Solem, *Learning Empire: Globalization and the
German Quest for World Status, 1875–1919*
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ERIK GRIMMER-SOLEM, *Learning Empire: Globalization and the German Quest for World Status, 1875–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), xiv + 654 pp. ISBN 978 1 108 48382 7. £34.99

The history of the German Empire has for some years now been viewed and interpreted anew against the background of the globalization debate at the turn of the millennium.¹ Numerous individual studies, particularly on the interdependence of the world economy, have deepened and decisively differentiated our knowledge of essential aspects of globalization, such as internationalism and monetary policy, the professionalization of financial journalism, and the global interdependence and relevance of private banks.²

With his book *Learning Empire*, Erik Grimmer-Solem now provides another exciting perspective which finally puts the phenomenon of globalization in the second half of the nineteenth century into the wider context of the long-dominant view of Germany's outrageous 'grab' for world power. Although the German challenge has recently been repeatedly placed in the context of global imperialism and often relativized, Grimmer-Solem now offers a new, primarily economically motivated view of the period between the 1870s and the end of the First World War.³ His study shows that Wilhelmine world politics was an 'improvised response' – a result 'of an accretion of insights' into 'opportunities and challenges' – in the context of a global trend involving all great powers and especially pitting the young ones, such

¹ Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Geschichte der Globalisierung: Dimensionen, Prozesse, Epochen* (Munich, 2003); available in English translation as *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton, 2009).

² Cornelius Torp, *Die Herausforderung der Globalisierung: Wirtschaft und Politik in Deutschland 1860–1914* (Göttingen, 2005); Guido Thiemeyer, *Internationalismus und Diplomatie: Währungspolitische Kooperation im europäischen Staatensystem 1865–1900* (Munich, 2009); Robert Radu, *Auguren des Geldes: Eine Kulturgeschichte des Finanzjournalismus in Deutschland 1850–1914* (Göttingen, 2017); Verena von Wiczlinski, *Im Zeichen der Weltwirtschaft: Das Frankfurter Privatbankhaus Gebr. Bethmann in der Zeit des deutschen Kaiserreiches 1870–1914* (Stuttgart, 2011); Niels P. Petersson, *Anarchie und Weltrecht: Das Deutsche Reich und die Institutionen der Weltwirtschaft 1890–1930* (Göttingen, 2009).

³ Andreas Rose, 'International Relations', in Matthew Jefferies (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Imperial Germany* (Farnham, 2015), 347–66.

as the USA, Japan, and Germany, against established powers such as the UK and France (p. 19). From the author's global economic perspective, the well-known German triad of 'world power as a goal', 'world politics as a task', and 'the High Seas Fleet as the means' therefore appears much less revolutionary and singular than has so far been suggested. Rather, this quest for global power proceeded from the logical conclusions of a liberal, imperialist elite, based on the lessons it learned from global developments since the 1860s in general and the British model in particular.

Using the approach of intellectual history, the author outlines the lives and cognitive paths of six influential national economists from Gustav von Schmoller's circle, all of whom had extensive national and international networks. These are Henry Walcott Farnam, Max Sering, Ernst von Halle, Karl Helfferich, Karl Rathgen, and Hermann Schumacher. He then traces the transfer of their insights and ideas into German economic, foreign, colonial, and social policy in the decades before the First World War. The result is a multifaceted study of how Germany perceived and reacted to the global situation during the period in question. The use of personal papers and publications by German national economists and social scientists provides an exciting change of perspective and distinguishes the study from the many works that draw upon diplomatic and military documents. A similar approach has been adopted in recent studies of the press as an actor in international relations. While these and other works have highlighted Anglo-German antagonisms, Erik Grimmer-Solem's selection of sources enables him to tell a story that stands out in four ways. First, there is the history of the UK as a role model that the emerging German nation sought to emulate. Second, he explores the history of the USA (pp. 29–78) and Japan (pp. 79–106), who were also newly emerging and provided the dominant frame of reference and parameters of comparison for Germany's own position in the world. Third, Grimmer-Solem presents the history of China (pp. 107–40), the Caribbean, and South America (pp. 119–58) as the last remaining outlets for the UK to play an active role in dividing up the world and its resources. And fourth and finally, this history is linked to another narrative that has hitherto often been overlooked – that of an empire which sought its own role in the world, orienting itself more by

contemporary examples and orders than by a desire to destroy them from the outset.

In three larger sections, divided into twelve chapters, the author develops a narrative that is initially (in the section 'Absent-Minded Empire, 1875–1897') devoted to the protagonists' experiences between 1870 and 1890 in the course of numerous journeys and observations, as well as transfers of ideas and expectations. The story is specifically concerned with the intellectual experiences of Henry Walcott Farnam (pp. 38–43), an American student of Gustav von Schmoller, and with the descriptions and impressions of industrial concentration and cartel formation that Max Sering (pp. 43–56), Hermann Schumacher, and Ernst von Halle (pp. 60–6) gathered and transferred to Germany during their extended stays in the USA (pp. 70–1).

The following chapters deal with Karl Rathgen's reflections on Japan and Schumacher's on China (pp. 79–118), which pointed to Germany's increasingly dangerous involvement in East Asia, and the South American expertise of Schumacher and von Halle (pp. 119–62). In the latter region, the goal of financial imperialism was dependent on the support of the UK due to the American Monroe Doctrine.

In the second section, 'Empire Imagined, 1897–1907', the author deals with the incipient exertion of influence of his protagonists, especially on the Chancellor of the Reich Bernhard von Bülow and Secretary of State of the German Imperial Naval Office Alfred von Tirpitz, and the implementation of political measures, from the building of a High Seas Fleet to enforce German trade interests (pp. 165–213) to the Anglo-German trade rivalry (pp. 213–50), the new mercantilism, the Bülow tariff, and the construction of the Baghdad Railway (pp. 250–388).

Grimmer-Solem devotes special attention to the importance of political and economic participation to the future of states in the twentieth century, as proclaimed by none other than the British colonial minister Joseph Chamberlain on 31 March 1897. His message was clearly heard, not least by German scholars and the German public: 'the tendency of the time is to throw all power into the hands of the great Empires, and the minor kingdoms . . . seem to be destined to fall into a secondary and subordinate place' (p. 159). The extent to which Chamberlain struck a chord in Germany is demonstrated by

the well-known quotation from the young Max Weber's inaugural lecture in Freiburg two years earlier: 'We must understand that the unification of Germany was a youthful prank which the nation committed in its old age, and which it would have been better to leave undone due to its cost if it meant the end, rather than the beginning, of a German policy of world power'.⁴ According to Grimmer-Solem, this position was undoubtedly a legitimate and fundamental idea for German politics at the turn of the century (p. 172).

Finally, the third section of the book, 'Empire Lost, 1908-1919', deals with the failure of the Kaiserreich to keep pace with other global players. Here, Grimmer-Solem discusses the influence of the Hamburg Colonial Institute (pp. 397-407), German colonial interests in Morocco (pp. 416-20) and the Balkans (pp. 438-46), Sering and Schumacher's travels to Russia (pp. 431-8), the Baghdad railway (pp. 482-9), the July Crisis (pp. 496-509), the 'submarine professors' (pp. 519-41), and the war, various peace scenarios, and defeat (pp. 541-600), among other topics.

Overall, Grimmer-Solem provides an exemplary combination of modern intellectual history and classical political history. The book takes advantage of, and makes valuable contributions to, a growing secondary literature about transnational entanglements, global flows of ideas, and liberal imperialism. The depth and scope are impressive. Grimmer-Solem almost always succeeds in embedding the intellectual and political aspirations of his protagonists in constantly changing situational contexts and economic cycles, as well as in his own account of the changing constellations of national politics and the competition for great power status. He examines Germany 'in the world' along many different lines, including through the examples of the USA and Japan, Germany's infamous *Weltpolitik*, the Reich's hopes of overcoming the double standards with which it was treated in the British-dominated international system, the naval arms race, economic and financial rivalries in the Caribbean, public disappointments surrounding German colonial efforts in Africa, responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914, and, not least, the failure of the post-war Versailles settlement. In each case, Grimmer-Solem scrutinizes

⁴ Max Weber, *Gesammelte politische Schriften* (Munich, 1921), 29.

particular academics' links to power with the aim of refining, and sometimes revising, conventional wisdom about German policies in the run-up to war. In this effort he succeeds, demonstrating that members of the broadly liberal German economics professoriate had a larger role in shaping German imperialism than has hitherto been appreciated. It is particularly noteworthy that the author resists the temptation of an ex post interpretation for most of the book, consistently grants his protagonists the benefit of the doubt, and does not use their judgements and recommendations for an expansive political course as direct evidence of German fantasies of omnipotence or war. Instead, he presents their experiences, perceptions, and expertise as the international state of the art of the time and treats their argumentation in the best sense of a Rankean tradition. Neither Weber nor Chamberlain thought of a European war in 1895 or 1897. For them, world power politics meant participation and protection of interests. Like most of their educated contemporaries, a conflict between European great powers would have struck them as against all reason, which they saw as having reached its historical zenith in the developed capitalism of the industrial nations. Time and again, the author stresses the enormous importance of the emerging powers—above all the USA—in the eyes of his key witnesses. At the same time, he succeeds in showing that the UK, as the dominant world power and with its course of self-assertion in the Far East, South America, and Europe, played a far greater part in the destabilization of the world before 1914 than the Kaiserreich, which was handicapped by its geopolitics, resources, restricted capacity for negotiation, limited instruments of power, and sometimes catastrophic political decisions. Germany, he makes clear, was a reactive power; however—and here Grimmer-Solem agrees with recent international historiography—it made disastrous decisions during crucial events, such as in the July Crisis of 1914 (pp. 496–509).⁵

Nevertheless, some questions remain—including whether the professors he chooses as protagonists offer a representative selection of the Empire's professorial elite. It is striking that moderate voices

⁵ Nicholas Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012); Christopher M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to War in 1914* (New York, 2013).

and critics of the Empire such as Hans Delbrück and Lujo Brentano are largely overlooked by the study. The focus on the intellectual history of individual economists, especially during the 1870s, also overlooks the Peace of Frankfurt in 1871 as an essential and constitutive moment for Germany's role in the world economy, when Germany finally became part of the network of most favoured nations (Article XII).⁶ The gold standard, like the most favoured nation principle, acted as a motor for global economic integration, helping to compensate for the disadvantages of international protectionism and making Germany the second-most closely integrated economy in the world behind Britain and just ahead of the USA.⁷

The focus on economics as a leading field of scholarly debate also automatically raises the questions of why the struggle for new resources was not known to have played a significant role in Bismarck's initial decision to acquire colonies, and how economists later justified the devastating balance sheet of German colonialism. It remains unclear where the author locates the boundary between economic expertise aimed at global economic penetration and the sphere of international relations. Grimmer-Solem rightly refers to recent studies of media and diplomacy before 1914 (p. 15). However, alongside many new findings on the interdependence of media and politics, the essential observation of these studies is that both fields followed their own rules. In this sense, Grimmer-Solem's impressive book clearly demands further research into the specific tensions between the economy and international politics as subsystems functioning according to their own rules, but nonetheless constituting integral components of an overall system of international relations.

⁶ Andreas Rose, 'Otto von Bismarck und das (außen-)politische Mittel der Handels- und Schutzzollpolitik', in Ulrich von Hehl and Michael Epkenhans (eds.), *Otto von Bismarck und die Wirtschaft* (Paderborn, 2013), 77-96.

⁷ Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, (Princeton, 2015), 730-34.

BOOK REVIEWS

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