

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, Franschoek and the pass to Houw 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 made phenotypic comments about his Khoi groom: 'I hired a couple of horses and a young Hottentot groom to accompany me as a guide, he spoke English very well and was most tidily drest [sic]; he wore a long coat, beaver hat, and white gloves! The Hottentots, or Hodmadods as old Dampier [the famous buccaneer William Dampier] calls them, to my eye look like partially bleached Negroes; they are of small stature, and have most singularly formed heads and faces. The temple and cheek bones project so much, that the whole face is hidden from a person standing in the same side position, in which he would be unable to see part of the features of a European. Their hair is very short and curly.'¹

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.'¹

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.'²

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 he is going, what is his business, and even how many brothers, sisters, or children he may happen to have.'³ 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 1836.² 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.⁴

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.'⁵

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

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.’²

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.’² 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 *Natural Selection as Affecting Civilized Nations*, a paragraph which, read with evil social intent, was embraced by the eugenics movements of the 20th century (p. 82):

I have considered the advancement of man from a former semi-human condition to his present state as a barbarian. But some remarks in the agency of natural selection

on civilised nations may be here worth adding. With savages, the weak in body and mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilised men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed and the sick; we institute poor laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment. Thus the weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind ... this must be highly injurious to the race of man.⁵

Finally, all of the variations had a common origin: Darwin observed in the mid-19th century what we now know to be palaeontologically and genetically true, which is that human beings originated in Africa (p. 182):

We are naturally led to enquire, where was the birthplace of man at that stage of descent when our progenitors diverged from the Catarrhine stock? The fact that they belonged to this stock clearly shows that they inhabited the Old World; but not Australia nor any oceanic island, as we may infer from the laws of geographic distribution. In each great region of the world the living mammals are closely related to the extinct species of the same region. It therefore is probable that Africa was formerly inhabited by extinct apes closely allied to the gorilla and chimpanzee; and as these two species are now man’s nearest allies, it is somewhat more probable that our early progenitors lived on the African continent than elsewhere.⁵

The theory of evolution is based on variation: Darwin published, in 1875, a book titled *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication*.⁶ He examined anatomical and physiological characteristics as well as what he called variation in instinct and other mental attributes of animals, including disposition, courage, pertinacity, suspicion, restlessness, ill-temper, sagacity and the reverse which unquestionably vary in animals and are inherited.⁷ He examined the variation of plants and animals under domestication: that resulting from humanly engineered interbreeding, hybridisation and mongrelisation. He also examined variation under natural circumstances, away from the vain, self-serving and instrumental hand of humanity.

He studied variation in barnacles, plants and coral reefs. He studied variation in human beings in both the *Expression of Emotion in Man and Animal* and the *Descent of Man*. He devoted a great deal of space to the roles of natural selection and sexual selection in evolutionary processes. In the *Descent of Man* he wrote (p. 44):

It is manifest that man is now subject to much variability. No two individuals of the

same race are quite alike. We may compare millions of faces, and each will be distinct. There is an equally great amount of diversity in the proportions and dimensions of the various parts of the body; the length of legs being one of the most variable points. An eminent dentist assures me that there is nearly as much diversity in the teeth as in the features. The muscles are eminently variable. The same muscle sometimes varies in many ways.⁵

Modern science would have no difficulty with Darwin’s observations. But it would have reservations about what he called ‘mental faculties’, for it turned out that there was little basis of scientific fact for him to observe (p. 44–5) that ‘the variability or diversity of the mental faculties in men of the same race, not to mention the greater differences between the men of distinct races, is so notorious that not a word need here to be said.’⁵

While there are factual grounds for saying that there is variability in the various layers of the nervous and neurological systems, there was no basis for saying that the variation is greater between groups, save perhaps between one family and the next. Still, modern advances in brain science might prove him right. Bruce Lahn and Lanny Ebenstein recently published a summary of what we know about individual and group variation in humanity’s genetic endowment, which is considerable.⁸ They refer in particular to the well-established fact that groups of individuals ‘differ markedly in their ability to metabolise certain anti-cancer drugs’. Group variation in disease-susceptibility and other traits may well extend to various brain functions. If they do, Lahn and Ebenstein argue, the academic community should treat group variation as an asset rather than a threat. But for now, 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
2. FitzRoy R. and Darwin C. (1836). Letter, containing remarks on the moral state of Tahiti, New Zealand, &c. *S. Afr. Christ. Rec.* 2(4), 221–238.
3. Darwin C. (1845). *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited during the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle*, 2nd edn, p. 58. John Murray, London.
4. Darwin C. (1958). *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809–1882*, ed. N. Barlow, pp. 73–74. W.W. Norton, New York.
5. Darwin C. (2004). *The Descent of Man*, 2nd edn, p. 82. Penguin Classics, London.
6. Darwin C. (1868). *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication*, p. 97. John Murray, London.
7. Darwin C. (1998). *The Expression of the Emotions of Man and Animals*, 3rd edn, p. 250. Oxford University Press, New York.
8. Lahn B. and Ebenstein L. (2009). Let’s celebrate human genetic diversity. *Nature* 461, 726–728.