Hague on Abbenhuis and Morrell, 'The First Age of Industrial Globalization: An International History 1815-1918'

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In the final pages of The First Age of Industrial Globalization, Maartje Abbenhuis and Gordon Morrell note that the most important consequence of China’s 1917 entry into the First World War was the spread of the influenza pandemic that likely originated there. The “Spanish flu,” as it came to be called, was the height of a crisis “when global warfare and global revolutions met global pandemic” (p. 201). The Spanish Flu served as an exclamation point to the destruction that came to a head between 1914 and 1918. As a global health challenge, it helped end the century-long process of “industrial globalization” described in this thin, useful volume. Intended primarily for students, the book provides a thoughtful analysis of the past while pointing toward valuable lessons for our own time.

Written before the onset of COVID-19, The First Age of Industrial Globalization aims to “offer an accessible international history of the nineteenth century as an ‘age of globalization’” (p. xi). Through ten chapters the book maps the contours of the nineteenth century, recasting the period as a story of industrialization leading to globalization. The first three chapters introduce the concept of industrial globalization and assess how the international diplomatic system and the growth of global industrial capitalism enabled European imperialism in the first half of the nineteenth century. Four middle chapters describe the repercussions of industrial globalization after 1850. The infrastructure associated with globalization—such as international law, global banking and insurance, and universal time-keeping—created the framework that enabled this process. Industrialization spurred migrations around the world, and it often came with staggering environmental costs. The authors juxtapose a “world of Anglo-European peace” after 1815 with a “world of imperial violence” to highlight the enormous level of state violence that occurred beyond Europe as industrial globalization and imperialism took place. Another chapter outlines the intersection of local and global ideas and politics in the form of nationalism, liberalism, Marxism, democracy, and universalism that underpinned these developments. The final two chapters assess the First World War, arguing that those states that had industrialized early and quickly emerged as the “winners in the international environment” (p. 166). Still, the resulting total war was a “system-breaking conflict” that destroyed an international system based on “restraint, cooperation, and war avoidance” (p. 202).

This story is well known to historians, if not their students, although the volume proffers a fresh
interpretation of the nineteenth century for both scholars and their classes. The large and growing number of excellent general works on the nineteenth century point to the excitement of reconsidering the century from a global vantage point, beginning with Eric Hobsbawn’s trifecta describing the ages of revolution, capitalism, and empire. More recent books such as Christopher Bayly’s *The Birth of the Modern World* (2004), Jürgen Osterhammel’s *The Transformation of the World* (2009), and Richard Evans’s *The Pursuit of Power* (2016) offer extended surveys of the nineteenth century, each highlighting the centrality of Europe while placing greater or lesser attention on its global context.

By contrast, Abbenhuis and Morrell make clear they have crafted a book for their students, and *The First Age of Industrial Globalization* should be read in this light. Neither a standard text for the nineteenth century nor a detailed study of the period from the Napoleonic Wars to the end of the First World War, the book offers a short, thematic analysis of industrialization, globalization, and imperialism. Their structure leaves narrative largely aside, but there is enough attention to chronology to underpin the thematic treatment without confusion. The result is an interesting and at times provocative perspective geared toward undergraduates.

The various combinations of terms such as industrialization, globalization, capitalism, and imperialism, however, will likely challenge students. The interplay between industrialization and globalization drives the book’s central argument that “because the world industrialized after 1815, it also globalized” (p. 7). Abbenhuis and Morrell argue that the post-1815 peace in Europe enabled industrialization to take root and flourish, which in turn enabled what Abbenhuis and Morrell call “industrial imperialism” (pp. 12, 48, 53, 140). Formulations such as “industrial globalization” and “industrial imperialism” appropriately describe these processes, but students may struggle to understand the cause and effect implicit in these catchy, compound, but somewhat woolly terms.

The account Abbenhuis and Morrell present is largely a Western or European one, or what they call “Anglo-European,” a term they propose to emphasize Britain’s centrality to industrial globalization, while also incorporating the efforts of other European states in creating the process they trace. In this way, the authors seek to distinguish Anglo-Europeans from a more generalized concept of the West that they see as including westernized parts of the world (p. 3n5). They cast their gaze around the globe but most of their account remains fixed on Europe.

There was also a distinction between the global influence and effects of industrialization and its global reach. Many parts of the world provided raw materials and substantial markets for Anglo-Europeans. Yet despite increased global interconnectivity, the claim that “the tentacles of the Industrial Revolution … reached into every community connected to the ever-growing global network of commerce, migration and communications” (p. 12), runs the risk of overstating the case. Industrial globalization was a hugely important process, but its networks had their limits.

In such a short survey, it is inevitable that some subjects garner more coverage than others. The book emphasizes geopolitics to explain how industrialization drove globalization, and how those processes in turn led to Anglo-European domination of the international environment. It deploys both top-down international history and bottom-up socioeconomic and cultural history, but it is grounded more in the former than the latter. Industrial globalization, as the authors emphasize in some chapters more strongly than others, was “a tragic and destructive story” (p. 8). The authors evince less interest in the global advance of European culture. Religion and missionaries as a globalizing force are
underrepresented, and culture—language, sport, music, architecture, and art—draws scant attention.

The theme of neutrality and neutral nations, which is Abbenhuis’s area of specialization, is better developed throughout. The period was an “age of neutrals,” an idea that takes account of nations operating outside the 1815 Congress system. For them, and for the period as whole, wars were expensive, while neutrality was not. The idea of neutrality draws attention as well to the development of systems intended to transcend the nation-state and reduce conflict. A noteworthy feature of the book is its attention to international organizations and legal structures. Priority is given to “institutions and networks that connected people across the globe and integrated their everyday lives” (p. 15). The book highlights how internationalism, humanitarianism, and human rights—all topics of current special interest to scholars in history and beyond—played significant roles in propelling globalization.

The authors have intentionally kept references to minimum, and this is one area where the book could be stronger. Each chapter ends with a series of useful study questions and recommended readings. Although offering students a focused guide to sources, many of the recommended readings suggest book chapters and the occasional article, rather than scholarly monographs. In some cases, especially evident in chapter 1, important sources mentioned in the text do not appear in either the notes or the reading list. Inevitably in a sweeping global survey there were choices about sources to include and exclude, but the book might have benefited from additional pointers to the key literature.

Likewise, in places the authors could do more to tease out historiographical debates. The opening chapter, for example, introduces several historians “for those familiar with the large literature on the broad sweep of the nineteenth century” (p. 3). But surely the point is that many students will not be conversant with these figures and their debates. Later in the volume, the diverse approaches of diplomatic and sociocultural historians of empire are mentioned but little is done to unpack their contrasting perspectives. Most intended readers would benefit from laying out this historiography in more detail, and it is tempting to say that the historiography presented is either too much or not quite enough.

Despite these minor drawbacks, The First Age of Industrial Globalization will be useful for a range of courses. In introductory survey classes I often assign in tandem Robert Marks’s The Origins of the Modern World (2002) and Niall Ferguson’s Civilization (2012), to offer different perspectives on the West’s engagement with the world, while for an upper-level course on nineteenth-century Europe, students read Osterhammel’s Transformation of the World. Abbenhuis and Morrell’s text could sit easily on an assigned reading list for classes such as these, offering an up-to-date, accessible, clearly written survey that maps an interesting framework for thinking about the creation of the modern global world.

For Abbenhuis and Morrell, 1917 tipped the world into a second, more destructive age of industrial globalization. The book makes a compelling case that the US entry into the war and the Russian Revolutions mark a seminal year in how we conceptualize the process of globalization. The global system that suffered chaos and dislocation as a result of the First World War, exacerbated by the Great Depression, did not recover until well after the Second World War.

Over the last decade, the forces of nationalism, localism, and populism have again challenged the
idea of globalization. The coronavirus has brought this challenge into sharp relief. While the concept of globalization has taken quite a beating in the twenty-first century, the failure of a global approach to the pandemic has significantly hindered public health policy and economic recovery worldwide. Insular responses have meant widespread global suffering. Globalization, therefore, comes with a decidedly mixed legacy. This is a central theme developed in this handy book, and one which students today will especially grapple with to their benefit.


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