

LSE Lit Fest 2016 Book Review: The Silk Roads: A New History of the World by Peter Frankopan

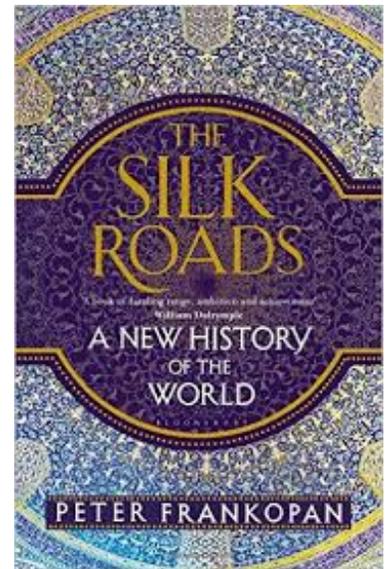
In *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, Peter Frankopan seeks to counter the Eurocentric tendency to see globalisation solely as a process of Western expansion by providing a comprehensive history of intellectual, physical and commercial exchange across The Silk Roads of Persia. Although the book does not quite live up to its ambition to present an overall history of the world due to its neglect of wider histories of the East, Lee Evans nonetheless praises the detail, zeal and passion that characterise Frankopan's account.

Today, Thursday 25 February 2016, Peter Frankopan will be speaking alongside Professor Jerry Brotton as part of the [LSE Space for Thought Literary Festival](#). 'Looking Eastwards: Cultural Exchange with the Islamic World' explores the rich histories of interaction between the East and the West. Tickets are free and are available [here](#).

***The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*. Peter Frankopan. Bloomsbury. 2015.**

The marriage of Hārūn al-Rashid in 781 was a spectacle of thitherto unknown splendour. Hosted in modern-day Baghdad, the 'heart of royal power, patronage and prestige' (93) for an Islamic order that controlled trade routes from Afghanistan to the Atlantic Ocean, the wedding featured unprecedentedly large pearls, luxurious ruby-clad tunics and the most gluttonous banquet in which any guest had ever indulged. Female attendees were gifted purses containing gold and silver along with heavily encrusted robes, and throughout the city people received gold distributed in silver bowls and silver distributed in gold bowls to celebrate the occasion. Nothing comparable had ever been seen before.

The accounts of Hārūn al-Rashid's wedding demonstrate the key claims of Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, a book in which arguments are often implicitly laid before the reader as part of a fact-driven, yet analysis-light, history of the Persian-centric world system. Frankopan, the Director of the Centre for Byzantine Research at Oxford University, makes his case for the Silk Roads as the heart of the world in meticulous detail, building on the work of pioneering scholars before him to provide a comprehensive history of intellectual and physical exchange across the Silk Roads of Persia, which created a region of religious visionaries, intellectual pioneers and traders to whom we owe the modern world.



This Persian-centrism places Frankopan's work squarely in the debate between Eurocentrism and non-Eurocentrism. Challenging Eurocentrism is amongst the biggest challenges in political economy; so embedded are its assumptions that it is difficult to detach ourselves from the Eurocentric beliefs of the western academe, not least the dominant narrative of endogenous western development which emerged from the classic Orientalist distinction between the 'rational' West and 'barbaric' East. By focusing on Persia and its contribution to the history of the world, this book therefore represents a fundamental and worthwhile assault on Eurocentrism through the re-orienting of world history away from a narrative of inevitable Western emergence.

In achieving this non-Eurocentric end, Frankopan consistently rejects the novelty thesis of globalisation, a theory which claims that the process of meaningful cross-border interaction is a relatively modern development. The

novelty thesis is proposed by [Thomas Friedman](#) (2005) amongst others, when he identifies the great stages of globalisation as beginning in 1492 with the European voyages of discovery. For Friedman and many like him, globalisation is synonymous with the expansion of the West outwards. Yet, Frankopan notes, if globalisation is to be conceived as the transnational exchange of people, goods and ideas, then what must at least be called proto-globalisation spans the two millennia that are the focus of this book, and certainly began long before Columbus and his contemporaries set sail.



Image Credit: Taldyk Pass ([Gusjer](#))

Across the Silk Roads, Frankopan claims, this process began with the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC, when ideas were exchanged alongside gold, commodities, violence and slaves. Of these, the exchange of ideas is perhaps the most fascinating and lasting legacy. Over the course of the next millennium, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam formed a crucible in the Persian sphere, creating a degree of intense, sometimes violent, theological interaction. This Godly region later became the hotbed of increased secular understanding as early scientific discoveries, specifically the Indian progress made in science, mathematics and astrology, introduced a new conceptual age charged with intellectual pursuit to the Persian world. This process was accelerated when Chinese paper-making skills were brought to Persia in the eighth century, revolutionising the synthesis and distribution of Oriental, Indian and Hellenic knowledge. Exchange along the Silk Roads thus made the Persia of a millennium ago the cosmopolitan and intellectual marvel of the world at a time when ‘Christian Europe withered in the gloom, crippled by a lack of resources and a dearth of curiosity’ (99).

As Frankopan forges ahead with his re-assertion of the importance of Persia, opportunities are missed for this book to live up to its ambitious subtitle – to be ‘a new history of the world’, an oft-attempted and rarely achieved goal. Despite acknowledging the categories of East and West in his introduction, Frankopan largely eschews them throughout the volume and neglects non-Persian Eastern achievements in favour of long-standing, yet contentious, Eurocentric claims. Consequently, many of the achievements of the Far East – which include gunpowder, the world’s first mechanical clock and the compass – are neglected. More concerning still, the printing press, one of the Four Great Achievements of Ancient China, is attributed to Johannes Gutenberg, despite the Chinese inventing woodblock printing in the sixth century and the first moveable-type printing press, by Pi Shêng, circa 1040. If Frankopan had limited himself to simply detailing the history of the Persian world system – something he does with remarkable zeal, detail and passion – the scale of his ambition would have been met. But by striving for the world

yet settling for just a fraction of the Eastern story of it, he has produced an incomplete world history and made up for just some of the deficiencies in Eurocentrism.

Frankopan ends his titanic volume in the modern-day Middle East. From this vantage point it becomes clear that the former heart of the world has become a bridge between, and product of, other powers – particularly the hegemonic West which, often inspired by Eurocentric assumptions, has remained heavily engaged in the region for more than a century. That this engagement has been either the product, or more contentiously the cause, of a troubled recent history for the region is well documented. Daily news reports still testify to the chaos across areas which once belonged to the Silk Roads. But Frankopan ends his volume with a surprisingly optimistic vision for the future of the region. ‘What we are witnessing’, he claims, ‘are the birthing pains of a region that once dominated the intellectual, cultural and economic landscape and which is now re-emerging. We are seeing the signs of the world’s centre of gravity shifting – back to where it lay for millenia.’ Yet, having digested the latter portion of Frankopan’s 500-plus-page volume, it seems scarcely obvious that the countries which occupy the former Silk Roads will cease to be more than a bridge between the two focal points of geopolitical power: the established European and North American West, and the emerging Chinese and Indian East. It is far from clear that the power, patronage and prestige of seventh-century Baghdad are going to be repeated.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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