

BOOK REVIEW

Simone M. Müller. *Wiring the World: The Social and Cultural Creation of Global Telegraph Networks*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

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Ana Paula Silva

Centro Interuniversitário de História das Ciências e da Tecnologia (CIUHCT),
Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa
anapaulasilvaster@gmail.com

The literature on telegraph networks is vast and rich, but *Wiring the World* gives us a surprising brand-new insight into the social and cultural history of the first electrical communication system encircling the world. In the Introduction, Simone Müller clearly explains that she adopts the actor–network perspective to analyse the action of the protagonists involved in the construction of the submarine telegraph system before World War I, such as “engineers, entrepreneurs, operators, politicians, media reformers, and financiers” (p. 3). The analysis of the role of these “actors of globalization,” which is described in connection to the “macrostructural processes of economic imperialism and geopolitics” (p. 3), not only draws on an impressive number of primary sources but engages as well in a dialogue with the work of scholars like Michael Adas,

Daniel Headrick, David Harvey, Pascal Griset, Peter Hugill or Jorma Ahvenainen, to name just a few.

From page one, the reader's attention is caught by the way Simone Müller deals with objects of material culture, such as, for instance, the lithograph "Torchlight Procession around the World." By analysing how the thinking and the feelings of historical actors were embedded into each trait of this lithograph, the author points to the construction of "the mythological narrative of the wiring of the world: the heroic struggle of male protagonists triumphing over the 'opposition of nature' through technology" (p. 1). The motto of Müller's "deconstructive" narrative is thus set.

The book is organised in seven chapters. Chapter 1, "Networking the Atlantic," retells the story of the Atlantic Cable (1854–1866) from the perspective of the "class of 1866," which comprised, among other protagonists, Cyrus Field, Samuel Morse and Charles Bright. By analysing their previous social networks, Simone Müller shows how pre-existing bonds were vital for the success of transnational infrastructure projects, how those protagonists managed to remain the dominant force in the field, and how they forged the cable discourse that still prevails in the present. Chapter 2, "The Battle for Cable Supremacy," addresses the economic aspects of the submarine cable business, namely the rivalry between John Pender and Siemens Brothers, with a focus on the changes in the cable stock market, which allowed women to enter the male-dominated world of ocean telegraphy. In Chapter 3, "The Imagined Globe," the role of David Dudley Field (the Nobel Peace Prize winner of 1907) and Louis Renault (a French jurist) in shaping international law is analysed in order to show the power relations that underlie technological progress and which are expressed in the notions of an electrical union, universal peace, and the civilizing mission of Europe and America. Chapter 4, "Weltcommunication," deconstructs the idea of the cable system as a Victorian Internet. Far from being a mass communication system accessible to all, the cable system was based on geopolitical structures of economic and political interests at the service of hegemonic powers. Chapter 5, "The Professionalization of the Telegraph Engineer," narrates the history of the Society of Engineers, Electricians and Operators, in transition from a transboundary cosmopolitan body to one of international scope, in the interplay of local and global forces. In chapter 6, "Cable Diplomacy

and Imperial Control,” the interplay of globalization and nationalization processes is analysed by focusing on the relationships between governments and cable agents, whose “neutrality” turned them into cable diplomats mediating between national agendas. Finally, Chapter 7, “The Wiring of the World,” sums up the book’s intention and arguments.

Despite the theoretical and empirical robustness and novelty of the book, the inclusion of visual representations mapping the social networks of the protagonists would have helped to capture one of the author’s main arguments and would therefore have been welcome by the reader. On the other hand, by focusing on the functions and views of the main protagonists, and not mentioning the relevance of secondary actors in global processes, the book ends up being a kind of elegy. By 1900, the Eastern consortium indeed controlled four-fifths of the world’s ocean cable traffic. However, the fact that most of this traffic passed in transit through stations located in Portuguese territories, such as Lisbon, the Azores (Horta) and Cape Verde (São Vicente), before reaching the operating centre of the system in London is neglected by the “all-red” routes British narrative (see my 2008 article in this journal: “Portugal and the Building of Atlantic Telegraph Networks – the role of a loser or a winner?”).