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Review: “The Silk Roads: A New History of the World” by Peter Frankopan

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The Silk Roads: A New History of the World
By Peter Frankopan, London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Pp. 638,
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REVIEWED BY ALEXANDRA LEONZINI

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Peter Frankopan’s intentions in writing *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* can only be described as ambitious. Well-researched and eloquently written, Frankopan’s mission statement is clear: to correct the imbalanced Eurocentric perspective that has thoroughly dominated the writing of ‘world history’, to recalibrate our view of history and the world, and to highlight the central importance of the various trade routes which have run through Central Asia for millennia, connecting Europe to Asia and beyond. Certainly not an easy task, his mission to write a “new world history” in 638 pages has produced a manuscript dripping in detail which is as fascinating as it is frustrating.

Frankopan’s critique of Eurocentric world histories, and his desire to reject such grand historical narratives are certainly valid when set against the traditional view of human development taught in many Western intellectual institutions. These traditional narratives of development and ‘progress’ focus on Europe as the centre of intellectual, economic, technological, and institutional innovation, innovations which enabled European domination of most of the globe. In such histories, Central Asia, if mentioned at all, is orientalised and ‘othered’, described purely to highlight the dangers faced by European traders who wished to access Asian markets, or to critique and ‘primitivise’ Central Asian forms of social order and governance in comparison to the European. This perspective, dubbed the “lazy history of civilization” by anthropologist Eric Wolf, is a relatively recent development, however; a product of colonial and civilizing discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Before this many historians and writers, including Christopher Marlowe in 1587, identified the world’s centre as laying to the east beyond Mesopotamia and the Caucasus, in Iran and the “stans”, where the ‘Silk Roads’ met.

First employed in 1877 by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, the term ‘Silk Road’ (*Seidenstrasse*) describes the weft of commercial arteries

that stretched between China and the Mediterranean, a network of tracks that split and converged across the breadth of Asia for a quarter of the length of the equator. Along these arteries, people, goods, ideas, religions, diseases and many other commodities and cultural products have flowed, and different groups met, negotiated, and traded together for millennia. In arguing that trade-based globalization has been a reality since before the written record, Frankopan begins his narrative by highlighting the multilateral nature of exchange within the region, offering an account of the early interaction between European and Asian parties as one not based on domination and subjugation, but rather, a mutually beneficial relationship between the participant peoples, regions, nations, and companies. In doing so, Frankopan thoroughly rejects the thesis of globalization championed by the likes of Thomas Friedman, who argues that processes of globalization began in 1492 with the European voyages of discovery. If, as is often understood, globalization is to be conceived as the transnational exchange of people, goods and ideas, then, argues Frankopan, this took place long before 1492 with the conquest of the Silk Roads by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC. With this as its starting point, the twenty-five thematic chapters of *The Silk Roads* offer something for everybody interested in the development of transcontinental trade, and the political and social ramifications of cultural exchange.

The book certainly has its highlights. Frankopan's treatment of the rise of the Mongols is very interesting, as is his treatment of the British and American interventions in the region since the nineteenth century. Also of interest is the connection made between the spread of the Black Death and the flowering of the Renaissance. The book, however, also has its weaknesses, chief amongst them, the age-old question of what to do with Europe. Despite his clear intention to decentralise Europe, the continent remains central in Frankopan's narrative, seeming almost like a stick against which to measure (and legitimise) the achievements of Central Asian rulers, and as the narrative continues, Europe emerges as the villain of the piece. Indeed, Frankopan concludes his chapter on the rise of Europe as the dominant global power through its "entrenched relation with violence and militarism" by stating, "Europe's distinctive character as more aggressive, more unstable, and less peace-minded than other parts of the world now paid off." Given the history of their often violent involvement in the region, this highly negative portrayal of Europeans by Frankopan is somewhat justified, but rather than presenting an even-handed history which redresses the disproportionate emphasis on European development in world history, Frankopan has instead written a 'Eurasiancentric' history which replicates many of the weaknesses associated with Eurocentrism through a highly problematic use of sources. This is not to undermine the achievements of Frankopan - a historian at Oxford University and Director of the Oxford Centre for Byzantine Research – but rather to point out his biases, which become increasingly obvious as one reads along. Fluent in both Russian and Arabic, and familiar with several other languages, Frankopan is

without a doubt eminently qualified to write this history, but his selection of material is key to the success of the book. His emphasis on European violence - the “acclaimed violence and killing” of ancient Rome, for example - while justified, appears somewhat uneven when followed by a discussion on the use of violence by the Mongols as “selective and deliberate”, underplaying their destruction of countless cities in their quest for continental domination as necessary in the establishment of free-trade policies. Equally problematic is his judgmental treatment of the Northern European intervention in the Asian slave trade while failing to mention the considerable demand for such slaves in the markets of Central Asia and the Middle East. Throughout the book, Frankopan highlights the deplorable actions of the Europeans while failing to mention the equally horrific acts perpetrated simultaneously in Eurasia. Given his considerable knowledge and skill as an historian and linguist, and the considerable body of work already undertaken on the more unsavory elements of the Central Asian societies of old, one can only assume that this silence is deliberate, a conscious attempt to rewrite the historical record by utilising the same narrative techniques employed by historians wishing to justify the terrible actions of Europeans in their domination of the world.

Additionally, despite claiming to write a history of whole civilizations and continents, the roles of Africa and the Americas in his world history are minor at best, entering his narrative only when they’ve come under the influence of the Europeans. Equally problematic is his representation of the diverse inhabitants of the Eurasian land mass as a homogenous whole rather than as a collection of largely autonomous sub-regions and peoples, a move straight out of the Eurocentrics’ handbook, so to speak. There is, for example, no such place as the “Arab-speaking-world” and yet Frankopan consistently utilises this as short-hand for the region. While one can assume that both issues have arisen due to the forced brevity of this work and its intention as a source of public history, they are still jarring when his aim is to not only write a history of the world, but to reject Eurocentric discourses on Central Asia and the Middle East.

None of this, however, can detract from the importance of this project. The greatest strength of *The Silk Roads* is its readability and focus on trade as the engine of connection and integration in the region. Frankopan’s history draws attention to an oft-ignored corner of the world which saw the first transcontinental trade and was central to the spread of goods, ideas, and people. Aforementioned issues aside, this is a history which should be known, providing a new perspective on the writing of world history and functioning as a model for the writing of neocentric historiography.