

# *Rethinking Global History*

## *The Balzan FRIAS Project in Global History*

**Jürgen Osterhammel**

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**Project Co-director:** Stefanie Gänger

**Hosting Institution:** Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS)

**Period:** 2019–

**Website:** <https://www.frias.uni-freiburg.de/de/personen/fellows/aktuelle-fellows/osterhammel/#Projekt>

Jürgen Osterhammel is Professor Emeritus of Modern and Contemporary History at the University of Konstanz (Germany) where he taught from 1999 to 2018, and Distinguished Fellow (2019-25) at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (University of Freiburg).

Stefanie Gänger is Chair of Modern History at the University of Heidelberg. She is a former member of Osterhammel's Konstanz-based research group "Global Processes," a Cambridge alumna, and a specialist on Latin American history. Her first book (Oxford University Press, 2014) was on the collecting and study of pre-Columbian antiquities in Republican Latin America, her second monograph, which studied how medical knowledge was shared across the Atlantic world around 1800, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2021.

### **Background: Global History as a General Perspective and a Sub-Discipline in Its Own Right**

After about three decades of expansion, the situation of global history as an academic sub-discipline remains ambiguous. On the one hand, global history has rapidly established itself as an important approach within historical studies. At least in the United States, it has already crystallized as a "field" with a well-developed scholarly infrastructure. While at the present time only a small minority of historians practice global history professionally and on a regular basis, there can be no doubt that the general awareness of non-Western history and of the need to situate historical studies in a global context has increased considerably. Thirty years ago, what is now subsumed under the broad heading "global history" was divided between an amateurish "worldhistory" and "extra-European" or "non-Western" history tucked away at the margins of

the profession, especially in Continental Europe (with the possible exception of the Netherlands). Since then, global history has gained impressively in attention and respectability.

On the other hand, this remarkable success comes at a certain cost. Global history has extended its reach to ever more topics without having rethought sufficiently the methodologies inherited from earlier historiographical approaches. Thus, there is an urgent need for careful reflection on methods, theories, terminologies and criteria of quality assessment. Issues such as explanation, comparison, narrative strategies, time and space, etc., merit fresh consideration.

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine from 24 February 2022 onwards have thrown into sharp relief the contradictory pulls and tendencies in world society. After the outbreak of the pandemic, the nation-state reasserted itself all over the world. National borders went up and were tightly controlled. Entire countries closed themselves off (China remains a sealed country at the time of writing in November 2022). Governments rivalled over vaccines and medical equipment. A deep rift opened between rich countries with efficient pharmaceutical industries and the poor South where an adequate vaccination was impossible for the majority of the population. The year 2020 saw de-coupling and de-globalisation on a vast scale. The Russian war against Ukraine strengthened these tendencies and was the culmination of a revival of aggressive nationalism that had begun several years before in many different countries, though never so far with the consequence of open aggression and warfare. While an alliance was formed to protect Ukraine and contain Russia, global governance, the great hope of a more optimistic age, lay in shambles.

These powerful tendencies towards far-reaching disintegration in the international system were counterbalanced by strong evidence for the intensity of global connections in an age of crisis. The pandemic itself was the prime example of how the world connected both in terms of real infections and the rapid circulation of scientific information. Only two years later, the Ukraine war revealed different kinds of connection. It set off an almost world-wide energy crisis and negatively impacted food provisioning in many parts of the Global South. All that was overshadowed by a tangible acceleration of climate change and the growing insight that a challenge of that unprecedented magnitude could only be met with global and concerted counter-action and a complete change of attitudes regarding consumption and waste.

All these recent tendencies have made the world quite different from what it was in the 1990s when Global History celebrated its first successes. Coming to terms with such momentous changes requires a vast international effort and would overstrain the resources even of a Balzan Prize project. However, it is worthwhile to join parallel efforts undertaken elsewhere to get this kind of theoretical work established on a broader basis. Our Balzan project attempts to contribute to that aim in various ways.

## Institutional Framework and Organization of the Project

Due to *force majeure*, the research plan of the project could not be implemented exactly in the way that had been agreed upon with the Balzan Foundation after the award of the prize. Our host institution, the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS), opened its doors to us in April 2019. For personal reasons, both Osterhammel and Co-director Gänger were prevented from devoting much of their energy to the project until the end of the year. The formal inauguration of the Balzan FRIAS Programme took place at a workshop and ceremony on 13

February 2020. On 18 February, the Covid-19 pandemic started in Italy, on 28 February, the first infection was recorded in the University of Freiburg. Within days, the University, including FRIAS, was closed. For the rest of the year, in-person academic activities were impossible. Offices at FRIAS were unavailable, and it was ruled out for invited research fellows to come to Freiburg. This is why we spent the rest of the year 2020 to re-schedule our activities. Our FRIAS fellowships were advertised and the selection process was initiated, but it was only in March 2021 that fellows were able to travel to Freiburg – although even at this stage office space was only available under severe restrictions. Much of our activities until spring 2022 were limited to online interaction.

## Sub-Project One: Postdoc Fellowships at FRIAS

FRIAS regularly hosts about 30 fellows from all disciplines. They are divided into senior and junior fellows. In line with the Balzan Foundation's policy to support young researchers we advertised two cohorts of three junior fellowships each for 2021 and 2022. In 2021 we received 88 applications. When for the 2022 group we narrowed the focus from Global History in general to Global Environmental History, the number of applications was still 34. For both years, the quality of applicants was, on average, very high and we were able to make excellent choices. In 2022, an adjustment of our budget made possible the funding of a seventh junior fellowship that we awarded, upon a recommendation by the Freiburg professors for East European and environmental history, to Dr Anna Olenenko who had fled from Ukraine to Poland. From spring 2022, she joined our regular weekly meetings through video communication.

The junior fellows who received six-month fellowships were expected to focus entirely on their ongoing book projects. While they took part in various ways in online communication within the University of Freiburg and beyond, they were explicitly put under no pressure to write articles or to contribute to a joint project. Both cohorts, 2021 and 2022, met in a lively weekly seminar to which many external guests were invited on an ad hoc basis. The main function of these seminars was to exchange and discuss draft chapters from the various book projects, including draft articles by the convenors, Stefanie Gänger und Jürgen Osterhammel.

Recent publications by members of the group and their subsequent advances in their respective careers after leaving the Balzan-FRIAS programme, bear witness to the fact that we made the right choices in the selection of fellows.

## Balzan-FRIAS Junior Fellows in Global History – 2021 group

Dr. Debjani Bhattacharyya (Philadelphia / Zurich)

Book Project: *Monsoon Landscapes. Law and Climate Science in the Indian Ocean World*

Bhattacharyya's project is a concept-history of cyclones as objects of scientific knowledge production, actuarial practices, and the administration of law. She charts the entangled developments of marine insurance, tidal science and climatology from the eighteenth century by mining legal records alongside meteorological accounts and scientific treatises. Her archival research on the history of insurance and the development of colonial weather science shows that much of the early history of weather and tidal science's entanglements with insurance industries

took place along the littorals of Caribbean Seas, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal. Not only did these areas become nodes from and through which vast amounts of imperial goods, capital and indentured laborers crisscrossed the world, but they also incubated global financial and actuarial experiments away from the shadows of the 1720 Bubble Act and financial regulations. Overturning the dominant binaries of metropolitan/colonial she asks how we write scalar histories that recover the littoral geographies of the Indian Ocean as nested within plural legal jurisdictions and financial networks. How do we begin investigating from the conjunctures that brought insurance, law and science together in the Marine Courts in Britain's eastern colonies? The book uses the analytic of chronoscape to argue that networks of credit and risk shaped both the contours and content of climate science.

During her time as a Balzan Fellow, Dr Bhattacharyya accepted an appointment to the Chair of the History of the Anthropocene at the University of Zurich, a position she took over in February 2022.

### Dr Jesús Bohorquez (Lisbon / Bogotá)

*Book Project: Slave Trade and Global Capital: Comparative and Global Perspectives (1780-1850)*

The slave trade is a very well-studied topic yet one which has awakened a new interest recently. Regardless of the richness of the literature, historians have rarely approached the theme from a comparative and global perspective. This means that the Portuguese, Spanish, British, and French slave trades have essentially been studied from a national or single-empire perspective. According to available data, the Iberian empires stood among the largest transporters of enslaved humans and the ones in which the business lasted the longest. Bohorquez's research focuses on the Portuguese and Spanish slave trade from a comparative and global perspective. By studying the slave traffic comparatively and globally, he seeks to examine whether or not it was a trans-imperial business that put into circulation capital at a truly global scale, mobilizing ventures that included agents in Europe, Asia, Africa and America. While focusing on the slave trade business, his research sheds light on uncoordinated investment cycles that were necessary for an enslaved workforce to be supplied. Bohorquez's special perspective on the business of slavery is not from the subjective experience of traders or enslaved humans but from the logic of capital.

### Dr Enrique Martino (Madrid)

*Book Project: Money, Bridewealth and Contract Labor in a Spanish-African Colonial Economy*

The book on which Dr Enrique Martino focussed during his Balzan-FRIAS fellowship brings together global economic history and economic anthropology through the prism of money and kinship. It traces the organization of imperial currencies and labour markets, and the transformation of kinship in the Fang societies of Spanish Guinea, Cameroon and Gabon from pre-colonial times through the first half of the twentieth century. The book project provides a conceptual renewal of the history of capitalist expansion in peripheral imperial territories by revisiting the work of Georges Balandier and Claude Meillassoux, as well as world-systems theory more generally, and by closely rereading a notable and century-spanning corpus of ethnographies of the Fang of Central Africa. Keeping track of the changes in monetary media

and its channelling and accumulation helps to understand how the commodification of social payments and ceremonial obligations such as bridewealth during periods of imperial commercial expansion engendered forms of debt bondage and the slave trade. It is a forensic work of the coming-together and collision of a human and commercial economy.

During his time as a Balzan Fellow, Dr Martino also revised his first book which was later published as *Touts: Recruiting Indentured Labor in the Gulf of Guinea*, Munich and Vienna: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022.

## Balzan-FRIAS Junior Fellows in Global Environmental History – 2022 group

Dr Jennifer Eaglin (Columbus [Ohio])

Book Project: *The Rise of the Brazilian Nuclear Industry*

Currently, Brazil relies on nuclear energy for less than 5 percent of its energy production, but the industry remains a controversial contributor to the country's energy matrix because of its perceived and real public health risks. Brazil first sought entry into the small club of countries that controlled the technology of their own nuclear plants in the 1950s but did not gain entry until military officials broke an agreement with the US in favour of German assistance in 1975. Eaglin's project traces the industry's development from a military interest to the establishment of the first plant, Angra I, in 1982 to the country's own nuclear incident in Goiânia, Goiás in 1987 to revived investment in the energy boom of the 2000s. In a country singularly focused on using technology to modernize its international image, "Going Nuclear" reveals how various actors, from government officials to scientists and environmental activists, shaped this domestic energy industry.

During her time as a Balzan Fellow, Dr Eaglin also revised and published her first book *Sweet Fuel: A Political and Environmental History of Brazilian Ethanol*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Dr Benjamin W. Goossen (Cambridge, MA / Chicago)

Book Project: *The Year of the Earth (1957-1958): Cold War Science and the Making of Planetary Consciousness*

Goossen's project examines how environmental science helped to concentrate wealth and power in the Global North following the retraction of European empires. It shows how the invention of Earth as an imagined set of physical systems was essential for new forms of empire and tactics of wealth accumulation. To tell this story, Goossen focuses on the 1957-1958 International Geophysical Year (IGY), the first global study of our planet as a unified environment. The IGY involved tens of thousands of scientists and citizen volunteers from most countries. Its organizers (a remarkable team of rivals representing both sides of the Iron Curtain) publicly depicted their program as vital for global economic development. But acquiring comprehensive environmental data—including data related to "extreme" regions like the upper atmosphere, deep ocean, north and south poles, and outer space—allowed the Cold War superpowers and their allies to exercise worldwide military and commercial force while claiming to support decolonization across the Global South.

From FRIAS, Dr. Goossen moved on to a senior research position at the Institute on the Formation of Knowledge (University of Chicago).

### Dr Lianming Wang (Heidelberg / Florence / Hong Kong)

*Book Project: Transgressive Animals, Territorial Locality, and the Qing Global Histories*

Animals enjoyed a momentous status in China's early-modern histories as both the subject and object of long-distance commercial interactions and vibrant global encounters. Defined as "transgressive animals," ranging from Central Asian steeds and peacocks to Mediterranean coral and hornbill skull, shagreen, pangolin scale, and numerous feather tributes from South Asia, their trans-territorial and indeed global movement deconstructed existing ecological, sociobiological, and even geopolitical regimes. Wang's interdisciplinary project explores China's early-modern global histories through an analytical "animal lens." Approaching four themes connected to transgressive animals – space and built environment, monumentality, materiality, and knowledge –, it discusses the wide array of agencies that animals performed in shaping economic, diplomatic and artistic connections in terms of their types of movement – physical, conceptual, commercial and intellectual. The project explores the multi-layered copying and translation of images, issues of collecting and display as well as the entangled histories of material practices that relate to transgressive animals.

Immediately after his Balzan Fellowship, Dr Wang was appointed Associated Professor of Art History at the City University Hong Kong, a position he took over in August 2022.

### Dr Anna Olenenko (Zaporizhzhia [Ukraine] / Edmonton)

Anna Olenenko is an associate professor at the Khortytsia National Academy in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, and researcher at the M.S. Hrushevsky Institute of Ukrainian Archeography and Source Study of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. After working on the cultural and intellectual history of eighteenth-century Ukraine, she redirected her research towards all kinds of nature transformation in the southern region of Ukraine including rivers, wetlands, forests and fauna. Her most recent publication on environmental history is a chapter in *New Ecological Order: Development and the Transformation of Nature in Eastern Europe* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022).

After her Balzan Fellowship, Dr. Olenenko moved from Gdansk (Poland) where she had found refuge with her child, to the University of Alberta in Edmonton to take up a four-year research fellowship that enables her to continue her research.

*Book Project: Under Different Regimes: The Environmental History of the Ukrainian Steppe*

The Steppe of Ukraine has experienced different kinds of management by different civilizations (nomadic, agricultural) and diverse peoples over the centuries, leading to radical changes in the landscape. The environmental history of Ukraine's steppe is especially connected with the development of the region as a part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, conditioned by the constant desire and need to transform nature for the benefit of the state. By focusing on two political regimes, the late Tsarist and the Soviet period, Olenenko's research analyzes the intended and unintended consequences of the changes induced in the steppe on different levels and by different means, for example flooding. In addition, it situates the developments in

Ukraine within the context of global trends in the management of steppe landscapes in different periods of time.

## Sub-Project Two:

### Rethinking Global History: Methodologies and Epistemologies (Workshop series and edited volume)

The Balzan sub-project Rethinking Global History has its origins in our uneasiness with many global historians' relative unconcern with theoretical, conceptual, and methodological reflections and their preference for 'softer' approaches – the use of metaphors, or a narrative mode. Based on the premise that the rise of global history ought to be accompanied by historiographical (self-)reflection, the Balzan Project organized a series of two connected workshops destined to provide a forum for scholars interested in the theory and methods of global history. While the project's emphasis rested on global history in a rather specific sense – as in the study of boundary-crossing, long-distance exchanges – we did not avoid occasional discussions of world history, that is, the comparative study of distinct societies or civilizations in a long-term perspective, and even of universal history, a reflection on overarching trends in the development of humanity.

Following up from key writings such as Sebastian Conrad's *What Is Global History?* or Diego Olstein's *Thinking History Globally*, the Balzan Project worked toward a reassessment of the field's analytical instruments, modes of arguing, prevalent metaphors and underlying 'figures of thought' (in German: 'Denkfiguren'). The project brought together researchers interested in questions of scale, in the narrative strategies and concepts of global history, as well as in reflections on methodological issues of causality, explanation, and comparison on a global scale. The project also engaged with the issue of the plurality of historical time as well as the field's tacit directionality, especially its assumptions about growing integration. Confronted with this broad range of aspects and questions, participants were encouraged to draw on their own fields of expertise, framed by a wider reading of the current historiography. The project, however, did not present and discuss case studies as such.

Since Gänger and Osterhammel had a clear idea of the agenda, if not of the results of the discussions. Consequently, they did not issue an open call for papers but put together a tightly knit study group by personal invitation. Members were not professional methodologists or theorists of history but practising historians from a diverse background of systematic, temporal and regional expertise who also have a sustained interest in theoretical issues. We did not involve our Balzan junior fellows since they were expected to focus entirely on their own major projects, though they participated in our discussions. Since the sub-project requires historical experience as well as wide theoretical knowledge it was not aimed at Ph.D. candidates or postdocs in the early stages of their research projects. Rather, we brought together a majority of newly appointed young professors with a minority of senior scholars.

The study group included senior scholars Jeremy Adelman (Princeton), Alessandro Stanziani (Paris) and Jürgen Osterhammel, recently appointed chairholders Sujit Sivasundaram (Cambridge) and Stefanie Gänger (Heidelberg) as well as assistant (or "junior") professors Christina Brauner (Tübingen), Valeska Huber (Berlin), Jan C. Jansen (Washington,DC / Essen), Daniel Margócsy (Cambridge), and Pim de Zwart (Wageningen).



Since work on the sub-project coincided with the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the two three-day workshops had to take place online. Workshop 1 (January 2021) was devoted to a general discussion and to the presentation of preliminary papers. At workshop 2 (September 2021) revised chapters were discussed. The edited manuscript of the volume was accepted by Cambridge University Press in November 2022. The book will be published in 2023.

### Sub-Project Three:

#### Global History and the Problems of Today – Lecture-Workshops (“Masterclasses”)

While sub-project one was aimed at postdoc researchers and sub-project two at scholars in the early stage of their professorial career, sub-project three is addressed at Ph.D. candidates. The idea is to invite a prominent global historian for an evening lecture that is open to the public. Ph.D. candidates from an area (South Western Germany, Switzerland, Alsace, Northern Italy) that allows rail travel to Freiburg – for ecological reasons, we try to minimise air travel – are invited to apply. They will work with the "master" in a non-public seminar during the following day, partly discussing work by the guest speaker, partly presenting sketches of their own projects.

In contrast to sub-projects one and two, it was pointless to transfer subproject three to cyberspace. One of its most attractive features is getting to know each other in person during the one and a half days in Freiburg. We had to wait for a relaxation of pandemic measures to start the sub-project. A first attempt in June 2022 had to be cancelled at short notice due to a sudden illness of the guest speaker. We are now going to (re-) launch the sub-project in March 2023. Speakers are asked to address aspects of global history that have a certain relevance for our present-day world. The first "master" will be Professor Dominic Sachsenmaier (University of Göttingen), a sinologist and global historian who will take China in the twentieth century as an example for reflecting on the possibility of narrating and analyzing a particular national history within a global frame.

Since FRIAS has agreed to host Jürgen Osterhammel as a Distinguished Fellow until the end of 2025, we are now planning to use the remainder of our Balzan funding for organising further master classes every semester, that is, twice a year. We are in touch with potential “masters” from the United Kingdom, Italy and France. We also hope to be able to invite a colleague from Shanghai, even though, for the time being, travel from and to China continues to be fraught with unsurmountable difficulties.



## Publications by Jürgen Osterhammel 2019-22 (selection: those relevant for global history)

„Imperiologie“. Neues nach der New Imperial History, in: *Neue Politische Literatur* 67:3 (2022), pp. 229-248.

(with Jan C. Jansen): *Kolonialismus. Geschichte, Formen, Folgen*, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, completely revised and updated, Munich: C.H. Beck 2021.

(with Stefanie Gänger): Une pause réflexive pour l'histoire globale, in: *Histoire Politique: Revue du Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po*, no. 45 (décembre 2021).

Cosmopolitanism as Doctrine, Attitude, and Practice, in: *Humanity* 12:1 (spring 2021), pp. 103-115

Warenökonomie und Mobilitätsfolklore, in: *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 15:1 (spring 2021), pp. 5-13.

*Jacob Burckhardts "Über das Studium der Geschichte" und die Weltgeschichtsschreibung der Gegenwart*, Basel: Schwabe 2019.

(ed., with Valeska Huber): *Global Publics: Their Power and Their Limits, 1870-1990*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2020.

(with Valeska Huber): Introduction: Global Publics, in: Huber / Osterhammel (eds), *Global Publics: Their Power and Their Limits, 1870-1990*, Oxford 2020, pp. 1-60.

1917 bis 1919 – Umbruch in Asien, in: Orden Pour le Mérite für Wissenschaften und Künste, *Reden und Gedenkworte*, vol. 44, Göttingen: Wallstein 2020, pp. 131-41.

China als Zentrum und Peripherie der Pandemiegeschichte, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 46 (2020), pp. 507-21.

Academies and the Public: Some Historical Reflections, in: Massimo Mori (ed.), *The Role of Academies in Sustaining European Knowledge Societies in Times of Crisis*, Torino: Accademia delle Scienze di Torino 2020 (= Quaderni, 35), pp. 107-24.

Global History 2020: Fragility in Stability, in: *Balzan Papers*, vol. 3, Firenze: Olschki 2020, pp. 11-30.

(Post-)Corona im Weltmaßstab, in: Bernd Kortmann / Günther G. Schulze (eds), *Jenseits von Corona: Unsere Welt nach der Pandemie – Perspektiven aus der Wissenschaft*, Bielefeld: Transcript 2020, pp. 255-262.

From Civilizing Missions to the Defence of Civility, in: Boris Barth / Rolf Hobson (eds), *Civilizing Missions in the Twentieth Century*, Leiden / Boston: Brill 2020, pp. 209-227.

(ed., with Christof Dejung and David Motadel): *The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Classes in the Age of Empire*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2019.

(with Christof Dejung and David Motadel): Introduction, in: Dejung / Motadel / Osterhammel (eds), *The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Classes in the Age of Empire*, Princeton, NJ 2019, pp. 1-39.

(with Sabine Dabringhaus): Chinese Middle Classes between Empire and Revolution, in: Dejung / Motadel / Osterhammel (eds), *The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Classes in the Age of Empire*, Princeton, NJ 2019, pp. 313-337.

Globalisierung und Kolonisation, in: David Blankenstein et al. (eds), *Wilhelm und Alexander von Humboldt* [Exhibition Catalogue], Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum 2019, pp. 182-190.

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