Fluid Histories: Oceans as the Metaphor of History

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My own interest in what I have called circulatory histories coincided with the burgeoning of inter-Asian studies in particular, including important work by historians of South Asia who wrote about connected and entangled histories. But overwhelmingly, the picture we get of AfroEurasia as a deeply inter-connected historical sphere populated by sprawling networks, warring militaries, traveling ideas and practices, circulating microbes and species of all kinds has been emerging from the Inter-Asia project which is now in its tenth year.

Our aim is to take stock of what kinds of intellectual, conceptual and perhaps even epistemological significance this genre of trans-border work can have, not simply for Asian studies but globally. Since 1995 when I published Rescuing History from the Nation, I have sought to dislodge historical writing from serving as the instrument of the nation’s sovereign legitimacy. The rationale for this is both simple and deep: the nation-form has been the dominant mode of identity for most of the world over the last couple of centuries and it is structured to engage in a competitive race for global resource domination; in turn, it has led most visibly to two World Wars and to the ravaging of the global environment as we enter the Anthropocene.

The forces for global cooperation and checks against predatory activities upon people and nature have been much weaker, in great part because of the nationalist imperative for GDP growth and the assemblage of interests legitimated by this imperative. In turn, I have argued that national histories are the principal means of establishing the imagined solidarity and destiny of the nation. I try to show here that history is by no means linear and tunneled to tell the story of the nation. Rather, historical processes are circulatory and global, emerging in one form in place A to many places where they interact with other local and trans-local forces to re-emerge often in place A, though recognized as something else.²

My alternative leads me to explore an oceanic metaphor of historical time that will allow us to grasp how historical ownership of science, technology, culture, civilization—the question of sovereignty itself—can only be sustained when historical process or flow is separated from historiographical understanding (i.e., not only the historical discipline). When we attend to temporalities of different historical processes, we recognize that history is a collective planetary

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heritage, a recognition that is imperative if we are to address the problems of planetary sustainability.

Arguments about connected and entangled histories do not go far enough in detaching historical flows and processes from territorial projects; after all connections still assume a distinct subject of history. This is not to say that there no subjects in history that seek to control or shape processes, but beyond a point, the process escapes these subjects. It flows on, shaping and being shaped, carrying with it the ‘many’ from the ‘disjunctive universe’ which it gathers. And in its carrying there are also memories and brandings that are cognized by some and recognized by others as a return. But for a start, we need to analytically differentiate the reflexive moments from the process itself.

What I call ‘circulatory history’ in my recent work is interested principally in the flow of time. Historians have engaged various conceptions of time, including the phenomenological whereby different societies experience time differently. The advocates of Big History conceive historical time as embedded in processes of evolutionary complexity. National histories engage evolution with a telos of progress. But let us begin by asking what bodies, media, vehicles and agencies allow us to recognize and measure the flow of time. The first candidate would be sunlight with its diurnal and seasonal cycles. Another natural candidate is water and may be more interesting for historical time, because although water is a re-cycling element, we never step into the same water twice.

Historical time is not fundamentally different from the flow of time in nature which too remains irreversible. The flow of historical time is expressed in routine repetitive acts as well as the morphing into events caused by global interactions and contingencies, human and natural. The model of natural processes that I find most useful to understand history is the circulatory flow of oceanic water. Unlike rivers, they are not tunneled and bounded; their channeling is more interactive.

Ocean currents develop in interaction with changing atmospheric conditions of heat and wind, geological features and tidal activity. The Coriolis Effect, Trade winds, Gulf Streams, Equatorial Currents and Counter-currents, El Nino, La Nina, Monsoons, cyclones, tsunamis, upwellings and thermohaline mixings are some of the well-recognized oceanic processes. The oceans and seas are realms where spaces and temporal processes interact at varying scales. Because it is

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3 Philosophically I follow process philosophy, particularly the idea of emergence in the work of Alfred N. Whitehead. Emergence is a form of creativity -- which for Whitehead is the ultimate principle (also known as God). “‘Creativity’ is the principle of novelty. An actual occasion (emphasis mine) is a novel entity diverse from any entity in the ‘many’ which it unifies. Thus ‘creativity’ introduces novelty into the content of the many, which are the universe disjunctively. The ‘creative advance’ is the application of this ultimate principle of creativity to each novel situation which it originates.” Historical processes and events may be seen fundamentally as emergences. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W Sherburne Free Press, NY, 1985. P 21.

4 Prasenjit Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity*

5 Routine repetitive acts, for instance, the activity of institutions, are contra Niklas Luhmann, to be sure still emergent occasions because they are separated by ‘degrees of difference’ not necessarily visible in everyday activities.
relatively enclosed, the Mediterranean has been a well-studied water body. It is a microcosm of an ocean and like it, has surface, intermediate and deep water masses the circulatory patterns of which are relatively autonomous, but also influence the N Atlantic circulation regime. The geography of islands and their shelves affect the circulation of these waters significantly. Thus the converging of the Sardinian and Tunisian shelves direct the inflowing Atlantic waters southwards whereas decaying eddies in the north are constrained to flow northwards off Western Corsica.6

Oceans reveal circulatory currents that are of different temporalities and effects as they go through diverse conditions. Surface currents are faster moving because they carry heat and are shaped by winds; eddies are still faster and more temporary gyres churn up smaller spaces. Deep currents are heavier because water becomes colder at the poles and is pulled down by salinity and gravity. But deep currents also flow across the various oceans and cycle through roughly once every thousand years. By and large their temporality – the rate of flow and the types of activity they produce–is maintained at the level, but of course they are also interactive with species, elements and other levels. Even the deepest level is affected and affects the rest.

Compare currents to historical processes – ideas, practices and material—that flow through time and space. Let me cite a case of a circulatory ideational complex across continents over the last 200 years. In 1833, Raja Ram Mohun Roy, a polyglot thinker and reformers, deist and Unitarian, who is often called the ‘father of modern India’, was visiting Bristol, UK. In American Salem at the time, Unitarians were circulating a locket with a curl of his hair in preparation for his visit, which, however, never happened because he died in Bristol that year. New England Transcendentalists, particularly, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, read Roy’s translations of the Upanishads and the principal Vedas, texts they deeply admired and cited profusely. As is well known, American Transcendentalists influenced a wide range of global ideas and practices including abolitionism, proto-environmentalism and civil disobedience founded upon Transcendentalist conceptions of self-cultivation of the powers of the mind and consciousness of ultimate reality. Thoreau’s Civil Disobedience (1849) influenced many people, including Tolstoy, who in turn was an important influence on Gandhi. In the 1890s in S Africa, Gandhi adopted the phrase ‘civil disobedience’ as the English version of his satyagraha (truth force) experiment. During Martin Luther King’s Civil Rights movement in post-war USA, it was Gandhi and not Thoreau who was seen as its patron saint.

We can continue to trace this circulatory current which merges, re-emerges, submerges, converges, de-merges with various related or novel processes till the present. Thoreau’s insights were carried on by spiritual naturalists –John Muir (Sierra Club), Aldo Leopold, and Arne Naess—and today has emerged as a significant American environment movement (although with many different channels). E F Schumacher, Gary Snyder, the Deep ecologists, feminist ecologists among others have been influenced by Asian and indigenous traditions. Many of these

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ideas around environmental spiritualism and moral protest have cross-fertilized with movements of indigenous people, forest dwellers, civil society and religious groups across the world, climaxing (in at least a demographic sense) with Pope Francis’s radical 2015 Encyclical on ecology and justice. What was for almost two centuries a sub-cultural and inconspicuous ‘counter current’ may yet swell into a movement of significance.

On a different dimension, consider the divers temporal scales of historical processes. Modern nationalism (or national modernity under conditions of capitalist competiveness) has developed as the axiomatic principle of legitimacy globally over the last two hundred years. The nation-form built around the self-other binary is the most enduring circulatory feature that has permeated all parts of the world which emerged from empires and other political forms built around more complex forms of belonging. The ideal nation-form is a confessional form that compacts people-state-culture for competitive control of global resources. Its immediate predecessor was the confessional state of the Reformation and Counter-reformation in Europe where a compact of church-state-believer believed itself to be saved as the chosen people, and other(s) to be damned.

The ecology that sustains this doxic and durable temporality from the early 19th century has to do with the system of nation-states that has been its most necessary condition for over two centuries. While the fundamental raison d’être for the nation-state is competition, this identitarian polity is, of course, insufficient to account for nationalism in a particular time and place. At this level, it is mediated by a host of other forces such as religion, language, political regime, historical relations etc. To be sure, the institutions of the capitalist competitive order have not always been the most durable formations; consider for instance the period of Soviet and Maoist socialism. But I believe Maoism itself needs to be grasped within a world-order of competitive states that ultimately pushed China towards capitalism.

Emergent historical forces or currents shaping societies at this level of mediation possesses a kind of middling temporality. The temporality may be seen in the mediatory form of Chinese nationalism which changed in accordance with the change in China’s place in the international order during the 1980s: simply put, from a Maoist socialist state to globally participating market society. It changed gradually from the socialist model of the civic nation-state that was built, however rhetorically, upon the fraternity of nationalities within and socialist and third-world internationalism abroad to an ethnic model of privileging the culture of the Han majority. In practice, this shift was also facilitated by the need to attract powerful overseas Chinese capitalist networks based on Chinese culturalism and Confucianism. At the same time, the relative weakness of development in the western regions of China and among the ethnically marginal communities also fostered ethnic nationalism among these minorities that we are witnessing on a daily basis today. Finally, at the most variable level, like eddies and gyres, nationalism can function as an ideology, as legitimating strategy, as mobilization politics and as ideals and dreams, changing according to contexts and constituencies.

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See Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, “Four Commentaries on the Pope’s Message on Climate Change and Income Inequality” The Quarterly Review of Biology, September 2016, Vol. 91, No. 3
Finally, to what extent are oceanic spaces comparable with historically formed spaces? Other than reflexively constructed boundaries that humans create—such as through territorial and cultural policing—many human boundaries—e.g. social, linguistic, and economic—have parallels with aquatic boundaries in the ocean. The ocean has many zones and changes from one to the other may be gradual or sudden. Differences in temperature, salinity and undersea geographies shape the variety of organic forms and communities of marine life. Take the northern Indian Ocean, ‘separated’ in the west from the Arabian Sea and in the northeast from the Bay of Bengal. The Tropical Convergence Zone (TCZ) in this part of the Indian Ocean is the Asian monsoon zone where the winds from the northeast and southwest converge. The zone shifts south and north of the equator according to the seasons and the currents driven by these winds are separated by Equatorial counter-currents.

The summer and winter monsoons are produced by the wind driven surface and coastal currents along the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal. As a result of differential water discharges from the land, the Arabian Sea is a negative water body and the Bay of Bengal, a positive one, leading to different levels of salinity and depths which also vary seasonally. In the east, the Indian Ocean meets the Indonesian archipelago which marks the boundary with the Pacific Ocean. But the archipelago, of course, does not completely block the Pacific waters. Warm, low salinity surface waters from the Pacific replenish the evaporating water of the northern Indian Ocean which is carried as vapor by the monsoon winds to produce the torrential rains of the South and Southeast Asia. These waters continue to flow westward to the South Atlantic and beyond.

The boundaries where waters meet are also variable. Rachel Carsons’ classic work on the ocean notes that “where two currents meet especially if they differ sharply in temperature and salinity, there are zones of great turbulence and unrest, with waters sinking or rising up from the depths and with shifting eddies and foam lines at the surface”. The ‘upwelling’ is a source of great richness in marine organisms. There are also spaces of dense salinity and surface stillness. Carsons observes that the Sargossa Sea in the mid-Atlantic is a ‘place forgotten by the winds, deserted by the strong flow of waters that girdle it as with a river… the only influx is of saline water from the adjacent currents’. Despite the seeming surface stagnation, even here there is the annual addition of weeds from distant coasts ‘reproducing vegetatively by a process of fragmentation.’

Aquatic zones are fluid with no territorial boundaries but currents flowing both within and across them. As such, they resemble the blurred, or perhaps, multiplex edges of historical spaces, more or less in accord with the spheres of their activities. By more or less, I mean that some societies mark or symbolize their spheres more in accord with the naturalistic or pre-reflexive bases of their activities, while others, such as modern or contemporary societies, tend to demarcate their

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8 Negative represents a condition where total influx [= precipitation + river flows] is less than total out flux [=evaporation]. For this section on the Indian Ocean, see “Biogeochemistry of the North Indian Ocean” National Institute of Oceanography (of India) http://www.nio.org/index/option/com_nomenue/task/show/tid/85/sid/92/id/178 accessed 06/26/2018

spheres beyond naturally or socially integrated communities, indeed, beyond Durkheim’s mechanical solidarity, to imagined and virtual communities.¹⁰

Regions, which are often constructed from the bottom-up through networks and exchanges woven within historical geographies, such as East or Southeast Asia, continue to have denser and accelerated currents of interaction. The physicality of a region created, for example, by the Himalayan rivers upon which well over a billion people in ten countries depend, continues to tie their destiny together even more, with melting glaciers and the rage of dam building. At the same time, in this age of rapid globalization, these regions are crossed by many other wider forces creating considerable turbulence, both productive and dangerous. The case for an Asian region of dense interactions remains valid.

What is the point of employing the oceanic metaphor to understand circulatory history? Why employ a natural metaphor to understand history which has been an important humanist project, whether in its radical or idealistic dimensions? For scholarship which favors ideas of distributed agency, post-humanism and the ontological turn, a naturalist metaphor should not be disturbing. But it is equally important to probe the limits of metaphor. The problem, for instance, with the Parsonian sociological model lay in that it sought to utilize the biological organism’s ideal of homeostatic equilibrium which missed out on the historical dynamics of society. There are many questions of social power and the constitutive function of consciousness in the dynamics of emergence that we cannot take up in any depth here.

At the same time, however, a metaphor always needs to be understood in the tension between identity and difference; it is to find meaning and understanding by -- in Paul Ricoeur’s felicitous statement -- ‘seeing the similar in the dissimilar.’¹¹ What is similar here is also crucial. The flow of events and processes like water cannot be brooked or boarded for long. The excesses of human (reflexive) activity upon the planet ought to cause us to abandon our competitive projects and work collectively to restore the flows of sustainable circulations of our world.

Equally, a metaphor is not a model. This is not just because it has limits of applicability, but because it is not heuristic. The ocean-atmosphere-land flows are obviously materially real and condition life on earth. Thus methodologically there is deep continuity between historical processes and the natural ones. The question that arises today is the extent to which the Anthropocene, an era where human activity represents the greatest influence on climate and the environment, will ravage the ocean and the degree to which the ocean will ravage us…and whether history comes to die at its own hands.

¹⁰ Needs work.