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CENTURIES rarely get lost forever, though they may pass out of fashion. Max Weber's "light of the great cultural problems" moves on to illuminate other ages.¹ After periods of intense scholarly endeavor, a period is exhausted like overexploited soil. Few stones have been left unturned. The marginal utility of the latest book or article added to a bibliography declines. Laurels beckon elsewhere. Enthusiastic and ambitious young scholars flock to the frontiers of research, as they should.

Yet, there is no reason to worry too much. When a century's reputation hits rock bottom, along comes a gifted historian to the rescue. Who cared for the seemingly dismal fourteenth century—after the glory of great monarchs, great architects, and great thinkers, but with pestilence and war everywhere—before Johan Huizinga revealed its dark wonders in 1919?² Who would have thought that the prerevolutionary eighteenth century—a dry-as-dust "age of reason"—could ever recover from the aspersions of Romantic historians? One might respond to such an attitude of relaxed contemplation by quoting John Maynard Keynes: "In the long run we are all dead." To be sure, in an "age of impatience" (Suzanne Marchand), we have no time to oscillate leisurely with the long cycles of waxing and waning interest. And bending those cycles to one's will—through splashy revisionism or, more precisely, asserting with good reason the opposite of what is believed to be true—is a hazardous strategy that a conscientious professor should not recommend to PhD candidates. It might lead to stardom, but it could also end in a crash landing. A well-tempered fatalism, or market conformity, seem to be the safer bet.

Tenured professors, especially those who do not lead from the front as managers of a new field, can better afford the luxury of countercyclical behavior. Because I am not an "insider," not a proper *dix-neuvièmiste*, I am in a semi-detached position from which to contribute this comment on the preceding contributions to this forum. My research monographs have dealt with topics from the twentieth and eighteenth centuries, and the Enlightenment remains my principal comfort zone. When, for reasons difficult to explain, I decided to take a closer look at the nineteenth century and write an interpretative essay about it, friends and colleagues advised against such suicidal recklessness.³ There did not seem to be an alternative to trotting out the same "well-worn" stories (James Brophy) or "teleological master narratives" (David Blackburn)—thus a recipe for ruining whatever modest reputation one may have had.

Yet, scavenging through the "historiographical dustbin" and reexamining topics that, to many nowadays "ring hollow" (Sebastian Conrad), had its own morbid pleasures. To turn the argument upside down: the incredible richness of international research on the nineteenth century—by no means on Europe and North America alone—makes gliding like Minerva's owl over the dusky landscapes of scholarly achievement such a rewarding

¹Max Weber, "Das Licht der großen Kulturprobleme ist weiter gezogen," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 3rd ed., ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1968), 214.

²Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996); the original Dutch edition appeared in 1919.

³Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). For an introduction intended for a general public, which discusses the nineteenth century at three distinct levels (Germany—Europe—world), see also idem, *Das 19. Jahrhundert* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2012).

experience. A feeling of immense admiration and gratitude for what thousands of scholars around the world have accomplished should outweigh any anxiety that a century, admired by some and reviled by others, may be slipping from our grasp. The view from the rear reveals other things—and perhaps even more—than what one perceives through the gun smoke on the front lines of pioneering historiographical research.

The contributions to this forum come as a great relief. The participants do not gather tearfully at the bedside of a moribund century. They register an unavoidable and entirely unsurprising—even welcome—shift of interests and resources toward more recent periods. Their concern about a certain loss of the century's erstwhile sparkle, especially in the eyes of younger generations of scholars, never amounts here to panic and alarm. More than one author assures us that the field is “vibrant”—a potent consolation for those who prefer high-energy hustle to the long-wave calm that, to overstate a bit Suzanne Marchand's memorable argument, was a token of the nineteenth century's inner strength. The contributors spot minor deficiencies and suggest sensible and practical remedies. None of them despairs. They all behave extremely civilly. There seems to be widespread agreement that the nineteenth century can make better claims on our attention, even with regard to staff positions and funding, than earlier epochs. It seems to be more of a “prehistory of the present” than the eighteenth century was: a fountainhead of legacies ranging from social theory (Lloyd Kramer) to the toxic delusions of ethnic nationalism (Pieter Judson). Even so, none of the contributors suggests that resources might be rechanneled to the nineteenth century from fields of history that are less relevant and innovative; in the German context, medieval studies, traditionally pampered and untouchable, comes to mind.

Finally, all the essays assure us that the field is basically on the right track. Only Sebastian Conrad adopts a welcome polemical fervor and conjures up a new vision of the nineteenth century centered on the “master trope” of colonialism. Scholars dizzy from the serpentine succession of paradigms and “turns” need not have to be persuaded at first sight by his “post-postcolonial framework” to find such boldness welcome and helpful. The debate only progresses when truly new ideas are being suggested that go beyond the pious commitment to take on board global approaches. Who would object to that nowadays?⁴

Before moving on to some more specific thoughts inspired by the essays, let me briefly say a few words about external pressures and constraints. Karen Hagemann rightly urges us not to “follow the power of the market and every fashion in the discipline.” Pressures to do so are different in each national academic arena, and I can only speak from my limited German experience. The great majority of our PhD students do not pursue university careers. Some try to do so after completion of their doctorate and fail. Many others never aim for academic advancement. For them, there is no question of a *Habilitation*, or a second book, and their choice of topic for the doctoral dissertation is not governed primarily by strategic calculations. The job market is simply too large and too fragmented to be predictable. If one wants to work in a museum, in the media, or in academic and cultural management, the topic of one's dissertation is of secondary importance. Nothing militates against working on a nineteenth-century subject.

For the more adventurous, or perhaps the more bookish, who see their future inside the academy, it is next to impossible to establish themselves as experts on the nineteenth century.

⁴On the strange lack of resistance to global studies, see Jürgen Osterhammel, “Global History,” in *Debating New Approaches to History*, ed. Peter Burke and Marek Tamm (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 21–47.

Only the biggest history departments offer specialized chairs in the history of the nineteenth century—German, European, or global. The safest strategy continues to be not to put all one's eggs into one basket and thus to demonstrate competence in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by writing a monograph on each. The mysterious label *Neuere and Neueste Geschichte* (modern and contemporary History) is still commonly attached to professorships at German universities, especially in small departments, and it is only slowly fading from use. It is usually taken to mean “history since c. 1800.” The popularity and institutional proliferation of *Zeitgeschichte* (contemporary history) notwithstanding, the incumbent of the chair in *Neuere and Neueste Geschichte* usually contributes to the teaching of twentieth-century history, especially if the occupant of the chair in *Zeitgeschichte* defines her or his responsibility as beginning in 1945. Surveying the German academic scene leads to the conclusion that nineteenth-century history is not losing senior positions *because it never had them*. At the same time, the reluctance of mainstream early modern historians, often firmly anchored in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to transcend the conventional caesura of 1800, leaves ample room for historians of “high” or “late” modernity.

The danger of pitiful nineteenth-century studies being crushed between adjacent subdisciplinary imperialisms is fairly remote, unless a dramatic contraction of the academic labor market triggers a struggle for survival. The nineteenth century will always figure, to some extent, in teaching transepochal *longue-durée* or comparative topics, even if only in masters' programs. This comes at the expense of many canonical topics of old. Still, one can fit the revolutions of 1848/1849 into a course on modern political breakdowns, see the French Revolution in a transatlantic or “Imperial Meridian” perspective, or place industrialization within a “Great Divergence” framework—while aware of the last's theoretical and empirical shortcomings.

Losing a century does not necessarily mean that it drifts away unmoored on the ocean of history. More pragmatically, it means that its shape becomes ever more difficult to determine. This is true, first of all, of its temporal shape. My own outsider's (or “ethnographic”) inspection of the nineteenth century baffled a few readers and reviewers because I refused to place demarcating dates on the century. When, people wondered, did it “really” begin and end? The starkly nominalist answer was not to everyone's taste. Sometimes it is convenient to begin a story in the 1760s with the “age of revolutions” and to bring it to a close somewhere in the 1920s. Sometimes a very short rump century (c. 1830 to 1880), as mentioned by David Blackbourn, is preferable; Richard Evans's superb new history of Europe is anchored in this kind of “Victorian” core.⁵ Such a century with frayed and amoeba-like elastic boundaries undermines the very idea of a parade of equally extensive slices of time. That is precisely the intention.

Two other issues are much more interesting: the internal structure of a chronological century, and its place within the *longue durée*. On both issues, the forum provides helpful insights. Alexander Martin points out that, for Russia and the tsarist empire, 1861 was a much more important turning point than any date around the calendric end of centuries; it even resulted in two different historiographies.⁶ Closer inspection will yield similar

⁵Richard J. Evans, *The Pursuit of Power: Europe 1815–1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2016).

⁶The turning point has lately been somewhat neglected in debates about periodization. By contrast, see Andrew Abbott, *Time Matters: On Theory and Method* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 240–60; Dieter Langewiesche, “‘Zeitwende’—Eine Grundfigur neuzeitlichen Geschichtsdenkens:

results for other European—and, even more so, for extra-European—countries. In large parts of the world, the onset of colonial conquest cut the century into two halves. Debates about periodization are rarely a waste of time, as some scholars maintain. But one should not get bogged down in fixing centuries temporally. Shorter periods, if flexibly handled, can be more sensible. A recent model of a virtuoso use of overlapping periods—of vastly differing lengths—is Anthony Reid’s magisterial *A History of Southeast Asia*, which is not just useful for historians of Asia.⁷

The question of how the conventional nineteenth century fits into longer rhythms and sequences is addressed, more or less explicitly, in all the contributions. They do not recommend that we all now rush into macrohistory and try to impress those in the lay public who constantly expect big answers to purportedly big questions. Those infatuated with fashionable “Big History” should not lose sight of the truisms and banalities that its protagonists routinely utter about the nineteenth century.⁸ But we should feel encouraged to adopt a broader view by taking the example, for instance, of the British political scientists, Barry Buzan and George Lawson, who, with the innocent exuberance of lay connoisseurs of historical literature, rediscovered the nineteenth century as the site of a bundle of world historical transformations.⁹ To take the measure of such profound changes requires harking back to the early modern period—something that comes naturally to Pieter Judson in a Habsburg framework and that is a matter of course, to cite just one other example, for historians of (European) empire. Provincializing the French Revolution and being less dazzled by Napoleon’s mega-show—which will be exhaustively commemorated in his anniversary year, 2019—might help to flatten a threshold that still keeps many early modernists and nineteenth-century specialists in separate camps. Overarching concepts such the *Anthropocene* (mentioned by Brophy) bridge the ages. They deserve serious consideration, especially when they encompass the environment, a vital topic missing from the contributions to this forum. In fact, the most glaring absence among the general surveys of Europe in the nineteenth century is a comprehensive work on environmental history.¹⁰

The contributors to this forum highlight different levels of analysis that are equally relevant and legitimate. Simone Lässig shows how a seemingly narrow and peripheral field can illuminate a far larger canvas. Others reflect briefly on devising new national histories as histories of entanglement. As a global historian, I welcome this tendency, while sympathizing with Alex Chase-Levenson’s admonition that we not forget those who remained “relatively

Richard Koebner im Vergleich mit Francis Fukuyama und Eric Hobsbawm,” in *Zeitwende: Geschichtsdenken heute*, ed. Dieter Langewiesche (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 41–55; Karsten Fischer, ed., *Neustart des Weltlaufs? Fiktion und Faszination der Zeitenwende* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).

⁷Anthony Reid, *A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

⁸See, e.g., David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 406–39.

⁹Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). See also Bo Stråth and Peter Wagner, *European Modernity: A Global Approach* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). For a completely different historical sociology of Europe, see Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 2: *The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁰I am thinking of a counterpart, largely limited to Europe, to John R. McNeill, *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: Norton, 2000). For a brief introduction, see Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, *Schranken der Natur: Umwelt, Gesellschaft, Experimente. 1750 bis heute* (Essen: Klartext, 2014), 19–163.

untouched by global connections.” *Relative* is the crucial word here, because globality is always a matter of degree. Perhaps wisely, none of the Forum contributors discusses ways in which nineteenth-century European history *as a whole* has been, and can be, conceptualized and narrated—wisely, because general histories, often written for the textbook market, tend to disappoint.¹¹ Many years ago, a distinguished British reviewer had this to say about John M. Merriman’s bulky *History of Modern Europe: From the Renaissance to the Present* (1996): “There is nothing in this book to cause offence, but there is nothing to generate excitement either.”¹² When Marchand meets people who find the nineteenth century boring, they might have been sent to sleep by the tepid encyclopaedism of this kind of literature.¹³

What might characterize exciting histories of Europe in the nineteenth century? They should be topical histories of something rather than inventories of everything—for example, histories of military affairs, here elegantly discussed by Roger Chickering, whose essay is a model for still unwritten essays on a number of similar topics.¹⁴ They should be unobtrusively comparativist—despite the fact that comparison seems to be out of favor nowadays, for no other reason than the myth that it is irreconcilable with the analysis of connectivity. They would and should not allow human beings to vanish behind big structures and large processes; at the same time, they should not be content with mere pointillism and the telling of anecdotes. In geographic terms, exciting histories of Europe should cover more than the triangle formed by Edinburgh, Toulouse, and Vienna. They should not neglect “lost corners” and lost causes, and they must not shirk the issue of relative backwardness, often considered taboo by critics of modernization theory. In temporal terms, a short cross section will do, perhaps nothing longer than a decade.¹⁵

Did I have models in mind while drawing up this laundry list? Yes, but let me conclude by mentioning just one: Richard Stites’s *The Four Horsemen*, a narrative history of revolutions in Spain, Naples, Greece, and Russia during the 1820s—and much more.¹⁶

¹¹See Jürgen Osterhammel, “Europamodelle und imperiale Kontexte,” *Journal of Modern European History* 2, no. 2 (2004): 157–81.

¹²Tim Blanning, “Gibbon Goes East: Three Contrasting Approaches to the History of Europe,” *Times Literary Supplement* (Dec. 20, 1996), 4. Blanning did, in fact, take offense at Norman Davies’s *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996). For an even stronger opinion on that widely read book, see Tony Judt, *When the Facts Change: Essays 1995–2010* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 47–64.

¹³Of course, a few works are exempt from such a harsh verdict. See, among more recent syntheses, Evans, *Pursuit of Power*; Robert Gildea, *Barricades and Borders: Europe 1800–1914*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); for an excellent study that deals with only one half of the century, see Jonathan Sperber, *Revolutionary Europe, 1780–1850*, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2017).

¹⁴For a list of possible topics, see the chapter headings in Stefan Berger, ed., *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Europe, 1789–1914* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

¹⁵Jan Vansina, “Towards a History of Lost Corners in the World,” *Economic History Review* 35, no. 2 (1982): 165–78.

¹⁶Richard Stites, *The Four Horsemen: Riding to Liberty in Post-Napoleonic Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).