Charles Darwin at the Cape: notes on his sociological observations

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Charles Darwin spent most of his time geologising at the Cape—as he did everywhere else on the voyage of the Beagle. Andrew Smith, the Scottish surgeon, naturalist and zoologist and the first Superintendent of the South African Museum in Cape Town, accompanied him to the important Cape Peninsula sites, and he collected a variety of rock specimens. He kept a special geological notebook in which he described in considerable detail his geological and geographical observations of the road from Simonstown to Cape Town, Table Mountain, Lion’s Head and Rump, the Sea Point Contact, the road to Paarl, Paarl Rock, the Drakenstein Mountains, Franschhoek and the pass to Hout Hoek, Sir Lowry’s Pass and the Cape Flats.

He also collected insects, frogs, plant and other specimens of interest, most of which are housed at British institutions. In his notebook he made observations about the Cape’s botany, zoology, geography, environmental aesthetics, economy, urban planning and transportation systems. He remarked on language use and revealed a perhaps unsurprising degree of chauvinism and colonial joy at the growth of English. He thought the Dutch were crude, far too direct and lacking in refined etiquette. He enjoyed the pleasant personalities of the Cape’s small and very distinguished science establishment—Smith, the Queen’s Astronomer at the Cape, Thomas Maclear, Secretary to the Colonial Government, John Bell; and the great astronomer, John Herschel.

Darwin described the population living at the Cape in 1836 as follows: ‘In Cape Town it is said the present number of inhabitants is about 15,000 and in the whole colony, including coloured people, 200,000. Many different nations are here mingled together; the Europeans consist of Dutch, French & English and scattered people from other parts. The Malays, descendants of slaves brought from the East Indian archipelago, form a large body; they appear a fine set of men; they can always be distinguished by conical hats, like the roof of a circular thatched cottage, or by a red handkerchief on their heads. The number of Negroes is not very great and the Hottentots, the ill treated aboriginals of the country, are, I should think, in a still smaller proportion.’

Darwin was descended from two families—the Darwins and the Wedgewoods—who had a long history of opposition to slavery. He noted that, at the Cape, in 1836 during the so-called apprenticeship period, the local settlers had not taken well to the abolition of slavery and that, as a result, turned their ire on the work of the pro-emancipation missionaries. ‘A very short stay at the Cape of Good Hope is sufficient’, he wrote, ‘to convince even a passing stranger, that a strong feeling against the Missionaries in South Africa is there very prevalent. From what cause a feeling so much to be lamented has arisen, is probably well known to residents at the Cape. We can only notice the fact: and feel sorrow.’

Elsewhere, in the Journal of Researches, Darwin wrote about the etiquette of the Dutch settlers: ‘The difference between Spanish and Dutch etiquette is the former never asking his guest a single question beyond the strictest rules of politeness, whilst the honest Dutchman demands where he has been, where is he going, what is his business, and even how many brothers, sisters, or children he may happen to have.’ He also remarked that the farming practices of the Dutch settlers left much to be desired, and that he was encouraged to learn that some families had sent their sons to England to acquire the more advanced techniques of cultivation.

The settlers’ attitudes to the emancipation of the slaves bothered Darwin so much that he was easily persuaded—by John Herschel’s wife Catherine we think—to co-publish with Captain FitzRoy a set of reflections on the good work of missionaries in the emancipation of slaves. Their 23-page (single-space printed) Letter, Containing Remarks on the Moral State of Tahiti, New Zealand, &c., was one of Darwin’s first publications and appeared in the South African Christian Recorder of September 1836. It revealed some of their thinking on the major questions of human variation and cultural development at the time. They advanced the notion of the ‘reclaimable barbarian’ and spoke against the idea that geographical populations were forever condemned to dwell in the limits of their stage of cultural development. Needless to say, this was not a typical view.

It is of course of considerable significance that Darwin and FitzRoy were joint authors of the Letter. A few years earlier they had had a famous row over the institution of slavery in Brazil, where Darwin had almost parted company with the Beagle. In his autobiography Darwin recounted the episode:

Early in the voyage at Bahia in Brazil he [FitzRoy] defended and praised slavery, which I abominated, and told me that he had just visited a great slave-owner, who had called up many of his slaves and asked them whether they were happy, and whether they wished to be free, and all answered ‘No’. I then asked him, perhaps with a sneer, whether he thought that the answers of slaves in the presence of their master was [sic] worth anything. This made him excessively angry, and he said that as I doubted his word, we could not live together any longer.

Known for his temper that bordered on insanity (FitzRoy committed suicide later), he also was a person capable of great magnanimity. He and Darwin made up to continue the journey, and to author a joint paper despite their differing views on slavery.

In the last paragraphs of The Descent of Man, Charles Darwin reflected on his experiences in South America on the Beagle voyage (page 689): ‘The astonishment which I felt on first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me, for the reflection at once rushed to my mind – such were our ancestors. These men were absolutely naked and bedaubed with paint, their long hair was tangled, their mouths frothed with excitement, and their expression was wild, startled and distrustful… He who has seen a savage in his native land will not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creature flows in his veins.’

The Fuegians—and the New Hollanders—were in FitzRoy and Darwin’s view...

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the most degraded human beings in the world. They were described as such largely because of their cannibalistic propensities (pp. 223–4): ‘in feasts of this horrid description’ they wrote, ‘their pride, their religion, their greatest luxury, were all implicated. The missionaries resolved to try to conquer this diabolical habit; but though they succeeded in putting down drunkenness – in healing intestine feuds – in making a man content with one wife; the delight of feasting on the flesh of their enemies was too great to be relinquished.’

The missionaries worked on all of these problems. In the case of the Tahitians, they appeared according to Darwin to have succeeded in large part: ‘the state of morality and religion in Tahiti is highly creditable.’ For those who criticised the Christian missionaries (p. 228) it ‘appears to be forgotten by those persons, that human sacrifices – the bloodiest warfare – parricide – and infanticide – the power of idolatrous priesthood – and a system of profligacy unparalleled in the annals of the world – have been abolished – and that dishonesty, licentiousness and intemperance have been greatly reduced, by the introduction of Christianity.’ The ‘wild cannibals of New Zealand’ were quite another story.

The missionaries brought Christianity, education, health care, agriculture, mechanical arts and an ethos of hard work, of industriousness. While their efforts indicated that ‘savages’ could be ‘civilised’ and specifically that cannibalism could be abandoned (albeit with difficulty), Darwin’s experience with the Fuegians showed that as much as human beings could rise to different levels of civilisation, so too they could fall. On a previous visit to the area, FitzRoy had brought three Fuegians back to England and they learnt the finest of aristocratic etiquette, good English habits and the ethos of the high mark of the civilised world. When they were returned to their homes on the Beagle, they had sunk back into their old ways, to Darwin’s great surprise.

As much as Darwin thought of variation in group terms—savages as opposed to the civilised—he also, unsurprisingly, examined variation within the group. In the Descent of Man he wrote in the famous chapter on our ‘intellectual and moral faculties’ under the sub-heading chapter on our ‘intellectual and moral faculties’ (pp. 43–9), ‘As much as Darwin thought of variation from a former semi-human condition to his so-called “races” of humankind, there is no clear evidence to support Darwin’s idea that our mental faculties are unevenly distributed among the so-called “races” of humankind.

1. Darwin C. (1836). Darwin’s Beagle Diary, Online at: www.darwin-online.org.uk