


[Short on 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. 668 pp. \$44.99 (cloth), [ISBN](#)

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As late as 1873, Karl Marx was sticking to the idea that Germany was a land without political economy—that “foreign science.” For, where capitalism failed to flourish, and bourgeois society withered on the vine, it followed that “the soil whence Political Economy springs was wanting.” Ultimately, he went on, “this ‘science’ had to be imported from England and France as a ready-made article; its German professors remained schoolboys.”[1] Would Eric Grimmer-Solem, in his exhaustive account of German *Weltwirtschaft*, agree? Certainly, much of his book *Learning Empire* unfolds on foreign soil; he follows those very schoolboys to the ends of the earth, carefully reconstructing the compound of cosmopolitan education and world travel that gave rise to a new generation of economists and public policy intellectuals in the German *Kaiserreich*. But where Marx famously saw backwardness, Grimmer-Solem finds the cutting edge of modern liberal economics in its most globalizing form.

The irony of their shared conception of German economic thought as originally global, not national, is slight, given their sharply different impulses. Marx saw the world from London, provincializing Germany, while Grimmer-Solem, in his world history, retraces “Germany’s global scholarly connections” after 1871, linking the international itineraries, scholarly contacts, and intellectual genealogies of a tiny cohort of economists—essentially six men—who together develop the new scholarly field of “Weltwirtschaft” (p. 7). He is entirely uninterested in Marx: in the critical, socialist, substantially German political economy also developing transnationally at just the same time. Indeed, he is not interested in the history of political economy or economics generally, but rather in the specific links between German *Weltwirtschaft* and German power. His detailed account of globalizing German economic thought maps a much broader diplomatic, military, and political history of Germany’s bid for world power status. He tracks how professors as public intellectuals “fatefully intersected with the ... quest for formal colonies and the national ambition to become a world power” (p. 7). *Weltwirtschaft* here signifies *Weltpolitik*: “The rapid traffic of university-educated people and the dissemination of their ideas through journalistic and scholarly description, comparison, and analysis was at the very heart of the formation of mental maps of the world that later came to justify *Weltpolitik* as a response to the challenges of globalization” (p. 8).

As it happened it was also in that same year, 1873, that the German colony of scholars and

businessmen in Japan combined to found the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens. Remarkably, Grimmer-Solem counts *this* the “very beginning of German Weltpolitik” (p. 82). Ideas are powerful in this work. They develop and circulate internationally, incubating among scholars in Japan, the United States, China, or Venezuela, then dramatically shape policy in Germany. Weltpolitik, Grimmer-Solem argues, “was an improvised response to the opportunities and challenges of globalization” in the 1870s and 1880s “that was largely communicated to the German metropole by university-educated bourgeois scholars who had been living and working overseas” (p. 19). Weltwirtschaft underpinned it. A scholarly formation that both described and advocated a world of dynamic economic interrelations, it was deployed at strategic moments in the development of an aggressive, expansionist world policy.

Gustav Schmoller, economist, public intellectual, and cofounder—again in 1873—of the influential Verein für Sozialpolitik, was the central figure in the development of Weltwirtschaft. From his position at the University of Berlin, where he took up a professorship in 1882, the economist, public intellectual, and cofounder—again in 1873—of the influential Verein für Sozialpolitik, he wielded extraordinary influence. The university attracted brilliant students in these years, among them W. E. B. Du Bois, Max Weber, and Werner Sombart. Grimmer-Solem’s core group—Ernst von Halle, Karl Helfferich, Karl Rathgen, Hermann Schumacher, and Max Sering—all shared a connection to Schmoller. Sering also taught at Berlin; Ernst von Halle studied there. The scene was cosmopolitan and dynamic as the traditions of German historical political economy and *Staatswissenschaft* found exposure to currents of intellectual and, above all, economic change sweeping the globe. Indeed, Berlin was but a local instance of a transnational development, and the whole first part of the book reconstructs the emergence of Weltwirtschaft not in Germany or its colonies but in East Asia, North America, and the Caribbean. Grimmer-Solem rightly situates Germany’s own overseas imperialism in the spectrum of formal and informal empire characteristic of European and American expansion in the period, and shows how Weltwirtschaft, evolving along a global distribution of scholarly networks, came to converge with it.

While Grimmer-Solem’s claim that the “global context of Weltpolitik is revealed for the first time” is perhaps exaggerated, it has certainly never been handled with such an ambitious combination of large scale and small detail (p. 23). His global perspective highlights the powerful significance of US expansion, Japanese modernization, the division of China, the fate of the Ottoman Empire, and the emergence of a world economy for German thinking. Awareness of those big facts is mediated by transnational academic exchange: by scholars, students, the circulation of ideas, especially in the United States and Japan. Schumacher and von Halle were among the many Germans pursuing graduate study in the US beginning in the 1890s. The idea of the frontier—shared with Frederick Jackson Turner—became “a fundamentally American reference point” for Sering’s thinking on German world policy (p. 59). Grimmer-Solem elaborates in extraordinary detail the profound German influence in Japan in the 1880s by exhaustively tracing the genealogy of academic, legal, and civil service networks linking the two countries around matters of political economy, law, government, and education. Flowing from these international contexts of politics and economy, scholarly Weltwirtschaft came to shape a shared worldview that amplified and dramatized competition, expansion, world commerce, German growth, and—not least—the remarkable rise of the United States and Japan.

This approach aligns Grimmer-Solem with a particular conception of German history advanced by

scholars like Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, who some twenty years ago called for “a transnational enlargement of our image of the Kaiserreich.”[2] Indeed, Grimmer-Solem’s own plain purpose “is to highlight how misleading it is to treat Imperial Germany purely endogenously and its later imperial gambits as emanating from the metropole outward” (p. 8). On the contrary, his is a story “told from the globe inward toward Germany,” recovering a history that was “inescapably global from the very beginning.” Transnational networks and currents predominate in *Learning Empire*, an approach that, as formulated by Conrad, “incorporates German ... history in a global interrelation” via attention to “manifold processes of integration” too often minimized by a national history that is itself ultimately “a result of transnational exchanges.”[3] Such an approach produces a German history after 1870 under the sign of globalization—the first *modern* globalization—in which technological and material forces unfolding on a world scale shape a German world view and policy. Sebastian Conrad’s own important account of the Kaiserreich frames it precisely as “part of the history of the process of globalization around 1900,” “an era of worldwide interaction,” of “mobility, exchange and circulation”—of which German nationalism was ultimately “an effect.”[4]

The affinity is clear. Grimmer-Solem’s book, he says, “makes it possible to view German history between 1875 and 1919 as concurrent with the rise and demise of the first era of globalization, which was linked directly to the profound changes in the global system brought on by the emergence of Germany, the United States, and Japan as new world powers” (pp. 24-25). By the 1880s, academic *Weltwirtschaft* recognizes—and exemplifies—the driving force of technology and transfer: of intercontinental railroads, steamships, telegraph cables, the Suez Canal, and consequent circulation. It is transposed into politics in the 1890s: the “transnational origins of Germany’s *Weltpolitik*” (p. 228). The fundamental effect of this is to contextualize German history in the period, to relativize it, so that German *Weltpolitik* and all that it encompasses—navalism, formal and informal empire, diplomacy, and the coming of the First World War—appear along a spectrum including Britain and the United States. At the origin and core of *Weltpolitik* he finds bourgeois liberalism, and in particular liberal imperialism, and this becomes a principal theme of the book. The liberal economists around Schmoller achieved their greatest influence by infusing German foreign and colonial policy with classically liberal values. Chancellor von Bülow epitomizes this as a reader of the economists right through the 1890s; as an Anglophile liberal imperialist shaped by Hamburg roots and modern political economy; as fundamentally bourgeois in thinking, a social reformer and liberal nationalist. Even Kaiser Wilhelm’s navalism ultimately reveals the power of “English and especially German educated bourgeois opinion” (p. 169).

Bülow’s famous speech calling for a German *Platz an der Sonne* demonstrates, according to the author, how “*Weltpolitik* was a complex of ideas originally defined by the German educated bourgeoisie that were profoundly shaped by the encounter with *Weltwirtschaft*” (p. 196). There “was a very strong consensus between Bülow, Tirpitz, Schmoller, and Schmoller’s students on these issues that grew out of the important role that von Halle, Rathgen, Schumacher, and Sering had played, in their travels and observations in East Asia and the Americas, in defining new objectives and in identifying the challenges to German foreign policy at a time of unprecedented international expansion of German ideas, capital, ships and goods” (p. 197). Liberal imperialism is the chief evidence of this. German liberal imperialism amounted to the “projection abroad” of “liberal values and ideals to become the equal of other great world powers” (p. 10). Central to this was a self-aware, restrained “scientific colonialism” as well as the development of informal spheres of influence grounded in a vision of technological and moral progress. The emphasis on free trade was one aspect

of a vision of “greater individual freedom and opportunity” that was among the “core ambitions of German liberal imperialism” (pp. 11-12).

In this broad sense, Germany takes its place among the industrializing, expansionist, liberal powers of Europe and North America. The account teems with educated liberals, the economists, and their elite public, who together achieve a far-reaching *embourgeoisement* of German policy. Grimmer-Solem’s scholars are no mandarins, but rather globe-trotters, canny publicists, and promoters, adept at building contacts and influence at the highest levels of politics and policymaking. And yet social class has no actual explanatory role. The scholars of *Weltwirtschaft* “shaped mental maps” that had a “hold on the political imagination,” but their ideas form autonomously (p. 20). Somehow, they stand at the center of, and yet apart from, the dynamic economic and social forces Grimmer-Solem prioritizes—a puzzle at the heart of the book’s methodology and its account. Material forces are critical, and ideas at least as much, but the relationship between them is obscure. *Weltpolitik*, he argues, was “a political response to the realities of *Weltwirtschaft* driven forward by the concurrence of economic interests, ideological forces, great power rivalries and domestic German politics” (p. 168). But, it “was not ‘capitalism’ or the economic system per se that were driving German *Weltpolitik*” (p. 169). And therefore not class in any economic sense. *Weltpolitik* was “not simply ... an ideological epiphenomenon,” he insists, as if there were not more supple and complex ways to configure the relationship. “*Weltwirtschaft* and *Weltpolitik* were a new problem field and a policy response based on real experiences and observations *in the world*” (p. 170). This remarkable statement, apparently equating a highly politicized—and bitterly contested—economics with an unmediated, objective “reality,” appears to be a kind of reflexive response to a rather old idea of ideology—as “superstructure”—or perhaps a particularly crude form of it. Unfortunately, it suggests a tendency in the book to perceive the world from the perspective of *Weltwirtschaft*, so that, for example, German imperialism really *is*, fundamentally, liberal imperialism, or is *not*, in fact, class-based.

Missing here—rather strangely, given how vividly Grimmer-Solem fills in his picture of these scholars as propagandists and partisans—is conflict, a strong sense of the vigorous contestation of imperialism or *Weltpolitik* that reveals the contours of class society. “All [Germans],” he tells us, “gradually internalized new colonial and racial tropes after the turn of the twentieth century through popular culture” (p. 13). Is this true? What about the awkward tensions dividing mass culture and the liberal *Bildungsbürgertum*, not least the bourgeois colonial enthusiasts uneasy at the crass commercialism, vulgarity, and sensationalism of fairground ethnographic spectacles? Or, more importantly, the powerful antagonism between bourgeois colonialists and German Social Democracy? Grimmer-Solem’s economists appear as “important facilitators of a North Atlantic milieu of reformers that included Fabian, Liberal, and Unionist reformers in Britain no less than American Progressives” (p. 262). Indeed, imperialism before 1914 “was often self-consciously progressive, and ... managed to mobilize the democratized masses not just in Britain and France, but also in Germany” (p. 9). But the colonial movement was stubbornly exclusive, fortified along boundaries of social class, and defined itself in bitter struggle against the SPD. And anti-imperialism was highly developed among both socialist intellectuals and broad parts of the rank and file—although of course ambivalence and contradiction mark this whole history very strongly. There was a contest of ideas in the Kaiserreich, an important one that was resolved neither by “scientific colonialism,” the coming of war in 1914, nor even the collapse of Germany in 1918. (Grimmer-Solem himself points out that the only factions that rejected a policy of colonial *revanche* after 1918 were the SPD and the Communists.)

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The author is not wrong to point out the historical intertwinement of imperialism and liberalism in Germany. It went right back to 1848. Typical was a plea in the Frankfurt Parliament for “an effective eastern policy,” by which Germany “will become a world empire of the first rank.” This same impassioned liberal imperialist would go on to proclaim—vividly, weirdly—that in the “rich, wonderful lands of the Orient ... lies our Texas, our Mexico.”[5] The American frontier already transposed; Weltpolitik prefigured. The “commercial geography” of the 1870s fused economic expansionism—if in some tension with free-trade liberalism—with a rhetoric of scientific discovery, preparing the colonialism of the 1880s. Grimmer-Solem presents the “scientific colonialism” that developed out of the crisis of 1904-6, centering around the German-Herero War, as the purest distillation of liberal imperialism. Its reformist, rationalizing, technocratic impulse found expression in the information and policy work of the Kolonialpolitisches Aktionskomité, which included Max Sering, and—of course—Gustav Schmoller as chair. The professors went to work again, as they had for the naval bills a few years before, propagandizing for a renovated *Kolonialreich* at the heart of their broader vision of Weltwirtschaft. In 1908, Karl Rathgen was appointed first chair in political economy at the new German Colonial Institute, a direct consequence of the “scientific” turn in German imperialism.

But how far can we really take the concept of liberal imperialism, in the German case or more broadly? Tension animates, but also complicates it. The elasticity or hollowness of the principle of “free trade” in the history of British imperialism, for example, points to the limitations of the idea. Marx, already in the 1850s, over a decade of observing Weltwirtschaft—India, China, the British Empire—for the *New York Tribune*, evaluated free trade in the harsh glare of the Opium Wars. “While openly preaching free trade in poison,” Britain “secretly defends the monopoly of its manufacture,” he wrote. “Whenever we look closely into the nature of British free trade, monopoly is pretty generally found to lie at the bottom of its ‘freedom.’”[6] In the same way, there is no separating the “science” of race from its grotesquerie, nor “progressive” technology from colonial exploitation and violence. What Germany shared with the British or Americans included a reformist impulse unfolding in continuous exchange with the realities of domination, ultimately serving only to renew the claims of empire.

Grimmer-Solem argues that this “powerful liberal imperialist ideology,” scholarly and “self-consciously modern,” could “resonate widely,” and that it did so, in one important example, among voters in the bitterly fought elections of 1906-7 (p. 357). But how do we know it was this, and not the ugly nationalist chauvinism and racism, which also marked the campaign, that resonated? Why was it, to take one piece of Grimmer-Solem’s evidence, the sober pamphlet *Die Eisenbahnen Afrikas*, and not the lurid, vitriolic *Die Koloniale Lügenfabrik*, conflating political enemies at home with the bloodthirsty savages of Southwest Africa into a “Hottentottenblock,” that rallied voters to Bülow?[7] Sometimes there is no clear line, as in Hermann Schumacher’s essay on German interests in China, which Grimmer-Solem emphasizes as thoughtful, scholarly Weltwirtschaft, but also “jingoist propaganda” (p. 242). Some of the language is conventionally Pan-German: “*Volkskraft*” bolstered by international “fear of our home battle fleet” will make it harder “for the German abroad to become disloyal to his fatherland, no longer serving almost wholly as the fertilizer of nations [*Völkerdünger*] strengthening our rivals!” (p. 242). Grimmer-Solem attributes the “wider influence” of the scholars’ publications “to their ambiguous status as both election literature with a political tendency and simultaneously as the pronouncements of respected scholars and thus as authoritative material relevant beyond politics” (p. 360). Similarly, propaganda in schools and universities “was a very effective way of conveying a coherent and compelling liberal imperialist ideology to Germany’s youth”

(p. 360). This appears to suggest the strength of a rational, deliberative—indeed, bourgeois—public sphere even as the author evokes an “increasingly populist and radical imperialism” (p. 18). Without some analysis of the historical field of reception, how is it really possible to argue for this wide resonance of a sober, “rational” Weltwirtschaft?

Of course, even a book on this ambitious scale cannot do everything. Its foremost achievement is to recover the history of Weltwirtschaft as a novel basis for reframing the history of the Kaiserreich globally. Grimmer-Solem works in diplomatic, political, military, and intellectual history, in an elaborate archive encompassing, he says, “many unknown, unused, underused or very obscure manuscript and published primary sources” (p. 21). He offers a perspective that is both microscopic and telescopic, at once an intimate history of six men and a global history of Germany, European great power politics, and the coming of the First World War. The magnifications can be strange, the group biography perhaps inadequate to the claims of a world history. (Are US-German exchanges of professors really “alternative arenas of Weltpolitik”—that is, “Weltpolitik by scholarship” [p. 369]? Are the linked trajectories of six professors sufficient scaffolding for a global history?) But most striking is the ingenious ability to make the method yield a broad interpretive and narrative framework that integrates the Kaiserreich into the history of the first modern globalization. Precisely that achievement makes the question of capitalism inevitable, and its absence from the book hard to understand. The term “capitalism” appears some fifteen times, for the most part incidentally, in a book of six hundred pages on world commerce, political economy, and imperialism circa 1870-1918. Capitalist dynamism was the single greatest force linking global powers in the period, and therefore at the very core of any interpretation of a bourgeois, liberal, imperialist Germany, and it would be fascinating to know Grimmer-Solem’s reasons for its spectral presence in this compelling, substantial work.

Notes

[1.] Karl Marx, afterword to the second German edition of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 23.

[2.] Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, “Einleitung,” in *Das Kaiserreich transnational: Deutschland in der Welt, 1871-1914*, ed. Conrad and Osterhammel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 16.

[3.] Sebastian Conrad, “Double Marginalization: A Plea for a Transnational Perspective on German History,” in *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*, ed. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 52, 53.

[4.] Sebastian Conrad, *Globalization and the Nation in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-4.

[5.] Friedrich Gottlieb Schulz, delivering a report on the “Donaufrage,” January 29, 1849; and then again, in debate on the *Auswanderungsgesetz*, on March 15, 1849. Franz Wigard, ed., *Reden für die deutsche Nation, 1848/49: Stenographischer Bericht über die Verhandlungen der Deutschen Constituierenden Nationalversammlung zu Frankfurt am Main*, vol. 7 (Munich: Moos und Pertner, 1988), 4,929; *ibid.*, vol. 8, 5,721.

[6]. Karl Marx, "History of the Opium Trade [II]," in Marx, *Dispatches for the New York Tribune: Selected Journalism of Karl Marx* (London: Penguin, 2007), 31.

[7]. "Die Koloniale Lügenfabrik," Bundesarchiv, R8023/510, DKG, Bl. 412-13.

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