
»Restlosigkeit«. World Projects around 1900

Summary

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»The hyena is the crest of mathematics, it knows
that nothing may remain. Zero is its god.«
(Heiner Müller)

The initial point of this study¹ is the *world*, but as a prefix. Around 1900 one can determine an almost inflationary use of this prefix, especially in the parlance of the young and ambitious imperial powers such as Germany, France, and the U.S. The wor(l)d usually shows up in conjunction with peculiar undertakings, reform initiatives and attempts of standardizing. All these undertakings present characteristics which can be deduced from the historical tradition of »projects« and »projecting« in the Early Modern Period. According to Daniel Defoe and his 1697 *Essay Upon Projects*, a project is defined as »a vast Undertaking, too big to be manag'd, and therefore likely enough to come to nothing«. Usually such an attempt is promoted by a single person, the so called »projector« (or »Projektmacher«, or »donneur d'avis«) who merely designs the plan. The subsequent execution as well as

¹ Markus Krajewski. *Restlosigkeit. Weltprojekte um 1900*. Vol. 16779. Fischer Taschenbücher. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006.

the funding is delegated to someone else. The projector is a mere commissioner.

But in contrast to the Early Modern Period, projectors around 1900 aim their undertakings at the totality of the world. The scope of the projects is extended to its maximum. Therefore, their projects mirror this pretension with labels like *World Money* for the distribution and circulation of an exclusive global valuta for all purposes, *World Auxiliary Language* (1883) for an entirely new language as a second code of communication besides the mother tongue; or for centralizing and standardizing *all* knowledge at one single location called *World Brain* (1911). The development of an early wireless communication system by the media magician Nikola Tesla (*world system*, 1901) held this claim of maximum range, as well as the construction of a global network of florists offering to deliver their »flowers by wire to all the world« (slogan of the *Florists' Telegraph Delivery Association*, 1910).

The book encircles, describes and analyzes this wor(l)d boom in three separate parts. Part 1, the *World around 1900*, is devoted to the terms *world*, *project* and *world project(or)*, including their etymology and a short history of projecting in the tradition of Daniel Defoe and others. Furthermore, it describes the so called *world traffic*, i.e. the gradual progress and dissemination of a compound transport system of goods, persons, and information. The development of deep sea telegraphy is depicted in close connection to ocean steamship lines, railway routes and a global postal system. These new services establish a global network based on standards, arrangements, and conventions between the global players of their time. The *world traffic* is the major impulse or motivating power of this projecting boom. Due to this basic shift or extension of transportational paradigms, a new situation of global transport and communication evolves which on its part produces new contexts and effects, e.g., the projectors' incentive to aim at the entire world.

In part 2, the book focuses on three case studies in order to exemplify and differentiate between three modes of *projecting world*. The first mode is to project *into* the world, i.e. to disseminate ideas concerning standardized concepts for the world's entirety. The protagonist of this mode is the chemist and 1909 nobel prize winner Wilhelm Ostwald (1853–1932) who produced a whole series of *world projects*, e.g. a unitarian *world auxiliary language* (*Ido*, a derivative of *Esperanto*), *world money* as well as *world brain*.

The second mode is the attempt to project the world via a 1:1-relation into a sample. The protagonist of this mode is the engineer and autodidact Franz Maria Feldhaus (1874–1957) who established a huge card index containing even the slightest item concerning the *world history of technology*. Feldhaus not only collects the world (of technology), he also designs this world within his indexes.²

The third mode is characterized by *reduction*. This mode is represented by Walther Rathenau (1867–1922), writer, president of the *Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft* and secretary of foreign affairs in the first phase of the Weimar Republic. During the first months of World War I he is involved in the Prussian ministry of war with a special task, namely the attempt to transform the former world wide operating economy of the German Reich to a national scale in order to deal with the sudden limit of resources. Whereas Ostwald aims at the world, it now serves as starting quantity. Rathenau's methods show that *world projects* also work the other way round. The global situation of trusts and cartels prove that organisation persists: although WWI marks the end of the boom of world projects, the results and insights are developed into new structures which pave the way to the process of today's globalization.

² For further details on FM Feldhaus see Markus Krajewski. "Paper Parasite. FM Feldhaus and the History of Technology". In: *European Modernism and the Information Society*. Ed. by W. Boyd Rayward. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate Publishing, 2008. (in press).

Finally, part 3 focuses on the moments and characteristics these projects share. Do they have structures and prerequisites in common? Are there similar results? In the end, in almost every case the projects fail. What's more, despite they miss the world, these world projects follow specific notions and determining factors: they are all based on a phantasma of completeness and accessibility of the world as a whole. This notion will be described as their common *dispositive* (Foucault) and will be discussed under the concurrent term »Restlosigkeit«. Unlimited access to all the world via new technical media (e.g. ocean telegraphy or steam ships) encourage the projectors around 1900 to extend the scope of their plans to an all encompassing totality. Finally, in terms of these projects' »left-overs«, this study intends to outline a small theory of incompleteness.

Each of the three case studies are based on separate archive studies: The Ostwald material was checked in Berlin and Großbothen (near Leipzig), whereas the estate of Rathenau was consulted in Moscow. The Feldhaus sources were examined in the *Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin* as well as at his daughter's home in Frankfurt, including interviews with his other children.

Besides the reconstruction of biographies and projects, the method of this study follows the strategy of discourse analysis. The study offers new insights into the historiography of technology: It can be assessed that all the projects incorporate failure as a specific method of productivity. Despite this affirmative kind of failure, these projects' dissemination and spreading of ideas – in terms of Michel Serres – can be regarded as parasitic.

Apart from the description and analysis of this so far unseen boom of world projecting, the aim of the study is both simple and highly topical: it tries to show how globalization and peculiar notions of totality converge as early as the dawning 20th century. At the horizon of this vista, a specific *dispositive* of administration and organisation emerges with the assertion of completeness.