

Chapter Eleven: Conclusions in the Wake of Cook

No one has travelled in the world like Captain James Cook, and no one can again. Before his voyages, the world was uncertain and dangerous; after them, it was clear and safe. The voyages took the fragmented and obscure printed texts that contained plausible descriptions and consolidated them into a single textual, tabular vision of the world. The places of the world were then articulated as fragmented and clear. Then, it was possible to seriously travel only in Cook's wake, to be always already moving either within, or in reaction to the published articulations of the world. The world was constructed by various European institutions, both scientific and political, that were animated by desires for knowledge and power.

Whatever principles are innovative in Cook's voyages, the world remains tied to a Cartesian world, where mathematics and physics are tied together, and where the goal of science is the evermore exact representation of natural entities and processes. Specific events are subsumed under general, and often highly complex, laws, while the world, the cosmos, is viewed as matter in motion, woven together in causal chains. With the articulation of places in Cook's voyages, this worldview is not challenged. But the voyages also affirm the importance of what does not move, what forms the basis on which changes in the material world can be understood. There is not simply a Cartesian, perfectly flat plane. What is most important in Cook's voyages, what becomes the key for making the world and all of its inhabitants intelligible, is cartography. The worldview becomes a view of the world: a picture of space taken from above, as it were, by a geometrically inclined observer who has transcended particular places and has established the terrain of possible locations.

What emerges, what is created by the authors, the books and the institutions that all take up the manuscripts, the artifacts, and the proper names of the voyage, is a world picture built on maps and narrated through astronomical observations and tables of numbers. It is a world-view that is supported by an arrogance, sometimes based on reason, sometimes on civilization, sometimes on theology, in which other images of the world, and other ways of life, are understood as misguided, superstitious, incomplete, or infantile. The world view thus not only offers a view of the world, it also creates a position for the viewer: both the collection and the collector are included in the complete vision.

In Cook's voyages, the articulations of place weave together knowledge and power, not only creating new instances of both, but also changing the way that knowledge and power are organized. The shift from coasts to areas, connected to the ability to accurately measure longitude, allowed the manifestation of political and economic relations to change. The ability to accurately trace the outlines of places, and to situate those places on a grid that is first geographical, and then national and political, allows the accumulation of considerable information from around the world. The voyages thus also help create the institutions that manage the accumulation. Lastly, the ability to publish all of these accounts in books, organized around a single authoritative voice, allows the world and the different ways of understanding the world to be unfolded through the text as a single, coherent narrative.

Cook, as a hero, illustrates a specific manifestation of power and authority. As a result, domination and power are held together through the logic of the voice and the structures of geopolitical intelligibility. The creation of empire depended at first on regulating the other voices (of the natives, of the English, of the Europeans, and of Cook himself). The diversity of texts and authors thus exists alongside a series of institutions which help create and maintain the unity and importance of the voyages. Cook, as a biographical

figure, becomes someone whose voyages can create real knowledge about the world, who can present that knowledge to anyone willing and able to read it, and who can offer a model for those who want to fill in the parts of the picture that remain empty. He has become the Copernicus of exploration.

The conceptual shifts that are evident in Cook's voyages begin with the ability to accurately determine longitude, which not only turned fuzzy points and wandering islands into a single, fixed, and clear grid of locations, but also changed the possibilities of movement for European ships from coastal and linear to oceanic and dispersed. Building on the clear and distinct articulation of places, understood as containers, the voyages also offered a clear and distinct account of all the things that the places contained, including human beings. However, while understood in biological terms, the humans were not treated like other species, which could be discovered unchanged in places around the world. Rather, the humans contained by a particular place became a species unto themselves, with their own social and political attributes. These nations were then located in a grid of identities that ultimately included all the nations of the world. A dispersed and coherent collection was formed, that allowed for comparisons and contrasts, correlations and variations to be determined. The world became a laboratory for studying the effects of place on different national characters. Finally, the world became a terrain on which often highly unequal economic, social, and political relationships could be created, which would eventually become the formal empires of the 19th century. The move from longitude to empire is thus complete, not only in terms of historical events, but also in terms of a conceptual system which was so firmly established by the exploration narratives of the late 18th century.

The logic of Cook's articulation of the places of the world appears triumphant — in the introductions and subsequent glorifications it is

typically described and celebrated in these terms. Not only does Cook clearly demonstrate the existence or non-existence of places, his voyages also offer reliable, accurate accounts of the natural and human world. The move from places to nations is as deductive, it would seem, as the move from points to lines. But perhaps it is the space in between the articulations that is the most important: the likenesses that Cook's voyages establish, without and even in spite of the evidence, between islands, nations, states, collections, and empires. The explorations offer an idea of empire, not only by creating a meaningful terrain on which empires could be articulated, but also by creating a sense of the relations that can, and ought to, be created between the enlightened people of Europe and the primitive or savage people everywhere, including Europe itself. Unenlightened people are the same everywhere.

The information presented in Cook's voyages, as much as the political and economic engagements, are all connected to the epistemological ideals that animated the voyages. As has been argued throughout, Cook's voyages are not simply descriptions of places, they are an articulation of how places ought to be described.

The articulations of place in Cook's voyages are also connected to specific ontological commitments, concerning among other things the relationship between mathematics and space, and between human identity and the physical world. The voyages affirm a close connection between geographical and national identities, where human beings, or at least primitive human beings, are primarily created by their environments. Thus, a space is made for civilization, not only as geographical areas in Europe, but also as causal interventions in the natural world and its uncivilized, naturalized inhabitants.

The voyages are also connected to various moral commitments. Cook is animated by an imperative to know the world, but he is also animated by a

desire to change it. Economic, social, and theological values are intertwined in the relationships between the ship and the shores, and are thus intertwined with the frequent, sometimes fatal, and frequently moralized use of force.

But the triumphs of Cook's voyages have costs, not only in human life, but also in the possibilities of existence. He simplifies the world, he limits the world to variables and pictures, and he uses the different articulations of place to expand the descriptions of places, but at the same time to limit what and how things exist. Nations exist as aspects of places; individuals exist as examples of nations, and so the organization of European encounters, interventions, and invasions change. In Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, Marlow offers a characterization of European imperialism, the latter part of the passage being often quoted by post-colonial writers.

"Mind," he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower — "Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency — the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force — nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind — as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea — something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . ."¹

¹ Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness*, page 7.

In the *Empires* chapter, a distinction was made between colonialism and empire, where empire did not essentially entail the expulsion of natives from their places. Unlike creating colonies, the creation of empires first involved the creation of wide-ranging systems influences and then finally formal control over both places and peoples. The justification of this world, far from depending on an appeal to a mystical idea, involves the creation and organization of detailed and comprehensive information, of a certain kind, about the places. The goal, in Cook's voyages, is not to conquer the world, but to make it useful. The process is no prettier, but it is much more complex than Marlow suggests

Cook's voyages make the world easy to understand, not only by organizing the information clearly, but also by simplifying the world and the possibilities of existence. The voyages also obscure the violence, not only that occurred during the voyage, but also that will occur over the next two hundred years. The voyages focus on the nation, but it is to particular people that violence is done, and in fact the violence done to individuals is connected, and often justified, by appealing to the benefit of the nation. The violence can be noted in statistics, such as populations from one time to another. The violence can also be seen when an entire nation is destroyed, such as when Besant notes:

A hundred years more and Cook's descriptions of the Polynesians and Australians will be invaluable as a record of things long since passed away; even the people of the islands will have disappeared; there will not be a single survivor of the Friendly Islanders, or of the gentle natives of Tahiti, or of the fierce warriors of New Zealand.²

Soon, these nations will be gone, not only as individuals, but also as nations. The species will be extinct. However, what Besant nostalgically passes over as a naturalized process, forgetting throughout the role of English, and more generally European activities in the destruction of the "Polynesians and

² Besant, *Captain Cook*, page 120.

Australians,” has been, and continues to be, a terrain of conflict, not simply between the Europeans and the natives, but between a wide range of different groups that are not so easily nationalized. Some Europeans criticized Europe’s treatment of the nations of the world, while some non-Europeans encouraged the spread of European beliefs and ways of life. But the diversity of opinions should not obscure the general pattern of conflicts, in which Europeans attempted to either remake or remove the native nations and supplant them with European ideals and people.

The focus on national identity as the primary object of analysis, which is one of the central features of Cook’s world, continued throughout the 19th and 20th century. Consider, for example, the recent controversy between Gananath Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins. The debate revolves around whether the Hawaiians understood Cook to be the akua (a term typically translated as god) Lono. In *Islands of History*, Sahlins argued that, because of specific aspects of their world-view, the Hawaiians understood Cook as Lono. Obeyesekere has argued that the Hawaiians were much more pragmatic and aware of Cook’s humanity, and that Cook’s divinity was more of a European invention than a Hawaiian one.

The detailed analysis of Hawaiian culture offered by both writers are not important here. What is more interesting is how both writers stand well within the shadow of Cook’s voyages — whatever their differences, the terms of the debate are largely the same. The issue between the two writers, leaving to one side the obvious academic competition, resolves into a concern for how access to this national identity can be achieved and by whom. Sahlins appeals to written documents from the early 19th century, such as *Mooolelo Hawaii*. Obeyesekere, on the other hand, questions the accuracy of many of these works to describe pre-contact Hawaiians, particularly because the books are clearly influenced by missionaries, who had their own political commitments.

The debate between Sahlins and Obeyesekere thus focuses on what the Hawaiian nation was like and how access to it can be achieved. *That* there is a Hawaiian national identity is not even debated: the goal is to accurately describe the beliefs or, in Sahlins's terms the "cultural categories," of the Hawaiians.

When Sahlins suggests in *Islands of History* that there could have been disagreements, he quickly appeals to the sovereign authority on the island.

We need not suppose that all Hawaiians were convinced that Captain Cook was Lono; or, more precisely, that his being Lono meant the same to everyone. With regard to the ordinary women cohabiting with the sailors on board the ships, Antigonus's remark on his own deification might have been more appropriate: "That's not my valet's opinion of me." On the other hand, the priests of Kealakekua assigned a so-called tabu-man to constantly attend Cook, heralding his comings and goings with the cry "Lono," so that the people could prostrate themselves. This shows that whatever the people in general were thinking, the Hawaiian powers-that-be had the unique capacity to publicly objectify their own interpretation. They could bring structure to bear on matters of opinion, and by rendering to Cook the tributes of Lono, they also practically engaged the people in this religion of which they were the legitimate prophets.

Thus what becomes important for Sahlins are the beliefs of the people who have power in the nation, and in particular the people whose power is manifested directly in the encounter with Cook. Are these people the most powerful in the island? Have they even agreed amongst themselves on the proper characterization of Cook? Which group of "powers-that-be" is Sahlins talking about, and is he concerned only with the island of Hawaii or the entire island chain? And why, in the end, is it acceptable to ignore so much potential variation, either because there is not enough information or, more significantly, because the important ideas are the ideas of the ruling class? To invoke one of Forster's criticisms of William Wales, Sahlins

is fond of the word authority, which with him, has that peculiar emphatical meaning,

lately introduced, tending to evince the infallibility of men in power, whose sanction alone is supposed to fix the stamp of truth on the accounts of circumstances which happened on the opposite side of the globe.³

Here, however, it is the sanction of those in power that fix the beliefs of an entire nation. But why? Neither Sahlins nor Obeyesekere consider why they believe that “the Hawaiian” exists as the primary entity of analysis. They, much like Cook, are concerned with determining the beliefs, not of individuals, but of the nation. As a result, far from challenging the basic organization of the world articulated in Cook’s voyages, both writers have taken that world for granted, and are carrying out his orders.

While Cook and his voyages are celebrated throughout the 19th century by England and Europe, the status of the voyage as an ideal epistemological picture of the world was increasingly challenged, or at least increasingly dated. Darwin’s account of the biological world, including humanity, was closely connected to the articulations of places and nations in Cook’s voyages. With Darwin, though, the table of identities is framed by a greater sense of time, and in particular evolutionary time. Much like other species, the nations that can adapt to changing conditions will survive. The others, such as the “gentle natives of Tahiti” are likely doomed.

However, while the division of the world in terms of nations remained a persistent theme in the 19th century, the intellectual and political structures of the empires of the 19th century became more and more indifferent to national identities. Instead, race became a primary way to divide the human world. However, the emergence of race in a 19th century is an issue that the current discussion cannot consider in any detail. But it is important to at least suggest some of the significant conceptual differences between an articulation of the world in terms of nations and in terms of races.

³ Wales, *Reply to Mr. Wales’s Remarks*, page 29.

Of course, Cook's voyages describe the physical characteristics of nations from around the world. Sometimes, these descriptions are highly prejudiced. But the physical characteristics were not the primary focus of Cook's descriptions. What mattered, instead, was the national character and its connection to the place, because this is how human identity was created. With racial identities, on the other hand, human identity was tied much more closely to physiological characteristics, and is more or less indifferent to national or environmental factors. In Gobineau's *Essai sur l'Inégalité des Races Humaines*, first published in 1854, the author claims that for the black, the animal character imprinted in the shape of the hip girdle marks his destiny from the moment of birth. He will never develop beyond the narrowest range of mental powers.⁴

Every member of a race is the same, no matter where they live or what customs they have adopted. The inequalities of the world are thus not only naturalized in the internal origins of human bodies, they are also imagined as permanent, beyond the influence of either peoples or places.

As with the concept of nations, the concept of race becomes useful for the extension of European control over the world, but the nature of the control changes. With Cook, the primary relationships between Europeans and the rest of the world are based on movement. With the exception of places that have climates similar to England, colonialism is not the primary form of engagement, influence is. But there is a danger posed by places that are significantly different from England. If people are affected so profoundly by the places where they live, then English national identity would be threatened if the English were to live in places that were not like England. The place would take over.

On the other hand, if the primary source of identity is race, then it is possible to resist the impact of place and to send colonists, or permanent

⁴ quoted in David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire*, page 65.

bureaucrats, anywhere in the world. Rather than movement, the empires could then become territorially dispersed, and home could become anywhere.

In Cook's voyages, the world is offered to the reader as a moral and intelligible space in which people can know their place. There are several different, although interconnected ways that places come to exist in the text. They are coordinates in a grid, they are shapes on a map, they are boxes of information in a table. Much of the impact of Cook's voyages was prefigured in the discourses of travel and colonialism, of the world and of otherness that already existed, and it would be difficult to trace any specific impact of the voyages on history. Nonetheless, themes in the journals have been taken up, reformulated, and represented. Cook has become part of a shared imaginary of the world as a place for exploration, travel, expansion, and signification.