

The explorer's dilemma

The question remains how these international systems best should be studied. The aim, we said, is to write a history of international relations “from a non-European perspective,” but it is not at all clear what this means and how to do it. First of all, there is not only one non-European perspective but very many, and these perspective do not necessarily correspond to each other. Secondly, it is not at all clear how we ever could gain a perspective on something which is other than our own. Somehow or another we would have to place ourselves outside of ourselves and to look at the world from that point of view. Compare what we perhaps could call “the explorer’s dilemma.” The problem for explorers traveling in foreign lands – think the Spanish conquistador Bernal Diaz or the Moroccan globetrotter Ibn Battuta [*Read more: Ibn Battuta, the greatest traveler of all time*] – is how to make sense of the many strange things they come across. They need to describe what they see, then explain it, first to themselves and then to the people back home who eagerly are waiting for news. Yet many of the things they see may be so radically different, so literally out-of-their-world, that they cannot easily be neither described nor explained. As historians of international systems we are facing much the same problem – of how to describe and explain the radically other.

The explorers dealt with this problem by describing the unknown in terms of the already known. Thus the Spanish conquistadors would compare a tall building in Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, with the cathedral in Zaragoza, and a temple in Cuzco, the Inca capital, with a palace in Granada. In general the natives of the Americas were compared to Muslims, an enemy which many of the conquistadors recently had spent time fighting in Spain. In addition, many events that occurred to them were compared to events they had read about in romances and chivalric tales. [*Read more: Tales of the*

Brave] The problem here is that the strange never is strange for very long. You incorporate the other world into your own world and you do it on your own terms and as it matters to you. Compare the work of a historian. Historians too compare the unknown to the known, the unfamiliar to the familiar, and history writing is always done in terms of their own projects and concerns. This, incidentally, is why history has to be rewritten with each new generation. Yet in this way what we see will necessarily become something different from what it originally was. This, consequently, is the explorer's dilemma: if you provide an accurate description of what you see, you will not understand it; if you understand it, it will not be an accurate description.

Trying to be more sophisticated about these descriptions does not necessarily help. Explorers and historians may both eventually come to realize that what they have come across is nothing like what they previously have seen. The building in Tenochtitlan is actually nothing like the cathedral of Zaragoza, the indigenous population of the Americas are not Muslims, and so on. Instead explorers and historians may come to argue, that what they have encountered is the very opposite of what they already know. In this way, they acknowledge differences but at the same time only the kind of differences which their own view of the world allows them to discover. They have brought the radically other into their conceptual schemes, and then they have inverted the schemes in order to accommodate it. The result is the kind of romantic exoticism in which imperial powers always have taken such delight. *[Read more: Edward Said and Orientalism]* To Europeans, people in Asia in particular were always the opposite of themselves; in fact all of Asia was an inverted, topsy-turvy, world. For example: while the Europeans represented a male, martial, culture, Asians were essentially passive, childish or female; the Europeans were rational and logical, but also superficial, and this made Asians, by definition, "irrational," "spiritual" and "deep." Compare historians who explain everything they

come across in terms of the most exotic features available. Thus when China's economy is doing badly, this is because of the country's patriarchal family-structure, and when China's economy is doing well, this too is because of the country's patriarchal family-structure.

Such descriptions are not only incorrect but also condescending and bordering on racist, and although that is bad enough, the most horrendous consequences can ensue in a situation in which an imperial occupier not only has the power to describe what it comes across but also the power to change it. Thus the British in India in the nineteenth-century decided that the Hindu religion was deficient in that it had no proper holy book, no priesthood and no fixed rituals. Yet these problems were straightened out as soon as the British redescribed Hinduism in terms of their own Anglicanism, the Christianity officially endorsed by the British state. *[Read more: Ashis Nandy on British colonialism]* But Europeans have no monopoly on exoticism and condescending redescriptions. In the eighteenth-century, the Chinese emperors employed European missionaries at their court. While the Chinese had no interest whatsoever in the Christian religion, they were very keen to learn more about various European sciences and arts. At his palace complex northwest of Beijing, the emperor had the missionaries construct European palaces where he and his courtiers would dress up in European costumes, prance around and pretend to speak French. A particular attraction was to run around in the European-style maze the missionaries had built for them. *[Read more: Santa Fe]*

The problem is consequently how to acknowledge something on its own terms and to describe and explain it without distortion. At the same time, we should never make the mistake that the world contains no differences and no mysteries. Not everyone is like us. It is not right to invite other people to become the honorary citizens of a world of which we are the masters. And if we come across obvious differences, we should

not seize upon them as an excuse to turn the world upside down. We must allow things to be different without becoming exotic and we must be prepared to explain things in familiar, non-exotic, terms. Obviously none of these challenges can actually be met. There is no conclusive way around the explorer's dilemma. But this is not to say that all suggested solutions to it are equally bad. And at least we are aware of the problems we will encounter.