Decolonising Discovery

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In 1860, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt published *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*. Although substantially revised and criticised ever since, the book continues to shape a version of the origins and characteristics of the European Renaissance in the public imagination, as centred on the Italian peninsula in the *Quattrocento*, shaped by the 'rebirth' of classical antiquity, the concomitant rise of humanism, and the development of modern individuality and self-consciousness. Despite recasting the period as proleptically 'early modern' and turning away from Burckhardt's analeptic 'Renaissance', subsequent early modern studies in the humanities (including New Historicism) has by and large remained tied to many of Burckhardt's key principals.[1]

In the fourth part of his book, Burckhardt writes of 'The Discovery of the World and of Man', where he describes how 'the Italian mind … turned to the discovery of the outward universe.'[2] As with his highly gendered cultural nationalism, Burckhardt's claim that 'Columbus himself is but the greatest of a long list of Italians who, in the service of the Western nations, sailed into distant seas,' never stood up to close scrutiny: merchants and pilots from the Italian peninsula like Columbus and Vespucci were part of complex multi-national voyages into the Atlantic and Indian oceans, while the majority of Italian trade was focussed on markets to the east through the Mediterranean and overland routes, not into

[1] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* [1860), trans S.G.C. Middlemore (Penguin, London, 1990). Jerry Brotton and Lisa Jardine, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West* (Cornell, 2000).
[2] Burckhardt, *Renaissance*, p. 185.

the Atlantic. This is not a particularly original observation. Scholarship from the 1970s transformed our historical understanding of the economic and political motivations underpinning what used to be called the late fifteenth and sixteenth-century 'Age of Discovery', usually defined as beginning with the first Portuguese voyages down the west coast of Africa in the 1420s, through the four voyages of Columbus (1492-1504) to the Caribbean, Central and Southern America, da Gama's voyage to India via the Cape of Good Hope (1497-99), Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe (1519-22), and culminating in the foundation of the Manila galleon (1565), a key moment in the history of globalisation when Spain established a trade route shipping Asian luxury items as well as slaves between Manila and Mexico in exchange for American silver, which was then transported westwards into Europe.

Initially, I had envisaged the project I called 'Decolonising Discovery' as an attempt to revise the standard account of the 'Age of Discovery', c. 1400-1700 AD, and with it the Burckhardtian version of the Renaissance as an exclusively male, European, Christian 'spirit' of western exceptionalism, driven by disinterested curiosity, and which assumed an innate superiority over other Arab, African, Asian and Mesoamerican societies. It planned to show how the practice and competing language of 'discovery' was used within a more global context, that drew on not just how European vernacular languages understood 'discovery', but also how the practice influenced African, Asian, even Mesoamerican communities.[3]

Such a project had not been undertaken for a generation, and the last attempt to do so was emphatically Eurocentric, underlining the ideological problems of such a subject. In 1983 Daniel J. Boorstin published *The Discoverers: A History of Man's Search to know his*

[3] Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492-1640* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995).

World and Himself. Replicating the gendered historical account provided by Burckhardt, Boorstin wrote, 'My hero is Man the Discoverer', in which 'All the world is still an America.'[4] Boorstin's approach came with its own ideological baggage. The twelfth Librarian of Congress, a former Communist Party member who cooperated enthusiastically with the House on Un-American Activities Committee (1953), Boorstin became a conservative pioneer of consensus history, whose 'discoverers' were almost exclusively white, male, Christian and European and who exhibited a level of intellectual curiosity that other cultures lacked, and which in many cases led to their colonial subjugation and imperial domination.

Even as Boorstin's book was published, the whole approach to the 'grand narratives' of progress, emancipation and modernity told exclusively from the perspective of the West was being questioned by the rise of postmodern critical theory. Jean-François Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* was published in 1979 and translated into English as *The Postmodern Condition* in 1984. Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' influenced a generation of 'micro-history' that rejected the grand historical and conceptual narratives of the kind proposed by Boorstin that seemed no longer possible nor desirable, underpinned as they were by the presumption of European supremacy in the discovery, acquisition and maintenance of colonial territories. Drawing on both postmodernist critical thinking and the revisionist anthropological work of scholars like James Clifford and George Marcus, micropolitical studies produced exceptional work on cultural encounters, within and beyond the early modern period.[5] They acknowledged the role of the 'subaltern voice' in such work and the challenges of speaking

[4] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers: A History of Man's Search to know his World and Himself* (Vintage, New York, 1983), pp. xv-xvi.
[5] James Clifford and George Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (California University Press, Berkeley, 1986).

'for' and about such groups from the perspectives of race, class and gender from the perspective of 'subaltern studies'.

Concepts like 'discovery' in the grand narrative of western modernity understandably fell out of favour. Non-essentialist identity politics and increasingly detailed rhetorical, temporal and anthropological contextualisation became established as what Jo Guldi and David Armitage have labelled the 'Short Past' or, more pejoratively, the 'Short Term', an approach which displaced the *longue durée* associated the French *Annales* school of historians.[6] They note the compression of historical periodisation within research over the last generation which stands in inverse proportion to the rise of globalisation and the Anthropocene as historical questions shaped by a much longer, 'deep' historical past.

The rise of 'Deep History', usually identified as stretching back around 300,000 years, focusses on the development of the human species, specifically *home sapiens*. It is set within the even wider context of 'Big History', reaching right back to the origins of the universe. The possibilities of such longer-term historical analyses are set out by Guldi and Armitage in their *History Manifesto*: 'History, with its rich, material understanding of human experience and institutions and its apprehension of multiple causality, is re-entering the arena of long-term discussions of time where evolutionary biologists, archaeologists, climate scientists, and economists have long been the only protagonists'.[7]

Having realised the challenges of writing a revisionist history of discovery and exploration confined to the early modern period, my response was not to go shorter but instead go *deeper*; to widen the historical analysis to what Armitage has called 'transtemporal history' that adopts a method he calls 'serial contextualism', offering a

[6] Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014),
[7] Guldi and Armitage, *Manifesto*, pp. 86-87.

'history *in* ideas', rather than a 'history *of* ideas'. Armitage defines transtemporal history as linking 'discrete contexts, moments and periods while maintaining the synchronic specificity of those contexts', while 'joining diachronically reconstructed contexts across time—transtemporally—to produce longer range histories which are neither artificially punctuated nor deceptively continuous'.[8]

Armitage's 'transtemporal history' can bet set within a wider context of relevant methodological cross-disciplinary approaches in the humanities that are relevant to this project: the 'spatial turn' (Massey, 2005), 'cultural mobility' (Greenblatt et al, 2010), 'connected histories' (Subramanyam, 2022), the 'philosophy of movement' (Nail, 2024), and more generally 'mobility studies', that has been particularly prominent in the fields of anthropology, sociology and geography (Cresswell, 2006, Kaufmann, 2002). In different ways they have offered responses to the development of various long-term historical forces, from modernity and globalisation to the Anthropocene.

Greenblatt's 'cultural mobility' and Subrahmanyam's 'connected histories' have been particularly useful in broadening the concept of 'discovery' within the early modern period. Subrahmanyam's 'connected histories' have helped us expand the boundaries of early modern encounter and exchange beyond the limits of Burckhardt's European Renaissance, across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean. Such connected histories include paintings and drawings exhibiting the competitive exchange of artistic styles, as seen in the cross-fertilisation of courtly art and its seated scribes, on one side the seated scribe attributed to Costanzo da Ferrara (1450-1524), painted at the court of the Ottoman sultan Mehmed the Conqueror in the 1480s, and the response (or is it the other way round?) of

[8] David Armitage, 'What's the big idea? Intellectual history and the longue durée', *History of European Ideas*, 38, 4 (20123), pp. 493-507: 510-511.

Kamal al-din Bihzad (1455/60-1535), court painter at the Timurid and Safavid courts (**Illus. 1**). A further example based on my own work on cartographic history would be the maps of the Ottoman naval commander Piri Reis, including the surviving fragment of his world map (1513) with one of the earliest written accounts of Columbus' first voyage, and the maps printed using woodblocks in the 1620s based on lost maps depicting the Chinese-Muslim naval commander Zheng He's seven Ming-sponsored voyages (1405-1433) that reached Japan, India and East Africa (**Illus. 2**).

These 'connected histories' both require a deeper 'transtemporal' historical understanding, and a broader sense of what Greenblatt calls 'cultural mobility', a process that undermines the fantasy of settled, integrated national or ethnic communities. It has always been a myth; 'only the increasingly settled and bureaucratized nature of academic institutions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conjoined with an ugly intensification of ethnocentrism, racism and nationalism, produced the temporary illusion of sedentary, indigenous literary cultures'.[9] The problem is a tendency to take for granted the stability of cultures, or to believe that in some mythical original or natural state, they are virtually motionless, rooted, sedentary, autochthonous. But this should not then lead to a celebration of nomadism in contrast to sedentarism, the kind of cosmopolitan 'liquid modernity' that Zygmunt Bauman warns us is 'the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement', where 'the settled majority is ruled by the nomadic and exterritorial elite'.[10]

Instead of 'cultural mobility' I use the concept of *social motility*, a regime of social motion drawing on the philosopher Thomas Nail's formulation of 'the being of motion and

[9] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Cultural mobility: an introduction', p. 6.
[10] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Polity, Oxford, 2000), p. 13.

the motion of beings.'[11] Motility is a term used in biology to describe an organism's ability to move spontaneously, from the use of muscles to the flagellar motility of cellular organisms. In contrast to mobility, that requires an external force to generate movement, motility is a more spontaneous process that helps to understand social manifestations of a range of changing environmental and climatic conditions; scarcity and the pursuit of new resources; warfare; conquest; disease; migration (voluntary and, in the terrible case of slavery, involuntary), exile, wandering, restlessness, conflict, hunger, colonisation, greed, work, even tourism, to name but a few—that have shaped culture and identity.

Such a capacious transtemporal and cross-cultural project goes beyond a traditional history of discovery and exploration, and also addresses the mass migration of people, and the vexed concept of 'encounter', a term used in a generation of humanities work on the confluence of cultures inflected through postcolonial critical theory, but which seems no longer adequate to explain the complexity of what happens in these moments of contact, confrontation, engagement,, contest, conflict, even clash—however we might categorise it.

In developing a new critical language for this cultural *métissage* throughout deep historical time and in the context of our current global moment, the research follows the changing perceptions of 'discovery' and 'exploration' in language and action. In English the two words are often used interchangeably, yet they require distinction. 'Discovery' is the 'action of finding out or becoming aware of something for the first time'; exploration is the 'action of travelling to or around an uncharted or unknown area for the purposes of discovery and gathering information' (*OED*). Exploration is thus more of an open-ended process that can—but does not necessarily—lead to discovery; explorers can travel for years

[11] Thomas Nail, *Being and Motion* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020), p. 11.

without actually discovering anything. In contrast, geographical discovery is an event based on reaching a place previously unknown to the explorer's community and disclosing its existence. In its broader sense, discovery produces a range of personal, social, scientific or artistic revelations. While cosmography, engineering and mathematics provided tools for long-distance exploration and discovery, other disciplines emerged as a consequence—like botany and ethnography emerged after the first wave of European seaborne explorations in the fifteenth century. The limited concept of 'discovery' as we understand it today is a consequence of this western narrative of settlement and colonisation and its ambivalent legacy. It is still with us today, and tends to obscure other cultures. It is also one that is deeply rhetorical: many of the iconic European 'discoverers'—Columbus, da Gama, Magellan, Cook, Livingstone—didn't technically 'discover' anything unknown to their community: they simply travelled great distances and claimed dominion over territories with long and complex histories of settlement. They self-consciously appropriated the language of 'discovery' and exploration in the act of colonial extraction as a way of justifying it, especially in the period of nineteenth-century European imperial hegemony.

Some of the most significant acts of discovery in the pre-literary historical and non-western classical age lack written records, but can still be understood as moments when places are encountered and placed within a much larger framework of knowledge. The earliest people that travelled out of east Africa into Asia over 200,000 years ago and those who first crossed the Bering Strait and peopled the Americas around 180,000 years later (whether by land or sea is still up for paleontological and genomic debate) cannot really be called discoverers or explorers: their movements should be more strictly defined as migrations, and yet does not this limit their cultural significance in contrast to European

'discoveries', diminishing them as 'just' migration'?[12] By transcending the western notion of 'discovery' established in Europe from the fifteenth century, we can expand our global horizons and the traditional historiography to provide a more inclusive narrative of global motility.

Such a transtemporal project requires going further into deep historical time than the written archival record, and into paleoanthropological and genomic research, what I call the 'DNA of history'. By estimating the rate at which mutations accumulate in the genetic code, historical geneticists (Reich, 2012) are calculating when populations diverged from each other and arrived in different places. Their findings support paleoanthropologists (Stringer, 2012) arguing that the rise of *Homo sapiens* nearly 200,000 years ago created a more enduring wave of migration out of Africa into the Arabian Peninsula, Southeast Asia and then, 65-50,000 years ago, Australia, even before Europe (10,000 years later)—the so-called Recent African Origin (RAO) theory.

These discoveries of early discovery are, as with all histories of discovery, replete with contemporary racial prejudices and cultural nationalist assumptions: the RAO thesis challenges the scientific racism and eugenicist theories of the 'multi-regional' hypothesis, according to which archaic humans (*Homo erectus*) arose around two million years ago, witnessing 'regional continuity' in evolution over millennia, leading to the tacit belief in distinct 'races', an approach backed by the Chinese Communist Party and built around the remains of 'Peking Man', a skull found in northern China in the 1920s, believed to be anywhere between 500,000-780,000 years old. In revising such hoary myths, the 'DNA revolution' of genetic pioneers like David Reich has identified 'massive mixtures of

[12] Brenda Baker and Takeyuki Tsuda (eds.), *Migrations and Disruptions: Toward a Unifying Theory of Ancient and Contemporary Migrations* (University of Florida Press, Gainesville, 2015).

differentiated populations; sweeping population replacements and expansions; and population divisions in prehistoric times that do not fall along the same lines as population differences that exist today.'[13] The deep historical narrative of social motility that is emerging from this rapidly evolving genetic analysis of prehistory undermines the cultural nationalism underpinning so many current accounts of belonging and identity—though such technology also comes with its challenges, as indigenous activists in places like Australia and South America reject genetic findings that everyone came from somewhere else as a contemporary manifestation of western scientific neo-colonialism that undermines their long-standing rights to their land.

My project on social motility, perhaps now better entitled 'Worlds in Motion', offers a series of historical case studies of crucial moments in the global history of movement, migration and exploration, the more surprising from a western perspective I can only sketch out here for reasons of time and space. It begins with the first dispersal out of Africa 200,000 years ago when the world was populated by an estimated four million people and witnessed one of the most important encounters in hominid history: the contact between *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals, and the eventual triumph of the former over the latter, based partly on *motility*: modern humans migrated more but hunted less than Neanderthals.

These predominantly land-based migrations are then contrasted with the first significant seaborne moment of discovery, in the Pacific around 4,500 years ago when the 'Lapita' Austronesian culture in western Melanesia (originating in modern-day Taiwan) sailed eastwards, *into* the prevailing wind, allowing them to retrace their voyages and to sail

[13] Reich, *Who We Are*, p. 22.

home with the wind, covering thousands of kilometres in one of the most significant periods of global outreach in history—yet which has left no written records and must be reconstituted through genetics, archaeology and oral folklore. At the same time in central Africa the so-called 'Bantu Migration' began in the savannahs of modern-day Cameroon and Nigeria, when hunting and gathering communities developed new experiments in agriculture, ceramics and iron. It initiated a pattern of migration, south and westwards as Bantu-speaking societies displaced autochthonous communities until they confronted Dutch settlers in the Eastern Cape district of South Africa in the 1650s, ending 5,000 years of population movement.

Six hundred years earlier to the north, the Norse landed on L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, the first known Europeans on the American continent. Archaeological remains reveal that this was the first time the Norse encountered the indigenous Inuits—a moment in global history that closed the circle of human contact and reconvergence following tens of thousands of years of dispersal from the first migrations out of Africa , which began a new age of encounter and confluence. The meeting in Newfoundland discloses the largely neglected preceding three millennia in the Americas, exhibiting what Claudia Brittenham describes as the 'Interconnected Mesoamerican World', corresponding to modern-day Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and parts of Honduras and El Salvador. While these interconnected histories of migration and exploration remained separate from societies in the eastern hemisphere from the fifth century onwards, transformations in Asia described as 'southernisation' laid the basis for the subsequent development of 'westernisation' from the Iberina peninsula in the fifteenth century. By 1200, India trading gold and cotton with Egypt, Malaysian traders navigating two-thirds of the globe from Easter Island to East Africa and the rise of Islam into Southeast Asia the reconfigured the

global world 'southwards' that created the conditions for Iberian outreach westwards from the late fifteenth century.

Europe's imperial depredations throughout the nineteenth century brought the history of global discovery to a close. The rise of the nation state and international law driven by European polities led to the unintentional end of non-state actors to pursue individual or corporate acts of exploration or discovery. Simultaneously migrations on an unprecedented scale saw further great shifts in global culture and society, categorised as the 'age of mass migration'. Just as the official abolition of slavery in 1833 ended one of the most evil forced migrations in history, another started: the so-called Great Atlantic Migration from the 1840s, with over 17 million Europeans entering the United States between 1880 and 1910, with 51 million Chinese and 30 million Indians migrating globally between 1840 and 1940. Today, there are over a billion migrants worldwide at a moment that Nail categorises as 'the century of the migrant.'[14]

Our current political convulsions in response to globalisation need to acknowledge the routes—rather roots—of our connected histories based on deep histories of movement, migration, exploration and discovery. We could fashion a story that counters the predominant narratives of parochial xenophobia that reveals the inveterate motility of people and societies through deep time. As this pre-paper has offered such a sweeping macro-historical and transtemporal overview of a research which is itself so wide-ranging, Wednesday's talk will offer a more in-depth case study of my argument, that will explain how an apparently sedentary society like the Tudors in sixteenth-century England exhibits motility.

[14] Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2015), p. 1.

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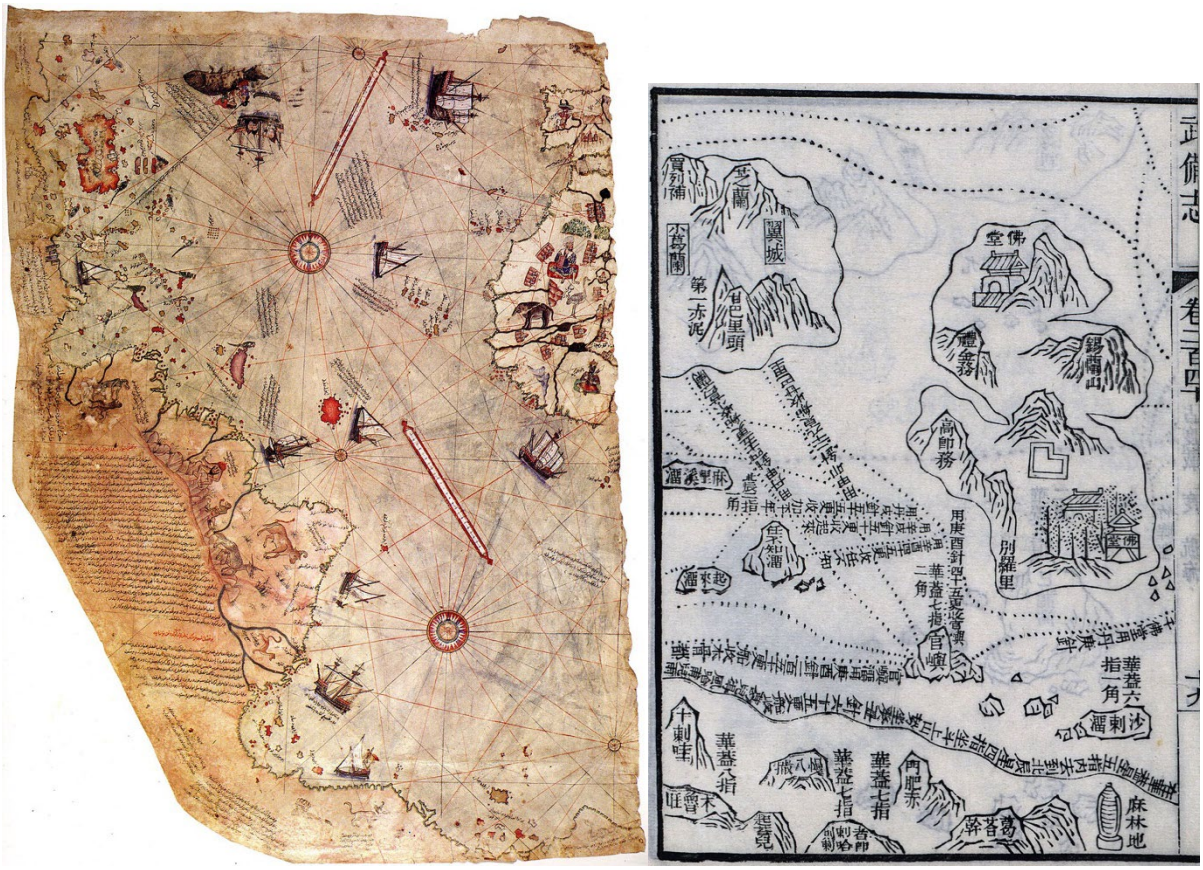
ILLUSTRATIONS

Illus.1. Seated scribes: top left, Costanzo da Ferrara, Istanbul,1480s; top right and bottom left, Kamal al-din Bihzad, Herat and Tabriz, Timurid/Safavid empire, 1480s?



Illus. 2. Left: Piri Reis, world map (fragment), showing the Atlantic and providing one of the earliest accounts of Columbus' first voyage (Istanbul, 1513). **Right**: Zheng He's navigation map showing the route of his voyages, 1405-1433, showing Sri Lanka (top) and the east African coast radically condensed (bottom). Woodcut block, 1628.

Illus. 3. 'Peking Man', a skull identified as *Homo erectus*, found in a cave southwest of Beijing in the 1920s. Its date remains the subject of controversy, ranging from 230,000 years old to 780,000 years.