

**Exploring one's own horizon - renegotiating a Western European worldview with
Georg Forsters "A Voyage Round the World"**

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Georg Forsters scientific work and career can both be seen as results of his involvement in James Cook's second Pacific voyage from 1772 to 1775. After accompanying his father, John Reinhold Forster, to the expedition, Georg Forster published a report of that journey in 1777: *A Voyage Round the World* (Forsters Werke, Erster Band). In 1778 and 1780, Forster himself translated and adapted the original English text especially for the German public and published the German version in two volumes (Forsters Werke, Zweiter Band and Dritter Band). The impact of these texts on the enlightened circles in Great Britain and Germany cannot be underestimated: They influenced - above all - German travel literature, provided new insights in the geography, cultures, zoology and botanic of the southern seas, inspired other scientists and writers like Christoph Martin Wieland or Alexander von Humboldt and the at this time still fairly young ethnology. These works made the young scientist Georg Forster famous and respected, and allowed him a life, not long, rich or healthy, but of scientific success and untimely conceptions. He was - one could say - a very modern, cosmopolitan man, ahead of his own time in many ways, with a horizon that was broader than that of most of his contemporaries - geographically, but also mentally, intellectually speaking (Uhlig 1994, p. 3).

One could argue that Forster knew what impact his work would make, that he indeed intended and succeeded in grasping and fulfilling a deep-seated demand for another type of travel description, a prose that goes way beyond studying and cataloging the plant and animal life of a particular region of the world (May 2011, p. 154). He indeed delivered a narrative that tries to approach personal impressions and experiences in a comprehensive, holistic way and to translate it for an interested, but not necessarily and not throughout scientifically trained readership. It is - as Forster himself puts it - a philosophical telling of his journey, consistently and uncompromisingly and without precedent (Forsters Werke, Zweiter Band, p. 8). This means that it is not only interesting *what* Forster tells in his *Voyage*, it is also crucial *how* he does it. His work does not neglect its primary intent - the detailed description of the journey and of its findings. However, it presents these insights in a manner that is accommodating for its reading public, a style that is cut out for a European, well-read, but not expertly scientifically educated readership. It is worth mentioning, for example, that there seems to be a lack of nautical terminology, of detailed descriptions of ship and crew in the *Voyage* as well as the *Reise*. Then again, both works have a lot of humanistic digresses, many philosophical deliberations. Forster seems to have incorporated in his works what he believed the English audience as well as the German readers preferred. He intended from the very beginning that his books would be a matter of broad discussion and of inspiration. He aimed for an academic *and* public discourse, and he got it.

Another aspect is important here: the primacy of subjectivity. He mentions it in the prefaces of the *Voyage* (Forsters Werke, Erster Band, p. 12) respectively the *Reise* (Forsters Werke, Zweiter Band, p. 11). In later texts such as the *Parisische Umrisse* (Forsters Werke, Zehnter Band, p. 593) or the *Ansichten vom Niederrhein* (Forsters Werke, Neunter Band) it seems to have become a self-evident principle. Forsters decision to mark out and implement his own

angle, his personal viewpoint in his works was undoubtedly a conscious, a deliberate one. To learn, to experience at first hand is crucial for Forster; theories and abstractions might be important for the scientific work, but that does not change the fact that Forster ultimately bans them in the realm of human fantasies (Forsters Werke, Achter Band, pp. 159 and 360).

Opposite of these fantasies, the perceiving, observing subject can find the truth. Because despite his radical subjectivity, Forster eventually believes in an objective truth - an evident truth that is rooted deeply in solid, palpable empirics (Ribeiro Sanches, p. 138). A truth that always seems to slip away from the truth-seeking researcher, because human beings are tainted by their ideas and prejudices their surroundings have conveyed upon them. So, can these prejudices be overcome?

Forster states that the good explorer and scientist will always strive for regarding the world with good will and without prejudice (Georg Forsters Werke, Zweiter Band, p. 13) - but eventually, this will not be enough. It is only in conversation, discussion, in scientific discourse that different perspectives can be compared and reconciled. In consequence, this means a leap from Forsters stringent subjectivity to an intersubjective approach to understand the world.

Let us dwell for a moment on the term “world”, as it is used here, just to be clear on its ambiguity: The title of Forsters *Voyage around the World* alludes to a spatial world that can be circumnavigated, explored and mapped. A world that is decidedly not a metaphysical cosmos (Bermes 2004). At first glance, one could compare Forsters worldview with that of fellow, earlier seafaring explorers Ferdinand Magellan or Christopher Columbus - a view that, while rooting deeply in a medieval worldview, in Christian belief and Neoplatonism, is primarily a topographical, geographical, mathematical view, an orientation on starlit skies, compasses and calculations (Wehle 1995). A view, that puts Western Europe and its people in a contrast to the rest of the world - ultimately creating the external, the other, the strange, the foreign and exotic; concepts, that were revived and transformed later on in the context of enlightenment and colonization (Lüsebrink 2006). Combining cosmography, geography, hydrography, astronomy, history of nature and of morals, as well as a globalized trade, the progress of maritime discovery seemed to mean automatically the progress of sciences and therefore of humankind - or, well, the European part of it. Travel literature, journals, logbooks meant initially to collect and ensure data and information, so that it might be used in scientific evaluation and discussion, before the literary aspect found its way to an interested general audience (Despoix 2009, pp. 28 and 81).

Forsters *Voyage* appears to focus in its entirety on this concept of another, a decidedly non-European part of the world that is destined to be fully explored - and, ultimately, exploited - by European scientists insofar, as it tells about exploring the so-called undiscovered territories of the world, its plants, its animals, its people, all from the perspective of Europeans. Following this interpretation, Forster becomes a truly intercultural writer, who illustrates the various aspects of knowledge exchange - between cultures and between people (May 2011; Greif/Ewert 2014). In this sense, to explore abroad, to travel, to witness, and to experience means consequently a return to oneself; to one's own perception and worldview, which is carved out *in contrast to* the other perspective *by dealing with* this other.

This goes hand in hand with what was mentioned above about the subjective and intersubjective bases of Forsters work. A traveler, Forster declares, has to be righteous enough to see the things as they really are, but also sharp and perceptive enough to be able to connect them, to deduce general rules and demands out of them, so that they and their readers may work towards new insights and future investigations. In the following section, he admits to be very aware of his own human weaknesses and to be as prejudiced as every other human being is (Forsters Werke, Zweiter Band, p. 13). This contradiction between the ideal of an objective, unbiased researcher and the reality of a person that is meshed into their surroundings was already mentioned

above, and it is indeed not resolved in Forsters *Voyage*, nor in Forsters later works. But then - maybe - it does not have to be resolved. Maybe it is no contradiction at all, but two steps equally necessary if one wants to understand the world without neglecting the peculiarities of the observers own viewpoint, creating a worldview that is more complex, more personal than either a spatial, technical-mathematical approach or a holistic, cosmic grasp.

The globe that Forster, his father and the crew under command of Captain Cook circumnavigated is therefore one aspect of a worldview that is much broader. The territories which are explored during the *Voyage* as well as the German region that is described in the *Ansichten*, the city Paris in the *Umriss* - all these places are in no way purely semantic spaces. However, in Forsters reports, they are charged highly with subjective as well as with historical-societal meaning: something, that is emphasized and intended by the writer Forster. He is the one who passes through these places - quite literally, as it is of utmost importance that *he himself* has witnessed what he later describes. His texts can be seen as practical outcomes of these observations, an eloquent witness bearing, an offer to the readership as well as an invitation and request to, reversely, use Forsters deliberations to start and continue proper self-reflexion, to participate in a discourse, to be active - mentally, scientifically, socially, politically. Forsters Paris in the *Umriss* vibrates with the French Revolution that takes place exactly there, exactly at that hour. Forsters region of the Niederrhein in the *Ansichten* is full of suspense with a political revolution that has yet to come. New Zealand, Tahiti, all these islands and shores described in the *Voyage* bear testimony to the intercultural confrontation of the European and Non-European, an image of Non-European colonies and future colonies that was generated and transferred by a decidedly European view, which anticipated drastic changes in these societies.

In his text, Uhlig demands from the contemporary reader that they accept, comprehend and seize Forsters horizontality (Uhlig 1994, pp. 6 and 14). To do so, one has to realize that Forsters horizon is *layered*: with the human subject at its center who reaches out and experiences, who explores and studies the world with scientific methods and technical means, all the while being meshed up in a societal, intersubjective background of perceiving, a *lifeworld*-context. The use of Husserlian terminology is no coincidence here: Uhlig implies it, Wehle performs it in regard to Columbus (Wehle 1995, pp. 153-203), and I want to emphasize it - a reinterpretation of Forsters work in association with a phenomenological-hermeneutical conception would be extremely fruitful for a debate not only for an ever-progressing, current philosophy of technology that includes humanistic perspective and self-reflexion, but also of a modern Europe that struggles with its cultural self-perception. Still, this is something the interdisciplinary Forster-research has to provide.

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