

Where Philosophy And Travel Meet: They Both Push Boundaries To Unlock New Worlds

The two are seemingly unrelated, but have enjoyed a quiet love affair for centuries.

EMILY THOMAS

Travel can help philosophers develop new questions. For example, 17th-century European travellers began bringing home, en masse, reports of foreign customs and beliefs. John Locke, the “father of liberalism” – and a voracious reader of travel books – discussed practices that Europeans found shocking. His Essay Concerning Human Understanding describes cannibalism among peoples in Georgia, the Caribbean and Peru; the immodest sex lives of Turkish saints; and atheism running rampant throughout China and Thailand.

In 2019, there were 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals globally – and, given that the planet only holds 7.7 billion humans, this figure alone suggests that a lot of us are travelling. The World Tourism Organisation reports two major motivations for this – “travel to change”: the quest for local experiences, authenticity, transformation; and “travel to show”: the desire for Instagramable moments and destinations.

I think both trends are fuelled by curiosity about the unknown, the unfamiliar. Humans have always looked for new experiences, ways to live, things to show to others. Travel magazines are strewn with articles about visiting “overlooked” and “unknown” places – and this curiosity has a long history.

Throughout his Antarctic explorations, Apsley Cherry-Garrard yearns for “unknown” places. Mary Kingsley describes the “sheer good pleasure” of canoeing down an “unknown” West African river by moonlight, and delights in places “not down” on maps. A character in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness describes how “inviting” the “blank spaces on the earth” seem and tells us about his hankering for “the biggest, the most blank”.

Philosophy can also be about exploring the unknown. In one of his groundbreaking books on idealism, 18th-century Irish philosopher George Berkeley likened his investigations to a “long Voyage”, involving difficult travel across “wild Mazes of Philosophy”.

Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume offers similar reflections halfway through his most radical sceptical work A Treatise of Human Nature. He imagines himself as a sailor who has struck shallow water, narrowly escaping shipwreck. Safety tempts him to remain perched on the rocks, rather than venturing out onto “that boundless ocean, which runs out into immensity”. Yet Hume decides he will put out to sea again, in the same “leaky weather-beaten vessel”.

Wild mazes of thought

The “philosophy of travel” isn’t a thing. It isn’t the subject of lecture courses, or conferences – there are no lists of great philosophical travellers. But, as I argue in my new book The Meaning of Travel: Philosophers Abroad, travel and philosophy have enjoyed a quiet love affair for centuries.

Travellers and philosophers can both aim at pushing the limits of their knowledge – at seeing how the world is. Adventurous travellers covet new places – even Earth’s unexplored oceans and planets around distant stars. Radical philosophers craft new questions and shake old assumptions. What is time? Or matter? Or goodness?

You might think wishing for the unknown is the only thing philosophy and travel have in common. Travel involves trains, passports, luggage. Philosophy involves books, ethics, bearded Greeks. But despite their differences, travel and philosophy are tangled together. Travel has affected philosophy, and philosophy has affected travel.

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A trip to Gurez Valley in north Kashmir is an unforgettable experience.

– discussed practices that Europeans found shocking. His Essay Concerning Human Understanding describes cannibalism among peoples in Georgia, the Caribbean and Peru; the immodest sex lives of Turkish saints; and atheism running rampant throughout China and Thailand.

Some of these reports were erroneous: reports of cannibalism were exaggerated, while – even then – China and Thailand had long religious traditions. But it was becoming clear that people across the planet disagree about ethics and religion. Locke used these disagreements to raise a philosophical question. Are there any innate ideas that all humans are born knowing? For Locke, the answer was “no”.

New questions

Travel is still prompting new questions today. What are the ethics of doom tourism, to places affected by climate change? Can we imagine what other, non-human minds are like? How might space travel affect us?

Just as travel has moved philosophy forward, philosophy has sometimes pushed travel practices in new directions. Every so often, a new philosophical idea impels travel to particular places, or in particular ways. For example, American literary scholar Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s Mountain Gloom, Mountain Glory argues that, from the late 17th century, a new theory of space incited tourists to visit mountains. On this “Absolute” theory, space is God’s immensity or infinite presence.

Nicolson argues this led to people perceiving big, infinite landscapes such as mountains as divine.

“Great cathedrals of the earth” – as the Victorian thinker John Ruskin wrote of the Alps – “altars of snow”. Once mountains had become cathedrals, everybody wanted to visit them.

Similarly, the philosophy of wilderness set out in American philosopher Henry Thoreau’s Walden started a craze for solitary wilderness travel – and cabin porn.

What counts as unknown depends on your starting point. For British sailor James Cook, Alaska and Australia were “new” lands – but their indigenous inhabitants knew them well. Roman Syria would have been unfamiliar to Chinese explorer Gan Ying, but not to the Syrians. Sometimes journeys explore places unknown to all human beings: the depths of Son Doong caves, the under-snow mountains of Antarctica, the Moon and Mars.

Philosophers can also venture into areas of thought that are new to them but familiar to others. I would have this experience if I began researching medieval German philosophy, or contemporary Chinese philosophy. And philosophers can attempt to strike out into wholly new areas of thought. I think this is when philosophy and travel are at their most fascinating: when they look to the borders of what humans do not know.

Emily Thomas, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Durham University.

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Pakistan TV And Pakistan Radio Were Guilty Pleasures Of Many Kashmiris After Independence

In ‘The Other Side of The Divide’, Sameer Arshad Khatlani writes about how radio crossed the India-Pakistan border after Partition.

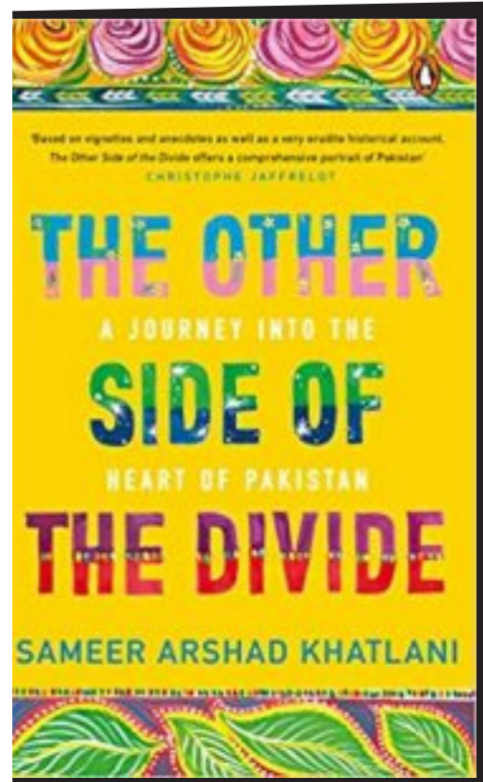
SAMEER ARSHAD KHATLANI

In the 1950s, radio was an innocuous luxury in Kashmir only if one chose the correct airwaves. It was a decade of consolidation and distrust. India was strengthening its grip over the state, constantly looking over its shoulder, wary of Pakistan’s designs. Pakistan coveted Kashmir and considered its idea of nationhood incomplete without it. India played its cards well to get the better of Pakistan. It won over to its side the state’s most popular leader, Sheikh Abdullah, even as a series of blunders ensured that Kashmir slipped through Pakistan’s fingers. It antagonized Abdullah to begin with.

The Kashmir Valley was expected to fall into Pakistan’s ‘lap like a ripe fruit’, but the attempt to take it by force in 1947 backfired. As a result, Kashmir became more of a forbidden fruit for Pakistan.

Ill-equipped Pakistani irregulars tried to capture the state; their indiscipline did them in. They were beaten back when they were within striking distance of Srinagar airport. A delay in taking the airfield allowed Indian forces to land in Srinagar. The irregulars proved to be no match for the professional force. They had no option but to beat a hasty retreat. The job was still half done. Kashmir’s political future was subject now to a referendum. India left nothing to chance. It did everything to maintain territorial status quo in Kashmir and to make the referendum redundant. A network of spies was given carte blanche to nip any real or perceived attempts to reverse the status quo in the bud. Everybody was a potential suspect. Big brother watched all.

Radio was the most potent propaganda tool at the time. It was, though, a medium that could not be banned. Airwaves did not respect national boundaries. There was nothing the spies could do to control them. Radios, however, were few and far between. It was not a difficult task to keep an eye on those who



had them. Music and locally broadcast news were fine, but anybody caught listening to Radio Pakistan faced the music, literally. The radio policing had a chilling effect. You could listen to Radio Pakistan at your own peril. People listening to the radio in groups were particularly vulnerable.

Abdullah turned a blind eye to the iron-fisted approach. The mistrust was to consume him soon. He was unceremoniously dismissed and put behind bars on charges of ‘being in contact with Pakistani intelligence’ in 1953. It was a fall from grace, which would have been unimaginable six years earlier when he sided with India. A supporter of Abdullah, Maqbool Sherwani, had tricked the irregulars into taking a wrong route to Srinagar. It was too late by the time they realized they had been misled.

The Pakistan-backed irregulars summarily executed Sherwani. He was nailed to death when they

prove grainy cross-border reception. It soon became risky once more when a full-blown, Pakistan-backed insurgency triggered in Kashmir in 1989. A heavy-handed response followed. I grew up in Bandipora, where the insurgency, cordon-and-search operations picked pace slowly. The operations were an important counter-insurgency tactic, which would send shivers down the spines of even the toughest among us.

It was not until the mid-1990s that we were caught in the middle of one such operation. We had nothing to hide and stayed put until someone realized a potential source of trouble: my collection of

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found out he had tricked them. Abdullah had rallied his supporters to resist the invasion. They did a fairly good job of it only to helplessly see their leader face the charge of treason in a matter of a few years. The charges were never proven, but it sent a larger message. It was better to be safe than sorry. Nobody understood it better than my risk-averse, petit bourgeois family. They always stayed clear of anything— forbidden airwaves included—that might risk the prospects of their government jobs.

The restrictions eased by the 1980s. It was normal for people to watch the state-owned Pakistan TV. Blockbuster Pakistani serials and reality shows like Neelam Ghar were a fad through the decade. People would spend hours fixing their TV antennas to im-

posters courtesy a popular magazine published from Madras (now Chennai), Sportstar. It included posters of iconic Pakistani cricketers, who were a rage at that time. The thought occurred to someone at the last moment, sending us into a tizzy. We had to make sure we disposed of the unwanted posters before our house was searched. I showed great presence of mind for my age by dumping the unwanted posters in a compost pit in our backyard. The search passed off without any surprises. I saved the day.

Pakistan has been a stick liberally used to beat the Kashmiris with.

The Print